

# Who gets remembered in public spaces?

## Summary Note - Online Focus Groups

December 2020

In August 2020 the Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee of the Welsh Parliament (Senedd) set out to explore how historical figures are remembered in Wales' significant public spaces.

This summary note contains the views of participants who attended online focus groups held in December.

It is of importance to the Committee to ensure the voices of the citizens of Wales are at the forefront of scrutiny. To support this, a method was devised to ensure relevant people were able to engage and share their views efficiently on this sensitive topic.

Findings in this note have been based upon the responses from **45 participants** based across Wales during **10 online focus groups**.

The aim was to gain qualitative information about the experiences of participants. This would enable a more in-depth understanding of the issues affecting the citizens of Wales.



# 1. Data collection

## Method:

The engagement approach included working closely with key organisations that communicate regularly with minority groups and young people. In addition, organisations that debate the views of this issue, from both sides of the argument, were invited to put forward appropriate participants, for example, Black Lives Matter Wales and Save Our Statues. Appendix 1 includes a full list of organisations that supported the engagement approach.

An invitation to take part was followed by a self-selecting ‘register your interest’ survey. This ensured that participants were also grouped appropriately to ensure productive discussion over debate.

The questions posed at each session were built around the inquiry’s terms of reference and these steered each session to generate relevant responses. Appendix 2 displays the specific questions participants were asked to develop this conversation.

This summary note aims to conclude the key themes arising that may be of relevance to the Committee’s work. Themes within this note have been selected on the basis that they are reoccurring. Where it's possible and appropriate, anonymised quotes have been selected to add context.

## Demographic of each group:

Group Number	Demographic of group	Number of participants
1	Participants linked to Race Council Cymru, National BAME Youth Forum and the Sub-Sahara Advisory Panel.	3
2	Participants were students, lecturers, artists, and some had links to community engagement, traveller communities and Black Lives Matter.	5
3	Participants were linked to Diverse Cymru, The Autistic Women’s Empowerment Project, Disability Wales, Autistic UK, Race Equality First and Race Council Cymru.	4
4	Participants were linked to either Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities or Welsh history groups.	6

5	Participants were artists and linked to BASW Cymru and traveller communities.	3
6	Participants all submitted written evidence in the initial consultation.	3
7	Participants were linked to Women's Archive Wales and Cwricwlwm Cymreig.	2
8	Participants were linked to Save our Statues, or based in Carmarthen where a recent consultation has been held with regards the Picton monument.	4
9	Participants were from a support group for Trans Gender and Non-Binary people and their families.	12
10	Three members of the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS), aged 19, 20 and 26.	3
	<b>Total number of participants:</b>	<b>45</b>

## 2. Key themes

### **The need for a process;**

The vast majority of participants felt that there should be a process that was transparent and open when reviewing new forms of commemoration but also to current forms of commemoration.

Participants felt this process should be inclusive, ensuring invitations to minority groups were included in all local consultations. There was also agreement that trust needs to be built between participants taking part and the public authorities for this process to work:

*“I think it can be very useful to have a process because especially at the moment the subject is so emotive and whereas some historical figures are quite clear cut, others aren't quite so. It's a very polarized subject, so if there is a process, it means that everybody will have a chance to voice their opinions. If there is a minority in an area but there is a process, then they may still have a voice that could otherwise be drowned out”*

*“I think it needs to be a process that's transparent, but one that's inclusive as well [...] I would like to think that groups like ourselves would be somehow involved in local consultation [...] You don't want a system that's too unwieldy but you need a process which is inclusive and one that people can trust”*

*“Anything that involves making changes to public space should be done with some openness. With openness you need a process so that people understand what is going on and how they can make comments and reflections”*

Furthermore participants felt there was needed to include a range of people involved in this process e.g. young people, 'ordinary people', academics, archivists, local history groups, ethnic minorities. It was suggested that a citizen assembly approach would ensure representative sample of opinion. Participants emphasized that this would ensure that all voices are heard, from both the extreme ends of the argument as well as the people in the middle:

*“I wonder about public consultations because I think naturally we have a democratic yen towards things like that and I also know that these topics can be very easily weaponized and sabotaged by particular groups”*

*"I think that the way public consultation is done is really, really important. It needs to be democratized in some way. It needs to be like a random selection or something like that"*

*"So that we don't fall into a white washing practice each structure needs to be judged on its own merits and I think you're not going to get the fullness of its merit unless you have a diverse board or body judging how bad this particular individual or idea is"*

Leadership of the management of any consultation and ensuring transparent discussions was raised many times:

*"I think the problem with just leaving it up to everyone is that you'll never get consensus and you will further alienate people from what actually matters, and I think taking real leadership and having someone making those decisions will make it much easier and make sure that people who are upset by these things can have their voices really heard and ensure change"*

There were also concerns that a process could be complex and have a detrimental effect on progress:

*"I think that a long bureaucratic process can obscure and overcomplicate this discussion. This is a gut feeling that you might end up with something that pleases nobody at the end of it, because it means listening to everybody and you risk getting some very dumbed down version of something"*

### **Characteristics that could be considered relevant to future commemoration;**

Participants were shown the list of possible characteristics that could be considered or reviewed when it comes to future public commemoration (you can find this in Appendix 2, question 2).

Many groups raised that the local impact of an individual should be included alongside the national impact of an individual:

*"I think the idea of national impact is much less important than the local significance"*

*"You get the same sort of people being celebrated throughout different cities. In a way that lots of city centre's look the same. That local specificity I think is*

*something that makes people feel much stronger about their local community. This would mean much more to communities, I think, than yet another statue of XYZ”*

Participants expressed that empathy should be added to the list in respect to how a proposed statue might make people in the community feel:

*“Re. Margaret Thatcher statues, “Yes, she was the first female Prime Minister in the UK, and a lot of people did like her. But it is upsetting for half the people as well. Perhaps empathy needs to be part of this list actually”*

*“I think the list is formed from obvious traits relating to monuments, structures and place, names, etc. One keyword perhaps missing is “experience” - what sort of an experience do people get from observing the statue has not been described and that’s important to me”*

There is also a need to consider how society's values will change over time, and public opinion is likely to change again in the future:

*“We do have to take into consideration how this person was viewed at the time and today and the impact that they have had on certain minority groups”*

*“Historical perceptions of them change. How we feel about these people changes overtime. Picton was a war hero and nobody cared what he did in Trinidad. When the monument was put up to him and now we're like oh \*\*\*\* he was a slave trader and we don't want that statue. It's shifting so should we be shifting by commemorating ideas or thoughts or feelings or events”*

### **Is the use of statues ‘out of date’?;**

Discussions arose in several groups about if the use of statues was less relevant in modern day society. Participants questioned if other approaches are more appropriate. For example, views were shared about the need for statues to assist with the promotion of equality now but would these be so necessary in 100 years’ time if the world is more equal.

Many participants recognised the sense of power and influence statues have in society and questioned whose responsibility is it to ensure that this power is not abused:

*“Statues have emerged from a society that sought to assert its ownership of a particular place and from the fragile ego of men who want to retain the memory of themselves perhaps through a fear of being forgotten. Now, we live in a different time and we have to ask why we do it at all”*

*“This recent debate has shown us that there is a power in statues. There is a power in public commemoration. There is certainly a use for that”*

*“The statues in my area are all about military might. Britain as a naval powerhouse dominating the world. It's all bravado. Britain rules the waves. That is not relevant now to the experience of Britain and that's not the kind of rhetoric that I feel we should be about. This harking back to the past about things that weren't always true even back then!”*

*“I quite like the 4th plinth in Trafalgar Square, where there is a rotation of commemoration. Perhaps we should be just open to the idea that something isn't going to be there forever. Accepting the flow”*

Points were raised around the historic and often systematic removal of statues and commemoration and some participants felt as a nation we shouldn't be fearful of having this conversation:

*“It's not unusual to remove statues. There's plenty of arguments from Roman times. Document show statues were removed and toppled once an Emperor had fallen. Their heads would be changed for the next Emperor”*

*“We've had a pretty static display around memorials in Britain for quite some time, even in more modern times places like the Soviet Union where statues of various historical leaders are almost on wheels. They were in place when they were in favour and removed when not. So this is a perfectly sensible and normal debate to be happening, but I think we need to try to get the heat out of it to normalize it so this becomes a process people feel comfortable in engaging with”*

*“As someone who studied British history, architectural history, art history, the act of destruction of monuments is nothing new and in a way that destruction of an object is also a commemoration. It fixes it at a point in history and for every generation that witnesses something being destroyed there'll be a generation of academics who'll spent their whole life trying to piece it together to reimagine what was destroyed”*

Others, however, strongly opposed the idea of removing statues at all and felt it was not the right thing to do:

*"It's an extreme circumstance to choose to destroy a monument. I would challenge anyone to find someone who doesn't have at least something which is controversial about them in our history"*

*"Even if you find something terribly offensive, it doesn't necessarily give you the right to destroy it. It wasn't that long ago we were complaining about what was happening with ISIS destroying Palmyra in Syria and that was them finding these statues deeply offensive"*

*"People ripping down statues, whether it's to do with Black Lives Matters or not, you can't erase your past. It's the same, as being a trans person, you can't erase your past. There's several of us on here who's got children and if our children still wish to call us dad, then obviously you know we still father children. You can't erase that either, even though you may not like the situation"*

An artists' role was viewed as an integral part of the creation of new commemorations. Much of this conversation echoed the sense of a need to educate people so they are aware of the objects around them and why they exist:

*"For me, arts is fundamental because when you're doing this, you almost have to have a brief phase where you're educating people, because many people are unaware of our culture, so you can't have people making decisions on what's of value and what's worthy if they have no understanding. There's got to be a period of public education"*

*"Historical significance plays a part in everything but I think the key thing is about making sure we know what way people want to learn about this person or learn about this piece of history"*

*"I feel it's better to leave the labelling of these monuments as they are because the history is all in place already and it's a failing of our education system if people don't know these facts"*

*"I'm an artistic person and I don't think it should be the artist that decides on what the monument should look like. The artist should be chosen carefully to portray that person in the light that they should be shown, but it should certainly be debated by their community"*

### **Is re-contextualisation relevant?**

Many participants agreed that the idea of re-contextualisation would need to be reviewed on a case by case basis – which they recognised was bold and potentially unrealistic, but necessary:

*“Statues are nuance. We can talk about extreme examples where the case is clear, but some which fall into a grey area”*

*“I think in regards to offensive statues, it would be good to gain public input. Let members of the public themselves decide whether or not it would be best to takedown a statue or leave it standing and provide more information about that specific person”*

*“I think it's impossible to have a one size fits all approach. Certainly some statues are more offensive than others”*

*“I know it (consultation and placing statues in a museum) costs money and people are going through a crisis at the moment, but I think that if we don't move forward with the times, there is going to be more anarchy and animosity towards the government in itself. Because people are slowly losing faith in the government and in what is being said.”*

Some people felt the mere action of keeping certain statues would equate to society accepting them even where they have been re-contextualised:

*“If a statue is considered inappropriate, then I think a repurposing of it is also inappropriate. This action doesn't really change anything, it just becomes a gesture rather than looking at the wider problem”*

*“I'm not sure I agree with this idea about it being down to the interpretation to tell these stories in a more complex, more rounded way. Because I think even if you have that interpretation, and even if that interpretation was available to everybody and accessible, which it never will be. I think that statue still being there is still saying this on some level this culture, this society, the establishment, somehow approves of this person and what they did in the world”*

The majority of the groups felt it was better to provide education and context and give the opportunity for people to rediscover and make their own judgement, rather than removing existing statues or memorials:

*"We need to face history, and remember it, and discuss it, and that is what is important, not to set it aside, or to try to forget it, or to cover it up"*

*"I don't think we should be hiding our history, I think we should be confronting it and having an open, honest discussion and providing the information out there for people to read and discuss and debate"*

*"We need to make those stories as publicly accessible as the statue because to me it's the stories that are dangerous, not the statue. The stories need to be constantly re-examined. You can have a statue and it's fulfilling that purpose because it can be telling an entirely negative, outdated story. But it's still there as a as a platform for the story. My concern is if you take a statue away, then the conversation is stopped and you need both"*

*"I certainly don't want to whitewash history but I do think we absolutely need to grapple with our genocidal imperial history. There are reminders of it everywhere. I think taking the statues down is only a tiny piece of it [...] I'm just not convinced that leaving those statues there as they are, allows us to grapple with our genocidal imperial past"*

*"If there is absolutely a requirement to remove that monument, potentially even for its own safety. I think it should be put in a museum, but I think that would be desperately sad and I think in many ways it would be cowardly because I think part of this debate, is to do with slavery, and that we are not comfortable with our own history"*

In contrast, those who wanted to see statues removed felt strongly about how the figures fail to represent them or current themes that the people of today value:

*"History brings changes and changes of views. What is terrible in one generation can be seen as heroism by the next generation, e.g. Beca's riots."*

*"Not being rude but why should we have statues of people? I don't understand why we need some of these statues of people who have no relevance to the history that we're in. Why should we have statues of people that aren't inspiration for anyone?"*

*"I don't feel represented by some of the statues and monuments in my 10 mile radius and I'd rather they came down. Perhaps not in a violent way, but like I said in a way that tells the story. That dismantling can help to tell the story"*

Participants shared many suggestions around how to re-contextualise (where it's considered appropriate), including using spaces that can change over time as opposed to fixed statues and monuments, for example murals and trails. Or the use of digital technology or QR codes where additional information can be given to provide background and context rather than undertaking costly changes or removals:

*"I think we need to start moving towards the idea of funding digitalization. We need there to be a digital aspect of these more traditional ways of commemorating that can be so easily switched and changed"*

*"One idea that might work is having QR codes put in place so someone can scan and read up. I know it may alienate an older generation, but I think it's worth having alternative ways of finding and researching about someone in your community"*

*"The issue here is to do with, not so much the statue which is an inert thing, but it's the stories we are trying to tell [...] how do you make sure that those stories are being told truthfully and fairly. An object in a museum is voiceless unless we give it those stories. Perhaps we need to take into account the fact that when we create public statues we have a whole host of resources that allow us to tell a much wider story"*

*"If you have public figures in public spaces, where does one go from there to get more information? We need to increase the accessibility. Do we need to add context within museums. Museums could have an entire exhibition that encapsulates this information"*

Education was deemed essential to progress by the vast majority of participants:

*"I think to some extent a lot of this recontextualization actually comes back to education. We need to re-educate ourselves on what the whole idea is behind our commemoration. It seems as though we've forgotten, and it's interesting that because the whole reason why we put these statues up was because to try and help us remember so that we would have a living memory"*

*"I think they (the statues relating to slave trading) teach us about who we are as a country, our history and how far we have come as a country. Things have changed and I think it reminds us of the past and kind of gives us a warning that it should never really happen again. The minute you start just deciding to tear that away, you are not giving other children and young people in society a proper education about history"*

*"Where we have a difficult history, are we just going to tear that down? How will that fix the problems? This idea is a fallacy. If we want to address these issues, which may or not have to do with race relations the answer is education"*

*"I thoroughly believe that we need to look at our past, try to understand it. I'm not trying to bury it and I really think that this sort of thing is dangerous because I think it will just breed more ignorance and lack of understanding"*

### **Who participants want to see remembered:**

Certain figures were considered as noteworthy for further public commemoration including David Lloyd George; Aneurin Bevan, Betty Campbell (which as we know is currently in progress), Reverend Hughes (the founder of the African Institute in Colwyn Bay), Luisa Calderon (the woman sentenced to be tortured by Thomas Picton when he was the Governor of Trinidad), Leo Abse (the Welsh MP who campaigned for the Bill to legalise homosexuality in 1967), Jan Morris (the Welsh Trans Gender author who was a reporter in the expedition team that were first to ascend Everest with Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing).

However, in general participants favoured future public commemoration being developed around groups rather than individuals. It appeared safer as individuals could have hidden flaws. Some examples of groups to focus on were, Somali and Yemeni, Bengali communities in Tiger Bay, Gypsy, Roma, Traveller communities, groups from Welsh history (e.g. children miners), groups from medieval Welsh history, women, health care workers, and Trans Gender communities.

*"Women... we are not a minority, we are a majority, but our representation is very minority."*

*"Usually commemoration is of white, non-disabled, straight men. We are missing certain social classes. We need statues of influential people of different races. Women who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people. Disabled people. Positive diversity in all its facets in Wales"*

*"I think minority groups are definitely going underrepresented, there are so many minority groups that are undermined and underestimated. Care leavers like ourselves for example. I think we are undermined and underestimated. There are so many people from disadvantaged backgrounds that just don't*

*get talked about enough. More often than not, it's people who come from privileged backgrounds who are commemorated"*

*"In my culture, as a nomadic people, we had stopping places throughout Wales where my family have stopped up for generations and to us they are sacred places. Why can't they be part of commemoration and memorialised. It's about being really creative, open and inclusive. This is why we need to engage wide opinion"*

*"Recently Jan Morris died, [...] She was a really good role model. She transitioned when I was much younger than I am now and I remember reading her book on that and thinking 'yes you can do it.' So those sort of things are really important to the LGBT community as a whole"*

*"I would like to see more Welsh history commemorated, particularly Welsh, rather than more broadly British history. Especially more radical history. Thinking of the minor's strike Wales' industrial history as well"*

*"I feel it's important that more people used to seeing trans people out and about the more that they're going to become integrated into society because they will be more the norm [...] I think that they would help the trans community integrate and it could become so ordinary, that nobody notices anymore"*

## Appendix 1

<b>The following organisations supported the process of evidence gathering from the online focus groups</b>
African Community Centre Wales Swansea
Autistic UK
Black Lives Matter Wales
Children in Wales
Cwricwlwm Cymreig
Disability Wales
Displaced People in Action
Diverse Cymru
Equality and Human Rights Commission in Wales
Ethnic Minorities & Youth Support Team (EYST) Wales
Llafur - Welsh People's History Society
National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS)
Our Chartist Heritage
Owain Glyn dŵr Society
Race Council Cymru
Race Council Cymru, National BAME Youth Forum
Race Equality First
Save Our Statues
Sub-Sahara Advisory Panel
The Autistic Women's Empowerment Project
Tros Gynnal Cymru
UNIQUE - a voluntary group supporting Trans Gender people in North Wales
Welsh Refugee Council
Women's Archive Wales
Wrexham Africa Community Centre
Yemeni Community Newport
<b>Total organisations: 25</b>

## Appendix 2 – questions asked during the sessions:

1. Do you think there should be a process for public authorities to follow when deciding whether to remove or transfer a statue or monument or rename a place?
2. Should the following characteristics be considered when agreeing to commemorating a historical figure publicly as a statue, road name or building name:
  - The historical significance of the person,
  - The continued influence of this person,
  - The national impact of this person,
  - His /her Impact on his/her field,
  - How this person was viewed at the time, and by people today,
  - The architectural significance of the monument,
  - The impact on minority groups and views of the act of commemoration.
3. Are there any individuals or groups of people that are underrepresented in public commemoration in Wales?
4. If statues or monuments are judged to be inappropriate, to what extent is it suitable to re-contextualise them?