



Collections Access Policy

Document Control

Policy owner: Director

Approved by: Board of Trustees

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1. Purpose

The Natural Sciences Museum, Sheffield (“NSM”) is committed to enabling appropriate access to the collections in its care for public benefit, research, education, display, interpretation and wider knowledge-sharing.

This policy sets out how NSM will provide, manage, authorise and record access to collections, collection information and associated resources, while protecting collections from unacceptable risk and ensuring that access is fair, lawful, documented and proportionate.

2. Scope

This policy applies to:

- accessioned and unaccessioned collections in NSM’s custody;
- specimens and objects on display;
- collections in store;
- associated collection data and documentation;
- images and other reproductions created by or for NSM;
- incoming and outgoing loans, where access issues arise; and
- all Trustees, the Director, Heads of Department, staff, volunteers, researchers, contractors and visitors using or requesting access to collections.

This policy covers physical, intellectual, sensory and digital access to collections, and should be read alongside NSM's:

- Collections Governance Policy;
- Collections Care Policy;

3. Policy Statement

NSM will make its collections and associated information available as widely as practicable, consistent with:

- the long-term preservation of the collections;
- legal and ethical obligations;
- health and safety requirements;
- security and confidentiality needs;
- available resources and staff capacity; and
- any restrictions arising from ownership, copyright, donor terms, lender conditions or sensitive content.

NSM recognises that access may take different forms, including:

- public display and interpretation;
- supervised access to stored collections;
- research visits;
- specimen or object loans;
- digital access to collection information and images;
- educational and learning use;
- public programmes and community engagement; and
- access to associated knowledge created through research and collections use.

4. Governance and Authority

NSM's authority structure is:

Trustees → Director → Heads of Department → staff

4.1 Trustees

The Trustees are responsible for overall oversight of collections access as part of their stewardship of the collections and approval of this policy and any material amendments.

4.2 Director

The Director is responsible for implementing this policy, ensuring suitable access procedures are in place, and referring major, contentious, high-risk or exceptional matters to the Trustees where necessary.

4.3 Heads of Department

Heads of Department are responsible for managing collections access within their areas, ensuring requests are reviewed appropriately, risks are considered, conditions are applied, and access activity is documented.

4.4 Staff

Staff may facilitate or supervise access only within delegated authority and must follow this policy, related procedures and any collections care, security or documentation requirements.

5. Core Principles

NSM will manage collections access according to the following principles.

5.1 Public benefit

Collections are held to support public benefit through research, learning, engagement and interpretation.

5.2 Access balanced with preservation

Access must be enabled wherever practicable, but not at the cost of unacceptable risk to collections.

5.3 Fairness and consistency

Access requests will be considered fairly, consistently and with regard to the nature of the material, the proposed use and NSM's capacity.

5.4 Inclusion

NSM will seek to maintain and, where possible, improve physical, sensory, intellectual and digital access to collections and collection information. Accreditation guidance specifically expects museums to plan to maintain and, where possible, improve physical, sensory and intellectual access to

collections, information about collections, and access to the buildings that house them.

5.5 Documentation

Access decisions and significant uses of collections should be recorded so that NSM can account for use, risks, outcomes and knowledge gained. Spectrum's use-of-collections standard recommends systems for making, reviewing and authorising requests, recording each use, keeping a record of who used specific objects, and adding knowledge gained and content created back into catalogue records.

6. Types of Access

6.1 Public access

NSM will provide access to collections through exhibitions, displays, interpretation, learning activity, events, publications and online content, subject to conservation, security, staffing and operational constraints.

6.2 Research access

NSM will support bona fide research access to collections, including visits to study specimens and, where appropriate, loans for research. NHM publicly states that its collections are open and that enquiries about research visits or research loans should be directed to the relevant curator, Curator in Charge or Head of Collections.

6.3 Digital access

Where resources and rights permit, NSM will provide digital access to collection information, images and metadata. NHM's Data Portal states that the Museum is committed to open access and open science and makes research and collections datasets available online for exploration, download and reuse.

6.4 Access to associated information

NSM will seek to make collection records, interpretation and research outputs discoverable and usable, subject to confidentiality, sensitivity, rights and data quality considerations.

7. Requests for Access

Requests for access may be made for purposes including research, teaching, display, learning, digitisation, publication, conservation, identification, community engagement or other legitimate museum-related use.

Requests should normally include:

- the requester's name, affiliation and contact details;
- the material requested;
- the purpose of access;
- the proposed dates or timescale;
- any handling, imaging, sampling or publication intentions; and
- any special requirements.

NSM may require additional information where needed to assess risk, feasibility, legality, ethics, resources or security.

8. Approval of Access

Access may be approved, refused, deferred or granted subject to conditions.

Routine requests may be approved by the relevant authorised staff member within departmental procedures. Requests raising unusual risk, high resource demand, legal or ethical sensitivity, major publication implications, significant handling, or reputational concern must be referred to the Head of Department and, where appropriate, to the Director.

NSM is not obliged to grant access where:

- the material is too fragile, hazardous or sensitive;
- the request would conflict with legal, ethical or contractual obligations;
- the request would unreasonably interfere with museum operations;
- the requester cannot meet the conditions of access; or
- NSM lacks the resources to support the request safely and properly.

9. Conditions of Physical Access

Anyone granted physical access to collections must comply with NSM's conditions of use, including requirements relating to:

- supervision where required;
- handling instructions;
- environmental, security and housekeeping rules;
- integrated pest management requirements;
- restricted use of food and drink;
- photography or imaging permissions;
- health and safety controls;
- hazardous specimens or materials; and
- restrictions on copying, movement, opening, disassembly, sampling or intervention.

Visitors and researchers must follow staff instructions at all times while using collections.

10. Research Access to Specimens

Research access to specimens is a core part of NSM's mission, but it must be managed responsibly.

Researchers using NSM collections must:

- use specimens, data and associated information only for the agreed purpose, unless further permission is obtained;
- comply with all handling, security, safety and documentation requirements;
- not undertake destructive or invasive sampling without separate written approval under the relevant policy;
- provide NSM with details of any significant findings, identifications, re-identifications or corrections arising from their work;
- provide citations, references, links, DOIs or copies of outputs arising from the research; and
- cooperate with reasonable requests to clarify specimen numbers, object identifiers, taxonomic usage, images or associated data in publications.

11. Acknowledgement of NSM in Research Outputs

Any thesis, dissertation, report, paper, dataset, exhibition text, presentation, digital output or other publishable work arising wholly or partly from the use of NSM collections must acknowledge the Natural Sciences Museum, Sheffield.

Where possible, acknowledgements should also include:

- the relevant department or collection;
- specimen, accession or catalogue numbers;
- image credits where applicable; and
- any funding, project or staff support that materially assisted the research.

This requirement reflects the wider museum-standard expectation that museums record and retain information arising from use of collections and add knowledge gained back into catalogue records.

12. Collaboration on Publishable Research

NSM expects researchers making substantial use of its specimens, collection data, specialist knowledge or curatorial input to consider collaboration with relevant NSM personnel at an early stage.

Accordingly:

- researchers should, where possible, discuss prospective publications with the relevant NSM contact during the planning or analysis stage;
- where NSM personnel make a substantive intellectual, analytical, interpretive, taxonomic, curatorial or methodological contribution, researchers should seek appropriate collaborative involvement;
- where the contribution meets recognised disciplinary standards for authorship or co-authorship, NSM personnel should be offered that status;
- where those standards are not met, the relevant personnel should be acknowledged appropriately.

The aim of this requirement is to ensure fair recognition of museum expertise, improve the quality of research based on NSM collections, and

strengthen the return of knowledge to the collections record. Recognised authorship guidance states that those who meet authorship criteria should be identified as authors, while those who do not should be acknowledged; it also states that people who meet the first criterion should have the opportunity to participate in manuscript review and approval.

13. Return of Information to the Museum

Researchers, authors and other users of collections must provide NSM, where relevant, with:

- copies or links to publications and outputs;
- updated determinations or identifications;
- derived data generated from specimens;
- relevant images produced through the work; and
- any information that improves the museum's understanding, documentation or interpretation of the material.

NSM will seek, where practicable, to incorporate significant knowledge gained through use back into its collection records, in line with Spectrum good practice.

14. Images, Data and Reproductions

Access to images, metadata and other reproductions may be granted subject to:

- copyright and licensing status;
- privacy, confidentiality or sensitivity issues;
- quality and technical limitations;
- restrictions imposed by lenders or rights holders; and
- any applicable fees, permissions or terms of use.

Where NSM holds rights in material, it may set licence conditions for reuse. Where NSM does not hold the relevant rights, the user is responsible for obtaining any necessary permissions unless otherwise agreed.

15. Inclusive Access and Accessibility

NSM will seek to make access arrangements as inclusive as practicable and will consider reasonable adjustments to support access to collections, collection information and collections-related spaces.

This includes, where possible:

- clear information about how to request access;
- alternative ways of accessing information;
- support for sensory and intellectual access;
- accessible digital information; and
- proportionate physical access arrangements for researchers, visitors and users.

Collections Trust guidance for Accreditation states that an access policy should cover how people can see, use and reference collections, gain access to museum buildings and sites, and how collection information is shared.

16. Restricted, Sensitive or Exceptional Access

Some collections, records or associated information may require restricted access because of:

- fragility or conservation risk;
- hazardous properties;
- legal or regulatory controls;
- culturally sensitive or ethically sensitive content;
- confidentiality or data protection issues;
- lender restrictions;
- security concerns; or
- unresolved ownership, provenance or rights issues.

In such cases, NSM may refuse access, limit access, impose additional conditions, or require higher-level approval.

17. Recording and Monitoring Access

NSM will keep appropriate records of significant collections access activity, including where relevant:

- who used the collections;
- what was used;
- for what purpose;
- when and where access occurred;
- what conditions applied;
- whether images, data or samples were created;
- what outputs resulted; and
- what new information should be added to museum records.

18. Non-Compliance

Failure to comply with this policy or with conditions of access may result in:

- refusal or withdrawal of access;
- withdrawal of permission to publish or reuse museum-created material where lawful and applicable;
- refusal of future loans or visits;
- requirement to correct acknowledgements or credits where feasible;
- escalation to the Director or Trustees; or
- other appropriate action.

19. Review

This policy takes effect on 01/04/2026 and will be reviewed by 01/04/2029, or earlier if required by changes in law, guidance, accreditation requirements, organisational structure or operational need.