



Code of Ethics for Museums

Ethical principles for all who work
for or govern museums in the UK

**MUSEUMS
ASSOCIATION**

Image courtesy of the
Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts

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A larger print version can be downloaded
from the Museums Association's
website: www.museumsassociation.org

Foreword

What is a code of ethics actually for? I believe it is to identify potential pitfalls; to offer guidance in difficult situations; to provide consistency in dealing with issues so we don't all make it up as we go along; and to maintain the confidence of benefactors, originators and society as a whole. But above all, I believe it is to help museum professionals resolve the operational and management problems that they face day in, day out.

A code of museum ethics should represent and articulate a set of consensual values and standards of behaviour that are agreed at a particular time to define a relationship of trust between the museum and the communities it serves. This Code of Ethics for Museums is the result of over 25 years of ethical development in the UK and overseas museum sectors.

In order to be helpful a code of ethics must be both aspirational and pragmatic. It must set high standards for professional behaviour, but ensure that its guidance is realistic and capable of being implemented by a wide range of museums. There is no point in occupying the ethical high ground if that results in museums becoming unsustainable.

It is always tempting to believe that things were simpler in the past, but I do truly believe that museums are currently facing unparalleled challenges. And this is where I think a code of ethics really comes into its own. If the problems we face every day were easily resolved, we would not need a code of ethics to guide us. The code is a navigational aid to help us to negotiate sometimes uncharted waters. If the code said 'this is too dangerous, don't even think about setting off', what help would that be to us?

It must, therefore, be a constantly evolving document, subject to scrutiny by and consultation with both the museum sector and society. The code will not tell us what to do but, if used correctly, will inform policy development and ensure that ethical dilemmas are considered in a balanced way. This is what society expects of us.

This latest revision of the code is the result of thoughtful input from numerous colleagues from every kind of museum. I would particularly like to acknowledge the contributions of Tristram Besterman, the previous convener of the ethics committee, Maurice Davies and, above all, Caitlin Griffiths, who lead the consultation. The ethics committee also played an indispensable role as a critical sounding-board in the code's development.

Vanessa Trevelyan

Convener

Museums Association Ethics Committee, 2001-present

Production of the Code of Ethics for Museums was overseen by the Museums Association Ethics Committee.

For advice on ethical matters or information on ethics training please contact the Museums Association at the address shown on page 2.

How to use this code

You will need to exercise judgement in applying the principles set out in the Code of Ethics for Museums. A number of sometimes competing considerations may need to be balanced. An ethical decision does not usually depend on a choice between 'right' and 'wrong' but between competing 'rights'. There is nothing wrong, for example, with a decision to 'accept financial support from commercial organisations...' (10.6). However, it would be unethical to accept such support if it is offered only on condition that the museum advertise a company's products on exhibit labels. Guidance on interpretation and application of the code can be sought from the Museums Association (MA), which may refer matters to its ethics committee for a definitive judgement.

Exercising judgement is required not only in assessing alternative courses of action but also in determining the extent of your responsibility as an individual. All those who work for or govern museums should endeavour, in their particular role, as far as it is within their power to do so, to ensure that the principles of the Code of Ethics for Museums are upheld in their institution or practice. Sometimes responsibilities lie very directly with individuals. It is, for example, the particular responsibility of event organisers to refer to 6.5 and to ensure that they 'Pay due regard to safeguarding collections and the public's right of access whenever museum premises are used for functions.'

However, all who work for museums do so on behalf of the museum's governing body, which has ultimate responsibility for policy and decisions affecting the governance of the museum. Responsibility may not therefore lie solely with an individual, but that individual should take responsibility for encouraging and assisting colleagues and the governing body to act ethically. For example, members of staff whose duties do not include organising functions should discuss with senior staff any concerns they may have over restrictions on public access when functions are held. Senior staff should give due consideration to legitimate concerns and assist the governing body to address them in setting ethically sound policy in this and all other key areas.

Members of governing bodies and policy

Members of governing bodies should be familiar with the code in its entirety. Their attention is drawn in particular to the following sections and points in the code: section 1; section 2.0 to 2.12; section 5.0 and 5.1; section 6.0 to 6.2, 6.9 to 6.14; and section 10.

The code should be referred to when defining the mission of a museum and in any policy development.

Ethical and legal obligations

The Code of Ethics for Museums defines standards that are often higher than those required by law. It is, however, self-evident that the code cannot override the legal obligations and rights of those who work in or for museums, including those arising from any contractual relationship there may be with an employer or client. The code represents the consensus view of members of the MA, which includes both those who work in museums and the institutions that employ them.

The MA therefore encourages employers to assure adherence to the Code of Ethics for Museums as a contractual requirement. An effective way of achieving this is to include reference to upholding and promoting the MA's Code of Ethics for Museums in job descriptions that form part of an employee's contract of employment.

The MA also recommends that adherence to the code should be used as a standard requirement in contracts between consultants and their clients.

The Code of Ethics for Museums must be subordinate to the legal powers and obligations of governing bodies responsible for museums and the legal powers and obligations of individual members of such bodies. However, the MA believes this code's provisions to be in the best interests of the public and therefore urges all museum governing bodies (and where appropriate, subsidiary, subcontracted or delegated bodies such as executive committees, contractors or managing bodies), formally to adopt it.

The Code of Ethics for Museums and other voluntary standards

Ethical standards developed by the MA have informed the national Accreditation scheme for museums in the UK at an institutional level. Accreditation is administered by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council.

The MA supports the work of specialist organisations in the UK whose members are involved in museum work and who may produce their own codes of ethics and ethical guidelines. The MA can help in cross-referencing to these codes and guidelines and in referring enquirers to appropriate sources of specialist advice.

The Code of Ethics for Museums is consistent with the Code of Ethics for Museums worldwide produced by the International Council of Museums (ICOM). The MA supports ICOM's work.

The MA encourages its members to support international conventions relating to museums whether or not these conventions have been ratified in the UK, where consistent with this code and the law.

This code and membership of the Museums Association

The MA is registered as a charity. It is a non-governmental, independently financed membership organisation providing services to and reflecting the interests of museums and those who work for, and govern them. The Code of Ethics for Museums outlines ethical principles for all museums in the UK. The code applies to members of staff, paid or unpaid, to consultants and those who work freelance, to members of museum governing bodies, and to those who work for or govern organisations that support, advise or provide services to museums, including the MA.

The MA expects all members to uphold and to promote the Code of Ethics for Museums as a professional obligation. To achieve Associateship of the Museums Association (AMA) members must demonstrate awareness of the code and the ways in which it is used. To achieve Fellowship of the Museums Association (FMA) members must show that they promote the wider application of the code within museums.

The Code of Ethics for Museums applies to individuals and institutions. The code is intended to underpin museum policies and to guide members of museum governing bodies. The MA expects its institutional members to uphold the Code of Ethics for Museums and encourages them formally to adopt it.

The structure of the code and related material

The spirit of the code is as important as the letter. The code is informed by a belief that ethical behaviour is as much about developing good practice as avoiding malpractice. Therefore, the numbered points in each section, which define and detail ethical activity, are expressed in positive rather than negative terms. The MA's definition of a museum can be found on p9. The values in the definition are elaborated in a statement of ten core museum values that preface the code. The values serve as a summary of the key points of the code and as headings for sections within it. The coloured sections under each heading in the code describe different aspects of museum activity and the ethos that informs them in museums at their best. These sections should be read with that consideration in mind.

The current code and guidelines, together with other updated related material and further information on practicalities associated with ethical good practice can be found on the MA's website: www.museumsassociation.org

This document is also supported by additional ethical guidelines:

- Disposal toolkit, 2008
- Acquisition, 2004

The definition, the core values, the code and the ethical guidelines move from principles to practice offering increasingly detailed guidance appropriate to different levels of involvement in particular aspects of museum activity.

Advice on ethical matters and ethics training

The MA offers free, confidential advice on ethical matters to people who work for or govern museums. In addition, training sessions on museum ethics are held throughout the UK. Sessions can be arranged specifically for people who work for museums or for those who govern them, or for mixed groups of both. In-house sessions can be arranged in individual museums on general or specific themes. These sessions can usually be provided free of charge or at minimal cost. For further information please contact the MA at the address shown on p2.

Historical note

The Code of Ethics for Museums was adopted at the October 2001 Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the MA and came into force in April 2002. Section 6 of the code was revised in 2007 and the wording was adopted at the October 2007 AGM. The Code of Ethics for Museums replaces the Code of Conduct for People who Work in Museums, adopted at the 1996 AGM, and the Code of Practice for Museum Governing Bodies, adopted at the 1994 AGM. Those codes themselves replaced earlier codes, listed below.

- The Code of Conduct for Museum Professionals, 1991
- The Code of Conduct for Museum Curators, 1983, revised 1987
- Guidelines for Professional Conduct, 1977
- Code of Practice for Museum Authorities, 1977, revised 1987.

The foundations for the publication of the association's first ethical standards and their subsequent development in the UK were laid by the Museum Assistants' Group (later renamed the Museum Professionals Group) between 1970 and 1983.

Glossary

Museum

Users of the Code of Ethics for Museums should be familiar with the MA's definition of a museum:

'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.'

In this definition and hence throughout the code, 'museums' should be taken to include galleries and subsidiary companies of museums.

A collection is an organised assemblage of selected material evidence of human activity or the natural environment, accompanied by associated information. As well as objects, scientific specimens or works of art held within a museum building, a collection may include buildings or sites.

Safeguarding includes undertaking conservation, security and collections management.

Making accessible includes undertaking interpretation, education, exhibition, outreach, documentation, research and publication, within or outside the museum's own buildings.

Dealing

Dealing is making a speculative acquisition with the intention of reselling for profit.

Governing body

The governing body of a museum is the principal body of individuals in which rests ultimate responsibility for policy and decisions affecting the governance of the museum. Legal title to the assets of the museum may be vested in this body.

In the case of a museum limited by guarantee the governing body is the board of directors or council of management.

In the case of a local authority museum, it is the full council of the authority. In some local authorities, however, under standing orders, policy decisions vested in full council are delegated to individual elected members or small groups of elected members. Such delegated powers, where formally agreed, may extend to include decisions on ethically-sensitive issues such as disposal.

In the case of a national museum or a museum run by a trust, it is the full board of trustees.

In the case of a museum run by an unincorporated association it is the committee.

In the case of a university museum it is the council (or other-named supreme governing body) of the university.

Public and society

The word 'public' is used in this code in two senses, that inter-connect.

The idea of society having a legitimate interest in museums and their activities is an underpinning value of the code. It is reflected in the use of the word 'public' in terms such as public domain, public service, public trust and public interest.

The word 'public' is also used to characterise those who are users of the museum (see below).

(An Accredited museum – see below – must comply with public access criteria prescribed by the Museum Accreditation Scheme).

Accredited museum

An Accredited museum is a museum provisionally or fully Accredited under the national Accreditation scheme for museums in the UK administered by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council.

Users

Users are all those individuals and groups with whom the individual museum is actively engaged, to mutual benefit. That sense of the public served by a museum will be reflected in the individual museum's corporate mission and aims, which should define its target audiences. They may include past, current and potential users of the services provided by the museum.

Code of Ethics for Museums

Society can expect museums to:

- hold collections in trust on behalf of society
- focus on public service
- encourage people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment
- consult and involve communities, users and supporters
- acquire items honestly and responsibly
- safeguard the long-term public interest in the collections
- recognise the interests of people who made, used, owned, collected or gave items in the collections
- support the protection of natural and human environments
- research, share and interpret information related to collections, reflecting diverse views
- review performance to innovate and improve.

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.

1

Society can expect museums to:

Hold collections in trust on behalf of society

1.0

Museums behave as ethical guardians as well as owners of collections. They never relinquish the trust invested in them, without public consent.

All those who work for or govern museums should ensure that they:

1.1

Uphold public trust responsibilities. View the museum as the guardian of its collections.

1.2

Retain items in the public domain at whichever location provides the best balance of care, context and access.

1.3

Avoid behaviour that could be construed as asserting personal ownership or control of collections or any part of them.

1.4

Treat collections as non-negotiable assets in financial affairs. Refuse to mortgage collections or offer them as security for a loan. Sustain the financial viability of the museum irrespective of any valuation placed on items in its collections.

1.5

Fulfil all the museum's guardianship responsibilities in respect not only of the collections but also of all other resources (for example, premises, land and information), which, in explicit or moral terms, it holds in trust for the benefit of the public.

2

Society can expect museums to:

Focus on public service

2.0

Museums belong to everybody. They exist to serve the public. They should enhance the quality of life of everyone, both today and in the future. They are funded because of their positive social, cultural, educational and economic impact.

All those who work for or govern museums should ensure that they:

2.1

Recognise the public purpose of museums. Put the public interest before other interests.

2.2

Uphold the highest standards of personal conduct and corporate integrity expected in public service.

2.3

Account for actions and decisions, be willing to justify them and take responsibility for the consequences that flow from them.

2.4

Uphold, promote and abide by the Museums Association's ethical standards both in the letter and the spirit of this Code of Ethics for Museums. Never require or suggest that anyone should act in conflict with the principles of the code.

2.5

Keep up to date with and work towards achieving other widely accepted standards, such as the Museums Association's ethical guidelines, the Accreditation scheme for museums in the UK and successor schemes. Respect the ethical codes of others where consistent with this one.

2.6

Avoid any private activity or pursuit of a personal interest that may conflict or be perceived to conflict with the public interest.

2.7

Declare to the governing body and have recorded by it any activity or pursuit of any interest that may conflict or be perceived to conflict with the public interest.

2.8

Understand legal responsibilities as members of staff or governing bodies and make all policy and practice at the museum comply with the law. Understand that personal liabilities may follow from insolvency or wrongful or fraudulent trading and from breaches of company, charity or trust law.

2.9

Adhere to the museum's constitution, which should establish its purpose and legal status and the role and composition of the governing body. Regard the constitution as a public document. Require each individual member of the museum's governing body to assume equal responsibility for adherence to the museum's constitution, approved procedures and codes of practice. Note that absence from a meeting of the governing body does not necessarily absolve an individual member from any liability for a decision taken at that meeting, should there be any question of breach of trust or statutory default.

2.10

Do not allow the chair or any individual member of a governing body to take on autonomous powers for decisions and actions unless formally delegated to do so, and then only on the basis that the actions of the individual are fully and promptly reported back to the governing body, as required by the rules of the governing body.

2.11

Consider the effect of activities conducted in private life on the reputation of the museum and of museums generally.

2.12

Observe recognised public service standards regarding gifts or favours. Refuse to solicit from any person or body, and turn down if offered, any personal gift or favour that might subsequently be interpreted as an inducement to promote or trade with that person or body. Declare any offer of a personal gift or favour and consult at an appropriate level of authority in advance of acting. Record the decision whether or not a gift or favour is accepted. Record gifts or favours accepted by individuals in accordance with well-defined, publicly-transparent procedures.

2.13

Refuse to draw on status or position at the museum, or the museum's resources, for personal gain or advancement without prior permission. Have in place policy and procedures so that private work undertaken by employees is approved in advance and does not conflict with the museum's interest or wider public interest. Consider the current needs of the museum in deciding the proportion of any fees that may be retained by employees engaged in private work.

2.14

Refuse to identify, authenticate or value items in private ownership for personal payment, gifts or favours.

2.15

Avoid all activities that could be construed as trading or dealing in cultural property unless authorised in advance by the governing body. Refuse to deal in any material covered by the museum's acquisition policy, to engage in private collecting in competition with the museum or to use a connection with the museum to promote private collecting. Refuse to acquire any items from collections that the museum has disposed of.

2.16

Declare to the museum, and have approved by its governing body, any significant private collecting that may be covered by the museum's acquisition policy. Apply, in any private collecting, the same ethical standards as museums adopt generally, refusing, for example, to acquire illicit material. Collect for private purposes on collecting or field trips only with explicit prior agreement from the museum and if the collecting is incidental and the time involved is reasonable. Make clear to all parties whether an item is being collected for a museum or a private collection.

2.17

Avoid being seen as representing the museum if speaking personally or on behalf of outside organisations whose practices and purposes conflict with that of the museum.

2.18

Recognise that it is legitimate for people who work in museums to present evidence based on their knowledge and experience of subjects that are a matter of public concern or controversy. Obtain authorisation before making statements on sensitive issues that affect the museum. Base any public comments as far as possible on sound scholarship and reliable information.

3

Society can expect museums to:

Encourage people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment

3.0

Museums have the generosity of spirit to be approachable at every point of contact, to reach out to audiences and to increase access to their collections. As educational institutions, museums encourage a participative approach to learning. However specialised their subjects or remote their locations, they develop new audiences and deepen relationships with existing users. Museums recognise that individuals have varied backgrounds and varying physical, intellectual and cultural needs and expectations.

All those who work for or govern museums should ensure that they:

3.1

Improve the quality of experience for all users.

3.2

Recognise the diversity and complexity of society and uphold the principle of equal opportunities for all.

3.3

Develop and promote the museum to appeal to an ever broader and more varied audience. Aim to provide something of interest to every potential user.

3.4

Promote public awareness, understanding and appreciation of the museum. Promote the educational role of the museum in its widest sense and cater for a broad range of interest levels and abilities.

3.5

Take account of individuals' differing educational experiences, learning styles, abilities and ways of understanding. Provide a choice of types and levels of access.

3.6

Respond to the diverse requirements of different cultural groups.

3.7

Respond to the needs and wishes of people with disabilities. Have in place effective systems to ensure that buildings, displays and other services are increasingly accessible to people with physical, sensory or learning disabilities.

3.8

Take account of present and potential users' ability and willingness to visit if admission or other charges are levied.

3.9

Make provision for those who are not currently prepared or able to visit. Use a variety of means to improve access, such as outreach, publishing or websites.

3.10

Make the museum's services available on a regular basis and at times which reflect the needs of users and potential users. Make opening times, events and other services widely known. Make explicit the levels of access available to collections, including items not on display.

3.11

Respond positively to people's expectations of access to museum collections, whether displayed or not. Regularly review the means available to the museum to make collections more accessible, either directly or in electronic or published form.

3.12

Reconcile the museum's role in safeguarding items for the benefit of future users with its obligation to optimise access for present users. Make explicit the criteria used if access needs to be restricted.

3.13

Make provision not just for safeguarding the collections but also for keeping them accessible whenever a building that houses collections needs to be closed or isolated.

3.14

Assist everyone who makes a reasonable request for information. Give public access to all documentation and other information held by a museum, unless the information was imparted in confidence, or it can be shown that the wider public interest demands that access be restricted (for example to protect collections or prevent abuse of sites of historic or scientific importance).

4

Society can expect museums to:

Consult and involve communities, users and supporters

3.15

Consider restricting access to certain specified items where unrestricted access may cause offence or distress to actual or cultural descendants. Provide separate storage facilities where appropriate. (See also section 7, Recognise the interests of people who made, used, owned, collected or gave items in the collections.)

3.16

Facilitate public access to the expertise of members of staff. Allow public access to unpublished research carried out on behalf of the museum unless there is a genuine need to protect the research.

3.17

Undertake identifications to the highest scholarly standards and provide as many significant facts about an item as possible. Do not conceal any lack of specialised knowledge and recommend other appropriate sources of advice to enquirers whenever possible.

3.18

Encourage public appreciation of the cultural rather than financial value of items. Refuse to put a financial value on items for the public. (Valuation for a museum's own internal management processes, such as insurance and acquisition is ethical.) (See also section 5, Acquire items honestly and responsibly.)

3.19

Balance provision for particular groups or individuals, such as specialist enquirers, with long-term provision for a wider audience.

4.0

Museums seek the views of communities, users and supporters and value the contributions they make. Museums actively involve them in developing policy, and balance this with the role of museums in leading and promoting debate. Museums engage with changing needs and values.

All those who work for or govern museums should ensure that they:

4.1

Consult and involve groups from communities they serve and their representatives to promote a sense of shared ownership in the work of the museum.

4.2

Use advisory and support groups but do not exploit them. Make the status and influence of advisory and support groups clear to their members, treat their views with respect and protect their confidences.

4.3

Work in partnership with others. Involve partners in decision-making. Treat partners with respect. Exercise the authority vested in the museum responsibly and guard against the unwitting or deliberate misuse of power. Remain sensitive to the possibility that the museum, however unintentionally, may act in a way that lacks empathy. Clarify the aspirations of the museum and partner organisations and establish common ground. Draw up clear statements of objectives and working methods for joint projects.

4.4

Keep up to date with social and economic change affecting any specific communities served by the museum. Work collaboratively with other organisations to address social disadvantage and exclusion.

5

Society can expect museums to:

Acquire items honestly and responsibly

5.0
Museums develop collections using long-term plans that are socially responsive. They reject items with dubious provenance. Museums regularly review, publish and adhere to acquisition policies agreed by the governing body that are realistic in terms of the resources required to sustain them. These policies address issues of the context and legitimacy of acquisitions, due diligence, long-term care, documentation and relevance to overriding, institutional aims. Items are acquired on the basis that they will be retained in the public domain.

All those who work for or govern museums should ensure that they:

5.1
Collect according to detailed, published policies that state clearly what, how and why the museum collects. Frame the acquisition policy in the light of the museum's stated mission. Specify criteria for future acquisitions that include topics, time periods and geographical areas. Collect only within acquisition policies, except in exceptional circumstances.

5.2
Acquire an item only after thorough consideration of its long-term value and how it will be used.

5.3
Accept an item only if the museum can provide adequate, continuing long-term care for the item and public access to it, without compromising standards of care and access relating to the existing collections.

5.4
Examine carefully the implications of, and record the reasons for, accepting items that will not be immediately accessioned into the permanent collection. (Acceptable reasons may include loan, demonstration, handling, testing or retention pending a final decision to accession into the permanent collection.)

5.5
Co-operate rather than compete with other UK museums when collecting. Recognise that other institutions collecting in the same or related fields may have a stronger claim to acquisition of a particular item. Resolve disputes with other museums constructively and in the best interest of the public. Take account of the interests not only of other registered museums but also of related public organisations, such as archives.

5.6
Recognise that individuals or communities may have a stronger claim to certain items than the museum. Take account also of scientific arguments for and against leaving items in their original context. (See also section 7, Recognise the interests of people who made, used, owned, collected or gave items in the collections and section 9, Research, share and interpret information related to collections, reflecting diverse views.)

5.7
Exercise due diligence when considering an acquisition or inward loan. Verify the ownership of any item being considered for acquisition or inward loan and that the current holder is legitimately able to transfer title or to lend. Apply the same strict criteria to gifts, bequests and loans as to purchases.

5.8
Reject any item if there is any suspicion that it was wrongfully taken during a time of conflict, unless allowed by treaties or other agreements.

5.9
Reject any item if there is any suspicion that it has been stolen unless, in exceptional circumstances, this is to bring it into the public domain, in consultation with the rightful owner.

5.10
Reject items that have been illicitly traded. Note that the UNESCO Convention (on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property) was finalised in 1970. Reject, therefore, any item if there is any suspicion that, since 1970, it may have been stolen, illegally excavated or removed from a monument, site or wreck contrary to local law or otherwise acquired in or exported from its country of origin (including the UK), or any intermediate country, in violation of that country's laws or any national and international treaties, unless the museum is able to obtain permission from authorities with the requisite jurisdiction in the country of origin. (See the Department for Culture, Media and Sport [DCMS] guidelines on combating illicit trade for more detailed guidance.)

5.11
Reject any item that lacks secure ownership history, unless there is reliable documentation to show that it was exported from its country of origin before 1970, or the museum is acting as an externally approved repository of last resort, or in the best judgement of experts in the field concerned the item is of minor importance and has not been illicitly traded.

5.12
Contact colleagues and appropriate authorities both in the UK and overseas for any information or advice that may be necessary to inform judgement regarding the legitimacy of items considered for acquisition or inward loan.

5.13

Comply not only with treaties that have been ratified by the UK government, but also uphold the principles of other international treaties intended to curtail the illicit trade, if legally free to do so.

5.14

Report any suspicion of criminal activity to the police. Report any other suspicions of illicit trade to other museums collecting in the same area and to organisations that aim to curtail the illicit trade.

5.15

Avoid appearing to promote or tolerate the sale of any material without adequate ownership history through inappropriate or compromising associations with vendors, dealers or auction houses. Refuse to lend items to any exhibition that is likely to include illicitly traded items.

5.16

Decline to offer expertise on, or otherwise assist the current possessor of any item that may have been illicitly obtained, unless it is to assist law enforcement or to support other organisations in countering illicit activities.

5.17

Exercise caution when accepting conditions attached to acquisitions, particularly those involving gifts and bequests. Discuss expectations and clarify in writing the precise terms on which all parties are accepting transfer of title. Specify unambiguously to donors the museum's intentions regarding such matters as: the long-term retention of items; display; storage and public acknowledgement. (See also section 7, Recognise the interests of people who made, used, owned, collected or gave items in the collections.)

5.18

Refuse tactfully but firmly to accept an offer of a gift or bequest if items offered do not meet criteria set out in the museum's collecting policy. Explain why the museum is unable to accept an offer of a gift or a bequest.

5.19

Refuse, in writing, any unwanted, unsolicited gifts even if the museum has been advised that they need not be returned. Consider informing intending benefactors, or their representatives, about other registered museums, archives or other public institutions that may be interested in the unwanted items.

5.20

Comply with conditions attached to an acquisition once the acquisition has been made. (See also section 7, Recognise the interests of people who made, used, owned, collected or gave items in the collections.)

5.21

Use agreed procedures for taking the final decision to acquire an item. Open procedures for transfer of title to external audit.

5.22

Encourage potential sellers to get an independent valuation when offering items for sale to the museum. Seek the best discount from vendors once they are aware of the likely value on the open market of items they offer to sell to the museum.

5.23

Have in place procedures approved by the governing body for loans from and to the museum, including historic loans.

For further guidance see also the MA's ethical guidelines on acquisition or visit the Cultural Property website at www.culturalpropertyadvice.gov.uk

6

Society can expect museums to:

Safeguard the long-term public interest in the collections

6.0

Collections are a tangible link between the past, present and future. Museums balance the interests of different generations by safeguarding collections, which may include buildings and sites.

Museums develop and implement a collections policy in order to ensure appropriate standards of care and security for all items entrusted to them, either permanently or on loan.

Museums meet their responsibility to future generations by ensuring that collections are well managed and sustainable. There is a strong presumption in favour of the retention of items within the public domain. Sometimes transfer within the public domain, or another form of disposal, can improve access to, or the use, care or context of, items or collections. Responsible, curatorially-motivated disposal takes place as part of a museum's long-term collections policy, in order to increase public benefit derived from museum collections.

All those who work for or govern museums should ensure that they:

6.1

Act as guardians of the long-term public interest in the collections.

6.2

Publish, implement and regularly review a forward-looking collections policy, approved by the governing body, which specifies standards of care. Define, in the collections policy, levels of care appropriate for different parts of the collection, acceptable levels of risk and how items will be made accessible.

6.3

Protect all items from loss, damage and physical deterioration, wherever they are. Maintain appropriate standards of protection against hazards such as theft, fire, flood, vandalism and deterioration of the collections resulting from adverse environmental conditions. Specify the action to be taken in the event of disasters threatening the museum's buildings, staff, visitors, records or collections. Make every effort to protect the collections in the event of a disaster but never put people's lives at risk.

6.4

Balance the duty of maintaining and enhancing collections for future generations with that of providing appropriate services to today's public. Reconcile security and conservation requirements with users' rights of access and the desirability of lending outside the museum.

6.5

Pay due regard to safeguarding collections and the public's right of access whenever museum premises are used for functions.

6.6

Make provision for safeguarding collections whenever buildings housing them are closed or isolated, whether this is planned or unexpected.

6.7

Make arrangements to care properly for the health and wellbeing of any live animals for which the museum is responsible.

6.8

Recognise that formal title to and guardianship of the collections is vested in the governing body, which must satisfy itself that decisions to dispose are informed by the highest standards of expertise and take into account all legal and other attendant circumstances.

6.9

Demonstrate clearly how the long-term local and general public interest is served in circumstances in which disposal may be appropriate and ensure that public trust in museums is upheld.

6.10

Give priority to transferring items, preferably by gift to registered or accredited museums. Consider donating items to other public institutions if it is not possible for another museum to accept them. To maintain public confidence in museums wherever possible do not transfer items out of the public domain. (This paragraph excludes material that is being disposed of because it is damaged beyond use, or dangerous, or is being returned to its place of origin or rightful owner.)

6.11

Base decisions to dispose on clear, published criteria as part of the institution's long-term collections policy, approved by the governing body. Ensure transparency and carry out any disposal openly, according to unambiguous, generally accepted procedures. Manage the process with care and sensitivity to public perceptions.

6.12

Seek the views of stakeholders (such as donors, researchers, local and source communities and others served by the museum) who have a vested interest in a proposed disposal. In some cases consent from the donor may be a legal requirement. Where appropriate seek the views of colleagues and sector bodies.

6.13

Refuse to undertake disposal principally for financial reasons, except in exceptional circumstances as defined in 6.14. Financially-motivated disposal risks damaging public confidence in museums and the principle that collections should not normally be regarded as financially-negotiable assets.

6.14

Consider financially-motivated disposal only in exceptional circumstances and when it can be demonstrated that:

- 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.

6.15

Ring-fence any money raised as a result of disposal through sale, if this exceptional circumstance arises, solely and directly for the benefit of the museum's collection. Money raised must be restricted to the long-term sustainability, use and development of the collection. If in doubt about the proposed use of such restricted funds consult sector bodies.

6.16

Openly communicate and document all disposals and the basis on which decisions to dispose were made.

6.17

Apply any money received in compensation for the loss, damage or destruction of objects in the collection solely and directly for the benefit of the museum's collection.

6.18

Respond to requests for return of human remains, and other culturally sensitive material with understanding and respect for communities of origin. (See DCMS guidance on human remains.)

For additional, more detailed guidance on all aspects of disposal see the MA Disposal toolkit.

7

Society can expect museums to:

Recognise the interests of people who made, used, owned, collected or gave items in the collections

7.0

Museums try to develop constructive relationships with people who contributed to collections, with representatives of these people, their heirs and cultural descendants, balancing responsibilities to a range of stakeholders. Gifts and bequests of items are usually made in the expectation that items will be preserved. Museums reconcile the wider public interest with that expectation.

All those who work for or govern museums should ensure that they:

7.1

Acknowledge that the museum benefits from all those who have contributed to the making, meaning and presence in the museum of its collections. Establish working relationships based on mutual understanding, wherever practical.

7.2

Establish principles that assist people who contributed to collections to develop mutually agreed arrangements with the museum, wherever practical. Specify and record these arrangements clearly and unambiguously.

7.3

Articulate clearly intentions and expectations about projects such as commissions, collaborations and workshops. Specify agreements over matters such as funding, copyright, site preparation and maintenance. Make written exhibition policies available to exhibitors. (See also section 4, Consult and involve communities, users and supporters.)

7.4

Inform originating communities of the presence of items relevant to them in the museum's collections, wherever practical.

7.5

Respect the interests of originating communities with regard to elements of their cultural heritage present or represented in the museum. Involve originating communities, wherever practical, in decisions about how the museum stores, researches, presents or otherwise uses collections and information about them.

7.6

Consider restricting access to certain specified items, particularly those of ceremonial or religious importance, where unrestricted access may cause offence or distress to actual or cultural descendants. (See also section 3, Encourage people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment.)

7.7

Deal sensitively and promptly with requests for repatriation both within the UK and from abroad of items in the museum's collection, taking into account: the law; current thinking on the subject; the interests of actual and cultural descendants; the strength of claimants' relationship to the items; their scientific, educational, cultural and historical importance; their future treatment. Refer to DCMS Guidelines on Human Remains on Restitution and Repatriation issued by Resource, the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries and guidelines on human remains issued by the Museum Ethnographers Group. Refer to any subsequent guidance issued by the bodies and their successors listed above. (See also section 6, Safeguard the long-term public interest in the collections.)

7.8

Exercise sensitivity and seek professional advice whenever acquiring items from fieldwork. Consider always the desirability of recording and preserving items where they are. Uphold guidelines issued by relevant bodies.

7.9

Exercise sensitivity and seek professional advice whenever reminiscence and oral history work is undertaken. Uphold guidelines issued by relevant bodies.

7.10

Follow up accepted gifts or bequests with a written acknowledgement and confirmation of the terms on which the gift or bequest is being accepted. (See also section 5, Acquire items honestly and responsibly and the MA's ethical guidelines on acquisition.)

7.11

Uphold and comply with conditions set by benefactors and accepted by the museum, unless changed circumstances mean that conditions need to be reconsidered in the light of what is generally held to be the public interest.

8

Society can expect museums to:

Support the protection of natural and human environments

8.0

Collections in museums represent the rich diversity of the world's natural and human environments. Museums promote learning without jeopardising this diversity. They contribute to sustainable economic activity and benefit local and wider communities.

All those who work for or govern museums should ensure that they:

8.1

Value and protect natural and human environments. Prevent abuse of places of scientific, historic or cultural importance. Exercise due diligence procedures when acquiring or borrowing items. Uphold appropriate national and international conventions and treaties on protection of natural and human environments, whether or not they have been ratified. (See section 5, Acquire items honestly and responsibly.)

8.2

Be sensitive to the impact of the museum and its visitors on natural and human environments. Make best use of resources, use energy and materials responsibly and minimise waste.

8.3

Contribute to the sustainable social and material vitality of the museum's surrounding area by, for example, attracting users, sustaining economic activity, offering satisfying and rewarding employment and pursuing local purchasing policies.

8.4

Develop purchasing and resale policies that address environmental and human rights' issues.

8.5

Make all growth sustainable. Evaluate the long-term impact of introducing, operating and maintaining new developments.

9

Society can expect museums to:

Research, share and interpret information related to collections, reflecting diverse views

9.0

Museums facilitate and carry out research. They share and interpret information consistent with their purpose and ensure that it is accurate, up to date and based on the highest standards of scholarship and research. They organise and manage information to make it accessible. Museums interpret information to engage a wide variety of interests and to reflect diverse views. They invite users to question assumptions and distinguish evidence from speculation.

All those who work for or govern museums should ensure that they:

9.1

Research and collate information about collections and the subject areas generally within which the museum has expertise. Enable the museum's researchers and others to keep up to date with developments in their field.

9.2

Apply the highest possible standards of objectivity to the research undertaken by the museum, and distinguish clearly between evidence and deduction. Maintain, as far as possible, records and material so that the evidence on which research is based can be re-examined and verified independently.

9.3

Make information publicly accessible. Conduct research with the intention of making it public. Publish research promptly and make it widely available. (See also section 3, Encourage people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment.)

9.4

Develop mechanisms that encourage people to research collections, develop their own ideas about them and participate in a variety of ways in shaping the interpretations offered by the museum. Make the museum a forum in which ideas can be discussed and tested. (See also section 3, Encourage people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment.)

9.5

Cultivate a variety of perspectives on the collections to reflect the diversity of the communities served by the museum.

9.6

Represent ideas, personalities, events and communities with sensitivity and respect. Recognise the humanity of all people. Develop procedures that allow people to define, and seek recognition of, their own cultural identity. (See also section 7, Recognise the interests of people who made, used, owned, collected or gave items in the collections.)

9.7

Respect the views of others and their right to express those views, unless illegal to do so or inconsistent with the purpose of museums as socially-inclusive institutions. Strive to dispel prejudice and indicate clearly the part played by opinion or conjecture in interpretation.

9.8

Reflect differing views striking a balance over time.

9.9

Recognise the assumptions on which interpretation is based and that presentational styles may shape perception in unintended ways. Consider carefully the impact of interpretations that exclude any reference to people associated with the items.

9.10

Strive for editorial integrity and remain alert to the pressure that can be exerted by particular interest groups, including lenders and funders (see also 10.12).

9.11

Keep records and presentations as accurate and up to date as possible. Record differences of expert opinion. Correct errors in documentation or presentations without delay, when they are brought to light.

10

Society can expect museums to:

Review performance to innovate and improve

10.0
Museums develop by initiating and responding to change. They establish, formally adopt, publish and regularly review their aims and objectives. Museums specify targets, monitor, evaluate and report on performance and make changes in operational practices to become more effective and efficient.

All those who work for or govern museums should ensure that they:

10.1
Adhere to the museum's constitution. Review, periodically, the museum's overarching purpose.

10.2
Keep up to date with developments in the law, museum practice, social policy and public expectations.

10.3
Directly involve users, staff, members of the governing body and other stakeholders in planning. Regularly update and make public the museum's aims, objectives, plans, policies and standards. (See also section 4, Consult and involve communities, users and supporters.)

10.4
Make prudent use of resources and maximise the benefit that the public derives from all activities. Account fully and openly to the public about how money is raised and spent.

10.5
Maintain the financial viability of the museum. Meet legal, constitutional and contractual requirements for financial control of the museum (and any subsidiary commercial companies). Avoid unjustifiable financial risk. (See also section 1, Hold collections in trust on behalf of society.)

10.6
Accept financial support from commercial organisations and other outside sources provided that it does not compromise the integrity of the museum. Clearly define and agree the relationship between the museum and its partners to avoid undue influence on museum activities.

10.7
Establish principles to inform trading and commercial activities so that they are consistent with the aims of the museum and, where possible, enhance the quality of the service. Do not allow trading and commercial activities to bring the museum into disrepute, reduce public access, subject the collections to unacceptable risk or jeopardise finances.

10.8
Make the museum's premises as suitable as possible for public services, collections management and access for all, in addition to fulfilling legal responsibilities for the health and safety of staff and visitors.

10.9
Recruit, train and develop individuals so that the skills and knowledge of members of museum staff, the governing body and support groups are appropriate to the needs of the individual and the museum. Facilitate the career-long professional and personal development of all staff and members of the governing body.

10.10
Recognise that all who work for the museum in any capacity have a contribution to make to its successful operation. Recruit and treat all staff fairly. Acknowledge the contributions of colleagues at all levels.

10.11
Undertake and delegate only such duties as are commensurate with individual knowledge and skills. Co-operate fully with any appropriate scrutiny, appraisal or evaluation. Seek and act on advice, whenever necessary, from colleagues in other museums, museum support bodies and consultants. Obtain, when necessary, specialist expertise through contracts or consultancies. (See also section 4, Consult and involve communities, users and supporters.)

10.12
Assist the governing body in making informed decisions and obtaining direct access to the advice it needs to fulfil its role.

10.13
Strive to increase the diversity of staff and members of the governing body so that they adequately represent the museum's present and potential audience.

10.14
Conduct disputes with others with courtesy and tolerance, even when differences of opinion are robustly expressed. Avoid giving needless personal offence. Seek independent arbitration, mediation or other means of resolution when disputes cannot otherwise be resolved.

Index

How to use this index

The first number in a reference is to a section, the second to a point within it. 1.2 refers, therefore, to section 1, point 2: Retain items in the public domain at whichever location provides the best balance of care, context and access.

If, for example, you are developing an access policy, or dealing with an ethical dilemma around an access issue, then section 3, Encourage people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment, is clearly the most important section. Access issues are also referred to in other sections, reference to which can be found by looking up the word 'access' in the index.

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The seven principles of public life

The MA endorses the seven principles of public life, as set out in Standards in Public Life: the First Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life (1995), chaired by Lord Nolan. The principles apply to all who work in or for museums and to all who serve on museum governing bodies.

Selflessness

Holders of public office should take decisions solely in terms of the public interest. They should not do so in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their families or their friends.

Integrity

Holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might influence them in the performance of their official duties.

Objectivity

In carrying out public business, including making public appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards or benefits, holders of public office should make choices on merit.

Accountability

Holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office.

Openness

Holders of public office should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions that they take. They should give reasons for their decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands.

Honesty

Holders of public office have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interest.

Leadership

Holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example.

Information on how to use the principles outlined above to inform the work of governing bodies is available from the Trustee and Governance Team at the National Council For Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), Regents Wharf, 8 All Saints Street, London N1 9RL
www.ncvo-vol.org.uk
Help desk tel: 0800 2798 798

Society can expect museums to:

1 Hold collections in trust on behalf of society

Museums behave as ethical guardians as well as owners of collections. They never relinquish the trust invested in them, without public consent.

2 Focus on public service

Museums belong to everybody. They exist to serve the public. They should enhance the quality of life of everyone, both today and in the future. They are funded because of their positive social, cultural, educational and economic impact.

3 Encourage people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment

Museums have the generosity of spirit to be approachable at every point of contact, to reach out to audiences and to increase access to their collections. As educational institutions, museums encourage a participative approach to learning. However specialised their subjects or remote their locations, they develop new audiences and deepen relationships with existing users. Museums recognise that individuals have varied backgrounds and varying physical, intellectual and cultural needs and expectations.

4 Consult and involve communities, users and supporters

Museums seek the views of communities, users and supporters and value the contributions they make. Museums actively involve them in developing policy, and balance this with the role of museums in leading and promoting debate. Museums engage with changing needs and values.

5 Acquire items honestly and responsibly

Museums develop collections using long-term plans that are socially responsive. They reject items with dubious provenance. Museums regularly review, publish and adhere to acquisition policies agreed by the governing body that are realistic in terms of the resources required to sustain them. These policies address issues of the context and legitimacy of acquisitions, due diligence, long-term care, documentation and relevance to overriding, institutional aims. Items are acquired on the basis that they will be retained in the public domain.

6 Safeguard the long-term public interest in the collections

Collections are a tangible link between the past, present and future. Museums balance the interests of different generations by safeguarding collections, which may include buildings and sites.

Museums develop and implement a collections policy in order to ensure appropriate standards of care and security for all items entrusted to them, either permanently or on loan.

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Museums try to develop constructive relationships with people who contributed to collections, with representatives of these people, their heirs and cultural descendants, balancing responsibilities to a range of stakeholders. Gifts and bequests of items are usually made in the expectation that items will be preserved. Museums reconcile the wider public interest with that expectation.

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