

Deaccessioning and disposal

Guidance for archive services

OGI

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Executive summary

This is a guide to the deaccessioning and disposal of archival records. It includes:

- definitions of 'deaccessioning', 'disposal' and related terminology in an archival context
- legal and regulatory issues that need to be addressed
- risks of improper disposal, e.g. the irretrievable loss of significant archives, damage to an archive service's reputation, and a service losing the trust of its community (including users, depositors and funders)
- principles that should govern decision-making
- practical advice on procedures to follow
- ethical options for disposal
- information about where to find further guidance and support
- case studies from the UK archives sector.

This guide has been written to support [Archive Service Accreditation](#), the UK-wide standard for archive services. The standard presents deaccessioning as part of collections development, and requires archive services to have policies, plans and procedures in place for collections development activities including deaccessioning.

The guidance was produced in consultation with many individuals and organisations across the archives, museum and library sectors, and The National Archives is grateful to all those who contributed. Archive services that sit within museums or libraries, and/or have objects or rare books among their collections, should also refer to the relevant guidance for museums¹ and libraries.²

Deaccessioning is and should be a rare occurrence because of the enduring value of archival records. Archive services have a continuing responsibility for the records they hold, and disposal decisions should be taken with great care. Certain types of records are controlled by legislation or regulation. Archive managers, their senior officers and governing organisations need to have a clear understanding of the regulatory environment, consider the ethical implications of deaccessioning and disposal, and actively manage the risks.

There are few ethical options for deaccessioning, and in practice the only available option may be to transfer records to another archive service, if that service is willing to take them. The sale

¹ Museums Association, [Disposal Toolkit Guidelines for Museums](#)

² CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals), [Disposals Policy for Rare Books and Manuscripts](#)

and destruction of archives are not ethical except in very limited circumstances. Financial constraints or a need to save physical space should not be the main drivers for deaccessioning and disposal. Instead, the collection development policy should be the primary reference point for decision-making.

This guide should help archive services avoid the risks resulting from the improper disposal of records. It should also help ensure that irreplaceable archival collections continue to develop and are valued and used by their communities for generations to come.

1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction to this guidance

Archives are 'preserved because of the enduring value contained in the information they contain or as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of their creator'.³ This important evidential role of archives supports research and the operational efficiency of organisations. Archives are also unique and therefore irreplaceable. For both these reasons, the collection, preservation and provision of access to archives should be undertaken following professional principles and ethical guidance.

The National Archives believes that it is a priority to support the proactive, strategic and sustainable management of collections. It supports archive services to manage these collections professionally. As part of this professional management of collections, archivists accept collections for permanent preservation. They also appraise the content of collections, assessing the cultural and informational value of the material, deciding what is archival material and worthy of retention in the archive. Following this appraisal, collections are formally accessioned by the archive service.

In contrast to these regular professional tasks, deaccessioning, the formal, documented removal of a collection or item from the accession register or custody of the archive service, is and should be a rare occurrence. Repeated reappraisal of collections is not acceptable as this will diminish the collection. Archive services have a continuing responsibility for the records in their care, and the ethical options for deaccessioning are therefore limited.

1.2 Purpose and scope of the guidance

This guidance has been written to support the [Archive Service Accreditation Standard](#), which requires that services have policies, plans and procedures to manage the deaccessioning and disposal of collections, within the context of wider collections development.

The guidance will help archive service managers to consider the issues of deaccessioning and disposal and to guard against the irretrievable loss and reputational damage that can result from

³ Richard Pearce-Moses, A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology (2005). See the [Society of American Archivists](#) website

the improper disposal of records. It defines relevant terminology in an archival context, and provides some key principles and a framework for deaccessioning and disposal. It gives practical advice on managing these processes, supported by a clear understanding of the ethical implications. It also provides case studies from archive services on managing deaccessioning and disposal. It is not a guide to appraisal, which is covered fully elsewhere,⁴ but it gives advice on undertaking appraisal after material has been accessioned.

The National Archives recognises that archive services are constantly seeking sustainable ways to preserve and manage their collections. At the same time, in today's challenging financial environment, many services are under pressure to make the best use of scarce resources and to save space where possible. Increasingly, therefore, archive managers are seeking advice on the rationalisation of collections, but no comprehensive guidance has been produced until now.

There have been high-profile events showing the dangers of destroying records without a careful process of appraisal.⁵ Deaccessioning the wrong material, or not following the appropriate procedures, could irreparably damage the evidential value of an archive collection and the reputation of a service and its governing organisation. This guidance seeks to ensure that archive services retain items and collections worthy of preservation and do not dispose of items without careful consideration. However, it does not seek to prevent the weeding⁶ of collections to remove ephemera, duplicates or non-archival material which are not integral to the collection.

This guidance is not intended as legal advice, and archive services should also take advice on these issues from relevant legal specialists.

1.3 Who the guidance is for

This guidance is aimed at archives that hold collections from multiple sources with different owners. It takes into account the needs of archive services within museums, which are also guided by the Accreditation Scheme for museums. Similarly this document is complementary to the guidance by the CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) Rare Books and Special Collections Group. It does not seek to override the judgement of the archive

⁴ For example The National Archives, [What is appraisal?](#)

⁵ For example: BBC News, [Met police corruption probe papers shredded 'over two days'](#); The Telegraph, [Expenses watchdog: MPs should not have destroyed records](#)

⁶ Defined as: The physical act of removing items from within a particular collection, which have been appraised as not having continuing value

professional in-situ, who is best placed to take detailed decisions about retention of materials, within established guidelines.

1.4 How the guidance was developed

This guidance is the result of discussions with over 120 people from the archive, library and museum sectors. In the summer of 2014 Janice Tullock Associates undertook a workshop with staff at The National Archives, held discussions with archivists at meetings in Manchester and York, ran an open access webinar online and a focus group with archive staff in London. The Disposal destination decision tree (section 5.4.1) was a direct result of these discussions. The guidance was also discussed at the Archives and Records Association Conference. Alongside this, Janice talked to archive staff around the UK to ascertain best practice in these areas. Interviews were also carried out with representatives from a range of cultural organisations, and a list of these is in Appendix 3. Therefore, although this guidance is designed primarily for the archives sector, it also reflects the increased interest in deaccessioning, disposal and related issues across the cultural sector more generally.

1.5 Definitions

The definitions used in this document align closely to Archive Service Accreditation, with the addition of some which have been written for this document.

Appendix 1 provides a complete set of definitions. The key definitions are as follows:

- Appraisal – the process of deciding whether an item or group of items has continuing value in accordance with the collecting organisation's mission statement.
- Deaccessioning – the formal, documented removal of a collection or item from the accession register or custody of the archive service.
- Reappraisal – a renewed process of appraisal for collections or items which have been previously appraised.
- Retrospective appraisal – appraisal of collections or items where evidence of previous appraisal to an approved standard is not apparent.

- Disposal – the physical act of transferring the collection or item from the archive service to another destination. This covers transfer to another repository, return to depositor or donor and as a last resort, destruction. Also called removal.⁷

⁷ Based upon BSI PAS 197:2009 Code of Practice for Cultural Collections Management

2. Why manage the deaccessioning and disposal process? The risks

If an organisation does not create policy and procedures which manage deaccessioning and disposal, it is open to a series of risks:

- Disposing of significant archives. Without agreed deaccessioning and disposal policies and procedures, archive services risk irretrievable loss of historically important records.
- Accusations of poor management. Archive services should record all their decisions and provide an approved audit trail for these decisions. Without this they cannot show that agreed policy was followed and cannot demonstrate professional judgement and accountability in managing archival collections. They may also risk accusations of bias in decision-making.
- Attracting bad public relations and damage to reputation. Archive services should consider the impact of their disposal decisions on their reputation. In particular, depositors and donors may make different donation decisions if they think there is a risk of items being disposed of later.
- Trust. Archive services that do not manage the deaccessioning and disposal process efficiently and ethically, risk losing the support of their community. This community for many services includes a range of stakeholders including users, depositors and funders. Improper disposal can damage the relationship between a funder and an archive service, risking future funding.
- The role of individual archive staff and managers. Without agreed policy and procedures, which have been approved by top management⁸ external to the archive service, individuals risk accusations of poor decision-making and even illegal activity or fraud.

⁸ As defined by PAS 197. See Appendix 1.

3. The regulatory environment

There are a number of areas of legislation and regulation that affect the policy and procedures for deaccessioning and disposal. Sections 3.1 and 3.2 below outline general regulations and regulations relating to specific classes of records, all of which should be taken into consideration when writing and enacting policies and procedures:

3.1 General regulation

3.1.1 Data Protection Act

A number of the principles of the Data Protection Act should be examined when considering deaccessioning and disposal. Records should be:

- kept for no longer than is absolutely necessary (though retention for historical research is permitted)
- kept safe and secure
- not transferred outside the UK without adequate protection.

3.1.2 The Lord Chancellor's Code of Practice on the management of records

The [Lord Chancellor's Code of Practice on the management of records](#) gives guidance on good practice in records management. It applies to all authorities subject to the Freedom of Information Act, to the Public Records Act 1958 or to the Public Records Act (Northern Ireland) 1923. Section 12 of the Code concerns the disposal of records. It states:

Authorities should define how long they need to keep particular records, should dispose of them when they are no longer needed and should be able to explain why records are no longer held.⁹

3.1.3 Acceptance in Lieu

The Acceptance in Lieu scheme enables taxpayers to transfer pre-eminent works of art and heritage objects, including archives, to the nation, while paying inheritance tax, or one of its earlier forms. Once accepted they are allocated to a public museum or record office for the public

⁹ Lord Chancellor's Code of Practice on the management of records issued under section 46 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000, section 12

benefit. It is a condition of the allocation that these items must remain available to the public. If an archive service can no longer care for the archive nor provide public access, the material must be returned to the Secretary of State. Anyone considering deaccessioning such material should contact Arts Council England and The National Archives in the first instance, or the relevant minister for the devolved nations. For more details of the scheme see the [Arts Council England](#) website.

3.1.4 Conditionally exempt material

Archives and manuscripts which are conditionally exempt from capital taxation are subject to undertakings between the owner and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) to ensure their preservation and accessibility. Repositories seeking to deaccession material subject to such undertakings should be aware that wider considerations of national interest may be at stake and that return of material to the owner may invalidate such undertakings. Advice may be sought from Arts Council England and The National Archives.

3.1.5 Statement on the Withdrawal of Accredited Status

The Archive Service Accreditation Committee's [Statement on the Withdrawal of Accredited Status](#) outlines circumstances where there may be extraordinary removal of accredited archive status from an archive service. These circumstances include:

Institutional failure to maintain the service's responsibility to the integrity and condition of its archive collections and declared area of collecting interest. Examples of this failure may include but are not limited to:

- a. Financially-motivated disposal of part or whole collections by sale;
- b. Disposal or destruction of materials beyond professionally-motivated appraisal and established policy, for example to obstruct criminal proceedings; to conceal practices regarded as immoral or unethical; [...]

This provision does not relate to managed and documented appraisal and/or disposal of collections in line with professional practice and documented policy.¹⁰

This statement is subject to annual review.

¹⁰ Archive Service Accreditation: Statement on the Withdrawal of Accredited Status (November 2014), section C

3.1.6 Records relating to current legal cases

Where records relate to ongoing legal proceedings, any appraisal decisions should be postponed until the conclusion of such proceedings to avoid prejudicial effects.

3.2 Regulations relating to specific classes of records

3.2.1 Public Records Act 1958

The National Archives can appoint an archive service as a place of deposit under s 4 (1) of the Public Records Act 1958, to hold certain types of public records that are not held by The National Archives.¹¹ You should contact The National Archives for advice on deaccessioning public records.

Section 6 of the Public Records Act 1958 permits the deaccessioning and disposal of public records and allows for their destruction. However, the deaccessioning of public records is possible only in very limited circumstances, and the Lord Chancellor's approval is needed for the destruction of public records.

Most public records will have been through an appraisal process on deposit, but there may be cases where there is no evidence of a formal appraisal and selection process having taken place. In such cases it may be possible to retrospectively appraise public records and make decisions on weeding. Again, you should contact The National Archives for advice.

If records were deposited with a place of deposit for permanent preservation under the Public Records Act s 4 (1), and it is subsequently found that it would be more appropriate for these records be held at an alternative place of deposit, the place of deposit that holds the records should bring this to the attention of The National Archives. If the alternative place of deposit agrees with this assessment, and is happy to receive the records, a transfer can be arranged. Transfer can only take place once an Instrument of Transfer is approved under the Public Records Act s 4 (3).

¹¹ See The National Archives' website for information on [approved places of deposit](#)

If the records were offered to the archive service under the Public Records Act s 3 (6) then the archive service may freely review, deaccession and dispose of the records, as they are no longer considered to be public records. The archive service does not need approval to do this, but it should notify The National Archives so that it can update its own documentation and public finding aids.

3.2.2 Diocesan, parochial and tithe records

These classes of record are held by appointed services and cannot be transferred without authority from the relevant body. For diocesan and parish records you should follow the guidance in the Church of England Record Centre's guide [Keep or Bin? The Care of Your Parish Records](#). In the case of the movement and disposal of tithe records, The National Archives must be consulted in advance.

3.2.3 Manorial documents

A register of these records is maintained by the Secretary of The National Archives: Historical Manuscripts Commission and any changes in ownership or movement of material should be notified. No manorial documents may be removed from England and Wales without the permission of the Master of the Rolls. Further details on [manorial documents](#) are available on The National Archives' website.

4. Principles for deaccessioning and disposal

A strong framework of policies, plans and procedures is essential to ensure that you meet regulatory requirements and mitigate risks in this area. Supporting this should be some key principles which you should follow when developing this framework.

1. The collection development policy and defined collecting area should be the primary reference points directing decision-making on reappraisal, retrospective appraisal and deaccessioning. If a collection or item sits within that policy and collecting area it should usually be retained.
2. While deaccessioning and disposal can lead to resource savings, budget constraints or a lack of physical space should not be the main drivers for decision-making.
3. Deaccessioning is the result of the process of either retrospective appraisal or reappraisal. Retrospective appraisal is a necessary process for the sustainable management of collections. In contrast, reappraisal is a rare occurrence, as it involves reviewing the professional judgement of a previous archivist. Reappraisal should be done with caution and not occur repeatedly, because repeated reappraisal will diminish the collection.
4. Deaccessioning should be the result of a documented and formal process and should always involve assessment by an archive professional, based upon archival principles and not driven solely by forces external to the archive service.
5. Deaccessioning and disposal should be guided by a coherent policy which describes the overall intentions and directions of the archive service on this topic. This policy should be agreed by top management.
6. In making disposal decisions you should consider:
 - a. How disposal decisions impact on the reputation of an organisation.
 - b. The institution's responsibilities, e.g. to the institution, to its community.
 - c. All ethical options for disposal (as outlined in section 5.4 below).

- d. How to advise your community of the disposal decisions and manage any publicity surrounding this. You should consider how you might reach researchers that may have used or referenced the items/collections.
7. If the acquisition, cataloguing or conservation of a collection or item was funded by external resources such as grant aid or a benefactor, you should consider the impact of this when making disposal decisions. You should examine the original funding agreement for any attached conditions and abide by them when reaching decisions.
8. When considering the options for disposal, the last resorts are destruction and sale. The sale of archives is not considered ethical unless it is the decision of the depositor, or the items are classed as ephemera or are duplicates. The classification of items as ephemera should be based upon your collections development policy and made using professional judgement. For example in some collections, items which could be classed as ephemera (theatre programmes etc.) have significant archival value.
9. Generally, where records have been accessible to the public for research and use, disposal decisions should ensure the same or similar levels of public access.
10. You should also consider the regulatory environment, ethics and standards of your governing body and sector when creating policy, reviewing collections and creating procedure. For museums, libraries and charities there are particular guidelines which should influence your thinking, which are listed in section 6.

5. Framework and procedures for deaccessioning and disposal

This section outlines a framework of policies, plans and procedures that archive services should follow to mitigate the risks of poorly managed deaccessioning and disposal of archives. This framework also supports the principles for deaccessioning and disposal outlined above.

5.1 Framework

The framework (overleaf) consists of three sections:

- Foundation – creating the foundations of effective deaccessioning and disposal.
- Collection review – reviewing collections by gathering information about the collections and appraising against the collections development policy.
- Enacting deaccessioning and disposal – following a disposal decision tree and associated guidance to reach a disposal decision; consulting on and reviewing that decision and enacting the disposal.

It is important to note that each section does not necessarily follow the other. Some archive services may never review collections as they have previously been well appraised. Other archive services may never undertake deaccessioning, as the collection review may result in a retention decision.

Framework

Foundation	Collection Review	Enacting Deaccessioning and Disposal
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> Develop a collections development policy, including a description of your collecting policy.	<input type="checkbox"/> Identify need for, scope and drivers for collection review	<input type="checkbox"/> Follow disposal decision tree to reach disposal destination
<input type="checkbox"/> Create detailed, coherent, accession records. Including detailed of appraisal processes undertaken on collections.	<input type="checkbox"/> Develop knowledge of the collections	<input type="checkbox"/> Meet the requirements of Museums Accreditation if applicable
<input type="checkbox"/> Create coherent, detailed deposit & donation records and agreements.	<input type="checkbox"/> Confirm ownership and terms of deposit, donation	<input type="checkbox"/> Follow CILIP guidance if applicable
	<input type="checkbox"/> Investigate relevant legislation and related collections	<input type="checkbox"/> Consult with users/interest groups and other stakeholders
	<input type="checkbox"/> Research use of the collections	<input type="checkbox"/> Contact donor and/or receiving archive service
	<input type="checkbox"/> Reappraise or retrospectively appraise collections against the collections development policy.	<input type="checkbox"/> Review decision
	<input type="checkbox"/> Identify material that could be deaccessioned	<input type="checkbox"/> Formal decision at senior level
	<input type="checkbox"/> Identify collections/items that require investment/ action to be efficiently used.	<input type="checkbox"/> Record decision
		<input type="checkbox"/> Enact deaccessioning and disposal
		<input type="checkbox"/> Communicate with stakeholders

5.2 Foundation stage

The foundation stage of the framework aims to create the building blocks for effective deaccessioning and disposal. This includes the types of policies, plans and procedures required by the Archive Service Accreditation Standard, which should be in place as part of responsible collections management.

5.2.2 Collection development policy

The first step is to create a collections development policy. The Archive Service Accreditation Standard says:

The archive service should have a clear policy on collections development, covering the acquisition (passive and proactive accruals), appraisal and deaccessioning of material.¹²

The archive service can provide a plan which details the actions that are being taken to appraise and rationalise existing holdings and to identify gaps and priorities for future collecting, in line with its policy on collection development.¹³

The standard describes a collection development policy or suite of policies which ensures that records are appraised and retained according to accountability, legal research, and community requirements and expectations.

The standard also states that the policy or suite of policies should include (amongst other issues):

- a detailed description of the areas in which the service collects, e.g. institution, theme, geography or format.
- a description of the policies, plans and procedures of the service on deaccessioning, and disposal.

Aside from the requirements of Archive Service Accreditation, a collections development policy should ensure that the deaccessioning and disposal actions of an archive service are:

¹² Archive Service Accreditation Standard (June 2014), Requirement 2.2.1

¹³ Archive Service Accreditation Standard (June 2014), Requirement 2.2.2

- a. Transparent.
- b. Based upon an approved policy and process.
- c. Compliant with applicable regulation.
- d. Based upon clear ownership of the item/collection.
- e. Such as to ensure the integrity and context of collections.
- f. Recorded. The whole process should be recorded from the decision to review a collection, reappraisal/retrospective appraisal decision and disposal, including the reasons for decision.
- g. Based upon a consultative process with defined parties from throughout the archive service community, including internal and external stakeholders.
- h. Not such as to undermine the integrity of the collection by frequently, repeatedly reappraising and weeding collections.

Making changes to an established collections development policy should be considered in detail. These changes should be the result of an assessment of the impact of these changes on existing collections and the wider archive collecting network. If changes to your policy mean that collections are no longer within your area of collecting, the archive service remains responsible for the collection until an equivalent disposal destination is found. It is not ethical to change a collections development policy simply to support rationalisation of collections.

5.2.3 Collection development procedures

Alongside this policy should sit procedures which create detailed, coherent accession records, deposit or donation records and agreements. Procedures should also be in place to record any appraisal processes undertaken on collections. Combined, these will provide the information necessary to support future reappraisal/retrospective appraisal processes. They will not, however, deal with the legacy of poor accession records which exist in many archive services. These often fail to show information on ownership and appraisal processes in sufficient detail. Archive services may find it useful to review their accessioning procedures at the same time as their deaccessioning procedures.

Policies and procedures should be approved by top management, reviewed regularly and should be up to date before undertaking any detailed reappraisal/retrospective appraisal. The policy should be approved by top management. This will ensure that archivists have support if future reappraisal/retrospective appraisal and disposal decisions are questioned.

During reappraisal/retrospective appraisal as in other professional matters, members of the Archives and Records Association are governed by their [Code of Conduct](#), which states:

The primary duty of members is to maintain the integrity of the records in their care and custody. In the accomplishment of this duty they must have due regard to the legitimate, but sometimes conflicting, rights and interests of employers, owners, data subjects and users, past, present and future. The objectivity and impartiality of members is the measure of their professionalism. They should resist pressure from any source to manipulate evidence so as to conceal or distort facts.¹⁴

5.2.4 Plans for retrospective appraisal or reappraisal

Archive services might also consider developing a plan for retrospective appraisal/reappraisal which describes how they plan to review their collections over the next few years. This would outline future priorities and the approach to review. Archive Service Accreditation supports a collections development plan which includes detailing plans to rationalise existing holdings.

5.3 Collection review

This collection review stage begins by considering why you are reviewing collections and what the scope will be. You could review all holdings or concentrate on a type of record or even undertake a repository wide survey and assess which collections require reappraisal/retrospective appraisal.

To identify the scope of the review you should consider the objectives of your review. Are you seeking to:

¹⁴ Archives and Records Association (UK and Ireland), Code of Conduct (2012), section 2. The ARA will review the Code in the near future. Additional guidance to members on ethical disposal of records will be one of the areas included in the review

- ensure that collections meet your collecting policy?
- ensure that all accessioned material was properly appraised initially?
- reunite collections that may be split with other repositories?
- undertake retrospective appraisal on collections/items where evidence of previous appraisal to an approved standard is not apparent?
- undertake reappraisal/retrospective appraisal for collections or items which have been previously appraised? This should be undertaken with caution as described in the principles section above (section 4).

Having decided the scope of your review, record this. Identify items for reappraisal/retrospective appraisal and obtain permission for these activities within the archive service. Develop knowledge of the identified collections/items. This might include information on:

- ownership or terms of deposit/donation/purchase
- legislation that applies to the collection/item
- related collections held by the service and others
- accession records and evidence of initial appraisal
- collection descriptions or cataloguing
- funding agreements for any externally funded work on the collection/item, for example cataloguing or conservation
- potential future research needs.

Armed with this information and using your appraisal and collections development policies as a guide, reappraise/retrospectively appraise the collection/item. The evidence used and the decision-making process should be recorded. Record why you have decided to deaccession the item/collection (where relevant).

It is common not to have complete or coherent ownership information or terms of deposit for the very earliest collections deposited with an archive service. In such cases archive services are encouraged to act carefully, seek legal advice and refrain from disposal without additional information.

5.4 Enacting disposals and deaccessioning

Many current donation or deposit agreements will state how an archive service will manage disposals and in these cases this stated process should always be followed. If you did not have coherent agreements for the period in question you should follow the steps outlined below.

If the collection/items are objects or the archive service sits within a museum service, the service should also follow the Disposal Toolkit Guidelines for Museums including [Appendix 4: Additional Guidance on Financially Motivated Disposal](#). If the collection/items are rare books, the service should also follow the CILIP Disposals Policy for Rare Books and Manuscripts.

If the governing body or archive service is a charitable body, then best practice is available from the Religious Archives Group's [Guidance to Trustees on the Disposal of Archives](#). In certain circumstances, charitable bodies may need the agreement of the Charity Commission for England and Wales (or its counterparts in other parts of the UK) in order to dispose of heritage assets including archives. Charities should therefore seek advice.

5.4.1 Disposal destination decision tree

Disposal covers a range of disposal destination options, from transfer to return to depositor. By this point in the framework you will have reappraised or retrospectively appraised the collection and confirmed whether the collections/item is within your collection development policy.

You should then decide the disposal destination for the item/collection using the following decision-making tree. This decision tree aims to assist you in reaching:

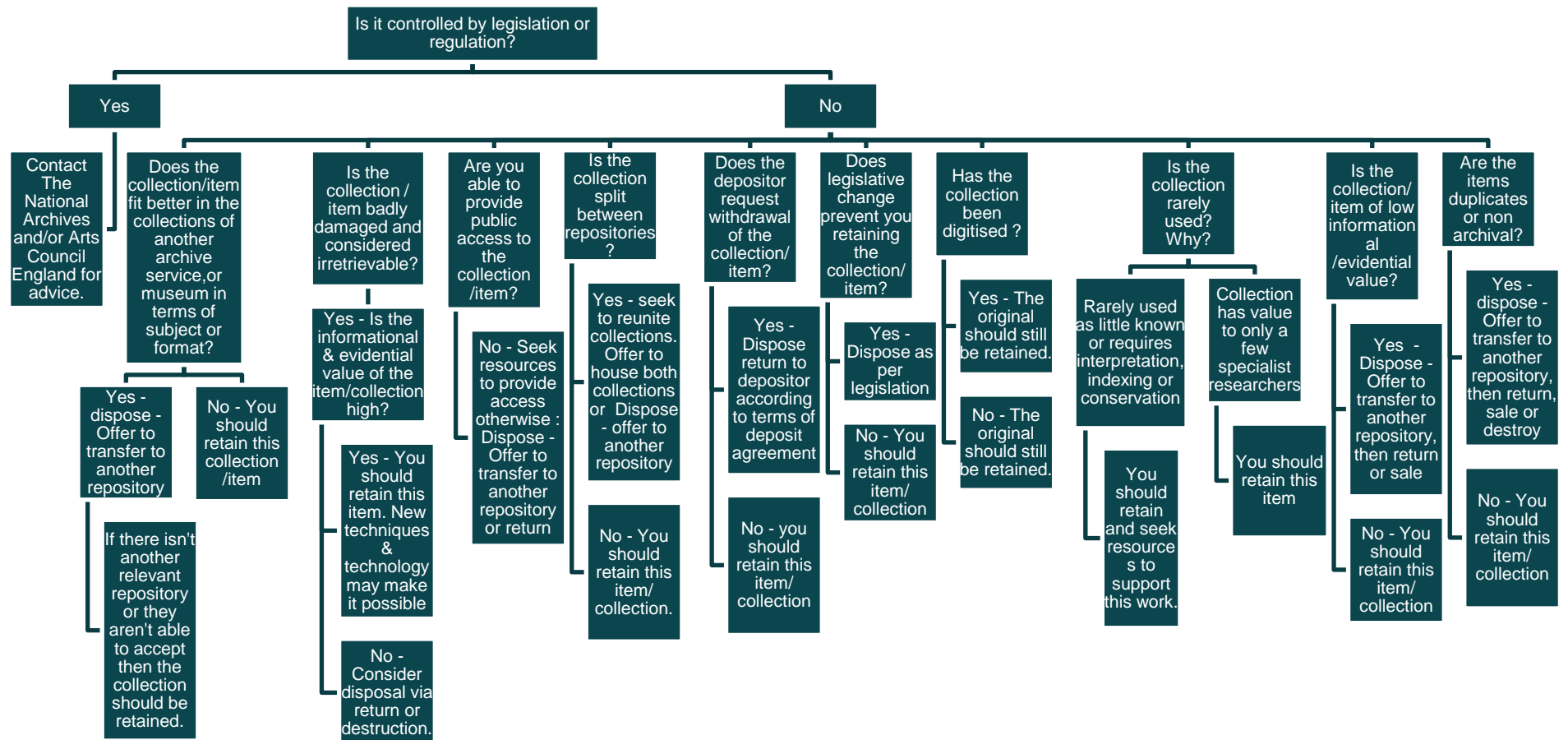
- confirmation the collection/item should be deaccessioned or retained
- an ethical disposal destination
- the relevant disposal destination.

Not all the questions shown in the tree will apply to all archive services, and they are not necessarily presented in sequential order.

One branch of the tree relates to digitised records. If accessioned analogue records are subsequently digitised, the analogue records should still be retained.

Disposal destination decision tree

Disposal Destinations include: Transfer; Return to Depositor/donor; Sale; Destruction.



5.5 Procedures for enacting disposals

5.5.1 For all disposals

The deposit or donation agreement should describe your procedures for disposals and should be the primary guide to procedures for enacting disposals. However, as collections sometimes lack detailed deposit agreements, the following is a list of procedures which should be enacted to achieve ethical disposal:

1. The donor of the item, or their heirs, should be informed of the disposal prior to its being enacted. Record the steps you have taken in contacting the donor or heirs.
2. Carry out any necessary consultation with user/interest groups and other stakeholders in your community.
3. Contact the funder of any externally funded work on the collection/item, for example cataloguing or conservation. The disposal should be discussed with the funder prior to it being undertaken.
4. Review the deaccessioning and disposal destination decisions and then secure a formal decision at a senior level.
5. Record the disposal decision and destination in the accession records.
6. Complete the deaccessioning/disposal record for the item. At a minimum you should record the reference number, disposal destination, date of disposal, authorising officer. If destroyed you should record how the records were destroyed and by whom.
7. Researchers should be informed of the deaccessioning decision and disposal destination via means appropriate to your service and the collection/item.
8. As well as changing the archive service catalogue, if the collection is listed on [Discovery](#) (The National Archives' catalogue), [Archives Hub](#), the [National Register of Archives for Scotland](#) or similar, then these records should be amended to show the change.

5.5.2 Transfer

The preferable option for disposal is to transfer the collection to an appropriate archive service. The National Archives recommends that services ensure that the receiving service (archives, museum or library) has the storage and access conditions to preserve the collections for the long term. The receiving service may have complementary collections or hold another part of the

same collection. These services can be identified through an examination of the various resources available on Discovery, Archives Hub or the National Register of Archives in Scotland.

- You should provide all details of the collection to the receiving service, including copies of the deposit/donation paperwork, including any agreement and correspondence. This will allow consideration of the transfer.
- When the transfer has been approved by the receiving service the donor/heirs should be informed of the potential transfer.
- Once the transfer has been agreed, a letter of transfer should be sent to the receiving archive service and a donation/deposit agreement signed.

5.5.3 Return to depositor or donor

After the transfer of archives to another repository, this is the next best option for disposal. Where a coherent deposit/donation agreement is in place the service should follow the process stated in this agreement. Where such an agreement is not in place the service should consider the impact on their reputation of returning unwanted items/collections to the donor.

Correspondence sent to the donor should explain how the reappraisal/retrospective appraisal of the collection/item was carried out, the basis for the decision and how the disposal decision was reached. It is important to ensure that you exercise due diligence and take every reasonable step to trace owners. You should record steps taken to contact owners.

5.5.4 Sale

The sale of archives from archive services is highly controversial and has only occurred in a handful of occasions in the UK. The sale of archives is only considered ethical if:

- the sale is the result of a private depositor withdrawing an archive collection from the custody of the archive service
- the material consists of duplicates, non-archival material or ephemera.

The sale of archives is not ethical if it is solely financially motivated. All disposals, including sale, should be the result of the processes and considerations outlined above. In particular The National Archives recommends that the sale of items is only considered if the collection or item does not meet the current collections development policy and it has not been possible to transfer

the collection/item to another archive service. If the sale of items is undertaken, the proceeds should be used to maintain and develop existing collections and services within the archive service. Sale should not be used to meet funding shortfalls in the day to day budget of an archive service.

If an archival collection/item within a museum is being considered for sale, it is important to consult the Disposal Toolkit for museums and its appendix on financially motivated disposal. Museums considering financially motivated disposal are encouraged to seek confidential advice from the Museums Association at an early stage. Proposed financially motivated disposals are evaluated by the Museums Association Ethics Committee.¹⁵ Museums should also seek advice from the relevant AAO (Accreditation Assessing Organisation).

5.5.5 Destruction

Destruction of archives is an irreversible act and therefore one which should be considered as a last resort. The destruction of archives should be carried out securely, respecting the needs of the depositor/donor and the requirements of legislation such as the Data Protection Act.

¹⁵ See the advice on [sale of collections](#) on the Museums Association website

6. Further advice and guidance

Arts Council England, Acceptance in Lieu

<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-museums/cultural-property/tax-incentives/acceptance-lieu/>

Church of England Record Centre, records management toolkit, including Keep or Bin? The Care of Your Parish Records

<https://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/structure/churchcommissioners/church-administration/librariesandarchives/recordsmanagementguides.aspx>

CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals), Disposals Policy for Rare Books and Manuscripts

<http://www.CILIP.org.uk/rare-books-and-special-collections-group/policy-statements/disposals-policy-rare-books-and>

Law Society, Depositing records and documents with public sector archives

<http://www.lawsociety.org.uk/advice/practice-notes/depositing-records-files/>

Lord Chancellor's Code of Practice on the management of records issued under section 46 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000

<http://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/information-access-rights/foi/foi-section-46-code-of-practice.pdf>

Museums Association, Disposal Toolkit Guidelines for Museums and Appendix 4: Additional Guidance on Financially Motivated Disposal (2014)

<http://www.museumsassociation.org/collections/disposal-toolkit>

<http://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=1075417>

Also available on Arts Council England and CyMAL websites:

<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-museums/accreditation-scheme/disposal-museum-collections-guidance/>

<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/cultureandsport/museumsarchiveslibraries/cymal/collections/collectionscareresources/>

Museums Association, Sale of Collections

<http://www.museumsassociation.org/collections/sale-of-collections>

Deaccessioning and disposal: guidance for archive services

Religious Archives Group, Guidance to Trustees on the Disposal of Archives

<http://religiousarchivesgroup.org.uk/advice/rag/>

The National Archives, Archive Service Accreditation Standard (June 2014)

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/archive-service-accreditation-standard-june-2014.pdf>

The National Archives, Archive Service Accreditation: Statement on the Withdrawal of Accredited Status (November 2014)

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/statement-on-withdrawal-of-archive-service-accreditation-november-2014.pdf>

The National Archives, Disposing of records

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/information-management/manage-information/policy-process/disposal/>

The National Archives, Loan agreements and accessions registers

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives-sector/loan-agreements-and-accessions-registers.htm>

The National Archives, Approved places of deposit

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives-sector/approved-places-of-deposit.htm>

The National Archives, Manorial documents

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/information-management/legislation/other-archival-legislation/manorial-documents/>

The National Archives, Purchasing archives and manuscripts: a checklist for archivists

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/information-management/purchasing-archives-and-manuscripts-checklist.pdf>

The National Archives, What is appraisal?

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/information-management/what-is-appraisal.pdf>

Appendix 1 Definitions

Accession – the process of recording the admission of an item or group of items into a collection.¹⁶

Appraisal – the process of deciding whether an item or group of items has continuing value in accordance with the collecting organisation’s mission statement.¹⁷

Archive – materials created or received by a person, family or organisation, public or private, in the conduct of their affairs and preserved because of the enduring value contained in them or as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of their creator, especially those materials maintained using the principles of provenance, original order and collective control; permanent records.¹⁸

Collections development – collecting new items, researching and reviewing the existing collection and removing items in accordance with the collecting organization’s policies and priorities.¹⁹

Collections management – strategies, policies, processes and procedures relating to a collection’s development, information, access and care.²⁰

Collections management framework – set of components that provide the foundations and organizational arrangements for designing, implementing, monitoring, reviewing and improving collections management processes throughout the organisation.

Collection review – a managed process for gathering information about an archive service’s collections and making appropriate decisions on appraisal, reappraisal and disposal.

Community – ‘the standard is based on the concept of a community which the archive service is constituted to serve. In its specific sense as a defined term the word “community” does not necessarily refer simply to the population of a political unit or physical area (e.g. a local authority or town). For many archive services the community will extend beyond the formal boundaries of its responsible body (government, educational institution, private or voluntary organisation). The

¹⁶ PAS 197

¹⁷ PAS 197

¹⁸ Pearce-Moses, Glossary

¹⁹ PAS 197

²⁰ PAS 197

archive will probably serve multiple communities: local, national and international; different communities of researchers and of other types of direct and indirect users and of non-users. Different elements of the community may attract different priorities, types and levels of service. The “community” to be served is defined through the stated purpose of the archive service. Community embraces both “stakeholders” and “users”.²¹

Deaccessioning – the formal, documented removal of a collection or item from the accession register/custody of the archive service.

Non-archival – an item which does not meet the definition of an archive.

Reappraisal – a renewed process of appraisal for collections or items which have been previously appraised.

Retrospective appraisal – appraisal of collections or items where evidence of previous appraisal to and approve standard is not apparent.

Disposal – the physical act of transferring the collection or item from the archive service to another destination. This covers transfer to another repository, return to depositor/donor and as a last resort, destruction. Also called removal.²²

Top management – person or group of people who directs and controls an organisation at the highest level.²³

Weeding – the physical act of removing items from within a particular collection, which have been appraised as not having continuing value. This may include duplicates, facsimiles, non-archival material or material which has been sampled as the value of retaining the whole collection is low.

²¹ Taken from Archive Service Accreditation Standard

²² Based upon PAS 197

²³ Taken from PAS 197

Appendix 2 Case studies

1. County archive service – simple deaccessioning

In the 1980s this service had accessioned and catalogued a series of Parish Council collections. Within this were a number of series of copy minutes from other organisations, which were also accessioned. These were mainly for organisations whose organisational archives were held elsewhere. Accessioning these was against the collecting policy of the Archive Service. The Service therefore wrote to the current clerks of the Parish Councils and asked permission to deaccession the minutes and proposed disposal by destruction. Permission was granted. The archive service marked the hard copy catalogues of the archive as having been deaccessioned in light of collecting policy.

2. City archive – sampling and appraisal

This city archive has drawn up a series of appraisal and deaccessioning projects in order to maximise available space in its strong rooms. One such project looked at their coroners records, which are public records under the terms of the Public Records Act. With the cooperation of The National Archives they have drawn up a sampling procedure and appraisal protocol for the collections. These documents balance future the needs of future researchers and the needs to only keep files with long term value. The appraisal criteria outline which types of case files to retain and which are for secure destruction. The documentation also provides guidance on the types of information to look for to aid appraisal, along with its probable location within the file. The appraisal criteria were piloted, refined and approved by The National Archives prior to their implementation.

3. City archive – retrospective appraisal

This city archive has been retrospectively appraising case files from a former City Council Valuation and Estates Department. These files were accessioned over 20 years ago and although catalogued to series level they have not been fully catalogued to file level and therefore cannot be accessed easily by the public. They were not appraised individually before being accessioned, but were assessed as part of a global appraisal process at Departmental and Authority level. At the time of accessioning the collection was accompanied by a database of file

descriptions and this was used for initial, high level appraisal. Due to the varied content and nature of the files the archive service is appraising the collection at a file level. This also ensures that related files are assessed by the same person. The Archive service has drawn up an appraisal/retention schedule for these records. This schedule describes the type of files contained in the collection and provides a series of reasons why a file might be worth keeping. This might be that they relate to major building schemes, or public inquiry files or act as a sample of the type of file to retain. The author of the appraisal schedule trained the staff undertaking the retrospective appraisal. Files not worthy of retention are noted and disposed of carefully with the permission of the depositor.

4. Large metropolitan archive – disposal via transfer

The archive service was established before many of its local borough archive services and in its earliest days acted as a county record office, collecting material from a wide area. Now the service limits its collecting to its metropolitan area and county-wide collections. Additionally the local boroughs now have archive services which had recently been approved as a Place of Deposit for public records.

This service was seeking to reduce the costs of processing and administrating their collections. Alongside this the service were about to renew the air conditioning system in a packed strong room. To enable the work to progress they undertook a programme of repackaging and moving the collection to offsite storage. They understood that they would not be able to fit the repackaged collection back into the same store and expected that 30% of the material would need to be stored elsewhere, probably in commercial storage. This ongoing cost of offsite storage would be paid from a reducing budget, so the service sought to save this cost by looking at the material they held and considering if it could be deaccessioned.

There were three strands of the deaccessioning. Firstly, the archive services identified a collection of public records which were entirely related to one local borough and suggested they were transferred to that Borough. After gaining the support of the borough archive service, the metropolitan archive service contacted The National Archives for permission to effect the transfer, which was granted. Secondly, the metropolitan archive service identified collections which were not public records and did not meet their current collecting policy. These were transferred to borough archive services following attempts to contact depositors. Finally the service identified collections and items which were not worthy of retention as they were either

duplicates of items held in the library service or were not worthy of permanent preservation. These items were disposed of via destruction.

5. City archive – deaccessioning in partnership

This city archive has retrospectively appraised its Building Control plans. Following an initial investigation and high level examination of the collection, the archive service drew up a description of the collection and an appraisal plan. This plan outlines the history of the documents, the contents of the files and provides criteria for retrospective appraisal. These criteria are dependent on the date of the file and the type of building it covered. The plan also includes paperwork used to record the retrospective appraisal decision, which matches the original appraisal criteria. The draft appraisal plan was shared with the council Building Control department which made alterations to the plan. The plan was then shared with English Heritage as a major stakeholder for the records, who were able to provide a list of major architects in the area for inclusion in the document. The archive also consulted local historians, academics and architectural historians on the retrospective appraisal criteria.

Appendix 3 Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to all those people in the archives sector and beyond that discussed the issues of deaccessioning and disposal for the preparation of this guidance. Particular thanks to those that were interviewed and provided case studies. Organisations we consulted included:

- Archives and Records Association
- Arts Council England
- CILIP Rare Books and Special Collections Group
- Heritage Lottery Fund
- Museums Association
- Research Libraries UK
- Scottish Council on Archives
- Archive services and archivists across the UK.