Collections Trust

A guide to selecting a review methodology for collections rationalisation

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Contents

Introduction

The aim of this guide is to support museumsin considering and selecting appropriate methodologies to guide the rationalisation of their collections. It identifies the main issues for museums to consider and provides information about tools and resources available to support the rationalisation procedure.

What is Collections Rationalisation?

Collections rationalisation is a procedure whereby a museum improves its understanding of a collection so that the collection can be used more effectively for the benefit of its users. The need to rationalise a collection is driven by many different factors, and may include uncontrolled collecting in the past, increasing pressures on storage space orthe need to meet organisational priorities.

Controlled rationalisation enables museums to develop a systematic and strategic approach to effective management and increased use of their collections, allowing them to maximise resources, refocus collecting activity and increase public access. Although one clear outcome of a programme of rationalisation can lead to disposal of objects, rationalisation can also provide ways of considering new and different uses for collections.

The Accreditation Scheme for museums and galleries in the UK encourages museums to consider rationalisation as a way to address collections management issues facing museums and make collections accessible to visitors and users. A museum's approach to rationalisation will be articulated in its Collections Development Policy which will include detail on the museum's themes and priorities for collections rationalisation.

A useful starting point when considering rationalisation is to access the resources available on the Share Museums East website. The Collections Rationalisation Planning for Action publication http://sharemuseumseast.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Collections-Rationalisation-Planning-For-Action.pdf includes templates for a rationalisation plan and a rationalisation policy, whilst the Collections Rationalisation animation provides a useful and accessible introduction to all involved in rationalisation projects http://sharemuseumseast.org.uk/videos/.

The benefits of collections rationalisation

Collections rationalisation is part of effective collections management. It can provide many benefits for museums which include:

- Ensuring that collections are relevant to the museum's vision and strategic objectives which may have evolved over time with historic collections now not fit for the current purpose of the museum

- Developing a clearer understanding of the collections the museum holds

- Determining the significance of objects in a collection

- Enabling effective collections development, including contemporary collecting

- Maximising resources – storage space, staffing and running costs, to care effectively for collections

- Developing priorities for collections care

- Improving storage and management of reserve collections

- Focusing collections, so that they are of high quality and relevant to users and stakeholders

- Providing increased access to collections

- Using collections within the museum and with partners in different ways

- Enhancing knowledge and information about collections and improving documentation

- Managing the disposal of objects both ethically and in response to organisational strategy

Applying a clear and systematic approach to rationalisation assists museums in clarifying decision making; many museums follow a process of *collections review* to help structure this process.

What is collections review?

Collections review is a process whereby a museum reviews a collection as part of a wider rationalisation project. In following a standardised, moderated and agreed procedure for considering collections and items within them, collections review provides clarity to decisions and recommendations for collections development.

A collections review can be the first step in making recommendations and decisions about the future of collections, including disposals and it will support museums in following the SPECTRUM 4.0 procedure for deaccession and disposal www.collectionstrust.org.uk/spectrum/spectrum-4-0-deaccession-and-disposal-procedure and the ethics of disposal as outlined in the 2014 Museums Association Code of Ethics and Disposal Toolkit www.museumsassociation.org/collections/disposal-toolkit.

To manage a collections review process time should be spent at the outset on developing and planning an effective methodology. There are a range of examples of successful collections review and rationalisation projects available. Before you start it is advisable to contact your museum development team and local and peer museums to learn from previous work.

The procedure for collections review is summarised below in eight steps.

Collections review - getting started

1. Setting your objectives

Collections review should be an active part of managing a museum collection and contribute to the delivery of the overall strategic direction of an organisation.

Setting clear reasons for the review and aligning it to your organisational objectives is an important first step. Reasons for a review may include:

- To resolve an historic and unsystematic approach to collecting, which has resulted in an accumulated backlog of items and a need to decide what should remain in the collection
- To improve knowledge about an area of the collection that you have little information about
- To inform a new exhibition
- A desire to maximise the collections knowledge and expertise of a member of staff, volunteer or individual expert
- To understand the storage and care needs of your collections

Following a defined methodology for collections review will enable a logical and evidenced decision making process to develop. It will contribute to the museum's accountability for the items it holds in its collections and the information that is known about them.

2. Deciding which collections to review

There are examples of entire museum collections being reviewed and rationalised, but it is more usual for collections review to take a project-based approach, focussing on particular areas of a collection; for example, these could be subject or location based, or a priority such as a collection type which is well used, or a subject theme which will be the focus of an upcoming exhibition.

3. Developing a framework for your plan

Creating a realistic plan is crucial for a successful project. The plan needs to refer to your objectives and include:

- Description of which collections are under review
- The questions you are aiming to answer with the review
- The methodology you will be using
- The resources required to undertake the review
- The timescale for the review
- How you will review the results and outcomes

In applying a project-based, step by step approach to collections review, a methodology to work with the collections will evolve, which can be developed and amended as different parts of the collections are addressed.

The level of detail demanded by the review depends on the questions being answered, for example collections review can be as effective at providing a top level overview of collections issues as it is at dealing with an object by object level approach; it all depends on how the assessment criteria are framed.

4. Identifying who will be involved in the review

Museums have found that for collections review to be effective it is best conducted by a team of individuals. This can allow areas of the museum to work together on discussing the potential for museum objects and is also an opportunity to engage collections specialists to inform the process. A team encompassing skills, expertise and perspectives from across collections, subject specialisms, learning and interpretation is an ideal mix.

5. Selecting/creating your methodology

There are a range of published methodologies to consider when creating a collections review methodology for your project. Published methodologies provide a starting point and a guide for many museums to develop their own bespoke review plans.

The methodologies provide guidance in developing reviews which address issues of:

- Collections significance
- Collections management and care
- Collections use and engagement

These methodologies were developed by organisations to meet specific museum needs, however each follows a similar process of measuring collections against a range of criteria.

In general, the methodologies provide review grids across a range of criteria, against which collections can be measured; examples of recording grids into which data can be recorded are also included.

There may be some areas of the collections which you wish to review at a group level and others which require an object by object approach; collections review tends to refer to these as 'review units'. The review units you select will depend on the questions you are asking, but will also take account of the time and people resources you have available for the review. Most collection review projects use a range of review unit types (group level and individual objects) to meet their objectives.

The current published methodologies are:

- **The University College London Collections Review Toolkit**, which provides guidance for reviewing significance, care and use of collections and tools, and exercises to guide museums in developing their own programme of review.
  www.ucl.ac.uk/museums/our-work/best-practice/collections-review

- **Significance 2.0: a guide to assessing the significance of collections**. This waswritten by Roslyn Russell and Kylie Winkworth for the former Collections Council of Australia and can be used as a standardised means to measure the cultural meaning and significance of items.
  http://arts.gov.au/resources-publications/industry-reports/significance-20

- **Reviewing Significance 2.0**. Developed by Caroline Reed this provides an updated version of the Reviewing Significance framework published by Renaissance East Midlands in 2010.
  www.collectionstrust.org.uk/collections-skills/reviewing-significance-2-0

- **Heritage Moving Image Collection Assessment toolkit**. Developed by Caroline Reed to provide a subject specific review framework for the Screen.
  www.collectionstrust.org.uk/collections-skills/screen-heritage-uk-moving-image-collection-assessment-toolkit

- **Why do we have it? A Significance Process and Template created by CYMAL**. This template focuses on significance of collections and provides a template and recording grid to download.
  http://wales.gov.uk/topics/cultureandsport/museumsarchiveslibraries/cymal/collections/significance-template/?lang=en

- **What's in store?** Developed by Renaissance North West in 2008, this publication detailed case studies which had been informed by work from the Musuems Association Effective Collections programme.
  www.nwfed.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/02/270_collections-review-in-the-north-west1.pdf

- **Why do a collections review?** The UK Museums Association collated information relating to collections review work in Museum Practice in 2010, http://www.museumsassociation.org/museum-practice/collections-reviews/16082010-why-do-collections-review this includes case studies and links to the application of collection review during the MA Effective Collections programme. The information is available to members of the Museums Association.
  www.museumsassociation.org/collections/effective-collections

6. Creating your review grid

In developing a collections review grid it is helpful to consider the published methodologies and to use them as a guide to creating your own grid. The example below was developed following consideration of elements from the UCL Collections Review Rubric and the Renaissance East Midlands Significance Assessment Toolkit.

	Significance	Public Engagement Potential	Formal Learning	Research Use	Ownership	Condition Assessment
A	Of **international** importance- making a fundamental and long term contribution to intellectual thought or the study of a discipline, and integral to the organisation's collections eg. through its iconic status or outstanding historical/cultural value	• Is considered a 'star' object and a focal point of a key exhibition space • High 'wow' factor • Deemed 'iconic ' by visitors • Strongly identified in the public's mind with your organisation or location • Regularly used in public events or outreach teaching • Stimulates strong personal/ associative response from visitors	• Can actively be used as a learning aid • Fosters interdisciplinary teaching and learning	• Part of a specifically created research collection • Regularly used by researchers • Strong potential for international/national research use • Regularly the subject of or cited in responses to public enquiries	• Accessioned and owned by the organisation • Proof of purchase/ letters of ownership/ documentation • On a documented loan with a clear time line.	• Stable material • Good condition • No conservation problems
B	Of **national** importance, making a significant or short term contribution to the study of a discipline and integral to the stories that the museum tells. Did it contribute to the changing course of national history?	• Engages visitor interest and stimulates gallery discussion and enquiries • Important support object in an exhibition space • Occasionally used in public events, talks, handling	• Has recognised potential for use in outreach and learning activities • Has potential to foster aspects of learning	• Unique to the museum and the site • Occasionally used by researchers and cited in enquiries • Clear potential for research use	• Accessioned and regarded as owned by the organisation • No letters or documentation as incorporated into the organisation over time • On a documented loan that is regularly renewed.	• Stable material • Minor cleaning: stable and not at risk
C	Of clear **site specific** importance, making a significant or short term contribution to the study of a discipline, and integral to the museum's themes and the site's educational and social purpose	• Useful support object for display and handling • No current public focus, but potential for future public focus	• Was originally collected and used as a learning/education aid, but is no longer used.	• Unique to the museum but similar objects held by other museums • Collected as part of research collection but no longer used • Some potential for future use	• Not accessioned but proved/known to be owned by the organisation • Collected by museum staff for research/teaching with no letters of ownership • On a documented loan	• Stable material but needs monitoring • Some risk: restoration or repair conservation desirable

D	Of clear **community** importance, whether a local community or community of interest. Does it embody or symbolise beliefs, ideas or customs that are important to a community	• Not known to have been used in a public focus capacity • Issues around access to the object need to be overcome	• Little potential for current use but could be relevant in the future	• Duplicate objects, one of a number in the collections • Little potential for current use but could be relevant in the future	• Accessioned but not regarded as owned by the organisation • On a documented indefinite loan	• Unstable material • High risk: immediate action required • Specialist conservation required • Major restoration, additions or loss
E	Not deemed to have historical interest OR provenance/identity unknown	• No potential for public focus • Not suitable for display or handling use	• Is not known to have been used in a learning capacity • No future value in learning	• Sample of a common type or types • Multiple objects held by the museum • Never used for research and no potential to do so	• Not accessioned, provenance not documented • Believed to be on a long term/indefinite loan but not documented. • Mis-accessioned (i.e. evidently not an item that should not have been added to the permanent collections – i.e. room setting material/prop/replica	• Very unstable material • Beyond repair • Poses immediate risk to other specimens

Using the grid above, the collections review will generate data with a letters based data analysis system. This does not seek to automatically score or rank individual objects or collections, but will provide identifiable trends and highlight specific areas of celebration or concern.

Using this example, a review unit may score an A on significance and use but an E on care and conservation. This indicates that this is an important object (or group of objects) which probably requires prioritising for collections care support and funding.

Museums have also developed review grids which incorporate a very clear numerical scoring system based on an individual project's strategic priorities. These result in review units obtaining an overall numerical score across a number of criteria. Although useful in ranking objects (or groups of objects) this numerical approach can override the subtle nuances that a letters based approach provides.

If you are using a scores based or numerical ranking approach to the review,which could lead to irreversible decisions for collections, e.g. around disposal, it is important that when making decisions full consideration is given to the future needs of users or possible changes to organisational priorities.

The example below again used elements from the UCL Collections Review Rubric and the Renaissance East Midlands Significance Assessment Toolkit but incorporated a numerical scoring system. It is evident from the review grid that potential for display has a high priority within this review.

	Display potential	Significance and relevance to the collections development policy	Learning and engagement potential	Condition assessment	Completeness		Interpreting the scores
Maximum score	**30**	**25**	**20**	**15**	**10**		**Overall total: 100**
Score	**22-30**	**20-25**	**16-20**	**13-15**	**9-10**		**79-100 – Excellent object**
Excellent	Potential to be: • Permanently on display with access in many forms to the general public. • Considered to have a high 'wow' factor. • Strongly identified in the public's mind with the organisation or location. • A focal point for an exhibition	Of clear national, regional, local or community use and integral to the collections development policy e.g. through the iconic status or historical/cultural value. Object known to be unique or rare.	Potential to be: • Actively used as a learning aid. • Engaged in outreach teaching programmes, widening participation in wider community, e.g. loan box use. • Regularly used in public events, workshops and demonstrations.	Object is in good, stable exhibition-ready condition and any damage is integral to its significance and historical importance.	Object is either fully complete or the missing elements are integral to its importance and significance. Object appears to be in its original condition.		Likely to be accessioned and in good condition with unique value and rarity. High potential for display and public focus. An object with the 'wow' factor. Definitely for retention in the permanent collections
Score	**15-20**	**13-19**	**10-15**	**9-12**	**6-8**		**76-52 –Good object**
Good	Potential to: • Engage visitor interest and stimulate gallery discussion. • Appear on the website • Be a focal point for a secondary display space. • Contribute as a support object in a major exhibition space. • Be displayed with access to the general public.	Within the Collections Development policy and of clear local importance, and being integral to the museum's educational and social purpose. No other museum is known to have an example.	Potential to be: • Used in outreach and learning activities. • Used to support aspects of learning. • Included in handling/loan box use. Possibly originally collected and used to support learning, but no longer used.	Object is in fair stable and nearly exhibition ready condition. Some minor remedial conservation maybe required before display or use.	Object is complete or missing only a small number of parts. Object is in near original condition, or any adaptations are consistent with its history and use. Any missing parts do not make it unrecognisable.		Regarded as owned by the organisation and within the collections development policy remit. Maybe unusual or rare. In good condition with potential for learning and display. For retention and consideration should be given to widening access and use.
Score	**7-14**	**6-12**	**5-9**	**4-8**	**3-5**		**51-27 – Average object**
Average	No current public focus but may have some potential for this in the future. Not known to have been used in displays or used more than 5 years ago.	Of little specific local, community or organisational importance but possibly some historical or scientific interest. No known connection to the local area. Outside of the Collections Development policy.	Little potential for current use. Not known to have been used in handling or as part of loans boxes, but some possible potential for this.	Object appears unstable and/or in poor condition. Significant specialist remedial conservation will be required prior to display or use.	Object is incomplete and its original function or appearance is not clear, Object has been significantly adapted and these changes do not relate to the significant periods of its history.		Outside of collections development policy remit. In poor condition requiring extensive conservation. Very probably acquired as a set dressing and of no historic value to the collections. No real potential identified for display or learning use. Maybe *considered* for disposal.

Score	0-6	0-5	0-4	0-3	0-2	1-26 – Poor object
Poor	Not suitable for display. No potential for public focus.	Does not fit within collections development policy. Not considered to have historical or scientific interest. Duplicate of existing item. Examples exist in many museums.	No potential as a learning tool. No future value in learning. Not suitable for loan box/handling.	Object is in very poor condition and unstable. Damage is irreversible Poses immediate risk to other objects. Beyond repair.	Object is incomplete and it no longer functions as it should. Object is unrecognisable. Object may not be authentic.	Not accessioned. Very likely a duplicate. No clear link to the collections development policy. Condition is beyond repair and object is incomplete. Not suitable for display and no potential as a learning tool. To be *considered* for disposal.

7. Undertaking the collections review

It is always useful to pilot a review methodology with a small sample of the collection. This will allow any minor changes to be made, timescales to be refined and confidence to be developed within a review team.

Measuring collections against collections review criteria generates a robust, easily presented set of data. This can highlight a collection's strengths and weaknesses and enable anomalies between the selected criteria to be addressed.

Creating a recording grid to populate with data will enable the process to be swift and efficient. A spreadsheet can be populated, either directly whilst completing the review or following an initial manual recording of information. A spreadsheet provides a useful way of collating and interpreting the data.

An example recording sheet using a system of alphabetic scoring is shown below

Collections Review Recording Form														
Review date: March 2014														
Sheet no:														
Collection Name	Location : building	Location : detail (bay/shelf/box)	Acc no.	Review unit	No of objects	SIGNIFICANCE	PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT POTENTIAL	FORMAL LEARNING	RESEARCH USE	OWNERSHIP	CONDITION ASSESSMENT	Notes	Reviewer name	Date
Bradshaw	Main store	Bay 3, shelf AA,	1998.11-27	Shelf AA – farm implements	17	a	b	c	d	e	a		Joanne Smith	3/3/2014
Bradshaw	Main store	Bay 3 Shelf AB	1998.34	Farm log book	1	a	b	b	c	a	d	Important supporting information in history file	Joanne Smith	3/3/2014

An example recording sheet using a numeric scoring system is shown below:

Collections Review Recording Form

Review date: March 2014

Sheet no:

No.	Collection Name	Location : building	Location : detail (bay/shelf/box)	Review unit description (description and number of boxes, number of shelves, individual object ...)	Accession no., temporary number or identification number	Est. no. of objects	DISPLAY POTENTIAL SCORE OUT OF 30	SIGNIFICANCE AND UNIQUENESS TO THE COLLECTIONS DEVELOPMENT POLICY SCORE OUT OF 25	LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT POTENTIAL SCORE OUT OF 20	CONDITION ASSESSMENT SCORE OUT OF 15	COMPLETENESS A SCORE OUT OF 10	TOTAL SCORE/100	Notes	Reviewer name	Date
1	Social history	museum gallery	display case 14	entire display case: 1960s games	1992.12,1992.35.1993.16.1997.43,2001.54-60,2012.7	12	25	20	15	7	7	**74**	Some light damage to printed box lids.	Lee Barber	12.3.2014
2	Natural history	museum gallery	top of display case 10	individual object: stuffed birds under glass dome.	1915.87	1	22	15	9	5	8	**59**		Lee Barber	12.3.2014

8. Interpreting your data

A collections review will generate a considerable amount of data. It is important that this is analysed and interpreted, taking into account the parameters of the criteria used and always focussing back to your original objectives and the questions you are asking the data to answer.

In making recommendations for future use of collections, museums have found it useful to provide a collections review report to present the findings of the project. This enables trends to be identified, key findings from the raw data to be articulated and recommendations to be made, which are backed by the evidence of the results.

When selecting your methodology and the number of criteria to use to measure your collections against, you will need to consider the amount of data which will be generated; the more criteria you use, the more information will need to be analysed.

Where to next?

Once you have developed your collections review methodology and applied it to one area of your collections you will then have a well-established methodology to use, amend and apply to other collections you wish to review.

You will find that as an organisation you become more confident in the use of review methodologies as your experience extends to more complex rationalisation projects. Many museums are now using collections rationalisation as a way to plan the development of their collections to benefit audiences, and as your museum becomes more confident in its use you may want to think about sharing your experience with others. Consider using your local museum networks, and larger groups such as the Collections Trust LinkedIn Collections Management group, to discuss and share with others so that the wider sector can benefit from your experience.

Collections
Trust

The Collections Trust is the professional association for people working in Collections Management. Our mission is to be the leading organisation in the management and use of collections and technology in museums.

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