

**How Should We Address Our History?
Community Conversations on the legacies of transatlantic
slavery and colonialism in Glasgow (June 2022)**





The Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights works to eliminate racial discrimination and promote racial justice across Scotland. Through capacity building, research and campaigning activities which respond to the needs of communities, our work takes a strategic approach to tackling deep rooted issues of racial inequality.

CRER has experience of anti-racist work covering areas such as community engagement and empowerment, research and resource development, practical training and equality mainstreaming support for Public and Voluntary Sector organisations.

CRER takes a rights-based approach, promoting relevant international, regional, and national human rights and equality conventions and legislation.

The cover image is an image of the spire of the Merchant's House located on West George Street in Glasgow City Centre.

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1. Introduction

This report explores perceptions and views around the historical legacies of slavery and colonialism in Glasgow and how to address these legacies in the present day.

The research was conducted by the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights (CRER) from May to June 2022. It was commissioned by Glasgow City Council's Black Lives Matter Slavery Legacy Working Group.

Context

In September 2020, Glasgow City Council approved the motion '[Black Lives Matter, slavery legacy and anti-racist initiatives](#)'. As a result of this, there was a commitment to look at some key areas, including:

- The ongoing work to recognise the historic legacy of slavery
- Developing a civic conversation regarding the history of the city and,
- How best the complete history of the city can be understood and embraced

The BLM Slavery Legacy Working Group (the Working Group) was convened on the back of this motion to look at addressing the legacy of slavery in the city, how to start the civic conversation and to learn from the approaches of other cities who have progressed this work.

One of the Working Group's key aims was to develop a set of initial community conversations that engage with Black and minority ethnic (BME) communities of interest and the wider Glasgow community, to assert the key issues for slavery legacy.

The Working Group recommended that this work should be delivered by a BME organisation. This is in line with the process followed by local government in Bristol. Having a trusted BME community organisation facilitate this work was crucial.

In January 2022, the Working Group tasked CRER with conducting this piece of work.

This report reflects the views expressed by a range of Glasgow residents on the historical legacies of slavery and colonialism present in the city. The research was qualitative in nature. A small number of people were engaged at this stage, to gain an initial insight into the range of views and opinions on legacies of transatlantic slavery and colonialism. The committee will be looking at carrying out a wider consultation in 2022/23.

This report highlights some of the broad themes raised and any key issues that the Working Group should be aware of moving forward.

Key Findings

There is a mixed level of knowledge and understanding of the legacies of colonialism and slavery present in Glasgow.

This included knowledge of:

- Key heritage sites with ties to slavery and colonialism such as Kelvingrove Museum and the Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA)
- Some of the street names and statues in Glasgow that have ties to people with connections to transatlantic slavery, including Buchanan Street, Oswald Street and Jamaica Street
- Some of the ways in which Glasgow had benefitted from wealth derived from transatlantic slavery, particularly in relation to key institutions such as the University of Glasgow

There is a strong desire to see actions taken to address issues of racism that exist in Glasgow in the present day.

Several participants suggested a need for more action to address these issues. There were calls for:

- More actions to be taken to address the disproportionate levels of poverty experienced by BME communities in Glasgow
- More support to be made available to migrants, asylum seekers and refugees living in the city
- More actions taken to address a lack of BME staff working for Glasgow City Council. This included a desire particularly for more BME teachers

There is a belief that Glasgow City Council needs to take more action to address legacies of slavery and colonialism and present-day racism.

Some of the views expressed highlighted a feeling of inadequate action being taken so far. For example:

- Most participants were unaware of the recent [apology made by Council Leader, Susan Aitken](#) for the city's historical role in transatlantic slavery
- Most participants felt that the apology should mark the start of wider actions of reparative justice, led by Glasgow City Council

2. How We Conducted the Research

The research took place from May 2022 to June 2022 and involved Glasgow residents recruited to take part from Community Council mailing lists, Glasgow based community and grassroots organisations who support African and Caribbean or BME members.

The research involved the following key stages:

- **Question design and structuring-** A set of questions were designed by CRER and approved by the Working Group. This ensured that there was a guide for the conversations, and they could be semi-structured.
- **Participant recruitment-** Participants were recruited to take part via email, with a gift voucher offered as compensation for their time. Participants were informed about the purpose of the community conversations and the activities of the Working Group.
- **Community Conversations-** CRER conducted five community conversations. The conversations were semi-structured and took place in a mix of settings with one in-person and four online. In total, we engaged with 38 participants throughout the conversations. The participants came from a range of backgrounds and ethnicities.

We adopted a flexible approach to engaging with participants, with them determining the dates, times, and settings for the community conversations.

A semi-structured approach was taken with the community conversations. This ensured that participants had an opportunity to engage with the topics with some flexibility, while also making sure that the conversations were relevant for the focuses of the Working Group.

3. Historical Legacies of Transatlantic Slavery and Colonialism

Each community conversation featured a discussion around a range of topics related to these, covering general views, and understanding of:

- Transatlantic slavery
- Colonialism and empire
- Glasgow's connections as a city to transatlantic slavery and colonialism

General views and understanding of transatlantic slavery

Most participants recognised transatlantic slavery as a historical evil, with negative connotations.

“It makes me think of a lack of humanity and horror. How could people treat other people like that?”

“Ashamed to be a part of a country responsible for it.”

“The whole triangle and how to whole system was so profitable. It was so much money at the time, so it engrained itself in society. A few kingdoms got quite rich from it. Lives had very little value, people were thrown overboard. It's horrible when you start thinking of it. One fact of it I hate, is that the enslavers gave them their name. Then people have names from their 'owner', it stripped them of their identity. Their level of intellect etc had no value, just all about how much labour someone could do – that really sticks with me.”

Several participants associated transatlantic slavery strongly with either the UK or USA. Many participants also noted it as being something they had not been taught much about during their time in education.

“Taught about industrial revolution but not taught what cotton and linen were used for and what happened on plantations. Taught about growth of cities and focused on Scotland but not the other consequences.”

“Associate it more with the Americas than Britain. The way the prison system works in America and the way African Americans are treated is a legacy of it.”

In a couple of the community conversations, the focus on transatlantic slavery was mainly on its impact in the present day. Several participants highlighted issues of intergenerational wealth inequalities and present-day racism experienced by Black people as a legacy of this.

“Enslaved people got nothing, and enslavers were rewarded handsomely and continued to have extraordinary wealth. We all paid for it and their descendants are still poor today.”

General views and understanding of colonialism and empire

A lot of the views raised surrounding colonialism and empire, associated it with ideas of wealth, white supremacy, and violence.

“Colonialism, theft, racism, exploitation.”

“When people are made to feel inferior because of the colour of their skin.”

Several participants felt that colonialism and empire still had an impact and relevance to their lives today.

“My parents come from Pakistan... Thinking of Pakistan there are still place names that originate from colonisation.”

“If a British person went to India they would be treated well, but the opposite isn't true. The legacies are still there. People are made to feel inferior.”

“Still carrying the baggage of pain and anger and every generation carries this anger and burden as our ancestors were enslaved.”

Glasgow's connections as a city to transatlantic slavery and colonialism

Across the conversations, several participants highlighted connections between Glasgow and transatlantic slavery. There were fewer connections made to wider colonialism.

Many participants highlighted examples of street names, key heritage sites, statues, and educational institutions with ties to transatlantic slavery. This included: Kelvingrove Museum, GoMA, Glassford Street, Oswald Street, Buchanan Street, Virginia Street, Jamaica Street, Pollok House, Merchant City, and the University of Glasgow.

There was some awareness across the community conversations of the wealth and influence those with connections to transatlantic slavery had held historically in Glasgow.

“18th Century Glasgow was full of massive profiteers from the slavery trade i.e., in sugar and cotton.”

Participants expressed a desire for Glasgow as a city to do more to address connections to transatlantic slavery. This included calls for a greater teaching of these connections in schools and more done to address issues of racism in the present day.

Across the community conversations, several participants were surprised and shocked to learn about some of Glasgow's connections to transatlantic slavery and colonialism. This included surprise at imagery glorifying colonial battles on the Duke of Wellington statue (outside GoMA).

“I haven't noticed a lot of these images and feel bad. Shocking images.”

Several participants highlighted that, from their perspective, gaining an understanding of Glasgow's connections to transatlantic slavery and colonialism was key to understanding Glasgow and its history.

“There haven't been enough conversations about Glasgow's involvement.”

“It is an important part of Glasgow’s history.”

“Glasgow flourished during slavery, and it was the second city of the British Empire. Buildings were built on the backs of enslaved people and white Glaswegians benefitted from it.”

In some of the community conversations, participants discussed their experiences of learning at school about slavery and colonialism. Several participants highlighted that they learnt very little about the ties between Glasgow (or Scotland) to transatlantic slavery and colonialism, with more focus and time being spent on learning about transatlantic slavery connections in the USA.

“Glasgow played a major role, so many institutions and people benefitted off the back of the slave trade. Specifically, Glasgow University it’s so old so you know there’s benefits there. In the last year, in the media, there’s been a lot more discussion about it.”

“When you think back to school how it was taught was very lightweight and did not reflect what happened.”

4. Contemporary Legacies of Transatlantic Slavery and Colonialism

The community conversations focused on a range of topics centred on present day racism affecting BME people in Glasgow.

Present day racism affecting BME people in Glasgow

Across the community conversations, several participants highlighted examples of present-day racism that they had witnessed or been a victim of in Glasgow. This included racist bullying in schools, racial hate crime and discrimination in the workplace.

Participants also spoke about issues of wealth inequalities and other forms of structural discrimination that impact BME people in Glasgow. This included disproportionate levels of poverty experienced by BME people, inequalities in housing access, inequalities in employment and inequalities in health.

“A lot of people are undergoing training and education but aren’t getting jobs because of discrimination.”

Some of the participants expressed a view that present-day racism is linked to the historical racism of the past that drove transatlantic slavery and colonialism.

“As a Black person and seeing what is happening within the hostile environment especially with the Home Secretary as a non-white person. Using people who are not from your community and status to perpetuate atrocities was the way the British ran the empire and continues today.”

In discussions around present day racism, some of the participants further expressed some reservations about the presence of statues and street names in Glasgow with ties and connections to transatlantic slavery and colonialism. Some felt that the presence of these statues and street names in Glasgow served as a reminder of Glasgow’s colonial past.

In a couple of the community conversations, there was a widespread frustration expressed with a lack of action taken by Glasgow City Council to address issues of present-day racism. This included frustration with the low number of BME staff employed by Glasgow City Council, the persistence of racist bullying in schools and a lack of employment opportunities for BME people across Glasgow.

“Not seeing a lot of Black people in Glasgow City Council.”

Some participants highlighted examples of positive work undertaken by third sector and voluntary organisations across the city in supporting BME communities and tackling racism. In some of the conversations, participants expressed pride in the level of race equality work done across the sector, while expressing frustrations with a perceived lack of action from public sector organisations.

Many participants felt that Glasgow City Council had a key role to play in tackling racism, with the importance of education services and reparative actions highlighted by some participants.

“Glasgow City Council needs to do more to own its history and emphasise it I think that’s important. Also set the tone. There needs to be a sustainable way to tackle racism over time as well.

“There also needs to be a foundational level change, in the educational system. There were never conversations about it when I was at school, there needs to be conversations about why people thought they were superior because of their skin colour.”

5. Addressing Legacies of Transatlantic Slavery and Colonialism

Participants were asked if they were aware of the recent apology made by Council Leader Susan Aitken for the role the city of Glasgow had played in historic slavery. Across the conversations, a majority of the participants were unaware of this apology.

“I had no idea. I follow them on social media and wasn’t aware.”

“An apology is a bit pathetic/ridiculous. It’s a start I suppose. Performative.”

The discussions here focused on:

- Built environment and heritage (including statues, street names and museums)
- Education and schooling
- Reparative actions to counter present day racism

Built environment and heritage (including statues, street names and museums).

Participants were divided over what, if any, action should be taken over street names and statues in Glasgow that have ties to transatlantic slavery and colonialism.

However, there was generally a consensus that some form of action or intervention should take place and these sites should not be left as they are.

“Making people more aware. Doing a proper study. A full investigation which is publicised. Plaques added to the statues.”

“Merchants who have been celebrated and uplifted as people we should honour/philanthropists should be exposed. Enslaved people’s stories should be told.”

Some of the actions suggested included the removal of statues of enslavers, the changing of street names named after enslavers and the adding of QR codes to street names and statues named after enslavers and those with ties to colonialism that when scanned gave more information about the person the street name or statue honoured.

Other interventions suggested included renaming the Merchant City area of the city centre and creating resources that educate people on the ties between Glasgow's built environment and slavery and colonialism.

In a couple of the community conversations, some participants discussed the possibility of Glasgow having a dedicated museum space to exploring the connections and histories of transatlantic slavery and colonialism in Scotland. In these conversations, most participants were supportive of the idea with a few participants stating that it was a key action that needed to be taken in addressing legacies of transatlantic slavery and colonialism.

“A museum is important because of Scottish exceptionalism. Recently we had the festival of resistance - the independence movement was there and say that after independence we wouldn't have the home office etc. People sit on the laurels of independence.”

“I think it's important to acknowledge Scotland's role in these histories.”

Many of the participants across the community conversations discussed the role of key heritage sites and institutions in Glasgow, such as museums. Some participants felt that such organisations and institutions had a duty to be a part of reparative actions, due to their historical ties with and benefits they had from transatlantic slavery and colonialism.

“Museum spaces are traditionally white and middle class – there should be a level of accountability for them.”

Education

A key point of focus across the community conversations was the importance of the role of education for both adults and schoolchildren in addressing legacies of transatlantic slavery and colonialism.

Some of the participants spoke to their own experiences of schooling as examples of what not to do in addressing legacies of transatlantic slavery and colonialism. This highlighted a potential need for teacher training on how to appropriately discuss histories of slavery and colonialism with young people.

“Growing up, in history they shy-ed away from discussing it – even remotely saying it was wrong. As if it was normal.”

“Teachers mention the slave trade and the whole class will stare at the pupils who are Black.”

Participants in all the conversations highlighted the education of young people, particularly at school age, as key to addressing these legacies. Many of the participants emphasised the importance of embedding education on Glasgow’s historical ties to slavery and colonialism into the school curriculum.

Some participants expressed a desire for more education on topics including present day racism and Glasgow’s historical ties to slavery and colonialism to be made available to people of all ages living in Glasgow. This included suggestions for walking tours, QR codes on statues and street names and free open access course.

Reparative actions to counter present day racism

Participants across the community conversations highlighted a range of actions that they wanted to see taken by the city council to address issues of present-day racism.

Several participants expressed a view that Glasgow City Council was not prioritising tackling racism enough.

“They need to use actions instead of words.”

“Not aware of Cllr Aitken’s apology, but this isn’t enough without action. Need restoration of the life that had been damaged and they know what to do but won’t do it.”

“Some people might be comfortable with an apology, but concrete action needs to be taken and there needs to be more acceptance of Black people into the community.”

For some of the participants prioritising race equality and making it a priority across all areas of Glasgow City Council’s services was seen as the starting point for any action taken to address issues of present-day racism.

In a couple of the conversations, participants discussed potential actions such as more positive action, the setting of targets for BME employees in Glasgow City Council’s workforce and greater community engagement with African and Caribbean community groups as ways to counter racism in Glasgow.

Some participants expressed the view that more support needs to be given by Glasgow City Council to third sector and community organisations that support BME people and campaign for racial equality. Participants also stated that they felt that Glasgow City Council should do more to work with these organisations to counter racism in Glasgow.

Throughout the community conversations, some of the participants expressed the view that further such conversations and consultations this were important to Glasgow City Council’s work to address racism. For some, this was because the conversations represented an opportunity for their views and interests to be heard by Glasgow City Council.

6. Conclusion

This chapter summaries the findings of the community conversations and highlights the key issues raised by the participants throughout the conversations.

Key themes around the understanding of the legacies of colonialism and slavery present in Glasgow.

Most participants expressed some level of knowledge and understanding of their being historical ties between the city of Glasgow and transatlantic slavery and colonialism. This included:

- Knowledge of some of the ways in which Glasgow had benefitted from wealth derived from transatlantic slavery, particularly some of its key institutions such as the University of Glasgow.
- Several participants expressed a desire to learn more and further their knowledge and understanding of this area of Glasgow's history.

Key themes around addressing legacies of transatlantic slavery and colonialism.

Most participants felt that some actions and interventions should be taken about the existence of street names, statues and key heritage sites in Glasgow that have connections to transatlantic slavery and colonialism.

Most participants were unaware of the apology made by Council Leader, Susan Aitken on 31/03/22 for the city's historical role in transatlantic slavery. Most participants felt that the apology should mark the start of wider actions of reparative justice, led by the city council.

Key themes around issues of racism that exist in Glasgow in the present day.

There was a strong awareness across the conversations about the existence of issues of structural racism in Glasgow in the present day. Several participants suggested a need for more action to address these issues.

Appendix 1- Community Conversations Structure:

Section One Historical Legacies of transatlantic slavery and colonialism:

What comes to mind when you think of:

- The British Empire

Is there a particular geographical part of Britain's empire or a particular social/religious community shaped by British colonialism that is especially relevant to you?

What comes to mind when you think of:

- The British Empire
- The Transatlantic Slavery Trade

What do you know about Glasgow's role as a city in transatlantic slavery and colonialism?

Do you know of any street names, heritage sites or statues in Glasgow that have direct ties to transatlantic slavery and colonialism?

How do you feel about people who have been complicit in transatlantic slavery being commemorated in street names, heritage sites or statues?

What do you think are the most important things people need to know about the legacies of transatlantic slavery and colonialism?

Section Two- Contemporary legacies of transatlantic slavery and colonialism:

In 1833 the British Government agreed to pay £20 million paid by British taxpayers in compensation to the owners of enslaved Africans (be worth £2.5 billion today). 15% of the absentee slave owners lived in Scotland and were compensated to the tune of £1.2 million (£152 million today). Glasgow and West Coast enslavers were compensated to the tune of £800,000 (be worth £101 million today). Were you aware of this? What do you think of it?

How do you understand the concepts of reparation and reparative justice?

How would you like to see the city of Glasgow address issues of racism in the present day?

How do you think legacies of slavery and colonialism impact present day Glasgow?

How do you think understanding legacies of slavery/colonialism can help with shaping understandings of racism in the present day?

Section Three- Addressing legacies of transatlantic slavery and colonialism:

How do you think Glasgow City Council should address the histories and legacies of transatlantic slavery and colonialism in:

- Public Spaces and heritage sites (for example Museums)
- Statues
- Street names
- Any other ways
- How would you like to see the city of Glasgow address its connection to slavery/empire?
- What would you like to see happen to parts of the built environment (statues, street names) in Glasgow that are linked to slavery/colonialism?
- How should we address the very visible/public connections to slavery in our public spaces (i.e., streets named after enslavers, statues etc. For example, Kelvingrove Museum and GOMA both stand on land that formerly belonged to enslavers and Kelvingrove itself was an enslavers mansion)