# Collections Governance Policy

Document Control

Policy owner: Director
Approved by: Board of Trustees
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# 1. Purpose

The Natural Sciences Museum, Sheffield ("NSM") holds and manages collections in trust for public benefit in support of its charitable purposes.

This policy sets out the governance framework for the ownership, stewardship, management, use, accountability and decision-making relating to NSM's collections. It establishes how authority is exercised, how responsibilities are allocated, and how key collections decisions are to be made, recorded and reviewed.

# 2. Scope

This policy applies to:

- all collections owned by NSM;
- all collections in NSM's custody but not owned by NSM, including incoming loans and deposited material;
- associated collection information and records;
- all Trustees, the Director, Heads of Department, staff, volunteers, researchers, contractors and others acting on behalf of NSM in relation to collections.

This policy applies across the full collections lifecycle, including:

- acquisition and accessioning;
- documentation and record-keeping;

- care and conservation;
- storage and display;
- access and use;
- loans in and loans out;
- sampling and research use;
- movement and transport;
- rationalisation and disposal; and
- incident, risk and compliance management.

# 3. Policy Statement

NSM will govern its collections in a way that:

- treats them as long-term assets held for public benefit, research, learning and engagement;
- ensures clear accountability for decisions affecting collections;
- integrates ethical, legal, financial and operational considerations;
- balances preservation with responsible access and use;
- maintains accurate and authoritative documentation;
- applies decisions consistently and transparently; and
- supports continual improvement in line with recognised museum standards.

Museums seeking to meet the UK Accreditation standard are expected to have an approved governance and management structure, to take responsibility for all the collections they manage, and to operate approved documentation arrangements supported by Spectrum procedures.

# 4. Relationship to Other Policies

This policy is the overarching governance policy for NSM collections. It should be read together with, and provides the governance framework for, the following:

- Collections Development Policy;
- Collections Care Policy;
- Loans and Physical Access Policy;
- Collections Documentation or Collections Information Policy;
- Business Continuity and Emergency Planning arrangements;
- Security and Risk policies; and
- Human Remains Policy, where applicable.

# 5. Governance Principles

NSM will manage its collections according to the following principles.

## 5.1 Public benefit

Collections are held and managed to advance NSM's charitable purposes and for the wider public benefit.

## 5.2 Stewardship

NSM will act as a responsible steward of collections in its ownership or care, recognising their scientific, educational, cultural, historical and evidential significance.

## 5.3 Accountability

Collections decisions must be made at the correct level of authority, supported by appropriate evidence, and recorded.

## 5.4 Legality and ethics

All collections activity must comply with applicable law, ethical guidance, donor conditions, funding conditions and relevant museum standards.

## 5.5 Documentation

Collections must be supported by sufficient documentation to identify what NSM holds, what it owns, where items are, what has happened to them, and what rights or restrictions apply. Accreditation guidance requires museums to be able to account for the size of their collections, the proportion owned and the proportion on loan, and to explain any associated loan risks.

## 5.6 Proportionality

Governance controls should be proportionate to the significance, sensitivity, value and risk of the material and decision concerned.

# 6. Authority Structure

NSM's authority structure for collections governance is:

Trustees → Director → Heads of Department → staff

No person may acquire, accession, lend, deaccession, dispose of, transfer, sample, significantly alter, or otherwise commit NSM in relation to collections except within delegated authority and in accordance with this policy and related procedures.

# 7. Roles and Responsibilities

## 7.1 Trustees

The Board of Trustees has ultimate responsibility for collections stewardship and governance. The Trustees will:

- approve this policy and any material amendments;
- approve the principal collections policies forming NSM's collections management framework;
- ensure collections governance supports NSM's charitable purposes, constitution and long-term stewardship duties;
- reserve to themselves decisions of major strategic, ethical, legal, reputational or financial significance;
- receive assurance on major collections risks, incidents, disputes and compliance issues.

## 7.2 Director

The Director is accountable for implementing this policy and ensuring that effective collections governance operates across NSM. The Director will:

- oversee the operation of collections policies and procedures;
- approve collections decisions within delegated authority;
- ensure that material or reserved matters are referred to the Trustees;
- ensure that appropriate systems exist for documentation, control, review and reporting.

### 7.3 Heads of Department

Heads of Department are responsible for collections governance within their areas. They will:

- ensure that collections activities are carried out in accordance with approved policy and procedure;
- review and approve routine proposals within delegated authority;
- ensure that documentation, condition, movement, loan and risk records are maintained;
- escalate novel, high-risk, contentious or high-significance matters to the Director;
- support staff competence and compliance.

### 7.4 Staff, volunteers, researchers and contractors

All persons working with or around collections must:

- follow approved procedures and handling rules;
- maintain accurate records where required;
- act only within delegated authority;
- report issues, incidents, losses, concerns or conflicts promptly; and
- not undertake unauthorised collections decisions or interventions.

## 8. Status of the Collections

NSM will maintain a clear understanding of:

- which collections it owns;
- which collections it holds on loan, deposit or other temporary basis;
- which material is accessioned, unaccessioned, reference, teaching or handling material;
- which records are authoritative for ownership, status and location; and
- what legal, ethical, donor, contractual or other restrictions apply.

Accreditation guidance specifically requires museums to take responsibility for all the collections they manage, not only those they own.

# 9. Decision-Making Framework

## 9.1 General rule

Collections decisions must be made by authorised persons, in line with policy, supported by adequate information, and documented.

## 9.2 Matters normally reserved to Trustees

The following matters will normally require Trustee approval unless formally delegated otherwise:

- any proposed disposal outside routine and low-risk procedures;
- any major acquisition carrying significant financial, legal, ethical or long-term care implications;
- any decision likely to attract significant public, donor, community or media interest;
- any matter involving major legal risk, title uncertainty or dispute;
- any proposal to change the fundamental status, purpose or stewardship basis of a collection area.

## 9.3 Matters normally approved by the Director

The Director will normally approve, or confirm approval of:

- significant acquisitions within approved policy but above departmental authority;
- significant outgoing or incoming loans;
- exceptional access arrangements;
- major conservation, display, transport or sampling proposals involving elevated risk;
- any waiver or departure from normal collections procedure.

## 9.4 Matters normally managed by Heads of Department

Heads of Department may approve routine operational collections decisions within policy, including routine access, movement, documentation, treatment, display and handling arrangements, provided these do not exceed delegated authority or raise unusual risk.

# 10. Acquisition, Accessioning and Ownership

All acquisition and accessioning activity must comply with NSM's Collections Development Policy and associated procedures.

Before acquisition is approved, NSM must be satisfied, as relevant, that:

- the acquisition fits NSM's mission and collecting priorities;
- title can be obtained or the basis of custody is clear;
- legal and ethical requirements have been considered;
- adequate resources exist for documentation, care, storage and access;
- any donor, funder or lender conditions are acceptable; and
- risks are understood.

Arts Council's collections development guidance states that museums hold collections for the benefit of the public and that collecting and disposal must sit within a clear legal and ethical framework.

# 11. Collections Documentation and Information Governance

NSM will maintain authoritative collections information so that collections can be identified, located, managed, used and accounted for.

This includes, where relevant:

- object entry and exit records;
- acquisition and accession records;
- inventory and cataloguing;
- location and movement control;
- loans documentation;
- condition and conservation records;
- rights, restrictions and associated legal information;
- incident and disposal records.

Accreditation requires an approved documentation policy, and Spectrum identifies primary procedures including object entry, acquisition and accessioning, location and movement control, inventory, cataloguing, object exit, loans in, loans out and documentation planning.

# 12. Access, Use and Loans

Access to collections will be enabled where consistent with NSM's charitable purposes, resources, security, care obligations and legal or ethical restrictions.

Loans in and loans out must be governed by written agreements and managed under approved procedures. NSM must be able to demonstrate responsibility for material in its custody and manage the risks arising from loans and movement. Spectrum identifies loans in and loans out as core procedures, and Accreditation requires museums to understand the extent of collections they hold on loan and associated risks.

# 13. Care, Conservation and Risk

Collections governance includes ensuring that collections are cared for appropriately, risks are assessed, and use does not compromise long-term stewardship unacceptably.

NSM will therefore maintain governance links between this policy and its arrangements for:

- collections care and conservation;
- security;
- environmental control;
- integrated pest management;
- transport and movement;
- emergency response and salvage;
- incident reporting and investigation.

Collections Trust's framework, based on PAS 197, treats collections development, information, care and access as integrated parts of a single collections management framework, with management review and continual improvement.

# 14. Ethical Review and Sensitive Material

Certain collections or proposed activities may require heightened ethical scrutiny, including but not limited to:

- human remains;
- culturally sensitive material;

- destructive or invasive sampling;
- contested ownership or provenance;
- material acquired in problematic historic contexts;
- requests for return or repatriation;
- use of collections in ways likely to raise community or reputational concerns.

Such matters must be referred to the Director and, where appropriate, the Trustees, and considered under any applicable specialist policy.

# 15. External Partnerships and Third-Party Custody

Where NSM collaborates with external institutions, stores collections off-site, borrows material, lends material, or allows third parties to work with collections, it must ensure that roles, standards, liabilities, access rights and care responsibilities are set out clearly in writing.

NSM remains responsible for ensuring that any collections in its custody, or entrusted by it to third parties, are governed appropriately.

# 16. Incident Reporting, Damage, Loss and Breach

Damage, loss, suspected loss, serious documentation failure, unauthorised access, unauthorised movement, or breach of collections procedure must be reported immediately to the relevant Head of Department and escalated to the Director where material.

Significant incidents must be recorded, investigated and reported to the Trustees as appropriate. Corrective action should address both the immediate issue and any underlying systems weakness.

# 17. Review, Assurance and Improvement

NSM will review its collections governance arrangements periodically to ensure they remain effective, proportionate and aligned with museum standards and organisational needs.

This may include:

- internal review of compliance with policy and procedure;
- review of delegated authority and decision records;
- audit or spot-checking of collections documentation and movement controls;
- review of incidents, risks and lessons learned;
- policy updates following legal, ethical or operational change.

Collections Trust's collections management framework explicitly promotes internal audit, management review and continual improvement as part of good collections governance.

## 18. Non-Compliance

Failure to comply with this policy may result in:

- withdrawal of access to collections;
- withdrawal of delegated authority;
- disciplinary action;
- termination of volunteer, researcher or contractor access;
- escalation to the Trustees; or
- referral to external authorities where required.

## 19. Review

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

- significant incident;
- change in law, guidance or accreditation requirements;
- major organisational change; or
- material change to NSM's collections or governance structure.