**Great North Museum: Decolonisation strategy scoping work**

**Executive Summary July 2021**

**Note:** There is no agreed definition as to what Decolonisation means for museums and it can often be misrepresented or misunderstood. Here we use the term to describe how we can acknowledge that the origins of collections might be connected to the acts of colonisation of other countries, and how we can ensure these stories are not overlooked. It also acknowledges that decolonisation is about addressing institutional power structures.

The term decolonisation will be addressed, with other use of language, as part of the collaborative strategy creation work.

**CONTEXT**

The history of the collections at the Great North Museum: Hancock (GNM) spans over 250 years. This means that a number of our objects are inextricably linked with Britain’s colonial past and systemic racism. We acknowledge this and are working towards using these collections in an equitable and just way.

In its statement on decolonisation, the Museums Association highlights the scale of the challenge, and the need for a long-term process to understand the colonial legacies in the wider museum sector. In this context, the GNM is seeking to develop a wide reaching decolonisation strategy that will further inform work across Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums (TWAM).

This would entail fully exploring and addressing what decolonisation would require across all of the GNM’s operations. Activities are likely to include contextualising current collections, continuing work around object repatriation issues, and finding new ways to share spaces and empower local communities in museum spaces.

**PRE-WORK SCOPING**

Recognising the potential complexity of creating a decolonisation strategy, the GNM engaged external consultants with experience in supporting organisations on race equity and inclusion across a range of sectors to undertake a piece of foundational work to determine how to go about creating the strategy itself. (<https://www.nousgroup.com/people/amatey-doku/> <https://www.nousgroup.com/people/jamie-tang/> )

This scoping work has drawn on the combined expertise of the consultants and the museum, as well as input from a small number of stakeholders who participated in exploratory interviews. Consultees included individuals from the university, the university students’ union, local community organisations, staff at the museum and representatives from key museum stakeholders the Natural History Society of Northumbria and the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne.

The stakeholders considered what a successful strategy would look like, identified specific issues to address, considered the risks involved in the strategy creation, and considered the right process for developing the strategy, including stakeholder engagement. They highlighted a few reasons why this work was important:

* Gives diverse communities (particularly those historically impacted by colonialism) a voice and stake in the Museum
* Potential to connect the Museum with new and diverse audiences
* Creates new ways of engaging with collections from around the world
* Provides a richer understanding of where collections came from and how they were collected

They also identified those areas that would be critical to the development of the strategy and plan:

* The need to engage community groups sensitively and appropriately to maintain trust
* Establishing clear compensation and reimbursement protocols
* Clear communication with stakeholders throughout the project
* Recognising that understanding of attitudes towards decolonisation varies widely amongst stakeholders
* Recognising particular challenges for internal stakeholders

**PURPOSE**

The purpose of the resulting strategy will be to put the GNM on the path to decolonisation, with meaningful, effective, collaborative engagement with a wide range of stakeholders. This is an important area for the museum to explore; firstly, it provides the museum an opportunity to better understand enduring colonial legacies; and secondly, it provides a space to reimagine a museum where those legacies no longer inform approaches and practices.

**OBJECTIVES**

There are a number of objectives for this collaborative strategy development exercise:

* Agree definitions of what decolonisation means and looks like for Great North Museum
* Begin the process of understanding and addressing continuing colonial legacies which inform current practices
* Explore opportunities for widening and diversifying the museum’s audiences, collaborators and colleagues
* Set out clear initiatives, reforms and milestones to deliver decolonisation for Great North Museum over a time period
* Establish ways of building relationships and support with key stakeholders (e.g. Black, Asian and Minoritised communities, general audiences and visitors, local community groups etc.)

**SCOPE**

The collaborative strategy development exercise will consider all aspects of the museum’s operations, through the lens of decolonisation. This includes a meaningful join up and consistency with work across Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums and Newcastle University.

**PROCESS**

The strategy will take place over 3 stages corresponding to understanding the current state of the museum, developing a future state and agreeing the plan. This engagement is designed to take place over a minimum of 12 months. This is not an insignificant amount of time, but necessary, given the sensitivities of the issues that need to be addressed and the need for meaningful engagement.

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| Stage 1: reviewing the museum’s current state | Stage 2: developing the desired future state | Stage 3: Agreeing the plan |
| * Kick off project
* Establish project reference group
* Collate and analyse internal data
* Prepare for engagement with internal stakeholders
* Conduct consultations with internal stakeholders
* Synthesise internal review findings
* Develop discussion paper and artefacts for external engagement
 | * Plan and prepare material for first round of external stakeholder engagement
* Conduct first round of external stakeholder engagement
* Synthesise first round of external engagement and develop summaries of desired target future state model(s) for testing
* Develop target future state model(s) based on first round of external stakeholder engagement
* Plan and prepare material for second round of external stakeholder engagement
* Conduct second round of external stakeholder engagement
* Synthesise findings from second round of stakeholder engagement and write- up for external circulation
 | * Develop draft strategy and plan
* Test draft strategy and plan with reference group and select stakeholders
* Develop final strategy and plan
* Present and publish strategy and plan
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**TIMELINE**

It is key that approaches to decolonising the GNM sits within the broader organisational strategies of the GNM, TWAM and Newcastle University to ensure that change is embedded and has wider influence on those organisations.

As part of this work, it is critical that the GNM/TWAM does not lead and influence the decolonisation strategy development process. External leadership and facilitation will be key and it is hoped to engage a consultant and trusted leader, with excellent experience of working with communities and organisational change, who can work with the organisation, stakeholders and the public through this process.

From the end of 2021 and throughout 2022, TWAM will be developing its 2023-2027 Business Plan as an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation, which will include informing the GNM’s own local Business Plan which will be developed in tandem. This means that the decolonisation work will be built in to the timeline for this plan.