



# Collections Development Policy

Document Control

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Approved by: Board of Trustees

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## 1. Purpose

The Natural Sciences Museum, Sheffield (“NSM”) holds collections in trust for public benefit. This policy sets out the principles and rules by which NSM will develop its collections through acquisition, accessioning, review, rationalisation and, where appropriate, disposal.

Its purpose is to ensure that collections development:

- supports NSM’s charitable purposes and long-term mission;
- is lawful, ethical and transparent;
- is properly governed and documented;
- is sustainable in terms of care, storage, staffing and use; and
- strengthens the scientific, educational, cultural and public value of the collections.

## 2. Scope

This policy applies to all material acquired, accessioned, held, reviewed, rationalised or disposed of by NSM, including:

- natural history specimens;
- geological and palaeontological material;
- zoological, botanical and environmental collections;
- associated archives, field notes, images and documentary material;
- models, teaching collections and reference collections;

- digital surrogates and born-digital collections where formally collected; and
- any other material held to support NSM's collecting purpose.

It applies to Trustees, the Director, Heads of Department, staff, volunteers, researchers and anyone acting on behalf of NSM in relation to collections development decisions.

### **3. Statement of Purpose**

NSM exists to collect, preserve, research, interpret and share natural science material for public benefit.

Its collections are developed to support:

- scientific research and specimen-based knowledge;
- public engagement with the natural world;
- learning and education;
- the preservation of evidence relating to biodiversity, geology, palaeontology and environmental change;
- the history of science, collecting and museum practice where relevant to NSM's remit; and
- responsible access to collections and associated information.

### **4. Overview of Current Collections**

NSM's collections comprise natural science material and associated information held for long-term preservation and use. These may include biological, geological and palaeontological specimens, scientific preparation and reference material, associated archives and documentation, and material that supports interpretation, learning and research.

NSM recognises that collections are more valuable when accompanied by reliable information about provenance, collection history, identification, context and use.

### **5. Governance and Authority**

NSM's authority structure is:

Trustees → Director → Heads of Department → staff

## 5.1 Trustees

The Board of Trustees has ultimate responsibility for collections stewardship and approves this policy and any material amendments. Trustees reserve to themselves any acquisition or disposal of major strategic, ethical, legal, reputational or financial significance.

## 5.2 Director

The Director is responsible for implementing this policy, ensuring proper decision-making and documentation, and escalating reserved matters to the Trustees.

## 5.3 Heads of Department

Heads of Department are responsible for applying this policy within their areas, preparing proposals, ensuring due diligence is undertaken, and managing approved acquisitions, reviews and disposals.

## 5.4 Staff

Staff may contribute to collections development activity only within delegated authority and in accordance with this policy and related procedures.

# **6. General Principles**

NSM will develop its collections in accordance with the following principles:

## 6.1 Public benefit

Collections are held and developed for public benefit and in support of NSM's charitable purposes.

## 6.2 Strategic collecting

NSM will acquire only where there is a clear fit with its statement of purpose, collecting priorities and available resources.

## 6.3 Long-term stewardship

NSM will not acquire material unless it can provide an appropriate standard of care, documentation, storage and access, or has a realistic plan to do so.

## 6.4 Legality and ethics

All acquisition and disposal decisions must comply with law, ethical guidance and recognised museum standards.

## 6.5 Documentation and transparency

Collections development decisions must be properly evidenced, recorded and capable of scrutiny.

## 6.6 Context and understanding

NSM will seek to improve understanding of the histories, contexts and contributors connected with its collections.

# **7. Themes and Priorities for Future Collecting**

NSM will collect selectively and strategically. Priority will normally be given to material that:

- supports NSM's charitable purposes and approved programmes of research, interpretation, learning or engagement;
- strengthens existing collections by filling significant gaps or improving representation, provenance or scientific usefulness;
- has clear relevance to natural science, natural history, environmental change or the history of scientific collecting;
- has relevance to Sheffield, South Yorkshire, the wider region, or to other geographic or thematic areas that NSM has identified as priorities;
- has strong associated data, provenance or contextual documentation;
- supports collaborative research, public access or future learning use;
- contributes to better understanding of how collections were formed, including previously overlooked collectors, communities, places and histories;
- is offered on terms that NSM can responsibly accept and sustain.

NSM may also collect associated archives, images, field records, digital data and interpretive material where these materially enhance the significance, usability or accountability of the collections.

## **8. Themes and Priorities for Rationalisation and Disposal**

NSM recognises that responsible collections development includes planned review and, where appropriate, rationalisation and disposal.

Priority for review may be given to material that is:

- outside NSM's current statement of purpose or collecting remit;
- duplicated without sufficient research, educational or interpretive value;
- insufficiently documented and unlikely to be made useful through further work;
- too damaged, hazardous or unstable to retain safely, and of limited continuing value;
- more appropriately held by another museum or specialist institution;
- subject to an agreed return, transfer, repatriation or other lawful claim;
- held in ways that create disproportionate care burdens without corresponding public benefit.

Any rationalisation or disposal will be undertaken only for sound curatorial, scientific, ethical or practical reasons, and not as a routine response to storage pressure alone.

## **9. Limits on Collecting**

NSM will take account of the practical consequences of acquisition. It will not normally acquire material where:

- legal title cannot be obtained or the basis of custody is unclear;
- provenance is inadequate and concerns cannot be resolved;
- the material falls outside NSM's collecting priorities;
- conservation, storage, documentation, staffing or access implications are unsustainable;
- hazards cannot be safely managed;

- donor, vendor, lender or funder conditions are unacceptable;
- acquisition would duplicate existing holdings without clear added value; or
- the ethical or reputational risk outweighs the benefit of acquisition.

## **10. Methods of Acquisition**

Material may be acquired by:

- gift;
- bequest;
- purchase;
- exchange;
- transfer;
- field collecting;
- excavation or lawful recovery;
- commission or creation; or
- long-term deposit or loan, where NSM expressly agrees to hold material in custody rather than ownership.

Accessioning is the formal commitment to hold material for the long term as part of NSM's collection.

## **11. Legal and Ethical Framework for Acquisition and Disposal**

NSM recognises its responsibility to work within the legal and ethical framework that governs museum collecting and disposal. This policy sets out the principles by which acquisitions, accessioning, review, rationalisation and disposal will be undertaken lawfully, ethically and transparently.

### **11.1 Valid title and due diligence**

NSM will undertake due diligence and will not acquire any object or specimen unless the authorised decision-maker is satisfied that NSM can obtain valid title or otherwise hold the material on a clear and lawful basis.

### **11.2 Provenance and lawful collecting**

NSM will make every reasonable effort to establish provenance, collecting history and lawful origin. It will not knowingly acquire material that has been illicitly traded, unlawfully removed, unlawfully collected, or transferred in breach of applicable law or ethical standards.

### 11.3 Natural science specimens and collecting permissions

For biological, geological, palaeontological or environmental material, NSM will consider whether collecting, removal, export, import, transfer, ownership and use were lawful in the place and time of collection and in any subsequent jurisdictions.

### 11.4 Protected species and controlled material

Where material is subject to wildlife trade controls, protected species legislation or other relevant restrictions, NSM will undertake additional due diligence and obtain any required permits, certificates or consents before acquisition, transfer, movement, import or export.

### 11.5 Genetic resources and benefit-sharing

Where relevant, NSM will take account of requirements relating to access to genetic resources and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from their use.

### 11.6 Human remains and culturally sensitive material

NSM will manage the acquisition, retention, return and use of human remains and culturally sensitive material only in accordance with any specialist policy adopted by the Trustees and with appropriate legal, ethical and community consideration.

### 11.7 Context, communities and historic injustice

NSM recognises that some collections may have been formed in historic contexts involving unequal power, exclusion or exploitation. In reviewing acquisitions, provenance and future collecting, NSM will seek to acknowledge such contexts and make informed, ethical decisions about retention, interpretation, access and possible return.

## **12. Acquisition Procedures**

All proposed acquisitions must be supported by an appropriate written proposal setting out:

- the description of the material;
- its significance and relevance to NSM;
- provenance and title information;
- any legal, ethical or reputational issues;
- condition and care implications;
- storage and documentation implications;
- any resource or funding requirements; and
- the proposed status of the material, including whether it is to be accessioned.

No acquisition may proceed without approval at the correct level of authority.

## **13. Disposal Procedures**

NSM may dispose of material only in accordance with approved policy, documented procedure and delegated authority.

Disposal may take place by methods including:

- transfer to another museum;
- transfer to another suitable public institution;
- return to donor, lender, source community or other lawful claimant where appropriate;
- repatriation or restitution where justified;
- exchange in exceptional cases; or
- destruction, only where the material is beyond use, too hazardous, lacks sufficient significance, or where no more appropriate route exists.

Preference will normally be given to transfer within the public domain, especially to museums or specialist institutions better able to care for or use the material.

## **14. Financially Motivated Disposal**

NSM will not normally undertake disposal principally for financial reasons.

Any proposal for financially motivated disposal would be exceptional, would require full Trustee approval, and would need to demonstrate compliance with applicable ethical guidance, transparency requirements and NSM's charitable duties.

## **15. Documentation**

All acquisitions, accessioning decisions, transfers, reviews, rationalisation decisions and disposals must be recorded in NSM's collections documentation systems and supported by appropriate evidence.

This includes, where relevant:

- transfer of title documents;
- provenance and due diligence records;
- collection status decisions;
- approval records;
- condition and location information; and
- disposal decisions and outcomes.

NSM will maintain documentation for acquisition, accessioning, review and disposal in line with its approved collections procedures and recognised museum documentation standards.

## **16. Review and Compliance**

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, sector standards, institutional priorities or significant collections issues.

Failure to comply with this policy may result in:

- refusal of an acquisition or disposal proposal;
- withdrawal of delegated authority;
- removal of access to collections systems or material;
- disciplinary or contractual action; or
- escalation to the Director or Trustees.