

National Museums of Scotland Advising Museums

Provision of advice to museums in Scotland

NMS's vision is to be a *world-class museums service that informs, educates and inspires*. A key component in delivering this vision is for the museum to fulfil a national role by increasing the advice provided to the museum¹ community in Scotland on collections, their care and management. There are limited resources available, therefore, this policy clarifies what advice can and cannot be offered and provides guidance on using this service.

1. What advice can NMS offer?

NMS staff can advise museums on **collections, their care and management**. This generally means advice provision from the NMS Collections Directorate i.e. staff involved in Curatorial activities, Collections Management, Conservation and Collections Care.

Museums in Scotland should seek advice on other areas of museum activity from the Scottish Museums Council (SMC) or other appropriate bodies. Other organisations that offer advice to museums are suggested at the end of this policy.

NMS is pursuing a range of mechanisms to share knowledge and expertise in other areas of museum activity. The *NMS Partnerships Strategy (2006)* takes forward support through training, knowledge sharing activities, generic guidance and professional networks. The extent of support available will be dependent on the resources available to NMS. Please consult our website for information on such partnership programmes.

2. Who is entitled to advice?

Representatives of organisations with a public collection in Scotland can approach NMS for advice. This is free of charge.

Provision is intended to have the greatest lasting legacy for the organisation responsible for the particular collection. Therefore, we will not normally offer this service to individuals without direct involvement with a public collection (e.g. consultants or personal projects).

3. How to ask for advice

Requests by e-mail are preferred, although telephone or other written requests are accepted too. The staff in NMS Collections Directorate are listed on the NMS website with information on individual expertise, collection responsibilities and departmental contact details.

If anyone is unclear where to start or has questions about this policy these should be directed to the NMS National Partnerships Manager.

¹ Where the term 'museum' is used this applies to the broader heritage sector, including galleries, libraries and archives or other cultural organisations concerned with collections based activities.

5. NMS approach to offering advice

An overarching principle for NMS in offering advice to museums is to contribute to the development of and access to Scotland's public collections to recognised professional standards. We expect to offer advice that builds such capacity. We expect the museums involved to be accredited within the UK-wide Museums Accreditation Scheme or working towards this (or other related) standard.

We hope that by giving advice we will help museums to solve particular problems or make decisions about local collection development. This is a shared process and we fully expect museums to use this knowledge, information or opinion and apply this as they see fit. Overall, we want to encourage development of confidence, knowledge and skills locally.

6. Constraints of service

At NMS, offering advice to other museums is just one area of organisational activity. This means provision is as subject to available resources and demands of wider priorities as our other activities. We may, therefore, at times have to restrict provision from particular individuals or departments in order to support NMS staff appropriately and manage demands placed upon them reasonably. Any major restrictions will be publicised on NMS website.

7. What we ask of users

- That they will seek advice when specialist information is required that cannot be obtained by other means i.e. for curators in other museums we would expect that a certain degree of responsibility will be taken to conduct basic research.
- That they will consider the collective responsibility of the sector to maximise resources for the widest benefit i.e. awareness of the level of provision given to one organisation and its impact on what can be offered to others if used unreasonably.
- That they will consider the other demands placed on NMS staff and the ability to meet requests which require considerable investment of staff time to complete.
- That they will understand NMS requirement to manage advice provision subject to organisational priorities, available resources and staff time

8. How we will respond to requests for advice

We prefer to offer advice by e-mail or telephone for efficiency, however, will respond by letter where this is necessary to the recipient or a formal response is required. We aim to offer advice in the way that is appropriate to individual circumstances but at the same time must balance the depth and complexity of a request against the resources we can apply.

For object identification it is suggested that images are provided. For large scale enquiries offering advice may be deemed more than basic and fall into the category of '*Sharing Expertise*' or '*Support Services*'. Appendix 1 of this policy offers guidance on this.

10. Frequently sought advice

When we find that the same or similar advice is being sought by a number of museums, we may produce some generic guidance. You will find much of this is already published on our website. We also hope to target frequently sought advice through mechanisms such as training, workshops, professional networks or other events.

11. Sharing the knowledge gained through advising

We will share internally the information gained through advising so that it can inform future delivery by all members of staff. We will also use this information for the long term benefit of the sector and will share this with other stakeholders as required.

We also ask of museums that they record and share the information provided through enquiries in order that the particular collections knowledge offered can benefit the museum, its collection and its staff in the long term future.

12. Other organisations that can offer advice

The Scottish Museums Council
<http://www.scottishmuseums.org.uk>

The Museums Documentation Association
<http://www.mda.org.uk>

The Scottish Conservation Bureau
<http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/index/conservation/conservationbureau.htm>

Group for Education in Museums
<http://www.gem.org.uk>

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

Appendix 1 Definitions

'Advice' can cover and describe a range of activities. At NMS, we distinguish between 'Information', 'Advice', 'Support Services' and 'Sharing Expertise'.

- **'Information'** is material already in the public domain. It can be from factual or technical publications or it can be knowledge about current events. NMS staff will endeavour to provide information when this is easily transmitted, or to signpost to relevant resources where these are accessible. Provision of information to museums will be primarily through our website, via telephone or by email. NMS will not operate as primary route for information to the sector and expects to compliment the information and advice services operated by other organisations like the Scottish Museums Council or the Museums Documentation Association for example.
- **'Advice'** is a recommendation of what to do and draws on information but with the added value of being tailored to the needs of a recipient. NMS staff can add value to information by researching or interpreting specialist knowledge towards a particular enquiry. NMS advice aims to assist museums to improve and to offer specialist expertise where there are gaps in local provision.
- **'Support Services'** As a general policy NMS does not provide support services as part of its recognised basic service delivery of its national role to museums in Scotland i.e. site visits, collection reviews, technical conservation or analysis for example. NMS is not resourced to provide such services.

We may, however, engage in such delivery where this contributes to NMS organisational priorities. This means where NMS has a specialist resource that can support public legacy of important material or shared priorities, then a service may be offered. However, this will normally be to organisations NMS is committed to through a formal partnership agreement or on a cost recoverable basis.

- **'Sharing Expertise'** NMS recognises the gap that exists between provision of a basic level of advice and that of a support service. In order to maximise the impact of NMS specialist knowledge and expertise, this category makes provision for NMS staff to offer more than basic advice within a structured framework. NMS will endeavour to meet its *NMS Partnerships Strategy (2006)* by pursuing mechanisms that can share NMS knowledge and expertise for maximum benefit to the wider sector. Such mechanisms will include specialist networks, professional training & development programmes, information resources and engagement in projects that meet Scottish Executive or museum sector strategic priorities i.e. the Regional Development Challenge Fund scheme, Significance Recognition Scheme and UK-wide subject specialist networks. NMS involvement with such programmes will be dependent on resources available. Furthermore, NMS aspires to form structured partnerships with some museums in Scotland for exchange of expertise on a more structured and strategic basis.

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