

# Responding to calls for public realm changes

12 June 2020

Many councils are currently receiving calls for changes to the names of estates and streets and the removal of statues – and objections to such proposals. Building cohesive communities lies at the core of councils' day-to-day business and as leaders of place, shaping and supporting a local identity and helping to develop relationships and engagement between different parts of the local community are key to achieving this.

The suggestions below are aimed at ensuring that whether or not a proposed change takes place, the outcome does not damage community cohesion and indeed provides an opportunity to enhance it.

Those calling for change may not appreciate the limits on the role of a council in delivering it. These may need to be clarified publicly. Some statues, etc may not be under council control, for example if they are on private land. In such cases the council may still have a role in granting planning or naming approval for changes. Statues may also be listed and councils may want to liaise with the listing authorities over planned changes.

While either removing or retaining a name/icon may sometimes be simple and uncontentious, where it is not objections may be made on practical grounds (eg around change of address) or on grounds of heritage and identity (the name of a street someone grew up on is part of their identity and may be a part they are not prepared to give up).

Where there are strong feelings for and against change, the [Local Government Association \(LGA\) cohesive communities guidance](#) provides a helpful general context. The LGA has also produced two best-practice guides on community engagement which may be found [here](#) and [here](#). In terms of the specific issue of public realm changes, the points below may be helpful:

1) Establishing a forum for discussion.

- All sections of the community have to feel heard by decision-makers, but also by each other.
- Councils should avoid telling people how they should feel or making assumptions about how they do feel. Simply telling people they are wrong to be offended (whether they are offended by a statue or by a proposal to remove it) never works.
- Changing street names has practical ramifications for businesses and for people who live there, but these are solvable.
- Where a change is contentious, councils may wish to provide opportunities for people to set out their views in detail, rather than simply expressing support for or opposition to a proposal. Where appropriate, community leaders may be able to help engage hard-to-reach groups.
- Establishing a community dialogue can allow a divisive issue to become an opportunity for understanding on both sides. The aim of dialogue should be that sections of the community talk to each other, as well as to the decision-making body, encouraging people to understand how a name or statue makes others feel – and how removing what someone sees as part of their heritage makes *them* feel.
- For dialogue to work, people must feel represented – councillors obviously have a role here, both as representatives and in terms of identifying other key actors.

2) Establishing a measure of objectivity

- Involving historians or cultural academics can assist in producing an approach that can be defended as objective. There is a wealth of expertise and experience available around relevant projects (for example, Historic England's [Immortalised](#)).

- Historians may also be useful in making a distinction between history, heritage and 'the past'.
  - Academics may be able to help establish disputed facts and explore nuanced interpretations.
  - There may be advantage in establishing a common set of criteria to apply to every case. The criteria need to be academically valid and be accepted by the community for this to be effective.
  - Councils should undertake due diligence before appointing people to any commission etc, to ensure their views will carry objective weight.
- 3) Countering extremism
- Visible local leadership is an important aspect of this, helping to avoid leaving a vacuum that extremists might exploit.
  - Again, the question of representation is key. It makes sense to consider the views of visitors; at the same time, it is relevant to ask who is speaking for whom.
- 4) Considering a suite of solutions in addition to 'erasing' a statue or street name:
- Relocating it to a museum where it can be seen in context as part of local/national history (this carries logistical and cost challenges, but may be an activity that could attract business funding)
  - Place an explanation at a contentious site, as was attempted in Bristol.
  - Balance (for example) a contentious statue with a memorial to victims of the slave trade or a naming, such as Windrush Square in Brixton. This is not going to be acceptable in every case.
  - The community should be offered an opportunity to suggest resolutions.

#### Examples of approaches:

- Liverpool has set up a [museum](#) of the Slave trade and is planning [plaques](#) on streets whose names are associated with the slave trade.
- In London, the Mayor is appointing a Commission for Diversity in the Public Realm which will focus on increasing representation among black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities, women, the LGBTQ+ community and disability groups.
- Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council plans to temporarily remove a statue to safe storage after warnings that it may be attacked and announced that it plans to involve all relevant communities and groups in discussions about its future.
- Manchester has announced a review of its statues and will take the opportunity to ask the public who should have a statue but is currently 'missing', with particular focus on BAME figures.
- The leader of Shropshire Council has publicised the provision in the council's constitution that all petitions that gain 1,000 signatures are presented to, and debated by, full council.
- [Plymouth](#) is renaming a square and may add an explanation to the Drake statue.
- The leader of Cardiff Council, supports removing a statue of the slave-trader Sir Thomas Picton from [Cardiff](#) City Hall and is proposing a task force to work with Black communities in Cardiff.