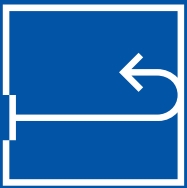


HERITAGE  
FUTURES



# PROFUSION IN MUSEUMS

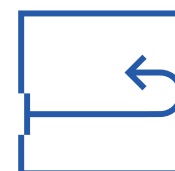
A REPORT ON CONTEMPORARY  
COLLECTING AND DISPOSAL



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council



UNIVERSITY  
*of York*



# PROFUSION IN MUSEUMS

A REPORT ON CONTEMPORARY  
COLLECTING AND DISPOSAL

Harald Fredheim, Sharon Macdonald and Jennie Morgan

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# FOREWORD

PROFUSION is one of four themes in the Heritage Futures research project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The term, Profusion, was chosen as one that communicates that there is a lot of something, without implying whether that is a good or a bad thing. Within the Heritage Futures project, Profusion is investigated within households and museums. We are interested in how people make decisions about what to keep and what to get rid of – especially everyday objects from the more recent past.

This report focuses on our work in museums, and specifically on the results from a survey and knowledge exchange event we organised in 2018. The survey questions were informed by more in-depth qualitative research, conducted through interviews and observations, since the project began in 2015.

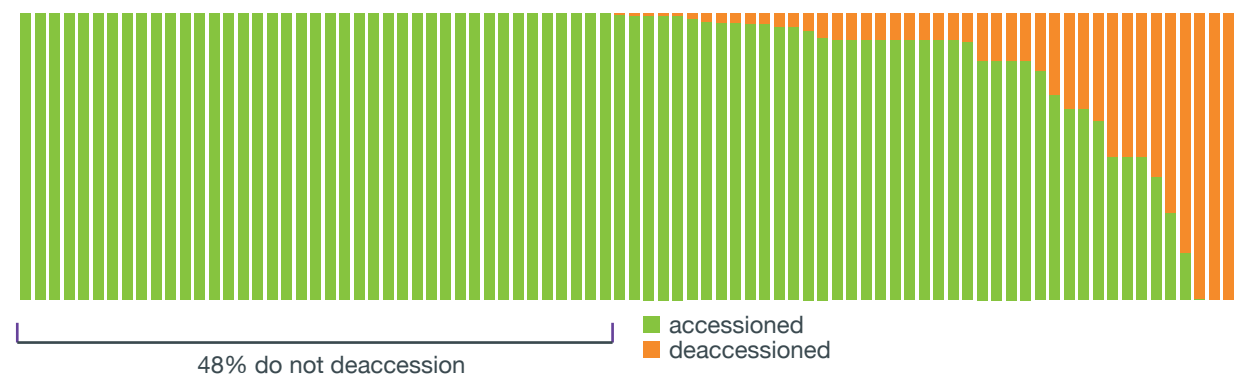
The Profusion theme addresses the challenge presented by the abundance of material and digital stuff for assembling the future archive – and how this challenge is compounded by mass-production and consumption. We often explain this by referring to Profusion in the context of social history and contemporary collecting. These terms have been helpful, but they also come with their own difficulties. For example, what is social history?



Heritage Futures is all about the futures we are making through caring for, conserving and curating things in the present. So as you flick through these pages about social history, contemporary collecting and disposal, we hope you will join us in taking a step back and thinking about what all this means for collections and collecting in the future. We would love to hear your thoughts – so do join in the Profusion conversation. Email us, tag us in a Tweet, send us a postcard – or strike up a conversation with a friend or colleague. If you want to reach us, our details are at the back.

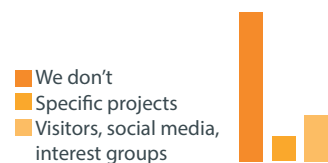
# AT A GLANCE

Roughly how many social history objects do you accession and deaccession each year?



Many museums have objects in their collection they would not accession today and have staff that are willing to perform rationalisation projects, but most museums are still accessioning far more than they are deaccessioning.

How do you solicit donations?



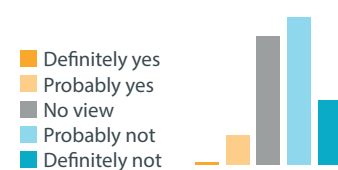
"Our collecting is manageable in its passive form. We are unable to be more active in our collecting as we do not have the time to do so or the space to put the collections that we could acquire."

The vast majority of newly accessioned social history objects are unsolicited donations and museums are generally collecting less due to their limited space for objects. This suggests that museums' experiences of Profusion are limiting their ability to develop their collections through active contemporary collecting.

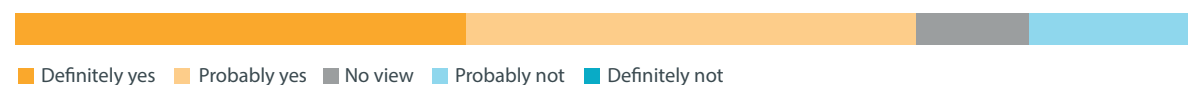
Are your museum's collections development meetings open to the public?



Do you think they should be?



Did you find public participation in acquisition and disposal decisions helpful?

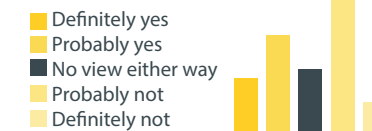


Museums do not hold open collections development meetings and do not necessarily think they should, but our respondents who have invited members of the public to participate in collections development have generally found it helpful.

? What will social history collecting look like at your museum in 50 or 100 years time?

# IN THIS REPORT YOU WILL FIND

Visualisations of survey data



"Quotes from survey respondents"

? Provocations from Profusion researchers

Reflections from knowledge exchange participants

Discussion questions from knowledge exchange participants

← Ideas from our Heritage Futures Colleagues

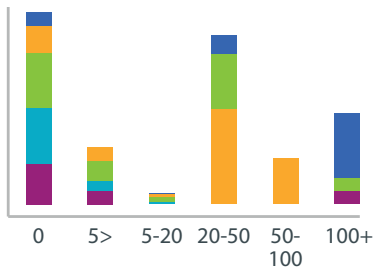
Heritage Futures is made up of four themes, each of which consists of researchers studying different ways practices in the present are designing futures in different fields. In this report we will share ideas from the Diversity, Transformation and Uncertainty themes that inform our thinking about Profusion.

# CONTEMPORARY COLLECTING AND DISPOSAL SURVEY

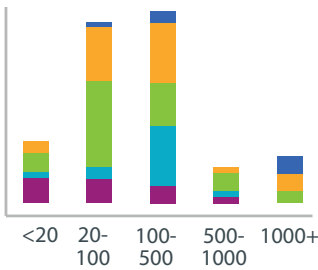
Size distribution of respondents' social history collections



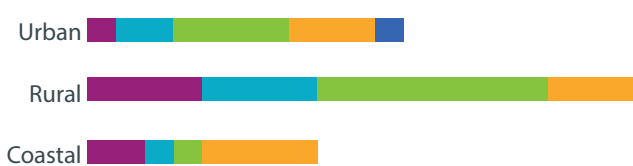
Number of full-time equivalent paid staff members by collection size



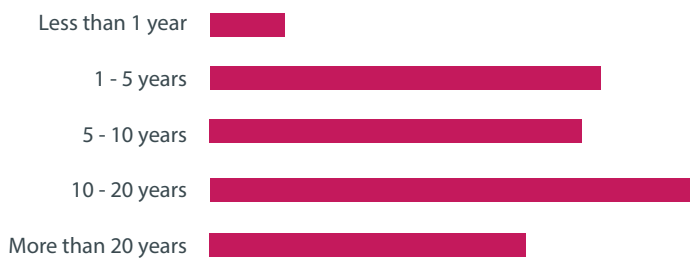
Average number of unpaid staff and volunteer hours contributed per month



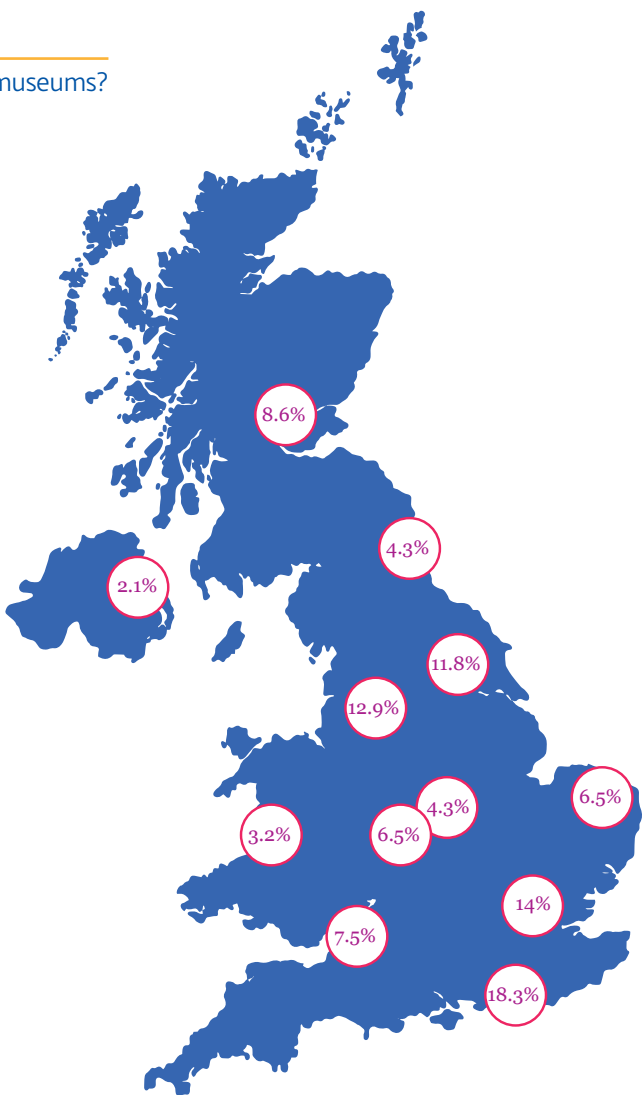
Would you describe your museum as urban rural or coastal?



How long have you been involved in collections decisions in museums?



Geographical distribution of respondents by regional Museum Development Networks



Our contemporary collecting and disposal survey was distributed to museums in the UK in June 2018 with help from our official project partners at the Arts Council England (Yorkshire), the York Museums Trust and the Association of Independent Museums, as well as the Collections Trust. The geographical distribution of our survey respondents shown on the left corresponds to the Museum Development Networks, which were integral to getting news out about the survey.

We received responses from over 90 individuals involved in collections development at museums of varying sizes across the UK. Over 70 of these were complete responses. While we are very pleased with this, we would like to caution you about drawing firm conclusions based on this sample alone, as it is likely to represent less than 10 % of the museums in the UK with everyday objects from the recent past. We should be especially cautious of making assumptions about small vs large collections or predominantly professional vs volunteer-run museums. If anything, the responses show that the challenges of dealing with Profusion are felt across all kinds of museums, all over the country.

The survey asked questions about museums' "social history collection" and "social history objects". We explained that other objects from the recent past that might not be formally classed as social history should be included in this and we received many responses from individuals who did not necessarily consider their collections to be social history. This includes collections of cars, buses, trains and boats, military collections and collections of musical and medical instruments, to name a few.

The responses are from people in museums who hold a large range of roles and who have been dealing with Profusion in various ways over extended periods of time. We really are very grateful to them for sharing their experiences with us. We think you will agree they constitute a rich sample of knowledge about current collections development practice in the UK.

What is your job/role title?





# MUSEUMS FOR PROFUSION



In this report, the survey responses are brought into conversation with discussions from our follow-up knowledge exchange event. We invited our survey respondents to join us at the National Railway Museum in September 2018 to discuss the results of the survey. We also invited members of Museum Detox and Museum as Muck - two networks for underrepresented demographics in museums: people identifying as BAME and from working class backgrounds respectively. Sector research has repeatedly shown that representation is a pressing issue in museums and as we were discussing what museums might be like in the future, we felt it was especially important to include as wide a range of voices as possible. We do not want to

pretend that we were entirely successful, as we were unable to

engage with organisations for other underrepresented demographics, such as people identifying as LGBTQIA+ or with disabilities. This is worth noting as we consider the futures we are creating for museums - who those futures are for and who is part of the conversation.

Museums for Profusion began with keynotes by Bernadette Lynch and Rachael Minott, who set the tone for the day.

Bernadette challenged us to foreground that collections should be useful, that we must overcome the fear of conflict and change our view of the publics we serve from beneficiaries to active agents. Rachael emphasised the need to reframe Profusion and highlighted that while we may want to develop inclusive projects by working with marginalised communities, we should be careful not to always make these projects about challenges and suffering.

She ended by asking us what museums should be trying to achieve and whether a museum that had 10 objects that were approached creatively would be more or less functional than a museum with a million objects all approached in one way.



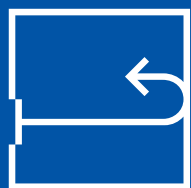
Most of the day was spent discussing the survey results together. We wanted to invite more voices into our discussion of the survey results and asked our participants to share their reflections on giant blue and purple Heritage Futures postcards. Some are anonymous and some have names attached. They have been transcribed and spell checked, but are otherwise unaltered.



Together, the survey and knowledge exchange event provide the bulk of the content for this report, though we have also drawn in some ideas from elsewhere - from within and beyond the Profusion theme and overarching Heritage Futures project.





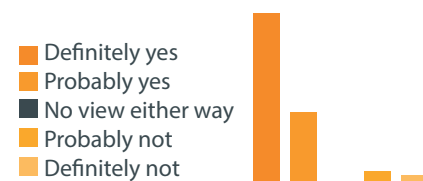


# WHAT IS PROFUSION - AND **WHAT** ARE WE DOING ABOUT IT?



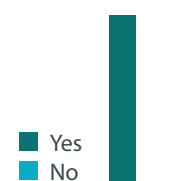
# COLLECTIONS DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

Are there accessioned social history objects in your collection you wouldn't accession if you were building your collection from scratch?



More than 90 % of our survey respondents answered that there are objects in their collection they would not collect if they were building their collection from scratch. Later in this report, you will see that respondents also identified space as their most common concern about the sustainability of their collecting practices. Profusion represents all the things that might be worth keeping for the future and the Profusion Predicament is what we are left to deal with when we realise we cannot possibly keep it all. We are wary of calling this a problem. Arguably it is an experience of having too much of a good thing. But most museums can't keep everything that meets the criteria of their collections development policy, so it is a predicament.

Does your museum have formal collections development policies (acquisition/disposal policies)?

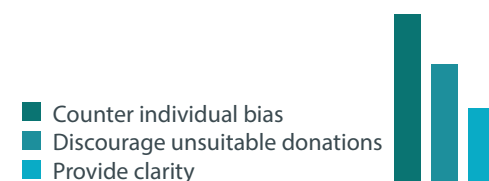


The most common way to address Profusion is through a formal collections development policy. Having one is a requirement for accreditation and almost all respondents, including some from non-accredited museums, are based in museums that have collections development policies. While you may hear complaints that collections development policies involve unnecessary bureaucracy, our survey results clearly suggest they are felt to be helpful.

Do you find that your collections development policies help you make better collecting and disposal decisions?



How do they help you make better decisions?



"They provide a clear framework of what should be kept and collected and conversely a clear framework for what should not be kept or collected."

First and foremost, respondents identified policies as helpful in reigning in individual interests and bias. There is a general sense that the absence of policies in the past led to a lack of rigour and focus in collections development – causing problems that present curators have been left to deal with. Within these responses are mentions of words such as "structure", "objectivity", "focus", "informed decisions" and "consistency".

The second most common response was that policies are a useful mechanism for politely turning down donations. Museums inevitably feel the need to refuse some donated objects. Collections development policies allow decision makers to explain why an object is being refused and to point to the fact that this is not an individual or personal decision, but in accordance with a collective museum policy.

Both of these reasons are connected to the response that policies provide clarity, as clarity is important for decision making within the museum and in communicating those decisions externally. Respondents also noted that policies could be a source of confidence, a way to coordinate with other museums to find the most suitable homes for objects and a marker of professionalism.

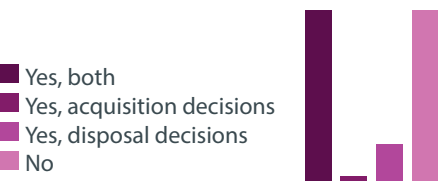
"[Policies] are guidelines and can still clearly be bent if you wish to acquire something, or conversely can be enforced to the letter if you don't. There is still flexibility in them which is useful."

The quote above questions the idea that policies can counter individual whims and interests alone, but argues this is a good thing. It suggests that collections decisions are not objective and that maybe they shouldn't be. It is tempting to think that policies provide objectivity, but the reality is that policies both leave room for subjectivity and are, themselves, the product of subjective judgments. This is what makes the Profusion Predicament – it is a predicament because there is no objectively RIGHT answer. This does not mean that policies are not helpful. They clearly are. It also does not mean that some decisions may not be better than others. We should recognise the value of informed judgments and the policies that lend structure to them, all while remembering where they come from.



# SIGNIFICANCE ASSESSMENTS

Does your museum use formal “assessments of significance” to aid decision-making about acquisition and disposal?



Approximately half our survey respondents reported they use formal assessments of significance to aid their collection and disposal decisions. This is significantly less than the number who have collections development policies, but this is not surprising as formal assessments of significance are not required for accreditation. However, optional comments and follow-up questions highlighted that many respondents were unsure what was meant by “a formal assessment of significance” and that the number who actually use formal templates is considerably lower. Several explained that they had answered yes because they use the language of “significance” as part of their process but do not use formal templates. This uncertainty was underscored at the Museums for Profusion event, where one participant scribbled “what is an assessment of significance?” on their data discussion card. Our results therefore suggest that thinking about the significance of objects is common practice in collections development, but that the formal processes that have been adopted in some other countries and fields of practice are not yet established in UK museums’ collections development processes.

Primary criteria proposed by the Collection Council of Australia’s *Significance 2.0*

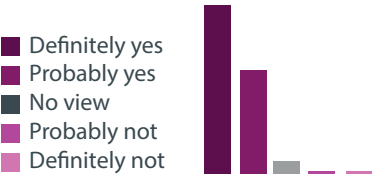


Comparative criteria proposed by the Collection Council of Australia’s *Significance 2.0*



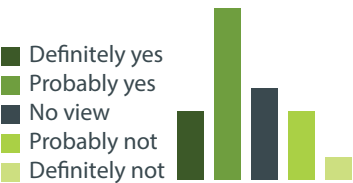
Significance assessments have a longer history in heritage site management than they do in museums. Their introduction to museums can be traced back to work by the Collections Council of Australia at the turn of the century and their two publications on the topic: *(Significance)* and *Significance 2.0*. In short, they propose that objects should be assessed according to four primary and four comparative criteria. Other publications suggest other criteria, but the premise of assessing the significance of objects against a list of set criteria or questions remains. Following the formal assessment on a standardised form or template, a concise “statement of significance” is written, which provides a summary of why the object in question is important, in order to inform decision making.

Do you find that your process for assessing the significance of objects helps you make better acquisition and disposal decisions?

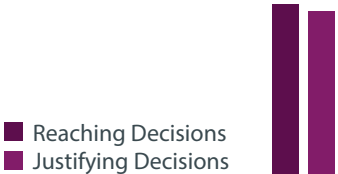


Arguably, collections decisions are always the result of assessments of significance – even though these often take the form of informal value judgements. Virtually all our respondents reported that their process for assessing significance helps them make better decisions.

Do you wish your museum had formal guidance documents for significance assessments?



Do you find formal assessments of significance most helpful in reaching or justifying your acquisition and disposal decisions?



How do you think these would help you?

“focus” “clear”  
“standardised”  
“informed” “objective”  
“rigorous”  
“consistency”

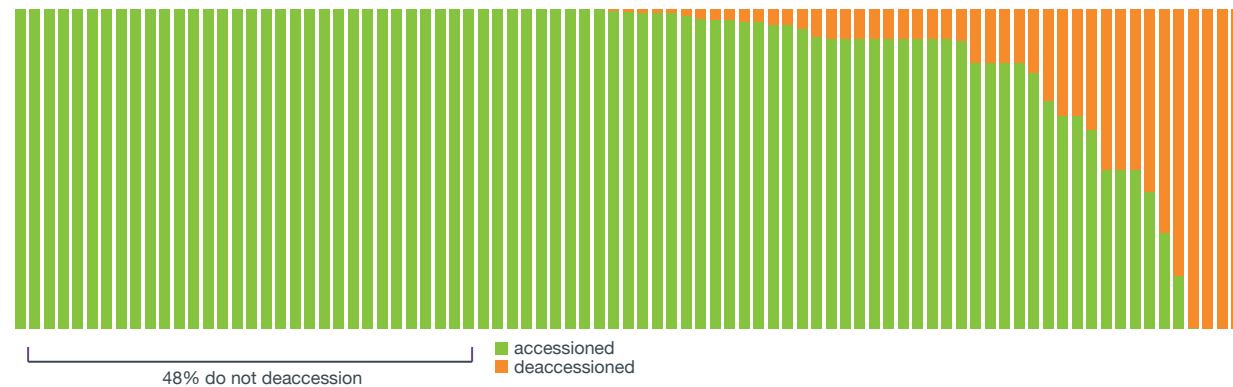
“We do not have any in-house subject specialists.”

“They will help my successors.”

Respondents who don’t have formal processes suggested they might be useful. Like collections development policies, formal assessments of significance are seen as a means for making decisions more consistent, informed and objective. But, as shown at the top of this page, respondents who already use formal assessments are split as to whether they are most helpful in reaching or justifying decisions. Like other policies, we should be careful of expecting assessments of significance to bring objectivity and expertise to the process. What they feed back depends on what we feed in.

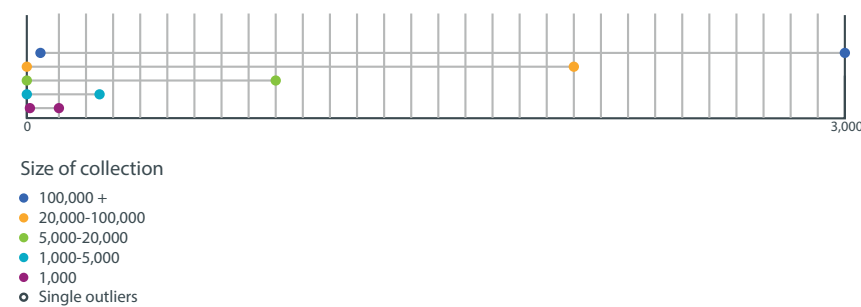
# ACCESSIONING & DEACCESSIONING

Roughly how many social history objects do you accession and deaccession each year?

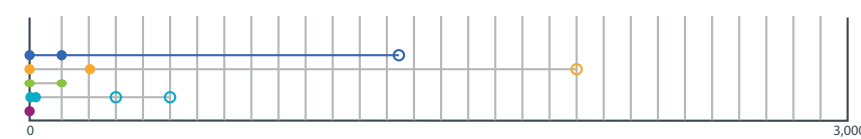


A concerted effort has been made by organisations such as the Museums Association to make disposal a core component of collections development and this is felt by our respondents, one of whom noted that 'disposal is all the rage at present'. One of the clearest findings from our survey is that while there may be more talk of disposal, museums are still very much collecting institutions. Even when discounting museums who reported no deaccessioning on average each year, the reported median ratio of annual social history accessioning to deaccessioning is 10:1, and the mean over 20:1.

Approximate number of social history objects accessioned each year by size of collection



Approximate number of social history objects deaccessioned each year by size of collection



Comparing the two plot graphs communicates the scale of this, demonstrating that with the exception of a few outliers, most museums are deaccessioning small numbers of objects. Due to the sample sizes, we are wary of drawing conclusions about the scale of accessioning or deaccessioning by collection size, but it is worth noting that larger collections do not necessarily deaccession more than smaller collections.

Both survey respondents and knowledge exchange participants noted that, crucially, there is a difference between acquiring and accessioning objects and that numbers can vary greatly from year to year. Despite this, the general trends are striking.

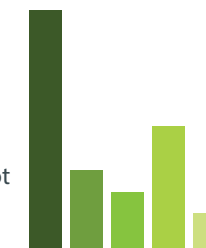
"In 2017 1409 new records were created, but many of these would have been for objects that were acquired many years ago, but for which appropriate documentation had not yet been created. I.e. they were not all collected in 2017."

Need to address # of objects acquired as well as accessioned

"Very few - only a couple objects officially deaccessioned in the last 5 years. This is in large part due to the fact that a large collection of objects that are being disposed of were never officially accessioned in the first place, so again a hard question to answer accurately."

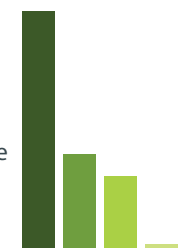
Have these numbers changed during your time working at the museum?

Definitely yes  
Probably yes  
Might or might not  
Probably not  
Definitely not



In what way?

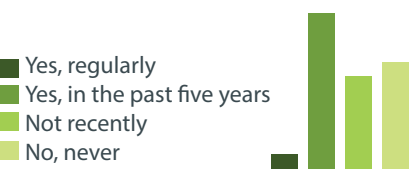
Deaccessioning more  
Collecting less  
Collecting more  
Deaccessioning less



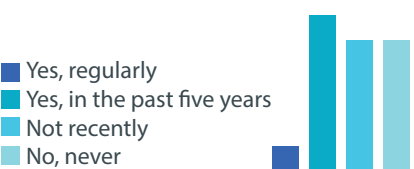
The majority of respondents who answered that numbers had changed during their time in the museum explained that they were now collecting less and or deaccessioning more. Only five respondents reported collecting more without also deaccessioning more. It is also worth noting that some respondents were based in new museums, who are understandably also collecting more than before.

Museum Association and Collections Trust guidance on disposal stipulates a preference for transferring deaccessioned objects to accredited museums or other organisations that commit to keeping objects publicly accessible. Only where no such organisation can be found to take objects, is disposal by re-use, recycling or destruction considered good practice.

Have you ever disposed of social history objects from your collection through re-use, recycling or destruction?

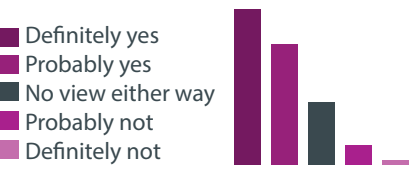


Have you ever disposed of social history objects from your collection through re-use, recycling or disposal for any reason other than an object's poor condition?



It is worth emphasising that 50 % of our survey respondents have never disposed of social history objects through re-use, recycling or disposal for any reason other than an object's poor condition. Respondents who answered no to the first question above were not asked the second. Answers to follow-up questions suggest that the vast majority of disposals, as distinct from transfers to other museums, are of objects that are in poor condition or are considered hazardous. Less than a third of survey respondents have disposed of objects for any reason other than poor condition in the last five years. Several of those who have, mentioned this was for safety reasons or because they had duplicates.

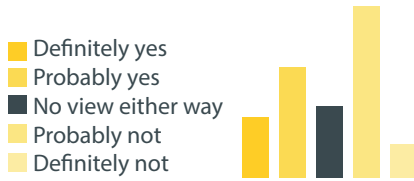
Would you consider disposing objects from your collection through re-use, recycling or destruction in the future?



Most respondents answered that they would consider disposing of objects through re-use, recycling or disposal in the future and a number of them informed us in comments that they are currently undertaking, or planning to begin, rationalisation projects.

However, even when collections staff are willing to recommend disposals, it's not always easy to actually remove objects from collections. We have heard of many examples where objects marked for disposal have remained in museums for years. Despite this, there is no clear consensus among our respondents that it should be made easier to dispose of objects from social history collections. It is worth noting some that answered positively did so because of difficulties specific to their own museum while others answered negatively because they felt the specific mention of "social history collections" implied a devaluation of social history objects in comparison to other types of collections. Even when taking this into account, views remain mixed:

Do you feel it should be made easier to dispose of objects from social history collections?



"The strict guidelines on ethical disposal can be onerous and time consuming and too complex for some sorts of collection. For example we have hundreds of milk bottles, we don't need them all and being local they are of no interest to anyone else which makes it simpler for us to leave them taking up space in the store than to attempt disposal."

"It is already possible to dispose of objects. You just need a clear collections development policy and to follow the process laid down by Accreditation. We have followed this process several times and I do not think it is unreasonably onerous. It requires that you think through what you are doing and that you try to keep the items in the public domain and I think that is fair."

"I feel that all disposal should be accountable. It should be approved from the very top level of the organisation. It should never be regarded as the first option of tackling a difficult problem such as lack of storage. It should always be curatorial led."

"I think it's easier than it was, given that rationalisation is now in the Accreditation standard. I think we do have all the tools we need, and there are several examples out there now of disposal projects successfully accomplished."

"We need to think carefully about objects that we dispose of, and shouldn't make it too easy. It is frustrating at times to jump through hoops to deaccession an object that should never have been accessioned in the first place. However, it protects us (and the collection) from interested parties within the museum who may want to sell items to raise money."



# DONATIONS

Does your museum purchase social history objects for your collection?



Many museums do still purchase social history objects, but only rarely, and some respondents who do noted that they would only be able to do this through targeted fundraising. It is clear that the bulk of social history objects that make their way into collections are donated.

Do you accept object donations to your social history collection from members of the public?



How do you solicit donations?



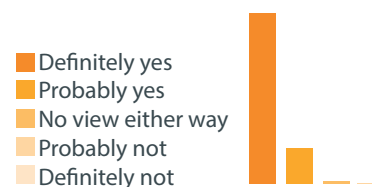
"We let it be known what we would like to collect."

"Because donations are donor led we only really have what other people think is of value – the collection is definitely a patchy record of life in times gone by."

"We don't have to, donors come to us."

Most respondents indicated that their museum does not actively solicit donations to their collections. Respondents from museums that do solicit donations described this taking place through channels that target existing museum audiences, such as visitor notices, posts to social media followers and notifying interest groups. While some highlight the need for more active collecting, others do not necessarily consider passive collecting a problem.

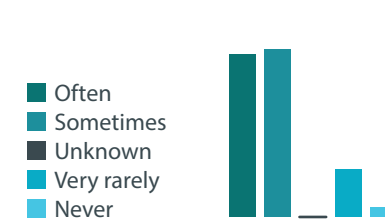
Do you hope your museum will accept social history donations from members of the public in the future?



Despite current experiences of Profusion, there is clearly still a pervading hope that museums will be able to accept donations in the future.

# SUSTAINABILITY

Is the sustainability of your collection practices a topic of discussion at your museum?

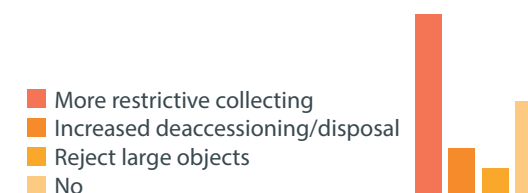


What, if any, are your most pressing concerns about the sustainability of your social history collecting practices?



Over 80 % of respondents reported that the sustainability of their collecting practices was often or sometimes a topic of discussion at their museum. Of these, 70 % mentioned space as being among their most pressing concerns in this context.

Have these concerns led you to think about approaching social history collecting differently? If yes, in which ways?



"We now have to decline objects that would be very suitable for the collection from the categories in the CDP because we do not have the facilities to take these on."

"Yes, we are about to undertake a major rationalisation project which will also lay the foundations for more sustainable practices in the future."

Together, responses to questions about donations and sustainability suggest that museums are addressing Profusion by collecting less (and less actively) and that it has not led to more concerted thinking about new approaches that could make continued contemporary collecting possible. It is also worth noting that most of the responses highlight museums' capacity to hold collections, not to care for them, use them or make them accessible.

Both our keynotes at our knowledge exchange event raised the issue of useful and effective collections. The ways we are addressing Profusion at the moment raises concerns both about our ability to develop representative collections with broad social relevance and to care for and use all these objects in meaningful ways.



**What do sustainable collecting practices look like?**

# PROFUSION

Virtually all the museums we have interacted with report experiencing what we call the Profusion Predicament – the sense that there is more to be collected than can be kept. This is caused by several dimensions of Profusion: accessioned objects already in store, backlog collections waiting to be accessioned and all the other things that could be collected. Museums use collections development policies to communicate the boundaries of what they collect. This can be understood as a strategic and curatorially led way of managing the scale of Profusion. Our survey and knowledge exchange event have revealed that the Profusion most museums actually engage with is unintentionally limited further. Despite their very real experiences of the Profusion Predicament, many museums are not actively engaging with the full range of things that could be collected, as defined by their collections development policies. Participants at our knowledge exchange event identified two causes for this: not collecting digital objects and only collecting passively.

*Should we be focusing on collecting the intangible rather than the tangible?*

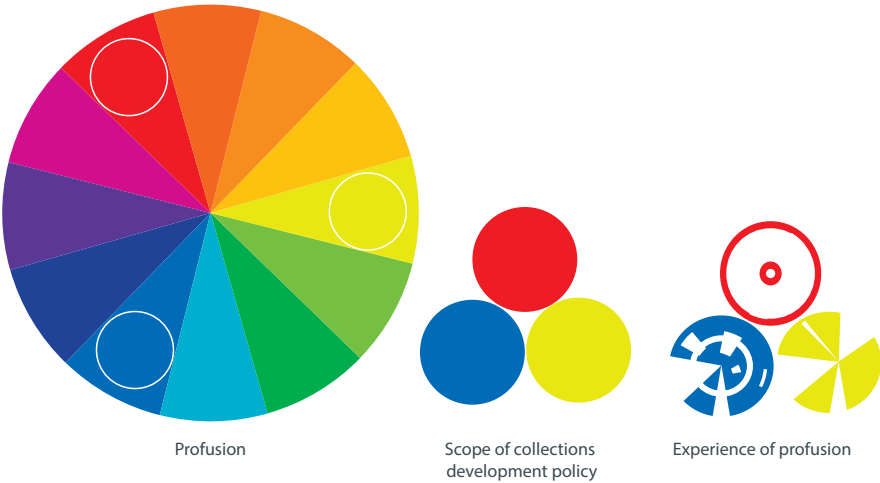
*Can digitisation help? E.g. can we just collect digital images/videos?*

*After we tackle the ‘physical’ profusion issue, how and when do we tackle the DIGITAL profusion and maintenance? (b/c tech. is always evolving and becoming obsolete, how do we keep up?)*

*If we don’t actively collect, we are relying on our communities to donate objects. But most members of the public think we don’t want contemporary objects, so we will never collect them if we don’t let our communities know we’re interested!*

Digital technology is sometimes promoted as a solution to Profusion, but those who work with digital objects highlight the costs involved and the relative instability of digital data as significant barriers. It is also worth noting the Profusion of digital objects that could be collected. The British Library, which is not a museum but has the mandate to collect everything published in the UK, reports expanding its various digital holdings by over 60 terabytes annually, despite only selectively collecting social media. Some museums already collect digital oral histories, digital “copies” of physical objects or even so-called “born digital” objects. While digitisation has many benefits, it does not necessarily replace the need for physical objects. Our results suggest that instead of offering a simple fix, digital technology adds an additional dimension to Profusion.

Museums actively limit Profusion through the scope of their collections development policies, but the Profusion they engage with is limited further through passive collecting and donor self-selection.



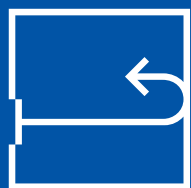
By only collecting passively, or not deliberately soliciting donations beyond established audiences, museums approach Profusion reactively - by deciding “what not to collect”. One consequence of this is that museums’ collecting is shaped by their donors instead of a curatorially led engagement with all of the things that might be worth collecting. Museum staff, volunteers and visitors are not representative of the communities we live in, so we must be wary of letting our existing Profusion Predicaments keep us from actively engaging with larger, more representative possibilities of what might be collected.

**? Are the objects we already have necessarily more important than the ones we haven’t collected yet?**

Getting contemporary collecting right is difficult and time-consuming. Deliberately engaging with Profusion by moving beyond “what not to collect” and exploring the potential for digital collecting requires new skills and resources that especially smaller museums may feel they simply do not have.

“Someone may have cracked it and so it would be great to learn from them. What is material culture in the twenty teens? I get that the Museum of London or the V&A might be able to make a reasonable stab at this but local museums?? Might we end up with the 21st century equivalent of multiple Victorian mangles? Is that ok?”





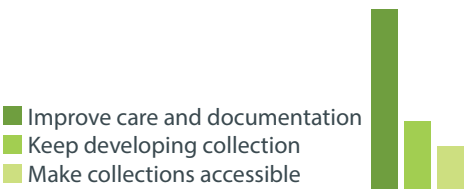
# HOW MIGHT WE ADDRESS PROFUSION DIFFERENTLY?





The Heritage Futures project explores the futures we are making through our actions in the present. In the Profusion theme, this idea is quite easily accessible because most people involved in collections development in museums are aware of how practices in the past have created the collections they manage today. Many survey respondents mentioned that they are having to deaccession now, because too much was accessioned in the past and that this is made more difficult by poor documentation. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that improving collections care and documentation was the most frequently mentioned responsibility they felt to future curators and publics.

What do you consider your curatorial responsibilities to be with regard to future curators and publics?



Interestingly, most respondents did not distinguish between their responsibilities in the present and their responsibilities to future curators and publics. This was especially the case in answers to how they felt their responsibilities to future publics and curators had changed. Most of these responses said nothing about the future, but described how their own practice had changed.

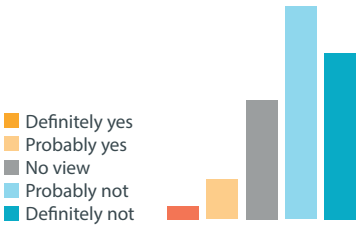
"I feel more strongly about recent history as I work with a lot of young people, and that history is just as important, and as alien, to them as Tudors or Romans."

"A growing desire for the dynamic narration and presentation of a collection."

"I have had to deal with more complicated collections."

"Having worked in museums for over 30 years the digital access has become increasingly important both for curators and the public to enable access to collections that otherwise might never see the light of day, or cannot be easily accessed by the public."

Museums keep objects for the future. Do you think the time-frames social history objects are kept for should be approached differently to those of objects in other types of collections, such as art, natural history or archaeology?



Almost all our survey respondents disagreed with the suggestion that social history objects should be kept for different time-periods than objects in types of collections. The minority who answered yes, were asked "in what way". Responses to this question showed that at least four respondents had misunderstood and meant to answer no. Only three respondents explained why they thought social history objects should be approached differently.

"Need to bear in mind long term sustainability, interest, uniqueness and means of storage."

"Tastes and significances change, and museums can be left with unwieldy collections if they are not careful."

"Social history collections are much more open-ended than the others mentioned (which we also have), they are liable to grow much faster & in a less controlled way, and selection criteria tend to be much less clear-cut (especially historically). This is likely to leave a legacy of debatable decisions that makes social history a prime candidate for collections review / rationalisation programmes."

While some may have answered no in order to emphasise that social history collections should not be considered less important than other types of collections, there appears to be little support for the idea that social history objects should not be kept for an indefinite future. However, this didn't keep our Museum for Profusion participants from raising questions about how the future should be approached in collections development:


Should different collection types have different collection management procedures? E.g. kept forever? Exist only digitally? Should they be touched? Should they exist in another space? Managed by outsiders?

who/when are you collecting for? (our work should be about stating the history of the present - e.g. homelessness.. - rather than preserving the present for the future? "The point is to change it".

# FUTURE SCENARIOS

One of the things the Heritage Futures project has attempted to do, is to make room for our partners to stop and think about the future – and the futures we are *creating* – more directly. We hope you can use this report to give yourself a similar opportunity. So let us take a moment to think seriously about the future of collecting in our museums.

Our colleagues in the Uncertainty theme have been working with organisations that deal with deep futures – in fields like nuclear waste management and space messaging. While we, in museums, talk about keeping things “for posterity”, “for future generations”, “forever”, or “for the long term”, we are not usually thinking about hundreds of thousands of years. When we think about the future, we’re also not usually thinking about the future of collecting, but about the future of objects in our collections.



### Ideas from Uncertainty

The Uncertainty theme explores how different professions plan for the distant future. Working with nuclear waste disposal and space messaging has emphasised that, by comparison, those of us in the heritage sector don’t actually think that far into the future on a regular basis. In fact, heritage professionals usually only think about the future as the continuation of the present. In this context, the idea of the “unwanted gift” is helpful in challenging the assumption that future generations will want what we give them. In our personal lives, most of us have inherited things from our parents or grandparents that we don’t really want, but don’t feel we can get rid of.

Who are the “future generations” we are keeping things for and do we really know what they want?

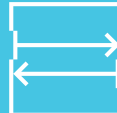
This is also true in museums. Over 90 % of our survey respondents said there are accessioned objects in their social history collection they would not collect if they were building the collection from scratch. Will future curators feel the same way about the collections they inherit?

In the first half of this report, we have shown that many museums are concerned about a lack of space and that most of the museums covered in our survey are coping with their experiences of Profusion by accessioning less and to only collect passively.

? Which futures for social history collecting are our “Profusion-coping-mechanisms” creating?

The social history collections in our museums are largely the product of less than 50 years’ worth of collecting. Are we set for a future where our social history museums are full of objects from the 1970s, 80s, 90s and early 2000s, but only very little from subsequent decades? Or are we going to keep on extending our museum stores indefinitely and create impossibly large and unwieldy collections? It seems the answer must lie somewhere between these two extremes, but so far we haven’t come across many answers anyone is excited about.

? What will social history collecting look like at your museum in 50 or 100 years time?



### Ideas from Diversity

Research in the Diversity theme on natural and cultural heritage conservation suggests that attempts to conserve “diversity” often stem from the sense that diversity is endangered and ever diminishing. This can be understood as an “entropic” understanding of diversity - there will be less and less of it and we can only ever slow down the rate of inevitable loss. But the “entropic” understanding of diversity is not our only option. In bio-conservation, for example, freezing seeds as new genetic variations are developed could be seen as increasing, rather than merely conserving, biodiversity.

What are the implications for Profusion?

While a lot of social history collecting began as a form of rescue, in response to a sense of endangerment and fear of imminent loss, it is certainly true that there is always more social history being created. This is what makes issues around Profusion especially relevant in social history and contemporary collecting and the need to make difficult decisions ever more pressing.

While we should be wary of making decisions future generations may come to regret, we inevitably will – just as we regret some of our predecessors’ decisions today. We are the future generations of the past and decisions must always be made in the present. Deciding not to collect is as much a decision as deciding not to dispose, so deciding not to decide is not an option. While we cannot know what curators or publics will want in the future, we can do our best to avoid passing on unwanted gifts. The very least we can do is try to make decisions less difficult in the future. Many of our survey respondents highlighted this by identifying improved documentation as a responsibility they feel to future curators and publics.

? What would the ideal collection to inherit be like?

# IMPROVING DISPOSAL

There is a growing recognition in the museum sector that disposal is a good and necessary part of responsible collections development. While many of our respondents emphasised that they plan on disposing more in the future, there was no consensus for making disposal easier or for keeping social history objects for shorter periods of time. Rather than making disposal easier, there appears to be a lot of support for making disposal better. Discussions at our knowledge exchange event highlighted that disposal could be improved on a number of levels.

*Need an 'insignificance' policy to support deaccessioning.*

As discussed earlier in this report, significance assessments can be used to inform both accessioning and deaccessioning. While a separate "insignificance" policy therefore may not be necessary, it is an interesting idea. Policies can take the emotional burden away from individuals when dealing with difficult decisions and it's possible that a set of criteria designed to identify objects that should be considered for disposal would be helpful in some cases.

*How do you prepare your successors to deal with the stuff you collected (especially the 'just in case')?*

This discussion topic highlights that sometimes objects are kept, "just in case". While we may feel a responsibility to respect the decisions made by curators in the past, some objects may have been kept despite doubts about their significance, just as they are today. We cannot know which objects collected in the past this applies to, but for what we collect now, it may be worth documenting when we keep things "just in case". They could be labelled as potentially insignificant so future curators don't attribute more meaning to our decisions than we intended.

Both our survey and knowledge exchange event highlighted the need for better coordination between museums and for scaling up our approaches to dealing with Profusion to the sector-level.

*Local, regional, national, new + old museums and institutions need to REALLY communicate w/each other. Issues that need to be discussed, especially in terms of evolution of moving forward as a whole.*

*How can the Nationals work with the rest of the museum sector to look at issues of Profusion.*

*"Disposal regulations are moving in the right direction, but more cooperation between museums as to who already holds what and places to dispose of items ethically and usefully for the public would be a big step forward."*

One suggestion is to create a central store for duplicate objects. At our knowledge exchange event this raised a discussion about what "duplicate" means in a social history context. Objects have different stories attached to them, so one participant suggested that only objects of the same type without stories attached should be considered duplicates. It is arguably these objects, mass-produced and without local attachments, that are the best candidates for a central store.

*Could there be a central repository for banal/everyday objects - to be taken on loan with local narratives applied?*

*How can you decide what to dispose of if you don't have its history? - Problem of dealing with poorly documented backlog collections.*



# CREATIVE DISPOSAL

Our results suggest that a lot of people are interested in working with artists in order to create something new and valuable through the disposal process. Despite this, only one of our respondents mentioned including an artist in a disposal project.

"Items were offered to local artists to use in public art projects."

One suggestion, emerging from our knowledge exchange event, is to establish a museum that specialises in creative disposal – both to deliver projects and to show other museums how they could go about initiating their own.

Now alert to the problem of profusion should we set up a "museum of tat" – either virtual or sent to central store?  
- Lynda Burrell,  
Creative Director at Museumand,  
The National Caribbean Heritage  
Museum

Disposed Objects Idea: Give local artists access to them to 'make' with – then if sold a percentage goes to institution, rest goes to artist. Also an exhibition of 're-made' heritage.

Lynda explains that she thinks this idea should be combined with the one about a central repository for duplicate objects, described on the previous page. Loaning objects back to other museums for exhibitions and delivering creative disposal projects are only two of the services the Museum of Tat could offer.

"This is not just listing what museums have to give away but properly curating the items as a museum would with relevant labels etc. If the items are with us for too long or we get too many of an item we could give them away to an artist to use for their work. If this work sells we as the museum will get a cut of the sales price. The artist will be expected to run a workshop for children, young adults, elders or families as a thank you for being given the items. Truly philanthropic!"

In the Profusion theme, we have explored the concept of "degrowth". The well-known expression "less is more" may well be useful in collections development. Both the keynotes at our knowledge exchange event touched on the idea that the most important thing is how a collection is used – and suggested that a larger collection is not always a more useful one. What creative disposal offers is a useful way of doing degrowth – so something can be gained both by and through disposal. This emphasis on process is something that resonates with other parts of the Heritage Futures project.



## Ideas from Transformation

The Transformation theme has explored how we might accommodate change and loss in our relationships with heritage buildings and landscapes. Are there ways of losing that are better than others – are there ways that losses can be turned into gains? It has also considered whether "loss" is the right idea in this context. If we take a step back and consider longer periods of time, it may be a question of continuity through change rather than loss. Fixating on individual things and clinging onto them at any cost may do more harm than good – maybe what is being "lost" is sometimes less important than the bigger picture?

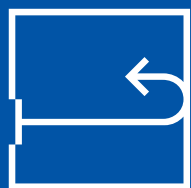
How might we think about "transforming loss" in a collections context?

Creative disposal resonates with both these ideas from the Transformation theme, by offering a meaningful way to "lose" things and by suggesting that "loss" is perhaps not the best way to understand disposal when it is done creatively. While some museums have experience of recycling objects, creative disposal should perhaps be understood as "upcycling".

Upcycling, or creative reuse, was coined in the 1990s as a critique of mainstream recycling practices that use large amounts of energy to transform waste into materials of lesser quality. Upcycling suggests that by approaching reuse creatively, we can produce both a meaningful process and a product that is more valuable than the original object. In a social history context, this concept is especially powerful as the value of objects is often in what they symbolise – and this symbolism could be retained and added to through the creative process.



Are there other ways we might think about "transforming loss" in a collections development context?



# WHO SHOULD BE MAKING PROFUSION DECISIONS?





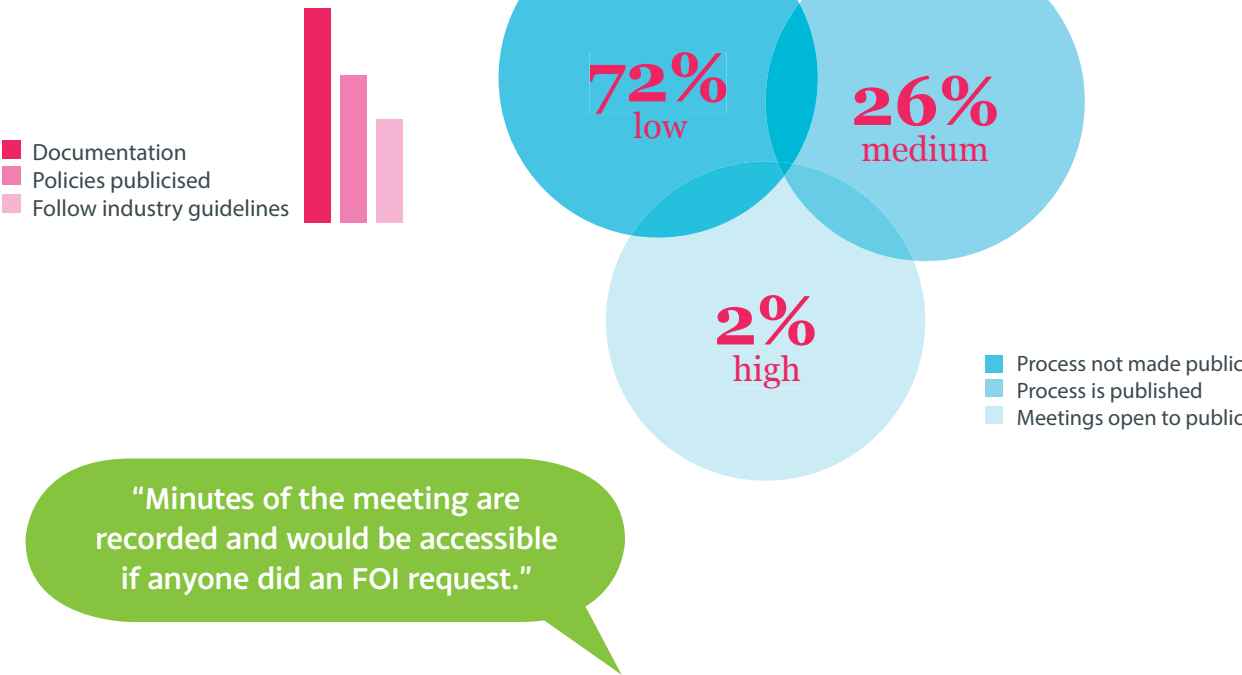
# TRANSPARENCY

"The governing body will ensure that both acquisition and disposal are carried out openly and with transparency" – Arts Council England, Collections Development Policy Template

Transparency in collections development is a requirement for accreditation, yet it is clear from our survey results that many people in museums have not really thought about what this means in practice. Despite the requirement of openness and transparency, the word "transparency" is not mentioned in the guidance documents for accreditation or in the Collection Trust's Spectrum Standard. It does feature in the Museum Association's Code of Ethics and is mentioned in their Disposal Toolkit. While the Code of Ethics does not go into much detail about how museums can be transparent in practice, the Disposal Toolkit expounds on what openness and transparency might mean for disposals by offering the following advice:

- Consider using community panels
- Document decisions
- Any sales should take place at public auction
- Communicate the process beyond the museum
- Communicate the disposal to the public

How does your museum ensure that acquisition and disposal are carried out openly and transparently?



Responses to the question of how their museum ensures that acquisition and disposal is carried out openly and transparently were largely defensive. Any documentation of decisions is usually internal and several respondents stated collections development decisions are not something the public are interested in.

Despite the reluctance to broadcast collections development processes and decisions, participants at our knowledge exchange event expressed the benefits of the public being better informed about collections development processes. The Museum Association's Code of Ethics actually points out how transparency is beneficial in this context: "Museums and those who work with and in them should acquire, care for, exhibit and loan collections with transparency and competency *in order to generate knowledge and engage the public with collections.*"

Our survey results suggest that more work needs to be done for museums to see transparency as an opportunity rather than a threat, though there are exceptions:

Museums are often ashamed to share their experiences, are afraid to upset their audiences or other museums. And it's to the detriment of all of us - we need each other to better understand our processes!

→ (cont on next page)

continued

This is in response to public involvement. So few in this survey have open collections meetings (maybe 1?), and I would love to know their experiences as we are trying to determine the level of public involvement at our museum! What are others' successes? What are their failures?

Kate Smith, Collections and Documentation Officer, The Scottish National Memorial to David Livingstone.

Educating the public about what museums do - e.g. that can't keep/accept everything. Issues of 'trust'.

How do we let people know what we want? How do we get them involved?

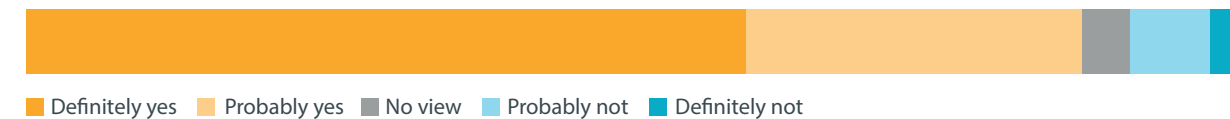
The bulk of the guidance available to museums about transparency and most of the survey responses immediately emphasised disposals. Yet the need to educate the public about collections development clearly also extends to acquisitions.

**? Why don't we use our interpreting and storytelling skills to raise public awareness of our collections development processes?**



# COLLECTIONS DEVELOPMENT MEETINGS

Are you happy with who is involved in making decisions about the acquisition and disposal of social history objects at your museum?



Respondents described various configurations of different staff members (in some cases including volunteers), directors, trustees and councillors in response to the question of who is involved in making collections development decisions. Over 80 % indicated that they are happy with the arrangements at their museum. Those who are not mentioned wanting more public input, more weight on curatorial judgement, more frequent acquisition meetings, a better informed governing body and more senior involvement in decision making.

"Some more public input to what we should collect would be interesting and probably eye opening."

"There is a lack of respect for the Museums Service and the levels of professional input I give. As we are non-statutory, we are an easy target for a cash strapped authority. They view all heritage as something that can be run by volunteers."

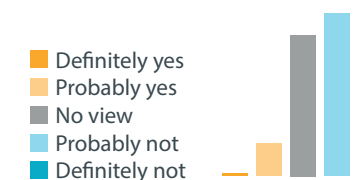
Are your museum's collections development meetings open to the public?



Only one respondent answered that their museum's collections development meetings are open to the public. They clarified that this did not refer to their internal meetings in the museum, but the local council sessions where final decisions are made by councillors. Optional comments made by other respondents reveal that this practice is shared by other local authority museums. Nevertheless, it suggest that none of the museums in our survey hold open collections development meetings within their own institutions.

"Final approval is made by elected councillors at sessions that the public can attend, details then published online. All approved objects are advertised in Museums Journal."

Do you think they should be?



Responses highlight that many people in museums are quite happy for collections development processes to remain opaque. The general consensus certainly appears to be that collections development meetings are not the place for public participation. Nevertheless, while this graphic shows that, as a whole, respondents do not believe collections development meetings should be open to the public, it is important to remember that established practice at all the museums in this sample is for them to be closed. Despite this, over a third of respondents answered "probably yes" or "no view either way" to this question. There therefore appears to be a level of uncertainty over whether or not the current practice of holding closed meetings should be re-considered.

"We are a professional organisation with professional standards. We should not feel the need to engage with members of the public on matters that require this specific professional expertise."

"It might help decisions to be more consistent but it may slow the process down. I am ashamed of the state of the collections at the moment so would prefer the public are not aware of the state of things."

"As above re openness, after all, acquisitions do come from public monies. The logistics of having open meetings, and the ability to speak freely, and keep personal donor information private would make it very difficult."

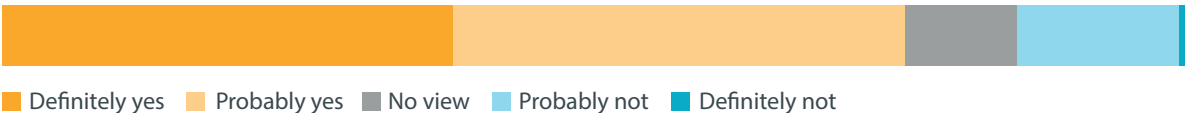
"The museum has to be managed and it would be too difficult to always justify decisions to a wide audience. We often get to know through chats to visitors their ideas about our collection and how they think it could be improved, expanded or changed. This informal evidence is more helpful than implementing a formal procedure which may only attract a narrow band of participants with particular agendas."

# PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Have you ever invited members of the public (through open calls or individual/group invitations) to inform your acquisition or disposal decisions?

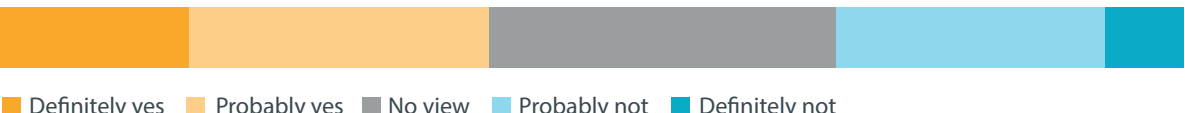


Did you find public participation in acquisition and disposal decisions helpful?

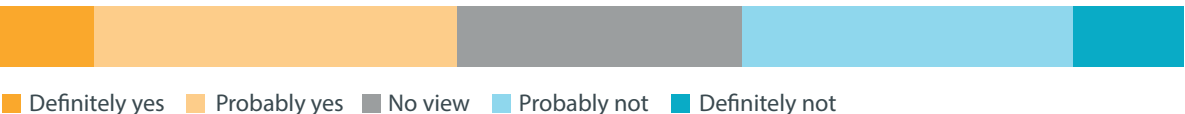


There are many ways of inviting public participation in collections development that do not involve opening internal collections development meetings. A third of our respondents had been involved in such projects. Of these, 80 % said they found public participation helpful. While we do not want to suggest that more public participation is appropriate in every context, the experiences of those who have experimented in this area clearly suggest that more museums could benefit from opening up their processes.

Do you hope your museums invites members of the public to participate in your acquisition decisions in the future (through open calls or individual/group invitations)?



Do you hope your museums invites members of the public to participate in your disposal decisions in the future (through open calls or individual/group invitations)?

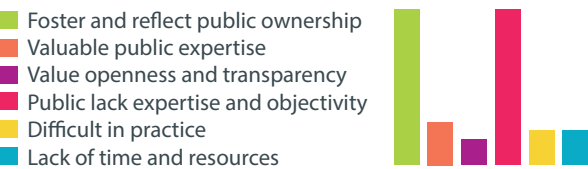


The number of respondents who hope their museum will invite public participation in collections development in the future is only marginally larger than the number who have been involved in such projects and found them helpful. This suggests that successful experiences are not being shared effectively through the sector or that museums feel these projects may only be useful in certain contexts.

Is there a practical way to involve the public in disposing of objects in collections?

More detailed analysis indicates that while practical advice is needed to encourage more museums to consider moving forward with projects like this, this advice must also demonstrate what public participation can bring to decision making processes.

Why do you feel this way about public participation in acquisition and disposal decisions?



Survey respondents' reasoning behind sentiments for or against public participation in collections development is instructive. The reasons given for increasing public participation are largely ideological – they reflect ideas about the responsibilities museums have as public institutions. On the other hand, the reasons against are practical, reflecting barriers that are felt to make public participation difficult and unhelpful. Less than 10 % recognise members of the public as a relevant source of expertise, while over a third of respondents judge the public to lack the necessary expertise and objectivity to be helpful participants in collections development.

"The collection belongs to the public."

"The collections are for the public, they should be involved in the decision making process. If we are to carry out contemporary collecting it would be beneficial to have input from people about what they consider important"

"We are a small community museum telling the story of the town and the surrounding villages – so we are surrounded by experts."

"I feel that these decisions should ideally be made by Museum professional who understand the needs of a collection and resources that are required to manage it."

"Don't have any particular thoughts on it; my main concern would be logistical and not knowing how to approach getting public participation!"

"Takes too much time and resource. Values public decision making above professional."

## WHAT IS "THE PUBLIC"

The term "the public" has been used repeatedly throughout our survey, knowledge exchange event and this report. One thing that has become clear is that different people use it to mean quite different things. This was highlighted by a participant at our knowledge exchange event.

What is 'the public'?  
Representation bias?  
Enthusiasts? Trustees?

Our survey respondents used "the public" both to refer to anyone who is not museum staff and to the idea of the "general public" or a typical, representative, member of the public. This is not surprising, and is absolutely reasonable in response to the general way our questions were phrased in the survey. What this participant's comment highlights is that volunteers, enthusiasts and trustees might be included as members of the public, but we know that, on the sector level, museum staff, volunteers, visitors and trustees are not representative of the general public. We should be wary of using one to stand in for the other. Below are two examples of how survey respondents have accidentally done this when trying to explain how they ensure decisions are transparent and invite members of the public to participate in collections development.

"Decisions made are mentioned at management meetings and trustees meetings the minutes of which are available to volunteers."

"We have a large cross section of volunteers and we had a group of them go over our collections review decisions for disposal before proceeding."

? Which publics do we engage with when we invite public participation?

## EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Emotional labour has been a recurring theme in our research on Profusion and we feel it is a fitting topic to end on, as it speaks to every aspect of addressing Profusion in museums. Making collections development decisions can be extremely stressful and difficult, especially disposals. This is part of the appeal of collections development policies and formal assessments of significance – they can help take the weight of responsibility away from individuals. A participant at our knowledge exchange event raised the issue of emotional labour, connecting it to controversial objects and participatory projects with minority groups.

Emotional labour. Asking the public (particularly members of minority groups) to consult on disposing/re-interpreting "hot" (e.g. colonial/racist) objects demands significant emotional labour. It can mean imposing painful demands on small groups – but who else to approach? Which 'publics' are most relevant to consult?

While decision makers in museums may not feel they are sufficiently informed to make decisions about some objects, and consider these prime candidates for inviting public participation, it is worth remembering both the cost and the benefits of being involved in collections development processes. This is important both with regard to who we invite to participate and how participation is managed and responsibility distributed.

? Do our participants benefit from participating in collections development?

We must think carefully about why we want to invite public participation in each individual case and why we might want to attribute decisions to specific groups or individuals. While participants might want their contributions recognised and attributed in some cases, in others they might benefit from the generic, unattributed, curatorial voice we usually grant ourselves. This has been raised by co-curators in exhibition projects, but is equally valid in collections development where we often value the opportunity to retreat behind faceless policy documents.

? How can institutions do more to shoulder the responsibilities of difficult collections development decisions for individuals?



# LIST OF PARTICIPANTS AT MUSEUMS FOR PROFUSION

Abby Hansen	Artist & PhD in Archaeology	University of York
Bernadette Lynch	Museum writer/researcher/consultant	Hon Research Associate, UCL
Bob Clark	Director	Urras Achadh an Droighinn/The Auchindrain Trust
Catherine Griffin	Curatorial Assistant	British Motor Museum
Catherine Ross	Founder/ Director	Museumand, The National Caribbean Heritage Museum
Charlotte Holmes	Urban and Social History Curator	National Trust
Debbie Hardy	Curator	Goole Museum
Dorian Knight	Heritage Officer	Brent Museum and Archives
Dorothy Halfhide	Curator, Thorney Heritage Museum	The Thorney Society
Ed Bartholomew	Lead Curator	National Railway Museum
Emma Mackinnon	Exhibitions and Collections Officer	St Barbe Museum and Art Gallery, Lymington
Gabrielle Gale	Curator	Royal Academy of Music Museum
Gabrielle Heffernan	Curatorial Manager	Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery Trust
Geoff Pearce	Trustee	Sturminster Newton Museum and Mill Society
Gill Greaves	Relationship Manager Museums, North	Arts Council England
Harald Fredheim	Research Associate	University of York
Ian Beavis	Research Curator	Tunbridge Wells Museum & Art Gallery
Jennie Morgan	Lecturer in Heritage	University of Stirling
Kate Smith	Collections and Documentation Officer	The Scottish National Memorial to David Livingstone
Kitty Ross	Curator of Leeds History	Leeds Museums and Galleries
Kyle Lee-Crossett	PhD Researcher	University College London
Lynda Burrell	Creative Director	Museumand, The National Caribbean Heritage Museum
Maria McLintock	Curatorial Assistant	the Design Museum
Mia Gubbay	Assistant Curator; The Migration Collections Project	The Open Museum; Glasgow Museums
Megan Von Ackermann	Graphic Designer, PhD Researcher	University of York
Michael Turnpenny	Head of Museum Development Yorkshire	Museum Development Yorkshire (York Museums Trust)
Patricia Duke-Cox	Chairman	Woodhall Spa Cottage Museum
Patrick Campbell	Senior Curator, Reptiles	Natural History Museum
Paul Tourle	Heritage Researcher / Practitioner	University College London
Peju Oshin	Assistant Curator	Tate/Freelance
Rachael Minott	Curator, Artist, Researcher, Board Member	Freelance and Museums Association
Sarah Chard-Cooper	Collections Officer	Milton Keynes Museum
Sharon Macdonald	Profusion theme investigator	Department of Sociology, University of York
Stephanie Boydell	Curator	Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections
Susanna Cordner	Documentary Curator	London Transport Museum
Tim Bryan	Head of Collections	British Motor Museum

# MEET THE PROFUSION TEAM

## Professor Sharon Macdonald

Sharon Macdonald is an anthropologist specialising in museums who has recently founded a new research centre for anthropological research on museums and heritage in Berlin. She is the lead researcher on the Profusion theme, which builds on her previous projects and publications. Sharon is currently Anniversary Professor of Cultural Anthropology at the University of York and Professor of Social Anthropology at the Humboldt University of Berlin.



## Dr Jennie Morgan

Jennie Morgan trained as a social anthropologist before working on a range of interdisciplinary research projects, studying organisational practices within and beyond the museum sector. She contributed to the design of the Profusion theme and has worked closely with curators around the UK to understand how they experience and address Profusion in their everyday practice. Jennie is currently Lecturer in Heritage at the University of Stirling.



## Harald Fredheim

Harald Fredheim is a trained objects conservator and archaeologist, whose research focuses on public participation in caring for heritage. He joined the Profusion theme in May 2018 to deliver the survey and knowledge exchange event discussed in this report. Harald is currently Research Associate in Sociology at the University of York.





## Get in touch with us!

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For more from Heritage Futures, visit our website: [www.heritage-futures.org](http://www.heritage-futures.org)

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