Birmingham Museums

Birmingham Museums Trust

Collections Management Framework

Appendix 4.3 Working Objects Policy 2025-2030

1 INTRODUCTION

This policy is intended to support the decision-making process around the continued use of accessioned museum objects in, or putting accessioned museum objects into, working order. Working objects in this context is defined as some level of operational use of an object. This policy applies to accessioned objects only – it excludes the use of interactives, props, surrogates etc.

This policy was agreed by Birmingham Museum Trust's Board of Trustees on 11 July 2025, and Birmingham City Council on 15 July 2025. This policy covers the period 15 July 2025 – 31 March 2030 and replaces any previous versions of the policy.

This Working Objects Policy will be published and reviewed from time to time, at least once every five years. The next date for review will be no later than 31 March 2030.

This policy forms part of the Collections Management Framework for BMT, which supports BMT to achieve its charity objects, vision and strategic aims. These are:

Birmingham Museums Trust Charity Objects

To advance education by the operation, maintenance, development and promotion of museums, galleries and libraries in Birmingham together with associated facilities and related programmes of outreach and research, fostering knowledge, understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of the arts, history, science and technology by residents and visitors to the City of Birmingham.

Vision

A radical reinvention of the museum as a catalyst of cultural and social change.

Mission

Bring Birmingham out by shining new light on people's stories, collections and creativity.

Strategic Aims

> **Experience** – to create fun, meaningful, involving experiences for the full diversity of our communities and their uses of our collection and services.

Infrastructure – to be at the heart of Birmingham's communities, providing inclusive access to the peoples' sites and collections, including digital access

People – to be a boldly progressive organisation, increasingly rooted in and porous to Birmingham's communities, with the skills and culture to engage with its audiences

Financial – to be a sustainable, more independent organisation that provides affordable, surplus-generating paid services and experiences that add social and economic value to Birmingham, and will have secured funding to support its priority capital projects

2. Wider Policy Context

This policy supports the wider Collections Care and Conservation Policy, the aim of which is to maintain the physical, historic and aesthetic integrity of the objects that are the responsibility of the Birmingham Museums Trust. This in turn supports the wider shared vision of Birmingham Museums Trust and Birmingham City Council to care for and develop the collection, balancing the demands of access in the present with the need to preserve the collection for future generations.

3. Object Context

Many objects in the collection were designed to have some movement to enable them to function – "working objects". This may have been as simple as a hinge, permitting access to the interior of a cupboard or as complex as a steam boiler connected to rods to enable a locomotive to move. Allowing the operation of the function can add significantly to the experience and understanding of the object but operation will cause wear and damage. This will eventually result in loss of original material.

4. Policy

In order to ensure that the object can be preserved in an original a state as possible and retaining as much original fabric as possible, the general policy of BMT is that objects should **not** be returned to functioning objects.

For some objects, however, the function may be the primary way to understand the object, or the experience gained from witnessing the object operate may far exceed the experience gained from witnessing the object as a static exhibit. In these cases, the decision may be taken to allow the object to function.

5. Procedure For Selection

The decision to return an object to its functioning state, should be taken with care and in consideration of the following criteria:

- The object's cultural significance, which is the aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value that it has for past, present and future generations. Objects which are considered rare will generally not be considered for operation as use is mutually incompatible with preservation of the whole.

- The significance of the object's function(s), including its alterations, repairs and modifications, if any. Any new use of an object must be compatible with original function with minimal change to fabric, respect of meanings and associations and continuation of practices which contribute to the cultural significance of that object.
- The object's current condition and state of preservation, the likely impact of wear to significant parts, the need to update to current safety standards and the requirement to remove hazardous materials and/or functions. Objects which are beyond their economic life (i.e. in a state of accelerated wear) will not be chosen for operation unless physical integrity is deemed insignificant in relation to significant function.
- The benefit to the public and to the museum, in order to inspire innovation, engage understanding, motivate learning or preserve the collections.
    - Publicity, direct revenue generation, sponsorship attraction or special interest group gratification may be considered as supplemental reasons for proposal for operation but are not acceptable motivations on their own.
- The resources required for maintaining the functionality for both the short and long term.
    - Money, time, facilities, equipment and skilled staff are required for treatments, maintenance and repair programmes. Thorough documentation including photography of all processes from decision-making to maintenance logs and handling requirements must be kept and be made accessible. Where resources cannot be committed to the long-term maintenance, repair and replacement programme, an object shall not be selected for operation.
- Museum needs in terms of frequency of operation and number of objects operating. One operating object can be a focus for visitors, but several operating objects can become a distraction or have minimal impact on public programmes.
- Restrictions of museum context (available space, exhibit design, health & safety requirements).
- Opportunities to record through the media of film and photography the return to operation, use and maintenance in order to maintain knowledge of craft and traditional skills.

Note: "Rare" is defined as unique, an icon, of incomparable significance, nationally important or bearing important historic evidence such as developmental information, significant use, original fabric. The status of the object as rare should be determined through the relevant significance survey.

The decision to allow an object to function will be taken by a group comprising the relevant curator, a conservator, collections management representative, relevant technician and relevant director. The decision will then be ratified by the collections committee.

6. Managing Working Objects

Once selected and returned to working order, the object will require the following to enable operation in a safe manner:

- Conservation management plan.
- Risk assessment.
- Operation manual.
- Daily operation log.

- Maintenance schedule.
- Planned condition assessment and review of operation.

Until these documents are created, newly selected objects cannot be operated.

7. Referenced Documents

The following published documents were referred to in developing this policy.

- Science Museum Group Procedure for Selecting Operating Objects 2018
- National Museum Scotland policy for selecting operating objects 2016
- ABTEM Guidelines larger and working objects 2018
- Larger & Working Objects: a guide to standards in their preservation and care. Collections Trust 2009

8. REVIEW

This policy will be published and reviewed from time to time, at least once every five years or at the expiry of the Agreement. The next date for review will be no later than 31 March 2030.

9. CHANGE CONTROL

Issue	Date	Author	Comments