



Disposal digest

An introduction for museums

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Introduction

Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society.

Museums Association definition of a museum

Museum collections are established for the long term. Each generation has a responsibility to the next to preserve them and to ensure that they are sustainable. Collections need to evolve in response to the needs of today's society and to stop them becoming a burden on the collecting institution. In certain instances disposal of objects may be necessary. However, disposal should not be undertaken in isolation and should be part of overall collections development, including continued acquisition.

Although disposing of items is not without risk, there can be significant benefits if the process is well managed. Better care and curation for an item or improving public access and use are just some of them.

A strong framework to support responsible disposal exists within the UK with ethical advice in the Museums Association Code of Ethics for Museums and from its ethics committee, supported by practical advice in the Disposal toolkit, www.museumsassociation.org/collections. Standards and procedures are also set out in the Museums Accreditation Scheme and SPECTRUM.



Guiding principles

The Museums Association Code of Ethics for Museums supports the responsible disposal of items from museum collections. Ethical disposal is characterised as being undertaken when:

- it is within the framework of a clearly defined collections policy
- it is on the advice of a range of staff (not an individual) and is agreed by the governing body
- it is done with the intention that wherever possible items remain within the public domain
- it is unlikely to damage public trust in museums
- it is likely to increase the public benefit derived from museum collections
- it is communicated openly to stakeholders and the public.

Full wording of the guiding principles for disposal can be found in section six of the code of ethics. These principles are adopted by the museum sector and underpin the standards set by other sector organisations and funding bodies. The Museums Association (MA) ethics committee can be consulted confidentially regarding any proposed disposal.

Museums may be subject to legal restrictions that will affect their ability to dispose of items from their collections. These include statutory restrictions laid down through legislation relating to specific museums, such as national museums, general legislation relating to charities and specific conditions relating to gifts or bequests.

Museums considering undertaking disposal must ensure that they are legally able to do so. If there is any doubt about a course of action the museum should take appropriate advice, for example regarding charity law or laws in different parts of the UK.



When to dispose

Before undertaking the disposal of any item the intended outcomes of the process should be considered and articulated. Defining clear outcomes will assist in the decision-making process and in the identification of a suitable method for disposal. If the desired outcome cannot be achieved, it is advisable to review the decision.

Outcomes of disposal should demonstrate how the public benefit derived from museum collections will increase as a result; through improved care, access and context for the item, and its continued retention in the public domain. Incidental outcomes, such as optimising storage space or freeing resources, should not be the main motivation to dispose.

Museums should establish clear selection criteria by which to judge disposal decisions. Creating a framework for assessing items within a collection, that can be used in a collection review, provides a useful guide when making decisions.

The categories of items that museums often select for disposal are listed below, and further information about each can be found in the MA Disposal toolkit:

- items that fall outside the museum's collections policy
- duplicate items
- underused items
- items for which the museum is unable to provide adequate care (or curation)
- items that are damaged or deteriorated beyond the museum's ability to repair
- uncontextualised or unprovenanced items
- items that pose a threat to health and safety.



When not to dispose

It is unacceptable to dispose of an item:

- for financial reasons, apart from in very exceptional circumstances
- on an ad hoc basis, ie other than as part of a long-term collections policy
- without considering advice from someone with specialist knowledge of the item
- if the disposal would adversely affect the public reputation of museums
- if the disposal would not be in the long-term public interest
- outside the public domain, except in exceptional circumstances.

Museums may consider selecting an item on the basis that it has the potential to generate income. In all but the most exceptional circumstances this is unacceptable and could result in significant consequences such as de-accreditation and ineligibility for some sources of funding. In the limited cases where all of the following conditions are met, financially-motivated disposal (ie sale) may be acceptable (taken from paragraph 6.14 of the code of ethics) if:

- it will significantly improve the long-term public benefit derived from the remaining collection
- it is not to generate short-term revenue (for example to meet a budget deficit)
- it is as a last resort after other sources of funding have been thoroughly explored
- extensive prior consultation with sector bodies has been undertaken
- the item under consideration lies outside the museum's established core collection as defined in the collections policy.

There is a high level of risk involved in this course of action and it should only take place after extensive consultation with the MA and other sector bodies.



FAQs

What is disposal?

The permanent removal of an item, through a variety of methods, from a museum collection.

What does disposal have to do with public trust in museums?

Museums are trusted institutions where items are donated or bequeathed in the expectation that they will be retained for the long term and made accessible within the public domain. Disposals must take account of this expectation in order to maintain public trust, including the museum's relationship with users and future donors. Disposal decisions must therefore be considered thoroughly and communicated openly.

What is the public domain?

In its broadest sense, and in relation to the removal and relocating of museum objects, the public domain refers to a location where reasonable public access can be achieved. This is likely to refer to public sector or publicly-funded bodies or those with charitable status, that hold items in trust for the public and not as private property.

Who should a museum contact for ethical, standards and legal advice?

A number of organisations offer advice to support responsible disposal. In addition to the MA, museums should consider seeking advice from the organisations listed below and from other subject specialist networks:

- Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), www.mla.gov.uk
- for more information on the Museums Accreditation Scheme visit www.mla.gov.uk/website/programmes/accreditation
- Collections Trust (formerly MDA), which publishes SPECTRUM, www.collectionstrust.org.uk
- Scottish Museums Council (SMC), www.scottishmuseums.org.uk
- CyMAL: Museums, Libraries and Archives Wales, <http://new.wales.gov.uk/topics/cultureandsport/museumsarchiveslibraries>
- Charity Commission, www.charitycommission.gov.uk
- Office of Scottish Charity Register, www.oscr.org.uk

Checklist for all disposals

Steps to take:

- determine the desirability of undertaking a full review of the collection
- develop a project plan and allocate resources to manage the process
- consider creating an assessment framework to evaluate items within the collection and their subsequent suitability for disposal
- secure the governing body's agreement to the potential disposal of items.

Making the decision to dispose:

- make decisions to dispose as part of an overall collections management strategy and in light of a collections policy, and preferably as part of a review of the collection
- articulate the desired outcome of and (curatorial) reasons behind the disposal
- seek specialist advice if necessary
- consider the views of donors and stakeholders where appropriate
- consider the public reaction, and develop a communications strategy
- establish whether the item was purchased or conserved with the aid of external funding bodies, if so seek views from appropriate bodies
- ensure the museum is legally able to remove the item
- recommend a method of disposal that is likely to achieve the desired outcome.

Things to consider:

- what is the desired outcome?
- if successful, how will the method of disposal help to achieve the desired outcome?
- what are the benefits of this course of action – to the care, use and context of the item, to the museum and its collection, to the broader museum community and to the public's use and enjoyment of museum collections?
- what is the potential for increased use and improved care of the item through the proposed course of action?
- what are the potential risks in the proposed course of action?

This checklist and further supporting advice can be found in the MA Disposal toolkit.



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