

SUBJECT: MonLife – Museum Service Collections Rationalisation

MEETING: Individual Cabinet Member Decision – Cllr Lisa Dymock

DATE: 14th July 2021

DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED: Not Applicable

1. PURPOSE:

To approve the deaccessing and disposal of selected items from the collections of Monmouthshire Museums to ensure:

- Everything we have in the collections relates to our Collections Development Policy.
- We know the broad themes of our collections
- We are more informed of our future storage needs
- We know where artefacts that need accessioning are and the size of the task

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. To agree the deaccessioning of and disposal actions for the proposed items in line with Section 4 of the Museums Association Disposal Toolkit. (List can be seen in Appendix 2).
2. To note this forms the fourth of a series. Further lists of items will be identified for disposal as we are able to make recommendations.

3. KEY ISSUES:

- 3.1 Accredited museums act within an agreed legal and ethical framework and have approved policies for developing their collections. This ensures that the public continue to have access to public collections – and that they continue to trust museums as responsible long-term guardians. Collections review, rationalisation and disposal are part of responsible collections management.
- 3.2 Accessioning is the process of formally recording that the governing body has taken legal ownership of objects and has committed to care for them over the long term. Deaccessioning is the formal decision by a governing body to take objects out of its accessioned collection and managing the disposal of those objects through an agreed method.
- 3.3 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 or the need to meet organisational priorities.

- 3.4 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 deaccessioning and the disposal of objects, rationalisation can also provide ways of considering new and different uses for collections.
- 3.5 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.
- 3.6 There are many benefits to collections rationalisation:
- 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

Please note these principals are taken from guidance documents published by Collections Trust (the UK body for museum documentation standards) and Arts Council England (the body that oversees Accreditation - the Museum Standard across the UK)

- 3.7 Managing the disposal of objects needs to be done both ethically and in response to organisational strategy. Rationalising a collection is a lengthy process; items need to be assessed, and if they are no longer relevant to the museum, where they go next needs to be assessed.

Section 4 of the Museums Association Disposal Toolkit provides full detail of acceptable methods of disposal. In brief these are:

- Transfer to an Accredited Museum
- Exchange of items between museums
- Transfer to another institution/organisation within the public domain
- Return to donor

- Sale to an accredited museum
- Transfer outside the public domain
- Sale outside the public domain
- Recycling of an item
- Destruction of an item

(In most instances the procedures would be followed in the order set out above, ie Transfer to Accredited Museum being the first procedure and destruction of an item being the last)

The following should be of key consideration when selecting a method of disposal:

- there is a strong presumption for keeping items within the public domain
- there is a strong preference for free gift or transfer to other accredited museums and items should be offered to them in the first instance
- action should be taken that ensure continued public trust in museums.

3.8 There may be a negative impact of antipathy and distrust of the service by people who thought items would be looked after in perpetuity. We will carry out the following procedures to mitigate this risk:

- Follow Museum Ethical Guidelines at all times.
- We will provide updates on the process to ensure that members of the public are aware of what we are doing at all times.
- We will keep relevant organisations up to date including MALD the body responsible for museums in Wales.
- We will keep any bodies that have provided funding towards the purchase or conservation of objects updated and consult with them at relevant stages.

4. EQUALITY AND FUTURE GENERATIONS EVALUATION (INCLUDES SOCIAL JUSTICE, SAFEGUARDING AND CORPORATE PARENTING):

4.1 The work of the Museum Service holds the wellbeing of our Future Generations at its very heart. It is well documented that participation in cultural life improves people's wellbeing and this is something considered throughout the service's work. Collections rationalisation ensures that resources are being targeted appropriately, we are caring for our collections appropriately and the artefacts we care for are telling the stories of our communities. If the method of disposal chosen is to transfer an item to another community then those communities also benefit by being able to tell their stories better.

5. OPTIONS APPRAISAL

5.1 Carrying out collections rationalisation will enable us to manage our collections better to the benefit of our communities.

5.2 This list represents: a number of larger social history items from the Abergavenny and Caldicot collections, previously held at an off-site store; small boxed items from the off site store and a store in Abergavenny Museum that relate to Social History; a number of boxes

and bags containing unstratified or unprovenanced archaeological material of no display, research or scientific value. All of these items have been assessed and a recommendation to keep or dispose has been made, by both the present museum curators and an archaeologist who is an expert in this specific material.

- 5.3 This process involved assessing 833 collection items in total, from which 224 more have now been identified for disposal (in addition to those previously agreed on lists 1, 2 and 3).

Further disposals from the 833 items have been proposed but the team are currently carrying out additional research on the objects to support their proposals or calling on expert advice to inform the process.

Further lists will be brought for decision when these processes have been carried out.

6 EVALUATION CRITERIA

- 6.1 We have referred to industry standards and best practice throughout and have consulted the following documents to help inform the review:

- Spectrum 5.0 (The UK Museums' Collection Management Standard) 'Collections Review' and 'Deaccessioning and disposal' chapters
- Museums Association Disposal Toolkit
- University College London Collections Review Toolkit (https://www.ucl.ac.uk/culture/sites/culture/files/cr_toolkit_final.pdf)
- Collections Trust : A guide to selecting a review methodology for collections rationalisation
- CyMal (2013) why do we have it- A significance process and template (CyMAL is the predecessor to MALD: Museums Archives and Libraries Wales – Welsh Government)
- South East Museum Development Programme: A guide to Collections Review and Rationalisation.
- SHARE Museums East: Collections Rationalisation: Planning for action

7. REASONS:

Like many museums across the UK, the stores housing Monmouthshire Museum Collections are reaching full capacity. In 2017 we carried out a study during which the percentage fullness of each item of shelving/cupboard was visually estimated. The mean fullness of shelving/cupboard housing the collections is 86% demonstrating that the space available for future collecting is very limited and there is little space for the collections to grow and remain relevant. There is also the issue of overcrowding with many of the collections stored on the floor. In addition the volume of Non Accessioned objects across the whole of the Museums Service collections is 23%. This means 23% of collections are not catalogued or recorded making it difficult for the service to use the collections to tell their stories to members of our communities.

8. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

This work can be considered in two parts:

- A pilot study was set up to consider items in our off site store. This list represents items from that work. Money to carry out that work was allocated from museum fundraising.
- Further work across all the collections is being carried out as part of a National Lottery Heritage Fund Award. Two project assistants have been appointed to carry out the work, alongside our Collections Management Officer who is leading on the project and whose hours have been increased and funded by the NLHF.

9. CONSULTEES:

MonLife DMT
Cabinet member for Museums
Museum Staff

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS:

Appendix 1: Equality and Future Generations Evaluation

Appendix 2: Recommendation for Disposal

Appendix 3: Monmouthshire Museums Collections' review process: April 2019

Appendix 4: Collection's Review Scoring grid

<https://www.museumsassociation.org/collections/disposal-toolkit>

<https://326gtd123dbk1xdkdm489u1q-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Deaccessioning-and-disposal.pdf>

11. AUTHOR: Rachael Rogers, Museums Manager

**12. CONTACT DETAILS: Tel: 01873 854282
E-mail: rachaelrogers@monmouthshire.gov.uk**