



National Museums NI Ethics Policy

Approved: 24th March 2026

Introduction

'Museums are public-facing, collections-based institutions that preserve and transmit knowledge, culture and history for past, present and future generations.'

This places museums in an important position of trust in relation to their audiences, local communities, donors, source communities, partner organisations, sponsors and funders. Museums must make sound ethical judgements in all areas of work in order to maintain this trust.'

Museums Association

Ethical best practice should be applied to all aspects of museum work and help inform decision-making. There are a number of ethical codes that are pertinent to our work, with the Museums Association's (MA) *Code of Ethics for Museums* and the International Council for Museums' (ICOM) *Code of Ethics for Museums Worldwide* (2004, currently going through a process of revision) being the most comprehensive and regularly referred to.

In 2025, members of the Museums Association voted to approve an updated Code of Ethics for the UK museum sector. The new code is structured around three fundamental guiding principles for ethical museum practice:

1. Equitable and Inclusive
2. Transparent and Accountable
3. Responsible and Sustainable

The National Museums NI Ethics Policy 2026 – 2029 has been structured according to these guiding principles. The policy also takes into account the *Seven Principles of Public Life* (1996).

This organisational policy does not seek to replace or duplicate the sectoral codes already in existence. Instead, it is to be read in conjunction with these codes and give more specific guidance

that takes into account our particular context, drivers and priorities. It should be read in conjunction with other National Museums NI policies which detail ethical considerations in particular areas, for example the Collections Development Policy, Collections Care and Conservation Policy and the Conflicts of Interest Policy.

Adherence to the ethical principles outlined in this policy will ensure the effective delivery of our statutory obligations, whilst maintaining public trust and confidence. The statutory obligations of National Museums NI, as set out in the Museums and Galleries (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, are:

- To care for, preserve and add to the collections
- To ensure that the collections are available to the public through exhibitions, effective interpretation and availability for research and study
- To promote the awareness, appreciation and understanding of:
 - Art, history and science
 - The way of life and traditions of people
 - The migration and settlement of people

All principles outlined in this policy have their roots in the organisational vision, mission and values of National Museums NI:

Our Vision

Celebrate who we are: telling the stories of our past, challenging our present, shaping our future

Our Mission

- Develop, manage and care for our collections to benefit current and future generations
- Make our collections accessible to the widest possible audiences
- Play a leading role in the economic and social wellbeing and future of this place
- Build an organisation where people feel valued.

Our Values

- **Striving for excellence** – being the best we can be in everything we do; delivering excellent customer service internally and externally; sharing our expertise
- **Being authentic** – being true to our collections; having integrity in everything we do; creating unique experiences
- **Working together** – promoting team-work; building mutually beneficial partnerships; being receptive to others and their ideas
- **Showing respect** – valuing everyone; supporting diversity; respecting collections

- **Being courageous** – being ambitious in programming; embracing change; being brave and creative in the stories we tell; empowering our people

The policy is designed to be used in accordance with the principles and impact areas set out in National Museums NI's Corporate Strategy 2025 – 20230:

Principles:

1. Museums are for everyone
2. Participation and co-creation
3. Responsible stewardship

Impact Areas:

- **Identity** – We will champion diverse and ever-evolving identities, creating spaces where different cultures are visible and respected.
- **Peacebuilding** – We will encourage courageous conversations that support the ongoing journey from conflict to lasting peace.
- **Environment** – We will mobilise our museums and collections to promote environmental action and protect our shared planet.
- **Innovation** – We will be a learning platform to equip a new generation of innovators and entrepreneurs with skills, confidence and creativity.

This policy applies to all representatives of National Museums NI, paid or otherwise, including staff, trustees and volunteers.

1. Equitable and Inclusive

1.1 Everything we do will be measured against the benefits we bring to the users of our museums. The public benefit of National Museums NI is that we help people, both individually and collectively, better understand the art, history, science and culture of Northern Ireland and its significance in wider national and global contexts.

1.2 As a publicly funded organisation, National Museums NI commits to the effective implementation of its Section 75 statutory duties. We will promote equitable relationships, based on respect and mutual benefit, with and between the nine equality categories of persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation; men and women generally; persons with a disability and persons without; and persons with dependants and persons without.

1.3 National Museums NI will proactively seek to democratise and decolonise its collections, through ethical collections development, research, partnerships and engagement. We commit to respect, value and profile community expertise about collections.

1.4 Our workforce, including staff, volunteers and freelancers, is a valuable asset. We will support this workforce through the creation of welcoming and inclusive workplaces, with a focus on dignity, respect and wellbeing.

2. Transparent and Accountable

2.1 National Museums NI will actively promote good relations between persons of different identities and beliefs. We will promote cultural pluralism and respect for diversity, build social cohesion and reconciliation, and celebrate and support all aspects of our cultural and linguistic heritage.

2.2 National Museums NI recognises its museums are safe, shared spaces for everyone. For this reason, we will support freedom of speech, as consistent with Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, and provide forums for the respectful sharing of different views and perspectives. Exceptions will be the sharing of views and perspectives that are sectarian, racist, sexist, ageist, ableist, homophobic, transphobic or express religious intolerance. Where our collections demonstrate such views and perspectives, we will ensure we curate them in a sensitive and informative manner, providing context and seeking the input of communities.

2.3 National Museums NI will take into account all aspects of preventive conservation before carrying out physical work on the cultural heritage and will limit the treatment to only that which is necessary. Restoration of the collection will only be considered through full consultation with relevant stakeholders and via an ethical decision-making framework devised by the Collections Services team.

2.4 As a custodian of human remains, National Museums NI will prioritise an open and responsive ethical approach, based on dialogue with audiences and communities.

2.5 National Museums NI welcomes enquiries about the repatriation or restitution of the World Cultures collections. We commit to work in equitable and respectful partnership with source communities to explore opportunities for return.

2.6 National Museums NI will not accept funding donations made anonymously, through an intermediary who is not prepared to identify the donor to anyone at National Museums NI.

2.7 National Museums NI will explore the potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other emerging technologies with an approach that is ambitious but responsible. We will encourage innovation and experimentation, but always in a way that is focused, safe, and aligned with our organisational values.

2.8 National Museums NI will facilitate responsible digital access, in line with legal requirements, organisational policies and procedures and open and informative dialogue with individuals and communities.

3. Responsible and Sustainable

3.1 National Museums NI commits to the ethical and effective management of public funds, through sound corporate governance.

3.2 As a scientific organisation, National Museums NI will always take an evidence-based approach to the interpretation of its collections and sites, based on sound data, research, scholarship and consultation.

3.3 National Museums NI recognises the urgency of the environmental crisis, and the responsibilities we have as a trusted public body to educate, involve and support positive environmental action. We will also take action to reduce the negative environmental impacts of our organisation.

3.4 National Museums NI will be mindful of its role as a scientific organisation and custodian of natural habitats and natural sciences collections. As such we have a leading role to play in climate change mitigation and biodiversity conservation, and in public engagement on these issues. We must not act in a way that jeopardises this or undermines public trust.

3.5 National Museums NI will take a sustainable approach to the development of the national collections, with informed decision-making processes for all new acquisitions and a proactive, strategic approach to the transfer, reuse and disposal of collections.

3.6 When embarking on relationships with partners, funders and sponsors National Museums NI will undertake due diligence to ensure the values and practices of such organisations are aligned with our own.

3.7 National Museums NI will not seek or accept donations, sponsorship or grants where the funding source does not align with the values of the organisation and acceptance of these funds would damage its effective operation, including:

- Harm to National Museums NI's duty to other benefactors, partners, visitors or stakeholders;
- Creation of unacceptable conflict of interest
- Material damage to the reputation, independence or integrity of National Museums NI
- Detrimentially affect the ability of National Museums NI to fulfil its mission in any way

3.8 National Museums NI will maintain its curatorial independence and integrity, resisting attempts to influence practice and decision making by particular interest groups including funders, donors, politicians and lenders.