

Review and Rationalisation of Collections at Leicestershire County Council Museums Service



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Review and Rationalisation Good Practice Case Studies

This case study is one of a series of Good Practice Case Studies, researched and written by the Collections Trust, and funded by Arts Council England. These case studies aim to illustrate how Accredited museums have developed their strategy, policy and practice to meet the needs of their own services, as well as to meet the Accreditation Standard. Although the project described in this Case Study goes beyond the requirements of Accreditation, because it reviewed non-accessioned collections, it is still an exemplar of good practice which can inform work with accessioned collections.

This case study explores collections review and rationalisation work which took place at Leicestershire County Council Museums Service from 2011 onwards. It is published alongside:

- A Guide to Selecting a Review Methodology for Collections Rationalisation
- Good Practice Case Study: Collections Review and Rationalisation at The Polar Museum
- Good Practice Case Study: Collections Review and Rationalisation at North Hertfordshire Museums Service
- Good Practice Case Study: Collections Review and Rationalisation at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust
- Good Practice Case Study: Collections Review and Rationalisation at Historic Royal Palaces

Leicestershire County Council museums all have Full Accreditation status, the most recent award being November 2011.

Accreditation, Review and Rationalisation

The **Museum Accreditation Standard** requires that Accredited museums have an approved policy for developing collections (also known as an Acquisition and Disposal Policy). (Accreditation Standard 2011, Arts Council England, 2. *Collections. 2.2 Development Policy*)

The policy must include:

- A statement of purpose
- An overview of current collections
- Future themes and collecting
- Themes and priorities for rationalisation and disposal
- Information about the legal and ethical framework for acquisition and disposal of items

The Collections Development Policy encourages museums to consider rationalisation as a way to address collections management issues and make collections more accessible to visitors and users. 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.

Leicestershire County Council Museums Service: Case Study

This case study explores collections rationalisation, placing an emphasis on the need to undertake rationalisation in the context of a planned and formal review of the collections. It focusses on how rationalisation can be linked to disposal, but can also create new and exciting opportunities for reconsidering the way in which museums use collections.

Leicestershire County Council Museum Service operates seven museum sites and provides a range of services and resources for visitors and users. The collections, which were started in 1849, and now number over 1 million objects reflect the varied history of the county and the people who live and work there. The collections form the basis of museum displays, travelling exhibitions, events programmes, community projects and academic research.

Project summary

The collections for review centred on the school loans collection, known as Resource Box. This collection, although not accessioned, has particular significance as it was one of the first school loan collections to be created in the UK. The first recorded loan was in 1931, by 1934 the service held 200 loan objects and in 2011, celebrating its 80th year, there were over 2000 objects listed in the catalogue. Resource Box contained a wide range of objects

focussing strongly on social history and natural history specimens.

The loan collections were historically managed and delivered to schools, without charge, on a demand basis. In recent years it had become increasingly difficult to market the collection to new customers without a website and due to budget restraints, staff reductions and a lack of storage space it was also difficult for teachers to visit the stores to view and select items.

Working collaboratively with colleagues from the council's Library Services for Education (LSE) it was decided that Resource Box could be transferred into the service offered by LSE. Library Services for Education is an established and valued service providing book stock and curriculum linked resources to schools via an online booking and delivery service.

A full review of the Resources Box collection was therefore undertaken to ensure that all items transferred were of sufficient quality and relevance.



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Children using the museum handling collection in the 1940s.

Project description

The review and assessment of the collections was carried out during an intensive 9 month period. The aim was to ensure that collections transferred to LSE were in good condition and would be used and accessible to schools.

The questions the review set out to answer were:

- How many of each object type are there?
- What is the condition of the object and what is it stored in?
- Is there support material available?
- Is the information accurate?
- Is the terminology in the object's documentation appropriate and up to date?

A range of existing published collection review methodologies was considered and a bespoke methodology was created. This was tested with a pilot group of objects and amended to create a simple, effective and quick review methodology.

The project used a paper based review grid system to work with the objects and gather information; this was then entered onto a spreadsheet. This worked well, enabling staff to moderate the data as it was entered and ensuring consistency across all areas. The methodology used a series of numerical gradings (1 [best] - 5 [worst]), which were linked to a colour coding. The colour coding proved a successful means



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Object from the Resource Box Collection

to interpret the data, providing an instant visual representation when entered into a spreadsheet.

It was decided that every object would also be photographed so that an image could be incorporated into an online catalogue.

A team of volunteers was recruited to assist staff in the collections review process. The volunteer team started small, but as space for the project became available, the team numbers increased and there was soon a strong and committed volunteer team. The easy to use methodology ensured that volunteers were quickly able to understand the project and make assessments. The staff lead for the project acted as moderator for the information collected.

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Volunteers from the Resource Box Project.

“We adopted a very flexible approach to volunteering, we ran two review sessions per week and some people came for every session, others for only a few. The methodology was easy to follow and use.”

Everyone involved in the review followed the same guidance sheets and initially worked in small teams. This helped build confidence and enabled those involved to develop a feel for the difference between, for example, a ‘2’ or a ‘3’ grading.

All taxidermy, natural history, organic material and boxes with felt linings were

frozen to deal with possible pest infestations. This was important as objects were being transferred for future use. It involved using a very large walk in freezer, which was housed in the stores for 6 weeks. This process was logistically challenging as it was important to match objects with the information held and it required considerable discipline around collections documentation to keep track of all material.

Resource Box also contained a considerable ethnographic collection. As there was no in-house ethnographic expertise available, it was decided to commission specialist input. A consultant was engaged to conduct the review process and provide recommendations, including the possibility of transferring objects to other Accredited museums.

Interpreting the data was extremely important enabling the project to provide the steer for the analysis and a full understanding of the significance of the objects; this role was undertaken by staff.

Although the collection comprised unaccessioned material, ethical considerations still underpinned the project. The necessary approvals for the transfer and disposal of objects were obtained and the Museums Association [Disposals Toolkit](#) was followed where appropriate.

The project individually reviewed 2000+ objects, which resulted in the following:

- The majority of items were transferred to LSE for use as loan material
- The museum loans material is now fully accessible via an online catalogue with improved ordering for schools and it is proving popular
- The disposal of items which were beyond use due to deterioration has been completed. As the collection was an unaccessioned school loans collection, objects had been handled and used, so it was found that certain objects had reached the end of their useful life
- Items which were too large to be transferred and used by LSE are being considered for disposal.
- Retention of some historic items which are representative of the development of the Leicestershire County Council Museums Service is currently being considered for accessioning into the permanent collections.

Outcomes and lessons learned

- A positive outcome has been achieved for the collections, with the majority transferred to the Leicestershire Schools Education service for continued use by schools as loan material
- The collections review methodology enabled a large number of objects to be reviewed and assessed in a short space of time
- Planning the project was important and having time at the beginning of the project to test and amend the methodology was crucial for success
- A better understanding of the collections has been achieved and all objects have improved documentation and a photograph, which has increased accessibility and use
- The results of the project enabled staff to feel confident in the decisions they made about the collections. Good collections management practice is now being carried forward positively
- It was important to ensure collections expertise was available for all areas of the collections; the project worked with an ethnographic specialist which proved very worthwhile
- The objects transferred to LSE were assessed prior to transfer and were of a high standard for continued loans to schools
- Colleagues in LSE, normally used to working with library collections, are developing new and creative ways of working through engagement with the museum collections
- The project provided an opportunity to rationalise some items which had naturally reached the end of their useful life
- Space has been freed up in the collections store and has improved storage for other collections
- Volunteers involved in the project gained new skills and several have subsequently found employment

'It made me realise the volume of materials you can get through with the help of volunteers, if you make it interesting you can easily get through 2000+ objects 'in 9 months'

Next steps

This was the first collections review undertaken by Leicestershire Museums Service, but it has enabled staff to see the potential for using review methodology with other collections.

The project enabled greater understanding of the Resource Box collections and recognition of opportunities to use these collections to enhance displays in museums. The museum service has recently borrowed items from Library Services for Education to support temporary exhibitions.

Case Study published by the Collections Trust, November 2014, with funding from Arts Council England.

Appendix 1: Leicestershire County Council Museum Service Review Assessment Sheets

Quality / Access Assessment Prompts

Accuracy / Support Information

Grade	Quality / Access
1	Support material provided. Accurate & well presented.
2	Support material provided. Accurate but improvements could easily be made to the presentation.
3	Support material provided. Possible accuracy concern. Poorly presented. Would benefit from further research.
4	Minimal/missing some material or unsuitably packed. Concerns over appropriateness. Needs further research.
5	No material provided. Inappropriate terminology. Must be researched / edited.

Aesthetics

Grade	Quality / Access
1	Well presented model with sensitive setting.
2	Well presented model but setting / background / text on model could be improved.
3	Ok presentation but does appear a little dated in style or presentation.
4	Of average presentation. Concerns over style. Appears quite dated.
5	Poor presentation. Does not represent the theme / topic very well.

Condition Assessment Prompts

Outer Casing

Grade	Condition
1	Complete. In good condition. Opens smoothly / easily. Labeled clearly.
2	Complete. In good condition. Some scratching. Awkward to open or display the object on the case top. Label faded or torn.
3	Complete. Poor appearance –badly scratched/branding labels torn. No Label or display instructions.
4	Missing component. Not possible to display object on the case top due to bad /incorrect fit.
5	Broken/damaged. Unsuitable casing e.g. card box

Inner Casing

Grade	Condition
1	Structurally sound. No marks/scratches. All fixings present.
2	Structurally sound. Some marks/scratches. All fixings present.
3	Previous repair visible but does not impede. Some fixings missing/unsuitable. Discoloured/poor lining.
4	Previous repair visible & impedes quality. Heavily scratched. Poor appearance. Very poor lining.
5	Structurally poor/broken/ missing. Heavily scratched. Poor appearance.

Object Structure






Grade	Condition
1	Very good condition. No concerns.
2	Good condition / minimal damage. Previous repair visible but does not impede in anyway.
3	Slight damage e.g. loose components –could be easily repaired.
4	Significant damage requiring extensive repair.
5	Significant damage/ loss. Beyond repair.

Object Surface

Grade	Condition
1	No signs of damage/ deterioration.
2	Slight deterioration e.g. minimal fading, light surface crazing, ruffled feathers.
3	Moderate deterioration e.g. some surface loss, corrosion, historical pest damage
4	Significant deterioration/ damage resulting in poor appearance. Concerns over pest activity e.g. loose feathers, possibly still active.
5	Extensive damage e.g. major surface loss. Evidence of active pest infestation.

Appendix 2: Leicestershire County Council Museum Service Review Recording Sheet

Leicestershire County Council's Museum Service - Collection Assessment Model													
Resource Box													
: Sherrier Centre		Security:		Environmental conditions:									
				1									
ober 2012 -													
No. of Objects in Unit	Image	Brief Description	Artefact or Replica?	Location	Condition					Quality / Access		Notes	
					Outer casing	Inner casing	Object structure	Object surface	Total /20	Accuracy / support / info	Aesthetics	Total /10	
1		Elder Duck	Artefact	B1/3	1	2	1	5	9	3	1	4	adult carpet beetle on body.
1		Green Woodpecker	Artefact	B1/3	2	1	1	1	5	3	2	5	
1		Green Woodpecker	Artefact	B1/3	2	1	2	2	7	3	2	5	
	