

Deaccessioning and disposal

Definition

The formal decision by a governing body to take objects out of its accessioned collection ('deaccessioning'), and managing the disposal of those objects through an agreed method.

Scope

Use this procedure to dispose of objects that belong to your museum. Reasons might include: objects damaged beyond further use; repatriation of human remains or sacred objects; or transferring duplicate objects to another museum as part of curator-led rationalisation. Sometimes, objects are 'transferred' within a museum, eg from the collection of accessioned objects to a handling collection of non-accessioned ones.

As explained in the ***Acquisition and accessioning*** procedure, 'accessioning' has a very specific meaning: a formal commitment by a museum governing body to accept objects into its long-term collection. Accessioning brings with it ethical responsibilities, as does the reverse process. Deaccessioning always needs careful thought in the light of agreed policy, ideally an integrated 'collection development policy' covering both acquisition and disposal.

The ethical consensus on museum disposal has shifted from, in the words of the Museums Association, a 'strong presumption' against disposing of accessioned objects to acknowledging that 'responsible disposal takes place as part of a museum's long-term collections development policy and starts with a curatorial review.' Financially-motivated disposal is still considered unethical and is likely to result in sanctions from professional and funding bodies.

You can also use this procedure to dispose of items that belong to you but have not been accessioned. These might include objects provisionally acquired through contemporary collecting, but not accessioned at the end of a specified review period. It also covers certain types of bulk material from archaeological and natural history fieldwork. After such material has been analysed and the results published and archived, often only a sample is retained for future research.

Whether accessioned or not, disposing of objects always needs careful thought within the framework of an agreed policy. The main difference is that your governing body should always consider proposed deaccessions, but might delegate decisions about non-accessioned material.

The Spectrum standard

You should have a **policy** covering the disposal of accessioned and non-accessioned objects. This could either be a standalone document, part of an integrated collection development policy, or within a wider collections management policy. Either way, in deciding your policy you will most likely need to consider these questions:

- What ethical codes will you follow when considering potential disposals?
- Apart from general considerations, are there any specific legal constraints on your ability to dispose of objects (eg your enabling legislation, governing document or specific agreements with donors)?
- Why and how might you dispose of objects?
- What criteria will you consider when considering proposed disposals?
- Who can propose and authorise the disposal of accessioned objects?
- Who can propose and authorise the disposal of other kinds of non-accessioned material?

You should also have a written **procedure** that explains the steps to follow when disposing of objects. Spectrum's suggested procedure is a useful starting point, but however you do it, your own procedure should meet the following minimum requirements:

Minimum requirement	Why this is important
You make the case for any proposed disposal of an object in writing.	Those making the decision have all relevant facts and can check the proposal against agreed policy.
In the written case you cite the documentation that proves you own the relevant objects (or gives grounds to assume you do).	Those responsible for the decision can assess the level of risk of disposing of objects when there is no clear proof of ownership.
In the written case you research and note any specific risks, costs or other relevant constraints.	You do not dispose of hazardous objects improperly or even illegally (eg asbestos).
You get specific approval from your governing body before disposing of any accessioned object, and from more than one authorised person disposing of any non-accessioned material.	Your governing body can be properly accountable for disposals. Objects are not disposed of at the whim of one individual.

Minimum requirement	Why this is important
You dispose of objects in line with the ethical codes that apply to your museum.	You do not risk reputational damage or lose Accredited status.
You formally enter approved deaccessions in your accessions register and update other relevant records.	Your accessions register is your tamper-proof master list of all the objects you own.
You keep all documentation relating to disposals.	There is an audit trail in case of later problems.

Suggested procedure

Deaccessioning objects

Check possible sources of information about the objects.

When disposal of objects is proposed, check all possible sources of information about the objects. Where available, this might include:

- Entry records.
- Loan agreements.
- Accession registers.
- Minutes of meetings at which acquisitions were considered or reported.
- Annual reports.
- Catalogue records.
- Object history files.
- Present or former staff and volunteers.

If there is reason to think that the objects are on loan, and it is possible to contact the lender (or their estate) to discuss returning them go to ***Loans in (borrowing objects)***.

If it seems likely that the objects are on loan, but it is not possible to trace the lender (or their estate), you should seek advice before proceeding further.

If there is clear evidence that the objects belong to your museum, but there are legal constraints (eg your enabling legislation or governing document) or specific agreements with donors that might prevent disposal, seek advice before proceeding further.

If the objects clearly belong to your museum and there are no conditions preventing disposal, double check your policy and relevant codes to make sure there are no ethical objections to the disposal.

You should open a file on the proposed disposal, and make a note of the research carried out at this stage, as evidence of due diligence should problems arise in future. Note the **Document location** so that you and others can find this file in future.

If in doubt, seek advice.

If there is any doubt about the legality or ethics of the disposal, you should seek advice, particularly if the objects are of high intrinsic or monetary value. If you do not have it in-house, you should also seek curatorial advice on the significance of the objects from a subject specialist.

Note that there are situations where you are obliged to dispose of an object (eg where it poses a public health or safety risk).

Add a record of any advice received to the disposal file and note the **Document location** so that you and others can find it in future.

Select the method of disposal and seek authorisation.

The final decision on disposals should always be taken by your governing body. You should prepare a written report on any proposed disposal, summarising the research carried out and any advice sought. As applicable, this report might include:

- Core inventory information about the objects in question, including images where possible.
- An evaluation of the significance of the objects in the context of your collection and your collection development policy.
- If you want to dispose of objects that seem to duplicate others in your collection, details of the other relevant items.
- If you want to dispose of objects because they are hazardous, a condition report and technical assessment from an expert advisor.
- If relevant, cost estimates for ongoing conservation, maintenance and storage of the object if you were to retain it, including a condition report by a conservator, if appropriate.
- Valuations provided by a third party.
- The relevant clauses in your collection development policy which support the decision to dispose.
- The proposed method of disposal.

File a copy of this report and record the **Document location**.

Does your governing body approve the disposal?

If your governing body decides against a proposed disposal, record the decision, close the file and end the procedure.

If the disposal is approved, also record the decision and note the **Document location** so you and others can find it in future if any question arises about the disposal.

Disposing of objects

Are the objects to be destroyed?

If objects are to be destroyed (eg because they are damaged beyond all further use, or pose a hazard) you may in some cases need specialist help to do this safely and legally (eg asbestos). See **Note 1** for further guidance.

To record that the objects have left your care go to **Object exit** and return to this procedure at 'Recording the disposal.'

Approach potential recipients directly or advertise the disposal appropriately.

If objects are to be disposed of by gift, exchange or sale you can approach potential organisations directly or advertise through appropriate professional channels (eg the UK Museums Journal). In the UK it is recommended that Accredited museums should have the chance to acquire disposed objects, but other community organisations may also be able to use them for public benefit.

The information provided to potential recipients should include:

- The number of objects involved, or approximate number if a bulk disposal.
- A description of the objects concerned (or subjects covered if a large number of similar items).
- The preferred method of disposal.
- The terms of disposal.

Allow a minimum period of two months for an interest in acquiring the material to be expressed.

File a copy of this information and record the **Document location** in case you or others need to find it in future.

Do you have a suitable recipient?

If not, you may need to rethink the disposal. You should go back to your governing body for a decision on how to proceed.

Agree terms with the new owner and transfer legal title to them.

If the disposal is by exchange or sale, you will need to agree the terms of the deal. Even if you are giving the objects away, you need to agree such issues as who is responsible for collecting or delivering them, any conservation work or packing needed, insurance, costs, timings and other practical matters. This should be agreed in writing by both parties, as should the transfer of legal title stating that your museum has handed over ownership of the objects to the recipient.

File your signed copy of these agreements and record the **Document location** in case you or others need to find them in future.

Arrange for the objects to be collected or delivered, along with relevant original documents.

To arrange transport for the objects go to **Object exit** and from there to **Location and movement control**, returning to this procedure to finish recording the disposal.

As well as giving the new owner a copy of all non-confidential information you have about the objects, you should also provide any relevant original documents relating to their history (eg operating manuals, associated correspondence, and conservation records).

Do not remove your museum's numbers from the objects, as they form part of the items' history.

Recording the disposal

Record information about the disposal process.

This should include:

Disposal information

- **Disposal reference number.**
- The date of disposal - **Disposal date** (use a standard term source).
- The method of disposal - **Disposal method** (use a standard term source).
- **Disposal reason** (use a standard term source).
- The person authorising the disposal - **Disposal authoriser** (Use a standard form of name).
 - The date of the authorisation - **Disposal authorisation date** (Use a standard format).
- The signature of the person with overall responsibility for the decision to dispose.
- Any restrictions that were applied to the disposal - **Disposal provisos.**
- Other information - **Disposal note**, including a reference to the decision your governing body to accept disposal (meeting date and minute number).

If the disposed objects were from your accessioned collection you should agree the point at which they officially stopped being part of it (eg when title was transferred), and record:

- **Deaccession date** (use a standard format).

If the disposed objects were transferred to someone else:

- The name and contact details of the recipient of the disposed objects:
 - **Disposal recipient** (use a standard form of name).
 - **Address**.
- The new number of the object in the recipient's collection (if relevant) - **Disposal new object number**.

If the disposed objects were sold record:

- For a single object - **Disposal price**.
- For a group of objects - **Group disposal price**.

Update your accession register, if applicable.

If the disposed objects were from your accessioned collection, annotate your accession register so that it is clear the objects have been deaccessioned.

Update catalogue records if not done already.

If information about the disposal process has not been recorded directly within the relevant catalogue records of the disposed objects, update these now. Go to **Cataloguing**.

Update your list or file of disposed objects, if applicable.

If your system is not computerised and you maintain a separate list or file of disposed objects, update this. Note the **Document location** of this list in the relevant catalogue records.

Guidance notes

Note 1: Destroying objects

Only destroy objects in exceptional circumstances such as:

- Where an object poses a serious conservation threat to other items in the collection and cannot be countered by treatment or isolation from other objects.
- Where an object creates a serious health and safety risk to staff, volunteers or the public which cannot be overcome in an acceptable way.
- Where an object has deteriorated or become broken beyond reasonable repair, and no part or sample has any identifiable use or viability.

- Where you have had no interest shown by another organisation or interested individual after advertisement, and the object is unsaleable.
- For certain categories of bulk archaeological or natural history material, from fieldwork, may be destroyed provided that the material has been fully analysed and published and all relevant records deposited with the site archive. Where applicable, an adequate and representative sample should be retained for future research.

Objects which have been identified as a hazard should be destroyed according to applicable legislation and regulations.

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