

Submission to the Working Group on Human Remains from the National Museums of Scotland

The National Museums of Scotland holds both skeletal and modified human remains across the two curatorial departments of History and Applied Art, and Zoology and Geology. The majority of the museum's holdings of unmodified human remains rests with the Department of Geology and Zoology and for this reason a submission, specifically regarding the Zoological collections, is appended.

As a national and public museum we have a duty of access to our public. Therefore access to information regarding the collections including human remains is available to members of the public on request.

The Museum has received several requests for the return of human remains and these have been put to the Board of Trustees. In no instance has this resulted in the disposal of items from the collections. These requests have been dealt with on a case by case basis and in accordance with the terms of the Acquisitions and Disposals Policy, which specifically refers to the treatment of human remains (Appendix A), and the 1985 National Heritage (Scotland) Act.

NMS feels that the current policy documents and legal status of the collections allows for the thorough investigation of any request, while also giving flexibility to respond to each request individually and imposes no restrictions on the potential outcomes of each case. For example the return of human remains would be possible if it met the terms of the disposal policy and the Trustees and Secretary of State were to agree. The policies and legislation limit the circumstances under which disposal may take place and we feel these limitations are entirely appropriate. The current system has a proven track record and NMS see no justification for either the legislation or the museum policies to be changed from their current status.

Details of various requests and their conclusion can be made available to the group if requested.

Appendix A

Extract from NMS Acquisitions and Disposal Policy 2001 (This public document is reviewed as a whole by the Trustees and published at least once every five years).

NMS's policy on human remains states that:

- (1) NMS is responsible for preserving material concerning the whole human species,
- (2) Human remains are preserved with great care and respect, and
- (3) Undertakings can be given neither to display such items nor to loan them to other sites where similar conditions cannot be guaranteed.

All decisions relating to the disposal of human remains are referred to NMS's Board of Trustees and considered on a case by case basis, taking due account of the advice of the Museum's professional staff.