

**Empire, Slavery & Scotland's Museums:  
Report of Museum/Heritage  
Workforce Focus Groups  
September-November 2021**

Sheila Asante, ESSM Project Manager

Devon McHugh, Senior Partnerships Manager

## Contents

Introduction.....	3
Purpose of Sessions .....	3
Session Numbers and Participants.....	4
Session Approaches .....	4
Sessions Overview .....	6
How do you feel? .....	6
INTRODUCTION .....	7
COLLECTIONS & LEARNING .....	12
PARTICIPATION.....	19
'Museums are racist'.....	25
ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE .....	27
ADDITIONAL QUALITATIVE SLIDES AND DISCUSSION .....	32
What support do you and your organisation need? .....	32
Discussion .....	32
Conclusion.....	34

## Introduction

This report is a summarised analysis of the findings from focus groups with the museums and heritage workforce members as part of *Empire, Slavery & Scotland's Museums*.

*Empire, Slavery & Scotland's Museums* is a national project, sponsored by the Scottish Government, to make recommendations on how Scotland's involvement in empire, colonialism, and historic slavery can be addressed using museum collections and spaces. The project is coordinated by Museums Galleries Scotland and overseen by an independent Steering Group, building on existing work from within the equalities sector and from across Scotland's museums, to explore the mechanisms of how Scotland can confront challenging histories within museum spaces.

Based on advice from the Scottish Government, the *Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums* (ESSM) Steering Group established the areas for consultation in April and May 2021, looking at six key areas:

- Collections and Interpretation
- Education (Curriculum)
- Participation
- Proposal for a Museum for Slavery and Empire
- Research
- Workforce Development (Human Resources)

The Steering Group defined the key stakeholder audiences for this project in March 2021. These were defined as: communities that experience racism; the museums and galleries workforce; and the wider public. This report summarises the findings of a set of focus groups run with museums, heritage, and cultural professionals as one of these key groups, to establish the understanding level and support needs of the sector in addressing the legacies of empire, colonialism, and historic slavery.

The findings within this report are intended to contribute to the development of the recommendations made by the Steering Group to Scottish Government in 2022.

## Purpose of Sessions

The purpose of these sessions was to gather information from a cross-section of the museums and wider heritage workforce (paid and voluntary) to inform the recommendations from the *Empire, Slavery & Scotland's Museums* Steering Group to Scottish Government on how Scotland's museums can better address the legacies of empire, chattel slavery, and colonialism through their spaces and programming.

### *Session outcomes*

- To understand where participants are in terms of addressing the legacies of slavery, empire, and colonialism in their spaces and through their collections;

- To explore what training, systems, standards, or other supports might need to be put into place to help museums to embrace anti-racist practice.

### Session Numbers and Participants

The mechanisms and material of the approach were piloted through 2 sessions (Museums Galleries Scotland staff, 27 August; Industrial Museums Scotland Directors, 31 August). Enhanced feedback was sought from these participants, and some structural and content changes were implemented following the pilots.

Formally scheduled sessions were held throughout September and October, and into the first week of November. During the consultation period, MGS staff ran 22 sessions, working with more than **250 participants**. These consisted of 5 general open sessions, a session specifically for people of colour working within the museum sector,<sup>1</sup> and 16 sessions for organisations or groups who expressed interest in holding their own team sessions. A session specifically for those working in 'front of house' roles was run in November 2021.

The archival sector has been extremely interested in this work: the project team held two dedicated sessions, publicised by National Records of Scotland, to respond to this. Additionally, the project team were approached by Engage Scotland, who publicised an additional session for their members, who work across Accredited and non-Accredited museums, galleries, and other arts and cultural organisations. A session was also held for Historic Environment Scotland staff: HES run several Accredited museums, but also work across areas of heritage.

### Session Approaches

Each session was 90 minutes: this length was selected based on experience in working with museum workforce focus groups digitally. All sessions were facilitated by MGS staff with the appropriate areas of expertise, including facilitation training. The sessions began with an introduction which outlined the goals, purpose, and ground rules of the session. Facilitators then offered a reflective exercise to help participants to settle into the space, before giving a short introduction to ESSM as a project.

The core of the session used an interactive online platform (Mentimeter), presenting agreement scales on a range of statements, grouped into themes. The statements used were based on the ESSM pre-consultation process undertaken in May-June 2021 and included direct quotes from the experts involved within the subgroup meetings.

Agreement scale exercises were followed by space for questions and for participants to offer qualitative comments on the themed areas. Each session concluded with a

---

<sup>1</sup> A second session was scheduled, but only had sign up from one participant, who was outside the Scottish sector. In lieu of formal consultation, the Project Manager had a one-to-one conversation with this individual.

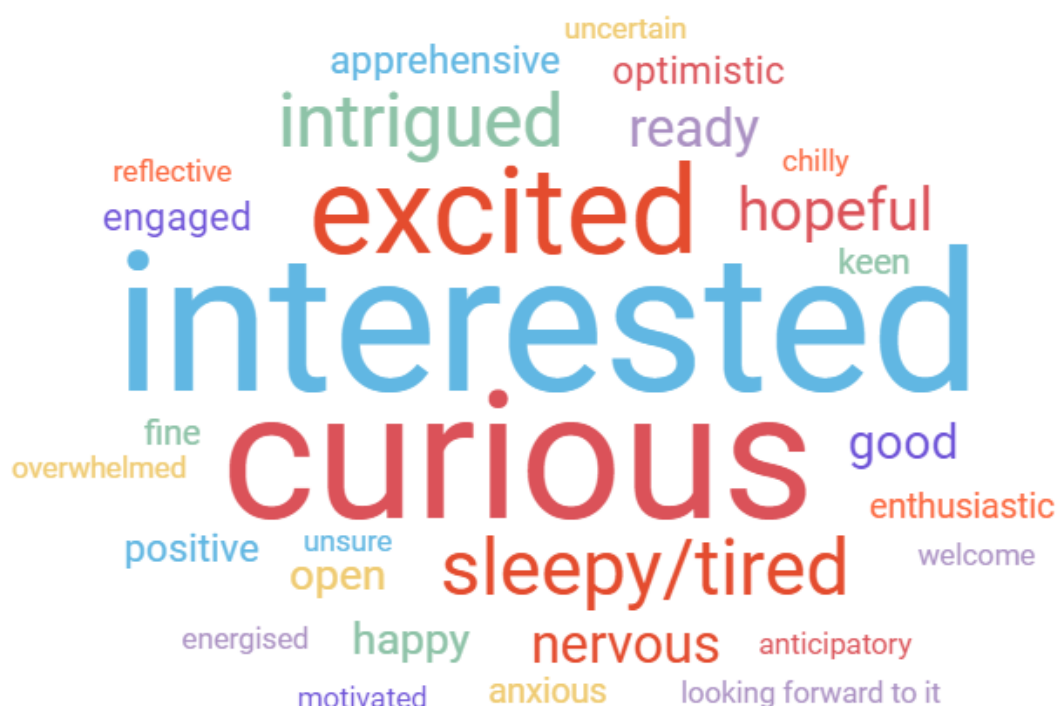
period for facilitated discussion, to enable facilitators to explore areas of key reaction or comment from within the agreement scale exercise, and to seek further input in terms of support needs from each group. The topics addressed within these discussions have been integrated within the wider comment narrative.

Analysis of the information within the sessions was undertaken in 2 parts. The project first analysed the agreement scale data, producing the pie charts that are included within this report. Secondly, the team used qualitative content analysis to evaluate the patterns within the comments shared during the sessions. The sessions provided extensive information through this exercise: these comments have been referenced within the document and can be found in the footnotes. Comments have been kept as they were typed within the sessions, except where a participant identified themselves or their organisation.

## Sessions Overview

### How do you feel?

As this session was intended as an introduction to the work of ESSM as a project, as well as an introduction to anti-racism work for the museum workforce in Scotland, we sought to assess the mood of individuals at the beginning of the session. The word cloud below captures those words/phrases that were used more than once across the sessions. Each participant was allowed up to 3 descriptors; those which occurred repeatedly across the sessions are included below.



The exercise indicates that the museum workforce was overall positive about the sessions, with 'interested' the most frequently used response (52), followed by 'curious' (46) and 'excited' (39). There was evidence within the sector of some unease about attendance at the sessions, including use of 'unsure', 'anxious', and 'nervous' by between 2 and 6 participants in total.

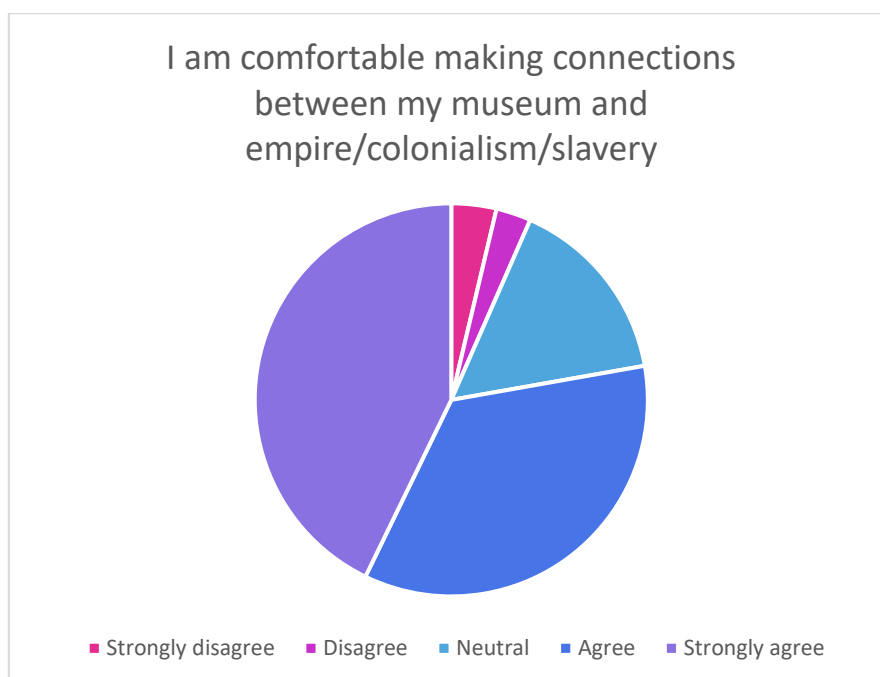
## INTRODUCTION

The agreement scale section of each session began with an introduction to the subject matter, establishing the group's self-identified comfort level, their understanding of 'decolonisation' in a museums context, and their use of this within their organisation. In total, participants offered 183 individual comments on this area of reflection, in addition to their input into the agreement scales reported above. The following analysis will overview the nature of the comments within this section, to give a picture of the stance of sector participants within these sessions.

Overall, the majority of attendees felt comfortable with making connections between their organisation and empire, colonialism, and slavery.

- 75% of the group agreed or strongly agreed with the statement *I am comfortable making connections between my museums and empire/colonialism/slavery.*
- 15% of the group indicated neutrality on this statement
- 6% of the group disagreed or strongly disagreed.

It should be noted that the high level of comfort with this statement is a likely indicator of the types of individuals who attend events designed to expressly explore these topics; this is unlikely to be wholly reflective of the museum sector workforce.



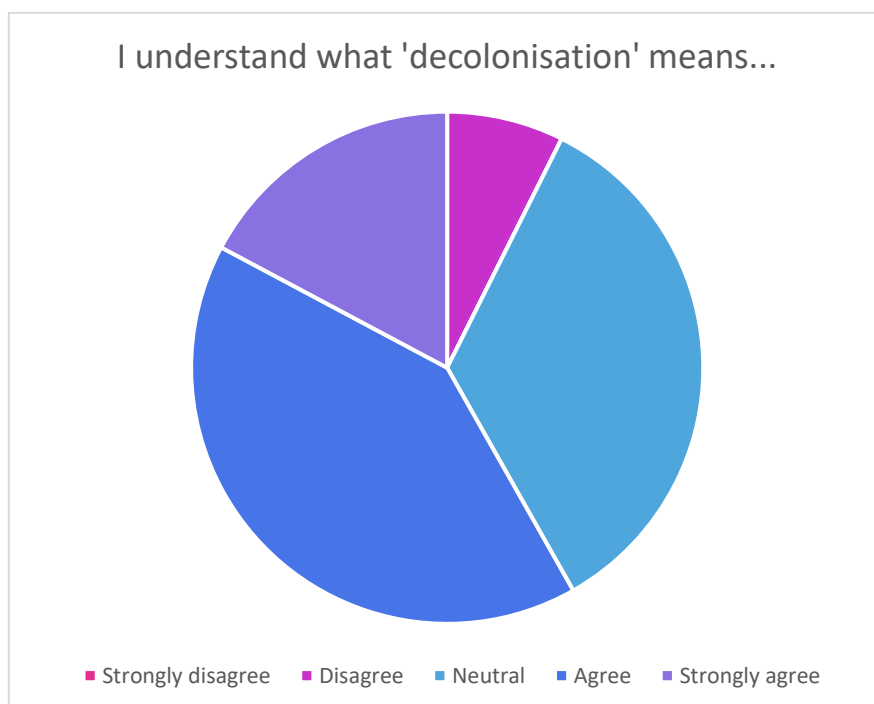
The statement 'I am comfortable making connections between my museum and empire/colonialism/slavery' elicited a range of comments: participants reflected on their approaches to working in this area. A group of participants from across the sessions commented that they feel generally comfortable making these connections. For some participants, this was due to professional or personal experience working the fields of anti-racism, equalities, or museum decolonisation. Others indicated that their organisation priorities making these connections, and they therefore feel

supported to do so. Many indicated that having conversations with colleagues allowed them to become more comfortable making connections between their work and historic slavery, colonialism, and empire. Some participants also indicated that while they were active in working in this area, they did not feel that 'comfort' should be sought.

A number of participants across the sessions indicated that they were operating from an understanding of the inherently colonial nature of museums. Some participants recognised that making connections between slavery, empire, and colonialism is easier within certain collections, but members of the sample also highlighted that a selective approach to decolonising collections (and museums as organisations), was limiting and incomplete. Some participants also questioned whether museums can be 'decolonised'. This reflected both an awareness of the tendency of the museum sector to use terminology around 'decolonisation' interchangeably with that around diversity and inclusion, as well as expressing ideas about the inherently colonial nature of the foundation and history of museums, that cannot (and potentially should not) be removed.

The level of self-identified understanding of 'decolonisation' as a term was moderate to high within the selected sample of the museum workforce.

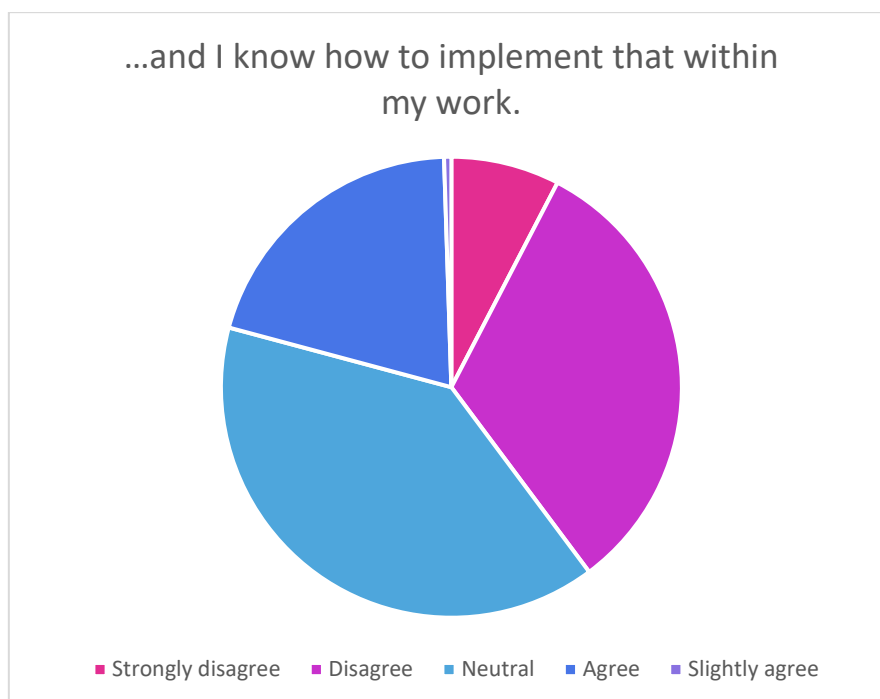
- 41% of the participants selected 'agree' on this scale
- 34% indicated neutrality
- 16% of the group strongly agreed with the statement.
- 7% of participants selected 'disagree'; no participants selected 'strongly disagree' on this statement.





However, when asked about their ability to implement this knowledge within their own work, the responses indicate that the museum workforce requires significant development.<sup>2</sup>

- 37% of the group indicated neutrality on this statement
- 37% of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed
- 23% of the group agreed or strongly agreed that they understand how to implement their knowledge within their work.



A limited number of participants actively commented that they had a strong understanding of 'decolonisation'. Of those who did, some indicated further detail about their own understanding of the terminology, while others emphasised how necessary more active work in this field is across our organisations. Some participants intentionally emphasised a need for approaching the subject with openness within the museum sector.

Participants were much more active in identifying a range of variable or misunderstandings of 'decolonisation' as a term. This included highlighting a general tendency to emphasise restitution as the central issue within the topic, as well as a wider tendency to conflate a range of issues around race, decolonisation, and equality, diversity & inclusion. Participants in the sessions identified a lack of

<sup>2</sup> NOTE: This set of focus groups were run in advance of the November 2021 release of the Museum Association's Decolonisation Guidance; it is expected that (for the most active within this group) this guidance will help many museum professionals to advance their understanding and implementation of the ways that they can address racism within their organisations.

This document can be found [here](#):

<https://ma-production.ams3.digitaloceanspaces.com/app/uploads/2021/11/09165651/Supporting-Decolonisation-in-Museums-final-version.pdf>

consensus on a definition for 'decolonisation' as a term and highlighted a lack of shared understanding across the museums sector, as well as how this was reflective of wider debates around the terminology. This lack of clarity around definitions was also felt to be a problem within individual organisations: this has resulted in confusion and a lack of direction for some participants.

Some participants additionally indicated that they had integrated some elements of a decolonising approach within their work, and that this was something that they were prioritising, personally and/or professionally. This included recognising areas of potential individual and sectoral weakness, specifically around key messaging, the legacy of impact, and the development of relationships. Some individuals indicated that they either already are or are planning to take their personal practice into their museum; while others identified that while they prioritised personal growth, they were still working on how to expand that into their professional lives.

Several participants highlighted in their comments that they had a limited knowledge of the ideas and practices around 'decolonisation'. Some participants came to these sessions quite new to the concepts of decolonisation, anti-racism, and inclusion, and expressed this in their comments. A higher level of uncertainty was expressed specifically around 'implementation': the sector indicated a need for support to take their theoretical knowledge and transform that into practice and sectoral change. For some, this was around a lack of understanding of how to integrate these practices holistically into museum work, rather than only in specific elements of programming, which may tie to the discussions around tokenism which occurred throughout the sessions. For others, this seemed to be about 'next steps' and the communication of best practice in implementation. Multiple participants highlighted in their comments that they were struggling to know where to begin in terms of decolonising their museum practice. This has resulted in participants feeling overwhelmed, either by the weight of the context of tackling decolonising museum spaces and practice, or simply with the amount of resources that are available.

The comments within this introductory set of agreement scales indicated some clear barriers that the sector is currently experiencing to decolonising Scotland's museums and to addressing the legacies of empire, historic slavery, and colonialism within their work. These include issues around personal and organisational confidence, clarity of messaging and the lack of workforce diversity within the sector. These themes were reflected across and throughout the sessions.

A substantial number of participants indicated that 'getting it wrong' was a concern in their approach to addressing the legacies of empire, historic slavery, and colonialism: this lack of confidence is a clear barrier for the sector in this area of work. For some of the participants, this nervousness was directly tied back to their own organisation, and a lack of clarity on the museum's priorities and perspectives;

additionally, one participant specifically indicated that they were worried about press and public backlash to mistakes made in changing their museum practice.

Participants from across the sessions indicated that they felt a sense of disconnect between their own practice or professional ambitions, and that of their organisation. While some participants recognised that the pace of change within organisations was inevitably slow (and slower around complex issues), many individuals expressed frustration with the approach their organisation has taken in tackling these issues. This is further addressed within the section on Organisational Change: see pages 28-31. Some participants indicated that their organisation was experiencing specific resistance due to direct links to the profits of slavery, including from the descendants of founders, trustees, and local land-owning families.

A lack of prioritisation for addressing the legacies of empire, slavery and colonialism was consistently highlighted as an issue for participants: they indicated that this area was either not a priority, or that its importance has not be clarified to staff. Many participants highlighted that their organisation does not seem comfortable addressing legacies of colonialism, or with actively pursuing decolonising within their institution. A lack of clarity and consistency was again highlighted. Some participants indicated that their organisation may not have sufficient knowledge or understanding to progress this area of work effectively, and several participants felt that they were not able to implement change due to a lack of consensus within their organisation, or because they lacked the authority to make change within their role. This was especially emphasised by participants working in front of house roles. The disparity of views within and around museums and heritage organisations was highlighted as a barrier to forging change.

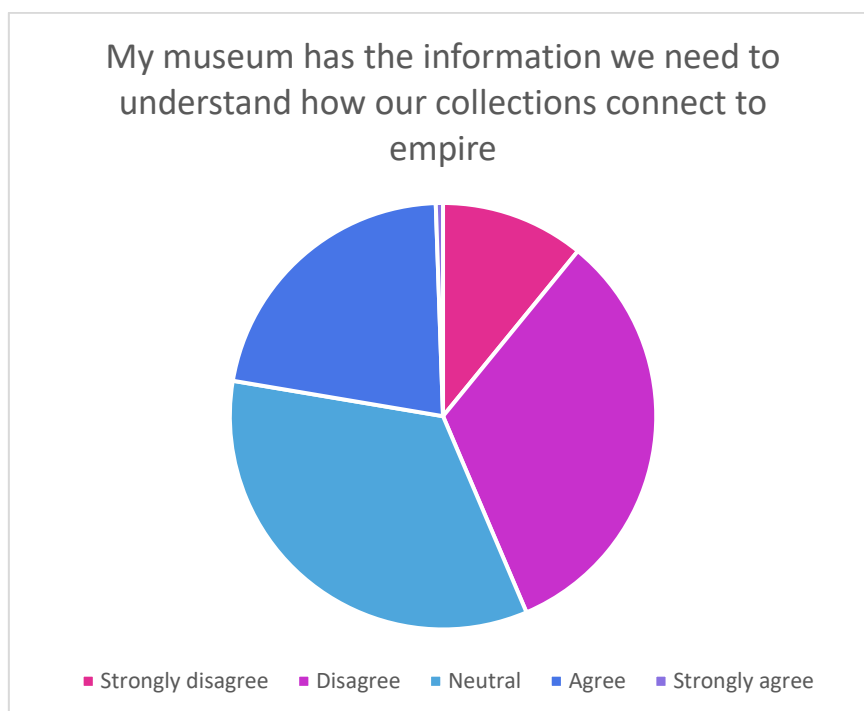
Some participants also made comments that indicated that they recognised the need to reflect wider perspectives, especially those brought by those with lived experience of racialisation, within their work. Some participants suggested that this is a barrier for themselves and potentially colleagues to progressing their work further; those who worked more diversely, especially those with people of colour within their teams, identified themselves as more able to proceed with confidence.

## COLLECTIONS & LEARNING

This section included 4 statements that encompassed the programming of museums (and heritage organisations), including collections, research, learning, and interpretation. In total, participants offered 211 individual comments on this area of reflection, in addition to their input into the agreement scales reported above.

Overall, the members of the workforce involved in these focus groups felt that they still do not have the information they need to understand how their collections connect to empire.

- 38% indicated that they strongly disagree or disagree
- 30% indicated neutrality on the above statement
- 25% of participants agreed or strongly agreed, indicating that their museum has the information they need to understand how their collections connect to empire.



Attendees commented that they needed to undertake further research to understand how their collections connected the legacies of empire, historic slavery, and colonialism. Issues within the collections held by organisations associated with attendees included documentation gaps or losses, incomplete provenance records, and accessibility of records. Some commenters identified the lack of appropriately experienced staff as a barrier to undertaking the research effectively.

Several participants identified nervousness around making the connections between their museum collections and the legacies of empire: for most, the concern is around 'not having enough information', whether on collections specifically or on appropriate organisational approaches. Public conversations, expectations, and media treatment

of the subject around this area were highlighted as impacting confidence for some participants. Others identified the pace of change as overwhelming and tied this change specifically to language.

Some colleagues identified that their organisations were struggling to connect their collections with legacies of empire, colonialism, and slavery due to a fear that their stakeholders would find challenging histories too difficult; these museums seem to be seeking to tell 'positive' or 'inspiring' stories. Some participants highlighted actively racist or pro-colonial/pro-empire stances taken either within their museum, or by their colleagues.

Several commenters highlighted the need for more resource to enable them to undertake the necessary research into their collection. Some attendees also indicated that this research needs to be prioritised by their organisation to allow them to undertake the work. This lack of organisational prioritisation was highlighted as an issue for several organisations (and was a theme across the discussion areas within these sessions).

Some attendees were unsure how what the connections would be, or of how to make the connections to the legacies. Many of these comments show a need for increased historic knowledge of the impact of empire and colonialism within Scottish daily life in the 17<sup>th</sup> through 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, and how that has impacted our fundamental history of collecting. Other commenters highlighted specific organisational issues that required further exploration.

Some participants identified that while they believed the knowledge is there, it was 'scattered' within their organisation. There is a recognition that expertise exists within some organisations, but that more collaboration and better internal/external communications are needed. Several attendees commented that they are aware of the need to do more, but overall indicated that they are keen to work on this. Participants also indicated a personal or organisational awareness of the scale of the task.

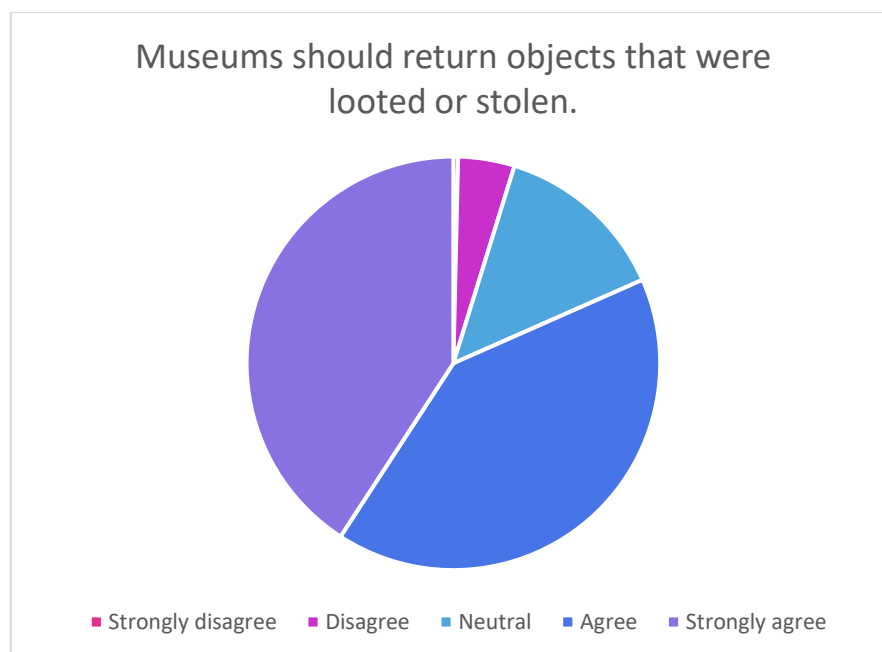
Other participants, however, saw waiting for the research to be complete as an excuse: commenters bemoaned colleagues waiting for perfect understanding as a barrier to making progress. One commenter indicated that creative thinking and responses would enable progress without increased resource. Some attendees shared how they are building the information they need to explore the legacies of empire, colonialism, and historic slavery through their collections. Most recognised that even within actively working organisations, there are still areas where more is needed.

Participants indicated that they would be interested in further support in this area, especially around developing a robust understanding of the histories of colonialism and empire, and support to connect this history to their collections. Comments suggested multiple approaches that could help the sector to develop their knowledge

and understandings, including case studies, workshops, and review schemes or standard.

The museum sector workforce supports the return of looted or stolen objects.

- 44% of the group strongly agreed
- 30% of the group agreed
- 15% of the group indicated neutrality: the comments indicate that recognition of the complexity of the issue is reflected in those responses in the neutral response space.
- 4% (12 individuals) disagreed with this statement
- 1 individual strongly disagreed.



More than three-quarters of the attendees from these focus groups indicated that museums should return objects that were looted or stolen, and this was reflected in the comments offered by a number of participants in the sessions. A substantial number of participants highlighted that they felt the return of objects should be undertaken as part of a dialogue or power-sharing arrangement with origin communities. Some participants indicated a strong awareness of the negative impact of violent acquisitions on the context of the object, and how this could impact on their value to their origin communities. Others reflected on their own evolving attitudes around this subject area. One participant questioned the value of restitution as a reparative measure.

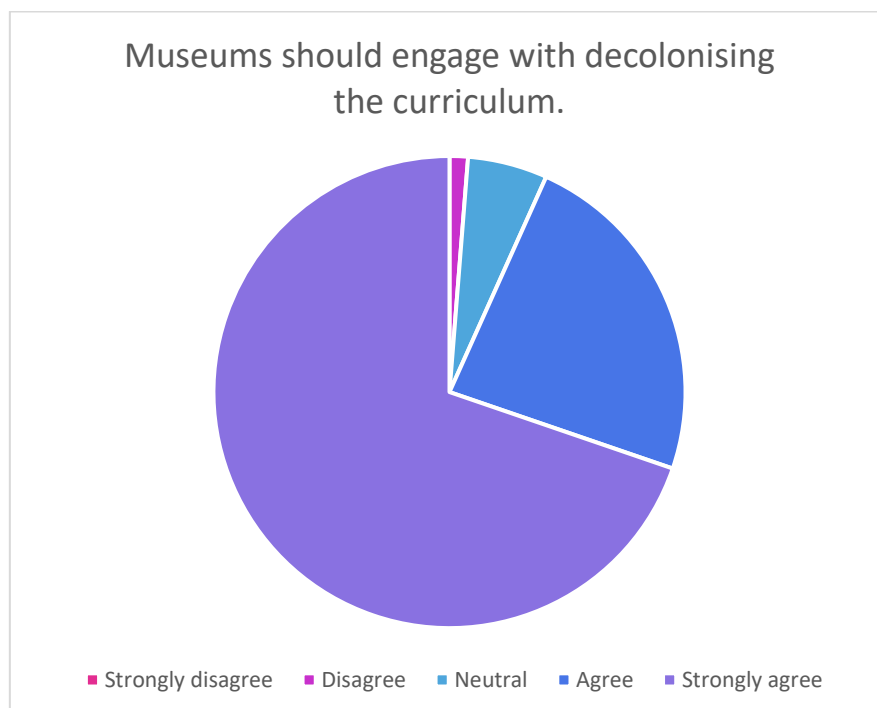
Others recognised the many complexities around the return of collections, and some highlighted that they would welcome more dialogue in this area. Participants commented on issues around specific sites of origin; while many of these comments reflect on the complexities of 21<sup>st</sup> century geopolitics, some may reflect persistent colonial attitudes within the museum workforce. Many of these comments indicate

that further research on collection provenance is required to understand the origin of collections.

Some participants indicated that where return of looted or stolen objects was not possible, that they supported alternate measures, including reinterpretation highlighting the provenance of items, potentially with loan agreements. A few attendees reflected on alternate means of displaying returned objects, including using creative technological and artistic solutions. Additional comments on return of looted or stolen objects that could not be analysed within this narrative were also offered.

Across the sessions, the statement 'Museums should engage with decolonising the curriculum' had the strongest agreement from the workforce, demonstrating a clear appetite within the museums workforce to align museums more closely to the education sector.

- 66% of the group strongly agreed with the statement
- 22% of the group agreed
- 5% of the group indicated neutrality
- 1% (3 individuals) indicated disagreement (there was no strong disagreement)



The museum sector overwhelmingly supports working closely with efforts to decolonise the curriculum. This was indicated in a limited range of comments, which highlight general support for a decolonised curriculum in schools and in higher education, and specific support for museums, heritage, and archives being more involved in creating a decolonised curriculum. Some participants indicated that they are already involved in this work.

Some commenters were supportive, but also highlighted challenges or nuances in this area. This included uncertainty around the racial literacy of both teachers and museums professionals, including indicating that the entire workforce on both sides must understand how the curriculum is colonised before this can be removed or interrupted. Other comments included the need for museums to retain some intellectual independence, and the need for facilitation to build the necessary relationships.

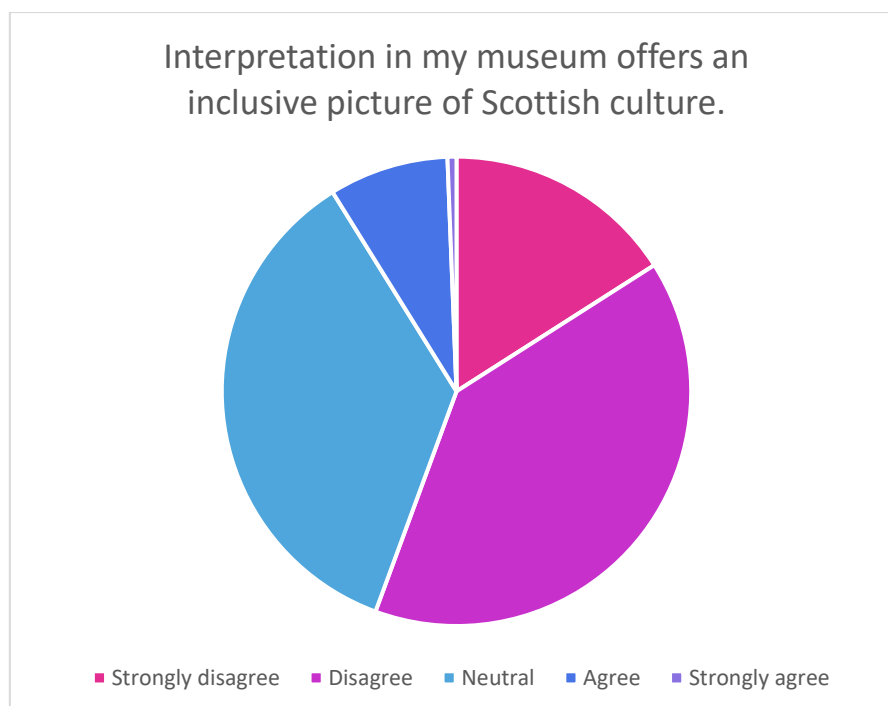
Other commenters expressed hesitancy around involvement with the curriculum. Some felt that they were not involved in these conversations within their organisations and did not have much professional experience in working with schools or curricular activity. Others indicated that they did not know what decolonising the curriculum was.

Overall, respondents from the museum workforce recognise that currently, interpretation within Scotland's museums does not offer an inclusive picture of Scottish culture.

- 30% of the group disagreed with the statement
- 12% strongly disagreed
- 27% of the group expressed neutrality

A small number of respondents feel that their museum does offer inclusive interpretation.

- 6% (16 respondents) agreed with the statement
- 1.5% (4 individuals) strongly agreed





Many participants did not feel that the interpretation within their museums offers an inclusive picture of Scottish culture, and this was reflected in some of the comments within this section. Some participants were very clear in their statements on this, others offered more in-depth analysis of the areas in which they saw exclusive narratives. Some identified gaps within the actual collection itself as an issue in this area, while others highlighted how power structures manifest themselves in records and in organisational approaches to interpretation.

The interpretative approaches used in several museum displays was highlighted by commenters as exclusionary. This is highlighted as manifesting both within the actual narrative used within interpretation, as well as in the internal and infrastructural approaches made by museums in organising collections. Some highlighted that there is inconsistency within individual museums. Commenters indicated that many displays are indicative of the white lens through which collections and interpretation has been developed, encompassing accession, focus, research, and narrative.

Specific issues with interpretation were highlighted by some commenters. The recycling of information from past exhibitions, without a critical eye, was highlighted as problematic. Issues around resourcing re-interpretation were also referred to as creating barriers to adapting existing narratives that cause the workforce unease. Some participants commented that progress was being made within their organisation. This was highlighted specifically in terms of ongoing research and in changes in cataloguing. A few attendees highlighted the problematic nature of a 'tokenistic' approach to inclusivity in interpretation; participants indicated that true inclusion comes from integration within the museum's core work, not use of a project-based model.

Some individuals indicated a feeling of nervousness or uncertainty around good practice in inclusive interpretation. This included highlighting a need for guidance, as well as comments that expressed uncertainty and were indicative of further thinking that is needed both around race and around interpretation. Some participants felt that both their own work, and wider approaches on inclusive interpretation, were in their infancy.

Several participants commented that they felt that community consultation was key to updating interpretation. This included comments that highlighted the need to speak to Scots of African descent, as well as to develop relationships with those outside Scotland. One participant highlighted that to offer local authority provision 'for everyone', the museum must work to be transparent about the provenance of their collection, especially in terms of the impact of exploitative labour and political systems; similar viewpoints were expressed by other participants around creating holistic and honest approaches to telling the whole stories of the collections.

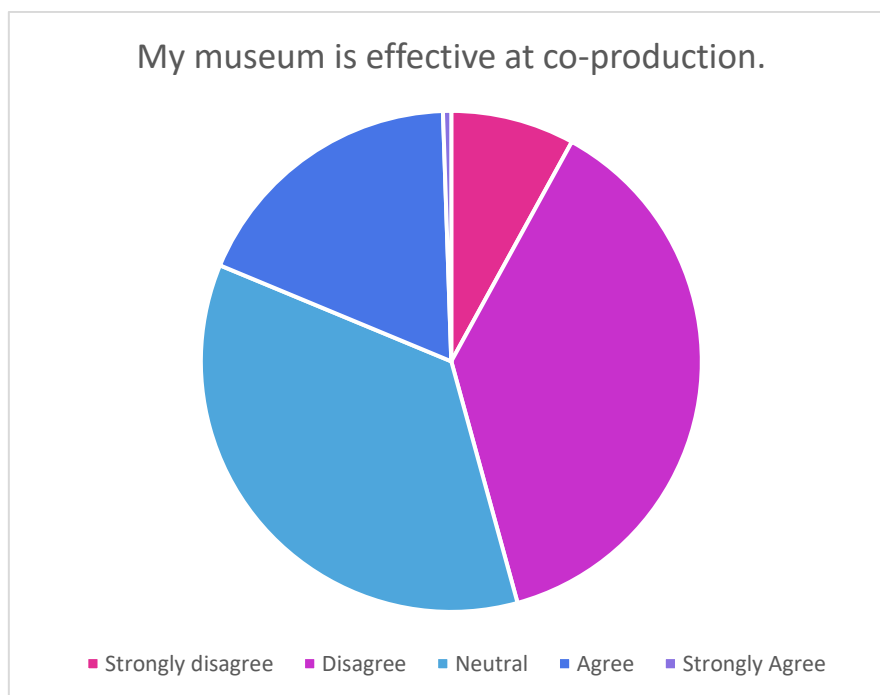
A small number of attendees highlighted that they did not feel that their museum narrative required inclusive interpretation, due to their understanding of the organisation's mission. Others recognised that their provision may be very specific now but wanted to know how they could expand beyond that to offer a more inclusive picture of their subject.

## PARTICIPATION

The third set of agreement scale statements concerned participation within museums, encompassing co-production, work with diverse audiences, representation within the museum space, and ideas about racism as central to the inception and continuance of museums. In total, participants offered 245 individual comments on this area of reflection, in addition to their input into the agreement scales reported above. These comments looked widely at the topic of participation within Scotland's museums, galleries, and heritage spaces.

In responding to the statement *My museum is effective at co-production*, participants showed some spread across the responses, with the majority sitting at disagreement to neutrality.

- 34% of the group disagreed with the statement
- 32% indicated neutrality
- 16% of participants agreed
- 7% of participants strongly disagree
- 4% (11 individuals) strongly agree



A few commenters highlighted that some museums excel at co-production, likely corresponding with the 20% of individuals who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Overall, comments highlighted that this is an area in which museums need significant development. Many participants highlighted their practice in this area as a 'work in progress', even where that undertaking has been significant, and identified areas of weakness in their approaches, especially around organisational risk-aversion.

A significant number of participants highlighted that while co-production was being used successfully in projects or exhibitions, it was not embedded within wider approaches, and that this had an impact on the effectiveness of their approaches. This is reflective of a wider group of commenters who identified effective co-production as the work of individuals, or of specific teams. Some commenters recognised that this was not an area that they had been working in; some highlighted that this was an intention for the future, while other indicated that they required support or guidance to make this possible for their organisation.

Several participants within the sessions perceived their organisation's approach to co-production as 'tokenistic', or as part of a 'box-ticking' exercise. Some participants indicated that their organisation's output in terms of co-production was dependent on external forces, especially funding and funders. Participants indicated that museums were still unwilling to cede power and/or authority to the groups they worked with.

A substantial number of participants commented on the importance to them of a focus on relationship building as part of encouraging genuine participation within museums. This included highlighting the need to take ethical approaches, the importance of not pursuing transactional relationships, and the need for decision makers to understand the investment (with an emphasis on time as the crucial resource, over money) required to build audiences. On the whole, the resource-intensive aspects of co-production were cited as a barrier for many participants.

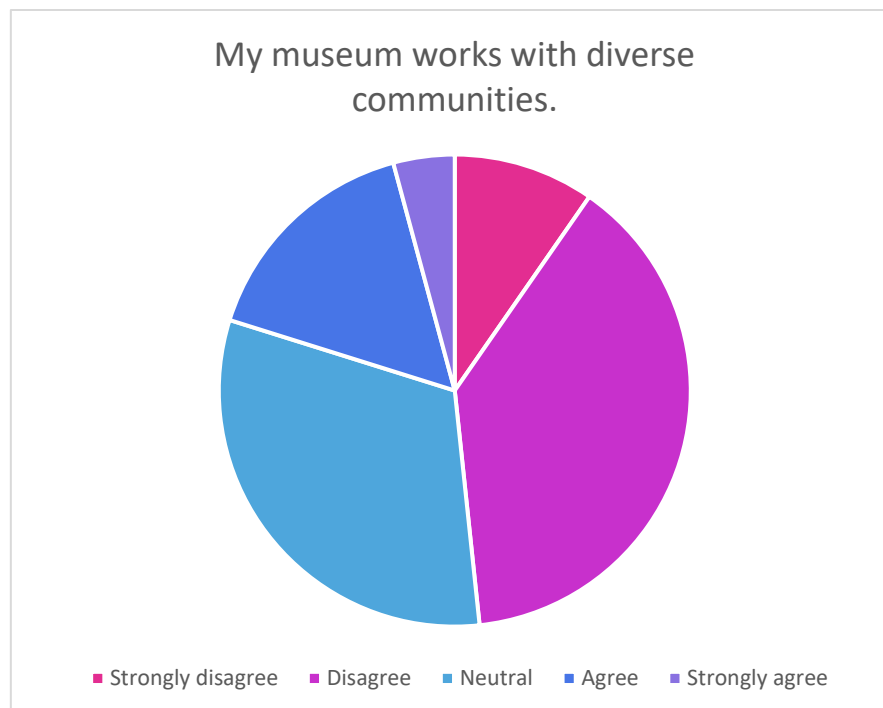
Some participants made it clear that working with diverse communities is a core aspect of their museum's mission. Some participants recognised that the community tied to their museum was inherently ethnically diverse, as is the case for some of Scotland's universities. Many of these comments also highlighted that the diversity within their audiences went beyond seeking ethnic diversity but was focused on offering provision for a wide variety of visitors from their local community.

Additional comments highlighted that this was an area that had developed substantially in recent years. For one participant, 'working with diverse communities has really accelerated in last 5 years. Museums and Special Collections are a key part of that.' Another remarked that 'The museum has improved in the way that the museum is working with more diverse communities. There is for a fact more youth engagement and more community engagement and that's definitely a positive.'

Other participants highlighted that this is an area that is more recently under development within their institution. 'We are about to change our target audiences going forward as we're aware we just don't work enough with diverse communities at the moment.' 'My organisation is getting better at trying to work with more diverse communities,' one participant wrote, 'but it is taking a lot of hard work.' Some organisations highlighted that they have consulted and would like to make changes but are struggling to implement these.

In responding to the second statement, *My museum works with diverse communities*, the participants roughly split between agreement, and disagreement/neutrality.

- 37% of the group disagreed with this statement
- 30% responding with neutral
- 15% of respondents agreed
- 9% of respondents strongly disagree
- 4% of respondents strongly agree



A few participants identified that their museum works with diverse communities and explored this within their comments. For this exercise, participants were not provided with a definition of 'diverse communities'.

Several participants noted that their museum does not work with diverse communities, and the comments shared as part of this work highlighted that (on the whole) participants feel that this is an area that requires development across Scotland's museums. One participant remarked that 'Community engagement is not valued highly enough - looking forward to this changing in a big way.' This was seen as a generic museums issue, but participants also identified that their individual institutions were not engaging with diverse communities. Some participants recognised that this lack of visitor input/engagement has meant that they are less able to share the range of their collections.

Participants were active in sharing some of the issues around working with diverse communities in the comments, which explore the disengagement with this area in

greater depth. Two of the most prevalent themes that emerged out of this area of enquiry included ideas about the 'non-diverse' nature of Scotland outside the central belt, and around diversity as an element of project-based, rather than core, engagement. Additional themes that were drawn out of these comments include: workforce (dis)comfort; a need to move toward a more visitor-centred way of thinking; and support and training needs.

A substantial number of participants identified the locality of their museum, and the local or regional demographics, as having an impact on their engagement with diverse communities. For some museums, including those in very rural locations, their visitor base is small and generally made up of the same individuals year-on-year; other museums seem to simply identify their areas as 'white' or 'very white'.

Some participants expressed that they anticipate negative feedback to anti-racist programming from their majority-white locality, while others indicated that they feel a responsibility to appeal more broadly across the population, even within areas with limited ethnic diversity. Some individuals have been able to take advantage of initiatives that have encouraged more visitors to rural locations and have found some successes here. Other commenters shared opinions that show that there is a section of the workforce that identifies 'racism' as an event that occurs in areas with racially diverse populations.

As with the comments around co-production, a number of participants recognised that 'diversity' is included within a project-based model but is not integrated across their organisation's activity. Some participants identified that work with diverse audiences was reactive, rather than proactive, and was led by external approaches. For some, this has led to what they identified as tokenistic or 'box-ticking' community projects, developed to fulfil reporting, rather than through genuine engagement. Participants identified approaches that they felt had problematic 'charitable' intentions, with an emphasis on work being on the museum's own terms.

An area that was identified as a barrier by some participants was the personal and professional limitations of staff themselves, and especially the tendency of the museum workforce to remain in their comfort zones. One individual recognised the gap between the ambition and the reality of their organisation in this area, and theorised that colleagues are 'more comfortable working with traditional archival audiences, e.g. academics, research students, etc.'. Another participant stated that: 'Museums are great at participating with groups that don't challenge or make them uncomfortable. Anything outside of their "base" is generally ignored.'

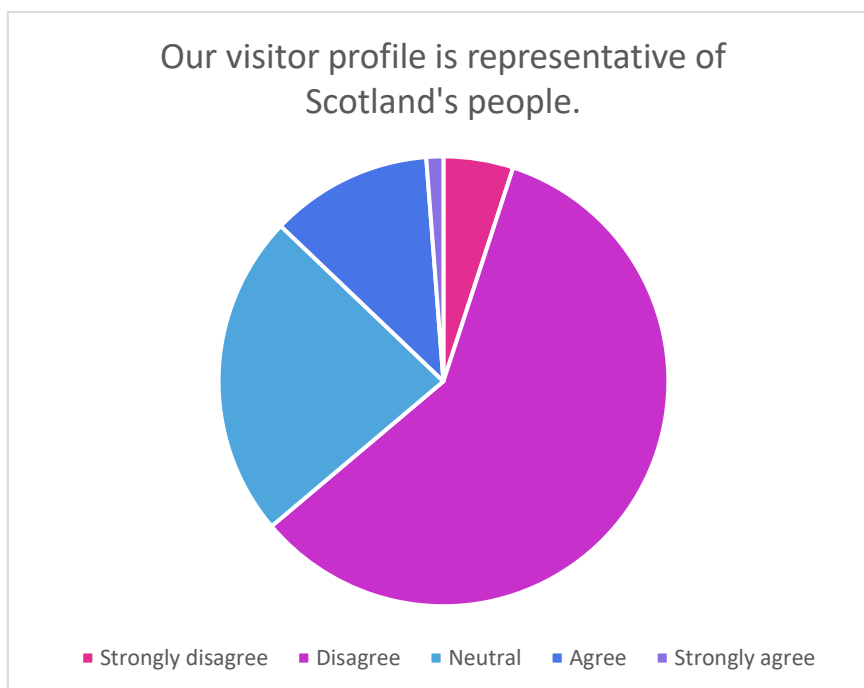
One participant recognised a pervasive attitude of "'we know best", and "the other group know nothing"', and noted a negative impact not only on the museum's external relationships, but also on internal communications: 'we are terrible at the various departments working together, and even worse at collaborating with external groups and organisations.' This is a theme across the sessions and was highlighted in the preparatory sub-group sessions.

Many participants expressed a desire to move beyond this type of thinking as a barrier and articulated a need for more visitor-centred thinking from across the museum sector. This included an emphasis on including more diverse voices and viewpoints within interpretation, ideas about shared ownership, the devolution of power and resource, and the need for more emphasis on meaningful relationships and consultation.

Several participants recognised that this is an area in which they specifically need support and stated this. Individuals specifically stated that they are interested in advice on how to engage with communities of colour. Issues for these participants included: understanding/identifying local demographics; making contact with non-white communities; developing representative content; and producing material that is appealing to these groups. One participant stated: 'I was at a consultation with community groups and their take was that they wanted to work with museums, but they didn't know how to. Need to make ourselves relevant.'

Participants within these focus groups clearly indicate that they recognise that the visitor profile of Scotland's museums is not representative of Scotland's people.

- 55% of respondents disagree or strongly disagree with the statement above
- 15% of participants responded with neutrality
- 8% of the group agreed or strongly agreed



This area of exploration produced a low number of comments, compared across the statements. While most of the group disagreed with the above statement, only a few individuals indicated this directly within comments. A slightly more substantial group

indicated some of the issues they experienced around this, including noting that their visitor profile is dependent on the national tourism profile. A few commenters also shared that their knowledge of their visitors was very economically driven. These comments also included those who highlighted elements relevant to their specific sites, as well as those who queried if a representative visitor profile was possible in Scotland's museums.

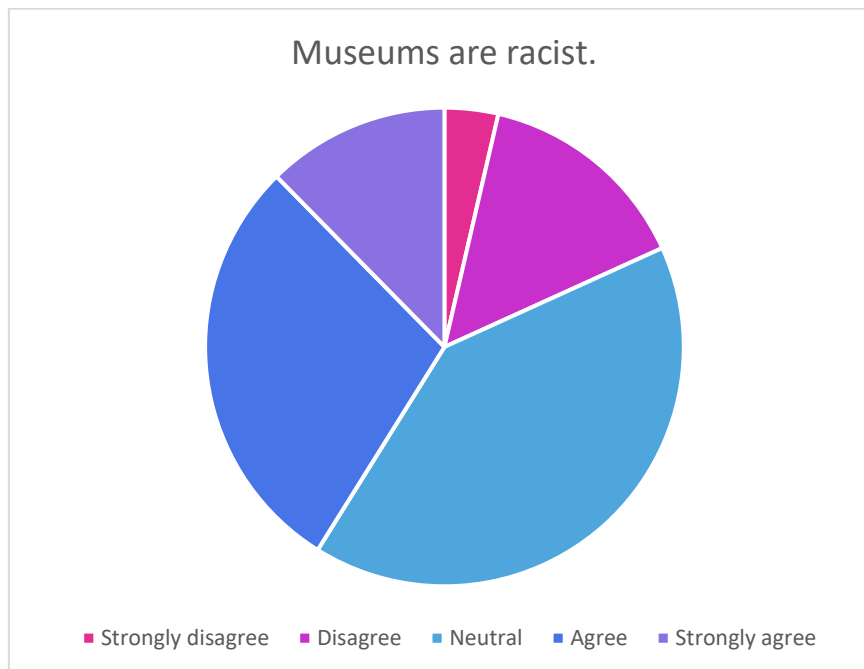
A few commenters indicated that a more representative visitor profile was a goal for their organisation, but that they were unsure as to how they should approach this, or recognised that progress was very slow. Some comments indicated that the participants actually did not have the information they needed to be able to respond to this question other than anecdotally: either they indicated that they did not collect visitor data, that the information was not shared within their organisation, or that there were gaps within this data, include collecting information on some types of visitors (on site v digital), but not all.



## 'Museums are racist'

This statement was directly quoted from discussion in the subgroups and was included to help the project team to better understand the comfort level of the workforce in challenging their own practise.

- 37% of participants indicated neutrality on this statement
- 37% agreed with the statement
- 22% disagreed with the statement



A significant number of participants responded to this statement in the comments, offering a range of reflections and reactions to the statement 'museums are racist'. Across the sessions, this statement prompted the highest number of specific statements from participants.

A small minority of individuals rejected the idea, although these rejections were largely equivocated in some way. Others indicated some discomfort or disquiet with the statement, but this largely seems to have been in reaction to the baldness of the statement, rather than the actual sentiment behind it: many of these statements referenced the ways in which museums reflect institutional, societal, or foundational racism, and reflect a perception that racism is found in active choices, rather than in acceptance of the status quo. Several respondents highlighted a distinction they were making, or had made, around intentional and unintentional racism; some then reflected that it was racism regardless. On the whole, this seems to be reflective of wider societal approaches to conversations about race and racism, and the newness of having this conversation in a very open way for many participants.

A substantial number of participants indicated that they felt museums need to acknowledge the racism, bias, and white supremacy that has influenced— and

continues to influence—their work. Many of these comments indicated that while work was beginning (and referred to a contemporary climate of change), that they felt that more ‘work is needed’ or that the sector had a long way to go to address racism in their organisations. Further comments explored how voice, narrative, and display within museums were perpetuating white-centric, colonial, and racist ideas and mentalities.

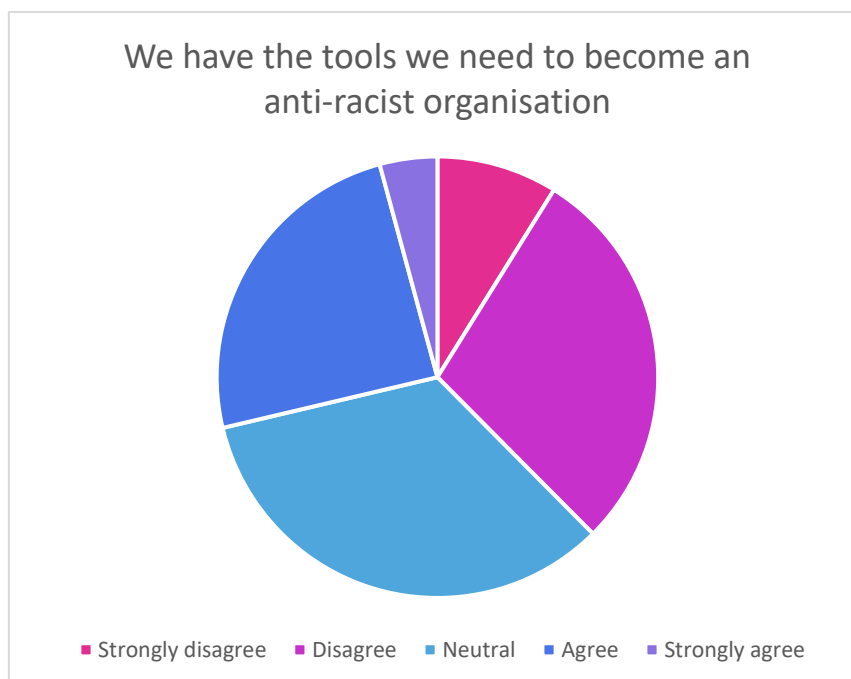
Significant numbers of participants saw racism and colonial structures and mentalities are part of the foundations of museums, and this included some scepticism of whether museums can ever move beyond this: ‘Museums are trying to be anti-racist but the history of their very creation means the racism is embedded.’ Within this wider theme of comment, some participants also recognised that many museums are trying to move away from their racist foundations. Participants recognised and highlighted the existence of structural racism within museums, which impacts on the sector even in the face of pockets of change or individual anti-racist practice. Comments on this theme also acknowledged that museums are reflective of society at large, and that the racism within UK society today is mirrored in museums.

## ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

The final set of agreement scales looked at organisational change within the museums represented by the focus group attendees. In total, participants offered 287 individual comments on this area of reflection, in addition to their input into the agreement scales reported above.

Participants indicated a spread across the agreement scale for the statement *We have the tools we need to become an anti-racist organisation.*

- 32% of respondents indicated neutrality on this statement
- 36% disagreed or strongly disagreed
- 27% of participants agreed or strongly agreed



Corresponding with the 36% of participants who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement above, a number of session attendees commented that they did not know they needed to be an anti-racist organisation, or what the tools they could use are. A small number of commenters indicated that they didn't know what an anti-racist organisation was. Others indicated that they felt that society was not sufficiently advanced around discussions of anti-racism for the tools they needed to be available yet, or that without wider societal change, that change in museums may not be possible.

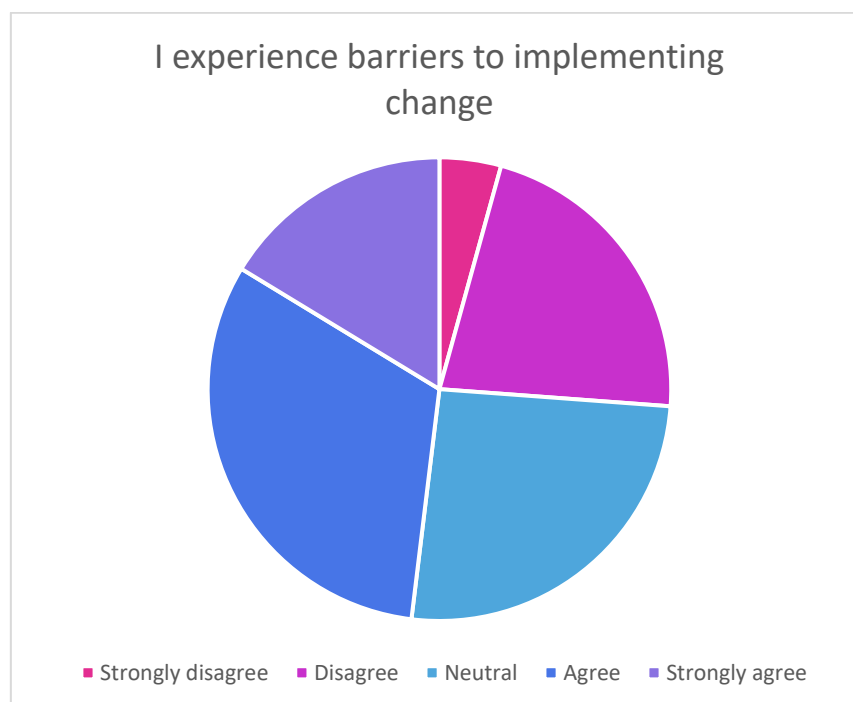
A more substantial number of commenters indicated that they have the tools they need to make their organisation an anti-racist one, but that they are not using them. Several commenters indicated that there were clear reasons for this: this included resources, institutional barriers, or a lack of racial literacy necessary to recognise the need. Others indicated that they had some of the tools they needed, and that they felt that their organisation was using them and beginning to see

change. Comments in this vein highlighted tools and approaches they have used, including reading groups, reports, and toolkits.

Other participants indicated that while they might have some of the tools, they felt that they really needed more to embed anti-racism within their organisation. A request for a toolkit for museums was a theme across the topics and the sessions. Others indicated that other approaches could be helpful, including stronger requirements from Scottish Government and funders, especially around monitoring HR processes, and the development of a standard or hallmark that museums could sign up to. Additional comments in this area included those that shared the personal thoughts of individuals on how anti-racism should manifest on a personal and/or organisational level.

The project team ran sessions for individuals at different levels within organisations from across the heritage sector: barriers to change were identified as a theme across all sessions.

- 30% of the group agreed with the statement *I experience barriers to implementing change.*
- 15% of respondents strongly agreed with this statement
- 24% of the group expressed neutrality
- 20% of the group disagreed
- 4% of the group strongly disagreed



With nearly half of participants agreeing that they experience barriers to implementing change within their organisations, attendees were active in identifying the barriers that they experienced. These included resource, bureaucracy, and organisational culture. A small number of participants (reflective of the 4 and 22%

who strongly disagreed or disagreed) commented that they do not experience barriers, or that any barriers they experience are perceived as constructive.

The most frequently identified barrier to change highlighted in the sessions was around 'resource'. Some of these comments referred to resource generally, while other participants clarified whether they meant time, funding, staffing, or some other element that they identified as 'resource'. Some participants highlighted that they do not feel they have the time to implement the change they would like to see.

A lack of funding, as a specific element within 'resource' as a concept, was highlighted in several sessions. These comments often reference a lack of funding as perceived to come from a lack of managerial or organisational commitment. The potential use of the funding was not always made clear within individual responses, but for many, this was directly tied to capacity around a lack of consistent staffing, which was also highlighted as a resource-based barrier.

Several individuals identified that they felt prioritisation or work around inclusion, anti-racism, or decolonisation was an issue for their organisation, and that this lack of prioritisation was acting as a barrier for them. Prioritisation may also be included or inherent in some of the comments about 'resource' referred to above, especially those around organisational commitment. This was directly highlighted by one participant: 'There will be no more resource, so it has to just be built into what we do with existing resources.' Others recognised that there are further questions around prioritisation that need to be explored, directly around the perceived challenges of resource. Other individuals did not make this connection but identified the lack of clear prioritisation (implied to come from a higher level) as creating blockages for them.

Bureaucracy was identified as a significant barrier for participants across the sessions. Some participants reflected that the size of an organisation could impact this, and that larger organisations had more trouble in implementing change. This seems to be especially impactful in those organisations with local and national government responsibilities or ties (even when those ties are historic, rather than current). Long process and multiple permissions were identified as 'hoop jumping', and this was highlighted by several participants as an issue within their work.

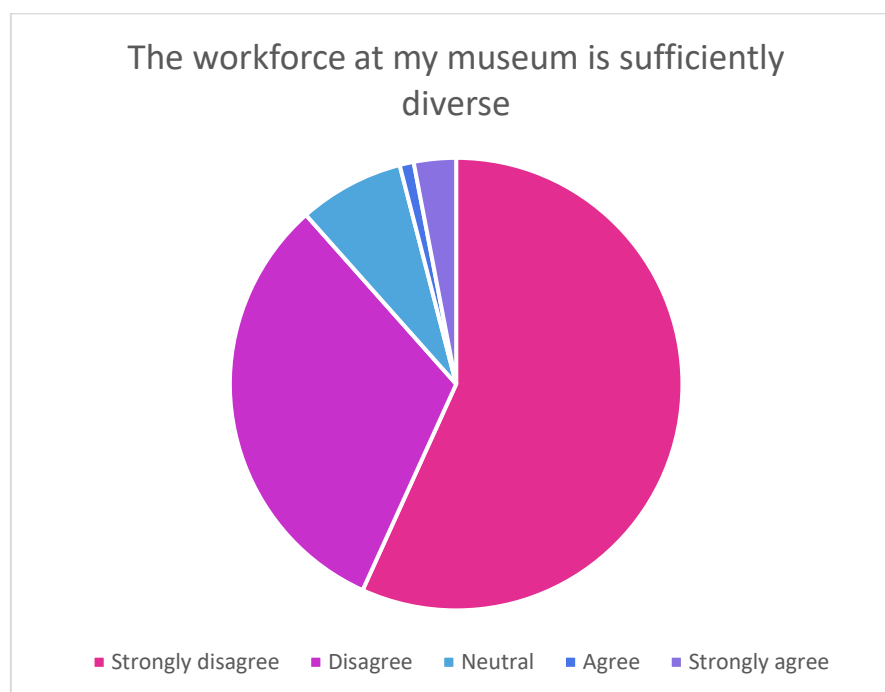
Across the sessions, trustees, elected officials, and funders were identified as acting as barriers by those in senior management and leadership positions; those who considered themselves to be at a more operational level tended to identify barriers at senior management/organisational level. One participant referenced the 'noisy and powerful interest groups associated with museums' as a barrier to change in their organisation.

'Workplace culture' (either explicitly stated or implied through comments) was identified as a barrier by some participants; this seems to have been related to the factors that influenced high levels of perceived bureaucracy among participants, including concentration within local authorities and other non-independent

museums. Some participants identified that there were specifically structurally racist elements within their workplace culture, or those that were discriminatory across a range of factors. One participant saw disconnection from their organisation (whether due to pandemic-related changes or a longer standing internal communication issues) as a barrier for them. A problematic, denial-based, or unresponsive workplace culture was related to wider social trends by some individuals. Colleagues were identified as a part of this, both as positive and as negative, factors.

Overall, the participants in these focus groups do not feel that the museums and heritage workforce is sufficiently diverse.<sup>3</sup>

- 45% of respondents strongly disagreed with the statement
- 25% of respondents disagreed
- 6% indicated neutrality
- 3% agreed or strongly agreed



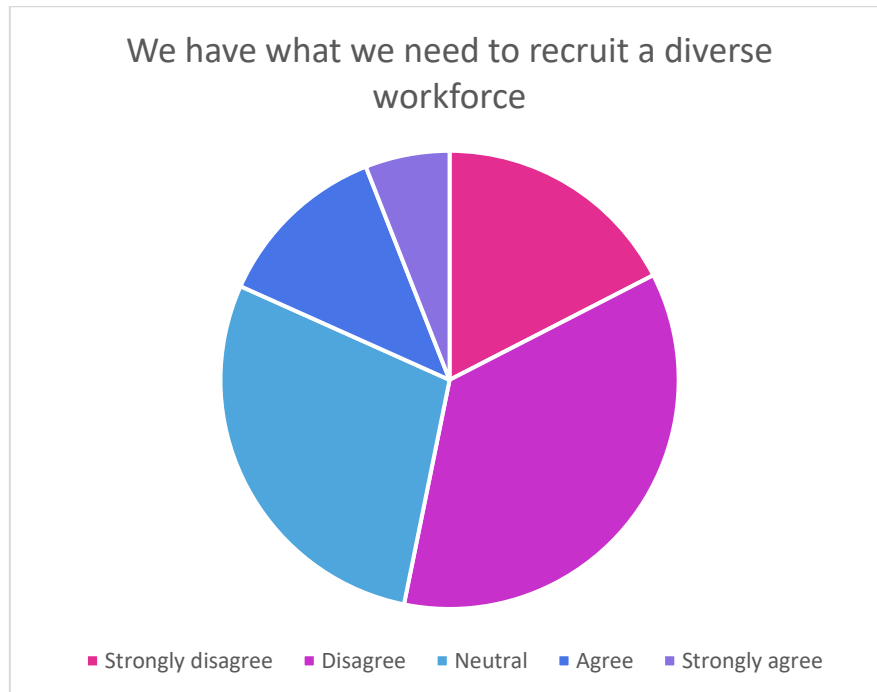
There was some spread within the responses on the statement *We have what we need to recruit a diverse workforce.*

- 33% of respondents disagreed with this statement
- 27% of participants indicated neutrality
- 16% of the group strongly disagreed
- 11% of participants agreed

<sup>3</sup> This statement was drawn as a direct quote from a senior HR professional who participated in the HR subgroup. The nature of 'sufficiency' was highlighted or questioned by some participants within the groups.

- 5% of participants strongly agreed

Several the comments on this area, in particular, expressed the idea that the sector has what is necessary for recruiting a diverse workforce, but that museums either aren't using these tools, or are not using them appropriately.



These two statements provoked higher levels of disagreement than in other areas; they also provoked substantial comments from within the group. This may reflect that, unlike conversations around race and racism (which are relatively new to the majority-white museums workforce), the museum and heritage sectors have been supported to think and talk about diversifying their workforce extensively over the past two decades<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> For example, through Skills for the Future, c. 2009-2020, Heritage Lottery Fund invested more than £43 million in workforce diversification across the UK heritage sector. [https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/sites/default/files/media/sbd\\_final\\_skills\\_for\\_the\\_future\\_forpublication.docx](https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/sites/default/files/media/sbd_final_skills_for_the_future_forpublication.docx) accessed 17/07/2021

## ADDITIONAL QUALITATIVE SLIDES AND DISCUSSION

Two additional qualitative comments slides were also presented to the focus group participants, following the completion of the four sets of agreement scales.

### **What support do you and your organisation need?**

Facilitators then invited participants to share the support they would like in this area; facilitators also prompted respondents to reflect on whether they were unsure of what they needed, and to share the barriers or issues they were facing, instead. Participants offered a total of 199 individual comments within this section; additional comments from across the session that specifically referred to support needs have been referenced here.

In general, the groups expressed an appetite throughout and across the sessions for guidance on 'how' to implement decolonisation within their work.<sup>5</sup> Some of these requests were for materials that already exist: effectively marketed communication around the resources already available to the sector is an important element of supporting the further development of museums.

A few participants highlighted that their confidence hits a stumbling block when communicating about issues of decolonising and anti-racism work, especially when they anticipate resistance. This appears to be most requested for those who are working with older volunteers, who are perceived by some participants as resistant to change or to inclusion initiatives.

One of the additional requests made within the sessions was for more information: specifically relevant historic literature that can help the museum workforce to better understand their collections and how they connect to contemporary racism. Tied to this was an indication that many museums feel that they need to prioritise research within their own organisation, to fully understand and communicate the connections between their museums as organisations (including in terms of foundation and history) and their collections, and the 21<sup>st</sup> century legacies of empire, slavery and colonialism.

### **Discussion**

Most sessions concluded with a period of discussion (usually for about 15 minutes), during which participants asked questions, or highlighted areas they would like to discuss further. In some instances, the facilitators offered prompts for these discussions, as based on comments shared in the session, which allowed participants

---

<sup>5</sup> As has been noted, these focus groups occurred in advance of the release of the MA's guidance in November 2021; it will be important to assess uptake of this guidance in 2022, and to see whether this has addressed the need.



to explore further. Facilitators also often shared key resources at this time: most sessions involved at least one request for a guide on language or glossary, and facilitators shared those guides included in the project resources. The discussion points have been integrated throughout this report, as they related to the narrative.

## Conclusion

***The workforce wants to have conversations about the legacies of empire, slavery, and colonialism, but requires support to implement change within their organisations.***

*Participants were active, open, and honest within these discussions, and welcomed the opportunity to have facilitated discussions with colleagues. The organisational sessions were especially successful, prompting several teams to consider themes of anti-racism and decolonial practice for the first time as a group. Despite the recognition of issues across the sector, the workforce does not know how to implement change. Much of the sector, while willing, lack confidence and are uninformed in the relevant areas, and conversations about race, equity, and organisational change are clearly in the early stages for much the museums and heritage sector.*

***The museums and heritage workforce would like to work closely with, and support, a decolonised curriculum.***

*The response to this statement within the session was overwhelmingly positive: museums support close working within a decolonised curriculum, and this presents a potential opportunity for future programming and partnership work. This has been echoed across other research strands for this project.*

***The museum sector requires leadership***

*While the project team recognise that much meaningful change occurs from a grassroots level, there is a clear indication that the museum workforce is looking for support and leadership. This is especially true within organisations: a lack of organisational support or clarity around stance was highlighted as a significant barrier to change. Leadership in embracing anti-racist practice must also be demonstrated at national and organisation levels. Museums Galleries Scotland's work was welcomed and should continue to be active and visible; further commitments and clarity of messaging from Scottish Government would be welcomed from the sector.*

***Participants within these focus groups recognise that the staff and visitor profile of Scotland's museums is not representative of Scotland's people.***

*With a few exceptions, the workforce within Scotland's museums is aware that it is not currently recruiting or working inclusively across Scotland's population, and it wants to be able to change this. On the whole, the participants in these focus groups do not feel that the museums and heritage workforce itself reflects the diversity of the nation.*