



# SHARE Museums East Collections rationalisation: planning for action

This report includes templates for developing a rationalisation policy and a rationalisation plan.

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 **NORFOLK** Museums  
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Supporting excellence, resilience and  
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## Foreword

This report is the culmination of a collections rationalisation project managed by Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service as part of its Renaissance Museum Development Programme for the East of England (SHARE Museums East). The aim of this project was, in the first instance, to work with a number of museums across the region to explore the meaning of collections rationalisation.

As part of this discussion, six participating museums met together with the Regional Museum Development Manager and a specialist consultant, Emmeline Leary, to discuss the definition and to explore what the benefits of rationalisation could be to their users. During this initial meeting, the museums also discussed what, in their organisational mission statement, forward plan and acquisitions & disposals policy could impact on collections rationalisation, and what sorts of things might be preventing their collections from being used effectively to benefit the public. Each participating museum (Bishops Stortford Museum, North Hertfordshire Museums Service, Peterborough Museum and Art Gallery, Scott Polar Museum, Southend Museums Service and Welwyn Hatfield Museums Service) worked on a one-to-one basis with the consultant and was supported to develop an

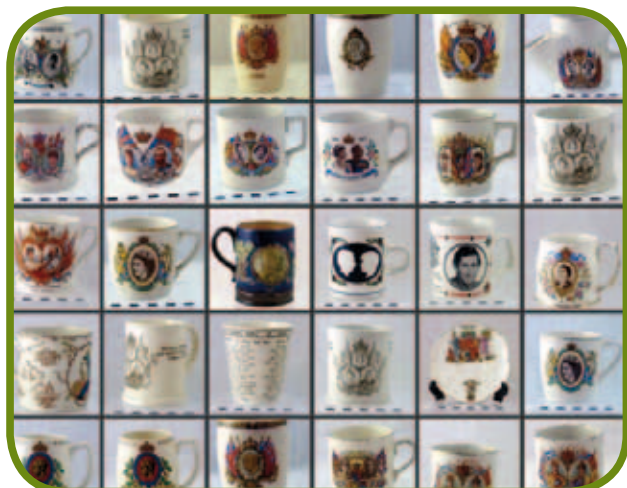
organisational policy around rationalisation. They also developed a rationalisation plan that they could take forward using a small grant from the Museum Development Programme.

Having worked with these museum services on collections rationalisation, this report provides a range of information that should be of use to others considering undertaking work in this area. In particular, through this project it has been possible to consider carefully the definition of collections rationalisation, keeping in mind public benefit as a central strand. The report considers in some detail the ways in which rationalisation can improve and support the delivery of a range of museum functions and priorities. Importantly, drawing on the work undertaken by the participating museums, this report includes a template for developing a rationalisation policy and plan. In addition, the report includes a section exploring the various challenges museums in this project faced and the solutions that they found.

In the Museums Accreditation Scheme (<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-museums/accreditation-scheme/>), museums are required to make a statement regarding rationalisation as part of their collections management strategy (Accreditation Scheme for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom: Accreditation Standard 2.2.4). It is anticipated that the resources within this report will support museums in this area of work.

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## Collections Rationalisation: Planning for Action

Emmeline Leary

### Part 1 Introduction to Collections Rationalisation

#### Background

Over the past few years, museums have increasingly implemented collections rationalisation as a means of revealing the potential of their collections to benefit the public.

The foundation for a rationalisation process which meets legal, ethical and professional standards was laid by the Museums Association (MA) which approved the Guidelines for Professional Conduct and the Code of Practice for Museum Authorities in 1977. These documents, revised in the 1980s and 1990s culminated in the first Code of Ethics for Museums published in 2002 and updated in 2008. The major shift towards a more dynamic approach to understanding and realising the potential of museum collections to benefit the public began with the Collections for the Future report published by the MA in 2005 which was followed by the launch of the Effective Collections programme in 2007 and the Disposal toolkit in 2008.

Alongside these developments, the Museums & Galleries Commission's Museum Registration scheme provided a formal process for the disposal of collections within the context of a museum standard from 1988. Renamed Museum Accreditation at its second review in 2004, the standard became the responsibility of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council and covered more than 1800 UK museums. The latest version, which for the first time includes a requirement to state rationalisation priorities, was launched in 2011 and is run by Art Council England.

#### Definition of Collections Rationalisation

'Improving public benefit by refining collections in line with the museum's statement of purpose.'

#### Commentary

*This definition is based on that included in the glossary of the 2011 Museum Accreditation Standard.*

*For the purposes of the Renaissance East of England project, rationalisation was not confined to the permanent removal of items from the collections but covered a range of options including reviewing loans. By taking this approach, a fuller understanding of the potential of all the collections to provide public benefit could be gained by museums from the inception of their rationalisation plans.*

Collections rationalisation and museum operation

Rationalisation can improve and support the delivery of a range of museum functions and priorities some of which are examined below.

#### 1 Improving benefit to the public

The approach taken in this project was to stress public benefit factors when creating a rationalisation plan. By linking the museum's statement of purpose with information on how collections help to deliver that purpose, a firm basis for rationalisation can be created which will also provide a clear starting point for communicating why and how rationalisation is taking place. Most museums preparing a rationalisation plan have no difficulty in identifying the professional and organisational benefits likely to be derived from the process. Such outcomes, while of importance to those creating the plan, are not necessarily the only factors of importance to the public and to external organisations, who are more likely to seek information on how users will benefit.

#### 2 Museum management

By examining existing planning and policy documents in the course of creating the plan, museums may become aware of inconsistencies relating to the scope of the collections and their intended use as well as to priorities and timing. The case for rationalisation can be supported by noting such inconsistencies within the plan. Steps can therefore be taken to avoid possible



adverse effects on the implementation of the plan and on communication and consultation.

### 3 Collections care and management

When preparing a rationalisation plan, a wide range of collection management issues could emerge as potentially benefitting from the rationalisation process. They include clarifying ownership, reviewing acquisition parameters, and loans, expanding documentation and improving the security, storage, care, and conservation arrangements.



### 4 Sustainability

The MA used the generally accepted definition of sustainability - 'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' and focused on the three sustainability headings, economic, environmental, and social in its discussion paper, Sustainability and museums, 2008. Many museums are now building a sustainable approach into their operation. Creating and implementing a rationalisation plan could directly contribute to targets in these areas. For example, taking action to reduce storage costs as fewer collections are held following rationalisation will support economic sustainability while social sustainability would be enhanced by establishing a dialogue with users on the challenges museums face in caring for

collections. The 2011 Museum Accreditation standard (1.10) covers for the first time the requirement to have a policy statement on environmental sustainability which is appropriate to a museum's statement of purpose.

### 5 Ethics and legal issues

Museums undertaking rationalisation must be scrupulous in their approach to ethics and to legal issues associated with the process. Museums' actions in these areas are likely to be the subject of external scrutiny and a clear statement on both areas should be included in the plan. Depending on the circumstances, ethical matters could be linked to the motivation for rationalisation, public benefit and how decisions on rationalisation are made. Legal issues could arise in matters of ownership, agreements with past owners or legislation affecting the museum and specific parts of the collections. It should be noted however that no single source of information exists to direct museum to specialist advice on the potential legal implications relating to the enormous range of material which comprises museum collections. Museums seeking advice may also find that the views of different specialists may not be consistent with each other.

### 6 Museum Accreditation

All museums participating in the Accreditation scheme will have an acquisition and disposal policy which provides the basis for the disposal process. In addition, the standard covers key elements of the management and care of collections and public access. The 2011 Museum Accreditation Standard (item 2.2.4) includes the requirement that the collection development (acquisition and disposal) policy must include 'themes and priorities for rationalisation and disposal.' By creating and implementing a rationalisation plan, museums will be in a good position to meet this requirement.



## Part 2 Templates

The following two templates provide a starting point when considering developing a rationalisation policy and plan for your own museum. Both these templates can be found as word documents in the resources section on the SHARE Museums East Website ([www.sharemuseumeast/training-resources.aspx](http://www.sharemuseumeast/training-resources.aspx)). *The commentary in italics is for guidance and does not form part of the templates.*

### Template 1: Rationalisation Policy

Name of museum: .....

Date of document: .....

Document approved by: .....

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

*Museums Association - definition of a museum*

#### Definition of Collections Rationalisation

‘Improving public benefit by refining collections in line with the museum’s statement of purpose.’

#### Principles

#### **1 Collections will be used to achieve our purpose**

*[Insert statement of purpose/mission statement]*

#### **2 Collections will be used effectively to benefit the public**

Public benefit is achieved by using the collections for Display/ Research/ Handling/ Demonstration/ Spares/ Set dressing. This activity may be organised by the museum or by other organisations to which we lend items. It is necessary, from time to time to reassess collections’ potential for public benefit in relation to our purpose, plans and polices as well as to take account of changes to legal and ethical considerations. Our users will benefit from good collection management practices which improve the potential for the effective use of the collections.

#### **3 Collection Rationalisation will cover a range of options**

Benefit to the public must be demonstrated in the choice of option made. Alternatives, not in order of priority are:

- Allocating items a different use within the museum
- Returning items on loan
- Recalling items on loan to other organisations
- Converting loans to the museum to gifts to the museum
- Disposal by gift to another Accredited museum or if this is not possible to other organisations or individuals
- Disposal by sale to another Accredited museum or if this is not possible to other organisations or individuals
- Disposal in cases of restitution, repatriation or spoliation
- Disposal by recycling
- Disposal by destruction – full or partial, in cases where no other option exists

#### **4 Collections rationalisation will observe the ethical and legal considerations outlined in the Museum Accreditation standard and the MA Code of Ethics**

Ethical matters relating to collections rationalisation include the process taking place:



- within a clearly defined collections policy
- on the advice of a range of staff (not an individual)
- when agreed by the governing body in the case of disposal
- with the intention that items remain in the public domain whenever possible
- when it is unlikely to damage public trust in museums
- when it is likely to increase public benefit deriving from the collections
- when financially-motivated disposal is only implemented in exceptional circumstances

Decisions made relating to collections rationalisation may be affected by legal restrictions arising from factors such as:

- legislation relating to the governing body of the museum [and its charitable status]
- legislation relating to the museum's collections
- the governing constitution of the museum
- museum management agreements
- conditions attached to gifts, bequests, purchases, loans and grants
- the ownership of items including those not yet accessioned into the collection

If doubts on legal restrictions exist, appropriate advice will be sought.

### **5 The collections rationalisation process and its documentation will take account of the requirements of the Museum Accreditation scheme, the MA Code of Ethics and the guidelines in the MA Disposal Toolkit**

In addition to ethical and legal matters, the implementation of the rationalisation process must demonstrate that the requirements have been met and guidelines followed. The process will be differ depending on whether

items are to be permanently disposed of from the collection, whether they have or have not been accessioned into the collection or are on loan to or from the museum. Documentation requirements are given in the museum's Documentation Procedural Manual.

### **6 The selection of items for rationalisation and the choice of a new owner will be subject to formal processes and written criteria with assistance from appropriate specialists**

Formal processes and criteria will ensure that consistency and transparency in collections rationalisation can be demonstrated. Specialist knowledge and advice will support the museum to make informed decisions on how the public benefit potential of items can best be achieved.

### **7 Our plans, policies and collection management arrangements will be reviewed and amended as necessary to reflect any changes in our approach to the development and use of the collections**

Collections rationalisation provides an opportunity to review plans, policies and practices relating to acquisition, disposal, loans and other aspects of collection management to ensure that the collections are being used effectively for public benefit. Any changes made will be consistent with the prevailing Museum Accreditation standard and with ethical and legal considerations.

### **8 Public trust in the museum as holders of the collections will be maintained by consultation and communication**

We recognise the need to raise understanding both inside and outside the museum of the public benefits arising from collections rationalisation. This includes respecting the sensibilities of those who have donated items to the museum, stakeholders and special interest groups.



## Collections rationalisation plan

### Background

Why is a plan necessary?

A plan will:

- provide a structure for the discussion of rationalisation
- formally set out the rationalisation processes
- identify who is responsible for implementing the plan
- support understanding of the context in which rationalisation takes place
- demonstrate knowledge of the rationalisation process and guide its implementation
- state the intended timescales for completing implementation
- support internal/external funding bids
- provide information to be used in internal and external communication and consultation

### Structure of the plan

The template represents four stages:

1. Establishing a foundation for rationalisation work
2. Preparing for collections rationalisation
3. Implementing rationalisation
4. Post-rationalisation action

Detailed processes to support rationalisation can be developed in parallel to the plan and are not covered here.





## Template 2: Collections Rationalisation Plan

Name of Museum .....

Prepared by/date: .....

Agreed by/date: .....

Next review date: .....

**Statement of purpose and how collections are used to achieve the purpose**  
 [Insert statements]

*Commentary*  
 The museum’s statement of purpose/mission statement will include the key concepts regarding the collections and public benefit which will underpin the creation of the Plan. For example:  
 ‘The County Museum collects, documents, cares for and provides access to collections which we use to inspire and educate the public in the history of the county and its people.’

A statement on how collections can be used to achieve the museum’s mission might be:  
 ‘The collections and information about them are used to achieve our mission via displays, interpretation, formal and informal learning events and activities and we support research into the collections by staff, volunteers and the public.’

### Stage 1 Foundation for Collections Rationalisation

Definition of Collections Rationalisation  
 [Insert definition]

*Commentary*  
 This is the definition used in the Principles of Rationalisation.

Principles of Collections Rationalisation  
 [Attach copy of Principles of Rationalisation]

*Commentary*  
 It is crucial to test the plan against the Principles at all stages of its creation and implementation.

Overview of collections  
 [Insert statement]

*Commentary*  
 A summary paragraph or table describing the entire collection using parameters which include the type of material, numbers, display, storage and loans should be inserted. Such a summary is likely to exist or be easily created from data already held by the museum. This summary forms part of the context against which rationalisation will take place.

Collections in relation to Forward Plan and Acquisition and Disposal policy  
 [Insert statement]

*Commentary*  
 The Forward Plan and Acquisition and Disposal policy should be consistent with the museum’s intentions to rationalise its collections. If this is the case, the statement should confirm that fact. An examination of these documents may however reveal inconsistencies which should be mentioned in the statement. For example, the planned expansion or contraction of storage areas may impact on the preferred rationalisation options. Likewise, those parts of the collections intended for development or disposal when the Acquisition and Disposal was



*created may not now be considered as priorities.*

[Attach copies of the Forward Plan and Acquisition and Disposal Policy]

Key collection management and/or other issues affecting public benefit which have motivated this plan

[Insert statement]

*Commentary*

*In order to build a firm case for rationalisation, it is vital to demonstrate that it has been motivated by specific issues affecting collections management and public benefit. Such an approach is likely to have a strong appeal to governing bodies and funding organisations rather than one which focuses on benefitting the comfort and convenience of staff and their personal views of the collections.*

Intended outcomes from collections rationalisation related to public benefit

[Insert statement]

*Commentary*

*Based on the issues identified in the previous paragraph, this statement provides an opportunity to describe the public benefits which will result from rationalisation. The clear articulation of these benefits within the plan can also be called upon when communication and consultation on rationalisation is taking place (see Stage 3).*

Overview of collections rationalisation potential

[Insert table]

*Commentary*

*The table (example given) should cover all the museum's collections including and loans in and loans out. By taking this approach, it can be demonstrated that rationalisation is being planned on the basis of a complete overview of the collection rather than from a partial and biased viewpoint.*

**EXAMPLE**

Collection areas	Estimated numbers in all	Rationalisation potential
Art	300 20 loans out	Yes Loans out
Natural history	100	Yes
Transport	20 5 loans in	Yes Loans in
Archaeology	2000	No

**Stage 2 Preparing for collections rationalisation**

Methodology to identify items rationalisation including assessment criteria

[Insert statement]

*Commentary*

*The criteria should be derived from the motivations for rationalisation identified in Stage 1. The number of criteria should be limited to avoid the assessment process becoming unwieldy. It should also be recognised that the criteria may not be equally relevant to all elements of the collections. Including levels to indicate how far the item under assessment meets the criteria is advisable. Training in the assessment process should be provided for all individuals undertaking this work.*

Forms used to assess items for rationalisation

[Attach copies of forms]

*Commentary*

*Depending on the type of material being assessed, more than one form may be required. The forms should incorporate the criteria identified in the methodology. It is suggested that the design of the form is kept as simple as possible to reduce the risk of inconsistency in the assessment process. The name of the assessor and the date of assessment should be recorded on the form.*



Staff/volunteers who will work on collections rationalisation  
[Insert statement]

*Commentary*

*Rationalisation will inevitably involve several individuals and may require new staff members or volunteers to be recruited. The names and job titles of personnel should be listed together with an indication of the role they will undertake in the rationalisation process and the timescales. If personnel are to be recruited, this should also be noted together with the planned dates of their work.*

Overall management responsibility and reporting arrangements for rationalisation  
[Insert statement]

*Commentary*

*The individual with overall responsibility for the rationalisation project should be identified and an indication of how progress with rationalisation will be reported by this person to more senior levels of the organisation should be given. A note of how progress on rationalisation will be reported to this person including frequency should also be included.*

Additional resources required  
[Insert statement]

*Commentary*

*The implementation of rationalisation may require resources such as finance, space, equipment, training and specialist advice which are not already in place. Inevitably, training in the various elements of rationalisation will be necessary especially for newly recruited staff or volunteers and associated collection handling could also be required. The potential origin of any additional financial resources should be identified and timescales given if appropriate. It may also be necessary to identify and prepare adequate space to accommodate both personnel and the material under assessment. New equipment such as shelving, laptops or*

*cameras may be required. Finally, the need for specialist advice in relation to particular parts of the collections should be identified.*

Any existing resources which will be utilised to support rationalisation should be noted to demonstrate that the needs of the project have been considered.

Overall timescale  
[Insert statement]

*Commentary*

*The anticipated completion date for the rationalisation work should be given together with any factors affecting this timescale. A more detailed breakdown will be included in the basic work plan at the end of this Stage.*

Published standards and guidance  
[Insert list]

*Commentary*

*A list of the relevant standards and guidance should be included and a check should be made that these items are available in the museum for reference. A list of key items is given at the end of this document.*

Basic work plan  
[Insert work plan]

*Commentary*

*By creating a simple work plan, the museum will identify those collections which will be subject to rationalisation, the actions required to achieve rationalisation, the personnel who will carry out the work and the timescale within which the activity will take place. An example of how the work plan might look is given below.*

Example

Collection area	Action	Personnel	Timescale



*The work plan could become the basis of a more detailed rationalisation implementation plan which could be created after rationalisation has been tested on a small group of material (see Stage 3)*

### Stage 3 Implementing Collections Rationalisation

Testing the implementation process  
Before rationalisation is formally implemented, it will be tested on a small group of material and the process will be refined as appropriate.  
[Insert statement]

#### Commentary

*The statement should briefly identify:*

- *the material on which the test will be made and the reasons for its selection*
- *the timescale for the test period*
- *the personnel participating in the work*

*Testing should include using the assessment form and the consideration of decisions on rationalisation options. Depending on the type of material, other elements of implementation could be covered such as ethical and legal matters.*

Communication and consultation  
Communication and consultation both inside and outside the museum will take place throughout the rationalisation process.  
[Insert statement on plans and potential action]

#### Commentary

*Collections rationalisation can become a sensitive area of activity for museums. To avoid the consequences of misleading and inaccurate information being circulated, it is crucial that consultation and communication are planned to take place throughout the rationalisation process. Research on disposal published by the MA in 2007 (A public consultation on museum disposal) provides useful information on probable public reactions and suggests how consultation could be approached.*

*Key issues to be examined when preparing the statement include:*

#### Purpose

- *to demonstrate openness about the process*
- *to be a mechanism for advocacy for the museum*
- *to provide understanding of the process*
- *to seek views both within and outside the museum*
- *to provide a channel for involvement in the process*

#### Who

*Consultation and communication should involve*

- *staff /volunteers /Friends /groups /funders / donors /stakeholders /special interest groups /media*
- *expert advisers*

#### Content

- *consistent with the principles of rationalisation and the rationalisation plan*
- *appropriate to the audience*
- *focus on the motivation and public benefits identified in Stage 1*
- *include information about the process and the evidence emerging from the consultation itself*

#### How

*Methods which should be appropriate to the intended audience might include: open meetings /correspondence /press releases / museum website/newsletters / formal and informal presentations /exhibitions-physical and virtual /events and activities.*

*The resulting feedback can be collected and used to inform future consultation and communication activities.*

Implementation of rationalisation will follow the process in the Museum Accreditation standard and the MA's Disposal Toolkit but allow for differences in the case of options such as loans and handling material.



Main steps in implementation:

- a Assessment of items including additional research and specialist advice
- b Checking ethical and legal considerations
- c Selection of items
- d Deciding on a specific rationalisation option
- e Taking formal decisions on rationalisation
- f Seeking a new owner if necessary
- g Confirming new arrangements or re-evaluating options for rationalisation

#### *Commentary*

*Brief further details on each of the steps a-g should be inserted including identifying who is responsible for the task, the process to be used and any associated issues of particular significance for the museum such as complex ethical or legal matters. Recent research published by the Collections Trust (Collections and Governance: a practical guide 2011) highlights legal issues concerning ownership and disposal under various governance arrangements.*

[Attach a copy of the disposal flowchart from Disposal Toolkit, 2008]

#### *Commentary*

*The MA's Disposal flowchart provides outline of the process for the permanent disposal of an item. A different process will take place when other rationalisation options are followed for example the return of loans in.*

### **Stage 4 Post-rationalisation action**

Amend museum's plans, policies and processes as necessary.  
Evaluate the implementation of collections rationalisation.

[Insert statement to confirm that both actions will take place]

#### *Commentary*

*Undertaking rationalisation may highlight the need to amend plans, policies as well as collections care and management processes with the aim of ensuring consistency across the board and avoiding confusion. Such amendments should also aim to avoid repeating the actions which prompted in the need for rationalisation. Any changes should be properly authorised and be communicated to staff and volunteers. The timing for the review of plans and policies may mean that amendments arising from rationalisation work may take place during the process rather than after rationalisation has been completed. A formal evaluation of the rationalisation process will inform any future rationalisation exercises.*



## Part 3 - Case studies

Each museum partner began the project from differing positions and with a specific range of motivations in relation to rationalisation although some common themes emerged such as the need to review collections as a result of a recent or planned move and pressures on storage space. As part of the project, Renaissance East of England provided grants of up to £1000 to enable progress to be made with rationalisation planning or implementation.

### Bishop's Stortford Museum

The present museum site had been created from the merger of two museums holding two very different collections and with separate documentation procedures. Following the move, a collection inventory had taken place over the past few years. In addition, it had been necessary to reassess storage arrangements after the demolition of one store. The museum now aimed to use the rationalisation process to assess the collections in the light of the mission statement and consider a more focused approach to acquisitions. A formal plan and a statement of principles would also assist in briefing the trustees on the rationalisation process.

Renaissance East of England project grant  
The grant would be used to support implementation of the testing stage in two ways. One part would cover the cost of additional days for the part-time museum assistant who would oversee this work. Training volunteers to continue rationalisation beyond the pilot stage would be included in the extra time. The second part would support the museum's communication initiative: fees for the creation of a set of professional photographs to document the pilot stage would form the basis of an online exhibition.

### North Hertfordshire Museums Service

The impetus to take forward collections rationalisation was provided by the planned

move of both existing museums to a single site. As part of this work, the potential of the collections to contribute to the work of the service was under review. At the same time, the service was aiming to improve the care and management of collections held in store. It was also the case that sustainability issues now had to be considered. A display which successfully engaged visitors with collection management challenges had been set up at one museum site.

Renaissance East of England project grant  
Improving access for staff to material held in store with the aim of facilitating the assessment of the collections' potential was a priority. The grant was therefore used to purchase a range of equipment to improve access including an hydraulic platform and a stair climber.

### Peterborough Museum and Art Gallery

A major refurbishment of the site including the displays which resulted in a period of closure to the public had provided an opportunity to give priority to rationalisation. At this time, the importance of using all the collections more effectively chimed with the development of a rationalisation policy and plan. There was a particular need to obtain specialist advice on the potential uses of the important archaeological collection.

Renaissance East of England project grant  
The grant was required to support the delivery of two current priorities linked to rationalisation: the creation of an assessment framework for the geology, natural history, archaeology and social history collections to provide a greater understanding of appropriate rationalisation options and the preparation of a grant application to undertake a strategic review of the museum's collections. The intended outcome would benefit the public by increasing the percentage of collection which could be included in temporary and touring exhibitions and in the educational handling collection.



### Scott Polar Museum

The museum had recently completed a successful refurbishment of the displays and completely refitted and reorganised the stores. As part of this, work on a collection inventory had taken place which revealed items which appeared to have become detached from their documentation. It was intended that rationalisation would help to reveal the potential of this material to contribute to the museum's mission.

Renaissance East of England project grant  
The grant would cover the costs of employing a new part-time assistant for a short period to reveal any documentation and data held by the museum and the institute relating to the provenance of the decontextualised items. This work would support the testing of the rationalisation process including the assessment forms, timing and costs as well as forming the basis for deciding on possible rationalisation options.

### Southend Museums Service

A successful rationalisation project relating to the radio collection had already taken place. The museum now planned to address the social history and natural history collections held in stores which could not currently provide the access needed for staff to assess the potential of this material. Improvements to the care and management of the collections and the need for a review of the collecting policy and acquisition practice were also motivating factors.

Renaissance East of England project grant  
The rationalisation plan identified the need to improve current storage conditions as one of the key motives for rationalisation. This action would support the long-term preservation of the collections for the benefit of current and future users. To achieve this aim, Southend Museums requested additional packing materials for the social history material and specialist storage furniture for the natural history collection.

### Welwyn Hatfield Museum Service

With advice from an external specialist some rationalisation of the archaeology collection had already taken place but more remained to be done. An ongoing collections audit had already revealed a range of stored items without sufficient information for their potential to be understood and the need for more effective use of the storage areas had also been identified. It was anticipated that good practice procedures for rationalisation which could be relevant to a broad range of material would be created and that the museum's approach to acquisition could be clarified.



Renaissance East of England project grant  
This service combined the testing of the rationalisation process with the ongoing collections audit with the aim of benefitting the public by improving the quality and care of the collections. An earlier collections care grant was used to upgrade packing and conservation materials so that the care of collections was improved as the audit took place. The testing of rationalisation implementation was to be carried out by existing volunteers already experienced in audit work and given extra training in using the assessment form.



## Challenges and solutions

Most museums will never have formally undertaken collections rationalisation. In these circumstances, creating a plan and understanding the contribution it could make to the museum's mission may present many challenges both to the culture of the organisation and to the individuals involved. All the museum partners participating in the Renaissance East of England project created a principles statement and a rationalisation plan using the templates given in this document and some began work on testing the implementation process before the end of the project. A range of the challenges experienced by the museum partners together with the solutions which emerged during the project are outlined below.

### **Challenge: understanding the value of having a collections rationalisation plan**

#### **Solutions**

Recognise that the plan provides a robust written process which reduces the operational and management difficulties of rationalisation. By breaking rationalisation work into manageable elements, the plan helps to make the process less daunting. Rationalisation can boost morale in the museum as the potential for using the collections more effectively begins to emerge. Writing the plan can provide the impetus to seek grants for additional resources to carry out rationalisation.



Having to describe how collections can be used positively to benefit the public has clarified this function for staff.

The active roles which the Acquisition and Disposal Policy and the Forward Plan can have in supporting and developing the use of collections is now better appreciated.

### **Challenge: allowing enough time for the creation of the plan**

#### **Solutions**

Be aware that it is not possible to write the plan in 'spare time.' Make sure this activity is formally recognised as part of the work schedules of those involved. This will ensure that time is allocated for the task and that colleagues are aware that this work is taking place.

Competing priorities should not be used as a reason to delay writing the plan; whatever year is chosen, there is likely to be another significant project taking place.

Allow time to:

- think about rationalisation, collect information and assemble relevant documents
- benefit from the expertise and knowledge of colleagues who may not be directly involved
- report back and/or discuss progress during routine meetings
- organise special meetings to discuss progress if necessary
- undertake advocacy at more senior management levels on the need for a plan, for time to create it and time to implement rationalisation
- draft and redraft the plan
- review the content of the plan including timescales if needed during the testing stage and during rationalisation itself, if necessary





**Challenge: ensuring the public benefit outcomes of rationalisation have been clearly identified and are understandable to others**

### Solution

It helps to focus on the benefits to the public of releasing the potential of collections such as:

- the increase in knowledge about collections as they become more accessible to staff and researchers will result in items having greater potential to contribute to displays and to be available for handling sessions
- better use of public funding can be demonstrated as storage space is released by transferring items to other museums where they can be used more effectively
- public understanding of the museum's role can be broadened by organising a public debate which could include asking the public to give reasons for the items they might consider for rationalisation in the light of the collection plan.

By being proactive in offering stories on public benefits to the media, the museum's views are made clear and misunderstandings are avoided.

It is particularly important to ensure that the wording of the plan clearly links rationalisation to positive outcomes for the public.

Rationalisation can be a means of demonstrating good collection care and management practices to the Board or to external stakeholders.

Ensure all staff and volunteers in the museum can understand the public benefits motivation for rationalisation.

**Challenge: addressing legal and ethical issues**

### Solutions

Seek expert help and establish sources of advice but be aware that there is no single

source which identifies legislation affecting all museum collections.

Recognise legal liabilities; don't ignore legal issues and hope they will go away.

Expect the unexpected when investigating the legal and ethical position.

Undertaking due diligence is essential.

Obtain evidence on the legal and ethical position rather than accepting verbal assurances that it has been dealt with or is not relevant.

Be specific in each case rather than generalising across a collection.

Ensure the conditions attached to bequests, gifts and loans are investigated.

Devise criteria such as the length of time since the donation when deciding how and when to inform donors about rationalisation.

Understand that relationships with donors might need a lot of work and should be pursued pragmatically.

Be polite but firm in dealing with people with a vested interest such as special interest groups, former members of staff and external stakeholders who may not at first understand the rationalisation plan.

Ensure the rationalisation decisions and the decision-making processes are fully documented.

**Challenge: creating an effective basic work plan with timescales**

### Solutions

Accept that the work plan is necessary to provide a focus and guide for the implementation process.

Rationalisation must be seen as a discreet function not just an 'as and when' activity.

Ensure that the objectives are SMART (Specific / Measurable / Attainable / Relevant / Timely).

Avoid both vagueness and inflexibility in the work plan.

Regard the work plan as flexible so that it can be amended to allow for unexpected developments.



Avoid underestimating the time needed to implement rationalisation - for most museums this work will take years rather than months  
Accept that the most appropriate rationalisation option may change during the process as new information emerges.

### **Challenge: communication and consultation**

#### **Solutions**

Accept that communication and consultation should be characterised by openness and transparency.  
The focus in both areas should be on the rationalisation process not personal opinions.  
Be prepared for a lack of public awareness of rationalisation issues and process.  
Be confident about explaining the motivation and benefits to the public.  
Ensure that the type of communication is appropriate to intended recipients; not everyone you wish to contact may use social media for example.  
Use Friends groups as advocates for rationalisation both within the museum and externally.  
Explain what is happening to all staff and volunteers.  
Be proactive in approaching the media and be aware of its power and that of public opinion.  
Use people with appropriate skills when communicating on rationalisation matters.  
When relevant skills are lacking in the museum should be ready to use external expertise such as the council media team.

### **Challenge: identifying the criteria for rationalisation and creating assessment forms**

#### **Solutions**

Take an objective approach to choosing the criteria; they should not be biased towards personal views of the collection.  
Ensure that those involved are familiar with the

wording of the acquisition and disposal policy and that the criteria fit with the policy.

Keep the assessment form as simple as possible to help achieve consistency and objectivity.

It is useful to include levels for all criteria to show how far each has been met.

Remember to include criteria linked to Health and Safety matters and to potential uses such as handling or spares parts.

Those selecting items can use the assessment score as an indicator for potential rationalisation rather than the final answer.

Consider whether a computerised or paper assessment process is preferable for those doing the assessments.

Revise the criteria and forms if necessary in the light of testing rationalisation implementation.

### **Challenge: testing the rationalisation process**

#### **Solutions**

Be clear why you are selecting material for testing; is it representative of the collection to be rationalised or a group with its own particular problems?  
Give clear instructions and training to staff and volunteers.  
Inform any staff and volunteers not involved what is happening.  
Hold regular meeting to give feedback and check the results of testing process.  
Use the test to obtain an overview of the time need to complete the assessment stage.  
Accept that not all the problems revealed by testing will be resolved immediately.  
Allow sufficient time for the testing process to take place.  
Avoid becoming disheartened if the testing process is inconclusive; consider revising the process.  
Ensure the testing process is well documented.



## Sources of information and advice on rationalisation

### Organisations

Arts Council England  
<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-museums/>

Collections Trust  
<http://www.collectionstrust.org.uk/>

Collections Link  
<http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/>

Museums Association  
<http://www.museumsassociation.org/home>

SHARE Museums East  
<http://www.sharemuseumeast.org.uk/youtube-videos.aspx>

### Publications

Arts Council England  
*The Accreditation Scheme for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom: Accreditation Standard 2011*  
 The *Standard* together with associated guidance documents on acquisition and disposal can be found at: [www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-museums/accreditation-scheme/how-do-i-apply/](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-museums/accreditation-scheme/how-do-i-apply/)

Collections Trust  
*Collections and Governance: a practical guide 2011* Available only in hard copy  
*SPECTRUM 4.0 The UK Museum Collection Management Standard 2011*  
 Available online to registered users of Collections Link -includes a section on the deaccession and disposal procedure as well as all other procedures necessary to document material held by museums.

Museums Association  
*Code of Ethics for Museums 2008*  
*Disposal toolkit, guidelines for museums 2008*  
*Disposal digest an introduction for museums*

(leaflet) undated (2008?)

*A public consultation on museum disposal 2007*  
 An A-Z of MA publications can be found at:  
[www.museumsassociation.org/publications/resources](http://www.museumsassociation.org/publications/resources)

*Museum Practice* Summer 2005 - special feature on disposal  
*Museum Practice* August 2010 - special feature on collection reviews  
 This publication is only available online to members of the Museums Association and to subscribers to *Museum Practice*.

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