

Changes to the Museums Association Code of Ethics

Raising funds through selling collections – why that decision was taken

Vanessa Trevelyan, convenor, Ethics Committee

In 2007 the Museums Association made a significant change to the Code of Ethics. Members were asked to agree that one of the key planks of museum stewardship – that museum collections were inviolable and should not be sold – should be amended to allow for sales under certain conditions. This change would allow greater flexibility in disposals, and particularly opening the door to disposal for financial reasons in very special circumstances. This was a very serious change, and one that many museum people felt would open to floodgates to raiding collections to balance the books. However, the Ethics Committee believed that the change was justified and, as Convenor of the Ethics Committee at the time, this was the argument that I presented at the MA Annual General Meeting.

I want to pose two questions –

What sort of museum sector do we want?

What sort of Code of Ethics do we want?

I'd like to take you back to a management exercise that was fashionable a few years ago – identifying what sort of animal your organisation was, and what sort you would like it to be? I think the museums sector could be said to be like a panda. Delightful, cuddly but endangered. Virtually the whole of a panda's time is spent in managing its eating programme. Its only source of nourishment is so lacking in nutrition that it must spend virtually the whole day eating in order to get enough calories to survive. It procreates with difficulty and is in danger of surviving only in zoo conditions. Could this be a vision of museums in the future that spend all their time managing their collections rather than using a well-managed collection to deliver exciting outcomes? Wouldn't we rather be like, say, an otter – inquisitive, speedy, sleek, appealing, playful, sociable, enjoying a nutritious diet? Endangered in some areas but making a strong come-back in the right conditions.

The official definition of a museum says that:

Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society.

Are we perhaps concentrating over much on the collecting and safeguarding, at the expense of inspiration, learning and enjoyment?

One of the key findings of the **Collections for the Future** inquiry was that a new attitude was starting to emerge in the sector towards the movement of objects out of museum collections. The report agreed that disposal is costly and time consuming if it is to be carried out appropriately. But it argued that responsible museums cannot keep expanding their collections indefinitely. Resources are limited, and if museums are to be able to continue to collect, while remaining sustainable, they must consider disposal. Disposal is sometimes a risky option, but so also is retention if inhibits all other activities.

Nick Merriman has carried out a survey into rates of collecting and disposal in a sample of seven museum services, as the basis of his inquiry into the sustainability of collections management practices. The survey demonstrated that museums are continuing to collect at a significant rate, and that disposal is not being used as a collections management tool except in a few museums. Over a 14-year period from 1990 to 2004, in five out of seven institutions, over 500 objects were acquired for every item disposed of. Let's just take a few seconds to reflect on that – 500 objects in and only one out. Think about your own stores – how long could that be sustained?

Nick argued that it should be possible to manage collections growth in a sustainable way by adopting a fully strategic approach to collections management, which includes programmes of community engagement, documentation, storage improvement, acquisition and disposal. Collections for the Future concluded that one significant barrier to appropriate disposal was what it saw as a disproportionate anxiety amongst some museum professionals. Many respondents believed that, by showing a willingness to

dispose of any items, they would open the floodgates to a rush of inappropriate disposals. This fear was particularly acute for some in the local government sector who feared being forced to sell high-value items to raise funds for their authority. However, Collections for the Future concluded that the risk of that actually happening was very low, despite the occasional high-profile case.

Extensive consultation to inform the changes before you today, also found that the majority of respondents were in favour of a more flexible approach to disposals, provided that suitable safeguards were in place. A number of museums have begun large-scale collections reviews, addressing some of the issues raised by Collections for the Future, and in some cases in direct response to the report. One university collection is undertaking a review to map and assess the collection, to review storage, use and retention, with the aim of producing a new, unified acquisitions and disposals policy, and thereby promote greater use of the collection.

So, some museums are entering risky territory. Isn't this when a Code of Ethics comes into its own? What is a code of ethics actually for? Is it

- To identify potential pitfalls?
- To offer guidance in difficult situations?
- To provide consistency in dealing with issues so we don't all make it up as we go along?
- To give confidence that we are keeping faith with benefactors, originators and society?

But above all is it to help museums operate in the real world? I feel that the MA's Code of Ethics should be helping museum professionals to resolve operational and management dilemmas. It should also contribute to the sustainability of the museum sector. There is no point in occupying the moral high ground if that results in museums becoming unsustainable. We're back to our panda that cannot find enough food and no other pandas to mate with.

The Introduction to the current Code of Ethics, written by my esteemed predecessor Tristram Besterman, says that we should *"Think of this code as a philosophical map which identifies important landmarks, preferred routes and*

dangerous terrain; everyone who is involved in any aspect of the management and development of museums can use it as a navigational aid.”

The introduction also suggests that *“A code of museum ethics represents and articulates a set of consensual values and standards of behaviour that are agreed at a particular time to define a relationship of trust between the museum and the communities it serves.”*

I think that word consensual is very important. A Code of Ethics should not be imposed on a sector but should reflect the circumstances in which we operate.

I am suggesting that we need to agree some re-calibrating of our navigational aid, so that it can guide us more effectively in the choppy waters of disposal into which many of us are dipping out toes. If the dilemmas we face every day were easily resolved, we would not need a Code of Ethics to guide us. The Code is a navigational aid to help us to negotiate sometimes uncharted waters. If the Code said “this is too dangerous, don’t even think about setting off”, what help would that be to you?

So this brings us to my second question - what do we all want for the museums sector?

The consultation for Collections for the Future identified that we want more dynamic and better managed and cared for collections so that we can deliver inspiration, learning and enjoyment. Well thought-out and well-managed disposals should be part of how we can achieve that. Some people are fearful of the floodgates opening, but the proposed changes in Code provide safeguards. Disposal for financial reasons should only take place in exceptional circumstances where significant long-term improvements to the collection would result, where the item falls outside the core collection, and only after other sources of funding have been explored. Monies raised as a result of disposal should be applied solely and directly for the benefit of the museum’s collection. Money raised must be invested in the long-term sustainability, use and development of the collection.

Consultation has shown that museums want to use disposal as part of a well-thought through collections management strategy. They also want the Code of Ethics to support them in this process. The revised Code of Ethics will help them to do this.

Excerpt from the revised Code of Ethics

6 Safeguard the long-term public interest in the collections

6.13

Refuse to undertake disposal principally for financial reasons, except in exceptional circumstances as defined in 6.14. Financially-motivated disposal risks damaging public confidence in museums and the principle that collections should not normally be regarded as financially-negotiable assets.

6.14

Consider financially-motivated disposal only in exceptional circumstances and when it can be demonstrated that:

- it will significantly improve the long-term public benefit derived from the remaining collection
- it is not to generate short-term revenue (for example to meet a budget deficit)
- it is as a last resort after other sources of funding have been thoroughly explored
- extensive prior consultation with sector bodies has been undertaken
- the item under consideration lies outside the museum's established core collection as defined in the collections policy.

6.15

Ring-fence any money raised as a result of disposal through sale, if this exceptional circumstance arises, solely and directly for the benefit of the museum's collection. Money raised must be restricted to the long-term sustainability, use and development of the collection. If in doubt about the proposed use of such restricted funds consult sector bodies.

6.16

Openly communicate and document all disposals and the basis on which decisions to dispose were made.