

# Culture and Communities Committee

10.00am, Thursday, 7 December 2023

## Museums and Galleries Edinburgh - Policies and Decolonisation Working Group Update

Executive/routine  
Wards

Routine  
All

### 1. Recommendations

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- 1.1 Committee is asked to note the information provided in the report, which was requested at the Committee meeting on 11 May 2023.

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Executive Director of Place

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## Museums and Galleries Edinburgh - Policies and Decolonisation Working Group Update

### 2. Executive Summary

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- 2.1 This report summarises how Museums and Galleries Edinburgh's collections and activity progress Council and national museum sector objectives, and updates on the work of its Decolonisation Working Group (Appendix 1).

### 3. Background

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- 3.1 In May 2023, Committee [received](#) two core policies for renewal - the Collections Development Policy and the Exhibitions Policy. Both have recently been updated to reflect the Council's strategic objectives, and those of the new National Strategy for Scotland's Museums and Galleries 2023-2030, published by Museums Galleries Scotland on behalf of Scottish Government.
- 3.2 Committee requested updates on two points:
- 3.2.1 How Edinburgh Museums and Galleries collections could reflect the Scotland's Museum and Galleries Strategy's focus on wellbeing, the climate crisis and decolonisation. The report should include a section on whether an audit of the collections for links to slavery, colonialism and racism could be undertaken; and
- 3.2.2 Work of the Decolonisation Working Group, including progress made to date in repatriating looted or unethically acquired items from Edinburgh's collections and ways in which the Council may seek to be proactive as well as reactive in repatriating these items.

### 4. Main report

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- 4.1 Contemporary collecting is a core activity for museums. It is key to ensuring collections remain current, comprehensive and relevant to local people. Museums and Galleries Edinburgh (MGE) regularly undertakes focussed collecting projects in the field with local communities and groups, and accepts donations of material offered by donors into the permanent collections where they reflect collecting priorities.

- 4.2 Three recent projects illustrating this and their alignment with National Strategy objectives are:
- 4.2.1 Covid-19 Collecting Project: This set out to capture experiences of the people of Edinburgh living with the impacts of lockdown through collection of everyday objects: <https://www.edinburghmuseums.org.uk/covid-19-contemporary-collecting>. Many evocative objects were donated, among them distillery-produced hand sanitiser, supermarket staff Personal Protective Equipment and crocheted blankets, Oral history testimonies were collected in partnership with the University of Edinburgh on: <https://lothianlockdown.org/>;
- 4.2.2 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protest collecting: Following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, the Council acquired a significant donation of material from the BLM protest held in Holyrood Park on 7 June 2020. An online exhibition was created for Black History Month, highlighting just some of the placards being accessioned into the permanent collections: <https://www.capitalcollections.org.uk/view-item?i=51168>; and
- 4.2.3 Wellbeing is considered as part of the planning process for many of MGE's outputs. For example, an exhibition being developed on craft and protest will include sessions with community groups to produce statements reflecting their values. The service recently worked with the University of Edinburgh on a 'Settling in with the Past' programme in conjunction with the WEA (Workers' Educational Association) to welcome new arrivals using our collections. The programme will be run again in partnership with the University and its student wellbeing services. Students will be referred to a programme to help with their mental health, and the Museum of Edinburgh and Writers' Museum will be participating by providing tours with a focus on wellbeing and belonging.
- 4.3 Climate Crisis/Justice is likely to become a key collecting strand, and has for several years been an issue being addressed mainly through exhibitions - the Think Global, Act Local exhibition at Museum of Edinburgh also involved a project with school children to transform the historic courtyard into an eco-friendly community space: <https://www.edinburghmuseums.org.uk/whats-on/think-local-act-global>. At City Art Centre, the upcoming Landscape Awards and Deep-Rooted exhibitions will be linked with a number of related events as we work to raise public awareness in this area: <https://www.edinburghmuseums.org.uk/whats-on/deep-rooted>.
- 4.4 The Decolonising Working Group is assessing current work and potential projects and programmes centring decolonisation. It recognises that the city cannot and should not undertake this in isolation, and participation in programmes such as Black History Month: <https://www.edinburghmuseums.org.uk/black-history-month-2023#:~:text=Each%20year%2C%20the%20learning%20and,Month%20during%20October%20since%202001> and work to co-produce exhibitions (such as the Windrush Creative Legacies at Museum of Edinburgh) are vital: <https://www.edinburghmuseums.org.uk/whats-on/windrush-legacy-creative-reflections>.

- 4.5 More information about the work of the Decolonisation Working Group is included in Appendix 1.
- 4.6 Officers recognise the need to audit collections to ensure their effective management, open up opportunities for public access and use, and to make informed decisions about future research, display and collecting practice.
- 4.7 While the Council does not hold ethnographic or world culture collections with clear and explicit examples, there are inevitably objects (and collection records) across our historic collections which link – laterally if not directly – to Edinburgh’s part in enabling and benefitting from the slave trade and colonialism, and the racist attitudes and language these legacies engendered. These issues are dealt with as they arise
- 4.8 The service participates in wider sector audits and with academic partners. For example, as part of our anti-racism action framework, we initiated an internship recognising and addressing racism and imperialist attitudes as represented through numerous books and objects in our Museum of Childhood collection. This work was supported by the Scottish Graduate School for Arts and Humanities.
- 4.9 A dedicated, comprehensive internal audit would need significant additional resourcing to complete within a reasonable timeframe due to staffing levels and existing workloads. If funding was available, the service would actively recruit people with lived experience of the issues under discussion, helping to diversify the workforce through the process and ensure multiplicity of interpretative voice.
- 4.10 In the meantime, the Council is actively collecting artworks by artists from different backgrounds and will continue to do so. Some artworks will address colonial legacies (such as Sekai Machache's photographs). A forthcoming museum collecting project which we are undertaking with Edinburgh Interfaith Association, Keep the Faith, will also actively address gaps in our collections’ representation of the many faith communities in modern-day Edinburgh.

## **5. Next Steps**

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- 5.1 Officers will continue to implement the service led approach and projects as described above. The theme of contemporary collecting will form a key part of the future service plan with the proposed new collections centre supporting the ambition to provide more resources for doing so.

## **6. Financial impact**

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- 6.1 All costs involved in delivering the work detailed in this report is contained within the 2023/ 24 revenue budget held by Culture and Wellbeing and through fundraising for public grants, charitable trusts and foundations.

## 7. Equality and Poverty Impact

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- 7.1 Continuation of the current service approach will allow access for all Edinburgh residents to engage with our collections and themes of wellbeing, the climate crisis and decolonisation. There are no further equalities and poverty factors have been identified that will need to be taken into account for this report. The Museums and Galleries service is engaged with the wider organisational approach to specific equality duties, the Equality and Diversity Framework, the End Poverty Edinburgh Plan, and our broader intention to shift the culture of the organisation to better embed equality.

## 8. Climate and Nature Emergency Implications

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- 8.1 As a public body, the Council has statutory duties relating to climate emissions and biodiversity. The Council

*“must, in exercising its functions, act in the way best calculated to contribute to the delivery of emissions reduction targets”*

(Climate Change (Emissions Reductions Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019), and

*“in exercising any functions, to further the conservation of biodiversity so far as it is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions”*

(Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004)

- 8.2 The City of Edinburgh Council declared a Climate Emergency in 2019 and committed to work towards a target of net zero emissions by 2030 for both city and corporate emissions, and embedded this as a core priority of the Council Business Plan 2023-27. The Council also declared a Nature Emergency in 2023.

### **Environmental Impacts**

- 8.3 Service led focus on environmental issues will help to raise awareness of the climate crisis.
- 8.4 The report does not contain any actions or consequences that negatively effect the Council’s [2030 Climate Strategy](#). The Heritage, Cultural Venues, Museums and Galleries service is working closely with colleagues on actions to support the strategy.

## 9. Risk, policy, compliance, governance and community impact

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- 9.1 Integrated Impact Assessments were produced to accompany each policy for the previous committee report in May and the documents and are available on request.

## 10. Background reading/external references

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- 10.1 [Scotland's Museums and Galleries Strategy - Museums Galleries Scotland](#).

## 11. Appendices

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11.1 Appendix 1 – Decolonisation Working Group Update.

### Decolonisation Working Group Update

What decolonising means for museums today - Extract from 'Supporting Decolonisation in Museums' – Museums Association (2022)

“Decolonising involves creatively reimagining the way museums work, who they work with and what they value. It covers all areas of practice and creates a framework to better support people and institutions. Decolonising is a collective activity, which can be messy, thoughtful, imaginative, and emotional.

It is driven by the desire for justice and equity in that it aims to rebalance power and representation away from the coloniser narrative of history and society. This work is intersectional, as it challenges structural inequalities across the board to redress forms of historic and ongoing harm.

Decolonising is often confused with other areas of practice, such as repatriation or work on equality, diversity and inclusion. Both of these areas overlap with decolonising and are an important part of it. But decolonising encompasses all areas of practice, and seeks long-term structural change in museums”.

- 1 Museums and Galleries has created a cross-team working group to explore what decolonisation means in our context, using the Museums Association decolonising guidance and principles as our starting point. The Group is currently seeking input from a range of partners and stakeholders in order to create a proposal for a major, funded programme of strategic and practical decolonising activity designed to initiate a cultural shift in the way we work and give us confidence that the Service is achieving our goal of providing 'welcoming spaces for all'.
- 2 This work takes place at a time when there is growing awareness and acknowledgement across the UK of how systemic exclusion is commonplace across society, including in our public services and cultural spaces, and how the legacy of slavery and colonialism continues to impact the life chances and experiences of many people of Black and Minority Ethnic heritage.
- 3 In Edinburgh, the independent Edinburgh Slavery and Colonialism Legacy Review (2020-22) – and subsequently the work beginning to deliver all 10 Recommendations made in its report – has brought the need for action, and the Council's commitment to delivering change, into sharp focus.
- 4 Within the museum sector, Museums Galleries Scotland has made recommendations to Scottish Government about the ways that Scottish museums and galleries can become anti-racist and proactive in taking an inclusive approach to recruitment, programming, collecting and communicating in Scottish Museums about the history of empire, slavery and migration. The new national Museum Strategy confirms there is significant support and resource available to undertake work which helps the sector achieve these aims.

- 5 As the capital city's museum service, MGE expects to play an active part in any national programme being rolled out to deliver these objectives, and to achieve the decolonisation recommendation of the ESCLR review.
- 6 The Decolonisation Working Group has already hosted a meeting with other local authority colleagues to share our learning about undertaking civic work to acknowledge our colonial past and its legacies, and have collaborated with Hannah Lavery, the Edinburgh Makar, on a project to highlight the need for this work. It will explore the need for (and benefits of) a revised, objective and holistic re-interpretation of Edinburgh's past and our approach to interpretation, to acknowledge the city's part in enabling and benefiting from both the slave trade and colonialism.
- 7 The vast majority of Edinburgh's historic collections were donated to the city, usually with little or no information about the donor or how or why they were collected. However, while given their domestic nature there is little to suggest looting or unethical acquisition, some objects do warrant further research i.e., Sudanese items in the Haig collection donated by the family to the city, and the Samoan and Pacific items in the Robert Louis Stevenson collections. While not acquired unethically, it would be good practice to be able to consult with people of Oceanian background to understand more about them, and to check that their display and/ or care arrangements are appropriate and sensitive to cultural expectations.
- 8 The Service has not received any repatriation requests, but if we did, would seek to proactively progress these positively and constructively with the authority of elected members. Similarly, if we were to discover something appropriate for repatriation, we would actively seek out a resolution and recognise the ethical imperative to do so.