



Collections Care Policy

Document Control

Policy owner: Director

Approved by: Board of Trustees

Effective from: 01/04/2026

Review date: 01/04/2029

Version: 1.0

1. Purpose

The Natural Sciences Museum, Sheffield (“NSM”) is committed to the long-term care, preservation and responsible use of the collections in its custody.

This policy sets out how NSM will protect collections from damage, deterioration, loss and avoidable risk while enabling appropriate access for research, learning, display and engagement. It establishes a framework for collections care that is proportionate, evidence-based, ethical and consistent with museum good practice.

2. Scope

This policy applies to:

- Trustees;
- the Director;
- Heads of Department;
- staff;
- volunteers, interns, students and researchers working on behalf of NSM;
- contractors and consultants working in collections, display, storage or related areas; and
- external users of collections, where relevant to handling, hygiene, pest control, security or access conditions.

It applies to all collections in NSM's custody, including:

- accessioned collections;
- study and reference collections;
- specimens and objects on display;
- collections in storage;
- incoming and outgoing loans;
- associated archives, labels and collection information;
- items in transit; and
- collections held temporarily in third-party storage or entrusted to NSM's care.

3. Policy Statement

NSM will care for its collections in a way that:

- supports their long-term preservation;
- reduces risks from deterioration, damage, pests, poor handling, unsuitable environments and emergencies;
- balances preservation with legitimate access and use;
- ensures that conservation and collections care decisions are documented and accountable;
- uses suitably trained staff and, where needed, specialist conservation advice; and
- integrates collections care with related policies on collections development, documentation, access, loans, security, health and safety, business continuity and emergency planning.

4. Governance and Responsibility

NSM's authority structure is:

Trustees → Director → Heads of Department → staff

4.1 Trustees

The Trustees are responsible for overall stewardship of NSM's collections and for approving this policy and major amendments. They will receive assurance on significant collections risks, serious incidents and strategic care needs.

4.2 Director

The Director is accountable for implementation of this policy across NSM and for ensuring that sufficient governance, planning and oversight arrangements are in place.

4.3 Heads of Department

Heads of Department are responsible for applying this policy within their areas, ensuring that collections care requirements are embedded in planning, projects, access, exhibitions and operations.

4.4 Staff, volunteers, researchers and contractors

All individuals working with or around collections must follow this policy, relevant procedures, training and handling guidance, and must report damage, hazards, pest incidents or other risks promptly.

5. Core Principles of Collections Care

NSM will apply the following principles:

5.1 Long-term stewardship

Collections are held for current and future public benefit. Care decisions must support their long-term preservation and significance.

5.2 Preventive conservation first

NSM will prioritise preventive conservation by managing the environment, storage, handling, housekeeping, security and pests so that deterioration is avoided wherever possible. NHM's public materials similarly emphasise preventive conservation, environmental monitoring, pest management, salvage planning and risk reporting as central parts of collections care.

5.3 Access balanced with preservation

Collections exist to be used, but access, display, research and handling must not expose them to unacceptable risk.

5.4 Evidence-based and ethical practice

Conservation and collections care decisions must be informed by condition, material nature, significance, intended use, known risks and current professional standards.

5.5 Documentation and accountability

Care, condition, treatment, movement and incidents affecting collections must be recorded appropriately.

6. Related Standards and Framework

This policy should be read alongside NSM's other collections policies and plans, including those covering:

- collections development;
- collections information and documentation;
- loans and physical access;
- security;
- health and safety;
- emergency planning and business continuity; and
- human remains, if applicable.

NSM will seek to align its collections care practice with appropriate sector standards and guidance. UK museum practice recognises collections care and conservation as a core policy area, and Accreditation expects both a policy and a plan in this area. Spectrum 5.1 also requires conservation work to be managed and documented as part of collections documentation, including where external specialists are used.

7. Buildings and Estate

Buildings and rooms used to store, display, study, digitise or prepare collections must provide an environment that is appropriate, secure and safe for the collections concerned.

NSM will seek to ensure that:

- collections areas are maintained in a condition suitable for their contents;
- building defects or maintenance issues that may affect collections are reported and addressed promptly;

- essential access routes and equipment needed for collections handling are kept available where practicable; and
- any building works likely to affect collections are planned with collections care requirements in mind.

8. Collections Security

The security of collections in store, on display, in transit and on loan must be managed proportionately to the risks involved.

Security measures may include:

- controlled or supervised access to collections areas;
- physical barriers, locks or case security;
- movement controls and location recording;
- risk assessment for display and loans; and
- additional safeguards during installation, deinstallation, transport or events.

Where incoming loans are subject to lender, insurer or Government Indemnity requirements, those conditions must be met.

9. Preventive Conservation

NSM is committed to preventive conservation as the foundation of collections care.

This includes:

- monitoring relevant environmental conditions;
- identifying and managing agents of deterioration;
- undertaking condition surveys or checks where appropriate;
- using appropriate storage and display methods;
- reducing avoidable handling;
- implementing integrated pest management;
- planning for emergencies, salvage and recovery; and
- reviewing risks to collections over time.

Environmental conditions will be managed in a way that is appropriate to the collection type, the building, the use of the space and available resources. Where ideal conditions cannot be achieved, mitigating controls and risk-based decisions will be used.

10. Storage and Display Standards

Collections must be stored and displayed in a way that supports their long-term preservation, security and access.

NSM will ensure that:

- storage furniture, enclosures and supports are suitable for the materials and size of collections;
- display methods are appropriate to condition, sensitivity and significance;
- materials used in storage, packing and display are inert or otherwise approved as suitable;
- environmental and light exposure for display are controlled as necessary; and
- open display is used only where the risks are understood and justified.

Projects involving new stores, displays, cases, mounts or major re-housing must take collections care requirements into account from the outset.

11. Integrated Pest Management

NSM will operate an Integrated Pest Management (“IPM”) approach to reduce the risk of infestation and pest-related damage.

This will include, as appropriate:

- inspection and monitoring;
- quarantine or checking of incoming items;
- prompt response to signs of pests;
- control of food and drink in collections-sensitive areas;
- good housekeeping;
- contractor compliance with collections hygiene requirements; and
- proportionate treatment measures consistent with legal and safety requirements.

All staff, volunteers, contractors and visitors using collections areas must comply with NSM’s pest-control rules.

12. Housekeeping and Conservation Cleaning

Housekeeping is an important part of collections care.

NSM will maintain cleaning arrangements that reduce dust, debris, pest attractants and avoidable hazards while protecting collections from inappropriate cleaning methods.

General cleaning does not include cleaning collection items unless that work is specifically authorised and carried out by trained staff or under appropriate supervision.

Where cleaning of open display items or exposed collections is required, it must be planned, risk-assessed and documented where appropriate.

13. Interventive Conservation

Preventive conservation is NSM's preferred approach, but direct interventive treatment may sometimes be necessary.

Interventive work may be undertaken where needed to:

- stabilise fragile or actively deteriorating material;
- enable safe access, storage, display or transport;
- prevent further loss of significance; or
- support a legitimate museum purpose.

Any such work must:

- be justified and proportionate;
- minimise unnecessary alteration or loss;
- be carried out by suitably qualified conservators or competent trained staff under appropriate supervision;
- use tested or suitable materials and methods; and
- be agreed and documented before and after treatment.

Where an item is not owned by NSM, written permission must be obtained from the lender or owner before interventive work is undertaken, unless immediate action is required to prevent serious loss.

14. Hazards

Some natural science collections contain inherent or acquired hazards, including but not limited to:

- toxic substances;
- historic pesticides;
- heavy metals;
- radioactive materials;
- asbestos-containing components;
- sharps;
- fluid preservatives; and
- fumes, dusts or residues.

NSM will identify and manage these risks through risk assessment, training, safe systems of work, appropriate equipment and access controls. Anyone working with hazardous collections must follow the relevant controls and use appropriate protective equipment.

15. Collections Handling, Access and Sampling

Collections handling must be minimised and controlled.

NSM will ensure that:

- handling is undertaken only by trained or instructed individuals;
- appropriate supports, equipment and workspaces are used;
- access arrangements reflect the condition and vulnerability of the material;
- destructive or invasive sampling is controlled under relevant collections policies; and
- condition is considered before sampling, transport, display or other potentially intrusive activity.

16. Packing and Transport

Collections are at elevated risk during packing and transport.

Accordingly:

- only suitable materials and methods may be used;
- transport arrangements must reflect the significance, sensitivity and risks of the material;
- external couriers or transport agents must be selected and briefed appropriately;
- conservation or curatorial advice must be sought for complex, fragile or significant items; and
- movements within a site, between sites, or externally must be documented appropriately.

17. Documentation of Collections Care and Conservation

Collections care and conservation activity must be documented to an appropriate standard.

This includes, where relevant:

- condition checks and assessments;
- treatment proposals and decisions;
- treatments undertaken;
- materials used;
- movement or packing notes;
- photographs before, during and after treatment where appropriate;
- incident, pest or environmental records; and
- updates to collection records.

Spectrum states that conservation records should form a seamless part of collections documentation, even where work is undertaken by external specialists.

18. Training and Competence

Staff are an essential resource in protecting the collections.

NSM will provide, or seek access to, appropriate training and guidance in areas such as:

- handling and movement;
- preventive conservation;
- housekeeping around collections;
- pest awareness;
- emergency salvage and recovery;
- hazardous collections;
- display and packing practice; and
- incident reporting.

No one should undertake specialist conservation or high-risk collections care work unless they are competent to do so.

19. Events, Displays and Public Use of Spaces

Where collections are displayed or present in public or event spaces, those activities must not expose collections to unacceptable additional risk.

Events involving collections or taking place near collections must consider:

- physical proximity and public access;
- food and drink;
- vibration, lighting and sound;
- temporary staging or infrastructure;
- fire and flammable materials;
- security and supervision;
- emergency arrangements; and
- lender or indemnity conditions for borrowed items.

Objects must not be used in events, handling sessions or demonstrations without prior approval from the relevant Head of Department and suitable risk controls.

20. Risk Management, Rescue and Recovery

NSM recognises that not all risk can be eliminated, but it must be identified, assessed and managed.

Collections risk management will consider, as relevant:

- physical force;
- fire;
- water;
- pests;
- pollutants and dust;
- light and radiation;
- incorrect temperature or relative humidity;
- theft, vandalism or unauthorised access;
- dissociation or poor information control; and
- inherent instability of materials.

NSM will maintain arrangements for collections emergency response, salvage and recovery, integrated with wider emergency and business continuity planning. NHM's public materials also describe emergency planning, salvage planning and regular risk reporting as part of preventive conservation practice.

21. Damage, Loss and Third-Party Storage

Damage, loss or suspected loss of collections material must be reported immediately to the relevant Head of Department and escalated to the Director where significant.

NSM will:

- record damage and loss on a case-by-case basis;
- maintain a central record of significant incidents;
- notify lenders or partners where required;
- review causes and corrective actions; and
- apply appropriate care, security and contractual requirements where items are held in third-party storage.

22. Resources, Costs and Non-Compliance

NSM will allocate resources to collections care on a risk-based and proportionate basis.

Where damage is caused through wilful negligence, disregard of this policy or unauthorised activity, NSM reserves the right to recover costs where lawful and appropriate.

Failure to comply with this policy may result in:

- withdrawal of access to collections;
- withdrawal of delegated authority;
- disciplinary action;
- termination of volunteer, contractor or research access arrangements; or
- other corrective action.

23. Review

This policy takes effect on 01/04/2026 and will be reviewed by 01/04/2029, or earlier if required by:

- significant incident or collections risk;
- changes in law, guidance or museum standards;
- organisational change; or
- material changes to NSM's collections, estate or operating model.