

Museums & Galleries NSW

Collection Policy Template

February 2005

- This Template has been developed by Kylie Winkworth with Museums & Galleries NSW (M&G NSW)
- Please read the accompanying document “*Rethinking the Collection – Collection Policy Template Explanatory Notes*” by Kylie Winkworth with M&G NSW before you adapt this Template for your Museum
- You may also wish to add the names of the members who have worked on adapting this Collection Policy Template for your museum
- M&G NSW recommends that your museum committee regularly reviews the Collection Policy you develop between two to five years
- Please acknowledge this Collection Policy Template as:

**“This Collection Policy was adapted from a template written by
Kylie Winkworth with Museums & Galleries NSW, 2005”**

Fact Sheet

1. Introduction and Mission

The *[insert museum's name]* collection policy is a public document that guides the management and development of the collection. It outlines why, what, where, how and when the museum collects, and how and why items may be deaccessioned and disposed.

The collection is a source of knowledge, ideas, stories and memories. It is developed and managed as a community resource to inspire, educate and inform the community and visitors, and to contribute to the conservation of the history and heritage of the district (or subject if the museum is focused around a theme).

These sentences can be adapted or altered to introduce the museum's mission, the collection policy and set the context for its policy clauses and provisions.

The mission is a short statement that defines the main purpose or goals of the museum. There is a clear relationship between the mission and the collection policy. The development, use and interpretation of the collection are one of the key means by which the mission is fulfilled.

2. History of the Museum

Insert a brief summary about the history and development of the museum or organisation. This will give new members and supporters an understanding of the museum's development and how the collection has evolved.

*See Section 2 "Preparing a History of the Museum and Collection" **Rethinking the Collection - Collection Policy Template Explanatory Notes.***

3. Purpose and Significance of the Collection

In addition to the mission some museums may wish to include a set of objectives that underpin development of the collection. Examples of these objectives include:

- Collect and conserve important objects associated with the history of the district
- Collect local photographs and other pictorial material illustrating the places and people of the district
- Build an historical resource for the community
- Develop the collection as an educational resource
- Interpret the history and development of the district

Assess the significance of the collection and insert a statement summarising the significance of the collection

*See Section 3 "Reviewing the Significance of the Collection" **Collection Policy Template Explanatory Notes.***

Fact Sheet

If the museum is in a heritage building, the collection policy should also include a section about the history and significance of the building and any associated collections. This section should discuss any conflicts or issues arising between the heritage significance of the building and the needs of the collection and museum. There are almost always appropriate and mutually respectful solutions to resolve these potential conflicts once they have been identified.

See Section 4 “Significance of the Museum Building or Site” **Collection Policy Template Explanatory Notes.**

4. Key Themes

Identify the key themes or the scope of the collection. This might include subjects of interest and the geographic range of the museum’s collecting interests. Try to avoid writing a list of types of objects that are similar to items found in other museums. Consider including a paragraph describing the scope of each theme, its relevance to the museum and the history of the district and significant objects associated with each theme. Add photos of these objects and statements of significance as they become available.

In a local history museum the themes may include:

- Early settlement and development
- People and families
- Agriculture and rural history
- Local businesses
- Domestic life
- War service
- Indigenous communities
- Contemporary events and subjects

The process of assessing the significance of the collection and analysing the scope of each theme, gives a sense of what’s missing from the collection and what might be the strategic priorities for future collecting. Discuss these issues with members and volunteers. Consider identifying three or four areas for more active and strategic collecting, and write some brief paragraphs describing the museum’s priorities for future collecting. For example, consider ways of collecting and documenting the changing environment, or strategically collecting certain areas of more recent history. This will enable the museum to develop a better-documented collection that is likely to be more significant in the future. See the last section of this policy for more discussion on this issue.

5. Collection policies

Collection policies are statements of principle and commitments to good museum practice. These policies guide the way the museum acquires and uses the collection for public benefit. Everything the museum does with the collection should be consistent with these clauses.

5.1 Objects and collections may be acquired as donations, bequests, purchases, transfer or commissions.

5.2 The museum will only acquire objects that can be properly stored, documented and managed.

5.3 The museum provides community access to the collection, through exhibitions, access to collection information, response to public enquiries and other means.

5.4 The museum only acquires objects that are provenanced to the area, or that help to interpret themes, places and people in the history of the district.

5.5 The museum aims to build unique historical records about local people and places, themes and environments through the collection, related archives and associated projects.

5.6 The museum will identify priority themes as a focus for research, strategic collecting and documentation on an annual basis. **See Section 13 – Future Collection Development Priorities.**

5.7 Where possible the museum will develop non-collecting initiatives, such as assisting the community to document and care for their heritage collections in their original context of use.

Collecting isn't always the best option. Many objects are best left in the family context in which they have most meaning. Museums can provide advice on caring for items in the home, and encourage families to record the object's history while the story is still in living memory.

5.8 Where possible the museum will record the owner's memories of the object and photograph and document objects in their original context, before removal to the museum.

Documenting the owner's memories and the context and location of the object enhances its significance and interpretive potential.

5.9 The museum works in partnership with other museums, libraries, galleries, archives, heritage and community organisations in the district, where possible developing a collaborative approach to collecting, and the research, analysis and interpretation of collections.

5.10 No objects will be acquired from significant heritage sites and buildings where acquisition and removal would diminish the significance of the place; except in circumstances where the object is at risk.

Fact Sheet

5.11 No objects or collections will be acquired or accepted with conditions or restrictions on the way they might be used or displayed in the future.

5.12 Ensure the donor or vendor of a proposed acquisition has clear legal title to the item

5.13 The museum will adhere to the Copyright Act 1968 (Amended 1 January 2005) and the Australian Copyright Council 2005 guidelines¹ in all collecting activity including acquiring new objects for the collection.

5.14 Where possible, the museum will obtain copyright and reproduction rights for new objects at the time of acquisition. No item will be acquired or accepted where copyright cannot be obtained (see 5.11).

5.15 Collecting, management and interpretation of Indigenous items will be in accordance with Museums Australia's Indigenous heritage policy.²

5.16 All collecting activity and collection management processes to be in accordance with the ICOM Code of Ethics³, Combating Illicit Trade⁴ and within the framework of the NSW Heritage Office's Movable Heritage Principles⁵.

5.17 The collection policy is a public document that is readily available in the museum for inspection by visitors and volunteers. Include a copy of the collection policy in volunteer training packages and resource kits.

If the museum is in a heritage building the collection policy should also include some clauses to conserve, manage and interpret the significance of the building and any associated collections.

*See Section 4 "Significance of the Museum Building or Site" **Collection Policy Template Explanatory Notes** for more advice and sample clauses.*

If the museum has been involved in moving heritage buildings in the past, good practice is to include a clause stating that the museum will not collect or be involved in moving or acquiring any further moved buildings.⁶ For example:

5.18 The museum will not acquire or be involved in moving historic buildings.

¹ Australian Copyright Council, "Galleries & Museums: A Copyright Guide" August 2005. Available from MGNSW.

² Museums Australia, Continuous Cultures Ongoing Responsibilities: guidelines for dealing with Australian Indigenous Heritage

³ ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums, International Council of Museums, 2002

⁴ Department for Culture, Media and Sport (UK): "Combating Illicit Trade – due diligence for museums, libraries and archives borrowing cultural material" October 2005. Available from MGNSW.

⁵ Movable Heritage Principles, NSW Heritage Office, NSW Ministry for the Arts, Heritage Information Series, 2000

⁶ See Moved Buildings- Not a Good Idea and Not an Easy Solution, Museums and Galleries NSW information sheet. Also, M. Walker and P. Marquis Kyle, *The Illustrated Burra Charter: good practice for heritage places*, Australia ICOMOS Inc, Burwood, 2004 for advice on all aspects of caring for heritage buildings.

Fact Sheet

If the museum already has moved buildings, consider managing the building/s as an object, rather than as an exhibition space and insert policy clauses to this effect. For example:

5.19 Manage [insert building name] as an object, document its fabric and history, assess significance, and interpret the building's original location, use, context, inhabitants, and how and why it was moved.

6. Acquisition and Assessment Policies and Criteria

6.1 The museum will keep accurate, up to date and detailed records.

6.2 The museum will establish object files for the most significant items and all new acquisitions.

See Section 5 "Creating Object Files" **Collection Policy Template Explanatory Notes.**

6.3 The museum will prepare a Statement of Significance for all new acquisitions.

6.4 Significance is the basis for considering new acquisitions, and relevance to the museum's mission, purpose, and its collection themes. What story does the object tell about people, places or themes that are of interest to the museum?

The Heritage Collections Council significance assessment method and criteria guides collection assessment and management.⁷ The primary assessment criteria are:

- Historic significance
- Aesthetic significance
- Scientific or research significance
- Social or spiritual significance

The comparative criteria are:

- Provenance⁸
- Representativeness
- Rarity
- Condition, intactness, integrity
- Interpretive potential

6.5 Assess potential new acquisitions in light of the scope and content of the museum's collection. Does the proposed acquisition relate to key themes in the collection or strengthen the interpretation of a particular subject or group of items?

6.6 Avoid duplicating items already in the collection unless the proposed acquisition is more significant than the items already in the collection, for

⁷ *Significance, a guide to assessing the significance of cultural heritage objects and collections*, Roslyn Russell and Kylie Winkworth, Heritage Collections Council and Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, 2001.

⁸ Provenance is the life history of an object, its story, context, and use and ideally a sequence of previous owners. In local history collections provenance is an important ingredient of significance. Museums & Galleries NSW, 43-51 Cowper Wharf Road, Woolloomooloo NSW 2011
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Fact Sheet

example, where the proposed new acquisition is provenanced or is in better condition.

6.7 No further objects will be acquired if there is a backlog with registration and collection documentation.

Don't be afraid to say no to offers of donation. Gifts come with obligations and unseen costs. Great collections are built by being selective and firm about what comes into the collection. Consider preparing a short statement that can be given to potential donors explaining why the museum says no to many offers of donation, and identifying key priorities for acquisitions, including items that are provenanced or tell a story about people and places.

7. Acquisition Procedures

7.1 A receipt will be issued when an object is received as a possible donation. Where possible the receipt will have two carbon copies; one to be issued to the donor, one to stay with the object until the object is acquired (after which it will be kept in the Object File). The original receipt will be kept in the receipt book⁹.

7.2 Where possible ask the donor to write down the history, associations, context and significance of the object they are donating. Alternatively the person receiving the item should make notes on the object's history and associations. Keep this information with the receipt to allow a proper assessment of the object's significance. If there is no information this may indicate the object is of limited significance and should not be acquired.

7.3 A committee will assess the significance of the object and consider the proposed acquisition against the collection policies, themes and acquisition criteria. Consider if the museum can properly care for and manage the item.

7.4 A short Statement of Significance will be prepared for all acquisitions, although this may be revised at a later date after further research.

7.5 Register the object in a bound accession register (this is more secure than loose leaf folders), noting the date, description of the object, object number and reference to the receipt number and donor details.

7.6 The object will be numbered¹⁰, photographed for security purposes, catalogued and the contextual information collated in an object file.

7.7 A letter of thanks will be written to donor.

7.8 Maintain an index of donors with a list of their donations and the object numbers.

7.8 Items that are not approved for acquisition will be returned to the owner unless the receipt spells out an alternative arrangement.

⁹ See MGnsw "Collection Management Manual" on www.mgnsw.org.au or contact MGnsw.

¹⁰ See Museums and Galleries NSW Fact Sheet 'Marking Objects with their Accession Number'
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8. Deaccessioning Policy and Procedures

*See Section 6 “Getting Started on Deaccessioning” **Collection Policy Template Explanatory Notes.***

8.1 Deaccessioning is the process of de-registering an object from the collection for clearly stated reasons, and disposing of it in accordance with approved policies and procedures. Caution and transparency are essential in the deaccessioning process.¹¹

8.2 To deaccession an object from the collection, assess the item against the museum’s mission, the collection policy and themes, and the assessment criteria.

8.3 The criteria for deaccessioning include:

- Little or no significance – using the assessment process and significance criteria
- This includes poor condition and lack of provenance
- Also consider:
- Duplication
- Inability to safely store and manage the object
- Lack of relevance to collection themes and policy
- Lack of relevance to the museum’s mission and purpose

8.4 Raising money for the museum through the sale of deaccessioned items is not a valid reason for deaccessioning.

8.5 In identifying priority items for deaccessioning, the museum will give priority to larger items that take up storage and display space, objects in poor condition, items that are hazardous or that create particular problems for management or visitors.

8.6 In exceptional circumstances, items may be deaccessioned where the object is of particular cultural significance and its return will support the maintenance and renewal of cultural traditions.¹²

8.7 Where there are reservations or disagreement about the significance and relevance of items proposed for deaccessioning, the museum may hold items for a period of 12 months before disposal. Items proposed for deaccessioning will be available for inspection, together with a statement detailing the reasons for deaccessioning.

¹¹ For more information on deaccessioning see the fact sheet on the MGNSW web site

¹² This includes returning items to Indigenous groups and organisations such as keeping places. In addition there are cases where museums have deaccessioned a family bible or christening robe where the family wanted to maintain the tradition of wearing the robe or entering family names in the bible. These decisions can be made by considering the context and people to whom the object has most significance. In such cases the museum may need to consider the views of other members of the family.

Fact Sheet

8.8 Items proposed for deaccessioning will be formally approved by the museum's management committee.

8.9 A short statement will be prepared indicating why the object is being deaccessioned and a photo taken. This information is kept in a register of all deaccessioned objects with a note about the method of disposal.

Method of Disposal

8.10 There are five main methods of disposal:

- Return to the donor
- Transfer to another museum
- Sale
- Reserve or Education Collection (see 8.14)
- Destruction

8.11 In the first instance, the donor of the object, if known, will be informed and offered the item, with an explanation of why it is to be deaccessioned. Return the item to the donor if they wish to have the object back.

8.12 Alternatively, deaccessioned items may be transferred to another institution. If items are transferred to another institution, the museum will ensure the item is appropriate to the organisation's mission and collection policy, and that they have the resources to manage the item.

8.13 In other cases, where the item is incomplete, in poor condition, and of no value, it may be destroyed or sent to the tip.

8.14 In some cases, objects of lower significance may be deaccessioned and transferred to a reserve or education collection for active hands-on use in education programs – see 10.8

8.15 Deaccessioned items may be sold through public auction or other method of sale.

8.16 All funds raised through the sale of deaccessioned items will be used for collection development or new acquisitions, or reserved for collection conservation.

8.17 Note the reasons for deaccessioning in the register and catalogue. Draw a line through the object in the register or the card catalogue. Do not delete the record.

8.18 No members, volunteers, staff, or committee members, or their relatives, may benefit or in any way acquire objects that have been deaccessioned.

9. Loans

9.1 No objects will be accepted on indefinite or long term loan.

Fact Sheet

9.2 Loans in or out may only be arranged for fixed periods and for specific purposes.

9.3 Before accepting or making a loan, photograph and record a detailed description of the object's condition.

9.4 Prepare a written and signed loan agreement between the museum and the lender or borrower, detailing the condition of the object and a fixed time span for the loan. This is signed by the museum and the lender or borrower.

9.5 Ensure that items lent from the museum's collection are in good condition, and are displayed in appropriate environmental conditions, in places with adequate security and supervision.

10. Exhibition and Education Policies

These policies may be adapted to reflect the particular mission of the museum.

10.1 Make the collection accessible through well-researched and interpreted displays and exhibitions.

10.2 Where possible promote local heritage places, attractions and businesses, such as the main street, (assuming this is consistent with the museum's purpose).

10.3 Objects made from organic materials will not be kept on permanent display as they deteriorate over time, e.g. textiles, costumes, leather, bone and original paper items.

10.4 Where possible original historic photographs will be copied, with the copies placed on exhibition and the original photos kept in secure storage and shown for limited periods of time.

Historic photographs in their original frames and mounts should be considered as objects and kept intact, and rotated on display for limited periods or copied.

10.5 As resources allow, work with local teachers to develop education programs and opportunities for students to learn from the collection.

10.6 Develop a research and publication program with identified priorities, detailed in the museum's strategic plan.

10.7 Explore opportunities to make the collection accessible on the web.

10.8 A secondary education collection may be developed comprising objects of lower significance that may be used for demonstrations, hands-on access and education activities. Such objects will be clearly identified in a separate register as part of the education collection.

11. Management of the Collection

11.1 Nominate a team to be responsible for the collection and its management. A representative of the collection management team will be on the museum's management committee.

11.2 Provide training opportunities for volunteers working on the collection. This might include funding their participation in workshops and conferences.

11.3 Ensure there is a clean, secure working space for collection documentation, research and significance assessment.

11.4 Regularly monitor and check the condition of the collection on display and in storage.

11.5 Conduct a stock take or audit of the collection every 5 years. Alternatively review designated sections of the collection on an annual basis.

11.6 Before conservation or restoration work to any item in the collection, prepare a statement of significance for the item and an outline of the proposed treatment. Seek advice from a trained conservator before starting work.

11.7 Photograph and document any restoration or conservation work in the object file, including details of all materials used, processes and people involved in the work.

11.8 Develop an annual work program for collection and ensure there is an annual budget line for collection management expenses and training.

For example this might include developing object files, setting a goal to do a certain number of statements of significance, reviewing particular collection themes or sections of the collection, deaccessioning or doing a stock-take. These priorities should also be included in the museum's strategic plan under the relevant collection goal.

11.9 Collection management is a standing item on the agenda of the museum's regular management committee meetings. The museum's annual report to members includes a section on the collection management work of the preceding year.

This means that there is a report to every committee meeting on the work done on collection management. This is guided by what's detailed in the museum's strategic plan and collection policy.

See Section 8 "Collection Policies and the Strategic Plan" Collection Policy Template Explanatory Notes.

11.10 Regularly review the collection policy as knowledge of the collection develops.

An alternative clause would be reviewing the collection policy every 3-5 years or in association with the development of a strategic plan.

12. Related Collections

In this space list the other museums and collections in your local government area and, where relevant the district or region.

12.1 The museum will complement the collections in other museums, galleries, libraries and archives in the region.

12.2 The museum will explore ways of working co-operatively to collaborate on strategic collecting of particular themes and priorities.

*See Section 7 “Linking your Collection – Regional Collaborations” **Collection Policy Template Explanatory Notes.***

13. Future collection development priorities

The best collections are developed by actively pursuing identified priorities and themes, rather than waiting for offers of donation. Use the process of reviewing the significance of the collection to identify priority areas for active collecting through research, public promotions and community awareness campaigns. This section should identify key themes or subjects for targeted collecting. These priorities may be linked to forthcoming exhibitions, such as a display of items made in your town or locality. Hold a morning tea to discuss the collection priorities with members and volunteers, building agreement about the future direction of the collection.

14. Adopting the Collection Policy

The Collection Policy and collecting priorities should be formally adopted by the management committee or the museum’s annual general meeting.

Note the date of adoption of the Policy at the end of the document.

Make a copy of the policy available to new members and volunteers, and on request to members of the public. You may want to place the Collection Policy on exhibition in the museum, or develop a board or panel highlighting the museum’s strategic priorities for the collection. This can assist the museum in saying ‘no’ to unwanted donations. The collection policy and strategic priorities for collection development can also be put on the museum’s web site

APPENDIX A:

Strategic Priorities for Collection Assessment and Development

The museum may not be able to immediately implement all the policies outlined in this template. In this section of the policy identify priority tasks to guide implementation of the collection policy. These priorities should be included in the museum's strategic plan or annual work program. Depending on the condition of the collection this may include the following areas:

1. Establish collection management procedures, receipt book, register and object files
2. Develop a clean, secure working space for collection documentation work
3. Train volunteers in collection management procedures
4. Identify and research the history of the most significant objects
5. Deaccession items that are in poor condition, incomplete, lacking a provenance or have low significance. The museum may decide to nominate a target number of items for deaccessioning per year.
6. Undertake a stock take of the collection
7. Review all loans, return all items on long-term loan, or convert to donations where appropriate
8. Prepare a statement of significance for the collection as a whole, see 3.2 in the explanatory notes
9. Develop detailed object files and statements of significance for the most important objects. Consider setting a target number of object files or statements of significance per year.
10. Put statements of significance on the web
11. Work with other museums in the district to develop complementary collection policies and collecting priorities for particular themes or subjects
12. Purchase a collection management system that will assist in developing on line access to the collection, e.g. Mosaic
13. Review progress on identified strategic priorities every 12 months, as part of the annual report of the museum

These tasks can also be incorporated in your strategic plan and annual work program based on the strategic plan.