

National Services Te Paerangi

Fact Sheet: Deaccession Process

Deaccession process

There are two parts to the process of deaccessioning:

- the procedure for withdrawing items from your collection management system
- actual disposal of the items – most often by donation, sale, or exchange.

Authorisation

Whoever authorises acquisitions in your museum should also be involved in authorising deaccessions.

There are three main questions that the process needs to answer:

- Does your museum have legal title to the item?
- Do you have a valid reason for disposing of it?
- Are there any interested parties, such as previous owners, who need to be consulted prior to the item's disposal?

Legal title

This can be a difficult question to answer if there are no records to show how the item came to be in the museum's collection. Is it the museum's to dispose of? Could it have been a poorly documented long-term loan? Many museums have a specific 'pre-disposal period' when they publicise their intentions to deaccession items, particularly to clear up ownership doubts and claims.

Other interested parties

Particularly in the case of gifts and bequests, the original donor, their family, or their descendants may wish the item to be returned to them if the museum has no further use for it. At any rate, they may have an interest in what kind of disposal is planned for the item. You should be prepared to cover all bases by consulting as widely as required. Again, the pre-disposal period is an opportunity for this.

Deaccessioning

Once a decision to deaccession an item has been made, you should document this in an entry to your collection catalogue. However, retain the item's record in the catalogue as well as a record of the decision. These should always be available for

public scrutiny and are a safeguard in case the integrity of the museum's actions is challenged.

Methods of disposal

There are five main options for disposal of collection items:

- return to the donor or family
- gift to or exchange with another appropriate institution
- public sale
- transfer within the museum for use as a hands-on or educational aid
- destroy or recycle

The latter should be an option of last resort. You should include procedures for these options in your policy.

Ethical considerations in selling

The selling of deaccessioned collection items is an area in which ethical issues and conflicts of interest are most likely to arise. Many museums expressly prohibit anyone connected with the museum – staff members, trustees, board members, or their families or agents – from purchasing deaccessioned items. This is a form of 'insider trading' and ethically very risky.

You will need to think through the ethics of the situation and set down guidelines in your policy.

Source: *He Rauemi Resource Guide No. 16: Developing Your Collection – Acquisition and Deaccession Policies*, pg 12
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