

Developing Your Collection Acquisition and Deaccession Policies

How do you decide on acquiring or no longer keeping collection items? Every museum needs a framework for making such decisions. This guide aims to help you develop suitable policies for that framework.

An acquisition policy helps your museum to:

- formalise and communicate the criteria for what you collect
- have a basis for deciding what new items you will accept, reject, or seek out
- formalise procedures for acquiring items for your collection.

A deaccession policy helps your museum to:

- formalise and communicate the criteria for retaining collection items
- have a basis for deciding on what no longer serves the needs of your collection
- formalise procedures to deaccession and dispose of collection items.

Both kinds of policies help your museum to:

- make decisions on developing a collection that you can house and care for properly
- have procedures to clarify issues of ownership and other legal and ethical matters
- inform the public, your staff, your governing body, and other interested people about how the collection is developed.

Repatriation

A repatriation policy is related to these policies. However, though it will be touched on in this guide, it is a topic that will be given more extensive treatment in a forthcoming issue of *Te Papa National Services He Rauemi Resource Guides*.

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Criteria for your

collection



What is your collection for?

At the heart of any policy on your collection lies your identity and purpose as a museum. Your collection is a focus of your organisation's mission. Defining your museum's purpose helps you to identify what is significant about and for your collection.

Your mission statement, or the museum's key objectives that flow from it, should be used as a preamble to give the background to, and the rationale for, your acquisition and deaccession policies.



Shantytown **collection policy**

Excerpt: the collection policy in relation to mission and objectives

The mission of the West Coast Historical and Mechanical Society is to provide an authentic, hands-on, educational experience with a focus on the historical, cultural, and natural evidence of the West Coast region and consequent European settlement. In order to achieve its mission, the following objectives have been adopted.

- a. To provide a museum the community feels proud of and is involved in.
- b. To work in partnership with other organisations (e.g. District Councils, Tourism West Coast, Museums Aotearoa) to appropriately display, protect and promote the region's historic past and tourism industry future.
- c. To appropriately acquire items and develop the museum's collection for the benefit of the West Coast region, its residents and visitors.
- d. To appropriately use and display the museum's collection for the benefit of the West Coast region, its residents and visitors.
- e. To safeguard the museum's collections and ensure that the collections are preserved for the benefit of future generations.
- f. To operate an effective, efficient and professional organisation with sound management principles.



Guiding principles for developing the collection

You should state the guiding principles that underlie your acquisition and deaccession policies. Your museum's purpose can help you determine these. The principles will often cover the following matters.

Acquisition criteria

What is significant for your collection? What geographical area or iwi rohe (district) do you focus on? What period of time? What categories of items or subjects of special interest?

Are there significant cultural or spiritual values associated with your collection? Do you have specific programmes of research and exhibitions? Do you make allowances for exceptional collecting opportunities?

Preventive conservation

Do you provide suitable housing for items or taonga in your collection? Are you able to give them appropriate levels of care? Are there cultural and spiritual values, as well as physical requirements, to take into account? What resources of time, money, and expertise are required?

Access

What kinds of access do you promote for your collection? Through exhibitions? Research? Education programmes? Online? Do partnerships with groups or communities or kaitiakitanga (guardianship) relationships with families and iwi play a part in your collection management? Are there restrictions on any items or taonga because of cultural considerations?

Ownership

What are your requirements for ownership? For the sourcing of collection items? For compliance with legislation and international conventions? Your rights to use and dispose of items as you see fit? Will you consider conditional ownership? Do you include Māori concepts of ownership in your policies and practice?

Cooperation and consultation

What other organisations are there with similar or related interests to yours? How will you manage any conflicts of interest with other organisations? What possibilities are there for cooperation between organisations in developing your collection? Do you have policies on consulting Māori about taonga?

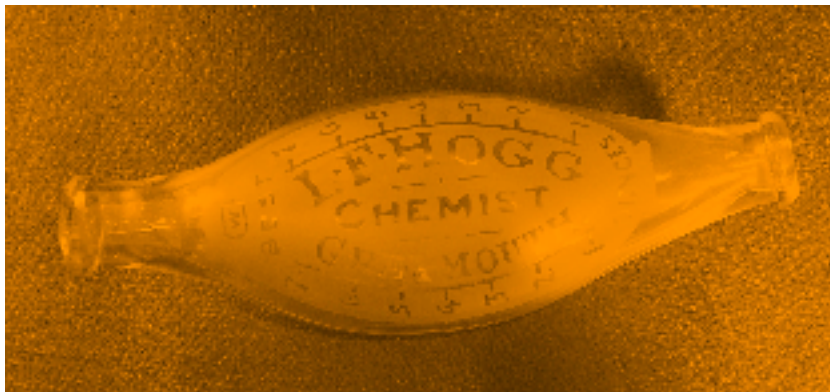
Other sensitive issues

Are you likely to have to deal with issues such as the handling and storage of kōiwi tangata (human remains) or the repatriation of collection items?

Internal ethics

The collection interests of your museum may coincide with those of individuals associated with it (such as staff, trustees, or board members). Do you require them to declare their interests? How do you handle any ethical issues for individuals or conflicts of interest between the parties?

These principles will be reflected in the procedures you adopt for acquiring and disposing of items in your collection. We look at how they might apply in the following sections.



Acquiring

items for your collection



There are four main ways in which items come into collections permanently:

- purchases
- gifts
- bequests
- fieldwork.

Items might also sometimes come from exchanges between museums. They might also come into your custody through the requirements of the Antiquities Act.

Temporary or special purpose items

Loans, short- and long-term, are items that need similar treatment for housing and care as permanent collection items. Their arrangement and management, however, have different requirements, and loans will be the subject of a forthcoming issue of *Te Papa National Services He Rauemi Resource Guides*.

Special purpose items include models and props made or brought in for exhibitions and hands-on specimens for use in educational activities. In our treatment of this topic, if they serve more as accessories or equipment, they need not be assessed by criteria for collection acquisitions.

Acquisition strategy

Some museums have an acquisition strategy or collection plan as part of their acquisition policy. Your strategy may relate to your collection's strengths, or particular themes or stories that you are pursuing. It will link with your museum's key objectives, which in turn link with the museum's mission.

You can use such a plan to show your acquisition emphases for a particular period, how you might seek out collection items and what you can budget for, as well as decide about gifts, bequests, or exchanges that come your way. Te Papa, for example, has a strategy planned for three years ahead, but reviewed and updated annually.

Dealing with owners and donors

In whatever way an opportunity for acquiring a collection item presents itself, if you have a stated policy on acquisitions and a procedure for deciding, you will be able to deal straightforwardly and courteously with owners, would-be donors, or their agents.

This can be particularly important for maintaining and building relationships within your local community. With donors, for example, you should be prepared to put as much thought into a decision to refuse an offered item as to accept it. You should also be able and prepared to say why. Your knowledge of the interests of other organisations may enable you to suggest alternative places for a gift or bequest.

You should not feel bound to accept gifts and bequests. They should be assessed for acquisition as rigorously as purchases. Your policy can point the way for open discussion on the suitability of gifts or bequests for your collection, and avoid giving offence in the case of refusal.

Shantytown collection **policy**

Excerpt: acquisition

Guidelines

Shantytown subscribes to a process of selective acquisition and is under no obligation to accept all items offered to it. Shantytown will not acquire any items which do not fit within its collection policy or for which it is unable to provide adequate physical protection, care, and documentation...

Conditions preventing acquisition

- a. Shantytown supports international efforts to prevent trafficking in stolen or illegally exported cultural material, and will not acquire any item known to have been obtained illegally.
- b. Shantytown will not acquire any specimen that has been collected in contravention of any law for the protection of wildlife species.
- c. Shantytown will not acquire any object known to have been collected in circumstances which are unscientific or intentionally destructive or damaging to archaeological sites.
- d. Shantytown will not acquire any item known to have been collected in contravention of the Antiquities Act 1975.



Procedures for

acquisition

Acquisition is a three-step process: assessment, approval, and accession. Your policy should identify who is responsible for these steps.

Assessing the merits of any acquisition involves four main questions:

- What do you know about the item?
- Is the item significant for your collection?
- Can you look after the item?
- Can you be sure that your ownership will be valid?

The following sections provide a checklist of matters needing consideration. (Warner Haldane's guide *Why Preserve That?*, published by Otago Museum, has been particularly useful in the compilation of this checklist.)

Information available

- Is the item complete?
- If the item is a fragment, does it provide useful information about the larger structure to which it belonged?
- Is the item unmodified?
- If modified, are the modifications significant?
- Has any modification, conservation, or restoration been fully documented?
- Is the item accompanied by information, as appropriate, on its:
 - origin?
 - identification?
 - composition?
 - manufacture?
 - use?
 - previous ownership?
 - cultural or spiritual dimensions
 - general history?
- Can information about this item be readily verified or, if absent, readily discovered?



Assessing significance

Does the item fit your criteria for:

- locality
- period
- collection emphasis
- aesthetic value
- cultural or spiritual value
- values of association with, or achievement by, people significant to your collection focus
- rarity (once common)
- rarity (always rare)
- uniqueness within your collection
- special relevance to other items in your collection
- availability in collections elsewhere?

Requirements for care

Every item you acquire places a demand on your resources of space, time, money, and expertise. This part of the assessment focuses on the physical side of the item, but should also include consideration of cultural and spiritual well-being.

- Is the item in good physical condition?
- Has any modification, restoration, or conservation been carefully carried out?
- Do you have physical space to house the item?
- Do you have suitable storage conditions?
- If required, do you have the resources to make and maintain special arrangements to store the item appropriately?
- If required, do you have the resources to give the item appropriate conservation care?
- If required, can you provide or do you have access to sources of appropriate cultural and spiritual care for the item?
- Will the item fit your criteria for collection accessibility?

Issues of ownership

Valid title

If you acquire an item, you want to be sure that you are entitled to the full rights of ownership. In the first place, this means ensuring that you are dealing with the entitled owner or their agent.

Conditional or limited ownership

You also need to ascertain any limitations on or conditions of ownership. This may be a specially sensitive issue with taonga Māori. It is also the case with copyright, for example, in artworks. You may own the artwork itself, but your entitlement to make copies of it, say, to be sold as postcards may be restricted by the work's copyright owner. *Te Papa National Services He Rauemi Resource Guides 9: 'Museums and Copyright'* provides an introduction to this complex area.

Some museums are very reluctant to acquire items that have conditions attached - of access, for example, or restrictions on use. But every case is unique, and museums are increasingly sensitive to the nuances of relationships that come with the transfer of ownership, particularly involving groups in their communities. Te Papa, for example, may consider conditions that 'in the judgment of the Chief Executive and Kaihautū are not contrary to the interests of Te Papa.'

Many museums are dealing with these issues case by case - often the first case will result in guidelines for how to deal with others. Experience may allow for a written procedure, but responsibility for such decisions should rest with the museum's top management or its governing body.

Questions about ownership

- Is the item being offered to you by a person legally entitled to do so?
- Are you dealing with the owner or a properly authorised agent? Or, in the case of taonga, with a mandated representative or group?
- Is documentation of the history of ownership available and verifiable?
- If not, can it be readily found out?
- Can you be sure that acquisition of this item has not infringed the rights of its owner or previous owners?
- Can you be sure that collection or acquisition of the item has not contravened any New Zealand or international environmental or cultural protection law, regulation, or convention?
- Can you be sure that collection has not involved intentional destruction or damage to reserves, historic sites, or monuments, including wāhi tapu (sacred places)?
- Does copyright law apply to this item?
- If so, are you expressly acquiring copyright along with physical ownership or will you need to negotiate copyright ownership separately?
- Are there any other conditions applying to the acquisition of this item?

It is useful to record all this information as evidence that an acquisition has been thoroughly examined and to lodge the record as part of the item's documentation.



Approval and accessioning

Your written-up assessment forms part of a proposal for acquisition. The proposal is what the decision makers use to approve an acquisition. Your policy will state who is responsible for these approvals - you should ensure that there is competent input from the budget-holding and curatorial sides of your operation, as well as senior management or your governing body.

You may also need to incorporate iwi or Māori input for taonga, or indeed from other groups where there is an identified community interest in proposed acquisitions.

Identify the chain of command and where the final decision making lies. All decisions on acquisition should be documented and accountable.

An approval sets the formal acquisition process in motion. The documentation of the proposal and the actual acquisition should be part of an item's collection record.

Once ownership of an item has been transferred to you, you arrange for its accessioning. This is the process of giving the item an identification number and documenting it in the museum's database. Accessioning signifies the item's entry into your collection management system, with all the attendant responsibilities for its security and care.



Deaccessioning

items from your **collection**



Developing your collection includes deciding on what to retain. The criteria for your collection form the basis for the criteria for your deaccession policy, the process by which you review your collection. The re-evaluation of collection items - whether they meet the collection criteria for relevance or resources required to care for them - is an ongoing process. This is especially important if you change the emphasis of your collection.

Reasons for deaccessions

The circumstances when you might decide to dispose of collection items include:

- when an item's presence in your collection is no longer relevant to your museum's present or likely future purposes - the definition of relevance should line up with your acquisition policy
- when an item is shown to be of inferior quality, either in itself or relative to other items
- when an item threatens the safety or preservation of other items, for example, through pest infestation or chemical hazard (such as nitrate film)
- when an item can no longer be cared for properly by your museum and its survival would be better served elsewhere
- when an item is in poor physical condition or has been damaged and conservation or restoration is not feasible or will render the item false or useless
- when an item has been shown to be fraudulent
- when an item has been collected in unethical or illegal ways
- when an item has been lost or stolen
- when it is no longer appropriate to keep the item in the museum (for example, kōiwi or human remains) and/or you need to facilitate the repatriation of an item.

You should state your criteria for deaccessions just as you do for acquisitions. This is part of the museum's practice of open communication with and accountability to its community. It is always advisable anyway to seek, and document, the views of external experts in proposed deaccessions.

Situations involving disposal of parts of a museum's collection can require a high degree of sensitivity in their handling, especially, for example, when they concern gifts or bequests of people long associated with the museum or community.

Procedures for deaccessions

There are two parts to the process of deaccessioning:

- the procedure for withdrawing items from your collection management system
- actual disposal of the items - most often by donation, sale, or exchange.

Authorisation

Whoever authorises acquisitions in your museum should also be involved in authorising deaccessions.

There are three main questions that the process needs to answer:

- Does your museum have legal title to the item?
- Do you have a valid reason for disposing of it?
- Are there any interested parties, such as previous owners, who need to be consulted prior to the item's disposal?

Legal title

This can be a difficult question to answer if there are no records to show how the item came to be in the museum's collection. Is it the museum's to dispose of? Could it have been a poorly documented long-term loan? Many museums have a specific 'pre-disposal period' when they publicise their intentions to deaccession items, particularly to clear up ownership doubts and claims.



Other interested parties

Particularly in the case of gifts and bequests, the original donor, their family, or their descendants may wish the item to be returned to them if the museum has no further use for it. At any rate, they may have an interest in what kind of disposal is planned for the item. You should be prepared to cover all bases by consulting as widely as required. Again, the pre-disposal period is an opportunity for this.

Deaccessioning

Once a decision to deaccession an item has been made, you should document this in an entry to your collection database. However, retain the item's record in the database as well as a record of the decision. These should always be available for public scrutiny and are a safeguard in case the integrity of the museum's actions is challenged.

Methods of disposal

There are five main options for disposal of collection items:

- return to the donor or family
- gift to or exchange with another appropriate institution
- public sale
- transfer within the museum for use as a hands-on or educational aid
- destroy or recycle

The latter should be an option of last resort. You should include procedures for these options in your policy.

Ethical considerations in selling

The selling of deaccessioned collection items is an area in which ethical issues and conflicts of interest are most likely to arise. Many museums expressly prohibit anyone connected with the museum - staff members, trustees, board members, or their families or agents - from purchasing deaccessioned items. This is a form of 'insider trading' and ethically very risky.

You will need to think through the ethics of the situation and set down guidelines in your policy.



Reviewing your

policies



Like all policies, your acquisition and deaccession policies should be reviewed regularly in line with the overall strategic plan for your museum. They will reflect the changes and developments in your museum purpose, your resources of time, money, and expertise, your exhibition programmes, and your methods of delivering information for visitors, researchers, and other interested people.

Ensure that your policies and any processes of review are accessible to staff members as well as interested parties outside the museum. Collection development is a critical part of a museum's operations and public presentation. A well-thought-out policy can provide an effective tool for its successful implementation.



Glossary

Kaitiakitanga Guardianship, but also in a wider sense the responsibility of iwi and hapū to exercise care and management for taonga and other resources

Policy A statement of commitment to mission, mandate, and purposes in relation to a particular museum function

Strategy An approach to key issues affecting a museum

Taonga Treasured resources, objects, or property

Wāhi tapu A place set aside for the performance of sacred rites

Further reading

Haldane, W., *Why Preserve That?* Otago Museum, 1992

Te Papa National Services He Rauemi Resource Guides No 5: 'Preventive Conservation'

Te Papa National Services He Rauemi Resource Guides No 8: 'A guide to guardians of iwi treasures'

Te Papa National Services He Rauemi Resource Guides No 9: 'Museums and copyright'

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