



Inclusive Histories:

Narrating our shared past in polarised times

British
Future...

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The authors' rights have been asserted. British Future is an independent, non-partisan thinktank engaging people's hopes and fears about integration and immigration, identity and race, so that we share a confident and welcoming Britain, inclusive and fair to all.

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I. Introduction

In an increasingly diverse Britain, there is growing interest in exploring how complex histories of race, migration and Empire have shaped the society that we share today. In particular, following the anti-racism protests of 2020, the work that institutions across the arts and culture sector have been doing on inclusive histories – to acknowledge the legacies of colonialism and transatlantic slavery, and to recognise the histories of minority groups previously hidden or not told – has come under increased scrutiny.

However, since this work can involve re-examining some of the dominant perceptions of British history, initiatives to promote inclusive histories have themselves often faced a range of critiques, exemplifying how questions of identity, culture and heritage are important to many of us. These changes are happening in an era of increased polarisation around questions of identity, where they are often received differently across generations and ethnic groups, by educational status or political perspective. This polarisation has then been further amplified by shifting political and media dynamics which influence the pace and intensity of public conversation.

These divisions over our past can be difficult for practitioners in the arts and culture sector to navigate in a way that promotes constructive discussion around the legacies of Empire, or the histories of underrepresented groups, without being derailed by excessively heated polarisation. Yet it would be a significant mistake for organisations to lean out of these debates, or to define the success of inclusive history work as the avoidance of controversy. Indeed, avoidance carries risks – as public appetite to learn about these histories is growing ever-stronger.

Rather, within a context where criticism of this work has become more intense, organisations will need to be better prepared to step up, deepen and extend their work on inclusive histories with confidence.

This report therefore compiles a set of insights and examples of good practice, through which arts and culture stakeholders can undertake work on inclusive histories in ways that successfully navigate polarised responses. Particular attention is paid to strategies through which the sector can reach ethnic or social minority audiences which it has historically failed to engage, while also bridging audiences from across the broad spectrum of public opinion, to widen support among groups with questions about how interpretations of our past are evolving.

Our aim is not to propose any prescriptive approach to engaging with the complexity of our history or navigating polarised responses. There is a strength in a pluralism of approaches, to the past, on different themes, with a range of objectives and a range of different target audiences. Rather, it is intended that the learnings and examples drawn from this research can help practitioners to

engage with inclusive histories with greater confidence, offering suggestions on how to drive educative debate on these themes, capable of deepening public awareness and interest in the origins of our diverse modern society.

The report reflects the independent thoughts of British Future, an independent and non-partisan think tank. The research was funded by Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and Art Fund to help understand how practitioners were responding to sceptical audiences and stakeholders when working to widen and deepen public awareness of inclusive histories.

This report is intended to be accessible to all those with an interest in shifting the tone and tenor of debates about our shared past. Different actors have different roles to play: from communications teams navigating media discourse to museum curators working with public audiences. The final section then also sets out eight ‘conditions for confidence’ that we hope can support those in senior strategic positions, including funders and convening bodies, to engage in and navigate these heated debates.

2. Inclusive histories: Context since 2020

“The emergencies of Black Lives Matter and Covid-19 came together and really accelerated a lot of conversations about power structures and hierarchies. We wanted to immediately respond to the anti-racism protests and what was happening.”

– Senior museum practitioner

The years since the anti-racism protests of 2020 have seen a major shift in the salience and focus of work on inclusive histories, especially around themes of colonialism, transatlantic slavery, migration and race. More than a third (26 out of 75) of the arts and culture organisations analysed in British Future’s mapping research² had acknowledged the protests as a catalyst for expanding their work on these themes, and over half had substantially scaled up their activity on inclusive histories since the protests took place. This also builds on an increasing focus on inclusive histories over the last three decades including in education and popular TV series, such as *Black and British: A Forgotten History*, mobilising new interest in learning more about our past among audiences from all walks of life.

The surge in activity on inclusive histories over last three years, though, has been accompanied by a sharp increase³ in polarisation around this work – encountering opposition among those who are anxious about how changing narratives of our past will impact our sense of identity as a nation. Accusations that the actions of those working to make histories inclusive ‘rewrite’, ‘airbrush’ or ‘erase’ parts of our history have caused growing difficulty and anxiety for practitioners seeking to engage with this work without becoming caught in the so-called ‘culture war’ crossfire.

There is a clear appetite in the arts and culture sector to commit to work that tells a fuller and more diverse account of our history, and not to run away from these issues in the face of opposition. Practitioners engaged in this project also want to approach themes of race, injustice, colonialism and historic slavery in ways that can effectively bridge broad audiences, reaching those with different starting points and levels of awareness about our past.

Yet major ‘history war’ flashpoints – namely the responses received by the National Trust for its report on colonialism and historic slavery – have had a palpable impact on the confidence of practitioners. Throughout our research we heard strong concerns that the current dynamic of debates around inclusive history is highly volatile, and that any work engaging on these themes was vulnerable to ‘culture war’ challenge, potentially with national profile.

Common themes and approaches

British Future categorised the key components of inclusive history projects through mapping research – exploring the websites of 75 history, arts, and theatre organisations that had engaged in new work on inclusive histories since 2020. While not a comprehensive assessment of the sector or the work underway on inclusive histories, the results revealed a wide range of examples and contexts where new initiatives on themes of inclusive histories had been pursued. Across these projects, the research identified some of the categories of work and examples of good practice where organisations had confidently navigated or mitigated polarised responses.

Reinterpretation

One of the most popular approaches taken is for organisations to reinterpret their collection items or indeed their own past, where this is linked to histories of Empire, transatlantic slavery or violence. 48 of the 75 organisations studied had undertaken reinterpretation work since 2020, all of these on themes of race, Empire or transatlantic slavery.

Common themes included seeking to provide visitors with context on the provenance or ties of a collection item, or an organisation itself, with contentious and sensitive histories – for example, through panels or displays that provide new layers of context.

Organisations have also embarked on creative ways of ‘adding in’ artworks, music or performance pieces that reinterpret contentious histories, exploring how interpretations of the past have shifted over time. St Paul’s Cathedral, for example, has commissioned a Nigerian-born artist to produce a mixed-media artwork, ‘Still Standing’ (see report cover image), that responds to an adjacent brass plaque that celebrates a Royal Navy Admiral involved in the Benin Expeditions. Whereas so-called ‘retain and explain’ approaches are often primarily educative, artistic or creative responses to complex histories can be used to prompt reflective dialogue among visitors on controversial historical legacies.

Incorporating historical narratives of under-represented groups

A second popular approach emerging from the mapping research has been for organisations to incorporate additional narratives into museums, galleries and theatres, telling the stories of underrepresented groups whose histories were previously hidden or not told. 52 of the 75 organisations researched had engaged in work of this category, to spotlight stories ranging from Black history, to LGBT+ history and Jewish history. A wide variety of formats and mediums were used to do this – from new exhibitions to permanent displays, lecture series, podcasts and collection trails.

The curatorial tone

When embarking on this work, a key theme raised throughout the interviews and roundtable discussions was the need to think carefully about the curatorial tone. Practitioners cautioned against approaches that ‘*tell audiences exactly what to think*’ but suggested rather to equip visitors with the critical thinking skills and knowledge to unpack and question historical relations of power and their contemporary legacies. As one museum director put it: “*We try to create an environment for discussion – showing visitors the complexity of these narratives, while avoiding coming across as instructive.*”

Linking local with global

Where histories such as that of transatlantic slavery are explored, curators emphasised the importance of rooting these global narratives within local histories, so that white British audiences may feel closer to and connected with the themes being presented. We found several interesting cases of this approach being taken. The Bluecoat, a contemporary arts centre in Liverpool, for instance, has led an “Echoes and Origins” project, working with children in Toxteth to explore Liverpool’s maritime trading links to Empire through discussions, creative activities and research projects. The young people themselves were then involved in co-curating a programme of talks and performances that shared what they had learned.

This was seen as an approach that was particularly likely to engage broader audiences in areas with lower diversity and rarer everyday social contact between people of different ethnicities.

Removing assets and renaming organisations

A less common approach was the removal of collection items with connections to sensitive histories, or to rename themselves where – as an organisation – their brand was linked with contentious historical figures. Out of the 75 organisations mapped, seven had removed items from public display, while two had renamed themselves in light of contestation over the past of their institution. Nine had also engaged in new processes of restitution – to return stolen or culturally sensitive items to their place of origin.

Initiatives around removing or rebranding are often among the most likely projects to receive polarised responses from media outlets, members of the public or political actors. Where actions involved items or figures that carry important symbolic resonance for British identity, organisations reported receiving high profile accusations of having ‘airbrushed’ or ‘erased’ parts of history.

Nevertheless, there were cases of these organisations having sensitively navigated this work through a process that commanded broad public and media support. For example, Bristol Beacon,

formerly Colston Hall, was renamed following a large community engagement project⁴ that sought the views of over 4,000 people, which had an impact in broadening the legitimacy of the decision. Though this took place shortly after the toppling of the Colston statue, the decision was reported in mostly a neutral or supportive way.

Commentary A:

Representing hidden and untold stories – Luke Syson, Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum

When I came out in my early 20s, at the height of AIDS activism and resistance to Section 28, I used to proclaim that the personal is political. I'm not sure though exactly what I meant. And though I never concealed my gayness at work, I didn't until very recently see my work as in any way connected with my sexuality. My 2011 National Gallery exhibition on Leonardo da Vinci resolutely ignored his homosexuality (and I remember that the single mention of it in my essay was challenged by a nervous editor). That changed in a flash during a meeting of senior leadership when I was working at the Met in New York at a meeting when colleagues were bemoaning a lack of join-up between exhibitions. I pointed out that we were ignoring opportunities – in the upcoming shows on Michelangelo and Hockney, for example. What could those possibly be, colleagues asked. And when I pointed out the obvious, they laughed as if I wasn't serious.

So even before I arrived at the Fitzwilliam in Cambridge, I was intrigued by efforts to uncover and represent hidden and untold stories in the collections there. And when in October 2019 we hung together the seventeenth-century portraits by Carlo Dolci of life-long partners Sir John Finch and Sir Thomas Baines (one of the pictures had been languishing in store) with new labels, I felt acknowledged and represented on the walls of a major museum for the first time in my life. Their 'beautiful and unbroken marriage of souls', as proclaimed on their Cambridge tomb could now involve me.

But still the Fitzwilliam, like many museums, had evolved over 200 years with a set of assumptions that remained largely unchanged and unchallenged. Its passion for tracing the histories of human ingenuity and artistic creativity remains laudable. But the messages its displays and collections conveyed suggested that only in certain places (Europe, ancient Egypt and parts of Asia), certain people (men) were – or are – ingenious and creative, and that those are the people worth representing and remembering.

To say something different, to make our histories more complex and complete, is emphatically not about obliterating one history for another. Why should it be? To confront the erasure of women artists from the history of art is not to reduce the achievements of Titian or Monet. When Dame Magdalene Odundo chose the pots that have inspired her brilliant career the fact that she put pieces from Africa and South America from Cambridge's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology with seventeenth-century British slipware demonstrated what a truly global story ceramics tell. What this effort is about is saying that two facts can live together in a single object, in ways that complicate neat divisions between good and bad. Titian's Rape of Lucretia may, as art historians have always said, be

These conversations are not always easy and they shouldn't be. After all, we're confronting uncomfortable truths about our past and present, at the Fitzwilliam and beyond. But if we don't have them, we're less likely to succeed in making the Fitzwilliam a place where everyone's voices are heard; where we respect difference of opinion (as long as those differences are themselves respectful); where we ensure that our values are anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-ableist and anti-homophobic; and where we can play our full and proper part in all our communities, local, national and international – making the Fitzwilliam a place where everyone feels they belong. That change needs to be fundamental.



Barbara Walker, Vanishing Point 29 (Duyster). Image courtesy the artist and Cristea Roberts Gallery, London. © Barbara Walker, 2023

3. Drivers of positive change and good practice

While there was frustration at the divided tone of public discourse, we also heard how experiences of deepening this work and navigating polarisation had energised new approaches in the arts and culture sector – within community engagement, communications, staff training and cross-sector learning – and more strategic thinking about how to anticipate a range of public and media responses. This section explores examples of good practice, and identifies some of the positive contributing factors that have enabled certain organisations to better communicate the legitimacy of their work.

Some of those closest to the frontline of the so-called ‘culture war’ often had more confidence in navigating polarised responses

Public communications responses to polarised ‘culture war’ flashpoints in the arts and heritage sector had, to date, largely been reactive. But many stakeholders and practitioners closest to these flashpoints had identified constructive insights and lessons about how to respond effectively.

A common reflection from several of the practitioners, looking back at their experiences of receiving high-profile challenge, was the importance – in future – of agreeing a communications plan at the earliest possible stage of the project. This should consider how all stakeholders and partners involved can be supported to engage with different polarised responses to the work, identifying risks and plans to address these, and being clear who was responsible for different responses.

Depolarisation through constructive dialogue

A key lesson for stakeholders with close experience of navigating polarised responses was the importance of using emotionally empathetic language. Rather than ‘calling people out’ for questioning the significance of histories of Empire or oppression, practitioners reflecting on experiences of receiving challenge around their work noted having success ‘calling those people in to the public conversation’, to hear their concerns and to recognise the sensitivity of debates around identity and heritage, before challenging these perspectives.

“The best way to respond is to be compassionate, even to the people who are criticising you, acknowledging that it’s a difficult journey for everyone to understand these histories and their legacy. For some of us in the sector, particularly those of us who are white, we should remember that there was a period of time when we did not understand it.” – Heritage expert

This approach was not always feasible and indeed there are necessary instances to call out racism and prejudice, or to acknowledge where some engage in debates for reasons of bad faith. However, we heard successful examples of this approach being used with a more sceptical yet engageable audience. Professor Corinne Fowler, director of the National Trust’s ‘Colonial Countryside’ project, for example, shared that she has begun a policy of responding to nearly all criticism she receives from journalists and members of the public (see Commentary C on page 27). Professor Fowler now offers to ‘hear the other side’ – enabling her critics to feel their voices are valued and to get concerns or anxieties off their chest. She then engages people in open debate, presenting them with a list of facts about the historical underrepresentation of certain groups. This was felt to have been effective in persuading a number of critics to acknowledge the importance of inclusive histories from a new point of view.

Community consultation is becoming mainstream

There is growing understanding among organisations throughout the sector that processes of community consultation are an important foundation in designing work on inclusive histories. 49 of the 75 organisations researched had embedded elements of community engagement within their activity on these themes. This was driven by a strong understanding that community input was necessary both to increase the legitimacy of the work among relevant underrepresented groups, but also to inform approaches to inclusive histories that could effectively reach wider audiences.

The quality and depth of community consultation was mixed between organisations (see chapter 4), with several organisations interested in resources and guidance on successful approaches to community engagement. But there does appear to be a clear cultural shift in the sector towards institutionalising community engagement in the decision-making and curatorial process and learning from doing so.

Support is being offered to front-of-house staff and volunteers

An increasing number of organisations – from large heritage bodies to local museums – are developing new guidance resources, to ensure that front of house staff and volunteers felt confident explaining new activity on inclusive histories to the public.

Front-of-house workers were frequently cited as being underconfident when communicating on these often-sensitive themes to visitors, particularly around race. Many were anxious of causing offence through using the incorrect language to describe underrepresented groups. Several organisations reported concerns, too, that staff and volunteers were nervous of fielding heated responses to the work underway.

It was largely felt, though, that organisations had been responsive in resourcing new training to equip internal stakeholders to explain and communicate this work. In particular, there was a growing trend toward organisations developing education courses to explain – in accessible language – the purpose of their activity on inclusive histories. Vocabulary guides were also seen as important resources to educate staff and volunteers on the appropriate language required for referring to minority groups and/or sensitive histories.

Training and guidance was, in some instances, being developed reactively – only after staff had experienced negative reactions from visitors. However, there was a clear step-change among organisations towards building strong support systems for staff or volunteers who encountered abusive audience responses, with wellbeing and after-care services being made available to practitioners affected by these experiences.

Different national contexts in the UK change the public context

Practitioners from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland were noticeably more confident at engaging in work on inclusive histories than their English peers. This is not to suggest that responses to their work had been less polarised. For example, in Scotland, projects on colonial history had received critique from multiple directions – from those engaging in ‘what-aboutism’ on the negative legacies of Empire, and from groups of the public who characterised Scotland as a victim of English imperial rule. However, it was evident that national governments in Scotland and Wales had helped play a role in strengthening the sectors’ resolve to engage in work on these histories – through offering vocal support to new activity on these themes, and through providing training resources and funding to the sector.

“I think there’s a stark difference in Wales to what’s happening in England. The government published an anti-racist action plan, including objectives for museums to diversify their collections and to work with different community organisations. And they’ve provided training and skills sharing resources to improve people’s confidence to deliver this agenda.”

– Museum public engagement practitioner, Wales

Organisations funded by or affiliated with national governments reported feeling empowered to substantially scale up their work on incorporating more diverse histories into their exhibitions – with some even citing government funding requirements on diversifying collections as a key driver for them doing so.

Empire, Slavery and Scotland’s Museums

In Scotland, the government had proactively funded research to help organisations legitimise and strategically communicate on their work around histories of Empire and transatlantic slavery. The project, delivered by Museums Galleries Scotland (MGS) has included nationally representative opinion poll surveys and deliberative focus group research with white and ethnic minority Scots^{5,6}. With the recommendations of the study now published, MGS has also called for the creation of a new organisation dedicated to addressing Scotland’s role in colonialism and historic slavery, that could convene and advise other organisations about how to communicate on these themes.

Openness towards different framing of inclusive history work

Mapping research for this project analysed the most popular frames being used by 75 UK arts and culture organisations to communicate work on inclusive histories.

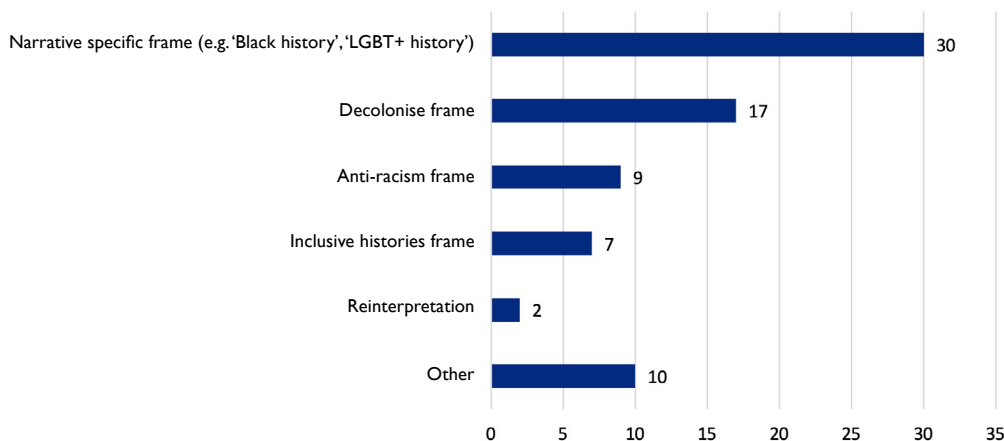


Figure 3.1: Frames used to describe activity on inclusive histories

The most common approach taken was to use **narrative-specific labels** of the history being explored ('Black history', 'The history of Empire', 'LGBT+ history'), with 30 out of 75 organisations preferring this frame. Meanwhile 17 of the organisations explored had framed their work within a process of **decolonisation**. Arts and theatre organisations were typically more likely to frame their activity within an **'anti-racism' lens**, characterising their work on inclusive histories as part of a broader action plan to boost representation of ethnic minority artists. A smaller proportion of organisations then opted for the term **'inclusive histories'**.

None of the stakeholders opted for the term 'contested histories', since this was felt to imply that the topics were unavoidably divisive. We also heard mixed views on the use of a 'decolonisation' frame. Some saw this as an important label for drawing attention to the modern legacy of historical injustices; while others shared concerns that the frame confused audiences due to its implications that *'something is being taken away, when actually new perspectives are being brought in'*.

A majority of those engaged throughout the research, however, had no strong preference or allegiance towards the label or frame used to characterise their work. Indeed, many expressed a sense of flexibility that they were comfortable to shift and adapt the framing of their work if this appealed to wider audiences – so long as the content of the activity itself was not impacted by this change.

“Obviously, words do matter. But I think in this instance, it doesn't matter what you call it, as long as you do it, as long as you put your shoulders to the wheel, you tell those inclusive histories and you work with communities, so that their voices are centred.”

– Director, Sector-convening organisation

There was an appetite for toolkits that could help organisations to reflect on which terms different audiences could understand and relate to most, to make informed choices about the best language that could help grow and deepen public engagement with inclusive histories.

Networks are being formed to improve sector learning

Since the anti-racism protests of 2020, practitioners noted that there had been new improvements in organisations sharing peer-to-peer learnings, challenges and good practice with one another – albeit often through informal and parallel networks. These ranged from small 'coffee groups' of communications practitioners through to larger and more formalised networks arranged by sector convening bodies – such as the Migration Museum's 'Migration Network' and the Museums Association.

It was noted that there were more networks involving curatorial and senior management staff and fewer opportunities for communications staff to share important learnings, with an appetite to see new forums which focus on this.

There was also a clear interest to see these discussions lead to closer cross-sector relationships over time, opening opportunities where organisations might collaborate or align their future work on inclusive histories. One theme discussed was how far different organisations could do more to express solidarity in instances where their work is challenged.

Commentary B:

To Whom Does This Belong – Sandra Shakespeare (Director, Museum X) and Charlotte Morgan (Cornwall Museums Partnership)



[Click to play trailer for *To Whom Does This Belong*](#)

Films can help us to explore cultural heritage and the world around us in profound ways. Our short film *To Whom Does This Belong* is testament to the power of collaboration and the impact it can have on the communities whose stories are being told.

Museum X began this journey with Cornwall Museums Partnership after the first lockdown of 2020. In 2021 we adapted a co-design approach through a series of open conversations with our community partner Black Voices Cornwall. Following subsequent lockdowns and multiple pauses, our wonderful site visits to Cornwall have resulted in a profound shift in our collective museum practice.

Through the support from Cornwall Museums Partnership, we commissioned two award winning documentary film makers: Caroline Deeds of Falmouth University and Pitch Films, and Ashton John, a documentary film maker from East London. We also worked closely with archivists from PK Porthcurno, Museum of Global Communications and Chloe Philips former learning lead for Cornwall's archive, Kresen Kernow.

The film sensitively portrays a small group of members from BlackVoices Cornwall as they handle and explore ephemera from PK Porthcurno, a fascinating museum documenting global telecommunications and telegram cables that started in Cornwall. The group also encounters local registrars and a journal from 1848-49 that documents Cornwall's historical links to the Transatlantic trade of Africans and includes harrowing accounts of brutality.

Working as a team, the film has been a process of deep reflection and contemplation. We leaned on the expertise and wisdom of incredible people like Jean Campbell, a specialist trainer in teaching the transatlantic slave trade with school groups and dealing with the racialised violence contained in historical museum collections, and Malcom Phillips, a psychotherapist and trainer supporting people to find their own tools to process racialised trauma, who facilitated an additional supportive space for members following the initial workshop at Kresen Kernow.

What are the key lessons learned?

- We must understand both the historical and cultural significance of archives and museum collections that reveal legacies of Black presence and experience in Britain when we work with people of the African diaspora.
- A co-design approach can be effective when working with people and transatlantic slave trade collections where racialised trauma is recognised as a key component of the process.
- Introduce all project members to have frank and candid discussion on the material preselection and identify any gaps in learning and support needs from the project team.
- Prioritising wellbeing means other elements of the project may need to change – budgets, timescales and deadlines are flexible compared to your team or your participants' wellbeing needs.
- Involve group members in all stages of the editing process – keep the transparency and allow time for feedback and support – we found sharing food together an invaluable part of the process!
- Think about setting the tone for comms and media in the planning stages – what are the key messages communicated to wider audiences?
- Create space for finding joy in between the cracks – keep the momentum with creative activities for personal reflection and contemplation relevant to the needs of the group.

To find out more about the film please visit [Museum X](#) to discuss use of the film for future workshops or events please contact:

Sandra Shakespeare, Museum X: sandra@themuseumx.com

Charlotte Morgan, Cornwall Museums Partnership: charlotte@cornwallmuseumpartnership.org.uk

4. What's missing: Challenges and knowledge gaps

Practitioner reflections on experiences of fielding polarised responses to their work also identified some gaps and challenges for responding more effectively.

Current attempts by organisations to defuse debates on inclusive histories were very rarely informed by robust feedback data or attitudes research, through which to derive how and why reactions to their work were divided. Another common theme was that few had considered how to constructively engage audiences with doubts and anxieties about their work, to explore approaches that could potentially broaden support among these groups.

While there was some fatalism about polarisation being an unavoidable component of doing important work on these histories, there was an interest in front-foot strategies that could defend and legitimise this work more confidently.

Peer-to-peer conversations often take place in siloes

Since 2020, arts and culture organisations have now begun to build new networks for sharing good practice. However, some of these conversations are taking place in parallel through separate forums, in many cases bringing together a group of stakeholders who agree with one perspective or approach to engaging in this work.

It is clear that there would be a range of benefits from doing more to connect these conversations. Bridging different networks would help to avoid the duplication of resources and increase the potential of encouraging better sharing of advice over time. Finding methods to convene stakeholders from separate networks would also help to facilitate better dialogue across the sector between practitioners with a plurality of views on how to approach work on inclusive histories, potentially increasing understanding of how to reach audiences that might have doubts or anxieties around how this activity challenges dominant perceptions of Britain's past.

“There are numerous institutions that have been undertaking this work, but they've been absolutely terrible at communicating with each other and actually reaching out to one another, and sharing the information about what's actually going on within their own organisation.”

– Museum curator

Practitioners lack an evidence base to understand audiences' views on inclusive history

Arts and culture practitioners rarely had a strong evidence base of audience responses to their work, especially the attitudes of Black, Asian and ethnic minority people.⁷ Only a handful had implemented systemised approaches to gathering audience feedback that could accurately assess the reach of their work across different ethnic and social groups, or measure the public responses to their activity on inclusive histories. Their knowledge of whether the public broadly understood different terms such as 'decolonisation' and 'inclusive histories' was also largely absent, with the exception of only one museum that had conducted survey research to inform their communications.

Critics and right-wing media commentators have often made implausible claims about the strength of opposition to inclusive history work – frequently pitching the supposedly 'woke' advocates of this work in opposition to a 'common-sense' majority. The lack of public attitudes research on which the sector can currently draw represents a missed opportunity to contest these claims and legitimise the current work to explore our complex shared past.

“We need more work on what an evidence base might look like. Currently in the sector we've got very little evidence on what the audience think of our work, but we're anecdote rich.”

– Museum Director

Community engagement often remains too narrow

Our research revealed numerous examples of organisations undertaking thorough and detailed community consultation processes, particularly in areas such as Bristol, where local divides over history and identity have recently been most fraught. These ranged from efforts to engage thousands of local residents through outreach activity and surveys, through to more simple methods of encouraging visitors at a museum to input their thoughts on whether a collection item should be repatriated.

However, in other cases, consultation processes were also narrower and more limited. For example, we heard multiple examples where community engagement activity had been restricted to a small and select audience of campaigners, or a single ethnic minority community group.

It is essential that the views of those groups or individuals closest to the historical narrative of focus are given priority and engaged in meaningful co-curation exercises – to ensure their voices are heard and represented within new work on inclusive histories.

Yet community outreach stakeholders have not always considered the extent to which views on these histories can be heterogenous across and within minoritised groups, requiring initiatives that engage the plurality of audience opinion.

There were also fewer examples where organisations had sought to engage the opinion of wider audiences, who may have concerns or questions about this work, to understand the framing and language needed to best help these visitors understand often uncomfortable truths about historic injustice.

“We have started new work on community engagement – around our object selection and labelling. But, to be honest, I’m still a little bit worried about how we reach [an area with less diversity and that is more traditionally Conservative-voting]. In future, I think we need to ask these groups at an early stage: ‘Are there things about this exhibition you’d find challenging?’ and ‘What stories would you be interested to hear?’”

– Museum Director

“Many of the [community] discussions we’ve had were hugely challenging. And when we started [the consultation] we were really under-equipped to do that work – to ask people to tell really difficult stories. It’s been a huge learning curve for us.”

– Museum Director

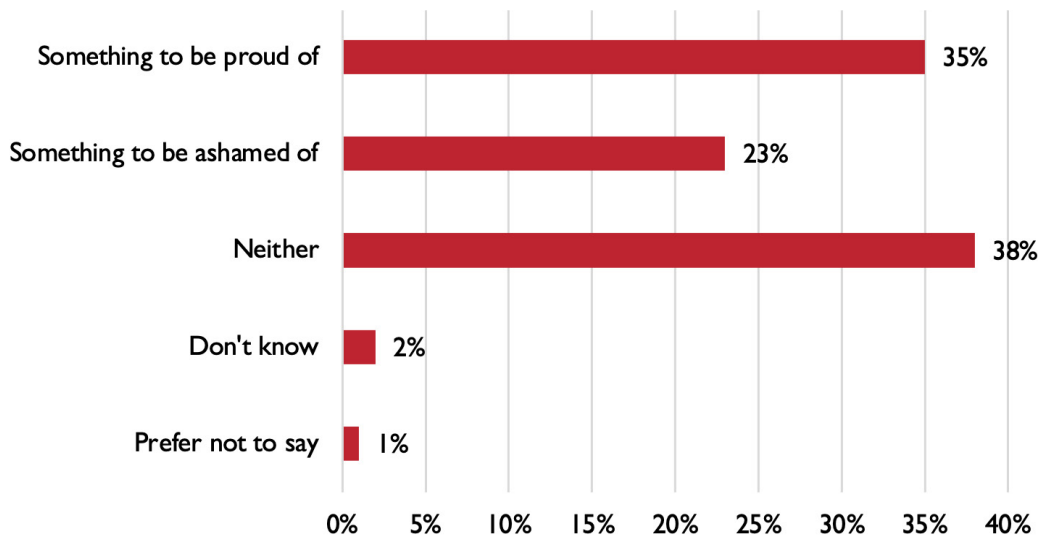
Practitioners suggested that guidance resources would be useful at the outset of their work, particularly in helping them decide how to prioritise, engage and balance the views of different stakeholder groups on contentious or sensitive histories. This should not necessarily offer prescriptive examples of ‘best practice’: since it was stressed that consultation methodologies varied depending on the resources of an organisation and the histories being explored. Yet it was felt that a set of guiding principles would be useful to help practitioners map the key stakeholders and to engage and consider the needs of each group, particularly when approaching themes of race and identity.

Perceptions of the ‘culture wars’ mischaracterise the sources and intensity of polarisation

The current ‘culture war’ debate on our past was often seen among practitioners as politicised and taking place at an elite level, among journalists and politicians, potentially under-acknowledging the perspectives of scepticism among the public. Many held the view that current polarisation over Britain’s past was being solely driven by conservative critics acting in bad faith or for political gain.

There are a number of risks to characterising the current national conversation on our past through this lens. Firstly, it underappreciates the degree of pluralism which exists in views around inclusive histories – across left and right, and among people from ethnic minority backgrounds. For example, polling in 2020 for the Policy Institute found that only one in four (23%) of the public reported feeling ashamed of the British Empire; while one in three (35%) were still proud of their country’s colonial past and similar proportions were on the fence (38%). This suggests there is still a long journey ahead to build public understanding of these complex histories – necessitating approaches that can guide audiences through a journey of discovering difficult and emotionally uncomfortable truths about British heritage and identity.

Is the British Empire something to be proud or ashamed of?



% who say the British Empire is something to be proud of

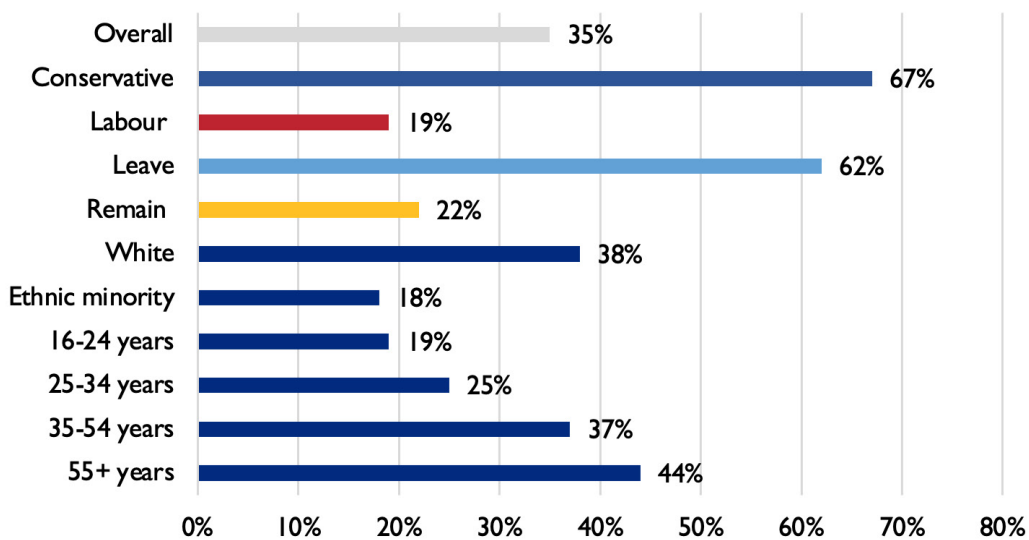


Figure 4.1: Ipsos Mori poll of 2,834 UK adults, 26th November-2nd December 2020 for KCL Policy Institute⁸

Secondly, perspectives of the debate on inclusive history that characterise all right-wing commentators as ‘bad faith actors’ can overlook the areas of broad latent consensus where it may be possible to grow support for one’s work among mainstream conservative stakeholders. There will unavoidably be groups of politicians and media critics that organisations will never fully be able to reach and engage. Yet there are signs to suggest that both public and expert views on matters of inclusive history are often nuanced. Polling shows there to be stronger levels of opposition to the removal of statues in public places⁹, but majority support among people in Britain for the restitution of the Parthenon Marbles¹⁰, or aboriginal artefacts¹¹, for instance.

“We need to find opportunities for respectful discussion with people who might feel educationally disenfranchised, because there are whole swathes of society who do. And, you know, that was one of the most important things that I learnt from encountering [media and public challenge]. I heard from people who I, as an academic in rarefied circles, don’t usually hear from. These people can feel a sense of hurt and insecurity when approaching difficult histories. They’re cut off from knowledge about Empire in a way that academics aren’t.”

– Heritage expert

Organisations lack resources on strategic communications guidance

There was evidence throughout our roundtables that arts and culture organisations were investing greater time in the communication strategies for their work on inclusive histories. Several stakeholders noted preparing clear Q&A answers to communicate the principles behind their work. Many had publicised charters and action plans to set out their programme of activity, some of which addressed anxieties that this work would ‘erase’ certain interpretations of history.

Nevertheless, many communications practitioners and senior directors expressed a nervousness about how to engage with and navigate polarised responses from media voices with opposing views – often opting for a policy of non-engagement.

“In every way possible, we just ignore it. It’s asking for opposition. [...] Our press and communications team take the view that we absolutely do not engage, because it only fans the flames. That’s true with both the left and the right.”

– Museum Director

This approach would certainly prove appropriate in instances where extreme responses have been received. But our communications roundtable also brought together consultants who had devised

strategies for reframing media debates on heated and divisive ‘culture war’ issues. Their insights highlighted that it is possible to challenge opponents of inclusive histories in ways that ‘shift the conversation onto your turf’ – through repeated use of common messages, measured and strategic use of social media, and training to identify and avoid the ‘traps’ set by some actors in the national media and political debate.

Responses to these ideas from communications staff in the discussion suggested that there was an appetite to see these guidance resources shared more widely, to increase practitioners’ confidence challenging media criticism.¹²

Commentary C:

Responding to the ‘culture war’ through engagement and dialogue – Professor Corinne Fowler, University of Leicester

I don't know if you've ever walked to a National Trust property but it involves soggy fields and some alarming fast roads. I discovered this whilst preparing a report on National Trust houses' historic connections to slavery and British colonial rule. The Trust commissioned me to produce an audit of published and peer-reviewed academic research and the result was a report called 'The Connections Between Colonialism and the Properties now in the Care of the National Trust.'

However, publishing the report, in 2020, felt like a walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I found myself in the middle of a major news story. The report was condemned by Cabinet Members and 59 Common Sense Group MPs and Peers, who turned the spotlight on me and my team of historians. We found ourselves being presented by influential opinion writers as unpatriotic denigrators of British history. My safety was threatened, I could not walk alone and I had to call the police.

The most inflammatory news articles prompted an avalanche of hate mail – letters and emails – full of threats and accusations. But I answered my hate mail. Once people overcame their surprise at receiving a polite reply, they told me what had upset them. I could nearly always tell which newspaper article they had read and I would explain what the history was and share the evidence with them. Almost always, after two or three exchanges, each person would wish me well. Then I felt sad because these culture wars are so unnecessary and so divisive. History should never be weaponised and we don't need to push each other off a cliff.

This year-long ordeal provided an unexpected masterclass in responding to culture wars. The first rule is not to engage in a war, but in a conversation. Culture wars are waged cynically for click-bait, profit or political gain. Having said this – and crucially – many of the people who join the fray are unaware that they are contaminating our public conversation. Adding to the toxicity is not the answer – doing so only empowers the wagers of culture wars and unconsciously furthers their cynical ends. In fact, war metaphors should probably be ditched altogether.

The writers of those letters and emails showed me many things. I learned that even people who are openly hostile can be called in. There is a big difference between calling in and calling out. Calling people out triggers feelings of shame and defensiveness which entrench difference and deepen divisions. Calling people in acknowledges somebody's starting point, encourages calmer

5. Horizon scanning: Potential scenarios for reduced or increased conflict over history

How has Britain become so polarised over its history? And will the pace and dynamic of these debates change over the next three to five years? We asked a group of ‘navigators’ representing different perspectives, including media and political commentators, public attitudes researchers and arts and culture experts from mainstream left and right-wing perspectives, to gather their predictions and insights on the future of Britain’s so-called ‘culture war’.

‘The History Wars’: Key insights

The navigator roundtable collated perspectives from political experts on the main causes and dynamics of current divides.

- **There was a sense of confidence about the warmth of public attitudes toward work on inclusive histories, particularly from think tank experts in the group.** Researchers acknowledged there were gaps in the current evidence base. But initial opinion polls and focus groups – for example by More in Common¹³ – had found that the public were more balanced in their views on history than might be assumed from the intensity of media and political debate.

Think tanks had found stronger divides in focus groups relating to debates about the removal of contentious statues and museum collection items linked to Britain’s past. However, this was balanced by a stronger consensus view among the public that methods of retaining and reinterpreting contentious statues or collection items were important approaches to acknowledge the more sensitive aspects of our shared past. Most participants in focus groups were also observed to be empathetic to the concerns of people from ethnic minority backgrounds that inclusive histories should be taught more widely rather than this being a polarising theme.

- **The navigators were optimistic on the ‘balanced’ nature of public opinion, but saw media and political voices as influential in escalating conflict.** There was a broad agreement that key political and media voices had launched critiques of arts and culture institutions with the intention to mobilise votes or boost advertisement revenue.

The navigators felt that giving more thought to the language and framing of this work could mitigate confusion and unhelpful polarisation. This did not necessarily mean avoiding controversy and it should not mean changing the content of

the work itself. But it was felt that the use of academic language by arts and culture organisation could produce unanticipated criticism, and that more clear, accessible communications should be used to unpack the reasons why narratives of our shared past were evolving.

- **It was felt that the progressive side of the debate could be too narrow and inward-looking, sometimes caricaturing and conflating different kinds of sceptical or critical responses.**

Public attitudes experts moreover highlighted that focus group participants often held complex and nuanced views on how to address contentious histories; for example, where a person may be opposed to removing statues, they may also support relocating these to a museum.

The navigators agreed that it could be useful for advocates for inclusive histories to consider how they should reach and persuade audiences who may be ‘on the fence’ about the need to tell under-represented histories, but who might have questions, concerns or knowledge gaps about what this means for contemporary understanding of British history and identity. Different organisations will naturally take different approaches based on their key audiences. Indeed, there is a strength in some pushing the boundaries and blazing the trail, while others broaden social awareness on these histories. Nonetheless, navigators felt that organisations in the sector could find it useful to consider the ways in which their activity might ‘bridge’ supportive audiences and more unaware or conflicted sections of the public, to deepen the understanding of our shared past.

“I feel like there need to be new and less inflammatory spaces for discussion with the centre right. There needs to be a constructive debate that doesn’t alienate people who might become key influences in driving change. [...] Because there are a lot of people in the [Conservative] Party who don’t see inclusive history as a negative thing, but they might currently be shy about voicing that.”

– Conservative councillor

Future Scenarios

Responses saw a mixture of optimism and pessimism but could broadly be categorised into three predictions: reduced conflict, sustained/middling conflict and increased conflict. We outline these three scenarios below.

Scenario	Predictions
Reduced conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Defuse the ‘culture war’ frame.• Hold a robust but more respectful debate on history and identity, acknowledging a plurality of views.• Demographic and generational shifts gradually shift public attitudes toward broad support for work on inclusive histories.
Middling levels of conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strategies to anticipate and reduce/mitigate polarisation.• Convening broad discussions to identify and build common ground between different ‘sides’ (utilising inclusive narratives of shared identity e.g. the history of NHS and Windrush, using strategic communication frames with broad support).
Increased conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Larger organisations lean out of the debate.• Avoidance from larger organisations amplifies radical voices on both sides.• Polarisation normalised as inevitable and unavoidable.

Scenario I: Reduced conflict

Even if our navigators thought this was desirable, it was not considered the most likely scenario. Several participants felt it would be possible to more proactively reduce some of the heat in the debate, while pursuing a robust and pluralist discussion between people with different views.

“Lots of people in this ‘culture war’ perceive threats to British history, which triggers a sense of anxiety. But I think the best way to respond is to be compassionate, to seek to understand their side, and then to provide them with more information. [...] I think it is possible for all of us to have these debates with a more respectful tone – to not get into arguments or patronise people. When I’m in interviews, for example, I just point to the evidence. And I think this has been a really important part of growing the platform for this work, because it’s a way of responding, which doesn’t add to the culture war, it takes us out of it.”

– Heritage expert

It was noted that cultural institutions were “among the few free civic spaces where generations with different views on our past come together.”¹⁴ Some suggested that interactive events, exhibitions or ‘road show’ collection displays on inclusive histories could help to nurture constructive dialogue among visitors,¹⁵ helping to counterbalance the often more divisive and reductive debates waged on social media platforms.

Engaging audiences across the full spectrum of public opinion in conversations about our past could help to discredit claims by critics that this work served only ‘small’ or ‘politically radical’ sections of society. Opportunities to understand the anxieties and questions of more concerned sections of the public would then also enable new insights around which messages can successfully reach these groups, helping communications and curatorial practitioners to feel better equipped in educating audiences on the sometimes uncomfortable truths about British history.

Scenario 2: Increased conflict

There is potential for divides over Britain’s history to become deeper and more entrenched, particularly in the run-up to future general elections. There was a strong concern among this group that bad faith actors would increasingly stoke polarisation over Britain’s past to mobilise voters, or to create attention-grabbing media headlines.

“I think a lot will depend on whether parties think that these positions or these issues are going to be politically advantageous or not. And that’s from both sides. And I think that’s the big question, whether they’re going to use our history in any sort of tactic to win an election, or to consolidate a coalition of the public.”

– Political researcher and campaigner

This political and media polarisation, in turn, was seen to risk causing a ‘silencing effect’ – whereby larger arts and culture organisations would shy away from engaging in work on inclusive histories, or from publicly communicating on these issues. A ‘leaning out’ of larger national institutions from more contentious debates might amplify polarisation – and make it harder to reach engageable audiences with somewhat mixed views on questions of history and identity.

Scenario 3: Sustained levels of conflict

The most common view was that polarised debates over history would continue – but that proactive steps could be taken to constructively ‘take the heat’ out of the debate, to increase dialogue and understanding across those with different perspectives.

“I think that the assumptions of bad faith have got to stop. Most of the time, when people say silly things about our past, it’s not done out of horrible intent but it’s because they just do not know enough about a certain issue to articulate it in a perfect way. We need to do more to engage those voices, to understand where they’re coming from, and to try and find a way forwards.”

– Media commentator

A point made by both sides was the need to challenge and shift the language that characterises the current debate. Pejorative terms such as ‘woke’ or ‘culture warrior’ had a toxifying effect on the national conversation and stripped debates of nuance.

Navigators from across the mainstream political right and left also noted that there was potential to develop broader consensus for inclusive narratives centred on national icons, or through harnessing the anniversaries of major national moments, such as this year’s Windrush¹⁶ and NHS anniversaries. Occasions that were less sharply contested across political divides could provide opportunities to build ‘unusual alliances’ for work on inclusive histories – across the sector and between commentators on the left and centre-right.

Initiatives to convene voices from across the debate around these more widely supported narratives should not come at the expense of efforts to address the sharper edges of history, including the legacies of colonialism and transatlantic slavery. Nevertheless, by establishing common ground on one area of our past, this approach was felt to have potential for enabling relationship building – which could provide a route into broadening engagement with other issues around historic injustice.

Commentary D:

Reflections on Windrush 75th Anniversary – Professor Patrick Vernon OBE, Chair of the Windrush 75 Network

A brief review of the history of our national Windrush Day shows how its origins were from within the community, not from the government.

Sam King, Second World War veteran and a passenger on the HMT Empire Windrush ship itself, had the idea of Windrush Day as an opportunity to bring together fellow passengers to share their successes and experiences, particularly for those living in South London and the Brixton area. Numerous events were organised in partnership with Arthur Torrington, co-founder of the Windrush Foundation in the 80s and 90s, leading to a reception on the 50th anniversary at Buckingham Palace in 1998., Eric and Jessica Huntley also organised Windrush Day events and invited Sam King as a guest speaker. At the same time, various church services were also taking place in the Midlands and North of England to acknowledge Windrush Day on the 22nd of June.

I got involved much later on, after making my film *A Charmed Life* in 2009, and we started to mobilise to campaign for a national day. From 2013 to 2018, working in partnership with the Windrush Foundation, British Future, the Baptist Church and a range of faith leaders and organisations, we organised annual events in Windrush Square in Brixton. These commemorated Windrush Day and the contribution of men and women from the Caribbean that served in the First and Second World War, recognising the wider African and Caribbean contribution to Britain, including to the NHS, and also acknowledging the achievements of the Windrush generation and their legacy.

However, it took the Windrush scandal in 2018 for Theresa May to apologise and for the government to adopt Windrush Day, which took effect from 2019. Thus, leading up to the 75th anniversary of Windrush, it was felt that it was important that the community and key stakeholders from civil society should strategically drive and navigate how we should commemorate the 75th anniversary. As a result of the Windrush scandal (or 'Home Office scandal') and particularly the issues around the compensation scheme, it was felt that the government was still failing the community. The issues of the scandal were still ongoing and more cases were surfacing of people's mistreatment by the Home Office.

The government has adopted a national Windrush Day and formed a Windrush Advisory Committee, which has now merged into the Cross Governmental Committee dealing with Windrush compensation and the implementation of the Lessons Learnt review report by Wendy Williams. But it displays little vision, ambition or inclination to mark Windrush Day in a significant way, other than

6. Conclusion and ‘Conditions for Confidence’

Most history is subject to different interpretations, which change over time. There have also been long-standing debates in the UK about how the arts and culture sector portrays this country’s past, including the histories of Empire and transatlantic slavery, and the stories of previously underrepresented groups. Since 2020, however, public and media debates about inclusive histories have sharply intensified, with many now deeming the UK to be in the grips of a ‘culture war’. Critics in the political, media and public conversation have levelled heated accusations that this work risks erasing or rewriting our country’s past.

It will be important that organisations are not deterred from pressing on with work that tells a fuller, more diverse account of our history; indeed, particularly following the Black Lives Matter anti-racism protests, there is a growing expectation that this work will continue and deepen. But this will also require greater confidence about how to navigate polarised responses from those who are concerned about how this work re-assesses Britain’s past and its identity today.

Outlined below, we set out eight ‘conditions for confidence’ – or insights and principles from the research that we hope can support strategic and practical thinking for organisations to engage in and navigate these heated debates. This is not an exhaustive list of recommendations. Rather, it can provide some context and framework for those in strategic roles to better understand, reach and persuade key audiences when communicating on themes of inclusive history.

Key to the principles is the need for the arts and culture sector to be bold – to not duck and avoid debates about our past. But as part of this, there are also crucial foundations and proactive strategies needed to equip practitioners, whether curators or communications staff, volunteers or directors – to project work on inclusive histories in ways that can defuse unconstructive polarisation and broaden public awareness about these areas of our past.

1. Get a clearer baseline on audiences’ attitudes – especially to communicate effectively

The arts and culture sector would benefit considerably from research that gathers public attitudes findings, in an iterative way, to map views on issues of British identity and history across the whole range of public opinion and demography. This would identify the different starting points for successfully engaging audiences on these themes, strengthening an evidenced understanding across the sector of what drives increased or reduced polarisation.

This should include more detailed research of groups whose histories have traditionally been underrepresented. Polling with substantial samples from ethnic, faith and social minority audiences, for example, would be able to illuminate areas of broad agreement. It could also strengthen awareness of where there is heterogeneity in views, both across and within groups, for example among different age generations, genders or attitudinal segments. This evidence base would in turn help practitioners feel more confident that work on diverse and under-represented histories can accurately reflect the interests (and concerns) of these audiences.

2. Communicate strategically – and bring communications strategy into project development from the outset

At a design and development stage, practitioners should be thinking through their choices for how to frame new projects on inclusive histories – in ways that can engage diverse audiences, and also reach more concerned and questioning sections of the public, such as those with a weaker baseline knowledge about histories of race, migration and Empire.

3. Consult across audiences and gather detailed feedback

Community consultation is integral when approaching themes of inclusive history, to ensure that new work accurately reflects and engages the under-represented groups whose past it intends to portray. But broad, thorough public consultations, with structured feedback mechanisms, can also help practitioners to better understand the challenges and opportunities across audience groups from different backgrounds, to widen engagement with this work, helping to identify public knowledge gaps and shifting social values.

4. Prepare better: but don't be too risk averse

Communications practitioners should establish a media and communications plan well in advance of new activity on inclusive histories 'going live', with a risk register that anticipates how each stakeholder group (from media spokespeople to front-of-house workers and volunteers) could be impacted by a polarised 'flashpoint'. At the same time, the risk register should strike a balance: risk aversion should not be taken too far, with fear of opposition leading organisations to under-communicate on new work or to duck away from engagement with potential critics and opponents.

5. Harness the catalytic power of anniversaries

Anniversaries of major historic events are important opportunities for building public awareness of histories previously hidden or not told. These offer useful ‘pegs’ through which organisations across the arts and culture sector can align and co-ordinate their activity on inclusive histories. Moreover, aligned efforts to mark anniversaries can offer ‘safety in numbers’, reducing the likelihood of a single organisation receiving challenge.

For example, celebrations to mark the 75th anniversary of the HMT Windrush and the NHS have been able to confidently speak to broad public audiences in a way that showed the history of race and empire can be nuanced and largely uncontested. Professor Patrick Vernon discusses this further in Commentary D (page 34).

6. Dialogue matters

There is value in bringing a mix of important voices to the table, through pluralist forums that discuss how work on inclusive histories could successfully engage with both left- and right-wing audiences, as well as ethnic minority communities and wider public audiences. Different organisations would be able to add value to this debate through their unique experiences of navigating polarisation and their expertise in engaging a range of different audiences (older/younger, ethnically diverse communities/non-diverse communities).

7. Recruit unusual allies

Certain arts and culture organisations will be strategically well-placed to initiate new activity on inclusive histories – particularly where these organisations have stronger connections to audiences, politicians or media outlets that are typically sceptical of work on these themes. Where partnerships and coalitions between organisations are formed around activity on inclusive histories, practitioners should consider how these ‘unusual allies’ can be strategic first-movers, potentially with stronger immunity to ‘culture war’ polarisation.

An example of this type of ally might be Historic Royal Palaces. Shortly after the release of the National Trust report into colonialism and historic slavery, the Historic Royal Palaces announced it was embarking on similar work to examine the residencies’ links to transatlantic slavery. Yet whereas the National Trust became subject to media and political opposition for their reinterpretation work, HRP received significantly less attention on its plans, with broadly warm coverage across both the Guardian and the Times. Their relative strong connection to the Royal Household and to more socially conservative audiences in this case shows how certain organisations will be better positioned

to broaden support for projects that consider different emerging narratives and tell inclusive histories.

8. Benchmark practice on diversity, equity and inclusion

There have been long term shortcomings in the arts and culture sector to boost diversity⁸, particularly at a senior and leadership level. As part of this, benchmarking targets for sector diversity⁹ should be set for all levels of an organisation, backed up by action plans on how to support the wellbeing and retention of staff – especially when addressing contentious themes which may incur public and media challenge. For example, all organisations increasing their engagement with inclusive histories should consider the necessary care and aftercare plans needed in instances of ‘culture war’ polarisation.

As the sector looks to increase its focus on work to tell more inclusive stories about our shared past, it will be important that these efforts are developed and led by staff that can draw on diverse lived experiences.

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We are grateful to the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Art Fund and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for funding the research. This study was initially commissioned as part of stakeholder scoping research to explore how funders could assist arts and culture organisations to engage in work on inclusive histories within a polarised context. This summary report outlines useful insights and findings from the research for practitioners in the sector.

We would like to give special thanks to the stakeholders involved in the project, who agreed to be interviewed, who took part in the roundtable discussions, or who submitted written evidence. We are tremendously grateful for their time taken to share valuable experiences, insights and reflections from their work.

Lastly, we would also like to thank British Future Associate Fellow Professor Patrick Vernon OBE for his support and insights while helping deliver the stakeholder roundtable discussions.

Appendix: Methodology

Research for this report used a mixed methodology, combining an evidence review with a series of interviews and roundtable discussions that brought together stakeholders and opinion formers on issues of history, identity, culture and the arts.

Qualitative Research

British Future engaged a total of 55 stakeholders to gather insights on good practice, to identify challenges and knowledge gaps, and to consider the changes needed to better navigate polarised responses to work on inclusive histories.

Five roundtable discussions were convened with the following groups:

- Curators and community engagement practitioners from arts and culture organisations;
- Museum directors, head curators and leaders from sector convening bodies;
- Communications staff and consultants;
- A group of ‘political navigators’ – formed of think tank researchers, and media and political commentators from across the political spectrum;
- And a ‘pathfinder’ discussion with practitioners from funding organisations that support the arts and culture sector.

In addition to this, ten in-depth interviews were then held with museum directors, thought-leaders and commentators on debates around inclusive histories. These drew experiences from around the UK and views from across the mainstream left and right wing of UK politics.

Eight organisations then submitted written evidence through an open survey made available on the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation websites.

Secondary Data Analysis

Alongside qualitative stakeholder engagement, British Future then conducted detailed secondary data analysis to summarise existing practice and perspectives on engaging with inclusive histories in an arts, culture and heritage context.

This comprised:

- Mapping research – involving searching the websites of 75 arts and culture organisations in the UK that have undertaken new activity on themes of inclusive history since 2020. These ranged from local art galleries and theatres to UK-wide convening bodies and national museums.

-
- A literature review of key public attitudes studies from the last ten years pertaining to themes of inclusive histories, transatlantic slavery and Empire.
 - A literature review of key media debates on inclusive histories since 2020.
 - And a set of case study analyses of major ‘history war’ flashpoints since 2020, which impacted the dynamic of public debate around arts, culture and heritage work on inclusive histories.

It was not within the scope of this project to undertake a comprehensive review of all the work taking place in the arts and culture sector on inclusive histories. Nonetheless, the research explored ongoing work from a wide variety of organisations:

- We engaged organisations in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, ranging from hyper-local initiatives to some of the largest heritage, arts and culture institutions in the UK.
- The research analysed a broad mix of approaches to inclusive histories, spanning work on histories of race, Empire and transatlantic slavery to histories of LGBT+ groups and religious minority groups.
- We also examined worked examples of organisations navigating polarisation around their work for a variety of different reasons and from a range of different media, public and political sources.

The research informing this report was conducted between February and August 2022. Examples used throughout the report refer to work on inclusive histories, and the public response to this work, at the time the report has been written. Some of the examples used may be subject to ongoing development and evaluation in future.

Endnotes

1. For the purpose of this report, we use the term ‘practitioner’ to refer to all stakeholders involved in work that engages with inclusive histories. This includes staff within organisations, but also external partner organisations, consultants and academics providing support and services to arts and culture initiatives on themes of inclusive history.
2. Full details on the methodology are available in the appendix.
3. Research by King’s College London Policy Institute has found a surge in media coverage of the so-called ‘culture wars’ in the last three years. Content analysis found that while 178 UK media articles had cited the term in 2019, this rose to 1,470 articles in 2021. Similar content analysis found a clear trend in articles referring to ‘woke politics’, with one of the top issues referenced being the National Trust’s “Colonialism and historic slavery report.” See <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/the-shifting-terms-of-the-uks-culture-war.pdf>
4. <https://bristolbeacon.org/about-us/our-new-name/>
5. <https://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/projects/empire-slavery-scotlands-museums/>
6. ‘Ethnic minority’. For the purpose of this report, the term refers to visible non-white minority groups. This was the preferred term of ethnic minority UK residents in [representative polling](#), when asked for views on four different aggregate terms. Over two thirds (68%) of respondents supported use of the term, which was preferred to the acronym BAME, and umbrella terms ‘people of colour’ and ‘non-white’.
7. During research for this report British Future conducted an evidence review compiling the key public attitudes studies on themes of Empire, heritage and inclusive histories from the last ten years. This identified the strengths and the gaps of current attitudes research. A briefing paper outlining the findings of the literature review is available on request. Please contact jake@britishfuture.org.
8. <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2021-06/fault-lines-in-the-uks-culture-wars-kings-ipsos-mori-jun-2021.pdf>
9. Savanta Comres survey of 1,535 GB adults, June 12th-14th 2020 for CNN.
10. YouGov survey of 7,717 GB adults, November 23rd 2021.
11. YouGov survey of 2,619 GB adults, June 6th 2023.
12. See for example: The Fabian Society (2021) Counter Culture: How to resist the culture wars and built 21st Century solidarity. London: The Fabian Society; NEON (2020) Divide and Rule:

How the culture wars are a reactionary backlash constructed to distract us, and how to respond. London: NEON.

13. https://www.britainschoice.uk/media/ecevsbt/0917-mic-uk-britain-s-choice_report_decor.pdf. Public attitudes on inclusive histories are collated and examined in the appendix.
14. Museum Director
15. For example, Manchester Museum introduced a participatory feedback book next to a controversial Benin tusk in its collection, asking visitors whether it should be kept in the Museum or returned to its country of origin. Not only had this helped legitimise a decision to consider repatriating the item (with 87% of visitors supporting the move), but practitioners noted that the book had prompted nuanced and constructive debate from visitors of all walks of life, helping depolarise discussion around the legacies of Empire and colonial looting.
16. 2023 marks the 75th anniversaries of the NHS and the arrival of the HMT Windrush in Britain. The Windrush 75 Network, for example, represents a broad civic and political coalition calling to mark the anniversary as a major national moment. See <https://www.windrush75.org/>
17. https://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Why-the-Windrush-matters-today.Report.Final_.pdf
18. The latest report from Arts Council England reveals that, across all the National Portfolio Organisations' projects, only 9% of managers were from ethnic minority backgrounds, compared with 21% of artists.
19. Research and recommendations for improving diversity in the arts and heritage sector can be found in 'It's all about handing over power', a report by Museum X and Culture& exploring the impact of diversity initiatives on curatorial roles since 1998. See: <https://bibli.artfund.org/m/53e933cf196387c3/original/Art-Fund-Curatorial-Diversity-report.pdf>

About British Future

British Future is an independent, non-partisan thinktank and registered charity, engaging people's hopes and fears about integration and immigration, identity and race. These debates, from EU migration and refugee protection to integration and combating prejudice, can seem noisy and polarised.

Securing political consent for policy change requires public support. British Future has developed a unique, in-depth understanding of public attitudes, uncovering the common ground on which people can agree. Our long-term aim is a country where we are no longer 'Them and Us' but rather a confident and welcoming Britain, inclusive and fair to all.

British Future...

British Future is an independent, non-partisan thinktank and registered charity engaging people's hopes and fears about integration and migration, identity and race, so that we share a confident and welcoming Britain, inclusive and fair to all.

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