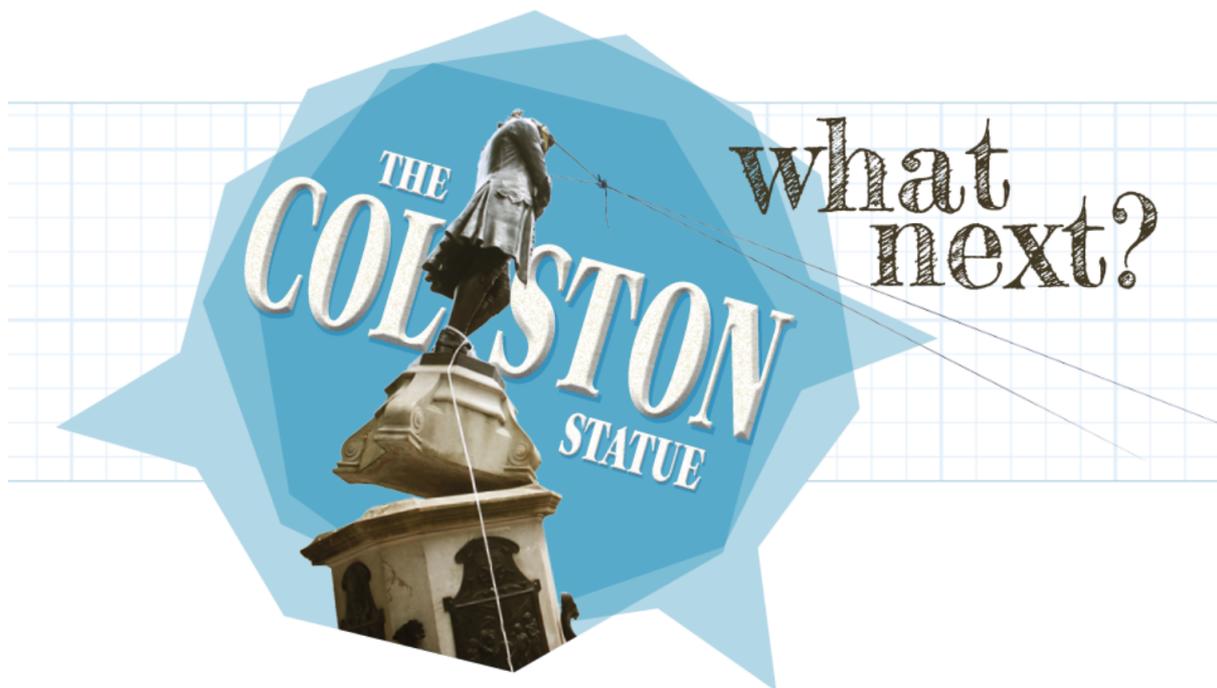


# The Colston Statue: What Next?

'We are Bristol' History Commission Full Report



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## 'We are Bristol' History Commission Full Report

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## Executive summary

In the summer of 2021, the 'We are Bristol' History Commission consulted with the public about the future of the Colston statue and the Colston plinth.

People had a chance to see the statue and learn about its history in a temporary display at the M Shed museum, as well as view the display online.

Alongside the display was a survey that invited people from Bristol and beyond to share their views on a number of questions that asked:

1. Do you agree or disagree that the Colston statue should be put on display in a museum in Bristol?

If you don't agree that the statue should be in a museum, please tell us what you think should happen to it instead;

If you agree that the statue should be in a museum permanently, please tell us how you would like to see it displayed.

2. What should be in the plinth space?

- Update the plaque on the plinth to reflect the events of 7 June 2020?
- Use the plinth for temporary artworks / sculptures?
- Use the plinth for a permanent artwork / sculpture?
- Keep the plinth but leave it empty?
- If 'Other', please specify.

3. How do you feel about the statue being pulled down?

With each question, there was also free space for people to share ideas and views in their own words. You will find a selection of these words throughout this report.

This survey was a chance for people to help to decide what happens to the statue and plinth. We are very grateful to all who took the time to participate. The answers you have given will help to decide their future.

The Mayor asked the History Commission to review the consultation and offer a number of recommendations in the light of it. This report summarizes the findings and also suggests what might happen next.

## **Who joined in?**

Nearly 14,000 people completed the survey (13,984). Of these, just over half were from Bristol (55 per cent). The Bristol participants were a cross-section of the city with people of every age, gender, ethnicity and deprivation level participating in large numbers. Every geographical area of the city took part. However, a few neighbourhoods had lower response rates, so we used outreach to encourage more people to join in from these neighbourhoods, and then gave equitable voice to each area of the city when analysing what people had written.

## **What do people want?**

The results point to considerable shared thinking and feeling in the city about the events of June 2020 and the future of the Colston statue and plinth.

### **1. Most people wish to see the Colston statue on display in a Bristol museum.**

Three out of four of all respondents said to put the statue in a Bristol museum (74 per cent). Bristol residents agreed with this option even more strongly, with four out of five people from Bristol saying the statue should be on display in a Bristol museum (80 per cent).

Around one in six people from Bristol (16 per cent) did not want the statue on display in a Bristol museum (4% expressed no view on this). Of this 16 per cent, approximately three-quarters wanted it returned to the plinth and approximately one-quarter wanted it destroyed or not on display.

In our sample of survey comments, for every one person from Bristol who said they would like the statue displayed vertically and cleaned up, five favoured having the statue displayed lying down and with graffiti. In their comments, many said they liked the way it appeared in the temporary display.

**2. A majority support adding a plaque in the vicinity of the plinth to reflect the events of 7 June 2020.**

More than five out of eight people (65 per cent) support adding a plaque. Support for a plaque is even stronger in Bristol, where seven out of ten Bristol residents (71 per cent) agree with adding a plaque to reflect the events of 7 June 2020.

**3. Opinion was more mixed on what to do with the plinth, although the most popular option was that it be used for temporary artworks or sculptures.**

Just under half of all respondents (49 per cent) and nearly six out of ten Bristol respondents (58 per cent) support using the plinth for temporary artworks or sculptures, and over seven out of ten Bristol respondents are open to this (72 per cent).

This is clearly preferred to either using the plinth for a permanent artwork - supported by fewer than four out of ten (35 per cent of all respondents and 38 per cent of Bristol respondents) - or leaving the plinth empty - supported by around three out of ten (29 per cent of all respondents and 31 per cent of Bristol respondents). Smaller numbers wished to see the Colston statue put back up on the plinth (supported by just over one out of ten in the city) or for the plinth to be removed entirely.

**4. A majority of respondents felt positive about the statue being pulled down.**

More than five out of eight Bristol residents (65 per cent) said they feel either very positive (50 per cent) or positive (15 per cent) about the statue being pulled down. While Bristol residents were the most supportive of the statue coming down, across the survey as a whole over half of all respondents (56 per cent) said they feel positive or very positive about the statue being removed. Just over one in three people (36 per cent of all respondents compared to 27 per cent of Bristol respondents) reported feeling negative about this, with the manner of removal the number one explanation for feeling this way.

How people felt about the statue being pulled down was broadly similar across different deprivation levels and ethnic groups. Age appears to make the biggest difference in how people feel, with younger people reporting more positive feelings about the statue coming down and older people reporting more negative feelings. While over four out of every five 18 to 34 year olds from Bristol (82 per cent aged 18 to 24; 81 per cent aged 25 to 34) were either very positive or positive about the toppling of the Colston statue, close to half of those aged 65+ were either very negative or negative about the toppling of the Colston statue (48 per cent aged 65 to 74; 56 per cent aged 75+).

## **Recommendations**

### **Future of the Colston statue**

**Recommendation 1:** We recommend that the Colston statue enters the permanent collection of the Bristol City Council Museums service.

**Recommendation 2:** We recommend that the statue is preserved in its current state and the opportunity to reflect this in the listing description is explored with Historic England.

**Recommendation 3:** We recommend that the statue be exhibited, drawing on the principles and practice of the temporary M Shed display where the statue was lying horizontally. We recommend that attention is paid to presenting the history in a nuanced, contextualised and engaging way, including information on the broader history of the enslavement of people of African descent.

### **Future of the empty plinth**

**Recommendation 4:** We recommend that the former Colston statue plinth, along with the original plaques, remain in place and that a new plaque is installed that briefly and factually explains when and why the statue was put up and taken down. We suggest the following wording for the new plaque:

**‘On 13 November 1895, a statue of Edward Colston (1636 - 1721) was unveiled here celebrating him as a city benefactor. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, the celebration of Colston was increasingly challenged given his prominent role in the enslavement of African people. On 7 June 2020, the statue was pulled down during Black Lives Matter protests and rolled into the harbour. Following consultation with the city in 2021, the statue entered the collections of Bristol City Council’s museums.’**

**Recommendation 5:** We recommend that the Conservation Area Character Appraisal is updated to include a) the events of 7 June 2020, b) this process of public engagement, and c) the decision to locate the statue within Bristol City Council Museums service. We recommend that the opportunity to reflect the current state of the plinth in the National List description is explored.

**Recommendation 6:** We recommend that the city think creatively about the empty plinth and its immediate vicinity. We recommend that funding is sought from public and private sources to commission temporary artworks and activities. These might take a digital or physical form, on and around the plinth. We recommend that two principles guide future use of the plinth:

- that there are periods of intentional emptiness and presence;
- that this is a space for dialogue and conversation about things that matter in and for the city, including the legacy of transatlantic slavery.

### **Broader Issues for further consideration**

- We see the need for a city-wide commitment to creating opportunities for younger and older generations to interact, share experiences and perspectives and develop greater empathy and mutual understanding, including sharing views on the city’s past, present and future.
- We see the need to develop processes and practices, both locally and nationally, that encourage active engagement in creating more representative public space. When making decisions around contested heritage, public bodies should develop and follow processes that are fair

and transparent, inclusive, participatory, evidence-based and committed to justice.<sup>1</sup>

- The history of the city's involvement with the transatlantic enslavement of African people is not an issue that can or should be consigned to the past, but rather remains embedded in present-day concerns. Strong feelings remain on this topic, and the toppling of the Colston statue has opened the opportunity for this history to be addressed urgently, appropriately and sensitively. We recognise the leadership of the Legacy Steering Group on the question of how Bristol might best memorialise and respond to the transatlantic trafficking and enslavement of African people.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Further guidance on possible processes can be found at Ben Stephenson, Marie-Annick Gournet and Joanna Burch-Brown, 'Reviewing contested statues, memorials and place names: Guidance for public bodies', University of Bristol, 2021 available at <https://tinyurl.com/dybkrt>

<sup>2</sup> For more information see the Project Truth report at <https://www.blacksouthwestnetwork.org/acc>

## Introduction and methods

In the year following the toppling of the Colston Statue, members of the History Commission worked with staff in Bristol City Council Museums service to co-design a temporary display of the statue at the M Shed that was mirrored in an online exhibition. This was an opportunity to invite the city into conversation over the future of the statue and plinth, as well as share their thoughts and feelings about the events of June 2020. In order to facilitate this, members of the History Commission worked with the Bristol City Council consultation team to develop an online and paper-based survey that ran from June through early October 2021. **A total of 13,984 responses were received:** 12,191 (87 per cent) via the online platform and 1,793 (13 per cent) through paper copy.

To ensure greater participation across the digital divide, additional feedback was gathered from paper questionnaires targeted at lower participating neighbourhoods, alongside records of conversations with M Shed staff and e-mails received by the museum and History Commission. In addition, as early results revealed lower participation among school-age children, 16 events were held at a diverse range of schools (including City of Bristol College, Badminton School, Orchard School, City Academy and Bristol Brunel Academy) between 21 June and 16 July 2021. To further engage lower participating neighbourhoods, six events were held between 10 and 19 July 2021: two private tours of M Shed with community leaders and four road shows in St Paul's Learning Centre, Ridingleaze in Lawrence Weston, Oldbury Court and Fishponds High Street, and Lawrence Hill Urban Park. Written feedback was recorded at these events and is used to inform this report alongside the online and paper surveys.

Respondents were asked a series of questions about what they wanted to see happen to the Colston statue and the empty plinth, as well as how they now felt about the statue's removal in June 2020:

1. Do you agree or disagree that the Colston statue should be put on display in a museum in Bristol?  
If you don't agree that the statue should be in a museum, please tell us what you think should happen to it instead.  
If you agree that the statue should be in a museum permanently, please tell us how you would like to see it displayed.

2. What should be in the plinth space?
  - Update the plaque on the plinth to reflect the events of 7 June 2020?
  - Use the plinth for temporary artworks / sculptures?
  - Use the plinth for a permanent artwork / sculpture?
  - Keep the plinth but leave it empty?
  - If 'Other', please specify.
  
3. How do you feel about the statue being pulled down?

As well as responding to these three main questions using a scale that enabled quantitative analysis (see graphs below), respondents were also encouraged to provide more detailed textual comments explaining their answers as well as to offer additional solutions (see quotes in the Bristol Voices sections below). Many took advantage of this and responded with thoughtful – and often lengthy – comments. We are very grateful to all those who took the time to share their thoughts and feelings with us.

Reading through these comments, we were struck by the challenge issued by one Bristol respondent. They reported feeling very negative about the toppling of the Colston statue and called on us to **'go public with this survey and gain a true reflection of the people of Bristol... Give the people a chance to speak.'** The survey was an opportunity for the city to speak, and this report is intended as a transparent way of making the results of that survey public. In due course, the millions of words recorded will be anonymised and made available for anyone to consult in the city archives.

But as well as being a chance for people to speak, our hope was that the temporary display and survey would also offer a chance for people to listen to the thoughts and feelings of others. As well as detailing the results of the engagement, this report includes a section within each topic area that introduces the voices of diverse residents from across the city. Including their voices is not simply about letting all have their say. It is also about letting all have an opportunity to listen.

As you read the words of others, you will find a diverse range of thoughts and feelings within the city about the events of June 2020 and the future for the statue and the plinth. This is something that many responding to the questions were themselves aware of. Indeed, a sense that the city was divided led to a

small number offering their own creative compromise solutions by way of a divided future for the statue.

This was taken literally by a couple of respondents who suggested that the statue **'be split down the middle with one half of it returned to the plinth, and the other half thrown back in the river.'** Another offered an imaginative **'compromise plan'** whereby **'(after updating the plinth with an accurate plaque) we put Colston back up. Then once every year on the anniversary of his toppling we have a festival where we pull him down again and ceremonially throw him in the river. Everyone's happy, we get a new civic tradition and it could be a great focal point for learning about the horrors of the slave trade and Bristol (and Colston's) role in it.'**

Attractive as the idea of a 'new civic tradition' might be, the results of the engagement suggest that there is no need to manufacture a compromise as there is more common thinking and feeling in the city about the events of June 2020 and the future of the statue and plinth than might be imagined. Reflecting on the thousands of responses from those living in the city as well as beyond, there does appear to be a shared way forward that clearly won't please absolutely everyone (one respondent who admitted personally, **'I don't really care what is done there'** when responding to the question of the future of the plinth, offered a word of caution: **'whatever you do you will be accused of pandering to someone or other: you're damned if you do and damned if you don't'**) but does represent the opinion of most of the city. The recommendations offered at the end of the report are therefore not a compromise that seeks to unite a divided city. Rather they reflect the aspirations of a city that has spoken with a far more unified voice.

The Mayor invited the History Commission to review responses and provide recommendations to Bristol City Council. This report is intended to do that. What happens next is not the responsibility of the History Commission but elected officials. However, we do ask elected officials to ensure that their actions are informed by the wealth of voices that we have heard through this consultation.

The remaining sections of this report:

- outline the demographic profile of those engaging with this survey (pp. 13-19);

- briefly explain the methods of analysis, discuss the results, and introduce the range of opinions expressed by respondents through their own words (pp. 20-55);
- offer a series of recommendations for consideration by elected officials (pp. 56-58).

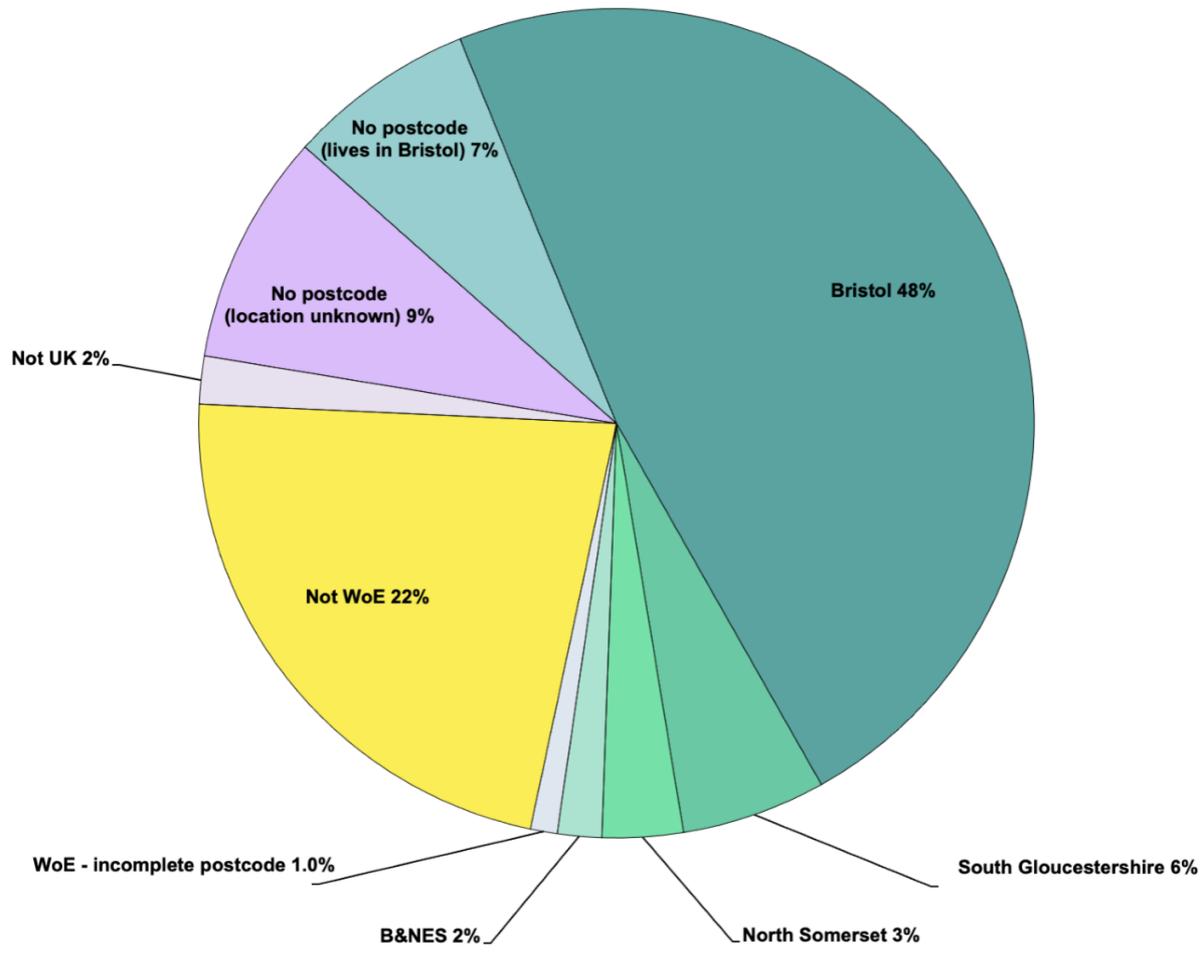
## **Demographic profile of responses**

### **Location of all responses**

Just over half of all responses came from those living in Bristol (48 per cent gave a Bristol postcode with an additional 7 per cent recorded as living in Bristol but without giving a postcode) with additional responses from those living in surrounding areas (12 per cent from West of England). Alongside these local submissions there were a significant number of national (22 per cent) and smaller number of international (2 per cent) responses to the online exhibition and survey (see Figure 1).

The re-display of the statue garnered national and international press interest, and there was also a targeted campaign by 'Save our Statues' to encourage those sympathetic to their position to complete the online survey. Given this profile, it is not surprising that there was national and international engagement with the consultation, especially in the early days when media interest was highest.

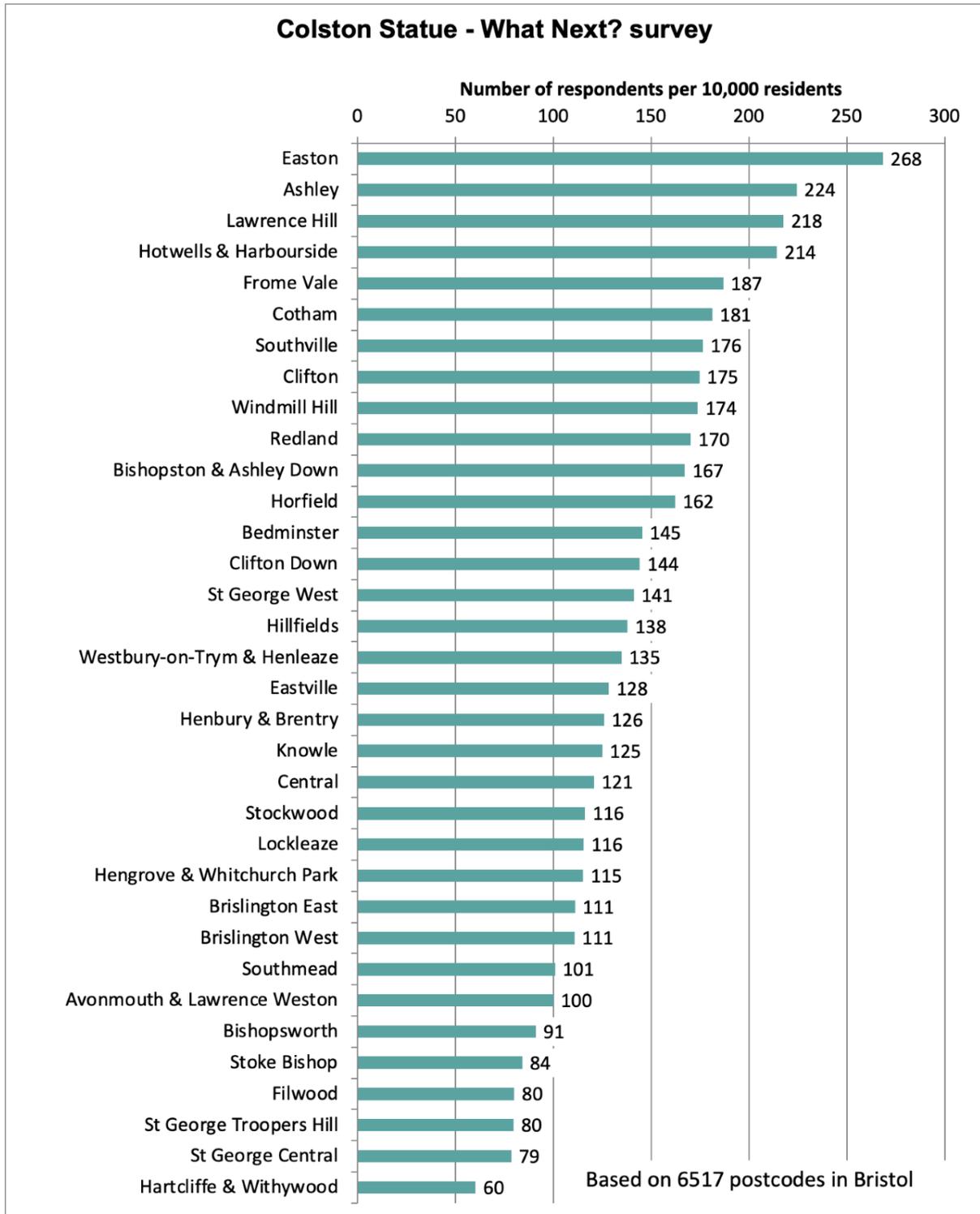
### Colston Statue - What Next? survey Respondent locations



**Figure 1 – Location of all responses**

#### **Location of Bristol responses**

Working with those Bristol residents who provided a postcode (6,517), it is possible to identify relative response rate by ward (see Figure 2). The highest response rate came from Easton ward (268 per 10,000 residents) and the lowest from Hartcliffe and Withywood (60 per 10,000 residents). At the mid-point of the consultation, in-person roadshows and paper questionnaires were targeted at those wards where there was lower initial online engagement.



**Figure 2 – Bristol respondents by ward (absolute numbers)**

As well as working with ward data, responses were also analysed according to deprivation deciles. This showed broadly equal responses across all deciles in

the city with no single decile dominating the survey (see Figure 3). This broad representativeness is important to consider when analysing the results.

### 'The Colston statue - what next?' survey Deprivation indices for Bristol respondents

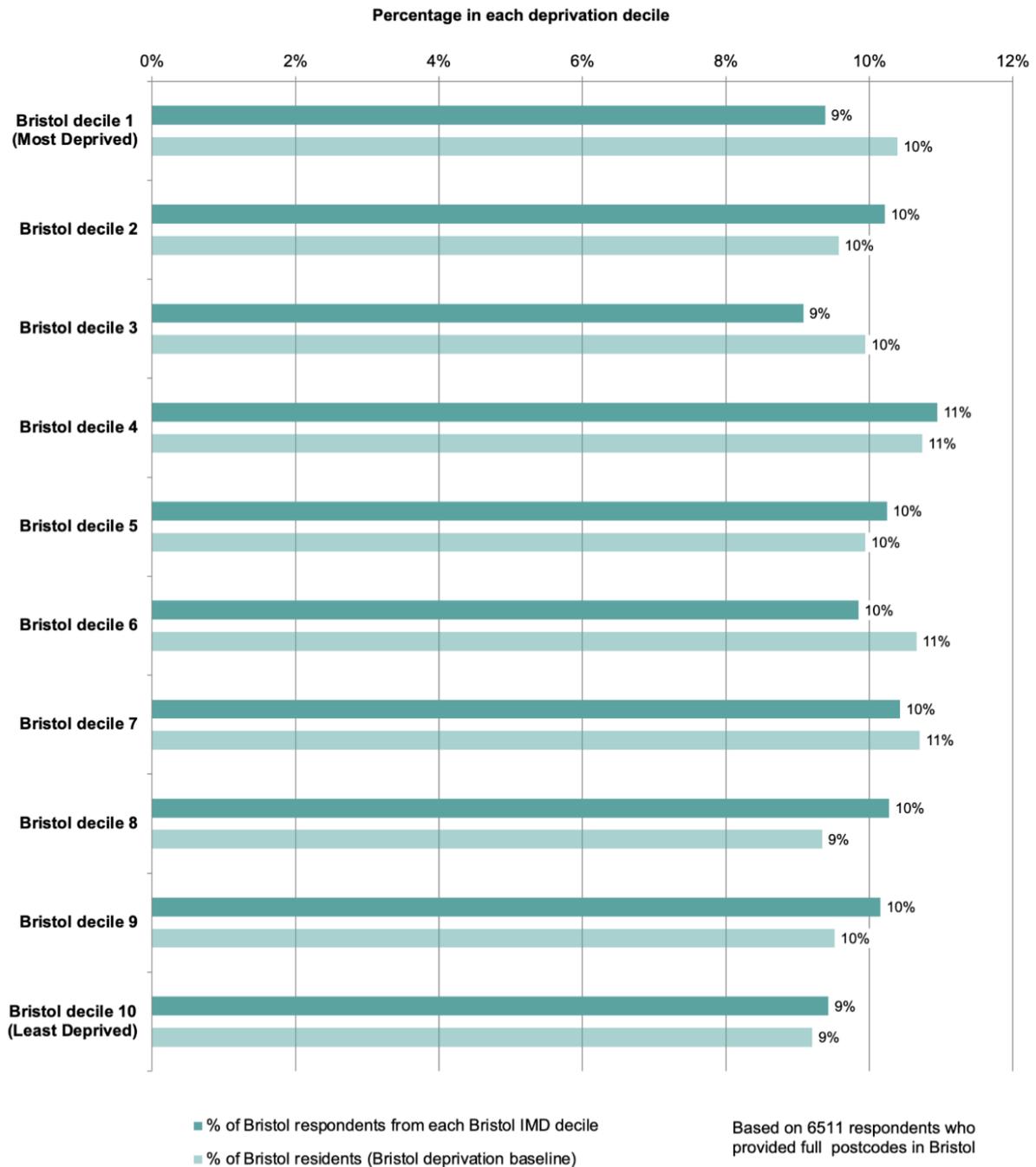
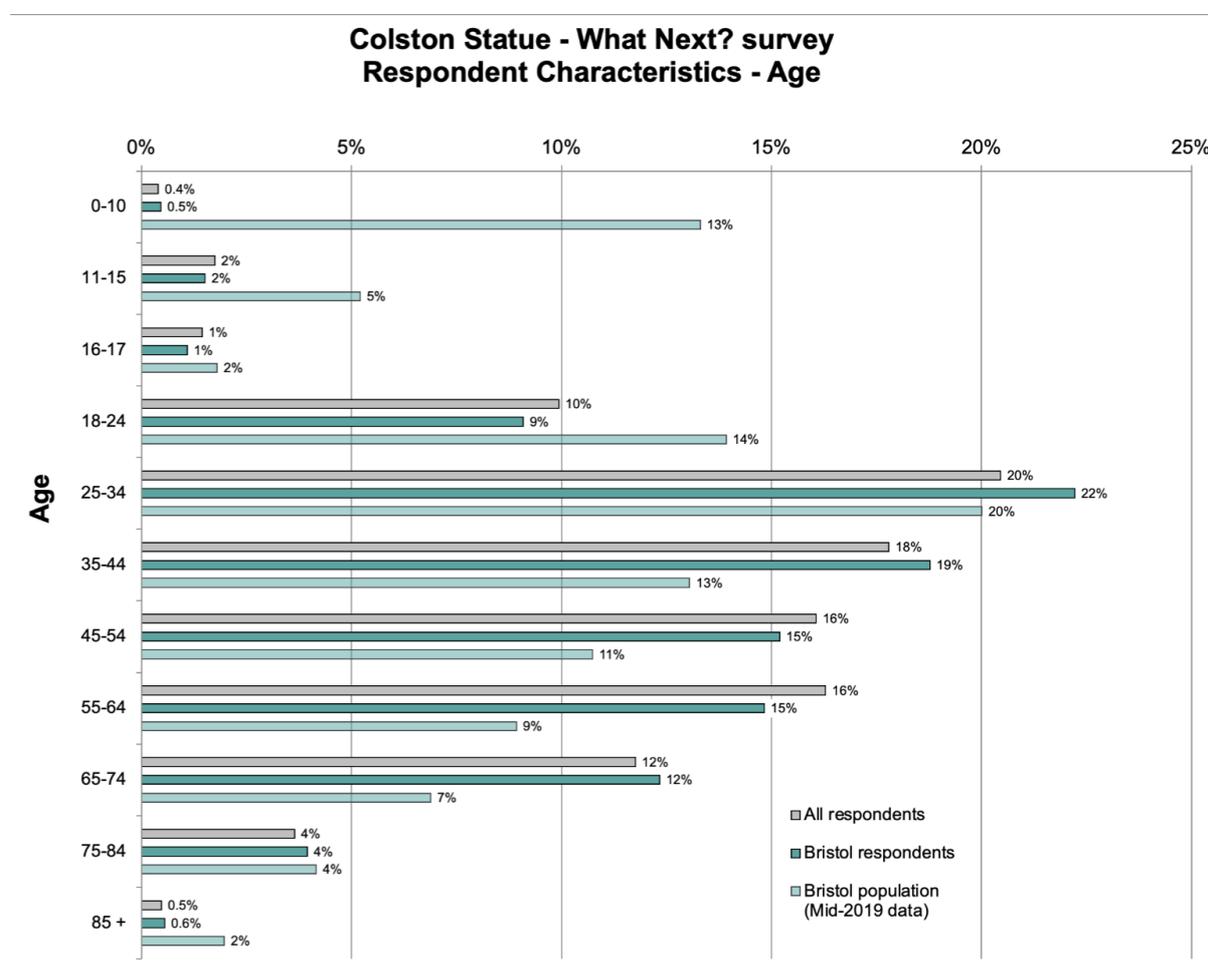


Figure 3 – Bristol respondents by deprivation decile

## Age of respondents

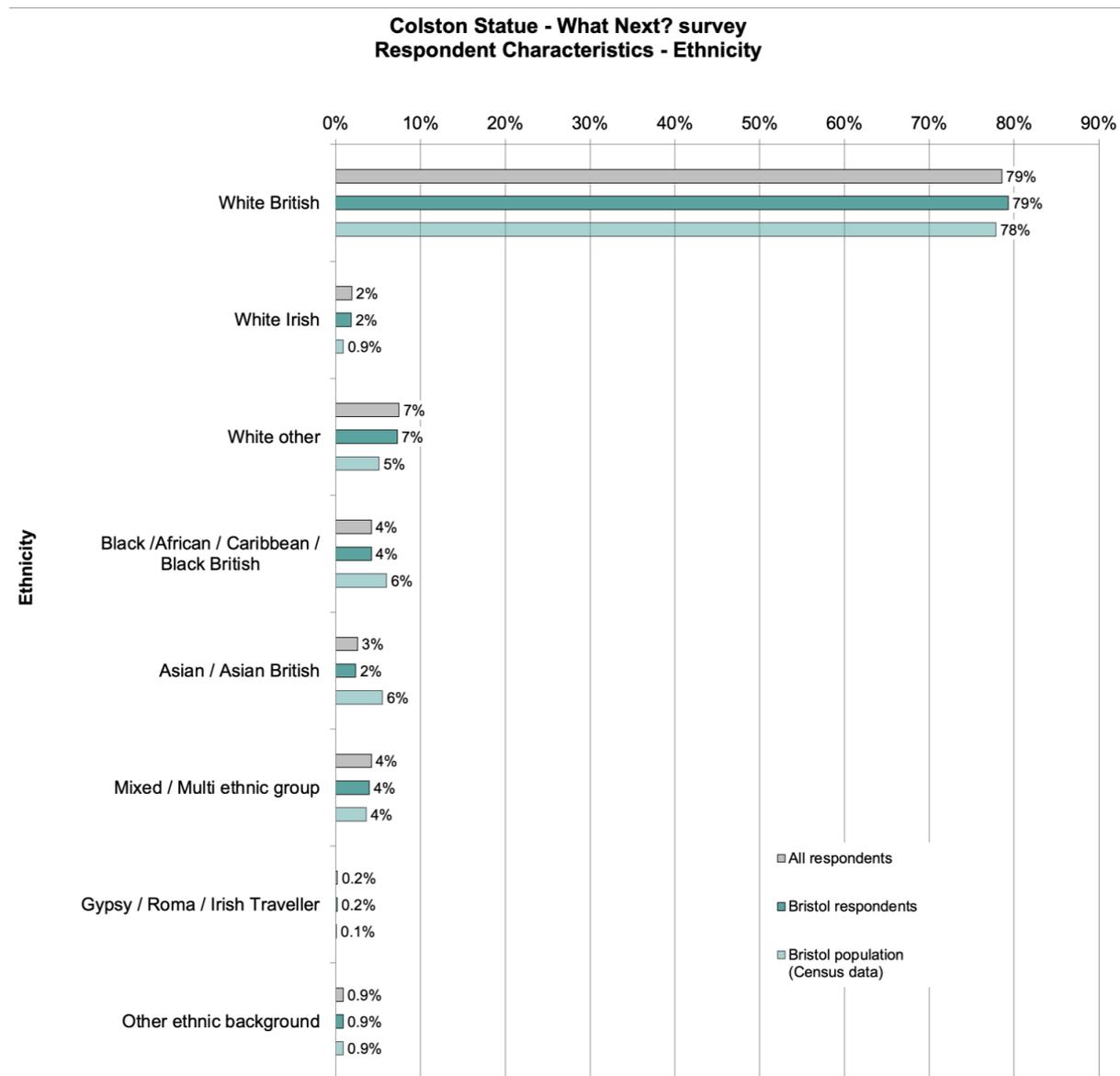
Responses were received from a wide range of ages. There was lower representation from under 16s (hence targeted consultation in schools), but strong engagement by those in other age ranges with over-representation of Bristol residents in all age cohorts from 25 to 74 (see Figure 4). While the response rate among 16 to 24 year olds was lower than their proportion in the city, the level of engagement among this age group was much higher than is normally the case in Bristol City Council consultations. It is clear that this topic matters to people of all ages within the city.



**Figure 4 – All respondents and Bristol respondents by age**

## Ethnicity of respondents

The consultation engaged all ethnic groups in the city, although there was slight overrepresentation of White British/White Irish/White Other (88 per cent of respondents compared to 84 per cent of Bristol population) and underrepresentation of Black/African/Caribbean/Black British (4 per cent compared to 6 per cent of Bristol population) and particularly Asian/Asian British (3 per cent of all respondents and 2 per cent of Bristol respondents compared to 6 per cent of Bristol population) (see Figure 5).



**Figure 5 – All respondents and Bristol respondents by ethnicity**

## **Other characteristics**

There was slight overrepresentation of respondents identifying as female (53 per cent of all respondents and 55 per cent of Bristol respondents compared to 50 per cent of Bristol population) and a slight overrepresentation of respondents who described themselves as a disabled person (9 per cent of all respondents and 10 per cent of Bristol respondents compared to 8 per cent of Bristol population).

## **Demographic profile of responses: Conclusion**

No consultation ever engages everyone. That is true of this survey like all others. However, there was strong engagement in terms of absolute numbers of responses (13,984 including 6,517 who gave a Bristol postcode) and the breadth of people who responded. The findings below do not reflect the attitudes of a narrow demographic group, but the thinking and feeling of people from right across the city. The next section of the report briefly introduces the methods of analysis and discusses the survey results.

## Results of consultation and methods of analysis

The consultation asked respondents to identify what they wished to happen to the Colston statue and empty plinth, as well as to reflect on the events of June 2020 and how they now felt about the toppling of the statue. It asked three main questions:

1. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The Colston statue should be put on display in a museum in Bristol?

This was answered on a scale from 'Yes, I agree,' through 'I don't have a view on this' to 'No, I disagree' with an opportunity for respondents to explain their answer and offer more comments through two follow-up questions:

- If you don't agree that the statue should be in a museum, please tell us what you think should happen to it instead;
- If you agree that the statue should be in a museum permanently, please tell us how you would like to see it displayed.

2. What should be in the plinth space?

- Update the plaque on the plinth to reflect the events of 7 June 2020?
- Use the plinth for temporary artworks / sculptures?
- Use the plinth for a permanent artwork / sculpture?
- Keep the plinth but leave it empty?

All were answered on a scale from 'Strongly agree' or 'Agree,' through 'Neither agree nor disagree,' to 'Disagree' or 'Strongly disagree' with an opportunity for respondents to explain their answer and offer more comments. Those who disagreed with all available options were invited to specify what their preferred option would be.

3. How do you feel about the statue being pulled down?

This was answered on a scale from 'I feel very positive' or 'I feel quite positive,' through 'I feel neither positive nor negative,' to 'I feel quite negative' or 'I feel very negative.' As with other questions, there was an opportunity for respondents to explain their answer.

Detailed responses to each question are given below. Each section provides a quantitative summary (generally in the form of a graph) of the responses given by all respondents as well as Bristol respondents.

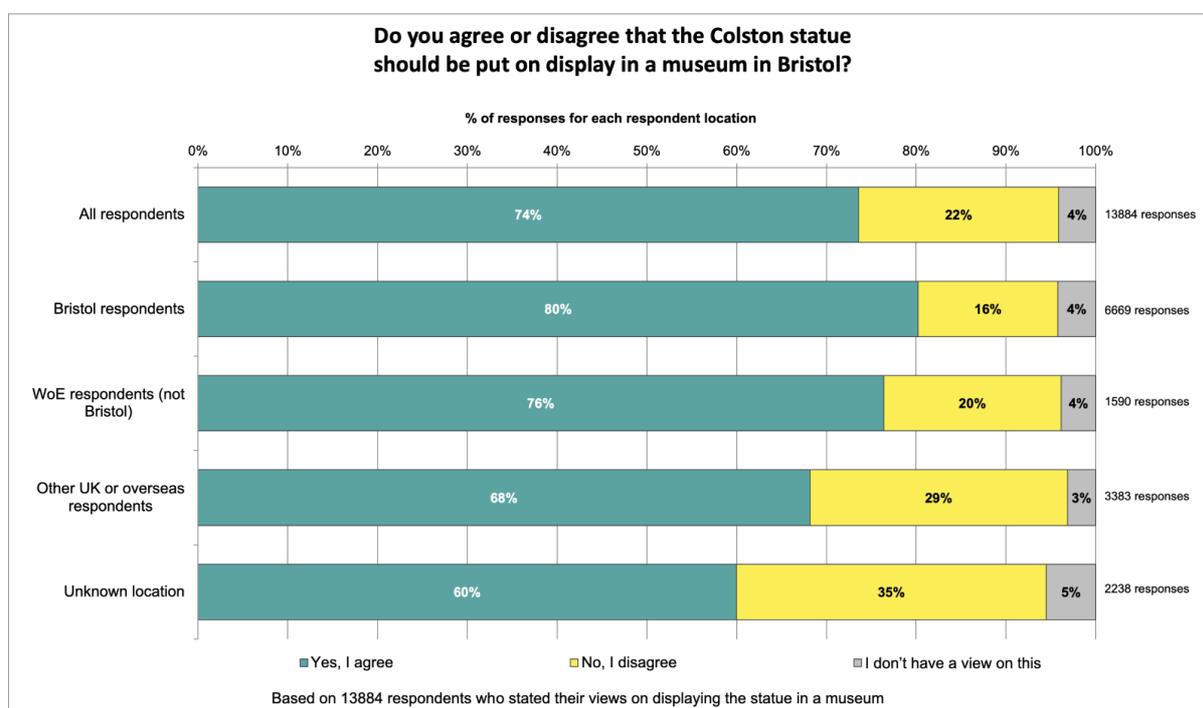
Alongside this quantitative analysis of the sample, we have undertaken more focused qualitative analysis of the millions of words of textual comments that were received. To do this we have worked with a weighted sample of Bristol respondents that acknowledges the differing number of responses by ward and the different number of citizens living in each ward (see Figure 2). We included all textual responses from the ward (Hartcliffe and Withywood) where the response rate was lowest (60 responses per 10,000 citizens in the ward), and then randomly sampled an equal proportion of the resident population from each of the remaining wards (i.e. a random sample of 60 responses per 10,000 citizens from each ward).

This weighted sample contained the textual comments of over 2000 people from every corner of the city. We did this to ensure that all parts of the city were given equal voice in the comments quoted in this report. We read all of these textual responses and also coded them according to themes and sub themes. Each section includes a representative sample of these voices, after introducing the overall results.

Taken together, quantitative and qualitative analysis reveals that while there are differences of opinion among those completing the survey – more marked with respondents outside Bristol than within Bristol – these are outweighed by significant areas of shared thinking and feeling. In all cases, Bristol respondents were more united in their responses to the questions posed than divided. It is therefore possible to identify a broad consensus in the city coalescing around each of the questions posed.

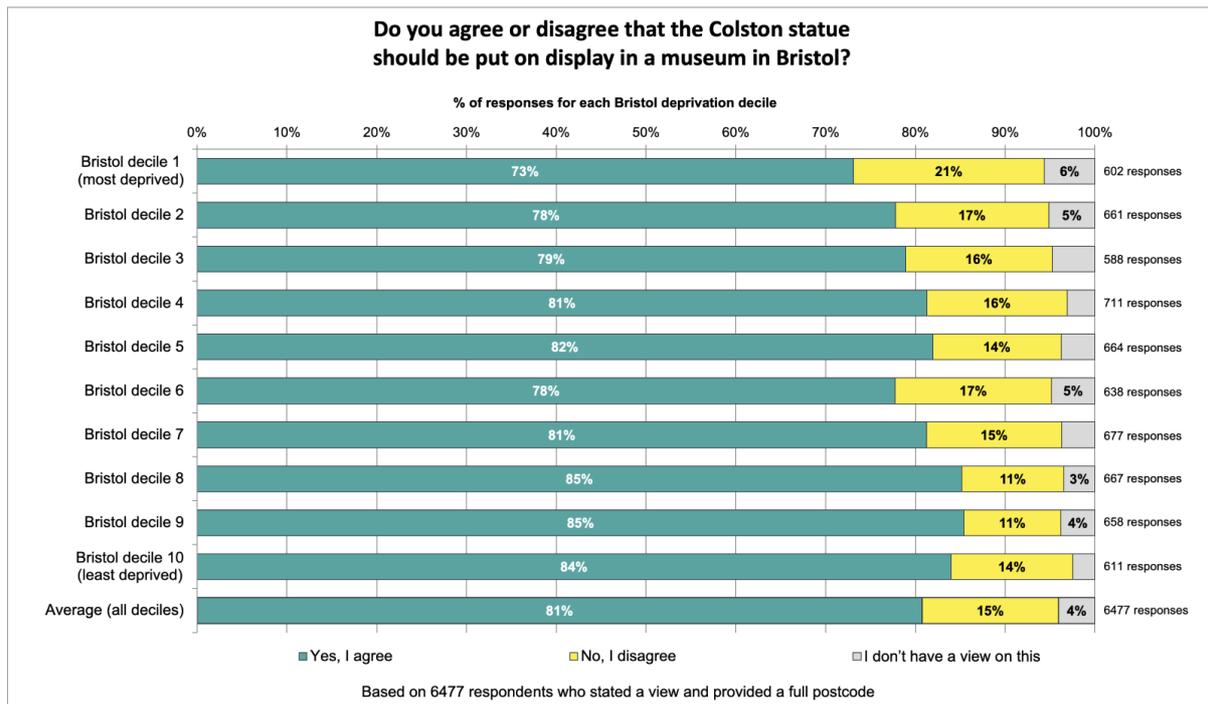
## The future of the Colston statue

A clear majority of all respondents (74 per cent) wish to see the statue put on display in a museum in Bristol. This opinion was strongest among respondents from Bristol (80 per cent) and weakest among those who either did not give a location (60 per cent) or gave a national or international location (68 per cent). However, in all cases a majority of respondents see the appropriate future location of the statue to be in a Bristol museum (see Figure 6).



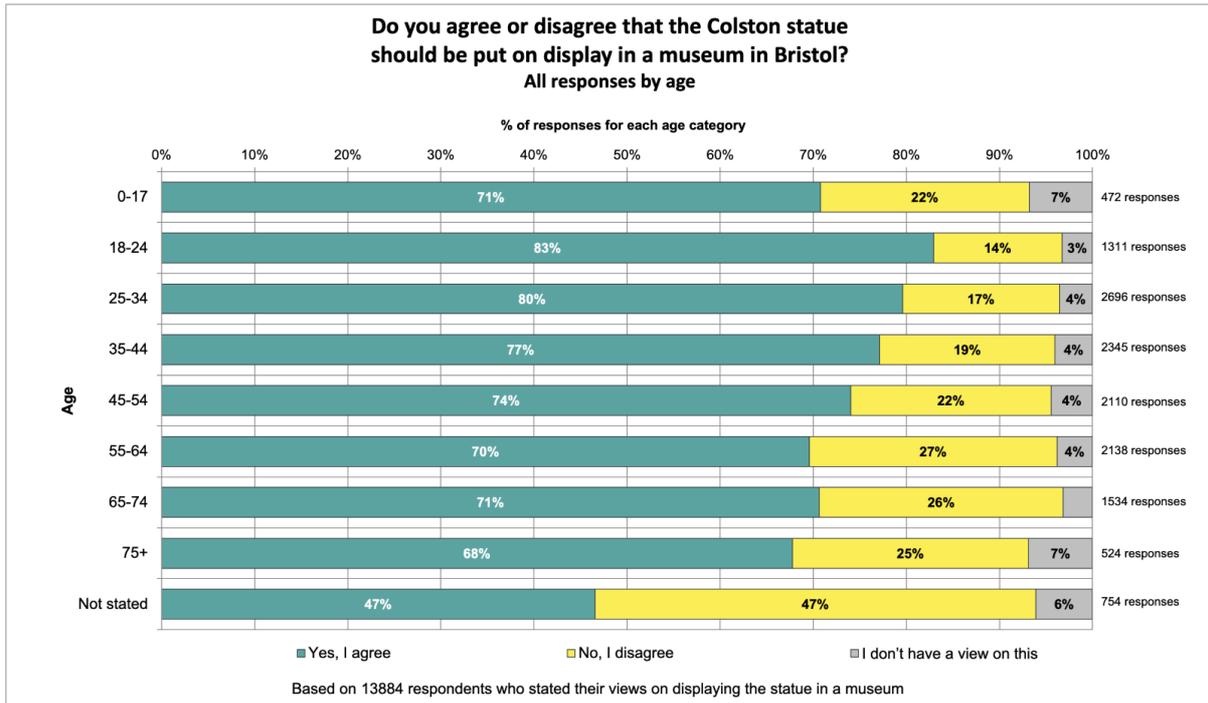
**Figure 6 – responses to future of Colston statue: all respondents by location**

Taking Bristol respondents only, slight differences in response to this question can be seen by deprivation decile (from 73 per cent in decile one to 85 per cent in deciles eight and nine) but there is a clear majority in favour of displaying the statue in a Bristol museum across the full range of the city's population (see Figure 7).

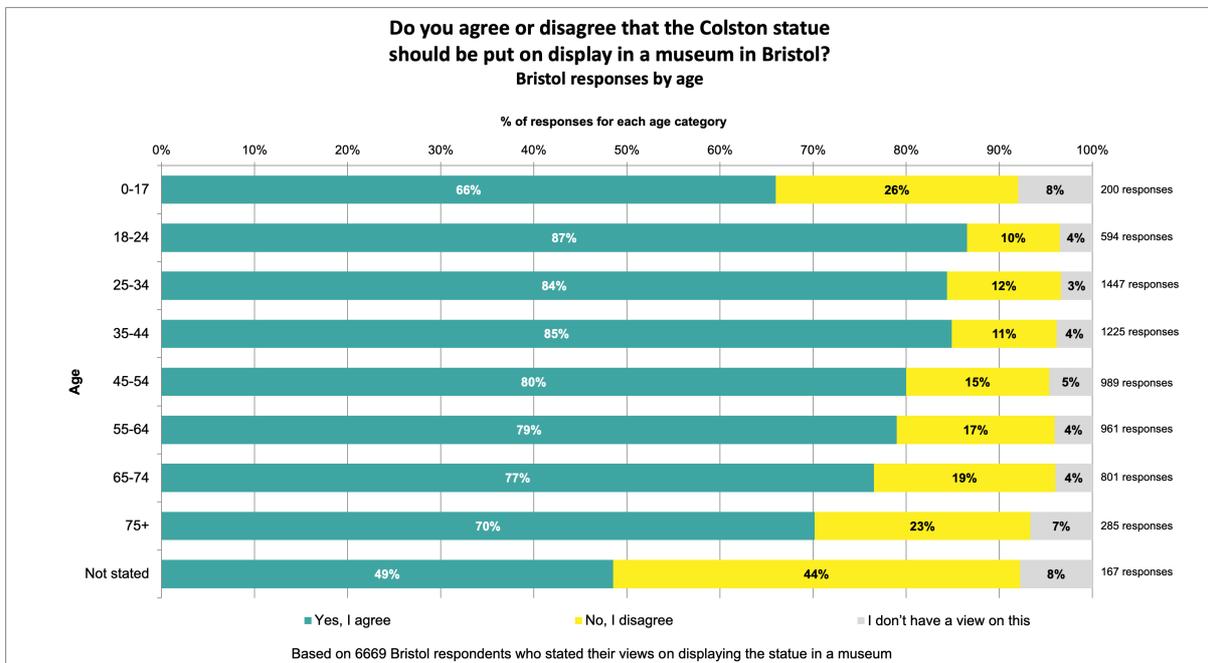


**Figure 7 – responses to the future of the Colston statue: Bristol respondents by deprivation decile**

There was a little more variation in responses when looking at the breakdown by age. Here there is a pattern across both all respondents (see Figure 8) and Bristol respondents (see Figure 9) of younger people being more favourable towards displaying the statue in a Bristol museum (83 per cent of all respondents and 87 per cent of Bristol respondents aged 18 to 24 in favour) than older people (68 per cent of all respondents and 70 per cent of Bristol respondents aged 75+). While a majority of both young and old are in favour of the statue being displayed in a museum, the significance of age is one that we return to when discussing the results of the question asked about how people now feel about the removal of the statue.

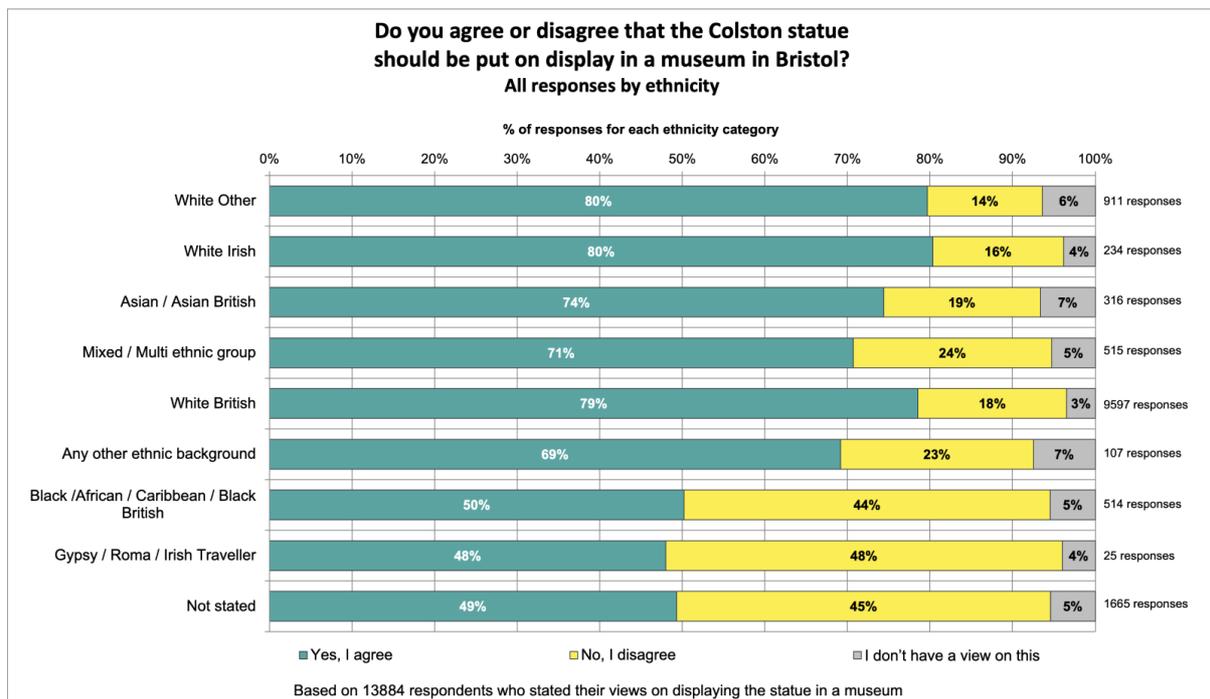


**Figure 8 - responses to the future of the Colston statue: All respondents by age**

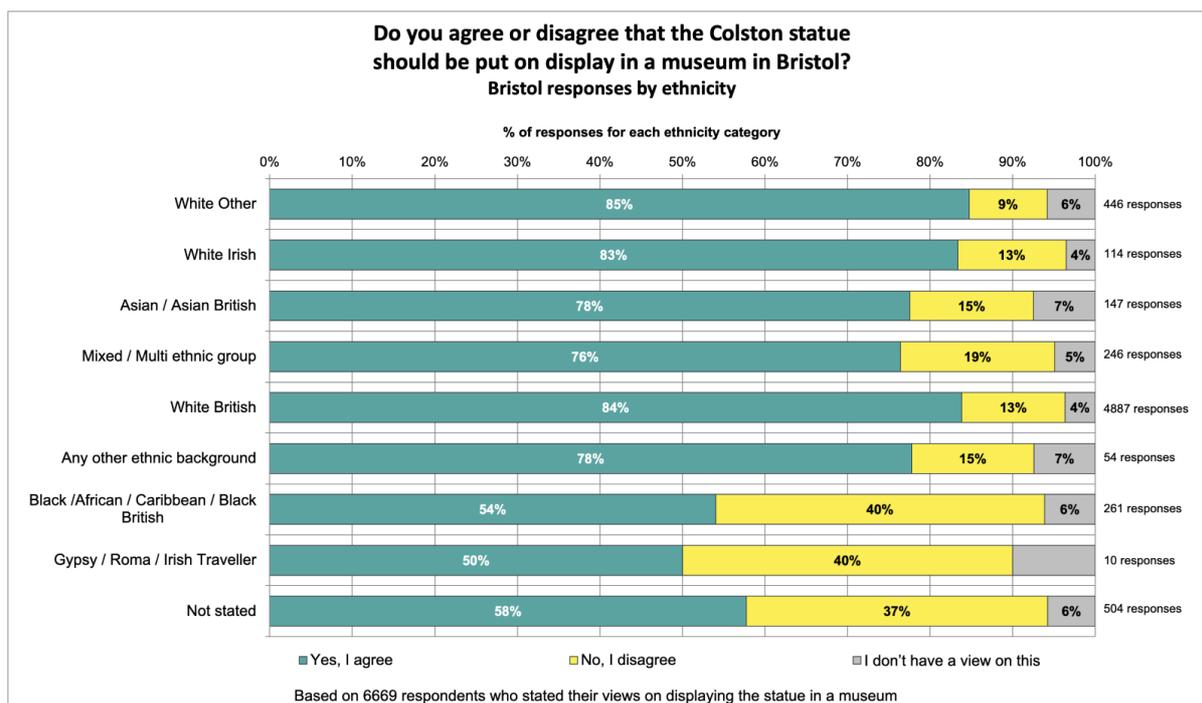


**Figure 9 - responses to the future of the Colston statue: Bristol respondents by age**

Alongside slightly different responses by age, it appears that ethnicity is also significant. The responses of those who identify as White (British/Irish/Other) among both all respondents (79 to 80 per cent) and Bristol respondents (83 to 85 per cent) are more positive than those who identify as Black (African/Caribbean/British) (50 per cent of all responses, 54 per cent of Bristol responses (see Figures 10 and 11). Why this is the case may be – as discussed below – because of fears among some respondents that placing the statue in a museum continues to glorify Colston and therefore that it would be better to destroy, rather than display, this object.



**Figure 10 - responses to the future of the Colston statue: All respondents by ethnicity**



**Figure 11 - responses to the future of the Colston statue: Bristol respondents by ethnicity**

While a large majority of Bristol respondents (80 per cent) wished to see the statue displayed in a museum, a minority either did not have a view on this (4 per cent) or did not see a museum as its appropriate future home (16 per cent). We analysed the responses of those who responded to the question ‘If you don’t agree that the statue should be in a museum, please tell us what you think should happen to it instead’ by looking at the weighted sample of Bristol respondents. Reading through these, just under three-quarters (72 per cent) of those who did not want to see the statue in a museum wished to see the statue returned to its original plinth. A smaller number - just under a quarter (24 per cent) of those who did not want the statue in a museum - would like to see the statue destroyed, placed into storage rather than on display, or thrown back into the harbour. **Working from this sample, it would seem that just over ten per cent of Bristol respondents wish to see the statue restored to the plinth and just under five per cent of Bristol respondents wish to see the statue destroyed.** The reasons behind these preferences are explored in the Bristol Voices section below.

Digging into the comments of those Bristol respondents who wished to see the statue displayed within a Bristol museum reveals a range of thoughts about

where and how the statue should be exhibited. While some wished to see the statue cleaned up, restored and displayed upright, far more wanted to see the statue displayed in its graffiti-covered and damaged state, lying down – as it was in the temporary display. As one respondent reflected, **‘I think the graffiti has just as much history as the statue’**. Those who felt that it was more appropriate to display the statue in its damaged state outnumbered those calling for restoration by almost five to one in the weighted sample. What is also clear is that the majority wish to see the statue displayed lying on its back – as in the temporary M Shed display. Those wishing to see the statue displayed on its back outnumbered those calling for display in an upright position by five to one in the weighted sample. The majority of those in the weighted sample wanted the display to include factual information and context on Colston, the events of 7 June 2020 and the history and legacy of transatlantic slavery and racism.

### **The future of the Colston statue: Bristol Voices**

This section introduces some of the voices of those Bristol residents who commented in more detail about their views on the future of the statue. While a large majority wanted the statue in a museum, this section begins by introducing the counter voices of the minority who did not hold this view. Those who did not want to see the statue displayed in a museum disagreed over whether **‘the plinth’** or a **‘scrap yard’** was the more appropriate future home for the statue. After introducing these voices, this section moves on to include the voices of the majority who outlined in more detail how they wanted the statue to be displayed within a city museum.

Many of those who wanted the statue restored to its original plinth explained this as putting the statue back **‘where it belongs’** or **‘to its rightful place’**. A typical response from those holding this view was: **‘it should be cleaned up and restored to its rightful place on the plinth. The destruction of the statue was illegal and unpopular outside of a small segment of radical protestors. The damage should be undone.’** This idea that ‘the damage should be undone’ was a recurring theme in the responses of the minority of Bristol residents who wished to see the statue restored ‘to its rightful place’. Key here (and something discussed below with regard to feelings about the removal of the statue) was a concern with the manner of the statue’s removal. Its restoration was seen by many as first and foremost an act of restoring law and order.

While a concern with law and order can be seen as particularly prevalent among those wishing to see the statue returned to the plinth, others argued more along the lines of seeing it as a historical object that shouldn't be removed because this would equate with **'erasing history.'** A typical comment reflecting this thinking was:

**'The statue should be returned to its plinth, it is part of our history and cannot be air brushed just because some people don't like it. There should be an explanation of who and what Colston did both in the slave trade and in legacy of his gifts of wealth to the city we all enjoy today.'**

Some of those who wished to see the statue reinstated, like the person quoted above, were keen to see explanatory plaques attached to the plinth:

**'The statue should be cleaned, stabilised and replaced on its plinth in the centre with explanatory panels making clear to everyone what Edward Colston did and did not do, especially in his capacity as managing director of the Royal African Company, and explaining why Arrowsmith thought he was the "wisest and most virtuous of the sons of Bristol". Instead of demonising him, they should set him in the context of his lifetime... It should not be hidden away in a "dusty old place" where it would take up an inappropriate volume of limited space.'**

However, not all agreed with the sentiment that the statue needed to be back on its plinth to ensure that history was not erased or forgotten. One Bristol respondent explained, **'glorifying slave traders is not education. We can educate people on the horrors of their actions without displaying them on a pedestal.'** Another, who did not want the statue to be displayed anywhere, explained:

**'It shouldn't be on display. We don't need statues to be displayed of slave owners, people who killed and murdered thousands. We do not need statues to remember their crimes. Teach the history but do not give them the honour of keeping their statues. Colston was a horrible man, he should not be on display. We do not need statues of Hitler to remember him, so it should be with slave owners.'**

As these comments reveal, not all of the 16 per cent of Bristol respondents who disagreed with the idea of the statue being put on display in a museum in Bristol wished to see the statue back on its plinth. Reading through the weighted sample of textual comments, around a quarter of those who did not want the statue in a museum suggested that the statue be destroyed, **'put in the bin'**, recycled, melted down and remade as an alternative artwork, returned to the harbour or put into storage and **'away from public view'**. Underlying these opinions was a sense that displaying the statue of someone involved in enslaving Africans anywhere was, in and of itself, problematic. As one explained,

**'I believe the statue should be disposed of – statues inherently glorify those they depict. I do not believe that having the statue erected anywhere would benefit the public.'**

They, like others, saw that statues are not neutral historical objects, but rather symbols that **'glorify'** or **'celebrate'**. As one respondent explained:

**'As a black person I personally wouldn't want to come and visit the museum knowing that the statue of a man who owned and sold slaves has been put on display as if he is being praised for what he did and his racism.'**

For most respondents (see Figure 6), however, a museum is the most appropriate place for the statue to be displayed in a contextualised and nuanced exhibition. The following are a representative sample of comments:

**'It's not "rewriting history" to remove a statue if it's preserved in a museum, with appropriate context. It's showing that we've moved on and are getting a better idea of the city's place in history – and therefore a better sense of the city's future.'**

**'Whilst I can recognise that Colston did good for Bristol it is also important to remember the other things he did. Whilst he may not have "known better at the time" we know better now and should not have such people on display in such a celebratory way. They should be included in museums yes, as it is important to keep our history but it is important to show the whole picture and not just the "good".'**

**‘It tells us something and is of value but it’s not to be admired in the street.’**

**‘Statues are celebratory, museums are educational.’**

**‘Perhaps all statues in Bristol should be given a max 100 year life before they are retired to a museum? Life moves on.’**

Respondents offered detailed commentary that will be critical in informing future display. Here, we introduce a selection of the very large number of responses that represent the careful thinking given to how to display the statue without falling into the trap of unintentional glorification or silencing that characterises the concerns expressed in the comments above.

One thing that respondents were well aware of is how **‘the story of Bristol and the slave trade is complicated and affected all strata of society’**. Given this, there was a desire for display that aimed at truthfulness, nuance and completeness. Respondents wanted future museum display of the statue to offer **‘a balanced historical context’** or **‘as complete and balanced a historical context as possible – both the good and the bad, up to and including its removal by protestors.’** Another asked that there be **‘no whitewashing, no focusing only on the good things, no glorifying, no whataboutism. Tell the full and complete story and the last effects that has on the people he so cruelly treated.’** As one respondent explained:

**‘I would like it to be displayed with the whole history surrounding it. Explaining why Colston was so revered in the past that a statue was erected for him, and why the statue has become so divisive. I would also like the whole story of the man himself explained. I believe that like all human beings he was multi-faceted and full of contradictions. He was not just a philanthropist or a slave trader but both.’**

Above all, respondents used the word **‘context’** time and time again. Their desire was for display that contextualised Colston, the statue as a symbol of what one termed **‘conspicuous benevolence’** in the late 19<sup>th</sup> c., and the toppling of the statue in 2020 in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd and BLM protests. This sense of a full, honest, and truthful contextualising led respondents to note a wide number of key elements that they identified could and should be included within future display:

- wider exploration of the history of the transatlantic trafficking and enslavement of Africans and Bristol's role as a port city;
- narratives and names of enslaved people;
- the specific history and context of Colston as leading official in the Royal African Company and benefactor;
- the presence in the city of many other families involved in transatlantic slavery and the financial compensation they received at abolition;
- the abolition movement in Bristol;
- **'the context of why the statue was erected and then eventually pulled down'; 'the cult of Colston' – 'maybe even a Colston bun!' - 'conspicuous benevolence' and the Society of Merchant Venturers; 'veneration and changing attitudes';**
- the more recent history of attempts to have the statue removed and history of protest in Bristol;
- **'how we memorialise public spaces and whose histories memorialisation does or does not reflect';**
- the moment of the toppling with the inclusion of the placards and **'testimony from the protestors';**
- potentially alongside the statue of Jen Reid;
- **'history...about old and modern debates around race', 'race relations' and the 'fight against racism';**
- **'the legacy of slavery within the city – both the infrastructure/buildings and the effect on the Black community'**

A number of respondents responded positively to the temporary display in the M Shed in 2021. One explained, **'I think the current presentation is a faithful depiction of the statue's history and an appropriate and balanced view of the life of Edward Colston.'** Others felt that future display might be **'as part of an exhibition like the current one' or 'exactly as it is in M Shed now'**, with one respondent noting **'exactly as it is now – it tells the complete story, not the one-dimensional whitewashed version of it.'** Another explained how they found **'the current display is measured, powerful and shows history as a living thing that we are part of.'** That sense of the connections between past, present, and future, was one that others commented on and can be seen in the chronological and thematic range of topics that emerge in the detailed comments outlined above.

While there was much support for the temporary display, it is clear that there was a desire for **'more history and context please!'** and **'a wider expansion of**

**the way it is currently exhibited, with an expansion of the slave trade exhibition with more stories about Bristol's role in it. The slave trade section in the M Shed is really small, I'd like to see that expanded.'** One respondent noted that **'ideally, the Colston statue should be placed on display within a larger Slavery and Bristol museum detailing Bristol's history with slavery, the ongoing legacy, who and where benefited. At a minimum, this statue should be placed within a permanent slavery and Bristol exhibition at the M-Shed.'** Another shared their aspiration that **'it should be part of a much bigger, dedicated museum/memorial and visitors centre to educate the city about the transatlantic slave trade.'** As one respondent noted, **'context takes a lot of space!'**

As well as full, honest, contextualised and nuanced display, there was a desire for display to be done **'in a manner that encourages reflection on Bristol's past and the ripples of that past in the present, not reverence'** and so this respondent suggested that **'it should be displayed as part of broader exhibits on the issues so that it doesn't become a "Colston exhibit".'** This sense of the statue being part of a broader exhibition, rather than the centre of the exhibition, was shared by others. One respondent wished to see it:

**'As part of a permanent exhibition about the transatlantic traffic in enslaved people. I want to know more about the long history of opposition in the city. I'd like to know more about how much of the city's architecture came from money, directly or indirectly, due to the triangular trade. And I'd like to know a lot less about Colston and a lot more about the lives of historic black people visiting the city and living in it.'**

### **The future of the Colston statue: Conclusion**

A small number of those who wished to see the statue returned to its plinth saw this as a temporary, rather than a permanent, solution. As one explained, **'put it back on its plinth and ask the people of Bristol where they want it. If they vote to remove it, then do so, but don't bow down to a minority who took the law into their own hands!!!'** Others suggested, **'it should be reinstalled onto the plinth, then put to a vote,' 'put it back until there is proper consultation. It should not be decided by vandals'** and **'it should be returned to its plinth. Then you can begin a process to determine its future.'** In a lengthy comment, another explained:

**‘It should be put back on its plinth with the condition that it is subject to a Bristol-wide vote on whether it should stay, or be removed. Mob rule is undemocratic and the statue being torn down sets a dangerous precedent that a violent minority may get their own way. Restoring the statue to its original place with a referendum on whether it should stay provides the opportunity for people who felt compelled to tear it down to have their say alongside the many people who had the same opportunity robbed from them.’**

While the survey and report do not fit with the timing of these wishes, they do represent a chance to consult widely with the city about the future of the statue and plinth before any further action is taken. The temporary display of the statue and accompanying survey was intended precisely to ‘ask the people of Bristol where they want it’ now.

Analysing the results, it is clear that the vast majority of respondents from the city (as well as a majority of all respondents) wish to see the statue displayed in a museum. Only a small minority want the statue either restored to the plinth or destroyed. Reading the comments of those holding this minority view, a number of widely-shared core principles emerge that inform the recommendations given at the end of this report.

Firstly, many who wish to see the statue restored do so because they disapprove of how it was removed. **‘If people want the statue removed it should have been democratically’** is a sentiment that pervades the comments in this section as well as the section on feelings towards the removal of the statue (discussed below). One gap in contemporary Britain is the lack of a clear democratic process for removing statues that do not mesh with contemporary values. We see an urgent need to address this gap.

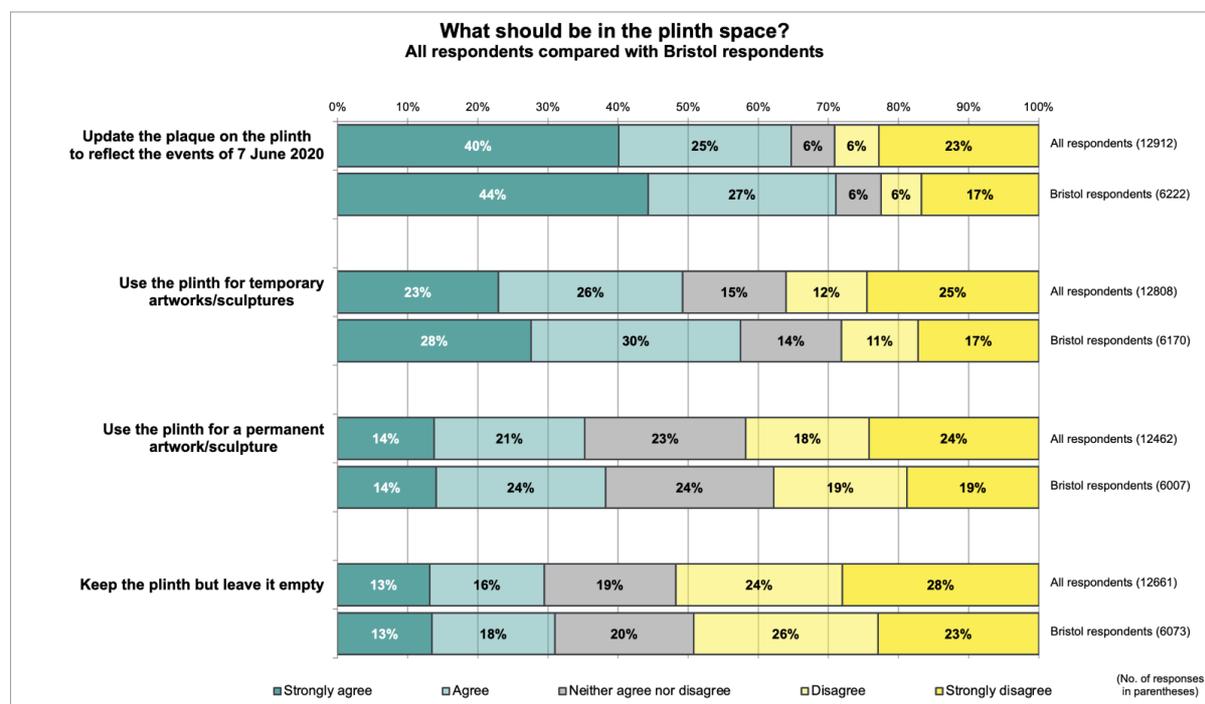
Secondly, all who variously want to see the statue back on the plinth, back in the harbour or in a museum, argued from a position of wishing to see the history of the past – both good and bad – honestly told rather than erased. Where they differ is over where the most appropriate place for retelling that history is. Most see this to be in a city museum. A smaller number see this to be in the public realm, rather than **‘hidden in some museum’**. Others fear that displaying a statue in a museum, let alone on a plinth, is not an act of telling history but rather glorifying an individual. One key principle that should frame museum display of the statue, the future of the plinth and any signage there, is that this should neither **‘glorify’** nor **‘erase’** but rather offer an honest telling of

the history of Colston and the city. It is clear that the past matters to all respondents from across the city and this shared desire to tell the history of Bristol and the wider world in nuanced and honest ways informs our recommendations.

In particular, there is clearly a desire on the part of respondents in the city to learn more about the numerous histories that the statue evokes that cover everything from Bristol's central role in the transatlantic enslavement of Africans, through the cult of Colston and philanthropy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> c, to the histories of protest in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and the legacies of slavery in the present. The shared sense across all respondents that history matters comes through strongly in the detailed responses given to future museum display of the Colston statue. At a minimum there is clearly appetite for a larger display within Bristol museums on this central part of our city's history. But there is also recognition that the space needed to do justice to this complex story could also warrant developing a dedicated museum and memorial. This is something that the Legacy Steering Group is exploring as they consider how Bristol might best memorialise the transatlantic trafficking of enslaved Africans.

## The future of the empty plinth

Respondents offered a broad range of opinions on the future of the empty plinth as can be seen in their quantitative (see Figure 12) and qualitative feedback (see Bristol Voices below). Although there were diverse views, a **majority of Bristol respondents wished to see an updated plaque placed near the plinth (71 per cent), and for the plinth itself to be used as a site for temporary artworks (58 per cent).**



**Figure 12 – response to the future of the Colston statue plinth: All respondents and Bristol respondents**

A majority of all respondents (65 per cent) wanted to see the provision of a plaque that reflected the events of 7 June 2020 (40 per cent strongly agreed; 25 per cent agreed). This sentiment was stronger among Bristol respondents with 71 per cent either strongly agreeing (44 per cent) or agreeing (27 per cent) with this updating.

Reading the textual comments it is clear that opinion was more divided on whether ‘the current plaques (which still honour Colston)’ should be removed

from the plinth and enter into the museum collection alongside the statue, or remain in place. If the original plaques remain, then one respondent was keen to ensure that **‘the “rejected by the citizens of Bristol” addition’** also remain. More generally, a key principle appeared to be that the original plaques should only remain if, and when, a new explanatory plaque is added. With an eye on the question of whether removing elements of the plinth amounted to erasure, one respondent suggested the need for a **‘plaque to describe whose statue stood there, who he was, what he did and the event that took place on 7 June,’** and also to **‘leave existing plaque as part of history which cannot be erased.’** Another noted that **‘the plinth contains much text and ornament linked with Colston. I would like to see that retained but with an explanatory text directing to the museum exhibition.’**

As elsewhere in the survey, textual responses reveal varied thinking about whether an updated plaque was appropriate or not and, if so, what it should contain. One respondent asked **‘why should we immortalise the actions of an unlawful act by a crowd of jobs’** and another argued that **‘I really don’t think anything should be put in place that commemorates what happened on 07/06/2020. Although I empathise with the feelings around the statue this was still an act of vandalism by organised thugs.’** In contrast, another was worried that **‘an update on the side of the plinth – that simply adds to, rather than challenges preceding narratives – would be a cop out. The city should not pretend it is neutral on this issue – that would be to act as though it is neutral about slavery and its legacies, which would be morally abhorrent.’**

However, it is clear that the majority opinion is that **‘the plaque must be updated to reflect history.’** Respondents offered suggestions as to what this plaque might include. Some called for a broader updating to include **‘the history of who Colston was, not just the events of June 2020.’** As one respondent explained, **‘I would like to see a plaque placed near the plinth that provides context and describes what it is and why it is like that, signposting people to a museum and other resources where they can learn more.’**

Opinion was mixed on what to do with the plinth itself, but there was greater support for temporary installations than either a permanent sculpture or leaving the plinth empty. This was the most popular solution among all respondents with just under half (49 per cent) either strongly agreeing (23 per cent) or agreeing (26 per cent) with the use of the plinth for temporary artworks or sculptures. **A majority of Bristol respondents (58 per cent) either**

**strongly agreed (28 per cent) or agreed (30 per cent) with the use of the plinth for temporary artworks or sculptures.** Adding in those (14 per cent) who neither agree nor disagree, it would appear that 72 per cent are open to this option (see Figure 12). Digging into the comments, it is clear that the use of the plinth to house temporary installations was seen as a way to ensure that the site become a space of continuing dialogue, rather than monologue, in the heart of the city.

**There was less support from both all respondents and Bristol respondents for a permanent artwork or sculpture being installed on the plinth, or the plinth being left empty.** The former attracted marginally more support, especially from Bristol respondents. 35 per cent of all respondents and 38 per cent of Bristol respondents either strongly agreed (14 per cent in both cases) or agreed (21 per cent of all respondents and 24 per cent of Bristol respondents) with the option of putting a permanent artwork or sculpture on the plinth. A slightly smaller number – 29 per cent of all respondents and 31 per cent of Bristol respondents either strongly agreed (13 per cent in both cases) or agreed (16 per cent of all respondents and 18 per cent of Bristol respondents) – wished to see the plinth remain empty. What motivated thinking about the future of the plinth became clearer when working with the extensive comments in the weighted sample of over two thousand Bristol respondents.

### **The future of the empty plinth: Bristol Voices**

This section introduces the words of respondents to show the variety of opinion, as well as the thoughts behind the consensus that emerged among Bristol residents. We start by introducing the voices of those who held minority positions – put the Colston statue back, keep the plinth empty or remove it altogether, or install a permanent statue – before turning to listen to those holding the majority position who favoured using the plinth as site for temporary artworks.

As noted above (see The future of the Colston statue), a small minority of Bristol respondents wished to see the Colston statue restored to the plinth (working with the weighted sample this is approximately ten per cent of the city). One lengthy response captures the range of opinions offered by those who wished to see the statue restored to the plinth:

**‘It’s where he belongs. He is part of Bristol’s history and his links to the slave trade are only a part of his history. He did a lot for the city in**

**terms of education, altruism, poverty and more. He has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with George Floyd and our history should not be changed to suit today's culture, views and opinions. We should not be sweeping our history under the carpet. By all means add a postscript but ... many of those so-called protesters were anarchists who saw an opportunity for protest and vandalism...'**

This desire to 'not be sweeping our history under the carpet' was a sentiment also shared by those who took very different positions on the future of the plinth. One respondent who wanted the plinth removed altogether, explicitly made clear that this **'doesn't erase history'** but explained that the more appropriate place for this historical object was **'preserved in museums like everything else.'** This respondent was one of several who wanted to see the plinth reunited with the statue in the collection of Bristol's museums. As another explained, **'The "stump" as we call it, should be displayed in the museum, and something new put in its place. Enough of looking backwards.'**

This sentiment that it was time for the city to move on, was shared by some others. One respondent recommended that we **'remove the plinth and place something there instead which can encourage a sense of closure and acceptance of the removal.'** For others, this desire to draw a line was driven by a pragmatic concern that it was better to **'remove plinth. People will not agree on what should go on it.'** Ideas for what might replace the plinth ranged from trees and flowers or the reopening of the river to cycle lanes or a skate park. What they shared was a sense of repurposing the site for use by all.

However, the idea of either replacing the statue back on its original plinth, or removing the plinth entirely were not shared by the majority of respondents (see Figure 12). A significant number favoured installing a new permanent statue on the plinth (38 per cent of Bristol respondents). Ideas ranged widely and included everyone, and everything, from the return of the Jen Reid statue or **'a statue to do with black lives matter'**, through a national figure like Brunel or Queen Elizabeth II, to the choice of **'a real heroic Bristolian like Paul Stephenson'**, Thomas Chatterton, George Muller, Cary Grant, Banksy or Gromit to name but a few. Others felt it was important to have a woman like Mary Carpenter, Mary Seacole, Hannah More or Princess Campbell represented because **'we have very few representations of women'** in the city. Yet others wanted a memorial to anything from enslaved people to victims of Covid 19, or to raise awareness of the climate crisis.

While one respondent specifically explained, **‘I think something permanent needs to happen so that the city can settle and the conversation doesn’t need to keep reopening old wounds,’** others were aware of the challenge of finding a single statue or artwork that would represent everyone in the city. One expressed their fear that **‘a permanent replacement could be divisive.’** Another noted that **‘It’s clear now that we all have different opinions ... about statues and not everyone can relate to them’** and so recommended that **‘the statue should not be replaced with another historical person’**. One respondent recommended avoiding statues altogether because **‘art work will always divide opinion and now there is an option, the replacement should be non-political and conciliatory to everyone – after all Bristol is the home to people of all ages, beliefs and politics’**. This was a more widely shared view, with one respondent noting that **‘if anything goes there, I think it should be non-political and something that would unite people not to cause unrest and conflict between communities otherwise we will be back to square one!’** and another recommending the choice of **‘a piece...that can be used to help harmonise the city.’**

Given fears of finding a single **‘suitable replacement’**, a significant number of respondents favoured keeping the plinth intentionally empty (31 per cent of Bristol respondents). As one explained, **‘I like the idea of it being left empty. The nothingness is a statement. A celebration of the absence of old white men.’** Another felt that **‘leaving it empty has a greater impact for the sake of history. An empty plinth leads to conversation,’** while **‘putting up artwork hides the point of removal.’** While most saw an empty plinth as a statement of the fact that the statue had been removed, a small number of others saw it rather differently. As one respondent explained, **‘empty is the only acceptable thing unless the statue is repaired and returned to its plinth, so that the world knows Bristol does not sanction riots and rioters!’**

However, a majority of respondents from Bristol (58 per cent) favoured a rotating series of temporary artworks/sculptures on the empty plinth. Many who held this view explicitly saw this as a way of making a virtue of intentional temporariness within the public realm. One respondent explained that **‘public space should reflect the values of society at the time. A space for temporary exhibitions would help this,’** adding that **‘we don’t want to end up with another statue that gets torn down in 200 year time because it’s so out of line with the values of the time.’** Others explained that **‘statues don’t have to and indeed shouldn’t be permanent’** but rather should be **‘ever changing with the times’** and urged **‘poignant and purposeful renewal which reflects the**

**movements and times society is making’.** As well as reflecting changing thinking about values, another explained that **‘temporary sculptures and artwork will demonstrate the changing views of statues.’** One respondent reported that they **‘love the idea of changing what is there! Views change over time ... I think the fact that the top bit isn’t permanent makes an interesting point about statues and is quite “Bristol”.’**

Given that **‘public spaces are constantly changing, as ... and with, society,’** one person wanted the plinth to **‘act as an exhibition space to present work and start conversations’.** The idea of this being a space for conversation – or as one person put it, **‘a learning journey’** – was repeated by others. One respondent explained that **‘it would be great to have alternating sculptures to reflect a multitude of responses to the conversations being had around slavery, diversity and ensuring Bristol is an inclusive city.’** Another saw temporary sculptures having the potential to **‘allow the conversation to develop further whilst also giving it some direction. Pulling down one statue won’t solve racial inequality, so what else can we do using this space to further that cause? Not a question that I have an answer to, but one that this space should be used to find out.’** One respondent explained their hope that **‘the opportunity for temporary artworks/sculptures to be displayed on the plinth would keep a lively and vibrant conversation going as the months and years unfold, to the benefit of all caring voices in the community.’** Another took this a stage further and suggested that,

**‘the rotation of new artworks can act as part of a mechanism to keep the story of 7/7/20, Colston and Bristol’s history of slavery in the public eye. I also think as work is replaced it could maybe then be displayed next to Colston in the museum, to keep the connection and conversations moving.’**

This idea of the plinth being used for ongoing conversation was taken more literally by a number of respondents who suggested **‘broaden this from just the plinth, into how can we use the “area” around the plinth, could it be a speaker’s corner, or a gathering space to share ideas?’** or **‘let’s have a meeting place for poets, speakers, musicians, actors - a safe forum for the creative outpouring of Bristol talents.’** Here, the plinth was seen as an opportunity to bring together two sites in London mentioned by several respondents: the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square and Speaker’s Corner on the edge of Hyde Park. What lay behind these references was a concern that the plinth be used in a dynamic and engaging way.

As well as expressing the virtue of intentionally temporary artworks, several respondents also saw a virtue in periods of intentional emptiness between artworks. As one explained,

**‘I think that keeping the plinth empty some of the time with irregular temporary artworks going up for a period of time cuts a nice compromise between keeping the presence of an absence at the centre of the old city and allowing artists to continue the conversation about Bristol’s relation to slavery.’**

Others were drawn to this mix of presence and absence, with the following typical comments:

**‘I think either keeping the plinth empty and/or using it for temporary exhibitions – and therefore empty some of the time – is a good way to go.’**

**‘I don’t see this as a space for a new permanent art work. The act of pulling it down signified change so it should be left empty with a plaque as testament to that or changing artworks that represent changing, emerging and experimental new talent and different points of view.’**

**‘Temporary art would allow the plinth to be left empty at times for individual reflection.’**

**‘Leaving the plinth empty with an updated plaque could be a really powerful statement. Rotating statues/art works could also be a nice way of making sure a multitude of voices are heard.’**

The idea of ‘a multitude of voices’ rather than a single voice was one that came up in comments that saw a future for the plinth as a site of dialogue rather than monologue.

As several respondents noted, artworks could be virtual and digital rather than solely material and physical. Some who wished to see temporary installations expressed a preference for showcasing the work of local, young and black artists in particular. However, there was some disagreement over whether the plinth **‘should be used to display artwork from black artists’** or host

**‘something that reflects Bristol’s multi-cultural and diverse community and not focus on one race’.** Whatever was exhibited temporarily on the plinth, one thing that a respondent urged was to **‘keep it as informal as possible to reflect Bristol’s creativity, rather than having a committee to plan what will go on it, which could make it too bureaucratic.’**

### **Future of the empty plinth: Conclusions**

Most respondents from Bristol wish to see the plinth remain in place in Bristol city centre. Most of all respondents (65 per cent) and all Bristol respondents (71 per cent) want an updated plaque to be placed by the plinth. They want this to offer brief context of the historical significance of the site that extends to, and includes, the history of the toppling in June 2020. Respondents wish to see brief mention made of who Colston was, when and why the statue was erected, and when and why the statue was removed and where it is now.

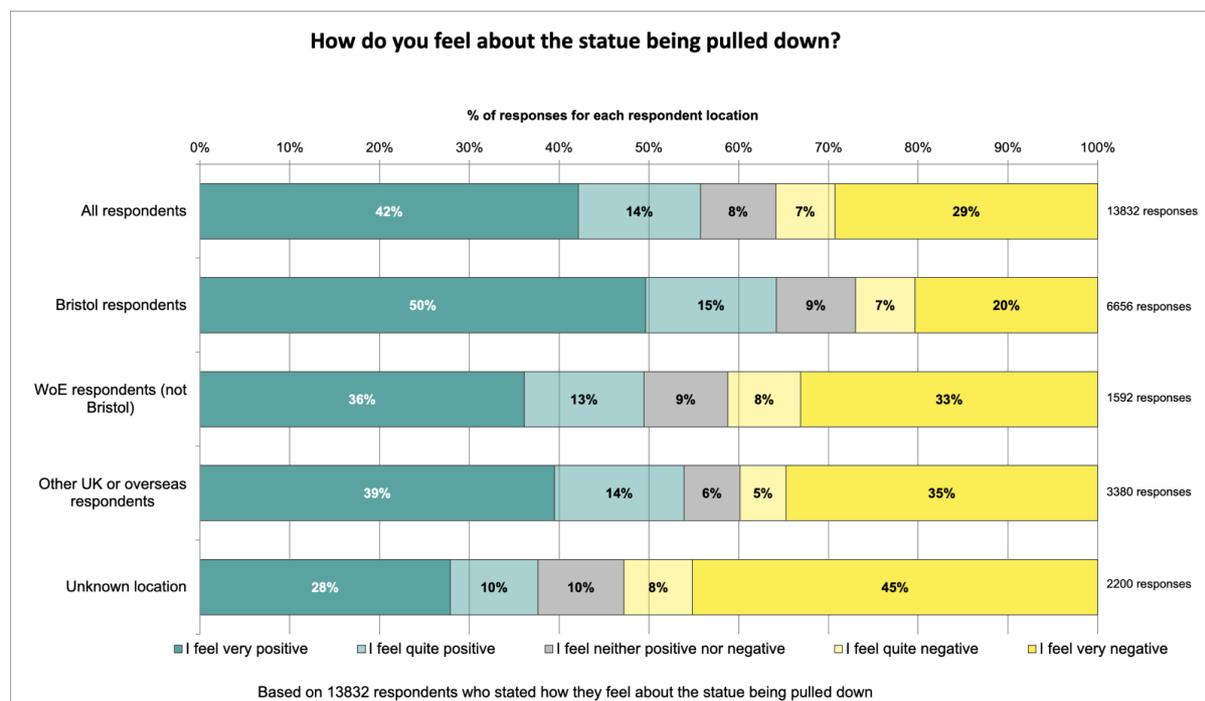
With the addition of an updated plaque, it seems that most would be happy to keep the original plaques and artwork on the plinth. Doing so would respond to fears about erasing the past expressed by several respondents. Rather than cleansing the plinth, most wish for its full history to remain visible and be contextualised by the accompanying plaque.

Rather than keeping the plinth permanently empty, most respondents from Bristol (58 per cent) wish to see it used for temporary artworks/sculptures with 72 per cent of Bristol respondents open to this option. They see a virtue in the temporariness and diversity of these additions to the public realms, as well as the fact that they would entail periods of intentional temporary emptiness. Some expressed a preference for showcasing the work of local artists, especially younger artists and people of colour, while others emphasised the importance of broad inclusion of the work by a variety of artists.

For some there is clearly a desire now for closure. This underlies both the thinking of the small number who want to see the plinth removed, or the larger number who want a new permanent artwork or sculpture on the plinth. However, what is striking reading through the responses as well as looking at the quantitative results is that there is an appetite on the part of more for the plinth to be a space that stimulates ongoing and dynamic conversation in the heart of the city about things that matter to, and in, the city.

## Sentiment on the toppling of the statue

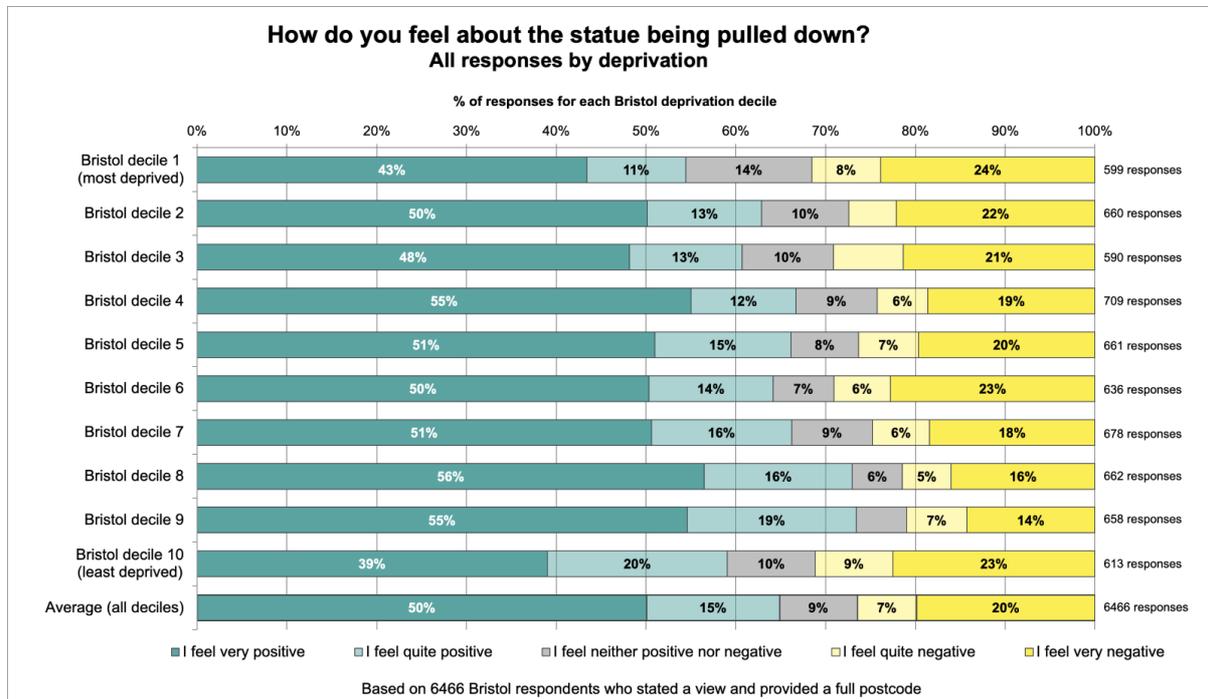
We were interested in taking the temperature of the city a year on from the toppling of the Colston statue. **A slight majority of all respondents (56 per cent) felt either very positive (42 per cent) or positive (14 per cent) about the statue being pulled down. This was more marked among Bristol respondents where 65 per cent felt either very positive (50 per cent) or positive (15 per cent) about the statue being pulled down.** The exception to this can be seen in those from an unknown location where a majority (53 per cent) were either very negative (45 per cent) or negative (8 per cent) about the statue being pulled down (see Figure 13). It may be that this is a result of the appeal by ‘Save our Statues’ for their supporters to participate in the online survey.



**Figure 13 – sentiment on the toppling of the Colston statue: all respondents**

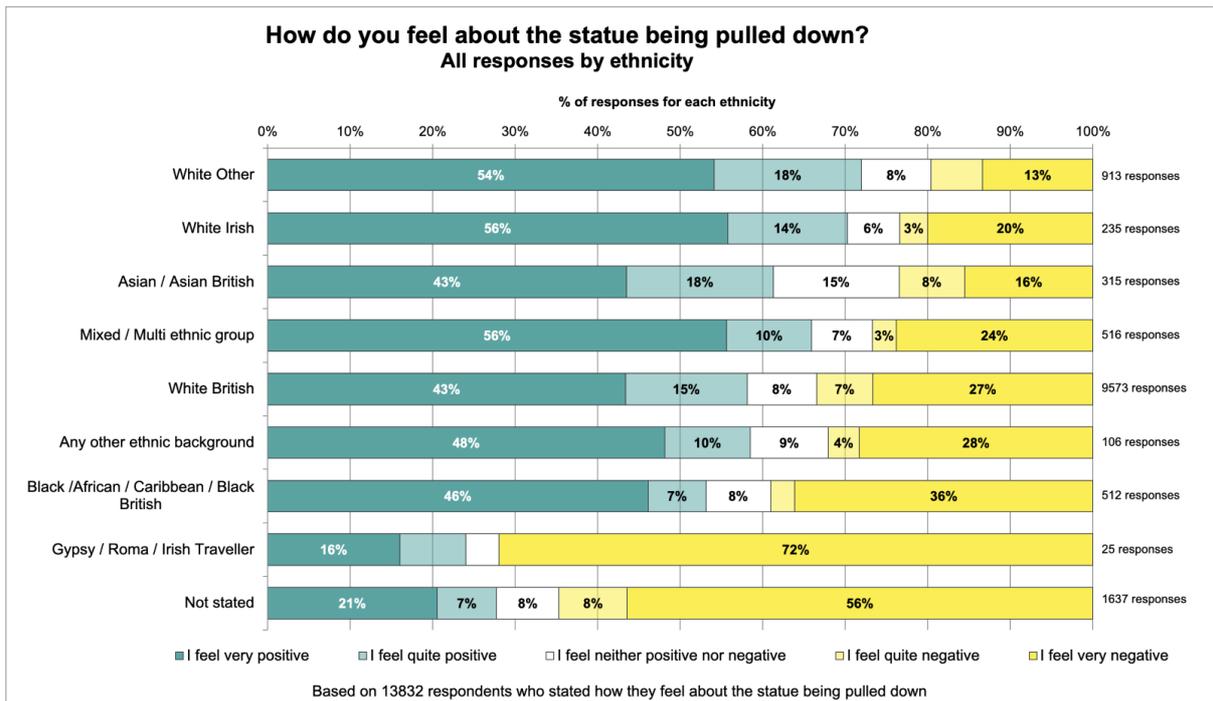
Digging into the detailed demographic profile of Bristol respondents revealed that differences in sentiment towards the toppling of the statue were not primarily based on differences in class or ethnicity (see Figures 14 and 16). All deprivation deciles of the city record more positive than negative feelings towards the toppling of the statue, with the least positive sentiments found at

the top and bottom decile (54 per cent either very positive or positive in decile one; 59 per cent either very positive or positive in decile ten) (see Figure 14).

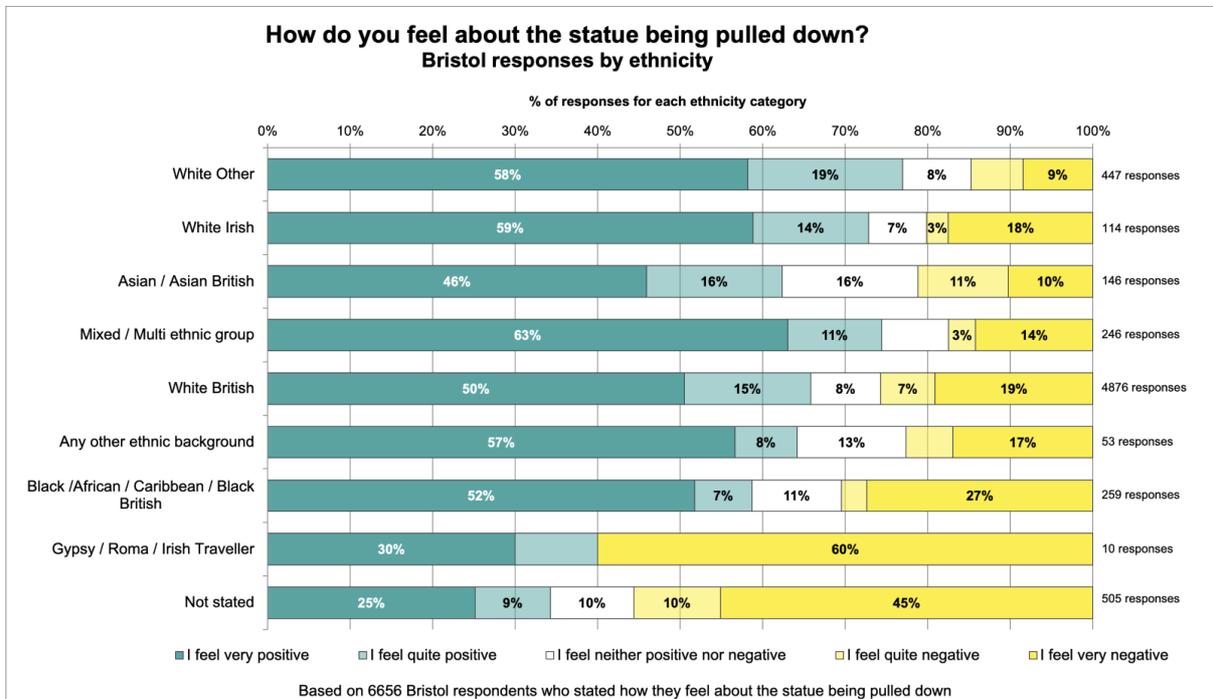


**Figure 14 – sentiment on the toppling of the Colston statue: Bristol respondents by deprivation decile**

The picture is a little more varied when looking at the sentiment of respondents by ethnicity (see Figures 15 and 16). Aside from the small number of responses (25 all and 10 Bristol) from those who identify as Gypsy/Roma/Irish Traveller who largely felt very negative (72 per cent all and 60 per cent Bristol), other ethnic groups showed a majority expressing that they were either very positive or positive. **Results were broadly similar for White British (58 per cent all and 65 per cent Bristol very positive or positive), Asian British (61 per cent all and 62 per cent Bristol very positive or positive) and Black/African/ Caribbean/Black British (53 per cent all and 59 per cent Bristol very positive or positive).** There were higher levels of positive feeling reported by those identifying as White Other (72 per cent all and 77 per cent Bristol very positive or positive), White Irish (70 per cent all and 73 per cent Bristol very positive or positive) and mixed/multi ethnic (65 per cent all and 74 per cent Bristol very positive or positive).



**Figure 15 – sentiment on the toppling of the Colston statue: all respondents by ethnicity**



**Figure 16 - sentiment on the toppling of the Colston statue: Bristol respondents by ethnicity**

To learn more about Black/African/Caribbean/Black British responses to the toppling of the statue, we read through the textual comments offered by 385 of the 512 respondents in this ethnic group. Many were happy to see the departure of a statue that **'was hard for any black person to walk past ... everyday.'** But we were particularly interested in learning more about the thinking of those (36 per cent) who were 'very negative' about the statue being pulled down. For most who felt this way, these feelings were clearly motivated by the manner of the toppling. The words **'vandalism'**, **'criminal'**, **'mob rule'** and **'minority'** appear again and again in the comments of Black/African/Caribbean/Black British respondents who feel 'very negative' about the toppling of the statue. The following three examples are typical comments:

**'A mob illegally removed it but there is no evidence that this was the wish of the citizens of Bristol. This will only encourage mob rule – if you don't like something tear it down. This is a terrible precedent.'**

**'It was a wanton act of vandalism. Irrespective of anyone's beliefs, the law is the law and must be respected.'**

**'A minority of activists went against the wishes of the people of Bristol, who had never voted to have it removed, took the law into their own hand and vandalised a piece of public property.'**

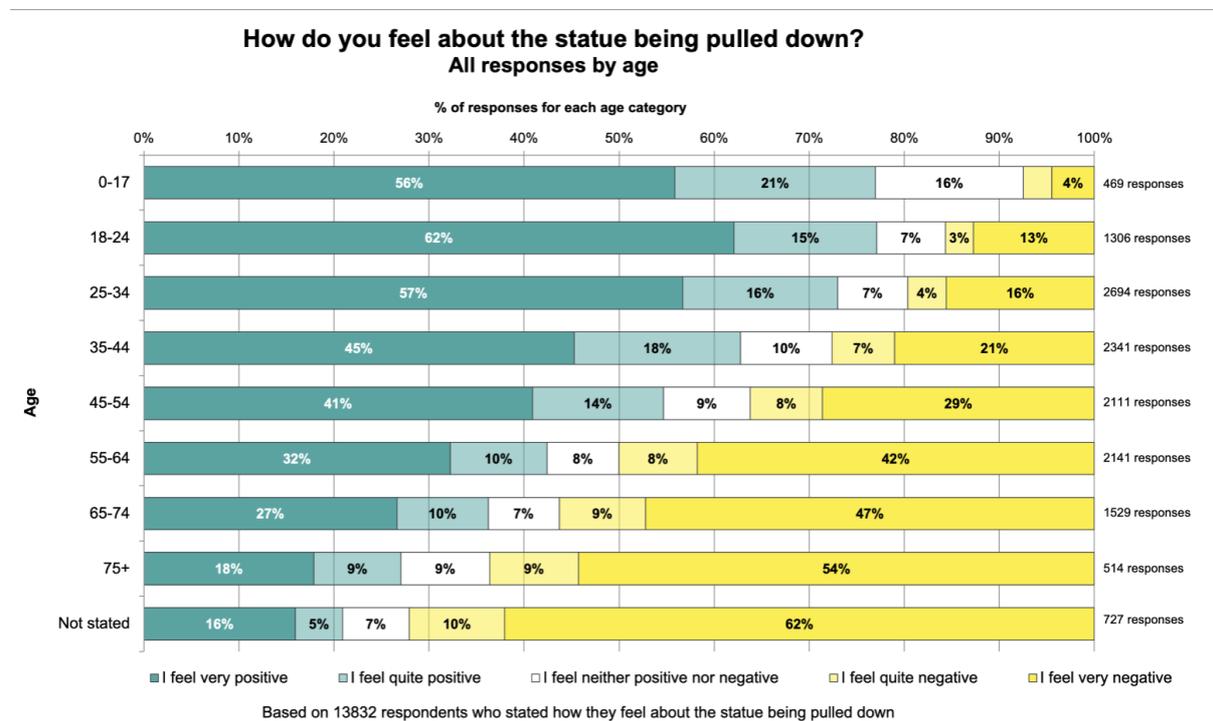
These comments share much in common with those from decile one (most deprived) and decile ten (least deprived) who expressed greater unease about the toppling of the statue than other deciles (see Figure 14). Among them, the common refrain was a feeling that it was the actions of a **'violent mob'** that was problematic. Many in the most and least deprived deciles felt that the statue **'should have come down ages ago,'** but through democratic processes.

Turning to gender, while more of all groups were positive, rather than negative about the toppling of the statue, this was more marked among those identifying as female or other. Across all respondents, 66% of those identifying as female were positive towards the statue being removed (51% very positive and 15% positive) compared to 25% expressing negative feelings (18% very negative and 7% negative). 72% of those identifying as 'other' were positive towards the statue being removed (66% very positive and 6% positive) compared to 26% expressing negative feelings (24% very negative and 2% negative). By contrast, 50% of those who identified as male were positive about

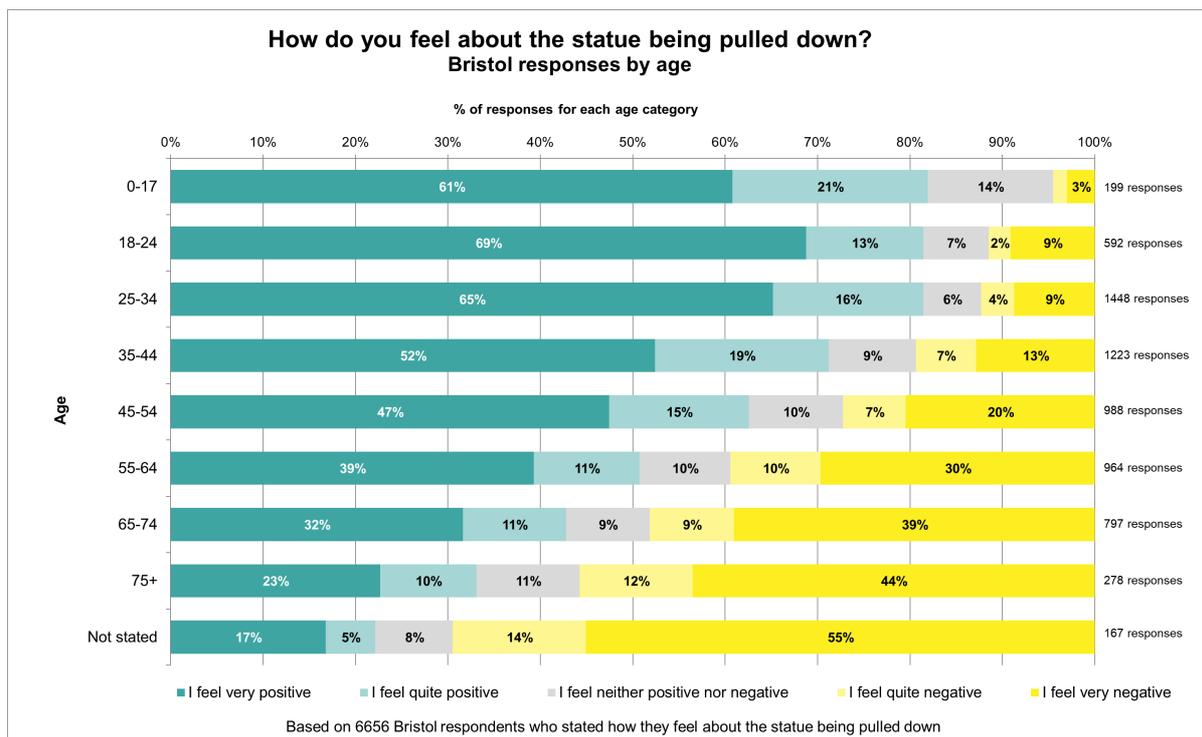
the statue being removed (36% very positive and 14% positive) while 42% expressed negative feelings (35% very negative and 7% negative).

Rather than class, ethnicity or gender being the key fault lines in determining how people feel about the toppling of the Colston statue, age is far more significant. This is the case when looking both at all respondents (see Figure 17) as well as at Bristol respondents (see Figure 18). Younger people were far more positive about the statue being pulled down, while older people were more negative about the statute being pulled down.

**Over 80 per cent of 18 to 34 year old respondents in Bristol (82 per cent aged 18 to 24; 81 per cent aged 25 to 34) were either very positive or positive about the toppling of the Colston statue. In contrast, around half of those aged 65+ were either very negative or negative about the toppling of the Colston statue (48 per cent aged 65 to 74; 56 per cent aged 75+).** This suggests significant generational differences in feeling within the city – as well as across the country – about the events of June 2020.



**Figure 17 – sentiment on the toppling of the Colston statue: all respondents by age**



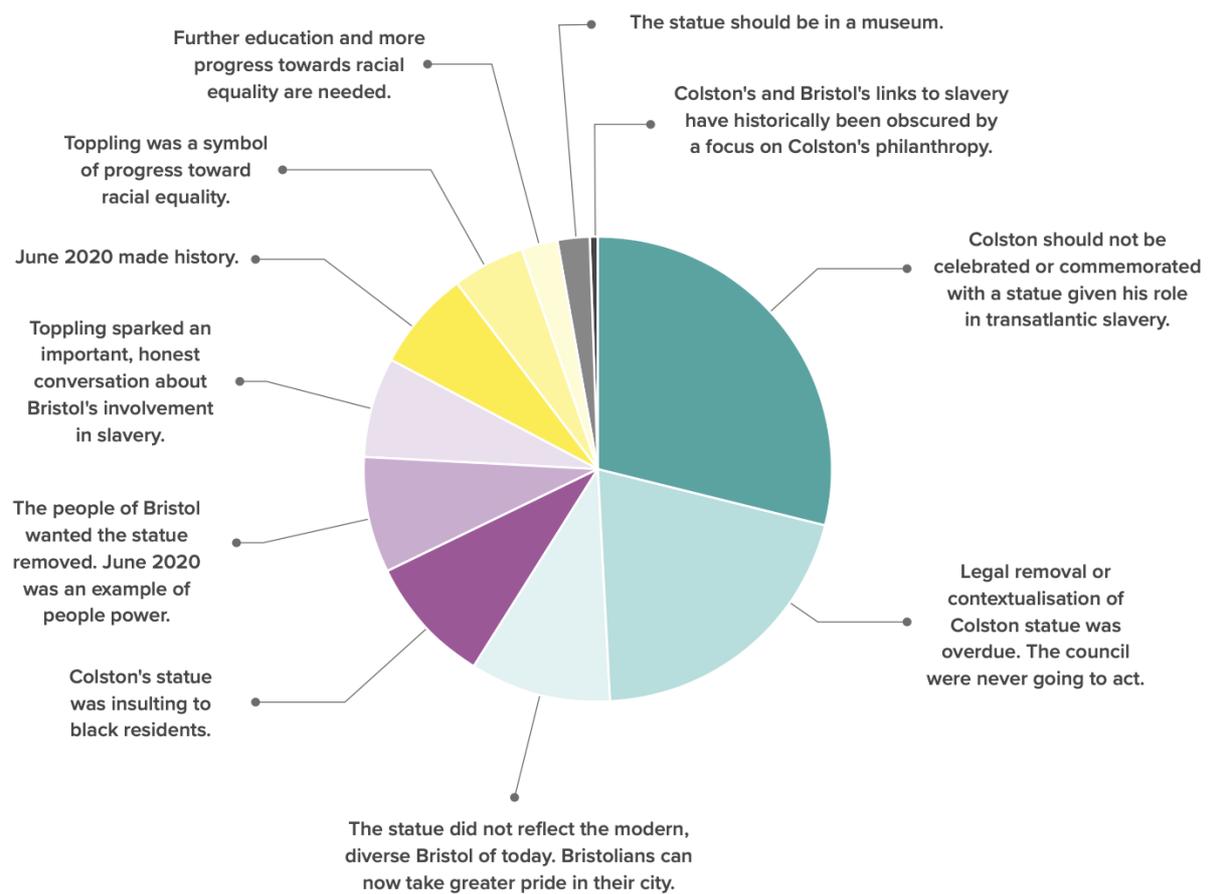
**Figure 18 – sentiment on the toppling of the Colston statue: Bristol respondents by age**

The distinctive attitudes of young people towards the removal of the statue are seen in the quantitative data from online and paper survey returns, but also in summary comments from the 16 events that were organised in the summer of 2021 in local schools. Overwhelmingly, students felt that the toppling of the statue was ‘**a sign of progress**’, that it was ‘**a display of justified anger**’ given that the statue of someone involved in transatlantic slavery ‘**should have been removed earlier,**’ and explained that the day was ‘**historic**’ for the city.

To better understand the reasons why people felt either positive or negative towards the Colston statue being pulled down, we turned to analyse the written responses in the weighted sample of 2,123 Bristol residents from across the city. The breakdown of this weighted sample broadly reflected the breakdown for all respondents (56 per cent were pro-toppling, 36 per cent were anti-toppling, seven per cent explained that they were pro-removal but anti-toppling with only one per cent expressing a more mixed view) but it also

introduces more nuance, enabling us to better understand what lay behind individual answers. The following shows the main reasons given by these groups for feeling either positive (see Figure 19) or negative (see Figure 20) towards the removal of the statue in their written comments.

### Reasons for positive feelings about the statue coming down

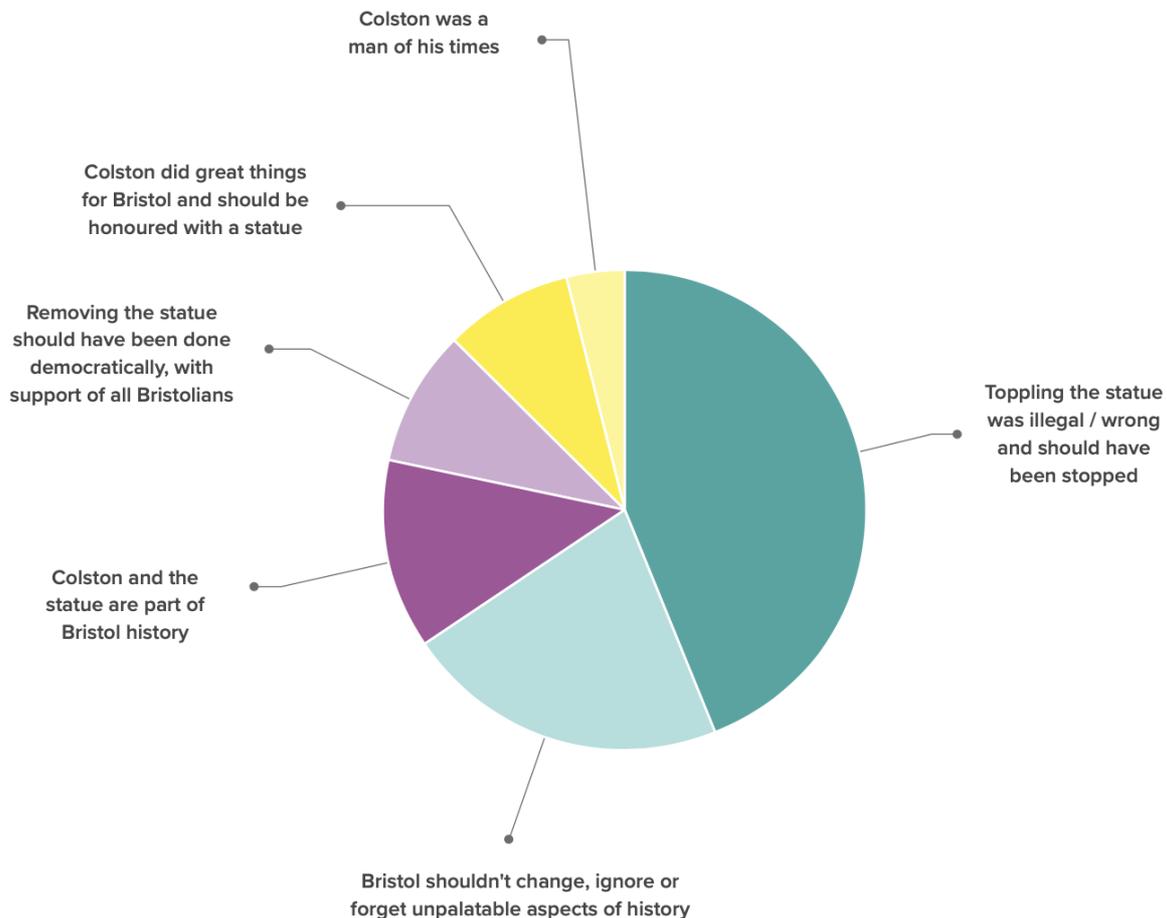


**Figure 19 – reasons given in weighted sample text comments by those Bristol residents pro-toppling**

The number one reason given by those Bristol residents who were positive towards the removal of the statue was their opposition to celebrating Colston in the city given his role in the enslavement of Africans (31 per cent of the total sample). The second most common reason given for feeling positive about the

statue's removal (22 per cent of the total sample) was that this dealt with an issue that legal processes had failed to solve (see Figure 19).

### Reasons for negative feelings about the statue coming down



**Figure 20 – reasons given in weighted sample text comments by those Bristol residents anti-toppling**

Turning to those who were negative about the removal of the statue, the number one reason given for feeling this was because the toppling of the statue was viewed as illegal (24 per cent of the total sample). This was more significant than concerns with erasing history (12 per cent and 7 per cent of the total sample expressed a desire that Bristol should not change unpalatable aspects of history and saw Colston and the statue as part of Bristol's history respectively) (see Figure 20). What is striking in exploring the reasons given in textual comments in the weighted sample of Bristol residents is that the

question of democratic processes is a matter of concern to those who feel positive and negative about the toppling of the statue. This is an issue that we return to in the Bristol Voices section below.

### **Sentiment on the toppling of the statue: Bristol Voices**

As the results discussed in this report show, most within the city see the future for the Colston statue to lie within the museum and imagine a new future for the empty plinth as the site of an updated, contextualising plaque and temporary artworks and events. The recommendations we offer at the end of the report follow these findings. However, what emerges from the comments given in response to the final question about how people now feel about the removal of the statue is a far more divided response: divided primarily along lines of the age. The fault lines lie less around the question of whether the statue should have been removed and much more about the manner of its removal. While one respondent felt that **‘the removal was correct, not the way it was done,’** another explained that **‘the statue should have been removed years ago’** and so **‘the delay in doing this meant that the direct action was justified.’**

Reading through the comments it is striking how feelings are clearly finely balanced within the city. For every respondent who was happy that **‘direct political action accomplished what bureaucracy couldn’t,’** another felt that **‘there is a democratic process and they didn’t exhaust it. It’s unsatisfactory to say “We tried but nothing happened” – that’s life in the world of grown-ups.’** For every respondent who denounced the removal as **‘cultural vandalism’** and **‘criminal damage’** undertaken by **‘a minority’** and an **‘unlawful mob,’** was another who celebrated the toppling as **‘an example of non-violent public protest that reflected the view of the majority of this city,’** a **‘brave thing to do’** and **‘a beautifully powerful act.’** Respondents were deeply divided between those who felt **‘very proud that protesters from my city did what they did’** to those who saw it as **‘a terribly embarrassing day for Bristol’**. The words **‘pride’** and **‘shame’** emerge as markedly different emotions felt by a significant number of respondents. 7 June 2020 was seen as either the best of days or the worst of days in the city’s recent past.

But what is also striking reading through responses is how many expressed feeling a complex range of emotions. The fault lines in feeling and thinking exist not simply between individuals, but also within individuals. As one respondent explained:

**‘Overall, I feel that removing the statue from the streets of Bristol is the right thing, due to his involvement in the slave trade. It’s not the kind of person we want to celebrate. At the same time I don’t think it’s the kind of person that we want to eradicate from our memory either. While I understand the reasons behind him being pulled down I fundamentally disagreed with it at the time mainly a) because it’s a blatant act of vandalism ... b) it was in the middle of the height of the pandemic where people weren’t supposed to leave their houses and congregate, so I felt that everybody there was putting everyone else at risk. So I’m not feeling negative that the statue was removed, that’s something I fundamentally agree with, I just really disagree with the way the statue was removed.’**

This sense of mixed emotions was shared by another who drew different conclusions:

**‘I partly disapprove of damage to property and am conscious that Colston was a man with family who may be upset by violence towards his figure or name. However, I overwhelmingly approve and celebrate the symbolic gesture that pulling down the statue represented in the fight against racism and oppression. We have moved on and as a Bristolian I feel proud of the fact that this happened in my city.’**

One respondent explained, **‘when there is a balance between justice and order, I tend to go for the former.’** Another reflected, **‘I don’t agree with vandalism but that statue had had its time.’**

Reading the detailed comments alongside the quantitative results, it is clear that some of those who recorded different answers to the question actually shared much in common. An example comes from two adjacent responses. The first, who felt ‘quite positive’ about the statue’s toppling, explained:

**‘Now it is removed I feel positive, but I disagree with the manner of its removal. An angry mob should not be allowed to take such decisions. It should have been taken down earlier by the council.’**

The next, who felt ‘quite negative’ about the statue’s toppling echoed many of these sentiments explaining that:

**'The statue and its prominent position has been controversial for some years. I don't support the destruction of public property. I have a negative view about the manner of its removal because it would have been better if it could have been moved as a result of a public/more democratic decision rather than the manner in which it was removed. Now it has gone from the plinth I'm glad it's not there and I wouldn't want to see it re-instated but it's OK in the museum.'**

As these examples suggest, respondents shared a complex mix of thoughts and feelings that ranged from the positive (the fact that the statue was no longer there) to the negative (the way that the statue was removed) and those who came to different conclusions sometimes had more shared feelings in common than might be imagined from examining the quantitative data alone.

Several respondents explained that their thinking about the removal of the statue had changed over time. One described,

**'At first I felt really negative about the statue being pulled down, as even though I agree it should have been removed it shouldn't have been vandalised and damaged as it is still a work of art... However, since the removal, it has sparked a huge talk about slavery and Bristol's part in it. I am glad we are now all discussing Bristol's equally great and terrible history.'**

Another reflected how after visiting the temporary display,

**'At first I saw it as destruction and the history it represents will be forgotten, but seeing it in the M Shed today it felt good. Seeing a statue which had such prominence laid down and graffitied can encourage conversations and the history of Bristol's involvement in the slave trade won't be forgotten'**

One explained their journey of emotions over the course of the last year:

**'On the day, I was so upset because it highlighted the division of feeling. I feel that it should have been done before, in a none public way. However, now I have accepted it. It's down. It's gone.'**

## Sentiment on toppling the statue: Conclusions

There is much that most of us in the city agree upon. Most of us think that the best place for the Colston statue is fully contextualised within one of the city's museums, rather than raised up on a plinth in the centre of the city. Most of us think that the empty plinth should remain, and the full story of its history briefly told there. Most of us think that temporary artworks and events with programmed periods of emptiness would be the most fitting thing to occupy the empty plinth. However, while there is clearly much that we agree upon, there is one key area where our views differ: was the way that the statue was removed justified or not? This is an area where we think differently, with younger and older people in the city holding divergent views.

Of course, thinking differently is not a problem, but rather something to celebrate. A core principle of democracy is the importance of not simply tolerating, but valuing, difference in opinion. The world – and our city – would be all the poorer without differences in the ways we think about the past, present, and future. One of the current Mayoral priorities is Bristol being a city that is comfortable with difference. However, there are perhaps less and less places where we can listen to, and seek to understand, the views of those who think and feel differently from ourselves. That appears to be particularly true when it comes to spaces for the kinds of intergenerational conversation that emerge as a priority from this survey.

One thing that is clear from the thoughts and feelings of those consulted is that there are many who desire effective democratic processes to enable renegotiation of what is represented in public space in peaceful and consensual ways. Many expressed frustration or disappointment that long-running concerns about the appropriateness of having a statue of someone involved in enslaving African people in the centre of the city were not acted upon. Its removal was seen by many as **'long overdue'**. In part, years of inaction were a result of stalemate between key stakeholders in the city that some respondents were aware of and commented on. But, it was also the result of the lack of any clear, democratic mechanism for enabling these kinds of changes to be discussed and acted upon with the UK. Some respondents knew that this statue, like others, had been **'relocated around the city from time to time'**. However, removing statues is quite different from moving statues and there is a lack of precedent for how this is done. Reading the voices of those who felt more negative towards to the events of June 2020, it is clear that many wished that there was a clear democratic process. One

respondent who felt unhappy about the way the statue was removed explained that **'Bristolians should have been asked to vote and if the outcome was to remove, then this should have been done legally and respectfully.'** Another expressed a desire that the city **'decide on these issues as a whole community.'**

There is currently no clear process in the city, or country, to enable this kind of community decision making to happen. The survey identifies a gap that urgently needs to be filled: what happens to a statue that – as one person put it – has **'had its time.'** As one respondent noted, **'the statue was removed by protesters because of a failure of democratic processes and disrespect of minority voices. The bigger picture is how do we address this?'**

## Recommendations for consideration by elected officials

The results of the ‘What’s next for the Colston statue’ survey point to a number of key recommendations relating to the future of the statue and the empty plinth, as well as some broader issues for further consideration.

### Future of the Colston statue

**Recommendation 1:** We recommend that the Colston statue enters the permanent collection of the Bristol City Council Museums service.

**Recommendation 2:** We recommend that the statue is preserved in its current state and the opportunity to reflect this in the listing description is explored with Historic England.

**Recommendation 3:** We recommend that the statue be exhibited, drawing on the principles and practice of the temporary M Shed display where the statue was lying horizontally. We recommend that attention is paid to presenting the history in a nuanced, contextualised and engaging way, including information on the broader history of the enslavement of people of African descent.

### Future of the empty plinth

**Recommendation 4:** We recommend that the former Colston statue plinth, along with the original plaques, remain in place and that a new plaque is installed that briefly and factually explains when and why the statue was put up and taken down. We suggest the following wording for the new plaque:

**‘On 13 November 1895, a statue of Edward Colston (1636 - 1721) was unveiled here celebrating him as a city benefactor. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, the celebration of Colston was increasingly challenged given his prominent role in the enslavement of African people. On 7 June 2020, the statue was pulled down during Black Lives Matter protests and rolled into the harbour. Following consultation with the city in 2021, the statue entered the collections of Bristol City Council’s museums.’**

**Recommendation 5:** We recommend that the Conservation Area Character Appraisal is updated to include a) the events of 7 June 2020, b) this process of public engagement, and c) the decision to locate the statue within Bristol City Council Museums service. We recommend that the opportunity to reflect the current state of the plinth in the National List description is explored.

**Recommendation 6:** We recommend that the city think creatively about the empty plinth and its immediate vicinity. We recommend that funding is sought from public and private sources to commission temporary artworks and activities. These might take a digital or physical form, on and around the plinth. We recommend that two principles guide future use of the plinth:

- that there are periods of intentional emptiness and presence;
- that this is a space for dialogue and conversation about things that matter in and for the city, including the legacy of transatlantic slavery.

### **Broader Issues for further consideration**

Reflecting on the responses to the final question asking people how they feel about the statue being pulled down, the survey points to the need for three broader issues to be given further consideration:

- We see the need for a city-wide commitment to creating opportunities for younger and older generations to interact, share experiences and perspectives and develop greater empathy and mutual understanding, including sharing views on the city's past, present and future.
- We see the need to develop processes and practices, both locally and nationally, that encourage active engagement in creating more representative public space. When making decisions around contested heritage, public bodies should develop and follow processes that are fair and transparent, inclusive, participatory, evidence-based and committed to justice.<sup>3</sup>
- The history of the city's involvement with the transatlantic enslavement of African people is not an issue that can or should be consigned to the

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<sup>3</sup> Further guidance on possible processes can be found at Ben Stephenson, Marie-Annick Gournet and Joanna Burch-Brown, 'Reviewing contested statues, memorials and place names: Guidance for public bodies', University of Bristol, 2021 available at <https://tinyurl.com/dybkrt>

past, but rather remains embedded in present-day concerns. Strong feelings remain on this topic, and the toppling of the Colston statue has opened the opportunity for this history to be addressed urgently, appropriately and sensitively. We recognise the leadership of the Legacy Steering Group on the question of how Bristol might best memorialise and respond to the transatlantic trafficking and enslavement of African people.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For more information see the Project Truth report at <https://www.blacksouthwestnetwork.org/acc>