



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

**Thursday 28 November 2024**

**Session 6**



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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**Thursday 28 November 2024**

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**CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE**  
**26<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2024, Session 6**

**CONVENER**

\*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

\*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)

\*Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)

\*Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)

\*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

Sheila Asante (Museums Galleries Scotland)

Lucy Casot (Museums Galleries Scotland)

Foysof Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab) (Committee Substitute)

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

Jatin Haria (Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums Steering Group)

Zandra Yeaman (Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums Steering Group)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

James Johnston

**LOCATION**

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)



## Scottish Parliament

### Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

*Thursday 28 November 2024*

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:41]*

### Decision on Taking Business in Private

**The Convener (Clare Adamson):** Good morning, and a warm welcome to the 26th meeting in 2024 of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee. We have received apologies from Keith Brown, and Jackie Dunbar is attending as his substitute. I invite Ms Dunbar to declare any relevant interests.

**Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** I have none that I am aware of.

**The Convener:** I also welcome Foysoy Choudhury, who joins us as a substitute for Mr Bibby.

I put on record our thanks to Megan Caskie, who is, sadly, leaving us to take up a promoted post in the legislation team. I can say with confidence that our loss is the legislation team's gain. On behalf of the committee, I thank Megan for her tremendous effort and wish her every success in her new role.

Our first agenda item is a decision on taking business in private. Are members content to take item 3 in private?

**Members indicated agreement.**

## Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums

09:42

**The Convener:** Under our second agenda item, we will take evidence on the progress of the empire, slavery and Scotland's museums project. We are joined by Lucy Casot, the chief executive of Museums Galleries Scotland, and Sheila Asante, its delivering change programme manager; and by Jatin Haria, the chair of the empire, slavery and Scotland's museums steering group, and Zandra Yeaman, a member of the group.

I thank the witnesses for their attendance and for their joint submission. As outlined in our papers, we hope to cover your views on the Scottish Government's response to the recommendations; the actions that have been taken by the museums sector; the next steps, including the work to scope a new organisation to lead on that work; progress on the delivering change project; and potential barriers to progress.

I will start by asking about barriers to progress. How content are you with the progress that has been made thus far to embed the recommendations? What do you see as the key stumbling blocks that might lie ahead? How proactive are the museums sector and individual museums in delivering the work?

Who will volunteer to answer first? I will put you on the spot, Lucy.

**Lucy Casot (Museums Galleries Scotland):** Thank you so much for inviting us to talk to the committee about this important work. It has been a long piece of work that is vital not just to addressing the future needs of the museums and galleries sector but to the way in which the sector can support change in society as a whole. That is the wider context.

Museums Galleries Scotland's involvement came about on the back of the murder of George Floyd and the motion in the Parliament on Black Lives Matter, which set out the ambition and commitment to create a dedicated space in Scotland to address those legacies. However, it is important to acknowledge that the work started long before then; in particular, it was led by the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights, and both Jatin Haria and Zandra Yeaman were involved. It is important to recognise that it is a long-term project. We are trying to address decades—even centuries—of harm that has been caused.

09:45

One challenge is that the change that we want in the sector is huge and will take time to deliver. Others at the table can probably say more about the specific barriers, but the elephant in the room is funding. The work will take real commitment.

There was work to create the recommendations, which were accepted in full. The recommendations requested an initial £5 million to take the work forward. So far, £200,000 has been made available: £100,000 for the steering group and £100,000 for work that is being led by MGS. I am sure that we will talk about that this morning.

It is important to say that there is a real commitment to this work from across the museums and galleries sector. There is a huge commitment to it from MGS, and there is a huge appetite for it when it comes to the response from the sector. Museums really want to do the work, because they recognise its importance, but the fact that the sector is so fragile is a challenge. Museums need to be open in order to do the work, and they need to be staffed properly with people who can engage with communities, look at collections, understand questions about provenance, look again at the stories that we tell and make changes to the exhibitions.

A huge breadth of work needs to happen. We cannot do it quickly, but what is positive is how committed the sector is to doing that work; the learning that we have from the great examples of those who have been doing the work for longest, who can share that experience and knowledge with others; and the fact that the sector will work together to do that.

Sheila Asante's project—our delivering change project—is part of MGS's response. There were six recommendations, including those for the Scottish Government, those for MGS as the national development body and those for the sector as a whole. Those six recommendations and how all the different parties act to fulfil them need to be seen together. We are developing our knowledge on how to do that work, and there are a lot of positives, but we will need that long-term commitment to make it happen.

**Zandra Yeaman (Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums Steering Group):** Thank you for inviting us along today.

A very basic barrier is finance. Our recommendation 1 involves a dedicated space, and £100,000 has afforded us the opportunity to employ a member of staff, but that amount of money will not go beyond a year.

Other barriers are much more intangible. It is about knowledge, skills, expertise and understanding anti-racism. That is not the same as

equality, diversity and inclusion. Many organisations get confused about that.

Another barrier concerns the ability to take the time to look at museum sector infrastructure—employment roles and skills gaps—and take legal, positive action steps that enable us to racially diversify the staffing.

We could spend the whole hour talking about the barriers. However, we also want to talk about some of the positive things that are happening.

**Sheila Asante (Museums Galleries Scotland):** When it comes to the positives, there is a real appetite in the sector to take this work forward, and the recommendations were welcomed by the sector. We have seen that in our work to develop racial literacy through an anti-racism programme, as part of delivering change—our programme was oversubscribed. There is definitely an appetite in the sector to have that understanding and to develop things to be better.

The most important thing when it comes to funding is that short-term funding can seem tokenistic if there is no understanding that long-term change is needed. For long-term change, there needs to be an approach that makes people feel that they will be funded going forward and that there is a future to their work.

**Jatin Haria (Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums Steering Group):** Thank you for inviting us.

As Lucy Casot said, the work has not just started recently. The Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights has been co-ordinating black history month in Scotland since 2001. The motion that she mentioned was passed in the Parliament in 2020, I believe. In a few weeks, we will be in 2025, so there will have been a long gap. It took a long time for the Scottish Government to respond to the recommendations in the report—I am not sure why it took so long—and some momentum was probably lost during the process.

There is an expectation management issue to be handled. The Parliament unanimously passed a motion saying that there should be "a dedicated space", but that did not create a dedicated space.

I will not say much more about the funding, as other people have talked about that, but the £100,000 will just be wasted if we do not continue funding something and whatever we do comes to an end in a year's time. It is not just the money; all our time and effort would have been totally wasted, and expectations will have been built up.

Although the focus is on museums and galleries, the issue is much wider than that. It is about building an anti-racist Scotland. There are educational recommendations and other things,

but this initiative is just one part of the whole picture, although it is a key part.

One of the reasons why museums need to be involved is the history behind it all. In recent times, we have done a lot more work on Scotland's role in slavery, but we have not done so much on empire. There is a lot more research still to be done, and that takes money for the researchers and historians. It is probably easier to research slavery, because that was more of a state-sanctioned thing, whereas the empire connections involve a lot more individuals from Scotland. That will take a lot more digging into Scottish people's role in all that.

If we are serious about it, the money has to be provided. It does not necessarily have to be just from the Scottish Government, but funding has to be provided if we are to get to where we want to be. As I said, it is not just about museums.

**Zandra Yeaman:** This is not an abstract matter. It is not about history; it is about the present. From my perspective, the reason why we started a museum campaign in 2014 was to enable the whole of society to understand how racism in Scotland is not an abstract concept; it has an impact on all our lives. Most people, from early years to adulthood, will get taken to a museum. Even if their parents do not take them, schools do. Museums are a great example of a colonial project, as they come from and are part of the colonial system. They are repositories of humanity, using collections, and we can tell the stories by using collections. That is one of the reasons why museums have been seen as a very important tool in anti-racist practice by enabling people to understand that racism is not an abstract concept or something that is just for our history books.

**Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** Nobody denies the ambitions that are in place in this project. As you have all identified, the ability to make things happen will probably come down to cost and financial constraints. Museums and galleries provide a huge opportunity for individuals to see, understand and gain knowledge from the past. You have also talked about how you manage for the future.

We have heard from the sector that timings and processes have to change in order for it to survive, and that you are finding it difficult to recruit the next generation of individuals for the sector. How realistic are you about achieving, in the short term, some of the goals and ambitions that you wish to try to achieve? No one is denying that the process is there but, at the same time, there are obstacles in front of you even today, as we go into a budget process that we know will be difficult. I cannot see the sector fulfilling its ambitions in the short term,

because of the financial constraints that it will find itself in.

Lucy, you have told us in the past about the difficulties that the sector is facing and the complexities of attracting investment, financial support and even individuals, who perceive that, if they join you, it will be for a short-term job and not a career, because of the financial constraints. It would be good to tease out some of that, because, yes, you want to try to identify and progress things, but if you are not in a position to do so, I do not know how you will fulfil some of your ambitions.

**Lucy Casot:** Those are the challenges and the realities that we are grappling with at the moment. The future of the museum sector is not to stand still. It must evolve. It is not about trying to preserve things or get enough money to do all the things that we are doing in the way that we are doing them. We are looking at a programme of change, and that is about choices. Part of those choices must be about how we serve Scotland's communities—all of them. In that programme of change, how do we make those choices about the stories that we tell? How do we choose which exhibitions we do? How do we choose which communities we work with?

The research gives us such powerful information about the challenges that we have. We talk a lot about all the areas where we know that museums can have a positive impact, but what we have identified here is an area where museums are causing harm. We cannot not address this. This is one of the important lenses through which we need to look when making those choices—such as where to invest and in what sort of activity—and for our evolution as a sector. If we are going to run an education programme, let us look at what we have not done; if we are going to run some community programmes and make commitments to working with some people, let us ask, "Who have we never worked with before?"

It is not just the sector workforce that is not as diverse as it needs to be; it is similar with audiences. If we are making a call for public money, we need to ensure that public money is serving all the public. We take the human right to access culture very seriously.

**Alexander Stewart:** It is also about understanding the community link. There is a vast opportunity here to see how you can marry your ambitions for that process and the work that you can do in a community. It has already been identified that some communities will be much more receptive than others, so it is about trying to get the message across to the harder-to-reach communities. That is what you need to try to identify. We know where we are with culture in some areas, but it is about trying to ensure that

the culture element is broad enough to go into the areas where it is more difficult to get that communication and understanding.

**Lucy Casot:** Communities first need to feel welcome in our spaces. I am sure that both Sheila Asante and Zandra Yeaman can come in on that point about work that is happening with communities.

**Zandra Yeaman:** I love that question—thank you. You are absolutely right that it is about infrastructure. That is what we are working to.

I am in a privileged position. Although I am part of the steering group, I work in the Hunterian museum at the University of Glasgow. I am right in a university museum that provides the education for emerging museum professionals. Although a lot of my work there is teaching, we are also looking at positive action programmes that enable us to bring in more racially diverse people to choose museum studies or museum education as a topic. That is what I meant about time. We need finance and we need time, because that is not a year's project. In fact, it is not a project; it is about embedding change, and I am privileged to be in a place where we are doing that.

You have talked about hidden communities. However, communities are not hidden; they are in plain sight. When we are doing the work that we do, we actively go out. The museum that I am working in is in one part of Glasgow, but we have already pulled hubs together from the east, the north, the south and the west.

10:00

It is important to have the skills to do participation. We have developed a participation framework that enables us to think about participation with not only external but internal stakeholders. We also have to know how to use participatory practice internally as well as externally, because if we cannot do that with our colleagues and with each other, we certainly cannot do it with communities.

I will pick up on the notion of community. What do we mean when we talk about communities? That takes us back to the paradigm shift in our thinking and the need to take an anti-racist approach. Those are all elements of the work. It is a deep dive and it is for all of society, because we are all impacted by the legacy of empire, slavery and colonialism.

**Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** I will stay away from the issue of finances, because I think we should put those questions to the cabinet secretary when we see the budget next week and find out where this agenda sits within the expectation of a rising budget for culture.

I will talk about the political context. There have already been some comments about this not being a new piece of work, as there has been more than a decade of work building towards the point of having a major programme such as this. The political context has changed in that time and we have seen a worrying regrowth and mainstreaming of far-right ideas, with people being apologists for imperialism and worse. Have you detected a growing backlash against the agenda that you are trying to pursue? Is there reluctance or resistance within the sector, hostility from the media and social media or even public reaction to interpretations of existing collections?

**Zandra Yeaman:** That gives me the opportunity to invite the committee to the Hunterian museum to see the curating discomfort intervention. If you have not seen it already, please get in touch and we will take you on a tour.

Curating discomfort is an initiative that was funded by Museums Galleries Scotland—I am the curator of discomfort, so if you are feeling uncomfortable, I am doing my job well. There was some concern, because the intervention goes to the heart of what we are discussing today and does that in a visible context. We wondered what the reaction was going to be, so I am pleased to be able to tell you something positive. The public reaction, not only locally but nationally and globally and not only from audiences but from people within the sector, has been immense and overwhelming, going beyond what even I thought it would be. The reaction from the public has been fantastic.

On the media side, we have not had much negative press. The usual suspects, such as the *Daily Mail*, will sometimes pick on someone like me who is doing the work, but that is the press, not the public, and we have to separate the two. You might read articles about the culture war, but that war is within the media, not on the ground in Glasgow or Scotland.

We have to be alert to the rise of fascism in Scotland, because that is real. I attended an event about that at the festival of politics. It is visible and we should not ignore it but, as an anti-racist activist, I see that as proof that we are winning. Why would someone bother turning up if they did not think that there was something to push against? We have been having the conversation for more than 20 years and I think that the Scottish public are smart enough for this and more than ready for it.

**Patrick Harvie:** That is encouraging—thank you.

**Lucy Casot:** We did seven different pieces of research—Sheila Asante was the project manager for the empire, slavery and Scotland's museums



project, so I am taking her glory here. One of the pieces of research that were very important was the Scotpulse survey. That was not about people who want to know about the work feeding in their thoughts; there was a range of ways in which people could contribute their thoughts. That survey covered a cross-section of the population. More than 80 per cent of people are saying that the work needs to happen: they are supportive of the work happening and acknowledge the importance of the stories being told. People want it to happen, and Zandra Yeaman is absolutely right. There are a few loud voices, but we should not allow them to stop us from doing this work.

**Zandra Yeaman:** Although many of us in the sector are doing this work, the dedicated space is a separate thing. It is absolutely right that museums are acknowledging and addressing the past harms, but the dedicated space is a completely different concept. It is almost a counter-culture. Do not panic, though, about the idea of counter-culture; counter-culture is good. One of the best museums in Glasgow is the Glasgow Women's Library. That is a great example of what counter-culture achieves, thinking in particular of intersectional feminism. When we are thinking about a dedicated space that is black led, that is equally important as we think about how we are driving change in our work and in this area to make an anti-racist Scotland a reality.

**Jatin Haria:** There will always be some people who are against such initiatives, and there is nothing that we can do about that, but the point of this work is to help educate the vast majority of people, who probably do not know much about Scotland's role in empire and slavery. The more we can tell them about it, the less likely they are to get on the side of the absolute racists and fascists. It will never change; they are a very small minority.

If the Scottish Government allocates even £100,000, or any amount of money, to this sort of work, that will get a backlash. That is just something that we have to deal with, and there is no way round it. That is not a reason not to give funding.

**Patrick Harvie:** I also want to ask about repatriation. The section of our written briefing that deals with that quotes from the Scottish Government:

"Where objects are proven to have been acquired unethically we strongly encourage that museums consider repatriation/rematriation of these objects."

The phrase

"Where objects are proven to have been acquired unethically"

could mean everything or nothing, it seems to me. I wonder whether any further work needs to be done on defining what that means. Is the context

of imperialism enough in itself to evidence unethical acquisition? Is a different, more specific or precise definition required, so that any decision not to consider taking that action can be challenged?

**Lucy Casot:** That is an interesting question. It is an area with evolving practice. There are a lot of objects that clearly meet that definition, and I think that we should start there. We keep developing the thinking around that as we build our knowledge. Examples include the return of the Benin bronzes, which were acquired in what was clearly a punitive raid. There is no question about the unethical acquisition of some of the objects that are in our collections. If we begin the work there, we will gain more confidence.

There are other ways in which repatriation happens. There is an interesting example from the Hunterian of where a museum is voluntarily returning an object. It is not always a question of requests coming in. Zandra Yeaman may wish to talk about the galliwasp.

**Zandra Yeaman:** It is part of our curating discomfort intervention. There is always a legacy to that work. We have a partnership with the University of the West Indies, and we have repatriated the galliwasp, which is a Jamaican lizard that is extinct in Jamaica. It is important for research in the Caribbean but also for thinking about impact on the ground. Lizards in the Caribbean are very scary, and there are a lot of myths around them, so there can be a far-reaching impact on a society even from having a specimen.

On repatriation, I agree with Patrick Harvie that it could be argued that all acquisitions are unethical because they are part of the imperial legacy. A lot of work is being done on that across the sector. It is not only objects that were acquired through punitive raids that are being repatriated. The galliwasp is an example of that—it is the first natural specimen in Europe to be repatriated. Therefore, we are looking at other parts of the collection and not only the well-known objects. For example, most members of the public would know about the Benin bronzes, but they would not necessarily think about natural history specimens.

We are doing a lot of work on this, but it is key that every object is taken on its own merit. We do not want to see museums scrambling about, saying, "Can you take stuff back?", which goes back to the point about infrastructure. We are also working with partners in Australia, and other Government bodies are involved in repatriation. It is great to see that the conversations around this issue are opening up, because there was a time when that was not the case. There is a lot of movement on the issue in the sector.

**Sheila Asante:** I will follow on from what Zandra Yeaman and Lucy Casot said. We need to open up and continue to have those dialogues and to centre the people in the global south whose objects we hold. There will not always be a repatriation or a rematriation of an object, but we have to centre the voices of those people for whom this is really important and who need to be part of the conversation. It is not just about us having those conversations internally in Scotland; we must consider what the process looks like for people in the global south, too.

**Lucy Casot:** On the point about capacity and curatorial expertise, it takes time and research has to be done. Individual organisations might struggle with that. We have funded the reveal and connect project, which is a partnership between National Museums Scotland, the University of Glasgow, the University of Aberdeen, the University of Edinburgh and Glasgow Life. The project is using central expertise to look at the collections in museums around Scotland, which is good practice in looking at what people hold. We have a lot of material in our museums that we do not have good information about. That material might have inaccurate labels and we might hold inaccurate information about it, so there is a huge piece of work to identify how we hold those objects and which objects we should think about differently.

**Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab):** Good morning. I want to draw my colleagues' attention to the fact that I was part of the steering group at the beginning. However, when I was elected as an MSP, I walked away—or rather, I thought that I would leave them to do all the hard work, which they have done.

Zandra Yeaman, I have visited the Hunterian museum and have seen the work that you are doing and which you have done. I know from my involvement with the group that Professor Sir Geoff Palmer and others, including Jatin Haria and you, have been doing a lot of very important work, because this is a story that needs to be told. We all want this to be successful.

However, there is a question that I have always had. I have seen your presentation and have attended quite a few meetings. I know that this will take time, as we have heard from you and others, but what can the committee do to speed things up, and how can we spread the message?

**Lucy Casot:** It is great that the committee is holding this evidence session and giving time to the topic. This work has been happening for a while, and we are delighted to be able to discuss it with you, because the committee has the potential to raise its profile and to keep it in people's minds when it comes to the various demands on the culture budget and the culture sector as a whole.

This is not just a culture issue; indeed, in our paper, we refer to the Welsh Government's commitment to making Wales an anti-racist nation by 2030. However, although it is not seen as just a cultural issue, the culture sector is seen as crucial in achieving the culture change needed. Therefore, multiyear funding, through culture, has been put forward to support cultural organisations in being responsive.

That said, it is not just a culture budget issue. I know that this is the culture committee, but I would encourage wider thinking across the Parliament through the connections that you have. Museums and galleries can play a role in supporting the change that we need, including through working in partnership with education and others, and through the equalities agenda, but we should not see the issue as belonging just to museums and galleries.

10:15

**Zandra Yeaman:** It is also about recognising power and responsibility. For me, the work is about building social and cultural capital, because a lack of social networks or cultural capital perpetuates inequality across society. Picking up on what Lucy Casot has said, I think that it is about the broader context; we can build our social and cultural capital in these spaces.

That is not all, though. Given the power that you have, if you have gaps in your knowledge on this topic, come and speak to us. You have to be curious and open minded. Keep coming back and forth and having this unfinished conversation with us. It is great that you are having this meeting today but, for us, this is about what happens every day. It is about revisiting and being okay with your own vulnerability about where your knowledge gaps are. Obviously, we would, in addition, want you to ask the minister to give us more resources.

**Jatin Haria:** It is great that you are discussing issues of anti-racism. I do not think that that happens in every committee. My organisation did some research about how often race is mentioned in different committees, and after today's discussion, you will get a lot of brownie points in our next bit of research.

Going back to Zandra Yeaman's point, I suggest that you take up the visit offer, not just to the Hunterian but to other spaces. It would be a far better learning curve than sitting in a meeting. I do know that it takes time, though.

As Lucy Casot has said, this is not just a culture budget issue, and it is not just a culture issue either. It is a wider anti-racist issue for Scotland, and you should absolutely dig into it. What would be the anti-racism outcomes from spending the £100 million-plus that has been promised? You

need to question such things. This is not just about a dedicated space or museums and galleries; it is about the wider cultural agenda that is within your remit. What is the employment rate of minority communities in relation to the £100 million that might be spent over the next few years? What different programmes are being funded? It is about those sorts of things. We are asking for only £5 million of that £100 million, to push our work forward.

The Parliament unanimously passed the motion in 2020 to say that there should be a dedicated space. What was the point, if there are to be no resources for pursuing it? There are questions to be asked of the Government and the wider Parliament. I would say that definitely, you should, within your own remit, demand more anti-racist outcomes from the work that you focus on.

**Foyso Choudhury:** A lot of museums are making changes to have a dedicated space for showcasing the history involved. How is the group working on that with MGS and other organisations?

**Zandra Yeaman:** It must be understood that there is output that we see and then there is what happens behind the scenes. Any museum can put an exhibition in place; that does not mean that it is an anti-racist space. Any museum can have any output but, to go back to what we said at the start of the meeting, it is all about the internal infrastructure. There has to be a lot of work done on that.

For me, it is about thinking in public. Although there could be a dedicated space in a museum, there might be no thinking in public about what has been achieved in order to get there. Everyone sitting here works across the sector. I can tell you about lots of work that I am doing across Europe or globally. There is a global conversation happening, it is happening not only in Scotland but locally, nationally and internationally and we are all part of it in different ways. I chose the museum sector, because I thought it was a great space for my anti-racist practice. We are members of different groups but are all supporting the museum sector not only in Scotland but beyond.

**Jatin Haria:** I will answer your question about the work of the steering group in a moment, but I just want to say that there is a great danger of a backlash if localised spaces are not handled properly. This is not about having a space but about what accompanies it. I will give you an example: in the city of empire space at Kelvingrove, there is a historic book that uses very racist language and is displayed open, which means that schoolkids can come and see that language. Our fear is that they will see that language and use it in the playground next day.

We have raised the issue with Glasgow Life, which thinks that there is no problem. However, what happens if there is no education behind having that book there and no discussion of why that language was used at the time? I have not seen any sign of that. I am not saying that it is not there, but I have not seen it. Something like that could actually make things worse than having no such space in the museum. You cannot do something like that ad hoc; it must be far more co-ordinated and done in the round.

In hindsight, the steering group has learned that getting a group of people together to look at research is much easier than getting a group to look at how dedicated spaces should come about. We need to have different skill sets in the group and, indeed, we are looking at that now. At the moment, seven of us are doing this voluntarily; our first member of staff is starting next Monday, so things will pick up and a lot more connections will be made. It has taken time to get to where we are, which is disappointing, but things will move on after next week.

**Sheila Asante:** On the issue of the Glasgow museums display, some work is being done on tours that will specifically educate visitors about that piece.

As part of the delivering change programme, we have been looking at mirroring the model that Zandra Yeaman used at the Hunterian to get an organisational understanding of what change looks like, so that it is not done only in small parts of the organisation or only by those who are dedicated to the work. We have 19 museum transformers who are themselves going through a programme of anti-oppression work that has anti-racism as its main focus and which builds on that to ensure that we are intersectional in all our work.

Those 19 museums are piloting a process to look at what change means for an organisation. It is important to understand that that is about more than the exhibition spaces and outputs that people see—it is also about the work that is going on in the background. There is an appetite to interrogate how they work together in that respect.

**Foyso Choudhury:** You have said that all the work is done by volunteers, but do you have any expertise? Lucy Casot talked about the Welsh model. Has the steering group been in touch with anyone in Wales to find out whether that model is working?

**Sheila Asante:** Since the beginning of the project on empire and slavery in Scotland's museums—and now, with the delivery and change project—we have maintained communication with regard to the work that they are doing. We have made connections across the museum and

Government sectors, as well as with some freelancers.

It has been interesting to note that the museum sector has made a change to its curriculum, which has resulted in dedicated funding, and there was a massive push from the education sector to come into the museum sector in order to understand that curriculum. Therefore, there was a huge need for the museums to upskill really quickly, and some lessons have been learned about how quickly we can expect that upskilling to happen.

Another lesson that we have learned is that, whenever we change a space, another space needs to catch up. As I have said, the museums were seen as places that could tell those stories, using the objects that were collected, so that people could connect directly to those histories. There are lessons to be learned about creating spaces and ensuring that they are ready, but it is also really important to show that direct connection between the education and cultural sectors.

**Zandra Yeaman:** We all keep abreast of what is happening out there politically, particularly around anti-racism, but racism is a shape-shifter, so what works in Wales might not work in Scotland. We have to be very mindful of that—the political context is different. For me, that has always been quite an issue when we do this work, as you can be buying in the services of someone who has no understanding of the Scottish context. That is why the dedicated space was very important.

I am involved in other grass-roots work, such as the Black British museum and the Migration museum in London. Again, the context is not the same as what we have in Scotland, but that does not mean that we do not work with those groups.

A lot of things that are happening come from the grass roots. We have to be mindful that, although we are here today in this committee room at the Scottish Parliament, these conversations started at the anti-racist grass-roots level, and we should always honour that. We might be looking at policies and different Government strategies, not only in the UK but beyond, but we also have to keep ahead of what is happening at grass-roots level. It relates to what was said earlier about the hidden groups; even within the museum sector, there are many community museums that have done better work than some of the nationals. We should be mindful of that, too.

I am not a fan of the cookie-cutter approach. We should develop our own work. We can draw from expertise, but we should be able to develop our own way for Scotland.

**Alexander Stewart:** I have a quick supplementary question. You have talked about the lessons learned and the balance required, but

there was a bit of negativity in the survey that you talk about in your submission. It said that

“a ... number of respondents expressed frustration with a perceived pressure on museums to interpret all links with empire and colonialism in a negative way”.

As that is part of the equation, how do you respond to it?

**Zandra Yeaman:** Do you want me to respond to the concern that empire stories are always quite negative?

**Alexander Stewart:** As I have said, the respondents to the survey indicated that they felt that there was a pressure to interpret empire and colonialism in a negative way. Individuals have concerns about the whole process. How do you respond to that, when you are trying to strike this balance and get the lessons learned?

**Zandra Yeaman:** What is beautiful about that is that it proves that there is a need for education. I can give a very specific example that is not in the abstract. We have a statue of James Watt, who is someone whom we all know—a global figure who is memorialised in many countries for being the inventor of the steam engine. We also have evidence that James Watt was a human trafficker. People can be both things.

We have an object—a statue—that talks about that in the Hunterian museum, and what is exciting is that we get a lot of response from the public about it. Some of the public responses can be like a blog. They will say, for example, “It is great that you are doing that work,” while there are other responses that say, “Leave our statues alone. Do not be saying this about James Watt.” Such responses tell us that this is a part of history that that person never knew about. For me, it shows that there is a real education need in Scotland so that we can know our history. Nobody is all bad or all good; people can be two things at the same time.

This is about enabling ourselves to think critically about whom we memorialise, and there are positives and negatives to that. For some people, the invention of the steam engine was wonderful, but I do not think that anybody will say that human trafficking is wonderful. That is how you deal with the issue—not by being challenging or by saying that people are wrong, but through education. After all, you do not know what you do not know.

10:30

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** That was a very illuminating set of comments—

**Zandra Yeaman:** It is great when you find those things out, isn't it?

**Stephen Kerr:** Earlier, when I was listening to you, I must confess that I was concerned that you were not prepared to allow for nuance. I thought that you were describing people who did not quite see the world through your lenses as racist and fascist. That is not the case, is it?

**Zandra Yeaman:** No.

**Stephen Kerr:** Do you want to say a bit more about the importance of nuance in the way that we tell the story?

**Zandra Yeaman:** Okay. This comes from my own lived experience. I was born in Glasgow in 1968 to a south Asian Punjabi Sikh father and a Scottish-Irish Catholic mother—and, you are right, that impacts the lens through which I view the world. I was born a month before Enoch Powell's "rivers of blood" speech, which was an example of a politician using immigration to progress his career, so I have my own view of the world and how society has treated me. However, it is through that lens that you get that understanding.

I do not see people as racist, but I do see the engine that drives racism. My work is not about individual behaviour but about the structures and the engine that drive prejudice and inequality. Education is part of that, too. As a Glaswegian, I was shocked, when I first delved into history, that I did not know half the things that I know now. I do not think that that is okay.

**Stephen Kerr:** Do you understand, however, the concerns that some people, including me, have about the fact that, as a political activist—you have been very honest and said that you are one—you have chosen the museum space as a vehicle to promote your view of the world? That is not an unfair thing to say, is it?

**Zandra Yeaman:** No, it is not. For me, being an activist is about social and political change—so, what is an MSP? We must think about what we mean by the term "activism". Looking at the definition, an activist is someone who wants social and political change, and is that not what a politician wants? I do not know the difference.

**Stephen Kerr:** Absolutely. It is just that, perhaps, the traditional view of a museum, as that of a school, is that you do not go there to be re-educated to a certain way of thinking, but to have your curiosity piqued and your desire for learning enhanced. No?

**Zandra Yeaman:** Well, a museum is a space where you go for education. Would you not want to know the unvarnished truth about your own history rather than get a comfortable view of it?

**Stephen Kerr:** I deliberately used the word "re-education", because that is how some people might view that. That was behind the survey

response that you gave, which Alexander Stewart highlighted.

I can see that other people want to come in. Sheila, do you want to come in?

**Sheila Asante:** I question the term "re-education", which implies that our current education has been open to perspectives and has not only considered one particular perspective—essentially, that what is taught now is the only history, and that anything else that tries to challenge that or bring in a variety of perspectives is re-education. However, as Zandra was saying, what we are trying to do is to understand that history is not one particular story.

To go back to personal experience, I am half Ghanaian—so, from a place in which people were enslaved. However, I am also the great-great—I cannot remember how far down—granddaughter of the mayor of Liverpool, where ships that would carry enslaved people sailed from. I am not one thing and history is not one thing—it is ever-evolving.

What we ask is for people, including students and pupils, to think critically and to constantly question everything. As you have said, we want open dialogue, but we are not trying to re-educate people—rather, we are asking them to ask questions. If they keep asking those questions, they will better understand how we connect across the globe and also how Scottish history connects.

For example, the story of the Highland clearances is not a simple story of the clearances alone but includes the fact that those people who were colonised and persecuted and then became part of a colonising and persecuting endeavour themselves. That is not to say that they were bad people, but that they were part of a history that we need to have a conversation about to ensure that everyone can see all its sides. Then, people can start to use their own critical thinking.

**Stephen Kerr:** I completely concur with everything that you just said. It is important that we see the vileness and evil of slavery in the context of what else was happening and the complexity of that issue. That is a vital aspect of education. I am just expressing the concern, which perhaps other people also have, that we should not use this worthy endeavour as a vehicle for political activism, which I personally would not want to see our museum spaces or our schools being used overtly for. That is another point of view.

I started with the question about nuance because I would not like you to think that because I have those concerns, I am a racist or a fascist. In my view, I am neither.

**Zandra Yeaman:** That is why museums, which use object-based learning, are great spaces for these conversations. If you were to come and visit us, I am sure that you would find it quite enlightening. It is about being able to have these conversations in such a way that those accusations are not on the table. That is the point. We have to be able to let these things bubble up.

**Stephen Kerr:** That is really good to hear.

Jatin Haria, you said a couple of things that I want to come back to you on, and others can comment. You mentioned the exhibit at Kelvingrove, which I have been to see. I came away with a lot of concerns about the stuff that I saw and what I read in the narratives that went along with the objects on display. That feeds into my broader concern, which I have already articulated.

Let me ask you about your frustration about the vote in Parliament that has not resulted in anything. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but that happens quite a lot in the Scottish Parliament. We have votes on all kinds of things and nothing much changes. I assure you that I am as frustrated as you are about that. What would you like to see as the dedicated space? Are we talking about a standalone museum of slavery that tells the whole story of Scotland's connection with slavery? As I made clear earlier, we all agree that slavery is an evil thing. Are we talking about a dedicated space within an existing institution? I am not sure that the motion was very explicit about what it meant by a dedicated space. What would that look like?

**Jatin Haria:** A lot of that is still open for consultation and decision.

**Stephen Kerr:** How did you interpret it?

**Jatin Haria:** One thing that the people involved in the steering group are agreed on is that it is not just about slavery; it is about empire, slavery, colonialism and migration, so it is a wider thing than just transatlantic slavery.

I think that there is a lot of merit in having a central dedicated space rather than lots of small, piecemeal exhibitions. Where localised museums need to do that, they absolutely should, but having a dedicated central space would be a better option. It would be able to support those localised spaces. My frustration with the Kelvingrove exhibition is that it could have done with some support from a group of experts who know what they are talking about and how to handle backlashes and such things. Lucy Casot mentioned the work that needs to be done on some of the material in museums. Until that is done, there is nothing to stop a kid from seeing something in a museum and then expounding it the next day in the playground without knowing

why it is wrong to do that and why it was done 100 years ago.

That is my personal view, but there is a wider consultation. Other politicians have said they would want such a space in their area, if there is to be one.

**Stephen Kerr:** What would it look like? Describe the experience.

**Jatin Haria:** We do not have many physical objects for colonialism, migration and slavery in Scotland. From my point of view, it would largely be an education space. It would be a museum of sorts.

**Stephen Kerr:** Would it be a teaching space?

**Jatin Haria:** Absolutely, and a community space. It would be a lot of things. It depends on how much resource we get for it. Zandra Yeaman might have more to say on that point.

**Zandra Yeaman:** The space should be a place where people feel welcome, can learn and can have discomfiting conversations. It should be a place over which young black people feel ownership—that is important, because there are not many museums that they would feel that way about.

As Jatin Haria said, it should also be a place that has archiving. There are a lot of archives. I am of a particular age, and I have seen a lot of anti-racism work and organisations in Scotland that no longer exist. Many people did not think that those archives were important, but they are.

It also needs to be a learning space, as Jatin said. There is a lot of work to do in anti-oppression training—Sheila Asante talked about the project that MGS is running. That will not change everything in one go. The work has to be long term. We have had anti-racist training throughout my whole lifetime, and it has not really changed anything. It has to be done in tandem with many other things.

We do not know what that space would look like, because we are at the mercy of resources, finances, space, location and so on. However, it should definitely be somewhere where even other museums could go for support. When it comes to educating in history, there is a lot of work across the sector, using museums, to educate teachers, to enable them to educate kids. It could be a catch-all space for a lot of that work.

None of us can say what it looks like, because we will probably not be around by the time that we get to that point.

**Stephen Kerr:** Oh dear, that is a very pessimistic view.

**Zandra Yeaman:** I did not mean “around” in that way. Seriously, it has been on-going. Look around the world. The USA’s national museum of African American history and culture is a great success. It has not taken away from the many other Smithsonian museums, but it is a dedicated space that speaks specifically to that history.

**Stephen Kerr:** Lucy Casot, is that how you see things?

**Lucy Casot:** What museums are, and can be, is evolving away from the didactic approach of, “This is the story that we are teaching you.” That is not the way that museums now put displays together. It is much more, “Here are lots of different perspectives on a particular thing”—the nuance that Zandra Yeaman talked about in the example of James Watt. Museums can say, “There are all these different narratives, and we can show more than one thing at a time.”

We can also ask questions. I was at an interesting museum earlier this year—Norway’s national museum in Oslo—which said, “We’ve had this object and have done this thing with it over the years. We are now wondering whether we should still do that. What do you think?” Museums have the power to get people to ask such questions. It is about not re-education but the curiosity that can come from engagement. The placed questions in that museum were powerful and brilliantly done: the museum and curators were thinking about a topic and were interested in people’s perspectives.

The work that we are discussing is well adapted for that evolution of what a museum can be.

**Stephen Kerr:** What a museum should be is a very broad question, obviously. I like your description of coming at an issue from different directions. I did not feel that that was the case in the Kelvingrove exhibit that was specifically mentioned. I felt that it was a very single-directional sort of narrative, which led people to pretty bad conclusions about themselves, I think. That is the opposite of what you said. You were talking about how the institutions that you are involved in were causing people harm. We do not want the new ways to cause people harm, either.

I have probably taken up enough time.

**The Convener:** Jatin Haria wants to come back in, Stephen.

**Jatin Haria:** You asked a specific question about whether the dedicated space should be a single place or part of something bigger. I answered from my personal perspective. If it could be part of something wider, that would be better, in my opinion, because that would draw people in who would not normally otherwise go there. That is of real benefit and is what we need from it. We do not just need the people who already know

about some of the issues to come along; we need the people who know nothing about those issues to learn about them. However, I am not sure how feasible that idea would be.

**Stephen Kerr:** So, separate not in the sense of being distinct, but in the sense of being a separate part of something else that brings people through the door?

**Jatin Haria:** If it could be that.

**Stephen Kerr:** That makes a lot of sense.

**Jatin Haria:** The more people who come through the door, the better.

**Zandra Yeaman:** It was always supposed to be that—a hub that would direct people to collections around Scotland. A dedicated space was never meant to be one in which we kept everything to ourselves. Its purpose was to enable people to feel comfortable enough to go into spaces that they do not normally feel comfortable about walking into.

10:45

**George Adam (Paisley) (SNP):** Good morning. My question has changed in my head about three or four times as the conversation has gone on, but I will try to say something lucid and come to some conclusion with everything that I am trying to ask.

You did the comprehensive audit of museums’ collections. The biggest capital spend in the cultural sector at the moment is the Paisley museum, so I will use Paisley as an example. I am wearing a tie in the Paisley pattern, for which the town is famous. It is black and white, which is for St Mirren as well—I am going totally Paisley today. A lot of people in Paisley probably do not know the history of the pattern, the fact that it is steeped in empire and colonialism and the fact that it was not a wee wifie or a man in Paisley who decided in their weaving cottage to make a Paisley pattern but that it was taken from India. It was originally created in India in the 11th century and became popular here in the 17th and 18th centuries.

I know that the Paisley museum is going to do an exhibition on the pattern. I hope that it looks into that history as well, because things like that will open people’s eyes and make them realise that they need to know more about something that is part of their culture. Do we agree that those are the key things that will get people in and get them talking?

**Zandra Yeaman:** That is important. We have been doing this work a long time. What is happening in Paisley will make the town a destination, so I am excited. For me, the Paisley museum is the big opening next year.

We had conversations about the Kashmiri pattern that you are wearing on your tie, but we have also had conversations about the Robertson's jam symbol. We need to lean into those conversations. To pick up on what Mr Kerr said, it is not about everything being all bad or all good, but we have to be able to talk about such issues and say that some people might have thought that symbols such as the Robertson's jam symbol were okay, but they were never okay to the people whom they were trying to symbolise. It is not simply that the issue is the conditions of the past. A lot of what happened was never okay. Paisley has been leaning into those discomfiting conversations in a way that is about enabling us to think critically, not about making people feel guilty or fragile about the matter. It is about saying, "I never knew that. I now think quite differently about this."

**George Adam:** I had forgotten about the Robertson's jam symbol. I have probably excised it from my head because it was just there all the time.

**Zandra Yeaman:** Yes, we all grew up with that.

**George Adam:** It just shows you how things have changed over my lifetime. We need to embrace those issues.

**Zandra Yeaman:** Yes, and museums are great spaces to do that.

**George Adam:** Modern museums—I believe that that is what Paisley is trying to create—have such conversations with young people and children to make sure that they understand.

If you look across the road from the museum to the University of the West of Scotland, there is a statue of the Rev Witherspoon. Paisley is very proud of the fact that he signed the declaration of independence for the United States, but he was also a slave owner. In my opinion, it is not so much that we need to take the statue down; it is more about the context. That is what you have been saying, Zandra. The context is that he signed the declaration and said those weighty words but, at the same time, he was a slave owner—along with just about everyone else who signed the document.

**Lucy Casot:** There is some brilliant work going on in Paisley at the moment. It also has an important world cultures collection. The team there has been thinking really hard about all of that.

I make an offer: if any member of the committee would like MGS to facilitate any visits to some of the organisations that we have been talking about to see some of the museums and talk to the people who have been doing that work, we would be really happy to try to do that for you. I am sure that the teams at Paisley and Glasgow would like

to have the opportunity to discuss the approach with you, if that is of interest.

**The Convener:** Thank you all for attending. I remember speaking in the debate in 2020 and saying that I wanted the space to be a museum without walls along the model of the National Theatre of Scotland. We need to get that message out about it being everywhere but nowhere.

That said, I visited the Canadian museum for human rights in Winnipeg, where incredible work is done to recognise human rights issues not only for First Nations people but right the way through history and around the world. The museum recognises all the genocides, even the ones that we do not recognise. It was profound.

You have a difficult dilemma in trying to strike the balance, but I wish you all the best in progressing the work. We have taken on board everything that you said about what you want our asks of the Government and the cabinet secretaries to be.

10:49

*Meeting continued in private until 11:01.*



This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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