




Education & Learning
Handling Collection Strategy

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1.0 Introduction

The National Museum of Ireland (NMI) has produced a Learning Policy that recognises learning as an organisation-wide principle that is fundamental to our role and purpose. It is supported by a Learning Strategy. This Handling Collection Strategy document outlines the role and management of the Handling Collection in support of learning across NMI.

The Education and Learning Handling Collection of (NMI) is a core learning resource and widely used for direct engagement with the public. The Handling Collection objects have been acquired to reflect the Museum's accessioned collections, selected by education staff to support public engagement.

The collection includes some replicas but primarily involves 'real' objects. The Handling Collection is separate to the NMI Core Collection used in exhibitions and research, which is covered by distinct policies. This strategy covers acquisition, disposal, management, care, and access for all handling collections of NMI.

2.0 NMI vision

The Master Vision Statement of NMI (2023) articulates the significance placed on direct public engagement:

Vision for 2028

The National Museum of Ireland will be a place of sanctuary and surprise. Through greater accessibility to our collections, we will strengthen how our audiences can engage with their cultural heritage. We will offer unexpected and diverse public programmes and develop opportunities for increased research and collaboration.

Our mission

We are leaders in the promotion of Ireland's cultural heritage through accessible collections and public programmes that are relevant and engaging.

Research has shown that handling objects allow visitors to have a more interactive and immersive experience and fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of the objects and their associated history. Handling original objects provides people with a direct experience of museum collections using the senses of sight, hearing, smell and touch. It is an inclusive way of learning that breaks down barriers and encourages group interaction in innovative ways. Handling objects have the power to stimulate memory, enable critical thinking, foster historical empathy and encourage interactivity.

While handling replica objects offers valuable learning opportunities, working with original objects can be particularly deep and profound. Our aim is to expand and care for the Handling Collection and to maximise its potential as a key learning resource in the Museum.

3.0 Education and Learning Handling Collection context

The current Handling Collection of objects and specimens was initiated in the late 1990s

following the expansion of the Education Department. Established as a key learning resource, the Handling Collection has grown in volume and variety over the last 25 years the Handling Collection is used in a variety of learning programmes including tours, workshops, drop-in sessions and special projects which take place onsite, online as well as in outreach settings.

Over the last 25 years, the Education Department has researched and developed a pedagogy around the use of this resource when working with different audiences and we aim to continue to develop our practice and theory around working with this resource. There are four separate Handling Collections in place reflecting the themes and objects in the Museum's core collections across the four sites and used primarily by the Education Department. See Appendix A for information on the nature of the Handling Collections at each Museum site.

4.0 Education and Learning Handling Collection strategy

Seven strategic aims have been set for NMI Handling Collections:

1. Advocate for the greater understanding on the power and potential of the Handling Collection as a core part of NMI Visitor Experience.
2. Augment the Handling Collection.
3. Ensure the Handling Collection is properly cared for and maintained.
4. Build on research associated with the Handling Collection.
5. Create learning opportunities through the Handling Collection.
6. Include handling objects into learning opportunities alongside NMI exhibitions.
7. Improve storage facilities for the Handling Collection.
8. Manage and maintain the Handling Collection database at each site.

Advocate

Advocate for greater understanding of the potential of the Handling Collection as a core part of NMI's Visitor Experience. It is widely acknowledged that museums that are truly visitor centred present a range of participatory experiences. Using the Handling Collection in a range of interactive ways can unlock a new level of engagement. By allowing visitors to touch and interact, it creates a deeper connection and deeper understanding. It's a hands-on adventure that sparks curiosity, fosters learning and makes the museum visit more memorable. It is also a great way to cater to different learning styles and engage a wider range of visitors. In order for NMI to deliver on our visitor centric commitment and to raise awareness on the power and potential of the Handling Collection, we will:

1. Create opportunities to share the full extent of the Handling Collection with colleagues including organising workshops and demonstrations to showcase its impact first-hand.
2. Organise CPDs for colleagues and peers on interactive museum experience.
3. Share success stories, testimonials, research and data showing increased visitor satisfaction.

4. Maximise NMI's Visitor Survey to collect findings and insights on the value of participatory experiences (including the handling collection).
5. Undertake a review of existing exhibitions to identify suitable spaces for handling material and make recommendations for the integration of handling objects or tactile elements into displays. This review will reflect findings gathered in previous audits and exhibition evaluations, including findings from tracking and observation exercises.
6. In consultation with curatorial and other colleagues, implement recommendations arising out of the above review.
7. Provide research and learning opportunities for the Education Department to ensure the most up to date skills, knowledge and expertise around object-based learning.

Augment

Augment the Handling Collection. The Handling Collection is a core learning resource and widely used by the Education Department in particular. It is subject to wear and tear, breakage and/or loss. The Handling Collection is replenished and augmented on an ongoing basis to reflect NMI's Core Collections, new exhibitions and issues and themes that are of relevance and interest to our audiences.

As the Museum strives to use the Handling Collection in innovative and inclusive ways, there is an ongoing need to add to and update it. Our aim is to acquire new material, both original and replica, that will inspire, engage and resonate with our audiences. In order for NMI to achieve this aim we will:

1. Identify objects for inclusion in the Handling Collection according to agreed criteria.
2. Consult with curatorial staff, conservation staff, Registration staff, and communities where relevant regarding potential donations of original objects to the Education and Learning Handling Collection and the potential of deaccessioned objects from the NMI's Core Collections to the Handling Collection.
3. Consult with communities about the content of the Handling Collection.
4. Use the opportunity of deaccessioning of objects from NMI's Core Collections to consider transfer to the Handling Collection under the terms of the Collections Disposal Policy, depending on condition, and in collaboration with Conservation and Registration.
5. Commission new replica material from reputable, ethical and recommended sources and document the commissioning process.
6. Ensure that any relevant information on provenance, scientific, or background information relating to the object at the time of donation or purchase is included in the acquisition process.

5.0 Care and maintenance

The Education Department is responsible for the care and longevity of the Handling Collection. The development of this core learning resource requires constant care and maintenance. In order to achieve this aim we will:

1. Undertake an annual review to ensure that any conservation and storage needs are addressed, as well as providing an opportunity to reflect on how the Handling Collection is being used across the sites to inform future planning.
2. Ensure to carry out preventative conservation on the handling collection, in consultation with NMI conservation and the Care of Collections strategy.
3. Undertake an audit of the Handling Collections at each site, including material that is on display in exhibitions, using the Handling Collection database to record condition of objects and note any conservation or maintenance requirements.
4. Review feedback, audience research and evaluations related to the use of the Handling Collections and use this data to inform future planning and the development of learning programmes.

6.0 Leader in research

Establish NMI as a leader in research associated with the Education and Learning Handling Collection. There is an existing body of research which recognises the power of handling objects in the learning process. We aim to build on this knowledge base through existing and new research programmes. In order for us to achieve this aim we need to:

1. Gather contextual information and knowledge about the individual pieces in the Handling Collection and record and add this data to the existing Handling Collection database.
2. Work with our visitors, audience and communities to understand better what they would like to see in our Handling Collections and why?
3. Ensure that information about the Handling Collection is up to date and accessible to the public.
4. Explore academic opportunities to build on existing research undertaken by the Education Department around the use of the Handling Collection as a teaching and learning resource and its impact on audiences.
5. Initiate new research into the value of the Handling Collection as a learning resource.
6. Create a set of guidelines and teaching strategies related to the use of the Handling Collections as a learning resource and share with those who will be using the Collection.

7.0 Improve storage facilities for the Handling Collection

Adequate and appropriate storage will ensure the longevity and care of the Handling Collection. Below are some of the ways NMI can achieve this aim:

1. Undertake a review of existing storage space at each of the four sites and at the Collections Resource Centre and make recommendations to, not only build on what we have, but to identify additional storage facilities that reflect future storage needs as the Handling Collection expands.

2. Implement recommendations arising out of the above review.
3. Liaise on an ongoing basis with the Registration team to ensure best practice in terms of storage and collections moves.

8.0 Manage and maintain the Handling Collection database across the four sites

Standardising and improving the documentation of the Handling Collection across the four sites will ensure good practice and consistency in the development and maintenance of data and recordkeeping. The standardisation of data and record keeping across the four sites will improve the quality of the overall service around the Handling Collection. In order for NMI to achieve this aim we will:

1. Designate staff in each Museum site with overall responsibility for maintenance of their section of the database.
2. Review existing databases and establish a common one for use across the four Museum sites, in consultation with relevant Museum departments such as Registration and ICT.
3. In consultation with Registration, introduce a set of protocols around maintenance of the database including new entry records, deletion of old records and updates of existing records.
4. In consultation with Registration, include fields around documenting loans and use of the Handling Collection by other staff and partner organisations.

9.0 Appendix A

Handling Collection at NMI Collins Barracks

The Collection consists of a wide range of original objects reflecting the Decorative Arts and History collections and includes three bespoke handling object boxes on themes of Textiles, Clothing & Jewellery, and Furniture & Silver. These original objects are supplemented by commissioned textile and clothing-based replicas. A collection of original and replica documents also forms part of the material.

Handling Collection at NMI Kildare Street

The Handling Collection consists primarily of replica objects with a small collection of bones and wood from archaeological sites. The high proportion of replicas is due to legislation governing archaeological material. Where possible the replicas are commissioned from experimental archaeologists while others are sourced from recognised craft practitioners. In addition, sample raw materials such as amber, antler and bone are used to demonstrate the skills of those in the past.

There also are models obtained from the British Museum of Ancient Egyptian artefacts in the collection. The Bronze Age Handling Box Project was conceived and led by the Education Department and includes 42 boxes of replica handling items that tell the story of the Bronze Age in Ireland and are available throughout Ireland. Accompanying these boxes are pedagogical tools to aid teachers in the use of this resource.

Handling Collection at NMI Natural History

The Collection consists of a range of taxidermy and skeletal material, wet specimens in jars and dry invertebrate specimens, mollusc shells and bird eggs. There is a large collection of geological specimens, including fossils and meteorites. There are recent taxidermy commissions, all ethically sourced, in addition to museum-quality casts and models of palaeontological and skeletal material. A small number of objects related to people's relationship and interaction with the natural world are included.

Handling Collection at NMI Country Life

The Collection consists of a diverse range of original and replica objects related to NMI's Irish Folklife collection, from clothing to straw hats to baskets. Many are bespoke items especially commissioned for the Handling Collection. Included in the Collection are donations and objects made by craftspeople.