

# NMS Collections Rationalisation Programme 2010-14

## Report by the Head of NMS

### Summary

As part of its strategy to review service needs and reduce costs NMS has an ongoing Collections Rationalisation programme whereby collections are assessed on a regular basis and those that are not suitable for future display or study needs are found alternative homes. This will ensure that the NMS:

- Reduces its accommodation needs to the minimum necessary for the safe and accessible storage of collections, in order to reduce the financial and staffing burden of collections care
- Ensures that all collections are accessible and used on a regular basis for the benefit of the public

Annex 2 sets out the latest list of items which have been assessed as surplus to NMS' requirements as being of poor quality, or of limited interest, or more relevant to another museum collection.

The programme is following best practice as advised by the Museums Association's Code of Ethics and Arts Council England's Museums Accreditation Standard.

### Recommendation

That members approve the rationalisation of the items listed in Annex 2.

## 1 Background

NMS has an ongoing Collections Rationalisation Programme whereby collections are assessed on a regular basis and those that are not suitable for future display or study needs are found alternative homes (see Annex 1). This is with the aim of:

- Reducing NMS' accommodation needs to the minimum necessary for the safe and accessible storage of collections, in order to reduce the financial and staffing burden of collections care
- Ensuring that all collections are accessible and used on a regular basis for the benefit of the public

The policy was considered and approved by the Norfolk Joint Museums & Archaeology Committee on 14 January 2011.

## 2 Collections review

The objects listed *in Annex 2* have been identified as candidates for deaccessioning and disposal. The list has been scrutinised by the NMS' internal Rationalisation Committee, which comprises the Chief Curator, Collections Development Manager, the Senior Conservation Officer and the Registrar. Where possible these objects will be found a home in another museum or cultural institution.

### **3 Resource Implications**

#### **3.1 Finance**

It is anticipated that this programme will identify savings of up to £15,000 a year. NMS will fund any necessary revenue or minor capital expenses resulting from moving in or out of accommodation out of efficiency savings. There will be a risk to budgets if the projected savings are not achieved.

#### **3.2 Property**

NMAS will vacate one leased and one NCC-owned building with advice from NPS.

### **4 Other Implications**

#### **4.1 Equality Impact Assessment**

NMS puts diversity, equality and community cohesion at the heart of service development and service delivery. It aims to ensure that activities included in the service plan are accessible to diverse groups in Norfolk and that all policies, practices and procedures undergo equality impact assessment. These assessments help the service focus on meeting the needs of customers in relation to age, disability, gender, race, religion & belief and sexual orientation.

This review of collections aims to improve accessibility. Principles of representation and equality will guide the selection of objects for disposals, which will all be offered in the first instance to other Accredited museums.

#### **4.2 Health and Safety Implications**

The rationalisation programme will improve health and safety conditions for staff by removing risks in overcrowded stores.

#### **4.3 Any Other implications**

Officers have considered all the implications which members should be aware of. Apart from those listed in the report (above), there are no other implications to take into account.

### **5 Section 17 – Crime and Disorder Act**

All NMS service plans take account of the need to address the issues of social exclusion, one of the key triggers for crime and disorder. Many of the museums are located in areas of social deprivation and their development is part of an integrated regeneration strategy. By providing services that are accessible to local people, by encouraging participation by young people at risk of offending, by assisting schools in improving pupil attainment, by generating pride in the local heritage, NMAS is making a substantial contribution towards reducing crime and disorder in Norfolk.

### **6 Action Required**

That members approve the rationalisation of the items listed in Annex 2.

# Annex 1: Strategy for rationalising NMS collections

## 1 Introduction

As part of a regular programme of good collections care all museum collections will be reviewed to ensure that objects conform to standards of high priority and top quality. All material that does not conform will be disposed of. This paper sets out how the review will be undertaken. The key elements of the process outlined below are required under the Museum Accreditation Scheme, the UK standards scheme for museums that ensure good practice is followed in all publicly funded museums.

The policy of the NMS is to preserve and interpret Norfolk's history while also providing a window on the world for the people of Norfolk. The NMS has rich and diverse collections and is ranked within the top 2.5% of non-national registered museums. These collections are held in trust on behalf of current and future generations. The collections housed in the Castle Museum & Art Gallery and the Shirehall Collections Study Centre have been Designated by the DCMS as being of national significance. Fifty museums out of over 2,000 Accredited museums have received this distinction, and a challenge fund has been established by the DCMS to support the work of Designated collections. The NMS has received £742,000 since the Fund was created in 1999 towards improving the quality of collections, making it accessible on-line, and improving our displays.

Collecting within the NMS is undertaken in accordance with the Collecting Policy, which is reviewed and approved by Committee every five years. This sets out the strengths of the collections, areas for future collecting and constraints on collecting, such as resources, space such as resources, space and expertise. Cromer Museum, for instance, will only acquire material that provides information about the history of Cromer not currently held within the museum. Thus, duplicates or material that is historic but not otherwise interesting or informative, will not be acquired. This does not preclude collecting outside the terms of the Policy in exceptional cases, such as the West Runton elephant, which is within the terms of the Collecting Policy but of unusual size and national importance. A similar exception is the famous teapot collection of over 3,000 examples is now a nationally important collection without parallel elsewhere in the country and supports the study of styles in ceramic design. It is also a good marketing "hook" for visitors and spreads the fame of Norfolk throughout the world through a series of international travelling exhibitions funded by Twinings.

## 2 Using collections

**The Core collections basically fall into three categories, with different levels of access:**

- 1. Display material** represents the best or most significant items in the collections and is easily accessible by all people visiting the museums. Gallery displays are highly interpreted to attract the interest of the general visitor and, hopefully, enthuse them. The Egyptology collection at Norwich Castle "earns its keep" by providing an interesting display for the general visitor and an important resource for schools, which are able to study this part of the national curriculum from real objects in their local museum.
- 2. Study collections** provide depth for people who want to learn more about a specific subject. The emphasis is on presenting as many objects as possible for study. Improved study facilities are being provided at Collections Study Centres, such as the Shirehall, Carrow House or Gressenhall, where collections are

available in reference galleries. Objects are either freely accessible when the museum is open, on open storage (easily accessible with an appointment or on regular open days) or in study rooms (open on set days a week).

3. **Long-term research material** is needed as evidence for current or future research and only needs to be available on an appointment basis. This can be contained in high density storage, thereby making the most cost effective use of space. It is debatable how much of this material is needed but museums have a responsibility to future research to ensure that important evidence is not destroyed unnecessarily. New analysis techniques are being developed all the time and often unprepossessing samples from a Roman midden or pieces of fire-damaged stone can provide important information. "Seahenge" is a case in point. The timbers are over 4,000 years old and have been damaged by the action of the tides but English Heritage has been able to determine the year and month in which the trees were felled, and how many individual people worked on them. However, we can't keep everything and a balance needs to be struck between keeping enough for future needs but not so much that there are no resources to do anything else.

### **Items not retained for the Core Collection are categorised as follows:**

4. **Working or demonstration material** Objects are put to working use or demonstration use at or on behalf of the museum. Items may require sufficient restoration to satisfy for example health and safety requirements, functionality, and should take account of presentation issues of object preservation/restoration within the museum environment. They should be used under defined conditions that are stated in their documentation.
5. **Education, handling and loan collection** Objects are included for educational reference material only, including loans. There is an implied deterioration through usage over time.
6. **Set dressing and cannibalisation** Objects are used as set dressing for on-site activities of the museum, following the principal of ultimate disposal by the 'back to nature' route.
7. **Dispersal** Objects are sold or given away to others. We shall follow MA and Registration guidelines. There will be a presumption that objects will remain in the public domain and offered initially to similar institutions at whichever location provides the best balance of care, context and access.
8. **Disposal** Following MA guidelines objects are scrapped or cannibalised for reference material or restoration use.

## **3 The rationalisation programme**

The rationalisation programme will particularly concentrate on identifying which material should fall in category 3 and below. Material in category 2 will also be reviewed as it is likely that there is some material which, over the years, has become surplus to requirements. Material in category 1 will have been reviewed when a decision was taken to put it on display. The NMS has an ongoing programme of renewing or refreshing displays which allows for changing objects on display and assessing their importance.

### **3.1 First steps in the rationalisation programme**

The Collections Development Manager will be responsible for the review programme. Other staff to be involved include:

- Chief Curator
- Head of Conservation or Senior Conservator

- Staff with curatorial responsibility for collections at specific sites, e.g. Curator of the museum
- Subject specialists

The first step will be to agree a review process and timetable with staff and identify staff teams to carry out the review. The timetable will be affected by major developments currently underway or in the planning cycle that will determine the availability of staff.

### **3.2 Identifying material for rationalisation**

We shall particularly examine material in the following categories to consider them for rationalisation:

- Does not fall within the current collecting policy.
- Unethically acquired material.
- Loan material no longer required for display.
- Does not provide important information about Norfolk and its history.
- Is irrelevant to the collection.
- Has no reasonable expectation of being useful for display or research.
- Is unaccessioned (ie has not been properly recorded).
- Is unprovenanced (ie has no background information to provide a context).
- Is of poor quality compared with other examples in the collection.
- Has deteriorated beyond any useful purpose (eg through decay or infestation. This might be a textile item that has rotted or a natural history specimen that has an infestation)
- Poses a threat to other objects or people (eg by contamination. This might be WW2 gas masks with degraded asbestos filters or radio-active geological specimens).
- Is an unnecessary duplicate.
- Where there is no reasonable expectation that NMS will be able to provide suitable levels of curation or collections care.
- Is of good quality but would fit better into another museum's collection (eg Archaeological material has been recently transferred to West Stowe Anglo-Saxon Village.
- May be more appropriate to the NRO or NLIS.

Meeting one of the above criteria does not automatically condemn any object. Each object will be considered on its merits. There may well be good reasons why objects that fall into one or more of the above categories should be kept, but they will be critically examined and justified.

### **3.3 Options for disposal**

There are several ways in which material that is not suitable for the NMS core collections might continue to fulfil a useful purpose including:

- Transfer to a handling collection for use with schools or the public
- Working machinery can be used to engage the public and demonstrate historic practices

Other alternatives include:

- Transfer to another Accredited museum by gift or sale
- Return to donor or lender
- Transfer to another public institution by gift or sale
- Repatriation to country of origin
- Charitable donation

- Cannibalisation or set dressing
- Sale on the open market, or
- Destruction (as a last resort)

### **3.4 Process for decision taking**

The process for taking decisions about disposal is time consuming but it is important to ensure that

- all legal responsibilities are fulfilled,
- that the sensibilities of donors are respected,
- that the political views of the partners in the Joint Museums & Archaeology Agreement are taken into account, and
- that the public retain confidence in the NMS and the County Council as trustees of Norfolk's heritage.

### **3.5 The process of selection for disposal will be as follows:**

- Objects for disposal will be identified by staff with curatorial or collections care responsibilities at each site, assisted by subject specialists as appropriate
- Documentation will be checked to confirm that the NMS is the legal owner of the items and is legally free to dispose of them (there may be conditions attached to a bequest etc)
- Permission for disposal will be sought from the Joint Museums & Archaeology Committee
- The views of particularly interested groups or organisations will be sought
- If material was acquired or conserved with grant aid, contact will be made with the grant funding body to establish whether the funder has any requirements or views on the disposal. Reimbursement of grant aid is a standard requirement unless the object is to be transferred as a gift to another Accredited museum.

### **3.6 Process for disposal of accessioned material**

Once Committee has agreed the list of proposed disposals the following steps will be taken:

- As required by the conditions of the Museum Accreditation Scheme, a notice will be placed in the Museums Journal or on-line equivalent, and any other appropriate specialist publication, advertising the availability of significant material to other Accredited museums.
- Direct contact will be made with any Accredited museums or other public institutions that would have a particular interest in any of the objects.
- If no Accredited museum is interested and the material was donated within the last 20 years, attempts will be made to contact the donor to return the item.
- Material in which no interest is expressed will be either sold or destroyed.
- Complete records of all transactions will be kept.