Disposal from Museum Collections:

Navigating the ethos, ideals, and practice

of transparency

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Abstract

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This thesis explores the concept of transparency and its application to the process of curatorially-motivated disposal in UK museums. I establish the ethical necessity of transparency through audience visibility and understanding, but evidence extensive concealment by practitioners. I propose this secrecy stems from a historical professional mindset of risk aversion. I demonstrate that transparency can be created through the conscious consideration of audiences and communication modes, utilising relationships of trust to transform perceived risks into beneficial practice.

Using an interpretivist strategy of exploration, I discover the interplay between individual perception and professional practice within the institutional context. Utilising the theories of Communities of Practice and Radical Transparency I propose a Transparent Communication Model in which reflexivity generates action.

Through a survey of practitioners' views and practice I explore how disposal has been hidden or revealed to professional, public, and stakeholder audiences. I discover a desire for transparency with those audiences perceived to share museum knowledge, and I identify perceived barriers to transparency creation.

Within two case studies I explore how mindset shapes practice. At Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery I examine transparency for public audiences within the project *Stories from the Stores.* Through innovation the staff made visible their work and sought publicly held knowledge. But I evidence how outcomes can be limited by institutional frameworks and resource practicalities. At the Museum of London I examine transparency for professional audiences through the project *Collections Review and Rationalisation (Social and Working History Collections)*. I reveal the

centrality of confidence for creating trusting relationships and influencing sectoral change, but discover a conscious opacity for public audiences.

Throughout this thesis I witness the emotive, temporal, and subjective quandaries of decision-making. Ultimately, I propose that the professional desire for disposal transparency can be achieved by considering risk as a tool for positive action.

Acknowledgements

This thesis is the outcome of a ten-year journey which has traversed life's highs and lows to completion. I dedicate this endeavour to our little Wookie. Sadly, we never met you in this life, but without you I would never have taken the first step. You're always in my heart and prayers.

Most of this thesis was written during the Covid-19 pandemic which began in spring 2020 and remains with us as I submit this thesis. The unnatural silence of lockdowns and social isolation provided a prolonged and productive writing retreat. During that time I attended a virtual writing course with the Royal Literary Society. My thanks to tutors Helena Attlee and Tina Pepler and the participants for their encouragement to improve this text. But the pandemic has been a time of great loss, and I remember fondly Pam Boyce, Ellen Carter, and Rick Lawrence whom we lost during that time. Rest well my friends.

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Throughout my research I have aimed for honesty and integrity. Any errors or omissions remain my own.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that."

(Martin Luther King)

1.1 Setting the scene

This research began with a flash of curatorial self-doubt. It was the moment I took a heavy green typewriter from a shelf in the museum storeroom, swiped my access card to exit the secure building, and placed the typewriter in the skip amongst the detritus of old exhibition panels and torn cardboard storage boxes (Figure 1). My walk from the museum store to car park marked the final transition in the life of this typewriter, taken from its deep sleep in the storeroom to meet its fate. This machine no longer had a purpose and it had reached the end of its life. The realisation of the finality of this literal act of disposal stopped me in my tracks, and a voice of doubt niggled in my mind.

But I soon realised I was not alone in these feelings of guilt and angst; this was the fear and uncertainty that I heard whispered among my peers. I was experiencing the complex tangle of professional and personal feelings caused by this simple, but discordant, action. In that moment of hesitancy I had glimpsed why museum staff might not like talking about disposal, even when undertaken in less literal terms. I had found my PhD topic. I wanted to explore this confusion of professional practice and personal feelings; to understand the reasons that prevented museum staff normalising disposal; and to encourage my peers to develop the confidence to reveal and explain their task.

For the silence encompassing disposal is, contrarily, a well-known cliché within the museum sector. On the occasions people outside of the profession think about 'disposal' they perhaps think of the 'Parthenon Marbles' at the British Museum, or African bronzes now scattered across UK collections, or the Holocaust-era artworks hidden in plain sight on museum walls. Or perhaps they have vague recollections of an item sold by a Local Authority Museum to pay for building renovations. Maybe these

examples jump to mind due to their visibility in traditional and social media. Portrayed as emotive controversies, such stories of repatriation, restitution, and financially motivated sale present museums as face-less institutions which act against public ideas of what is right and just.
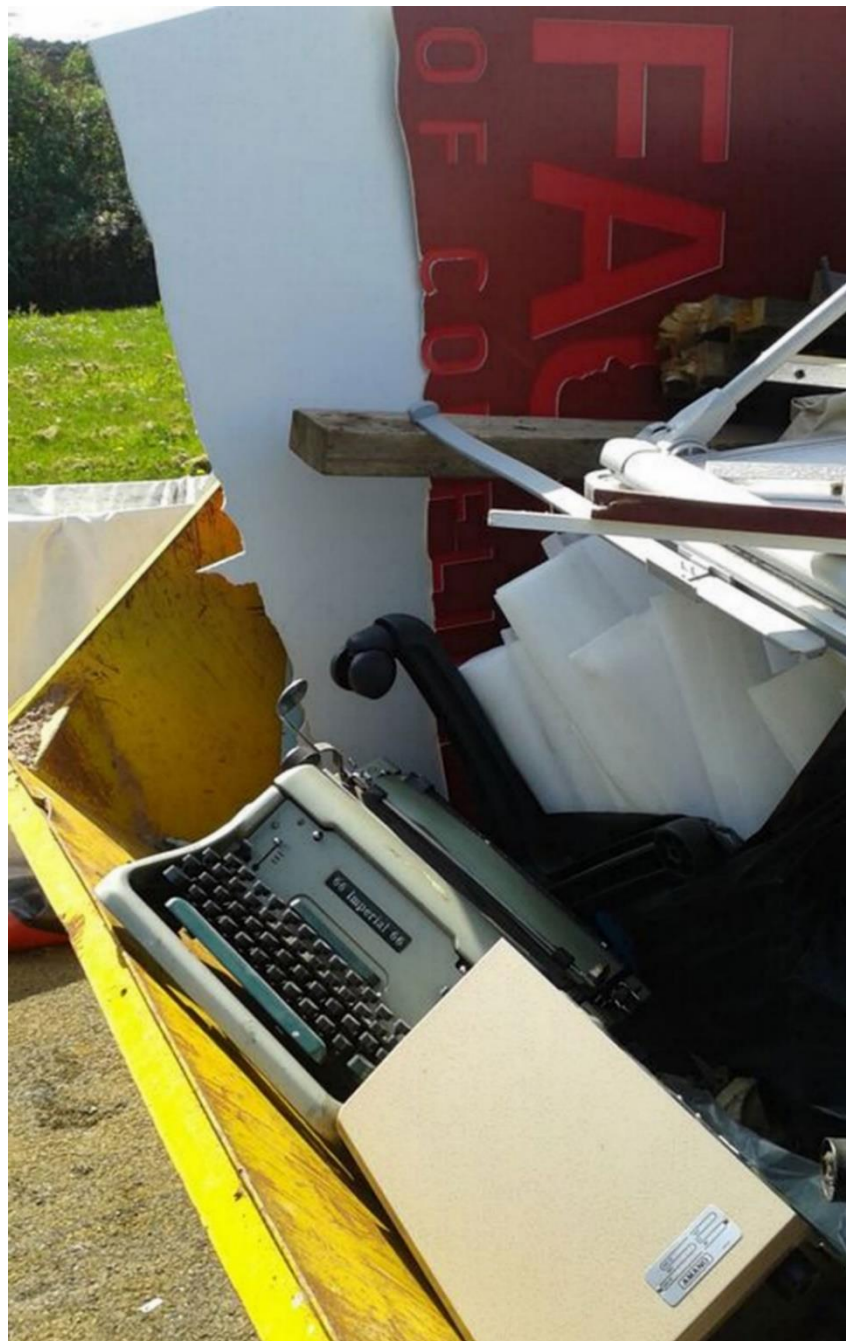
Figure 1: The deaccessioned typewriter that began this research story.
(Credit: Author. First published as Durrant 2016).

These social debates have rapidly come to the fore during the time of this PhD research. They have caused the museum sector to consider the legacy of past actions on contemporary lives. Within the legalities and ethics of returning items which were collected unlawfully (Herman 2021; Hicks 2021), or the selling of objects to plug shortfalls caused by Covid income losses (Durrant 2021), conversations revolve around the rights and wrongs of ownership and display. A recurring question is being asked by museum staff and public alike: who has the final say on the return, or indeed the retention, of contested objects? Disposal therefore runs through the heart of these emotive matters. Many museum staff now acknowledge they must better represent those people for whom collections embody discord or hurt, and more accurately portray the elites who created, shaped, and told museum stories.

These issues are complex areas to unpack and explain, and the overlapping theory and practice within these removal processes is only beginning to be explored (Callaghan et al. 2020). But while these modes of disposal are highly relevant to contemporary museums and society they are not the subject of this thesis. Contrary to these high-visibility cases, my interest lies in the unseen. In the mundane, the broken, the unloved; those items whose time in the display case is over. Or never happened. I'm interested in the uncontroversial things for which there is a better example, or a better story; or which arrived in the store by mistake and inadvertently became part of the collection (Figure 2). Or the object which awaited a staff member with the time and inclination to rediscover its history, only to find a mystery which could not be resolved (Figure 3). My interest is in the removal of these 'unwanted' objects that the public do not know are in museums, and that are typically hidden from museum professionals too. They are not good enough, or pretty enough, or quirky enough to tell their story within the museum in which they reside, but they may have the chance at a new life in a different museum, or a different social institution, or a charity shop. Or, like the green typewriter, they have reached the end of their life and are destined for the skip or recycling centre.

Figure 2: Modern items mistakenly boxed and catalogued among the stored Technology collection at RAMM, Exeter. (Credit: Author).

Figure 3: A mystery item discovered in the store at RAMM, Exeter. Research revealed it was a Victorian Geissler tube, without provenance and which had never been accessioned. (Credit: Author).

The disposal of such unwanted objects is led by museum staff working to achieve a professional vision for their institution and, in best practice, using their knowledge of museum practices and practicalities to inform their decisions. These processes are 'curatorially-motivated' in museum parlance. Staff also utilise an understanding of their audiences' needs and desires, whether demonstrable or merely perceived, in their decisions of how best to shape the collection; but often they initiate and undertake the disposal process without audience involvement.

Within these curatorially-motivated disposals are numerous and nuanced decisions about the value and possible use of objects. The subjectivity of such decisions is very real. In the example of the green typewriter, my walk from the museum store to the car park marked the final transition in its life. It was the voice of doubt that temporarily stopped me in my tracks. Even though I had followed the official guidance, was it right that *I* had ended its life in this way, and at *this* time? How could I be sure that this was the correct course of action?

But my voice of self-doubt began to converse with itself. For this journey from store to skip was the culmination of the object's life story, and I was not the sole character. The process of the typewriter's changing value had begun forty years earlier when the museum's administration team decided it was no longer of practical use, and it was taken to the storeroom as a possible future exhibit. This potential lay untapped for twenty years until its existence was logged by a Documentation Assistant more familiar with modern technology than this relic from a bygone age. Onwards it slumbered until I discovered it lurking on the storeroom shelf, and demarked it as an item to be used, or removed. The final blow was enacted when its potential for rehoming was shared with other museums, but no-one responded with a desire to be its rescuer. During its lifetime of active use and quiet rest the value of the typewriter had changed from a functional item, to an object with a potential but unrealised museum value, to an item of rubbish. As I will explore in the early chapters of this thesis, perhaps this 'death' is the inevitable conclusion for all museum objects.

But still, my personal jolt of professional self-doubt remained deeply embedded within the physical act of removal: the question of whether *I* was the right actor in this scene. For I was a professional curator with the responsibility to care for the museum's

collection on behalf of the public. The very definition of a 'museum' extols a duty to safeguard objects, to collect stories about history, and to preserve them for future generations (Museums Association 1998). In this worthy endeavour museums offer the chance of a new life beyond the function for which an object was originally made; and perhaps a new home in which the item can be admired by the many, rather than the few. In so doing, museums may satisfy a human interest to explore the world, to understand our personal role in it, and be transported to another place or time. This narrative of embedded and enduring 'cultural value' is the fundamental defining aspect within which museums act and defend their actions. 'Letting objects go' seemingly contradicts all that museums are.

Yet I realise the narrative of museum permanence is a fairy-tale of misdirection and half-truths. For the removal of objects from public ownership is as old as museums themselves. As objects move on and off display, they move in and out of visibility, and in and out of the curatorial mind. Many never make it into the public's gaze. Objects commonly move out of the museum realm whether by a formalised process of repatriation, restitution or disposal; or by informal processes of decay, theft, or errant misplacement. Like the plethora of unseen objects in store, these processes are hidden from public view and operate in a shaded world which is as rarely talked about as seen.

This opacity prevents public sight of the complex contradictions of value and loss. These ambiguities can set professional expertise against public opinion, and raise questions of duty, rights, and representation. For as witnessed in the recent debates about African bronzes or public statues, the removal of an object from public ownership is rarely a simple process of right and wrong. It raises complex issues of legalities and ethics, of voices and representation, and provokes deeply held and enigmatic emotional responses. Disposal, in whatever form, is rarely a black and white simplicity but a swirling accumulation of grey indecision; the boundaries are blurred and constantly evolving.

Within curatorially-motivated disposal, the legalities are too intricate and extensive for this study and are being tackled by others with the relevant expertise (Ulph 2015a; 2015b). My research is situated within the area of ethical grey. In this shadowy blur are found diverse and divergent voices of professional, public, and stakeholder opinion.

Here are the questions of how to assess an object's value and significance, and who makes those decisions. Here too is rooted the imperative for transparency: a concept and practice purported to be the lens focussing light into the ethical shadows to provide visibility for those on the outside looking in. But while transparency offers a tool to reveal the people and processes within disposal, to engage museum audiences with theory and the practice, and provide a chance to resolve conflict and uncertainties, this transparency lens is often ignored or forgotten. The lens of transparency itself needs an illuminating source, to provide sight of the disposal ethical grey. But many practitioners do not seem to know how to light the lamp to enable this transparency, or perhaps fear what it will reveal.

From my own starting point of professional experience, personal insight, and academic rigour, I seek to explore the reasons for this common professional experience of fear of the ethical grey. For this uncertainty seemingly hides disposal practice and its necessity from those whom museum professionals claim to serve. By exploring the words and actions of real-world museum practitioners I aim to provide a torch to illuminate the transparency darkness, to shine light on the unseen world of curatorially-motivated disposal. By identifying common experiences, thoughts, and perceptions, I seek to ease professional fears of what lurks in the dark. By identifying and extolling the benefits of transparent practice I seek to reassure museum practitioners and audiences of the mutual benefits of developing relationships based in clear communication and trust. Like an object being brought out of the storeroom for its time in public view, in this thesis I will bring disposal out of the gloom and into the limelight to play its central role in the story of museums.

Chapter 2: The Ethics of Disposal

"Professing an ethical attitude is not the same

as acting in an ethical manner." (Gary Edson 2017, 11).

2.1 Introduction

The earliest written records from ancient Mesopotamia and contemporary debates on Twitter may seem worlds apart and yet they share a commonality: they evidence the instinctive human need to record and question the world. As people attempt to "understand the world and their role in it" (Levene 2010, 9) individuals consider what is 'good' or 'bad', and how differences in such understandings affect our own, and others', thoughts and actions (Craig 2002, 21-3). As social animals we collaborate to develop shared understandings and preferred ways of acting (Blackburn 2003, 4). Museums are a microcosm of this social questioning and record. As public institutions they seek to represent humankind and its relationship with the natural and social worlds. It is the question of *which* aspects are recorded and represented that challenge contemporary museum practice.

The sector is increasingly aware of the necessity to reconcile past, present, and future museum practices with the needs and preferences of contemporary audiences – whether they be actual or potential (e.g. Janes and Sandell 2019). Museum practitioners are increasingly encouraged to consider their own practices and reveal their motives and assumptions (e.g. Museums Association 2008). This PhD research began several years before the momentous changes of 2020-21 with its concurrent pandemic and vociferous calls for social representation of, and by, diverse voices. Yet this thesis emerges into a society which calls the museum profession to reconsider its ethical boundaries and amend its practices.

Against this backdrop curatorially-motivated disposal may seem a minor issue. But such rapid social changes make it a more pressing concern. For the process — in which staff make decisions about the content of a museum collection — directly reflects institutional mission and affects whose stories may be told by the remaining objects.

Such disposal is guided by the professional knowledge and skills of those undertaking the process, but also reflects their conscious and unconscious preconceptions. Further, disposal may not represent the views of those absent from the process. It is therefore situated within an area of ethical grey whose boundaries are under frequent renegotiation, and which may reflect fearful assessments of trust and risk rather than a professional goal for visible practice and representation. It is timely for practitioners to reassess who is involved in curatorially-motivated disposal, what roles they undertake, and how others are made aware of the process, its workings, and outcomes.

To begin an exploration of this topic it is necessary to explore the development of curatorially-motivated disposal, hereafter called 'disposal', in its historical and contemporary context. The review begins with a consideration of present-day museum ethics and their application to disposal and demonstrates the centrality of transparency and communication. In the next chapter I will chart the historical development of disposal practice, to reveal the sectoral legacy within which current museum staff operate.

In providing this thorough review I will identify recurring themes which shape contemporary professional practice and attitudes. While this approach risks generalisations which may not be relevant to all museum situations, it is important to set the scene from which to explore the realities and potential of disposal transparency more deeply. For as museums themselves demonstrate, it is only by acknowledging the past that we can understand our present day and visualise possible futures.

2.2 Professional museum ethics

Contemporary museums offer a complex intermediary role between people and the natural and human-made material around them. They aim to:

> … enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society. (Museums Association 1998).

Without objects a museum becomes a community space for social gathering. Without people a museum is a storeroom of forgotten stories. As socially endorsed institutions,

maintaining public trust is a fundamental concern and the sector is a "respectable profession" (Douglas 1966, 4) entreated with making sensible decisions on behalf of the public (Borg 1991, 31). Indeed, museum curators are among the most trusted of public professions (Ipsos MORI 2020). This public remit drives sectoral ethical ideals and "ensures a level of consistency, promotes the concept of perpetuity, and reinforces public trust" (Edson 2017, 3).

Alongside international frameworks (International Council of Museums 2004; 2019) the UK sector is guided by the Museums Association's *Code of Ethics* (2015). It is ambitious in its reach and claims application for all museum staff, volunteers, stakeholders, suppliers, contractors, and freelance consultants (Museums Association 2015). This voluntary code enshrines three core principles: "Public engagement and public benefit; Stewardship of collections; and Individual and institutional integrity" (ibid., 4-7). These are located within the concept of "Everyday Ethics", which posits that decisions and actions often occur without conscious choice (Cheney et al. 2010, 16). To make actions conscious is to realise that ethics is not a protective stance, but a matter of daily concern which recognises how actions are framed and explained (ibid., 52). Accordingly, the contemporary sector is encouraged to move away from ethics as "a set of standards to fall back on" (Douglas 1966, 4) represented by previous codes of practice (Museums Association 1977a, 1977b, 1987, 1991, 2002 and 2007), and embrace both the technicalities and the *spirit* of the current code (Heal 2015). Modern museum ethics is no longer a defensive mindset but requires a reflexive process by which museums and individuals contemplate the purpose of their practices (Janes 2011, 55) and demonstrate these to their audiences (Marstine 2011, 14-17). The role of the individual within institutional practice cannot be underestimated, as:

> The tendency is often to locate correct or incorrect activities, particularly unethical practice, in the institution or profession instead of the person. Ultimately, individuals are responsible for dealing with issues relating to ethical practice. (Edson 2017, 172).

Contemporary museum ethics therefore requires each institution, and its constituent practitioners, to act with conscious intent and integrity.

2.3 The ethics of disposal

Sectoral ethical codes are a guide to best practice with the aim of maintaining public trust. But they are not legal requirements, and it is important to acknowledge the distinctions between ethics and law. Indeed, this confusion has itself generated clarification and guidance (Ulph 2015a). While conscious to avoid an oversimplification, laws are created by Parliament and the courts. Laws about museum collections, such as the *British Museum Act 1963,* primarily concern ownership and the entailing rights for object use, access, and removal (Ulph 2015b, 179). These legal nuances are themselves the subject of detailed research (e.g. Oost 2018) and lie beyond the scope of this thesis.

By contrast, ethics is socially derived rules and understandings arising from a subjective viewpoint of the world. Ethics is:

> … [a] climate of ideas about how to live… what we find acceptable or unacceptable… it shapes our emotional responses… it gives us our standards of behaviours… it shapes our very identities". (Blackburn 2001, 1).

Ethics is therefore an internalised process formed from the social environment in which we live. Boundaries and understandings of acceptable action are socially endorsed by those around us (Chadwick 2013, 124). When considering ethical actions museum practitioners are encouraged to consider the "right decisions as they relate to persons and activities" (Edson 2017, 3); or in other words the needs of the objects, or the collection, or the institution, in their *relationship* with people. By its nature this is a highly subjective process.

In any situation the determination of ethical suitability is therefore a process of social endorsement with subtleties of individuals, actions, and social environments creating moveable *boundaries* of acceptable action. Ethical *dilemmas* arise from a dispute between individuals or groups about the 'correct' course of action or decision (Cheney et al. 2010, 91). Within ethical *conflict* there is no choice or action to satisfy all parties.

The permanent removal of an object via curatorially-motivated disposal provokes several areas of potential conflict. These include:

- The removal may seemingly contravene the function to preserve objects as stipulated by professional definitions of the "Museum".

- As a process instigated and led by practitioners it may set professional expertise against public opinion and raise questions of inclusion or exclusion from the process.

- As a process to realign collections with institutional mission it may raise questions of audiences and representation.

- As a process which considers the multivarious aspects of objects, it may create tensions between the perceived importance of economic and social values.

Accordingly, in addition to the *Code of Ethics*, the ethical removal of objects is defined and delineated by separate guidance in the *Disposal Toolkit* (Museums Association 2014). "Curatorially-motivated disposal" is loosely defined as object removals "undertaken as part of the overall process of responsible collections management" (ibid., 27). The "curatorial" emphasis denotes collections staff as the instigators and leaders of the task. Six acceptable motivations for disposal are defined: duplication, under-use, decay, lack of provenance, or the museum's inability to care for the object (ibid., 9-10). Five acceptable outcomes are suggested: improved care, access, or context; retention elsewhere in the public domain; or destruction. Freeing up space or resources are deemed incidental, not primary, outcomes (ibid., 9). In accordance with the public ownership of collections, and the professional duty to serve the public, the *Toolkit* guides practitioners towards a "strong presumption for keeping objects within the public domain" (ibid., 16). An object is therefore selected for disposal for reasons arising from its physical or intellectual properties, or its care and interpretation within the museum, and with a preferential outcome of continued public access and use.

Importantly, these definitions and goals differentiate this process from "financially motivated disposal" in which economic gain is a primary motivation (ibid., 27). The ethical guidance makes a clear distinction: within curatorially-motivated disposal the economic worth of an object is merely one of its values. To address the subjective assessments of object significance museums are urged to "establish clear selection

criteria by which to judge each decision" (ibid., 9). These criteria should be clearly linked to the institutional mission and use of the collection (ibid., 6).

At this point it is worth briefly stepping aside to acknowledge other methods of removal from museum collections, as curatorially-motivated disposal does not operate in ethical isolation. The most notable processes within contemporary practice are repatriation to source communities (e.g. Hicks 2020), and restitution of illegally acquired material (e.g. Herman 2021). Like financially motivated disposal, these practices are themselves subject to deep legal and ethical debates and their consideration lies beyond the scope of this thesis. So too do the numerous informal removal processes including theft, misplacement, or accidental destruction. While the intersections of all these processes of object loss merit further research (Callaghan et. al. 2020) its attention here would distract from the focus of this research. Still, it is important to note they provide a wider context in which practitioners navigate curatorially-motivated disposal.

Indeed, my focus of curatorially-motivated practice presents extensive ethical complexity for consideration. The value of the *Disposal Toolkit*, as best practice guidance, is endorsed by sectoral bodies including the Collections Trust (2017), and through the Arts Council England's *Museum Accreditation* process (Arts Council England 2018). But despite these assurances disposal embodies significant areas of ethical uncertainty. These originate from how an object's value is assessed, and I will now explore this complex area.

2.4 Valuing museum objects

As "public-facing, collections-based institutions" (Museums Association 2015, 2) museum practices centre around their objects. The social values embodied within, and represented by, an object is ostensibly the reason for its presence within a museum collection (Matassa 2017, 17).

Acquisition is the primary museum action in which an object's significance is assessed through consideration of its physical properties, and the values and stories it represents. Accepting an object into a museum collection removes it from the use for which it was made and assigns a new value of importance akin to "sacredness" (Pearce

1995, 406) or "other-worldliness" (Pearce 1992, 33). Acquisition legitimises both the donor and museum staff by endorsing their understanding of social values (Pearce 1995, 407) as the museum becomes a guardian of "approved" narratives of society's history (Longair 2015, 2). By storing *collections* of objects museums obtain, develop, and reinforce their status as valued institutions reflecting shared public values (Edson 2017, 9). This authoritative recording and retelling of 'history' through the material world is both the source and reinforcement of public trust in museums (Longair 2015, 2), as "Assuming that our own memories are fallible, we rely on museums as well as historians to get the past 'right' for us" (Crane 1997, 51).

But the acquisition process has come under scrutiny from public and profession alike. Many acquisition processes were, and arguably remain, ill-documented or become later evident as mistakes (Klein 2016, ix). The over-zealous, and sometimes ill-conceived, acquisition processes have created museums akin to "society's attic" (Britainthinks 2013, 15) with storerooms containing "too much stuff" (National Museum Directors Conference 2003). It is these eclectic, illogical, and disparate collections which present-day practitioners are called to evaluate. They must make decisions of retention or removal based on contemporary criteria of value, within a framework of institutional sustainability (Merriman 2004).

The questioning of acquisition processes demonstrates an important change in museum practice. While the criteria for assessing an object's social significance was traditionally regarded as a simple demonstration of objective truth (Duggan 1984, 113), the contemporary basis for evaluating object value is a subjective confusion of intellectual, aesthetic, physical, and emotional responses, and perceived economic worth (Keene 2005). These ascribed values are transient according to individual, social, physical, and temporal context. In contemporary practice an object's significance is perceived as "the accretion of everything that has happened to it physically (including repairs and conservation) and the accumulation of different values" (Pye 2016). To museum practitioners this presents a complex "interpretative tension" (Knell 2007, 23-4) to be navigated to generate the best possible public benefit. Among the profession the traditional "unified public face" of history and museological practice now hides "tensions, resistance and challenge [and] curatorial frustrations" (Longair 2015, 4)

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about what collections contain and represent. The preceding chapter in this thesis notes how these social values and tensions are also being considered by the public.

Further, social value may only be evident from the object's ephemeral context as "the value and the magic reside in the knowledge about the object, not the object itself" (Janes 2009, 88). For example, a Victorian teapot may be aesthetically valuable for its physical properties of manufacture or decoration. It may become socially valuable from written information which tells its association with people, places, and events. Yet the significance of such stories is also subjective. For example, the donor's family may highly value stories of the teapot's use at their grandmother's suffragette tea parties. By contrast, members of an online community may find more value in associated stories of colonial exploitation at tea plantations. Without representation from such communities these stories may never be heard. Without a written record of these human associations the teapot's social value may be forgotten. In both situations disposal could become a potential outcome.

Acquisition and disposal therefore work in symbiosis as disposal requires an assessment of the longevity of perceived social significance. This assessment is extremely difficult, for when framed within the contemporary understanding of the multiple uses for which objects can be used — physical display, handling, research, or digital access; through intangible enjoyment, inspiration or intellectual thought (Keene 2005) — an object's potential is unlimited. Collections of "under-used material" (Resource 2001) may contain items whose value and significance have yet to be realised. Indeed, for some practitioners the quest to "recover pasts lost as the collection has passed into the present" (Knell 2007, 24) is an important aspect of their public role. A decision for disposal removes the object's potential for these future narratives.

Practitioners may also be aware of the cyclical nature of object value (Thompson 2017) in which objects can move in and out of perceived significance. Indeed, the very act of disposal can unintentionally reignite discarded values as, "By falling into disuse and disregard, a transient object can be one day revalued as a classic, as retro, as kitsch, as an archaeological artifact [sic] or relic, or rare and exceptional" (Reno 2017, viii). The preference within the *Disposal Toolkit* for 'retention within the public domain'

attempts to delay this cycle by transferring objects to a context which maintains social value beyond the scope of the original museum context.

Instead of diametrically opposed practices of acquisition and disposal, of gain and of loss, it is therefore helpful to consider them as complementary practices. Disposal becomes just one aspect within an object's life cycle. As museums move towards retention for the "long term" rather than "in perpetuity" (Vaughn 2018), a more subtle understanding of their role is emerging: to extend object life for as long as the object has significance (Pye 2016). Disposal marks the point at which an object no longer has perceived significance within the context of the museum in which it resides, although it may have value beyond that realm.

2.5 The role of transparency in disposal

Disposal therefore contains significant potential for ethical debate and conflict arising from the subjectivity of the significance review process, the presence or absence of knowledge and information, and the decision-making process. Transparency is posited as a core requirement of ethical disposal practice to reveal these processes to museum audiences. Practitioners are entreated to:

> "Ensure transparency and carry out any disposal openly, according to unambiguous, generally accepted procedures." (Museums Association 2014, 4).

Further, each museum is guided "to articulate clearly why it has adopted the approach in question" (ibid., 12). Transparency seeks to make visible the disposal process and the rationale for the decisions taken. This stance sits comfortably alongside the requirement for accountability as set out in the *Seven Principles of Public Life* (Nolan 1995), within which museum practitioners operate albeit often at a subconscious level.

The phrasing and framing of transparency are important for understanding the practice. In common with the wider public sector, the combination and inter-changeability of the words "transparent" and "open" has become "a linguistic device for emphasis rather than semantics" (Heald 2006, 26). Indeed, this is evident within the extracted quote above from the Museums Association's guidance. Such usage fails to differentiate the subtleties of meaning and action and risks transparency becoming

"a pervasive cliché… more often preached than practised, more often invoked than defined" (Hood 2006, 3).

It is important, then, to understand what these words mean. 'Openness' is an attitude of sincerity which acts without secrecy (Oxford English Dictionary). 'Transparency' embraces this attitude of openness and frankness (ibid.) but moves towards an action of visibility; for being 'transparent' is to be "apparent or visible through something" (ibid.). Transparency is therefore:

> "… an action which requires the openness mindset, to reveal the rules and procedures of a process, the people making decisions, and the winners and losers from the process." (Heald 2006, 5).

Within this realisation of seeing *through* the revealed practice it is possible to reach a deeper understanding of transparency. Museum practitioners must move beyond merely telling audiences a disposal has happened, and instead help them understand why decisions were taken, who was involved with that process, and what their involvement was. Moving from "dashboard" presentation to "radical transparency" enables audiences to see a process is happening, and understand what is being revealed, through a fuller engagement of "reciprocity in relations between museums and communities" (Marstine 2013, 13). 'Radical transparency' requires interaction between a museum and its audiences to achieve "respectful and transparent relationships with partner organisations, governing bodies, staff and volunteers" (Museums Association 2015, 17).

From this viewpoint it is evident that practitioners are at the heart of disposal transparency. This accords with framing of disposal as 'curatorially-motivated' and emphasises a view that collections staff have "an intimate knowledge and understanding of the institution's collection" (Longair 2015, 3). But another challenge to such ethical practice arises from a contemporary awareness of the fluidity and transience of professional knowledge. For:

> … while one curator's expertise around a collection might appear paramount, the value and significance accorded to objects by curators, collectors and visitors were not fixed but manipulated and contested over time. (ibid.).

Concurrent with social questioning of the nature and functioning of "expertise" (Nichols 2017), socially engaged practices within museums now acknowledge professional knowledge is supplemented by information held outside the sectoral realm (e.g. Keith 2012, 45) and "the curator sits at the intersection of multiple networks" (Longair 2015, 4). This therefore brings another aspect to transparency, in the *Disposal Toolkit's* encouragement to "adopt a flexible approach to involvement and consultation with others" (Museums Association 2014, 12). Practitioners are thereby encouraged to incorporate "a range of views" including staff, object donors, local communities, and other public and stakeholders (ibid., 11). For in contemporary practice:

> Museum professionals are coming to recognize [sic] that they need to be less exclusive about expertise and information. Curators are repositories of knowledge about objects in the context of collections, but others may know more about the objects' real world meaning… The future lies in much more serious and wholehearted collaboration with those outside the museum. The curator of the future must be as much a knowledge broker as a specialist expert. (Keene 2005, 22-3).

By bringing outside voices into the conversation about object value, the 'curator as knowledge-broker' attempts to find objectivity within the inherently subjective value-assessment process (Janes 2009, 89-90). It therefore benefits the decisions being made within the assessment of object value. But it also aids transparency by allowing communication between the practitioner and the audience (Farrell 2016, 449). This process of communication and knowledge exchange enables radical transparency to occur.

It is therefore essential when considering transparency to explore the underlying motivation and intent. Within disposal, the transparency goal is not a transaction of sharing for sharing's sake, but an exercise in maintaining public trust. For as explained in the *Disposal Toolkit*, "Museums are trusted institutions and it is important that this legacy is not damaged" (Museums Association 2014, 6). For disposal, the risk of reputational damage (Janes 2009, 58) may arise from many sources, as outlined earlier in this chapter. Specifically, disposal may be perceived as dismantling society's

collection of 'sacred' objects and the associated historical narratives (Janes 2009, 88-89). Disposal may be regarded as a "breach of faith" (Crane 1997, 51), which is exacerbated when seemingly undertaken without public sight or consent.

But it is important to acknowledge two widespread misconceptions about transparency. First is the erroneous equivalence between 'transparency' and 'consultation' (Farrell 2016), with assumptions that transparency will cause museums to seek input from their audiences. However, as "consulting" means "giving professional advice to others working in the same field or subject" (Oxford English Dictionary) it is not inevitable that the public will be perceived as experts and thus invited to contribute. Indeed, the common assumption for active public involvement demonstrates a wider societal misunderstanding of what communication itself entails. For "communication" is the "act of imparting information", or an act of "social discourse" (Oxford English Dictionary). Yet in common usage some people "use the term 'communication' when what they actually mean is 'talking'" (Cameron 2000, 2). Therefore 'transparency' does not require a particular type of engagement or participation, but audiences might have expectations to the contrary. Given these social misunderstandings it is important that practitioners themselves attempt to understand the subtleties of transparent communication before they attempt it.

The second confusion is that transparency creates involvement with decision-making (Farrell 2016). Transparency does not inevitably lead to such involvement, as "transparency is not consensus decision-making" (ibid., 447). Instead, it will reveal how decisions will be made, by whom, why they are needed, and who decided that process (ibid., 445). The responsibility for making a decision will ultimately fall to one person or group of individuals (ibid., 450). It is the choice to make the disposal process "open" (outsiders can affect the outcome) or "closed" (decisions are made by pre-determined individuals) that will affect the nature of input from those beyond the core process (ibid., 447). Therefore, transparency may not enable outsiders to affect a decision, but it will enable them to interrogate the process which led to a decision being made. In the same light, transparency does not override legal issues such as confidentiality (ibid., 447), but acknowledges when such information exists and explains why it cannot be shared.

Therefore, none of these common understandings accurately characterises transparency. Transparency will enable information to be shared and communicated, but not necessarily seek response or involvement from those outside the process. Transparency requires practical action and purposeful intent to share information from those within the process, but does not require participation from audiences or full disclosure of sensitive information. But transparency does require integrity of purpose and action within a vision of creating meaningful relationships.

2.6 Sectoral disposal transparency

Given the centrality of transparency to disposal the sectoral literature should contain abundant examples of practice. Practitioners should be revealing their practices and encouraging conversation and reflection. But examples of transparency are scarce. This lack of visibility contradicts the ethical requirement for disposal and generates a significant arena for conflict as:

> … the persistent lack of visibility further reinforces the stigma of deaccessioning [disposal], and fuels the episodic public suspicion which arises when deaccessioning does become public. (Janes 2009, 91).

Indeed, Robert Janes' work at the Glenbow Museum in Canada offers the primary shining beacon for transparent disposal practice. His work emphasises the centrality of communication to visibility and understanding, and he suggests "You simply cannot communicate too much" (Janes 2013, 123). The international setting of his work prevents direct comparison to UK disposal practice, due to differing legalities and ethics (e.g. Janes and Conaty 2005; Janes 2013), but his advocated communication is largely absent in the UK.

Two academic edited volumes specifically address UK disposal. Despite both being published by the same company with a base in Scotland, they contain only a handful of UK examples. For instance, among the plentiful international examples within *Museums and the Disposals Debate* (Davies 2011) are just two case studies from England. One, written by a practitioner, tells of a disposal process at East Grinstead Museum undertaken solely by museum staff (Hadfield 2011). The author thereby enables sectoral visibility to the process and offers her experiences for wider

consideration. The second chapter (Das, Passmore and Dunn 2011) offers a contrasting approach. It presents a disposal process undertaken by University College London Museums and Collections, with explanation and exploration of its public exhibition of proposed object removals. The process enabled audience participation "to open up the discussion… and to encourage conversations about stakeholders and how decisions should be made" (ibid., 182). Indeed, the methodology for assessing object significance developed by the team has become a practical tool for other museums' use (Collections Trust 2018) and thereby aided sectoral practice.

The second publication comprises three volumes entitled *Collections and Deaccessioning in a Post-Pandemic World* (Jandl and Gold 2021a, 2021b, 2021c), and extensively assesses the changing ethics and practicalities of disposal following the tumult of the Covid pandemic. Its primary focus is museums in the USA, and the absence of UK practical case studies or interviews with sectoral leaders is a notable omission. Specifically, these volumes contain just four UK-based authors, including myself (Durrant 2021), who offer theoretical considerations and provocations for sectoral development rather than practical examples. This lack of representation for the UK sector might be explained by the catalyst for the book: at the time of creation the pandemic had forced UK museums to temporarily close, and many practitioners were on furlough leave or had been made redundant.

Disposal transparency is also largely absent within practitioner literature, but with a recent rise in interest. For example, the sectoral *Museums Journal* offered a series of case studies (e.g. Booth and Griffith 2019; Durrant 2019; Jones 2019) and sectoral opinion (Atkinson 2020) to encourage best practice and address "the sector's resistance to disposal" (Atkinson 2019a). This included a reflexive assessment of the state of disposal from sectoral leader Nick Merriman, who concluded "things have barely changed" since his consideration of the practice many years before (Merriman 2020). This general lack of sectoral visibility might suggest disposal is not occurring. Or it may evidence that "the museum community is in an everlasting state of denial" (Janes 2009, 88) about the practice and the need for its transparency.

Within the public realm is evidence of the "suspicion" proposed by Janes (2009, 91). The common source of information is the media, whose typical portrayal of disposal

purports conspiracy and creates public confusion. Recent visible examples of disposal by sale emphasised ethical conflict, including the ancient Egyptian statue of Sekhemka by Northampton Borough Council in 2014 (Quirke and Stevenson 2015). Such news stories typically provoked a public response which centred around two areas: the purpose of stored collections, and public and stakeholder involvement in decision-making. For example, one commentator in Northampton explained, "It's not ethical that it will be sold for profit and also not acceptable. The council should have consulted with the Egyptian government" (Elkholy 2014).

While it is a distraction to dwell on financially motivated disposals they suggest an important aspect of transparency: that audience response cannot be anticipated or controlled. Within curatorially-motivated disposal practices this important truism was evidenced by the 2016 transfer of the Royal Photographic Society collection from the National Media Museum in Bradford to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Museum staff were confident the task was firmly rooted in the ethical guidance, as their aim to refine the core collection accorded with their museum's mission, and the desire to improve public access to under-used items (Terwey 2017). But the transfer of 400,000 items away from Bradford caused deep emotional responses from public and stakeholders, with one city councillor calling it an "appalling act of cultural vandalism" (Sullivan 2016a). Such reactions revealed to the museum team some important differences between the public and professional understanding of the museum's mission and purpose; the nature of social identity; philosophical subtleties between art and science; and also exposed anger at regional disparities between North-South museum funding and access (Terwey 2017). Commentators questioned the lack of non-professional engagement with the process, with Judith Cummins, a local Member of Parliament, stating, "There has been a complete lack of transparency and consultation both with local MPs and the Bradford community at large" (Sullivan 2016b). Her words demonstrate the conflation between transparency and consultation discussed earlier in this chapter.

In the aftermath the lead practitioner, Michael Terwey, reflected on these experiences in a session entitled *Adapt or Die* at the Museums Association Annual Conference (2016), and in print (Terwey 2017). In so doing he demonstrated the importance of

practitioners more consciously understanding their audiences' needs and desires, both for the museum and their preferences for communication, and offered a new arena for transparency through professional engagement and reflection about the difficulties the museum had encountered.

The experience of the National Media Museum provides an important witness to the intricacies of navigating the ethics of disposal. It demonstrates a difference in knowledge, skills, and expertise between the profession, public, and stakeholders, and the need for professionals to identify and manage potential conflict and utilise communication with considered intent. But it also demonstrates that even when acting with good faith and ethical integrity, the actions revealed by transparency may not be perceived in that way. Ultimately it demonstrates that the outcomes of transparency cannot be controlled or predicted. This uncertainty is a risk inherent within transparent practice and results from the complex social ground occupied by museums and the subjective nature of the decisions being taken.

2.7 Chapter summary

In this chapter I have presented an overview of curatorially-motivated disposal within sectoral ethics. I have demonstrated the disposal process as rooted in professional knowledge and expertise, and transparency rooted in a mindset which obliges visibility to, and clarity of, the disposal process. I have made visible some tensions surrounding the understanding of the social value of museum objects. I propose that through radical transparency those outside the process can be enabled to both see and attempt understanding of the removal process. I have emphasised the importance of understanding terminology, both for practitioners to understand the ethical requirements asked of them and for their audiences' expectations of visibility and engagement. For it is essential to understand that while the 'spirit of openness and honesty' requires transparency to enable engagement with information, it does not require active audience participation in the process being revealed.

At the heart of these propositions are two recurring undercurrents: of practitioner reflection, and of communication practices. Both are essential for revealing museum processes to 'outsiders' and enabling them to understand the need and rationale for

such transparency. The silence within the academic and sectoral literatures therefore speaks volumes about disposal transparency within contemporary UK practice. Either disposal is not occurring and the call for transparency is irrelevant; or practitioners are failing to make visible their actions to those beyond the project team.

But just as it is important to view curatorially-motivated disposal within its wider context of removal processes, it is important to view the present day in its historical context. Museum practices and ideas are rooted in the foundation of these institutions and the inherited collections management practices. In the next chapter I will explore how this historic legacy has shaped the current situation.

Chapter 3: Disposal in Historic and Contemporary Practice

"More work needs to be done for museums to see transparency

as an opportunity rather than a threat." (Fredheim et al. 2018, 39).

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I explored the ethical context for disposal and demonstrated transparency to be of central importance for maintaining public trust in museums. There is a significant silence in the literature surrounding the practice which either represents an absence of the process, or an absence of its transparency. But, like any social situation, ideas and practices do not simply occur; they arise within a social context which is formed and shaped by other peoples' thoughts and actions.

This chapter offers a detailed historical overview of curatorially-motivated disposal and, to the best of my knowledge, is the first time this has been attempted. Limited mapping of the practice has occurred in academic literature (Merriman 2008; Morgan and Mcdonald 2020, 57-8), and within the context of professional training (Davies 2005). But these reviews considered shorter historical timescales and fewer sources.

In this chapter I offer a fuller historical assessment using two bodies of evidence. First, through sectoral literature I identify the roots of disposal and some recurring professional attitudes and practices from which contemporary practice has emerged. Specifically, I demonstrate that disposal predates other fundamental collections management tasks, and its functioning should not be dismissed as a recent phenomenon. I also document the early origins of calls for collecting restraint and rationalisation and suggest that contemporary practice arose from a professional mindset of risk aversion to such outside pressures. Second, through a brief exploration of disposal transparency in 'real-world' museum settings I witness attempts to make disposal visible to visitors, and the nuances that arise from these limited revelations. This chapter will demonstrate the long-lasting and embedded ideas which inform and constrain disposal transparency and demonstrate areas which merit further investigation.

3.2 The origins of disposal practice

Numerous authors have explored the history and development of museums and their practices (see for example *Museum History Journal*). Amid this analysis one truism of the sector's endeavours pervades that, "Museum-making is about sorting often quite ordinary objects to make meaningful patterns out of the muddle and confusion of the universe…" (Morris 2020, 15).

Within the UK, the demarcation of the professional sector arose with the creation of the Museums Association in 1888 (Howarth 1902, 5). This moment marked a move away from disparate and eclectic individual practices towards an established profession of "museum officials" (ibid., 4) centred around the curator, their expert knowledge, and their responsibility for managing collections and disseminating information (ibid., 5). Within these sectoral origins was an explicit recognition of the problem of sizeable collections, their under-use, and the need for rationalisation. For the first goal of the new Museums Association was to be a "Means of interchange of duplicate and surplus specimens" (ibid., 5). It is therefore evident that at this time of great civic foundation and functioning museum collections were already regarded as cumbersome.

Collections management practices developed in response to these logistical issues. In 1891 the concept of "accessioning" was adopted from library practice and proposed as a method of physically attaching an identity mark to objects (Hoyle 1891, 59). The primary purpose of the accompanying register, or "Accessions Book" (ibid., 59), was to record storage locations. Accessioning therefore originated as a pragmatic inventorying process, with a subsidiary practicality of denoting legal ownership. The date of this new museological terminology and process is a significant finding within this research, as it arose after the need for rationalisation was formally acknowledged. This is an important discovery in terms of collections management history, but most especially in its relationship to disposal. For the accessioning process, now a legal status of ownership against which disposal acts, arose three years *after* the idea of rationalising collections was stated as a founding reason for the Museums Association. Or, put simply: disposal predates accessioning.

Within these early processes of museum practice is therefore seen the development of the ideology, and practical workflow, of 'provenance-accession-review-retain/remove' which underpins modern practice. These developments present a desire, as Rachel Morris suggests above, to create order from chaos. Further, these actions demonstrate a reactionary response to change, and an aversion to the risk of loss, that underpin contemporary disposal practice.

Akin to the present day, the solution to unwieldy collections generated opposing reactions. While some advocated retention in centralised storage forming a "national repository for science and art" (Petrie 1900, 89), others proposed active significance assessment so that, "The Curator should eliminate with an unsparing hand all the less important specimens, and keep only the best of the characteristic types…" (Cameron 1890, 82). Such propositions are a foretaste of later debates about the merits of storage versus disposal which are presented later in this chapter. Importantly, they demonstrate the concepts of object significance and professional expertise as early concerns for the sector.

Similar conversations continued throughout the 1920s and 1930s as excessive collecting caused "objects of real historical and scientific value [to be] crowded out" (Miers 1928, 24-25). This issue even became a public concern with the satirical magazine *The Spectator* condemning regional museums for overcrowded, poorly catalogued, and poorly stored collections (Digby 1925a). That this article was reproduced in the *Museums Journal* for consideration (Digby 1925b) demonstrates a professional awareness to consider public attitudes about collections management, and represents awareness of the risk of damaging the public view of museums.

Within the profession, inter-museum loans and transfers were suggested as a solution to excessive duplicate material (e.g. Miers 1928; Renouf 1928). This emphasised a need to retain such items within the public domain. As evidenced in the preceding chapter this desire is embedded in contemporary ethical guidance (Museums Association 2014). Other professionals called for more consideration in the approach to collecting as, "…there have been few curators with sufficient foresight and determination to control the [collecting] process" (Miers 1928, 23). Curators were reminded:

> The value of the museum does not lie so much in the number of specimens as in their quality, order and arrangement, and in the steps taken to make them interesting… The unworthy, the unsuitable, and the redundant should be firmly excluded. (Kennedy 1938, 10).

Within these words are echoes of contemporary conversations about the purpose and potential use of collections, as discussed in the previous chapter. These suggest a truth that it is easier to collect material than dispose of it (Vaughn 2018, xvi).

As the collections and the profession continued to expand, the sector turned inward and sought to classify itself. Accordingly, a proposal arose to define museums by their social purpose. This identified eight "obvious types" including, "The Museum National", "The Museum Educational", "The Museum Municipal" and "The Museum Artistic" (Howarth 1902, 3-4). The legacy of this system can be traced into the current classifications of National, University, Local Authority and Independent museums which is used to denote funding, practice, and importance (Arts Council 2019).

These demarcations also placed institutions and their practices in conflict. For example, Elijah Howarth, Curator of the Public Museum and Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield, and a founding member of the Museums Association (Anonymous n.d.a.), emphasised the heavy load placed on Municipal museums, "…where all the objects [functions] of the other museums are supposed to be carried out under local restrictions…" (Howarth 1902, 4). In a foretaste of contemporary museological debates, tensions arose about differing disposal practices. For example, the source of distress at the British Museum selling "duplicate" coins in 1923 was not the idea of trading items from a National collection, but that the *method*, by auction in a foreign country, restricted the ability of UK museums to acquire those items. As one professional declaimed, "Surely if our National Collection has duplicates they might be distributed among the county or more important provincial museums as gifts" (Sheppard, quoted in Bailey 1923, 4).

In tandem with these practical concerns was a new questioning of the legalities and ethics of acquisition. While the origin of the debate is unclear, readers of *The Times* newspaper sought a retrospective review of professional and individual collectors'

practices centring around the "Elgin Marbles" (Bailey 1925). The profession's published response was reactionary with a passionate riposte to the call for repatriation:

> A moment's reflection by anyone acquainted with the contents of our national museums and galleries, and the history of their acquisition, would make him stand aghast at the thought of what those institutions would become if the policy of restitution were carried to conclusion. (ibid.).

The 'fear of opening the floodgates' evident in Bailey's words has remained a defensive response to calls for ethical collections removal throughout the twentieth century (e.g. Trevelyan n.d.). Yet such public questioning, and the resulting professional fear of reprisal against museums, did cause professionals to consider their practices. Accordingly, discussions began for the development of a Code of Ethics.

The first move was the publication in the *Museums Journal* of the American Association of Museums' tentative *Code of Ethics* (Munro 1925, 19-23), albeit without any editorial comment. Perhaps reflecting the then-recent sale of coins from the British Museum, the draft American code stated, "A museum should not 'corner the market' by refusing to dispose of duplicate items to other museums" (ibid., 20). The ethical emphasis therefore lay in the retention of objects in the public domain, and the power relationships between institutions.

The legacy of this early history for contemporary disposal ethics is important, as it demonstrates that it was *external* rather than *internal* forces that instigated professional change. The sector only began to consider its practices after receiving public scrutiny and criticism. Indeed, as an indication of the enduring professional reluctance to address ethical issues, it was to be another forty-five years until the UK's first ethics policy was adopted, in all but name, in the dual *Code of Practice for Museum Authorities* and *Guidelines for Professional Conduct* (Boylan 1977). Further evidencing the slow nature of ethical development, these remained in place until the first full Code of Ethics nearly twenty years later (Museums Association 1995). This development will be explored later in this chapter.

The roots of contemporary museum professionalism and disposal practice are therefore found in late nineteenth and early twentieth century practice, and largely

arose from practicalities of collections size and under-use. The catalyst for ethical development was a public questioning of museum practice. These aspects combined to create a complex dynamic between disposal and accessioning, and a preference for object retention in the public sector.

Underneath this foundation is evidenced a professional attitude of reactionary risk-aversion which aimed to protect reputations, but created institutional suspicion and a defensive reaction to external pressure. Professional expertise was positioned as the central requirement for judging object significance and use, with a corresponding aversion to loss. In the following section these themes are evidenced to continue into the mid and late twentieth century.

3.3 Disposal in the mid- to late- 20th century

During the mid- to late- twentieth century the public questioning of museum purpose continued as institutions demonstrated practices of "privacy and secrecy… storage and hiding things" (Wittlin 1970, 1). Alma Wittlin's survey of public attitudes to museums, undertaken in the mid-1940s but not published until 1970, demonstrated a public desire for less content on display as, "things should be less crammed. If only there were fewer things… less examples of one kind" (ibid., 161). Another of her interviewees called for museums to "ruthlessly throw out all repetitions" (ibid., 161). In response to this public view Wittlin called the sector to apply "self-imposed brakes" to their collecting practices (ibid., 207). But her prophetic words went unheeded. As collections expanded exponentially, museums undertook an unintentional "change of institutional function from action to archive" (Thomson 2002, 60) with a significant volume of material in "reserve collections" becoming publicly inaccessible (ibid.).

Concurrently, international audiences began to question the ethical and legal nature of 'heritage' and museum collections. The UNESCO *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property* (1970) encouraged governments to address issues of collecting, storage, use, and education, but remained unratified within the UK until 2002. Still, this context may have been a catalyst for the sector beginning to consider its own professional ethics (Boylan 1977), as seen earlier in the chapter.

Disposals which did occur during this time generally created controversy. For example, the Royal Academy's sale in 1962 caused a government inquiry into artworks held by "public and semi-public bodies" (Cottesloe 1964, 3). For the next thirty years rumbles of disposal discontent continued, and the damage caused by the lack of transparency was highlighted as:

> Cases of disposal, although rare, are accompanied by outcries from the press, followed by further legal and administrative controls and apologetic responses from museum curators and directors. More often than not the motives behind disposal are inglorious, rather than an underlying desire to rationalise the collection. (Robertson 1990, 32).

In 1991, sales by Derbyshire County Council prompted a special issue of *Museums Journal* dedicated to the disposal topic (September 1991). This now provides a snapshot of professional attitudes and hints at an emerging divergence therein. Firstly, the reactionary fear of 'opening the floodgates', originally encountered in the early twentieth century, remained in some authors' minds. Specifically, this stance emphasised a disregard for public and stakeholder views and suggested, "Few within the profession are likely to advocate it [disposal], whatever the outside pressures" (Borg 1991, 29). In this mindset, professional actions were not to be affected by those outside the sector; museum staff acted on their public's behalf. Another practitioner provocatively called disposal "The Ethics of Emasculation" (Besterman 1991), thereby suggesting disposal would cause museums to lose the very essence of their being. Such provocations evidence a desire to disregard ideas which challenged the established norms.

But against this stance is found the beginnings of contemporary practice. For Tristram Besterman's description of 'museum emasculation' was intentionally provocative, and he proceeded to offer valuable insights to disposal practice. Most significantly, he advocated the separation of disposal "motive" from "method" (Besterman 1992, 30). This distinction, which identifies 'motive' as an ideology and 'method' as a practice, offered the means to identify protagonists and actors within the disposal process. His second proposal, to define "deaccession" and "disposal" as distinct semantic terms for separate processes, offered a similar level of clarification. It helped practitioners

separate the collections management process of de-accessioning (i.e. the process to remove ownership and a duty of care), from the physical action of object removal. All these distinctions were later adopted within sectoral guidance (e.g. Museums Association 2014).

Despite these internal developments in mindset, continuing external pressures were the primary catalyst for sectoral change. For example, the government-funded report *The Cost of Collecting* (Lord et al. 1989) attempted to identify the real-term financial costs of maintaining collections, and the costs to be considered for new acquisitions (ibid., xv). In so doing it demonstrated the financial burden created by collections. Further, it provided quantifiable evidence that many museums continued to collect but did not undertake disposal (ibid., 112-113). Demonstrating the fearful opinion that disposal was "a dangerous procedure that could lead to the irretrievable destruction of a part of the national heritage" (ibid., 44), some professionals declared they "had a simple policy of not disposing of any collections" (ibid.). The report concluded that museum collections were a social burden which needed addressing.

A subsequent review entitled *The Road to Wigan Pier?* (Audit Commission 1991) worked with a new voluntary museum *Registration* scheme (today called the *Accreditation* standard) and its requirement for museums to operate an Acquisition and Disposal policy (Museums and Galleries Commission 1989, 27). Museums were encouraged to undertake disposal for "objects which do not fit that [collecting] policy" (Audit Commission 1991, 6-7). Museum mission and professional expertise were thereby placed at the heart of the process. But the underlying rationale for "dealing with storage problems" without "asset stripping" (ibid.) retained the view of disposal as an economic, not a cultural, process. Still, the legacy of this report is significant as its terminology, including the concept of "collections rationalisation" (ibid., 30), has become enshrined within contemporary ethical codes.

Some museum subsectors heeded the assertion that "those who have the confidence to collect should also have the courage to dispose" (Clark 1991, 34), and began to address the disposal challenge. For example, archaeology curators discussed the "dispersal" of material (Payne 1992, 2) with a recommendation that removals be "determined primarily by archaeological, not financial or political motives…" (Wingfield

1995, 32). For such disposals were not to be from extant collections but from a deluge of acquisitions generated by new planning guidance and the creation of development-led archaeology (Department for Communities and Local Government 1991). Still, discussion failed to generate action and calls to rationalise archaeology collections have continued into the twenty-first century (Baxter et al. 2018).

In common with the earlier disposal developments, the commonality underpinning these mid-twentieth century practices remained one of external pressure driving sectoral change. Disposal still created sectoral debate and uncertainty but with a growing awareness that it might be necessary in certain circumstances. Voices outside the sector demanded museums improved accountability and transparency, and moved towards sustainable institutions. I will now turn attention to the subsequent years and explore how these themes have shaped contemporary practice.

3.4 Internal change during the 21st century

The seed ideas planted in the 1990s developed through the early 2000s as the sector undertook a drastic paradigm shift away from disposal as an exceptional event towards an ethical imperative for regular disposal practice (Wilkinson 2005, 24). This radical change, instigated by a report provocatively entitled *Too Much Stuff?* (National Museum Directors Conference 2003), proposed disposal as an essential collections management tool within a cautious awareness of curatorial fashion and future legacy (ibid., 13-14). Disposal was thereby proposed as a process situated within a temporal timeline of past practice, current assessment, and future gazing. By describing the "pain of parting" the report's authors made an important acknowledgment of the emotional complexities within disposal decisions (ibid., 14). Contrary to earlier epistemologies museum practice was no longer regarded as dispassionate and objective but as a reflexive and self-aware engagement between people and objects.

This radical call to action was echoed by sectoral leaders who directed attention to the integration of disposal with other collections management processes. For example, Nick Poole, then Chief Executive Officer of the Collections Trust, pragmatically called for a year-long "crap amnesty". In this practice he advocated the use of professional expertise to remove low value items without impairment by feelings of guilt or regret

(Nick Poole, personal communication, 14 July 2020). Countering this approach to disposal by "expediency rather than principle" (Merriman 2008, 11), and emphasising the lack of transparency implicit within it, Clore Leadership Fellow Nick Merriman argued for a solid intellectual framework in which to situate practice. This proposed context was institutional sustainability, as museums faced a "deepening crisis… [between] the needs of collections management and the resources required to meet those needs" (ibid., 9). Merriman's analogy of collections management and ecology, with "selective growth and cutting back to prevent choking" (Merriman 2004, 41-44), provides an enticing visual metaphor which merits further consideration by the sector.

This future-gazing concern for sustainability was echoed in a challenging Museums Association report *Collections for the Future* which proposed the "…burden of caring for unwanted and unusable collections will tie our successors' hands" (Wilkinson 2005, 24). While ostensibly acknowledging the emotional entanglement of collections work, the language perhaps added emotional burden to a profession already fraught with uncertainty and doubt. Indeed, this doubt was evident within a subsequent benchmarking survey which demonstrated practitioners were reluctant to undertake disposal "before the profession and public have had time to consider the long-term implications" (Taylor and Sansom 2007, 3). While the framing of sustainability and emotions within these proposals were seemingly innovative, they directly echo issues of institutional purpose and legacy first raised one hundred years earlier.

Set against this late twentieth and early twenty-first century context of challenge and uncertainty was a plethora of rapidly evolving guidance from sectoral leaders. This is best evidenced by the number of ethical codes and revisions issued by the Museums Association (1995, 1997, 1999, 2002, 2008, 2015), the development of specific disposal guidance (1996, 2004a, 2004b, and 2014), and the clarification of legalities (Ulph 2015a, 2015b, and 2017). These witness an attempt to reassure the sector of the validity of disposal practice within a paradigm shift to keep objects for "the long term" rather than in permanence (Museums Association 2004a, 6). But seemingly once again, they demonstrate a sector which reacts to external pressures rather than internal innovation and is cautious to adopt new processes.

This tension between radical change and cautious reflection remains in the present day. Disposal continues to be perceived as a 'difficult' practice, evidenced by a sectoral training session entitled *The art of Acquisitions and the devilish nature of Disposals* (UK Registrars Group 2016). Against this background, a small number of sectoral guides (e.g. South East Museum Development Programme, n.d.) and reports (e.g. Cannadine 2018) have sought to reassure practitioners of the need for, and limitations and benefits of, disposal.

Further challenging the status quo is an innovative proposal to regard collections as a "dynamic resource" (Cannadine 2018, 25). This suggestion to reinvigorate collections was first voiced in a government review into contemporary museum practice (Mendoza 2017, 44). In practice it is being tested by the arrival of *MuseumDepotShop*, run by a Dutch "non-profit foundation" which seeks to expand its workings to the UK (Kendall Adams 2021, 6). It offers museums an outlet for selling deaccessioned and 'unwanted' items, and its use is cautiously allowed by the Museums Association's Ethics Committee (Museums Association n.d.).

Still, the sector continues to evidence disposal hesitancy as:

> Disposal or transfer is often prevented by lack of resources, acceptable process in the individual museum, or confidence: museums reported they would like explicit 'permission' to make disposals. (Mendoza 2017, 45).

This question of 'permission' is important as it raises the question of from whom practitioners desire such approval? Are they seeking professional peer support, or agreement from public or stakeholder groups? Further, it speaks directly of the need for transparency. To gain 'permission' will require disposal to be made visible to and understandable by those outside the immediate process: it requires the "radical transparency" of "working towards reciprocity in relations between museums and communities" (Marstine 2011, 13).

Yet such radical transparency remains absent in disposal practice. Indeed, even the "dashboard transparency" of information visibility (Marstine 2011, 13) is currently missing from contemporary practice and literature, as evidenced in the preceding chapter. This absence was also reported during an important research project entitled

Profusion in Museums, which investigated material culture, "…within households and museums [and] how people make decisions about what to keep and what to get rid of" (Fredheim et al. 2018, 5). The project, which occurred during the time of this PhD research, provides evidence of disposal occurring at low levels in contemporary practice (ibid., 18). It also identified barriers to practice and highlighted future investigative priorities (Fredheim, Macdonald and Morgan 2020). Several of these, by serendipity, I explore within this thesis.

Underpinning the *Profusion* authors' proposals is the clear articulation that practitioners need to engage with disposal within the contemporary context, but mindful of both past and future:

> While we should be wary of making decisions future generations may come to regret, we inevitably will – just as we regret some of our predecessors' decisions today. We are the future generations of the past and decisions must always be made in the present. (ibid., 31).

In their exploration of barriers to disposal practice, the authors identify three areas of relevance to this thesis. First are practitioner feelings of guilt and anxiety generated by disposal, as "Emotional labour has been a recurring theme in our research… Making collections development decisions can be extremely stressful and difficult, especially disposals." (ibid., 45).

Second is the nature of knowledge, with an important difference between public and professional expertise. This was summarised by one participant as, "I feel that these decisions should be made by [a] Museum professional who understands the needs of the collection and resources that are required to manage it." (ibid., 42).

The third barrier is language, with the authors suggesting the abundance of museum collections could helpfully be framed as "too much of a good thing" (ibid., 14), rather than the portrayal as an overwhelming burden. Indeed, in an allied journal article the project leaders witnessed:

> Curators' use of adjectives such as 'expanding', 'vast', and 'huge' to describe their collections, and their accompanying sighs and hand-gestures, express

their frustration with what we call 'the profusion struggle'. (Morgan and
Macdonald 2020, 56).

The project team proposed that reframing museum practices is the key to future
development, and their idea of "de-growing" collections may counteract the emotions
associated with "disposal" (ibid., 59-60). In a succinct summary of the barriers and
professional struggles identified in their *Profusion* project the team proposed that,
"…more work needs to be done for museums to see transparency as an opportunity
rather than a threat" (Fredheim et al. 2020, 39). My thesis offers a significant
contribution to this proposition.

3.5 Disposal transparency in practice

My exploration of disposal history presented in this chapter, and the literature survey
in the preceding chapter, suggest that disposal is largely absent from public view.
Indeed, there are also overwhelming silences in the professional and academic
literature. But it is inaccurate to portray disposal as being entirely hidden from sight as
it is visually present within a small number of museums and practices. It is now
pertinent to briefly explore these, to fully understand how disposal transparency is
regarded by practitioner and public.

3.5.1 Displaying disposal

Firstly, when disposal is made visible it is typically portrayed as an historic process
within institutional history. For example, until recent years this was seen within the
permanent display of institutional history at Leicester's New Walk Museum. The
narrative shared two object removals. First was the 1930s renovation of the natural
history displays, during which taxidermy specimens were "found to be in a very poor
state, and were not worth keeping" (Figure 4). Their fate was not stated but the
implication is of disposal by destruction. The text panel then described the transfer of
a taxidermy giraffe to another museum in the 1960s, where it could "still be seen" on
display (Figure 5). In both examples disposal was undertaken for institutional reasons
of relevance and condition. They subtly introduced visitors to the ideas of object value
and transience in museum collections.

The new Zoology Room on first floor of the completed west wing extension in 1933. Most of the large mammals displayed here were newly purchased. When the old pre-1911 Vertebrate Room had been dismantled many of the specimens were found to be in a very poor state, and were not worth keeping.
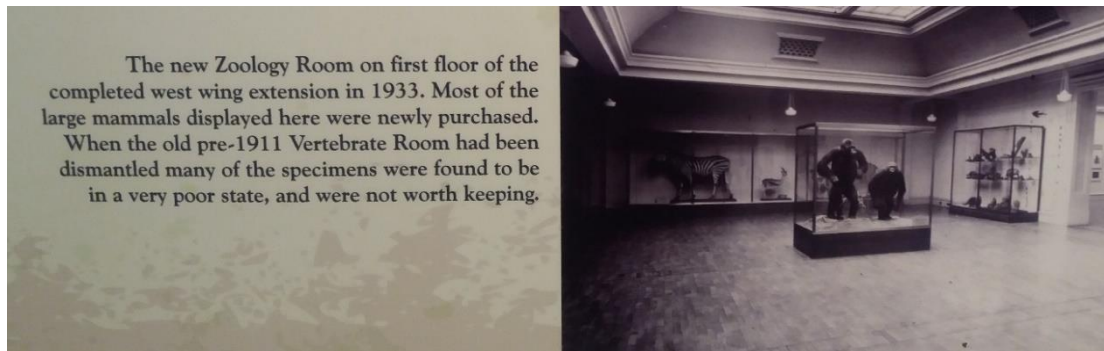
Figure 4: Extract from a display panel describing the disposal of taxidermy items, as they were "not worth keeping". New Walk Museum, Leicester. (Credit: Author).

In 1926 the Museum acquired an impressive adult male Giraffe from Kenya, mounted by noted taxidermists Rowland Ward. It acquired the nickname of 'George' and, despite being a favourite with visitors, in the late 1960s it was transferred to Wollaton Hall Museum in Nottingham, where it can still be seen.
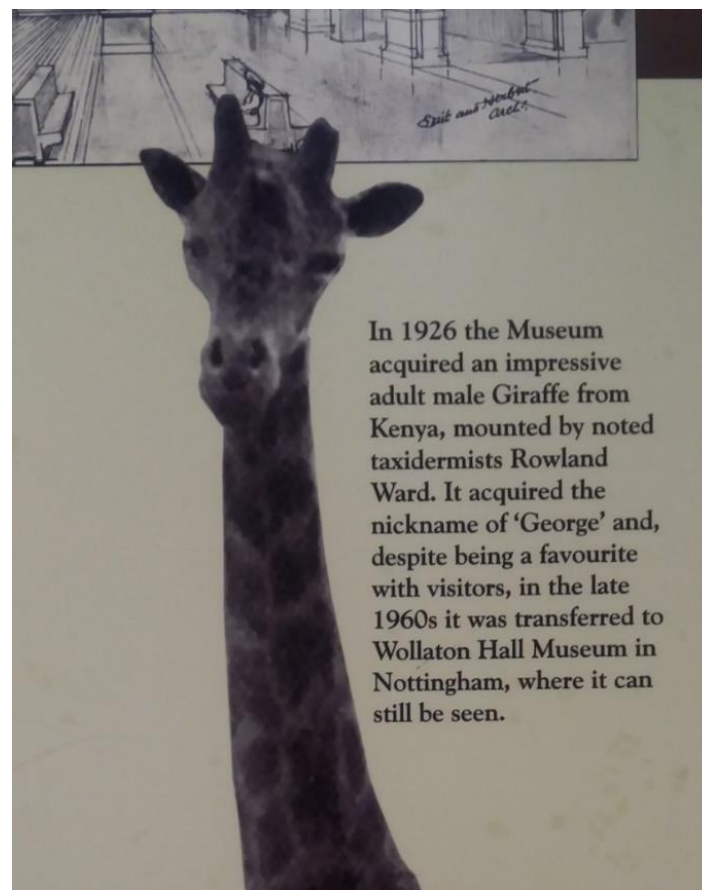
Figure 5: Extract from a display text panel describing the transfer of a taxidermy giraffe in the 1960s. New Walk Museum, Leicester. (Credit: Author).

More recently installed, a text panel in the *Ashmolean Story* gallery at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, describes a lengthy rehoming process with the Bodleian Library, which began in 1860. They "finally completed the transfer of objects to the Ashmolean in 2005" (Figure 6). This gallery, which opened in 2017 (Ashmolean Museum 2017), tells stories about the museum by examining historical collecting practices alongside modern ethical issues. Here, the framing of disposal subtly encourages visitors to reflect on disposal as a necessary and considered practice.
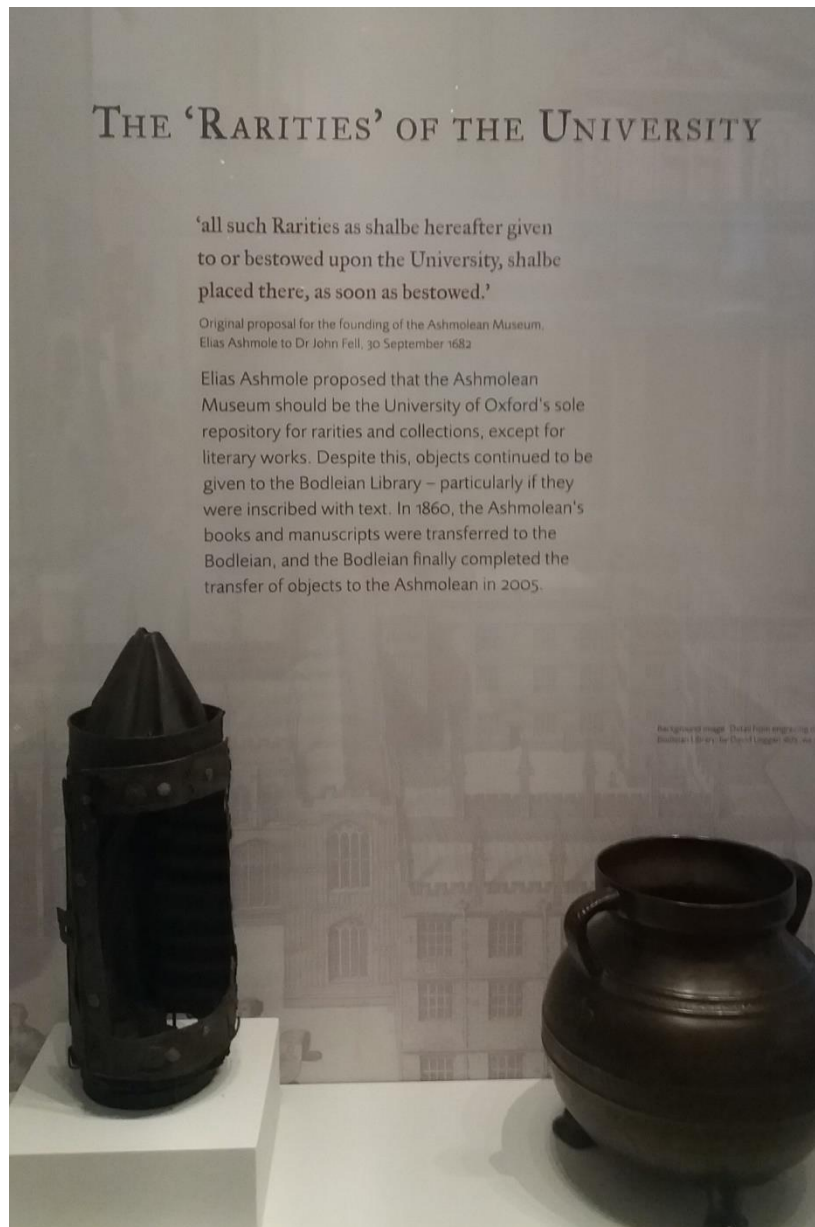
Figure 6: Description of a transfer of items from the Bodleian Library. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. (Credit: Author).

A contrasting approach to the text panel narration of institutional history is evident at the Waterworks Museum, Hereford. Disposal visibility is provided through object biographies on display labels. For example, one caption (Figure 7) states the object was:

> … transferred to a museum in Burnley but probably stored rather than displayed… It was transferred to the Waterworks Museum by Lancashire Museums Service in December 2012.

Within this process of transfer — to rehome an under-used object — visitors are informed of the existence of stored collections. They are also guided to consider the concept of object value and its changing nature within different settings. Importantly, and in similarity with the previous two examples, the considered use of language avoids the word 'disposal'.

Figure 7: Detailed object biography on a display label. The Waterworks Museum, Hereford. (Credit: Author).

A starker contrast to these examples of visibility is the display of 'absence': a concept which requires a high level of conceptual thinking by visitors. For example, at the Scottish National Gallery can be seen a number of empty corbel plinths above a doorway (Figure 8). Nearby, a long label details the history of a collection of plaster busts and states, "The majority of the casts, excluding the Albacini Collection, were transferred to the Municipal School of Art in 1907". It is only by conscious consideration that the text and the strange architectural feature can be linked, and disposal revealed as the explanation. Again, disposal is portrayed as a historic practice and the information seeks to explain a visible absence, rather than encouraging deeper reflection.

Figure 8: The portrayal of disposal as absence. Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh. (Credit: Author).

The intellectual concept of absence was itself explored in an art installation by Linda Brothwell entitled *The Missing* at the Holburne Museum, Bath (6 August 2016 – 2 January 2017). This temporary exhibition:

> … gave new purpose to display mounts from Sir William Holburne's original Collection. Having become separated from the historic artworks they used to showcase, she [the artist] presented them as pieces in their own right… (The Holburne Museum 2016, 4).

The display of absence as an artistic form, literally framing empty plinths as meaningful items (Figure 9), offered visitors an emotional and intellectual engagement with concepts of 'object', 'value', 'permanence', and 'loss'. It is of interest that both these examples of 'visible absence' are situated within fine art settings. This may suggest a different professional attitude to disposal than other types of cultural or museum collection.

Figure 9: The display of empty plinths as provocations for value and loss. The Holburne Museum, Bath. (Credit: Author).

3.5.2 Communicating disposal

Exhibition has therefore been used in a very limited way to share information about disposal processes. The practical examples of disposal transparency explored in the preceding section demonstrate three components of visibility and understanding. First, that the language of transparent disposal practice typically avoids technical terminology. As evidenced by the *Profusion in Museums* project earlier in this chapter, the words used to describe the disposal process may be emotionally loaded.

Second, the physical context of communication affects its outcomes (Gill and Adams 2002, 53-4). In these practical examples, presenting information through the exhibition format offers familiarity to visitors as the typical museum communication mode. The unfamiliar concept of object removal is cushioned within familiarity.

Third, by attempting visibility the practitioners demonstrate a level of confidence in themselves as communicator, the subject matter, and recipient audience (ibid., 17). But within this confidence is a hesitancy; the typical framing of disposal as historic practice presents a *fait-accomplis* without public involvement, and also distances it from the contemporary practitioner.

With this in mind, and as this thesis focusses on contemporary practice, it is worth briefly diverting to the realm of social media as a dominant communication mode. It offers a significant opportunity for enabling transparency (Kidd 2016, 6) which utilises the expectation of personalised and democratised communication (Meecham 2013, 33-36). But while museum Twitter and Facebook posts about 'behind-the-scenes' collections processes seemingly create transparency they typically "push nicely illustrated content, involving little or no audience involvement" (Gronemann et al. 2015, 183). The absence of dialogue causes communication to become "about making public statements and symbolizing good decision-making rather than actually influencing it" (Mosse 2001, quoted in Kidd 2016, 14). Practitioners seemingly continue their hesitant practice witnessed throughout the opening two chapters of this thesis.

That this applies to disposal transparency is succinctly evidenced by a Tweet from a National museum practitioner who commented that disposal and rationalisation were "topics we personally avoid bringing up, but we *always* get asked - and people feel

very strongly" (Tasha McNaught, @TashaMcN, 30 April 2020). With modern communication practices offering wide-reaching public visibility this comment clearly articulates the continuing professional reluctance to allow visibility to disposal, let alone allowing wider understanding or engagement with its workings.

3.6 Chapter summary

For 130 years museum professionals have acknowledged and considered the need to shape collections through disposal. Ideas and language have commonly expressed the need to manage collections, undertake considered collecting, and develop institutional co-operation to secure future sustainability.

During those 130 years the process of removal has recurrently caused conflict, debate, angst, and hesitancy from those within and outside the profession. This journey of inaction and opacity clearly began at the inception of the profession, with the reactive adoption of accessioning to legitimise collections in the face of calls to refine and reduce their extent.

Enduring throughout the years is a sectoral reluctance to make disposal visible or enable discussion to move beyond the emotive cycle of inaction. For perhaps the overwhelming discovery of this survey of historical and contemporary disposal practice is the evidence of a steadfast body of individuals who resolve to maintain and extend collections, while also preserving core professional attitudes and actions; and who only deviate from this cyclical practice when external pressures become too much to resist. The role played by these external catalysts cannot be downplayed: it is typically 'outsiders' who highlight problem areas of collections and their management, question the long-term sustainability of museums, and force developments in sectoral and disposal ethics.

Within this professional steadfastness the hiding of disposal demonstrates a modern lack of practitioner confidence in their right to act on behalf of their public. This reluctance firmly underpins professional inaction. The typical, but rare, presentation of disposal as an historic process safeguards the contemporary sector and practitioners from harm. Instead of utilising communication tools to seek conversation and approval, visibility and engagement is seemingly regarded as a risk to museums

themselves. In the absence of addressing this threat it grows larger in the practitioner mind, seemingly like a monster from a bad dream whose lurking presence is shut away in the hope it will be silenced and forgotten.

But perhaps this evocative description is itself unhelpful. For the process of disposal is a pragmatic reality which requires attention, and disposal opacity is not merely a theoretical concern. Curatorially-motivated disposal appears to be happening in contemporary practice, as the sector slowly moves towards an acceptance of rationalising collections to aid institutional function. But covering the anecdotal evidence and the glimpses of practice is a large veil of silence. This hides the potential scale and nature of disposal. But disposal fundamentally shapes the work that museums can undertake on behalf of, and with, their audiences; and this overwhelming opacity prevents visibility and understanding by the very people whom museums serve. It is the veil of opacity which this PhD research seeks to remove, encouraging "museums to see transparency as an opportunity rather than a threat" (Fredheim et al. 2018, 39), by deeply exploring the fullness of disposal revelation to those outside the sector.

Chapter 4: Methodology

"We shall not cease from exploration, And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started, And know the place for the first time."

(T.S. Eliot)

4.1 Introduction

Within the preceding chapters I have traced the development of disposal in UK museums throughout 130 years of professional practice and identified key themes which have shaped the process. From its roots as a logistical collections management tool into the ethical uncertainties of contemporary practice disposal has generated conversation and consternation, and this enduring uncertainty evidences a need for radical transparency. For surrounding historic and modern contexts are veils of opacity, which strongly suggest curatorially-motivated disposal is occurring, but that it remains hidden from the view of those outside the process. These areas deserve exploration to understand the reasons for this enduring impenetrability, and to identify opportunities to develop visible disposal practice and create engaged relationships between practitioner and public.

In this chapter I will therefore outline my research by defining my questions and aims and voice the methods by which I have addressed this topic. To begin this methodological journey I will trace my own context as a museum professional and academic researcher and explain how this shapes, and is shaped by, my understanding of society and the role individuals play within it. From this subjective professional context arise my key research questions and explanations for my chosen research strategy.

4.2 Situating the researcher

Just as contemporary museums narrate stories of cultural memory and possible futures, this thesis presents the story of an academic journey which questions cultural practice and envisions future possibilities.

Storytelling is a powerful communication tool which enables us "to make sense of the world…. [and] encounter new perspectives that change how we think and feel…" (Faherty 2019). Indeed, the storytelling found in contemporary museums has much in common with qualitative research, whose researchers narrate their journey and findings. But behind every tale is a narrator who shapes the plot by informing the reader of pertinent points, removes distractions, and brings certain characters to the fore whilst side-lining others. For the reader, identifying the chronicler provides insight to the subtleties and biases being woven into the tale.

As the narrator of this research story it is important to provide an overview of my own assumptions and prejudices. This situates the thesis within reflexive practice: a process of "immediate, dynamic and continuing self-awareness" (Finlay and Gough 2003, ix). Reflexivity requires social science researchers to actively consider their own assumptions and biases, and ethical researchers should be "keen to acknowledge the situated nature of their research and to demonstrate the trustworthiness of their findings" (ibid., xi).

The fundamental premise throughout my research is that museums are for people: they are funded by public and individual subscription and operate a public duty for collections management and engagement. But this role is only possible through the safeguarding of objects important to society: items that tell stories of human interaction with each other, and with the natural world (Durrant 2020a). From this purpose and mission arise all the debates, controversies, and practices encompassed by the sector.

My own relationship with disposal began as a vicar's daughter with a daily experience of sacred spaces, objects, and rituals. As community leaders who dedicated their lives to public service and moral thought my parents gently supported the oppressed, represented the marginalised, and challenged societal norms. Bible stories combined with our family hobby for visiting archaeological sites and filled me with a need to look backwards to past lives to understand the present day, and look forward to imagine what the future holds. Our family home was filled with treasured heirlooms and found objects. In my bedroom I displayed my growing collection of knick-knacks (Figure 10), organising and displaying them in a precursor to my career as a museum curator.

Figure 10: My childhood curation of valued objects. (Credit: A. Wheeler).

These early experiences contained complex associations between objects and loss. Parishioners donated items to the church in memoriam of deceased loved ones, and thereby transferred the obligation and guilt of disposal to my father, the Vicar. Now as an adult and married to a Rector, the association of sacred space, special objects, and social memory still encroaches my daily life. I witness debates whether to use the four-hundred-year-old communion chalice for its intended sacred use, or set it aside as a valuable historic relic; I hear suggestions that old banners be removed to better enable the current mission for church and community. The resonances between my home life and museum career, between religious and secular practice, remain strong.

As an undergraduate archaeology student, I realised my passion was not the physical digging, but the objects uncovered – for the 'magic moment' of holding something last touched generations ago, and experiencing a human connection to lives before my own. In my subsequent career I inventoried the archaeology and social history collections (Figure 11) in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter (RAMM) and witnessed issues of storage and under-use.

Figure 11: Inventorying the schools' Egyptology collection in Rougemont House, RAMM, Exeter. (Credit: O. Blackmore).

I moved on to become a finds specialist in commercial archaeology, cataloguing and assessing the social value of archaeological objects and arranging their transfer to museum collections (Figure 12). I witnessed tensions between different expert opinions and practices. Concurrently I undertook my Master's degree, in the same academic School as this doctoral research. In my dissertation I responded to the Museums Association's *Collections for the Future* report which called for increased rationalisation and disposal (Wilkinson 2005). I extolled the unique and irreplaceable importance of archaeological collections and the need to retain them in perpetuity, asserting that "disposal of archaeological collections is not a viable practice" (Wheeler 2006, i). I emphasised the importance of communication between museum staff and audiences to improve use of collections and prevent the need for disposal (ibid.). This PhD thesis developed from those ideas and presents a more nuanced understanding of object removal processes.

Figure 12: A plethora of archaeological finds filling my office space, destined for a museum collection. (Credit: Author).

Returning to RAMM as Assistant Curator of Antiquities I resumed my work with the collections I had previously catalogued (Figure 13). Following the excitement of a major redevelopment project with its considered display of 'important' objects and stories (Figure 14), I began to question the complexities which created my professional duty to care for items of more dubious social value (Figure 15). I questioned how my personal attitudes interacted with my professional experience and institutional knowledge and insight.

From the side-lines I watched as an external Project Officer led a Collections Review and instigated a disposal process which was begrudgingly acknowledged by the curatorial team. I subsequently relished reinventing and leading the disposal process for five years and attempted to apply ethical ideals to pragmatic realities. In so doing I became local front-page news (Figure 16) and discovered that disposal can be made visible without generating controversy. By encouraging colleagues to consider disposal from their own sub-collections I quickly encountered their feelings of guilt and

hesitancy. I also experienced practical restrictions which created bottlenecks and barriers to the physical removal of items from the store. I championed pragmatic responses to complex situations. The doubts and questions raised in my mind during this process were the catalyst for this doctoral research.

Figure 13: Working with the extensive Antiquities collection at RAMM, Exeter. (Credit: H. Burbage).

Figure 14: The installation of 'socially important' objects during the RAMM redevelopment project in 2011. (Credit: H. Burbage).

Figure 15: A bunch of old keys demonstrate the dubious social value of items accessioned under historic curatorial practice. (Credit: Author).

Figure 16: Disposal as a good news story. (Credit: C. Durrant).

I therefore came to my research as an insider: a mid-career museum professional with practical experience of my topic. I was immersed in professional debate and practising the topic under consideration (Mercer 2007) with a "'lived familiarity' with the group being researched" (ibid., 3). But my status has changed during this research as I moved "back and forth across different boundaries" (Griffith 1998, 368) to become an 'insider/outsider' on the "continuum" model (Mercer 2007, 3). As serious ill-health forced long pauses to my research I chose to leave my curatorial role and I became a partial outsider: my mind remained with museum networks and friendships but time away from practical involvement brought new objectivity to this research. Latterly I returned to the heritage sector as a Finds Liaison Officer for the Portable Antiquities Scheme, once again working with historical remnants of the past and tasked with assessing the social value of objects. Within this professional fluidity my mindset has changed from 'keep everything for it might be of future importance', as expressed in my Masters dissertation, to a pragmatic and nuanced realisation that public benefit is sometimes best achieved by 'letting things go'.

Alongside this personal witness it is important to acknowledge how my professional identity has shaped this thesis. Importantly, my research interests and professional opinions were visible in sectoral and academic journals both before and after my field research (e.g. Durrant 2016; Durrant 2019; Durrant 2020b; Durrant and Terwey 2017), at conferences (e.g. Durrant 2017) and in practitioner settings (e.g. Durrant n.d.). Accordingly, a small number of participants were aware of my work before their involvement in this research. The impact on my data is unknowable, but I acknowledge it could have affected participants' responses (Holstein and Gubrium 2003, 13) and introduced an element of information bias (Mercer 2007, 7). However, my identity as a "known person" (Drever 1995, 31) enabled me to build trusting relationships with those participants and aided dialogue of sensitive subjects during interviews (Shah 2004, 556). This was essential to progress the interviews from institutionalised professional responses to revelations of participants' subjective attitudes.

My insider status also enabled me to bridge a gap between museum theory and practice to "bring together the insights from academic studies with the practical work of museums" (Macdonald 2011, 6). This combination of theoretical insight and

practical experience strengthens my findings and presents direct relevance to 'real-world' museum work. For:

> Those who work on museums – practitioners of museum studies – are coming
> to a new extent to be in demand to provide the wider perspectives and
> knowledge that are, increasingly, required. (ibid., 8-9).

I am aware of the challenge to validity posed by this situation and have tried to identify my preconceptions to avoid "taking things for granted" (Mercer 2007, 6) or failing to ask the "obvious question" (Hockey 1993, 206). Indeed, with my natural propensity for reflection by "thinking about something after the event" (Finlay and Gough 2003, ix) I have tried to identify and challenge my own assumptions. I undertook this research with a note pinned above my desk reminding me, "Reliability – would another researcher reach the same conclusions? Validity – are you actually observing what you say you are?" (after Hughes n.d.). I explore this consideration in relation to my case study institutions later in this chapter. But inevitably it is impossible to remove the social researcher from their research and this thesis remains my interpretation of the gathered data. My aim is that it presents a fair and insightful reflection of contemporary practice.

4.3 Research framework

Corresponding with my reflexive awareness of my place in the world, this research is set within postmodern questions of the nature of reality, truth, and knowledge (Mason 2018, 9). I am rooted in the interpretivist understanding of the world as "the sense people make of their own lives and experiences" (ibid., 8). From this viewpoint "reality is socially constructed, filled with multiple meanings and interpretations, and emotions are involved" (Hurworth 2011, 210). I therefore understand life as a subjective encounter in which individuals negotiate and renegotiate meaning (Scott 2014, 460), with a person's actions representing their intellectual and emotional connection to their reality.

But alongside this individuality I believe humans have an innate desire for collaboration and community, with groups of people creating social institutions based on similar understandings and experiences. Museums are an epitome of this social

construct, an "interpretive net woven by individuals and groups" (ibid., 692) whose value is evidenced through socially endorsed funding and regulation. This social functioning is codified through authorised professional definitions, including:

> Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society. (Museums Association 1998).

Within this quagmire of subjectivity, ethics is the essential tool for the negotiation and renegotiation of individual and social visions. As people who are guided by shared professional ethics, museum practitioners work to uphold the public benefit of their daily tasks and responsibilities.

4.4 Research aims and questions

My research topic therefore arose from my personal experiences of collections management, object value, use, and interpretation, and contradictions between perception and reality. I explore curatorially-motivated disposal within UK practice, and what transparency means in this context. I aim to identify opportunities for sectoral development. This goal is a conscious attempt to counteract the negative and hesitant practices witnessed within the preceding chapters. My main question therefore asks: How can UK museums develop transparent disposal practice, and why is this a necessary development?

To explore this over-arching question, I will address four closely linked sub questions. Firstly, what does the concept of 'transparency' mean within the museum context? Specifically, what is its purpose and functioning? Second, how do the core components of people and communication interact to enable this transparency to occur? Third, how is disposal transparency regarded by practitioners? Finally, what barriers prevent disposal transparency, and how might these be addressed?

With these questions and aims in mind the following sections set out my chosen theory and methodology.

4.5 Research theory

In Chapter Two of this thesis I set out the ethical context for transparent disposal practice, proposing the need for conscious creation and enaction of ideas within the 'everyday ethics' of the contemporary sector. Accordingly, and as outlined by the sectoral guidance, ethical disposal should draw on a range of viewpoints, and transparency should be enabled for those outside the process. I therefore propose disposal transparency incorporates two core components: people and communication. Specifically, museum staff and their audiences, and the communication between them.

Taking the latter element first, I suggest information sharing alone does not create transparency, as the one-way transmission process prevents the development of understanding by the audience. I therefore draw on Janet Marstine's concept of Radical Transparency, examined in Chapter Two, which proposes transparency as a "bridge to communication" (Marstine 2011, 15) rather than the end destination. Accordingly, an audience is empowered to choose how deeply to engage with information through utilisation of "broadly accessible communication tools" (ibid., 15). The transparency process is thereby one of engaged relationship and communication between museum and audience. For disposal, radical transparency requires an institution to reveal its process to its audiences, and offer opportunities to develop understanding of the methods, decision-making, and outcomes.

But it is important to explore how 'an institution' can enable or prevent this transparency process, and here I turn to the other component of disposal transparency: the museum staff and their audiences. Firstly, it is important to tease out the role of 'staff' within the interpretivist understanding of the world. For an individual's actions reflect their perceptions and understandings, and this applies equally to an individual acting in a professional or lay capacity. Therefore, it is not the 'institution' which enacts transparency, but the constituent individual professionals who create and shape institutional processes and outcomes. I therefore suggest it is important to examine the individual staff perceptions and attitudes which underpin organisational disposal actions.

Second, it is important to examine the nature of the groups labelled above as 'museum staff' and 'audiences'. To explore this aspect, I utilise Communities of Practice theory which defines 'communities' as groups of individuals who:

> ...share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis. (Wenger et al. 2002, 4).

Importantly, these communities centre around the presence or absence of knowledge. Each community thereby contains expertise which is an:

> ...accumulation of experience – a kind of residue of their actions, thinking, and conversations that remains a dynamic part of their ongoing experience... [Communities] make it an integral part of their activities and interactions, and they serve as a living repository for that knowledge. (ibid., 8-9).

Further, such knowledge has both "tacit and explicit" elements comprising "...embodied expertise – a deep understanding of complex, interdependent systems that enable dynamic responses to context-specific problems" (ibid., 9-10). This dynamism is present in both knowledge creation and use. Knowledge is revised and reshaped by drawing on expertise in "...an active, inventive process that is just as critical as their store of knowledge itself" (ibid., 9). Communities are therefore definable and dynamic entities, with knowledge individually and collectively attained, endorsed, and reinforced. The participants within a community are therefore experts in their community's knowledge and can apply this expertise to matters under consideration. Further, this expertise is difficult to share between communities. Only through sustained interaction, communication, and experience can outsiders grasp the knowledge held by another community of practice.

Within my interpretivist framing, I therefore regard museum staff and museum audiences as separate groups of people. The constituent individuals of each community share commonality of knowledge, understanding, and experience which is distinct from other communities. For disposal, like many other museum communities, this knowledge centres around the objects contained within the collection, and also the museum's mission. As evidenced by the sectoral guidance, assessment of the

importance of such object knowledge is essential to the process of collections review and disposal. I propose transparent disposal practice enables audience communities to attempt to understand the knowledge held by the professional museum community.

4.5.1 Transparent Communication Model

To test the real-world application of these proposals I have developed a model which explores the dynamics of disposal transparency. This was created prior to my first element of field research (a survey of practitioners) and refined ahead of my case study research visits. I intended for the model to aid my own understanding of disposal transparency, and to test its relevance as a potential tool for sectoral use.

The Transparent Communication Model includes the two core elements of transparency proposed in the preceding section: people, and the communication between them.

For the first element (people) I utilise Communities of Practice theory to propose three overarching Communities of individuals relevant to museums: the Profession, and their audiences the Public, and Stakeholders. These are not rigidly defined, and people can move between them in real-world settings. But within this research I define their characteristics as:

- Profession: individuals with paid employment in a museum or freelance role; and familiarity of the policies and practices of their employing institution and the wider sector.

- Public: individuals with no formal relationship with museums; members may or may not have an awareness that a particular museum exists; and may or may not choose to engage with museums.

- Stakeholders: individuals with a similar formal relationship with a museum; who thus have a vested interest in the museum's policy or practice, either directly or indirectly.

To reflect the subtleties of the knowledge, expertise, and skill within these broad categories I further propose that each community comprises sub-communities, or 'subgroups' (Figure 17). These were identified using my professional experience of the

museum sector, and as audiences or demographics routinely mentioned in museum literature such as the *Museums Journal*. These lists of proposed subgroups are not exhaustive, and others will occur in local, regional, or national situations. Still, I suggest the overarching communities and their subgroups are familiar across UK museum types and geography.

Further, I propose that a person may belong to several communities and subgroups at the same time, according to the context of their role and actions. For example, individuals within the Profession may belong to subgroups according to their role within the museum (e.g. Curatorial, or Visitor Services), or by employment status (e.g. institutional staff, or external consultants). Therefore, these communities are not mutually exclusive.

Proposed Transparent Communication Model:
Communities of Practice

Profession	Public	Stakeholder

- Internal: Collections
- Internal: Non collections
- External professionals

- Visitors
- Local communities
- Online audiences
- Journalists

- Governing body
- Funding body
- Patrons / Financial donors
- Volunteers
- Friends / Members
- Object donors
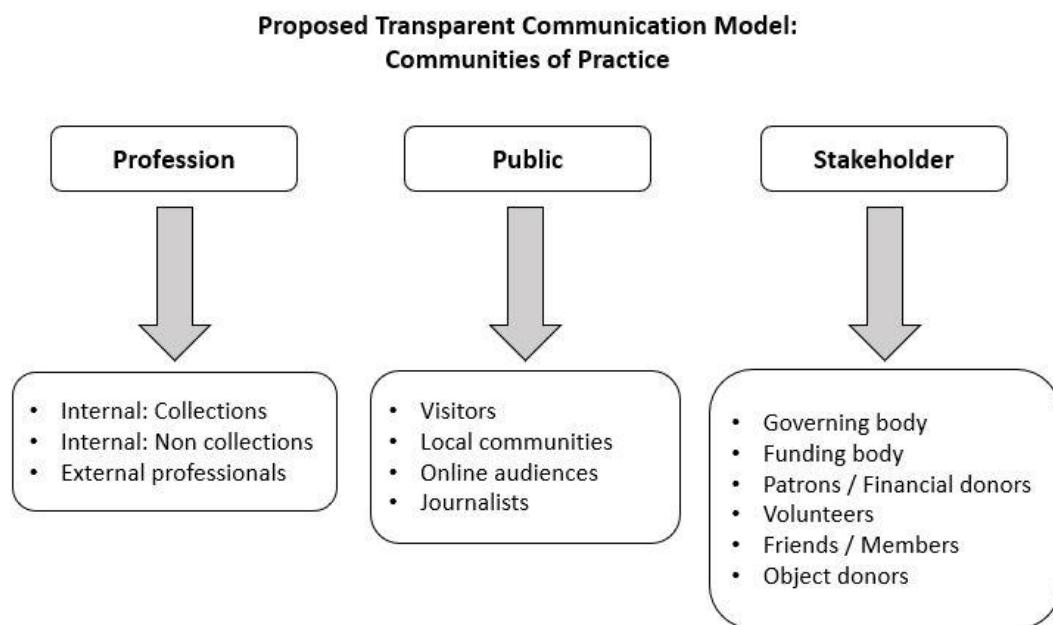
Figure 17: The proposed Communities of Practice and their subgroups within my Transparent Communication Model.

The second element of the Transparent Communication Model embraces Radical Transparency and identifies the type of communication between the professional museum staff and their audiences. This is expressed through a Spectrum of Communication Modes (Figure 18). This scheme was inspired by the *Future Proof*

Museums programme which suggested museums and their actions could be characterised according to a "Spectrum of Audience Engagement" (Anonymous n.d.b). While utilising some of those ideas, such as the action to "Inform", my model proposes that interaction (or 'engagement') stems from individuals rather than institutions.
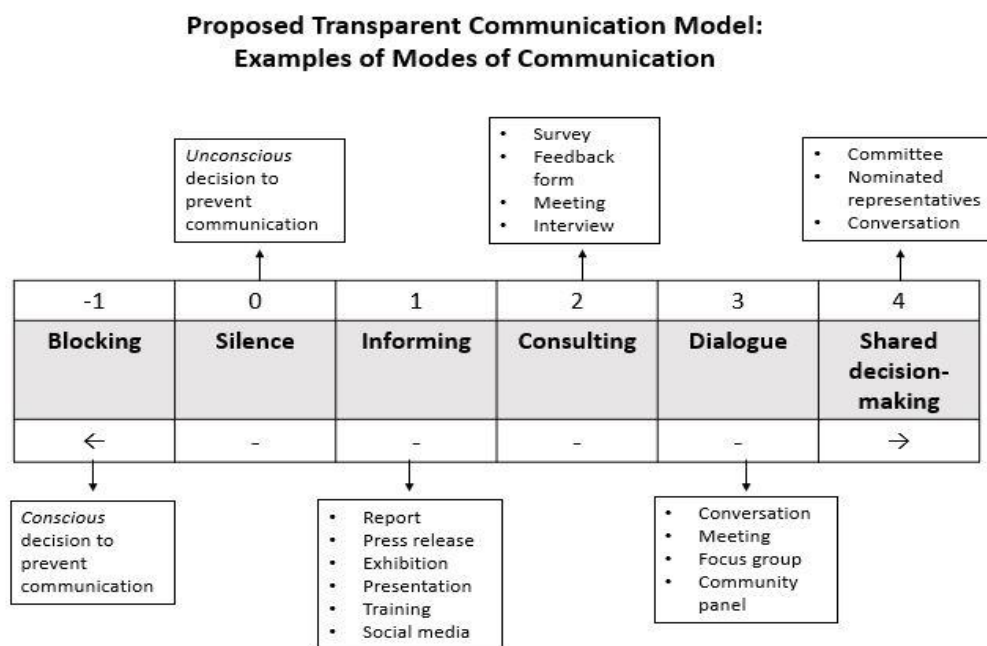
Figure 18: The proposed Spectrum of Communication Modes within my Transparent Communication Model.

My proposed Spectrum contains six communication options: Blocking, Silence, Informing, Consulting, Dialogue, and Shared decision-making. These are not characterised by their format (e.g. a survey, or a meeting, or newspaper article), but rather by their *intent*. For I propose transparency is created when the communicator identifies a target audience and then chooses a mode to enable information to flow between them. In other words, the communication mode is deliberately chosen for its suitability to the purpose of that communication, and the audience's skills, knowledge, and interests. Transparent communication is therefore both the *reason* for the communication, and the deliberate *choice* of mode and audience. From this view, transparency will vary according to the people involved, and the communities and subgroups they represent.

Further, I propose it is the attitudes — both conscious and unconscious — of the people initiating communication that affect the choices made. In turn, these affect the outcomes, or 'success', of the transparency act. Put simply, what individual museum staff perceive and think, and how they act, will either create or prevent transparency.

To propose the application of the Transparent Communication Model and avoid it being purely abstract, it is possible to provide an example of how a disposal process could be categorised. In the following fictional example the communication actions arise from both conscious and unconscious practitioner decisions, and utilises all communication modes:

- Blocking: information about an object's financial value is deliberately withheld from Public audiences.

- Silence: no member of staff considers the needs of the Friends of the museum.

- Informing: a press release about the disposal process is issued to local media.

- Consulting: meetings are held with the governing body to discuss proposals.

- Shared decision-making: local community representatives help decide where to rehome objects.

Throughout this thesis I utilise my Transparent Communication Model as a tool to categorise and analyse my research data. The proposed Communities and their subgroups provide labels for understanding the people involved in the disposal transparency process, and the Spectrum of Communication Modes provides categorisations to explore how communication was attempted between them.

4.6 Research strategy and methods

As an endeavour of social research into peoples' attitudes and actions it was clear a qualitative methodology provided the best strategy to explore participants' subjective views, motivations, and decisions. The qualitative process offered an iterative unpacking of the topic by "moving between everyday concepts and meanings… in alternate phases of immersion in data then withdrawal for contemplation" (Mason 2018, 228).

Indeed, the development of my research strategy was itself an iterative process. I dismissed an early idea to undertake a historical archival review, as it lacked contemporary relevance. I then considered utilising my employing museum as a single case study of changing practice. While this offered the deep insights of ethnographic study (Denscombe 2014, 80) the blurred boundaries between professional and academic practice, and between objectivity and insider knowledge, were too complex to navigate. The suggestion of deep institutional exploration also elicited reluctance from my senior management team; itself an indication of professional hesitancy for disposal transparency.

The third iteration of my research design is contained within this thesis and entails a mixed method strategy. The first element was a qualitative survey of practitioners, with the aim to capture a snapshot of contemporary disposal practice and the attitudes of people involved therein. This method offered a tool for "purposefully seeking the necessary information from relevant people" with wide and inclusive coverage (ibid., 7-8). The second component was a multiple case study comprising museums which had attempted transparent disposal processes. By utilising two examples of real practice I aimed to provide "compelling" and "robust" data (Yin 2014, 57) and avoid emphasising a single "extreme case" (Yin 2014, 57) whose analysis would add narrow relevance to the sectoral conversation. My decision to select case studies of museums with positive strategies for transparency was a conscious attempt to explore best practice in action, reveal the benefits of enabling transparency, and inform the development of my Transparent Communication Model and its application for sectoral use. I will now examine these research elements and explain more fully their purpose in answering my research questions.

4.6.1 Survey

The purpose of the survey was to provide a snapshot overview of contemporary practice and professional attitudes; I sought to peer behind the veil of opacity by seeking practitioners involved in disposal and shining a spotlight on the process. This sought to inform my research in two areas. First, to ascertain whether curatorially-motivated disposal was occurring in contemporary practice, and thus support (or contradict) my proposal that disposal was a hidden practice. Second, I aimed to

capture individual practitioner attitudes, to identify any common perceptions or practices. These would provide insight to my research questions of how 'transparency' is understood by practitioners and perceived in application to disposal practice, and the barriers to its creation.

The qualitative survey method offered the best strategy for recording these subjective insights; I was not seeking a statistical representation of practice, but an understanding of the current perceptions and attitudes enacted by the sector. I selected an online survey strategy to best reach a broad range of participants (Sue and Ritter 2012, 10). I chose *Googleforms* as the software tool as it offered longevity of data storage, respondent anonymity, a familiar interface for respondents, and met the University of Leicester's requirements within Research Ethics. The software required respondents to login with a Google account, but this information was not accessible to me. As individuals could access the survey on their work or personal devices it was accessible to a wide range of potential participants.

For my sampling population I chose individuals in UK Accredited museums with a role associated with collections in a paid, voluntary, or freelance capacity. The UK focus was essential to avoid potential confusions of differing cultural ethics or legalities. The requirement for association with an Accredited museum ensured a professional mindset and context of regulated adherence to sectoral codes and practices.

For my sampling frame I targeted people working with a diversity of collection types. I utilised Subject Specialist Networks to invite participation, and received assistance from the Society for Museum Archaeology, Social History Curators Group, and UK Registrars Group, who all circulated the survey information to their members. I did not receive a response from the Natural Science Collections Association. In addition, the British Art Network declined to circulate the survey and I instead contacted the Society of Decorative Arts Curators who agreed to engage. Importantly, I chose not to directly approach the Museum Ethnographers Group because of their practical associations with repatriation; I desired the participants should retain a clear focus on curatorially-motivated disposal to avoid confusing influences from allied, but distinct, areas of practice.

In addition to this strategy, I utilised my existing professional contacts to publicise the survey, beginning with Tweeting from my professional Twitter account. I also approached contacts in sectoral bodies, namely the Collections Trust, participants undertaking the Associateship of the Museums Association, and members of the South East Museums Peer Development Group for Collections Review and Rationalisation. Their help to promote the survey widened the reach to potential participants and offered reassurance of a credible and legitimate research project.

My strategy of convenience sampling allowed participants to choose to partake (Sue and Ritter 2012, 44). From the outset I understood this might attract respondents with strong views about the topic (ibid., 44) with the moderate middle ground less represented. Within my data the ability to draw generalisations about the wider museum profession is therefore limited (ibid., 45). Nor is the data statistically reliable (ibid., 46); but this is irrelevant within my qualitative methodology. As an exploratory sample (Denscombe 2014, 32-3) the survey aimed to reveal subjective understandings of experience. Within the interpretivist framework, "it is better to have collected some data and gained some insight than to have collected no data and gained no information" (Hill 1998, in Sue and Ritter 2012, 46-7). I have therefore attempted to consider possible biases and extreme views throughout my analysis and interpretation.

When designing the practicalities of the survey I utilised the wire frames digital development method to focus my attention to the main categories of information I sought to gather (Green 2016). I used a mixture of open and closed questions. The closed format comprised tick-box and multiple-choice options for respondent's ease of use, and always offered a 'don't know' option to enable them to continue the survey despite uncertainty on a particular question. During analysis I was tempted to stray into quantitative analysis through percentage overviews of data, but after consideration I remained focussed on the qualitative methodology to accord with my research strategy.

Several open-ended questions and free-text comments offered respondents the ability to present new ideas to my research (Sue and Ritter 2012, 56), and thereby addressed the possible bias of preconception from my insider status. This format also increased data validity, for in using their own words respondents were not forced to modify their

views to my own (ibid., 57). As a socially distant tool, the online format reduced the risk of participants offering perceived 'correct' answers and increased the likelihood of honesty (ibid., 53). All questions were compulsory, apart from free text options at the end of each section. To improve the reliability of the data I repeatedly emphasised the anonymity of responses including, "Please remember your answers are anonymous". To conclude the survey, participants were invited to offer themselves for an informant interview or propose their museum for case study by providing contact details. No respondents chose that option.

In the context of my research development, this survey was designed whilst in the early stages of development of my Transparent Communication Model; I had predicted three groupings of individuals and expertise, and the importance of communication between them, but had not encountered Communities of Practice theory. By the stage of data analysis I had reached a clearer vision of my Transparent Communication Model and was able to utilise it for data interpretation.

Before its launch my PhD supervisors provided feedback on my wire frame designs of questions and structure. Between 24 July and 14 August 2017 I shared a pilot version with three professional colleagues and two PhD colleagues who had expressed interest in its testing: two did not respond; three completed the survey, with two also providing feedback. This pilot process demonstrated a non-response rate was a possibility and would hinder the quality of data received. I realised the importance of respondents being motivated to "make a difference" through the survey (Sue and Ritter 2012, 49), and also realised the importance of emphasising the sectoral change I aimed to encourage through my findings.

From this pilot process I made only minor revisions, including separating some questions to avoid possible bias from participants seeing similar content on the screen at the same time. The biggest change was to Question 4.1 which asked respondents to select words from a list to answer the question, "Which of these words best reflect your personal attitude to curatorially-motivated disposal?". This revision process demonstrates the consideration I enacted throughout the design process. For example, I reduced the number of words in the list from eleven to eight. This revised list was created by placing the words into groups of 'negative' and 'positive' associations, and

mapping the words to their antonym in the other list. This revealed duplicates of synonyms, which reflected my own views. Accordingly, in the final selection four words had a negative connotation (Boring, Controversial, Difficult, and Unnecessary), and four words had a positive connotation (Essential, Liberating, Opportunity, and Revitalising). I chose to present the words as a randomised list to remove any unintended bias from my own ordering. These words were specifically chosen to elicit emotive or 'gut' responses rather than abstract theoretical concepts. This aimed to avoid responses of perceived 'correct' answers which reflected the authorised ethical guidelines, and instead emphasised the subjectivity of individual perception.

The final survey was live between 14 September and 16 October 2017 and received 43 responses. It contained 41 questions in five sections (Appendix 1) guiding respondents from higher level questions about their institution, to their own professional experiences, and finally their individual personal attitudes:

- Section One, 'About You', 12 questions: to gauge representativeness of the research sample. Included geographic location, job title, paid or voluntary role, collection type, highest educational qualification, and if they were an individual member of the Museums Association.

- Section Two, 'About your museum', 5 questions: defined as "the museum in which you currently work or volunteer. If you work at more than one museum, please think of the museum in which you spend the most time". Included questions of governance, Accreditation status, and institutional history of disposals.

Sections Three and Four utilised a simplified version of my Transparent Communication Model to assess its application to theory and practice. It addressed the selection, timing and involvement of different communities and sub-communities:

- Section Three, 'Your professional experience of curatorially-motivated disposals' (7 questions): included multiple choice options to test the Transparent Communication model, and open-ended questions to provide deeper insights.

- Section Four, 'Your personal thoughts about curatorially-motivated disposals': with an emphasis to "please be honest as your responses are anonymous" (15 questions). Many of these questions repeated those of section three but asked respondents to reply from a personal rather than professional viewpoint. Three questions asked about barriers to involving communities in the process, comprising two multiple choice questions and one compulsory open-ended question.

For analysis all the responses were downloaded into a spreadsheet and each respondent allocated a numerical identifier by order of response. Details of survey participation, results and interpretation are explored within the next chapter.

4.6.2 Multiple case studies

The case study component of my research sought to address three of my research areas. First, I wished to evidence practitioner understanding of 'disposal transparency' within enacted practice, and secondly to explore how barriers were perceived and addressed. Third, I sought insight to the core transparency components of communities and communication, by exploring the interactions between them and their relevance to radical transparency.

The case study approach sought details and insights of real-world practice through "in-depth study… [of] self-contained entities… [with] "distinct boundaries" (Denscombe 2014, 54-5), with an aim to "illuminate the general by looking at the particular" (ibid., 54). This approach offered a deep exploration (Yin 2014, 4) of the topic while the "emergent and empathetic" (Stake 1995) nature accorded with my interpretivist understanding of individuality of meaning for both participants and researcher. The multiple case study method fulfilled my aim to draw generalisations applicable to the wider sector (Yin 2014, 63) by enabling comparison between institutions. To fulfil my goal to provide insights for future sectoral application, I sought institutions which demonstrated positive attempts at transparency.

Within my research frame of UK Accredited museums I needed institutions which were currently attempting, or had recently completed, a transparent disposal process. I discounted National museums to avoid the lure of large, atypical examples which

offered high visibility to my findings but limited applicability to the wider sector due to their distinctive legal status. My initial idea to select three or four small independent museums was also soon discounted as examples were difficult to find.

At this stage my insider knowledge proved useful by helping locate suitable examples (Shah 2004, 556). I chose institutions with which I had some prior knowledge and contact with a disposal practitioner: Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery (PCMAG) and the Museum of London (MoL). With MoL this previous connection was weak. When beginning my PhD journey in 2014 the museum was developing a reputation for innovative disposals work, and in 2016 I was invited to speak on a panel alongside Beverley Cook (project lead) at the Museums Association Annual Conference. In the session entitled *Closing and Disposing: Museum Ethics in a Time of Crisis*, I witnessed an example of practitioner transparency like those I would later study in my research. After my field research was concluded I further witnessed another act of transparency by MoL, by observing a presentation by Beverley Cook at the Museums Association event *Future of Museums: Collections* (March 2018, London).

My connection with PCMAG was deeper as I knew Tabitha Cadbury, Curator of Social History and World Cultures, through regional professional and social circles. Between 2012 and 2015 my employing museum RAMM and PCMAG were a consortium Major Partner Museum (Arts Council England, n.d.), although this collaboration had minimal impact on my daily work. More importantly, our two museums shared commonalities of regional curation in archaeology and social history, so I had a broad familiarity with the workings of that museum. Indeed, my interest in Tabitha's work with disposal was an inspiration for this PhD topic, with a visit to the *Stories from the Stores* exhibition in August 2013 prompting me to seek PhD funding. That visit later enabled research insights which were unavailable from other data sources.

My identity as a 'known person' built on these previous contacts by encouraging trust when I invited institutional participation in my research. For example, it enabled access to key interview participants at PCMAG when research enquiries were otherwise restricted due to institutional workloads. During my research I was conscious that both Tabitha Cadbury and Beverley Cook were loosely aware of my attitudes to disposal and may have modified their responses to accord with these. While this possible bias

cannot be removed from the data, I attempted to counteract it by emphasising my role as an academic researcher rather than a museum practitioner.

The choice of these two case study organisations was also guided by their base-line similarities for comparison: both were in large cities, contained diverse collections, and had a large professional staff. More pertinently, both had undertaken recent projects of collections review and rationalisation of their social history collection, funded by external sources. The focus on social history collections removed potential data complications of legal, practical, or perceptions associated with different collection specialities. Most important to their selection was that each project was visible to public and professional audiences, but with different emphases: PCMAG targeted public audiences, while MoL prioritised professional audiences. From these commonalities I aimed for points of similarity or difference to reveal subtleties of attitude, motivation, and practice and thus provide deeper insights.

For data collection within my case studies I aimed to use multiple evidence sources including interview, participant observation, documentary research, and digital content (Yin 2014, 119-123). This data triangulation strengthened the validity of my research findings (ibid., 120-1) by corroborating my interpretation. The most important of these was interviews with the project teams. Accordingly, I undertook semi-structured interviews (Morris 2015, 10) with project staff and volunteers. Each lasted about one hour, was held in a quiet location to avoid being overheard by others and thereby improve interviewee honesty, and was audio-recorded with their consent.

To situate the research, I began with an explanation of the purpose of the interview and my role as a researcher. Each interview contained informal conversation before and after the recorder was switched on, to build rapport and draw the participant from their daily work to the immersive research world. Indeed, I believed rapport between myself and the interviewee was so important in establishing trust that within the interviews I moved beyond active listening to "empathetic interviewing" (Fontana and Frey 2008), allowing my responses to become apparent. While this removed an element of neutrality (Rapley 2007, 22) it successfully built rapport with each interviewee and provided rich data.

Prior to each interview I prepared a written prompt of themes and words specifically for the individual and their role within the disposal project. This guide, visible only to me, ensured interviewees discussed similar areas, but did not curtail unplanned topics as conversation developed. This freedom to "ramble" (Morris 2015, 10) enabled me to clarify or prompt for more information. The five dominant themes explored in the interviews were:

1. Career history: Including current role in the museum, extent of museum career, academic background.

2. Disposal project: Including their role, their understanding of the project goals, constraints or barriers to the project, project legacy, and unexpected outcomes.

3. Project communication: Including within the project team, and with the public, stakeholders, and the sector. During this theme I introduced an early version of the Transparent Communication Model to gauge if, and how, they thought it relevant to their experience.

4. Personal attitudes to disposal: Including three key words or phrases summarising their attitude, whether their attitude had changed during or since the project, and whether they spoke about the project with family or friends.

5. Public-professional relationships: Including their thoughts of the purpose of museums, the value of collections, and the reactions of non-project members to the disposal process.

Each interview was transcribed — the majority by the Accessibility centre at the University of Leicester — and subsequently checked by me for accuracy and errors. I then coded each interview with keywords developed through an iterative process. My technique was not to utilise a specific coding system but allow themes and ideas to emerge from the data. Throughout this thesis each interviewee is named and then referenced by their initials, as listed below. Information and extracts from the interview material are referenced by the relevant question number ('Qx').

The use of other data sources varied between the two institutions, as detailed below. My aim for participant observation of project meetings and other communication events was not possible at either institution, as each project was complete or nearing completion by the time of my research. I acquired project documents to understand the goals and methods underpinning the projects, and the institutional policies which framed practical processes. I also requested project outputs including reports, exhibition texts, and press releases. However, the collection of this data proved difficult due to physical and intellectual access restrictions. For example, I was reliant on participants providing material according to my requests and descriptions, within their knowledge of their institution's data management systems. After the interviews I also gathered digital content including project blogs, social media posts, and website information, to explore how communication intentions were enacted. I will now present the nature of each case study in more detail.

4.6.2.1 Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery

The first case study is the project *Stories from the Stores* at Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery (Figure 19), which was renamed in 2020 *The Box, Plymouth*. The project ran between winter 2012 and spring 2015 and was funded by a grant of £46,100 from the Heritage Lottery Fund's *Your Heritage* scheme (Plymouth Museums Galleries Archives n.d.a). It was:

> … a project to assess the social history collection at Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery and create plans and opportunities for its future use. The project began with an audit of the collection which facilitated an 'open stores' style exhibition, when public opinion on the collection and style of display was solicited. The project ended with a pilot collections review. Throughout the project 'object stories' were collected to add context and interest to items in the collection. (Smith 2014a, 1).

This project thereby presented an opportunity to explore how transparency was enabled for public audiences through exhibition and other forms of engagement. The aims, rationale, and workings are explored in Chapter Six.

Figure 19: Exterior of Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery as it appeared in 2013. (Credit: Mick Lobb/City Museum and Art Gallery – Plymouth. Used under licence CC-BY-SA-2.0).

Participant interviews took place on 27 February and 8, 9, 14 March 2018, and 17 April and 5 July 2019. The disrupted timescale was caused by severe snowstorms, my ill health, and difficulties contacting the final interviewee. I interviewed nine individuals, comprising seven staff and two volunteers. Both volunteers were proposed by the curators as individuals enthusiastic about their involvement with the museum and the project. The interviewees and their roles (applicable during the project) were:

- Tabitha Cadbury (TC): Curator of Social History and World Cultures [job share], and joint project lead.

- Rachel Smith (RS): Curator of Social History and World Cultures [job share], and joint project lead.

- Jo Cairns (JCs): Curator of Social History [maternity cover].

- Laura Sorensen (LS): Project Officer.

- Florence Morgan-Richards (FMR): Project Assistant [Maternity cover].

- Jo Clarke (JCe): Marketing and Programme Development Officer.

- Nicki Thomas (NT): Documentation and IT Officer.

- June Beahan (JB): Volunteer.

- Michael Moore (MM): Volunteer, and Chair of the Friends of Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery.

4.6.2.2 Museum of London

The second case study is the Museum of London (Figure 20) and its project *Collections Review and Rationalisation (Social and Working History Collections)*. This ran between January 2014 and March 2017 (Cook 2017, 1) and aimed to:

> … undertake a major, curatorial led review and rationalisation of the Museum's social and working history collections at Mortimer Wheeler House… and also intended to create a refined collection that was better managed, stored and documented and more physically and intellectually accessible. (ibid.).

In practice this comprised a significance assessment and condition check of every object, by "opening each storage box and investigating every corner of the store" (Naomi Russell, pers. comm. 21 November 2017). A grant of £90,000 from the Esmée Fairbairn *Collections Fund*:

> … proved a turning point, transforming an initially inward focused [sic] project to one that had the potential to benefit the wider museum community and beyond. The development of an innovative and inspirational disposals programme lay at the heart of the funding application and it was anticipated that the project would also be sector-leading and set a benchmark for other museums... A further key strand of the funding application was to share the experience of review and rationalisation with other museum professions through formal and informal skill-sharing workshops and presentations. (ibid., 1-2).

The purpose of this case study was therefore to explore how transparency was enabled for professional museum audiences. The aims, rationale, and workings are explored in Chapter Seven.

Figure 20: Exterior of the Museum of London. (Credit: Iolanda Ogando, used under licence CC-BY-SA-2.0).

Participant interviews occurred on 20, 21, and 22 November 2017 with five members of staff:

- Beverley Cook (BC): Curator of Social and Working History, and project lead.

- Abby Moore (AM): Collection Care Conservator.

- Luke Pomeroy (LP): Documentation Officer.

- Kathy Richmond (KR): Registrar.

- Naomi Russell (NR): Project Assistant.

Additional interviews with another Project Assistant (Lizzie Cooper) and the Head of Communications (Andrew Marcus) were cancelled due to my ill health, and proved impossible to reschedule due to Covid restrictions.

4.7 Statement of Research Ethics

Researcher integrity and ethics are essential components of contemporary academic practice, and my research is subject to the University of Leicester's Research Ethics approval and monitoring system (Reference 11191-jmd53-museumstudies, Approved

21/6/2017). As a student exploring applied ethics, I have been mindful to maintain these standards throughout my research journey.

Within this chapter I have already explored the issues of my researcher status and bias. The involvement of my research contributors requires a similar explanation within my duty "to protect the interests of participants" (Denscombe 2010, 59). Most importantly, this research is underpinned by informed consent, with all institutions and individuals choosing to participate. For both case study museums I obtained written institutional approval from a senior member of staff prior to my research visits. For interviewees, consent was given based on a written statement provided before each interview which explained the purpose and use of the data they provided, and a short summary of my identity and research role. Any information taken from case study documents, for example quotes from focus group participants, is used with institutional permission. The individuals had consented for their words to be recorded and used in association with that project.

The option for participant anonymity differed according to the nature of their involvement. For survey respondents, anonymity was offered as very limited identifying data was collected. By contrast, anonymity for case study participants was not possible as they would be easily identifiable from their institution and role. Indeed, the visibility of these individuals is an important aspect of transparency. However, I was mindful to create opportunities for participants to assess their contributions for contextual accuracy. Accordingly, each interviewee was able to request information be taken off-the-record both during and after the interview. A small number of individuals chose this option, and the relevant data has been excluded from this thesis. Interviewees were able to withdraw from the research within two months of the interview date; an option which was not used. Finally, I offered interviewees the opportunity to review their words as quoted within my thesis to avoid misrepresentation. It is with sincere gratitude that I thank all my research participants for their engagement with this research and their willingness to reveal their practices and personal motivations for my consideration.

4.8 A note on terminology

Within this research exploring transparency and communication it is pertinent that I briefly clarify key terms used throughout this thesis. Most importantly, and allied with the geographical focus of my research, I use the UK terminology outlined in the Museum Association's *Disposal Toolkit* (2014). I define "disposal" as the process and workings of object removal from a museum collection, and "deaccessioning" as the administrative step to remove legal guardianship. My use of "curatorially-motivated disposal", "financially-motivated disposal", "collections review", and "rationalisation" also accord to those used by the Museums Association. For simplicity, throughout this thesis 'disposal' solely refers to curatorially-motivated disposal, unless otherwise stated.

I also distinguish between 'practitioners' and 'professionals'. I use the term 'practitioner' as a catch-all term for anyone who operates in a museum to a defined role description on either a paid or unpaid basis. I use 'professional' to denote individuals who are paid for their work and have prolonged museum training and knowledge (Oxford English Dictionary).

4.9 Chapter summary

At the beginning of this chapter I introduced myself as the research narrator, and shared the development of this research project as powerfully shaped by my personal and professional experiences of objects, stories, and perceptions of social value. I have demonstrated how my subjective experiences and world view have informed my methodology, and created an interpretivist strategy which places importance on individual perceptions and resulting actions within a framework of socially-approved and endorsed boundaries. I have explained the reasons for my methodology and the rationale for the selection of research participants.

Within my overarching aim to explore the need and possibilities for transparent disposal practice I have outlined four areas I will explore in this thesis: the nature and understanding of 'transparency' within the museum context of disposal; the proposed two core elements of people and communication for creating and shaping

transparency acts; how disposal transparency is regarded by individual practitioners within the professional domain; and the barriers affecting its successful creation.

Further, I have proposed a Transparent Communication Model which utilises the theories of Communities of Practice and Radical Transparency to suggest how practitioners might identify audiences for transparent communication acts, and select appropriate modes of communication by which to attempt it. This model will be tested by my data and shaped for potential application in the real-world setting of museum disposal.

Accordingly, within the narrative story of this thesis it is now time to move from the opening scene-setting and become immersed in the stories revealed by the data.

Chapter 5: Practitioner Attitudes to Disposal Transparency

"In an ideal world consultation and communication

would absolutely be part of the process." (Respondent 41)

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I begin to reveal the hidden world of disposal practice. My first step is to prove that disposal is occurring within UK practice and demonstrate that silence does not arise from the absence of disposal practice. The next step is to explore the cause of the silence. To delve into this topic we hear from practitioners themselves; many of whom have experienced disposal in the 'real world' and have a professional duty to create transparency to their actions. Their important testimonies present a 'big picture' of how disposal has been revealed or concealed from audiences.

But this chapter is not simply an explanation of absent practice. Through practitioners' words I explore perceptions of what disposal transparency *could* be, and consider the proposed barriers which prevent its creation. I examine the interplay between personal attitudes and professional practice, and attempt to identify how institutional context might constrain or support practitioners. Through this detailed data I propose that opacity of practice originates from the mindset and perceptions of individual practitioners, who navigate a complex route within their institutional setting.

When reading this chapter it is important to remain aware of the sectoral context which arose after this survey was undertaken in 2017. For as explored in Chapter One, the 'disposal problem' was subsequently identified by researchers from the sociological context within the *Profusion in Museums* project (Fredheim et al. 2018). Their three key findings about the professional disposal process – the emotional impact, differing knowledges, and communication issues – were all explored in my survey and are discussed throughout this chapter. This coincidence of academic insights demonstrates the relevance of my thesis, and the value of exploring practitioners' personal experiences and views about disposal transparency.

Throughout this chapter I utilise the ideas and terminology of my Transparent Communication Model outlined in the previous chapter: of Professional, Public, and Stakeholder Communities and their constituent subgroup audiences. Also, the Spectrum of Communication Modes, from Blocking to Shared decision-making, which prevent or enable transparency. I use my model as a framework to understand the surveyed practitioners' thoughts, ideas, and actions.

My analysis is presented in four main sections: Attitudes to disposal; Attitudes to transparency; Perceptions of audiences; and Perceived barriers to practice. Within each section I offer insights to the 'real world' experience versus ideals, and I explore how perceptions and actions differ according to the target audience. To aid navigation it may be helpful to refer to this chapter structure:

5.2 Survey participation

5.3 Attitudes to disposal

5.3.1   Professional attitudes

5.3.2   Personal attitudes

5.4 Attitudes to transparency

5.4.1: Disposal transparency as 'real-world' practice

    5.4.1.1: Professional transparency

    5.4.1.2: Public transparency

    5.4.1.3: Stakeholder transparency

    5.4.1.4: Practitioner insights

    5.4.1.5: Summary of real-world transparency practice

5.4.2: Disposal transparency in an ideal world

    5.4.2.1: Professional transparency

    5.4.2.2: Public transparency

    5.4.2.3: Stakeholder transparency

5.2 Survey participation

Before I explore the survey findings it is important to review the respondent demographics and assess the relevance of the data offered. My research criteria were outlined in the preceding chapter.

The survey received 43 responses. My requirement for participants to be involved with an Accredited museum required the removal of three respondents from the data analysis. These individuals represented museums without Accredited status and comprised: a volunteer in an independent museum "working towards Accreditation" (R30); a paid professional in a local authority museum which had "lost Accreditation due to financially motivated disposal" (R5); and a professional in a private museum who gave no context for the lack of Accredited status (R33). These participants have been excluded from the data and this chapter solely utilises information from the 40 participants associated with an Accredited museum.

The survey achieved a geographical spread across England, Scotland, and Wales, albeit with most respondents from England (36/40). Participants represented different types of museum governance including Local Authority museums (19), National museums (6), Independent museums with paid staff (12), and University museums (3).

The participants encompassed a strong theoretical knowledge of museum practice. All were educated to degree level, with most holding a postgraduate qualification (36/40). This theoretical awareness of sectoral practice was further evidenced by a common familiarity with the *Disposal Toolkit*, with most respondents having read the document (35/40). Of the five respondents who had not read the *Toolkit*, two were also not individual members of the Museums Association.

Most respondents were female (31/40). Over half the participants had worked in the museum profession for more than 16 years, and therefore offered a deep familiarity with the sector. Most respondents were in roles closely associated with practical collections work: 21 in curatorial roles of Curator, Assistant Curator, or Senior Curator; and 15 in collections management including Assistant Registrar, Collections Manager, Documentation Officer, or Museum Collections Project Officer. In addition, four respondents worked with a broader remit as Collections Care Officer, Digitisation Officer, Director, or Consultant. Individuals represented a breadth of collection types including Archaeology, Decorative and Fine Art, Industrial, Military, Natural History, Numismatics, Social History, and World Cultures.

Importantly for this research, most respondents (34/40) had practical experience of curatorially-motivated disposal. Further, fifteen respondents had *initiated* a disposal process. Therefore, most respondents offered insight to the 'real world' workings of disposal transparency. They also conclusively demonstrate that disposal is occurring in UK museums, and across a range of governance types and collections.

5.3 Attitudes to disposal

My analysis begins with the first main section: practitioner attitudes to disposal. Before unpicking the intricacies of 'transparency' it is important to understand how the disposal process itself is regarded. I sought to understand whether a negative perception of disposal causes practitioners to hide it from view. According to my theory — that professional practice is underpinned by personal views — I asked participants about this area in two aspects: their experience of disposal as practitioners, and their personal perceptions of the practice.

5.3.1 Professional attitudes to disposal

To begin this exploration participants were asked to, "Write three words or phrases which best reflect your professional attitude to curatorially-motivated disposal". These are summarised in Figure 21.

Figure 21: Words used by participants to express their professional attitude to disposal.

The responses suggest a general acceptance of disposal with over a third of participants describing it as "necessary". Other positive words included "good" and "beneficial", with more emphatic positivity evidenced by "ambitious" and "presents opportunities". Only two of the forty respondents voiced hesitancy, evidenced by their responses "slightly scary" (R16) and "extreme caution advised" (R40). In addition, three individuals described disposal as "challenging", but without a supporting

explanation it is unknown whether these represent a positive or negative perception. Overall, the survey participants therefore demonstrated a professional attitude of cautious positivity about the disposal process.

Within this generalisation are subtleties and nuance. For example, five individuals offered emotional responses. These included a positive reflection from an individual who declared themselves, "A convert. I recognise I've come on the same journey as the wider sector. It's actually very fulfilling!" (R13). Their words hint at the personal investment within professional practice which has been evidenced in the preceding chapters, and the value of peer support for changing ideas and practice.

Other participants focussed on the technicalities of disposal. These included seven people whose language reflected the terminology of sectoral guidance. For example, Respondent 35 stated:

> Often essential part of rationalisation; can lead to objects going to a more appropriate home; often unavoidable if there is an issue of conservation.

Another stated:

> Necessary to make efficient use of limited space and increase access to collections; Ensures the collections you hold are relevant and of historical value; Enables better care and documentation of retained items. (R38).

Within these 'textbook' answers the individuals placed emphasis on practicalities such as access, care, and documentation, and thereby demonstrated that the language and ideas of sectoral guidance were present in their mind. Such responses are unsurprising as the question asked for their professional views, and most respondents worked in roles allied with collections management and were thereby familiar with official guidance. Still, one of these respondents offered a critique of the sectoral guidance by suggesting, "Current approaches to CMD [curatorially-motivated disposal] are insufficiently systematic or rigorous" (R36). In this way the individual has distanced themselves from the process by directing criticism towards sectoral leaders. It is interesting to ponder whether this position indicates a genuine criticism; or a lack of confidence in the disposal process, or their institutional approach to it, or indeed in their own practice.

While procedural guidelines were present in some respondents' minds the underlying ethics were notably absent. Two participants regarded disposal as "controversial" (R18 and R4), while another counteracted this view and suggested disposal was "Usually the uncontroversial 'day-job'" (R20). This latter comment is especially important because it suggests disposal was an embedded practice for that individual and their museum.

Similarly, transparency was notable by its absence. Only a single individual stated "transparency" (R21) among their three words, while others suggested disposal should be "open and honest" (R28) or "requiring high levels of knowledge, accountability and integrity" (R18). These individuals therefore demonstrate awareness of the need for transparency, and lightly evidence the parity of the words 'open and honest' which was examined in Chapter Two of this thesis.

Taken together, the general absence of regard for disposal ethics and transparency may suggest that ethical issues are not perceived to exist. Or conversely, it could suggest the survey participants believed transparency was already occurring. More importantly, for the three respondents who expressed notions of transparency, their consideration of disposal had moved beyond practicalities to a bigger concern for practitioner-audience relationships. That so few respondents verbalised this awareness may indicate a prevalent view of disposal as an inwardly focussed task.

The expressed 'big picture' professional attitudes to disposal therefore suggest an inclination towards positivity. The focus on process suggests a task-orientated view. The dominant lack of consideration for the ethical imperative of transparency may suggest an inward-looking gaze that separates the practice from the wider social context.

5.3.2 Personal attitudes to disposal

Having explored participants' professional views of disposal a separate question asked for their personal attitudes. This question aimed to discover how these views accorded with, or differed from, the professional mindset.

Participants were shown a list of eight words that represented positive or negative associations, and which represented attitudes rather than practicalities. The rationale for this was discussed in Chapter Four. The distinction between positive words

(Essential, Liberating, Opportunity, Revitalising) and negative words (Boring, Controversial, Difficult, Unnecessary) was not revealed to the participants. They were asked to select any words that represented their personal view.

In total, respondents chose 99 positive words and 63 negative (Figure 22). The maximum number of selections for each word was 40 (if it was chosen by all respondents). The most popular was 'Opportunity' (32/40). The positive 'Essential' and the negatives 'Difficult' and 'Controversial' were jointly in second place (31 each). The least popular were 'Boring' with a single selection, and nobody viewed disposal as 'Unnecessary'. The strong perception that disposal can be 'Liberating' (19) and 'Revitalising' (17) suggests optimism about the disposal process. The general picture is therefore of personal positivity to disposal but with a perception that it can be troublesome. This perception mirrors the prevalent professional attitude revealed in the preceding section.
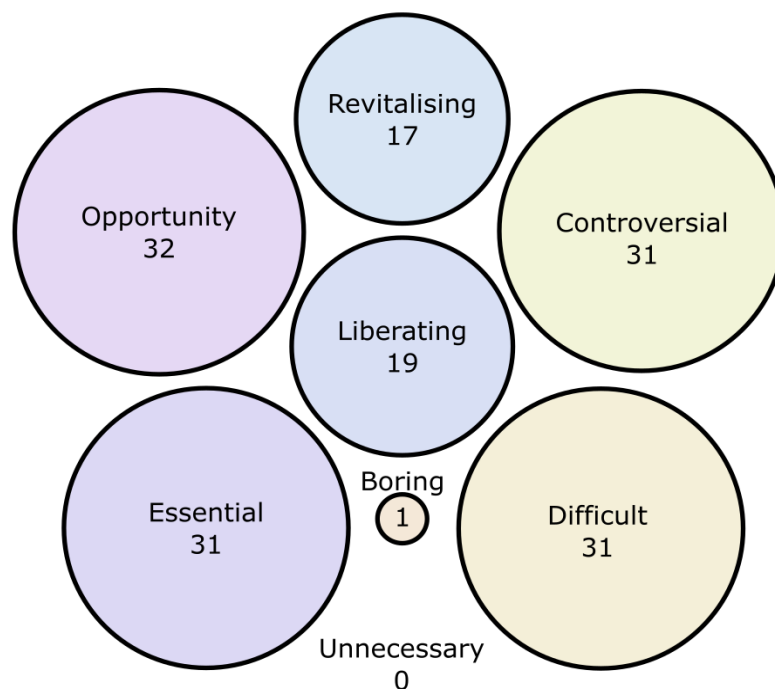
Figure 22: Participants' personal attitude to disposal, as represented by their selections from a list of eight words.

To explore this finding more deeply I examined the number of words chosen by each respondent. A majority of positive or negative words indicated their overall attitude. Respondents who scored an equal number of each were recorded as neutral. For example, Respondent 1 chose two negative words, so their overall attitude was negative. Respondent 29 chose four words, two positive and two negative, so their attitude was neutral. Respondent 3 chose five words, four from the positive list and one negative, so their overall attitude was positive.

The results of this analysis (Figure 23) showed an overwhelming individual positivity for disposal. Of the 40 respondents, 30 expressed a positive view and six were neutral. This general attitude of positivity is of considerable interest, especially because, as seen in Figure 22, many individuals supported an emphatic view of disposal as 'Liberating' (19/40) or 'Revitalising' (17/40). This contrasts with the findings of the *Profusion in Museums* study, examined in Chapter Three, whose participants expressed feelings of guilt and anxiety about disposal practice (Fredheim et al. 2018). It demonstrates that, as individuals, my surveyed practitioners felt positively about the disposal process and identified emotional benefits from undertaking it.
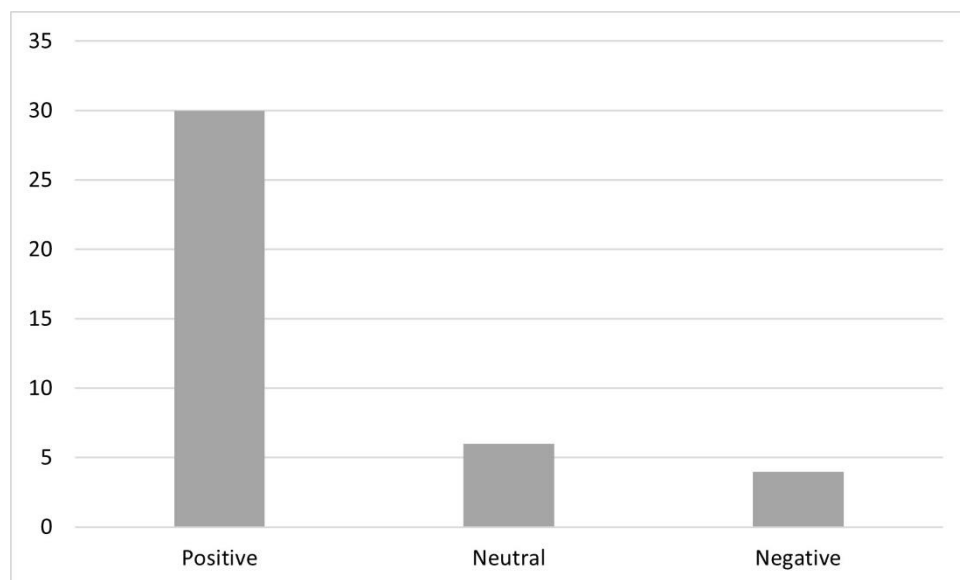
Figure 23: Personal attitude to disposal practice, as indicated by the number of positive or negative words chosen from the offered list.

Only four people (R1, R2, R16 and R40) held a negative view of disposal. Two of those were not members of the Museums Association and also had not read the *Disposals Toolkit*, although one had been involved in a disposal process during their career. A third had no practical experience of disposal. This suggests that for two of the respondents their negative personal view reflected their practical experience. For the other two, their personal attitude was based on theoretical knowledge. But it is important to note that across the results there is no clear association between practical involvement with disposal and either a positive or negative personal attitude. For example, of the six respondents with no practical experience of disposal, three regarded it as positive, and three expressed a neutral or negative perception.

When considering these results of personal attitude it is important to consider the possible bias in my sampling population. For the opt-in participation will likely have attracted people with strong feelings about disposal. If this bias is present, the data suggests the survey attracted people with a general positivity for disposal, while those with anti-disposal feelings may be less represented. Indeed, perhaps the latter are better represented among the *Profusion in Museums* project findings with its evidenced hesitancy and reluctance for disposal.

Still, as many respondents in my survey had experienced disposal, rather than merely considering the theoretical concept, the evident positivity may suggest one of two things. First, these practitioners were more inclined to undertake disposal because they regarded it in a positive light. Alternatively, that undertaking a disposal process had changed their feelings from the general anxiety witnessed elsewhere in the sector, to feelings of positive liberation. Unfortunately, it is not possible from the data to resolve this question of 'chicken or egg'.

One intriguing finding surrounds the concept of 'controversy' evidenced within personal and professional views. When compared to the question of professional attitudes, the personal association with 'controversial' saw a large increase in reporting (31/40). Therefore, more people identified with this concept when it was presented as a specific option, than in the preceding question with its free text comments. But the meaning of this difference is unclear. It may suggest that controversy was not within the professional mind. Or it could mean that controversy

was in their mind, but within their short, written answers was deemed of less importance than the words and phrases they gave. It could also indicate that practitioners more strongly identified with the risk of controversy as an individual person, rather than in their professional role. It is interesting to pose that this means the fear of risk is personally felt, but professionally shielded by the institutional context.

It is therefore evident that while many respondents regarded disposal as a controversial practice, the majority voiced a stronger personal positivity than was evident from their professional mindset. Further interpretation must be undertaken with caution, given the self-selecting nature of the sample population. But it is interesting to ponder the implications. For it suggests that professional attitudes are more cautious than personal views. In turn this may demonstrate a high level of professionalism which removes personal beliefs from daily practice.

Further, and most importantly, it cannot be asserted that the general lack of disposal transparency arises from a practitioner negativity towards disposal itself. It is therefore important to explore how practitioners perceive 'transparency' and its interplay with the disposal process.

5.4 Attitudes to transparency

My analysis now turns to the second section of exploration: attitudes to transparency for museum audiences. This was explored from two angles. First, practitioners' experience of transparency in the 'real world': or more simply, what *had* happened? Second, their personal views for an idealised world: or, what *should* happen? The following analysis is therefore presented as two sections. Section 5.4.1 delves into disposal transparency as 'real-world' practice, and Section 5.4.2 explores disposal transparency in an ideal world.

Within both explorations the proposed audiences correspond to those in my Transparent Communication Model (Figure 24). Survey participants were asked to choose modes of communication for each audience and could choose as many per audience as they deemed suitable.

Proposed Transparent Communication Model:
Communities of Practice

Profession	Public	Stakeholder
• Internal: Collections • Internal: Non collections • External professionals	• Visitors • Local communities • Online audiences • Journalists	• Governing body • Funding body • Patrons / Financial donors • Volunteers • Friends / Members • Object donors
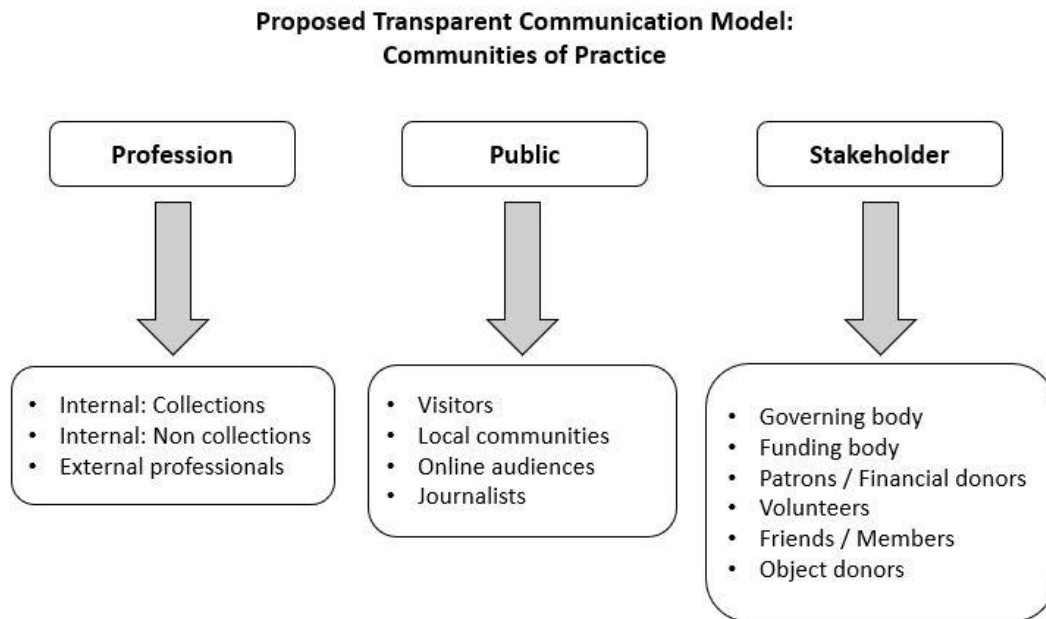
Figure 24: Audiences for transparency, grouped by Community of Practice.

5.4.1 Disposal transparency as 'real world' practice

For the following exploration of 'real world' practice — of what *has* happened — the data contains only the 34 respondents who stated an experience of disposal; it excludes six individuals who said they had never been involved. The possible communication options correlated to those in my proposed Model (Table 1).

Type of communication	Equivalent Model mode
Group was not involved	Blocking; Silence
Information sharing (e.g. press release, social media, display)	Informing
Consultation (e.g. survey, interviews)	Consulting
Dialogue (e.g. community panels, focus groups)	Dialogue
Shared decision-making (e.g. nominated representatives)	Shared decision-making
Not applicable – I have not been involved	For respondents without experience

Table 1: The communication choices offered to participants within the question of real-world experience of disposal transparency.

The headline results of real-world disposal transparency further demonstrate the trends outlined in earlier in this thesis. Specifically (Figure 25), the most common experience was opacity through 'Silence or Blocking' (184 responses). 'Informing' was the second most common experience (106). This finding provides firm evidence that museums have been preventing or restricting transparency to their disposal processes.
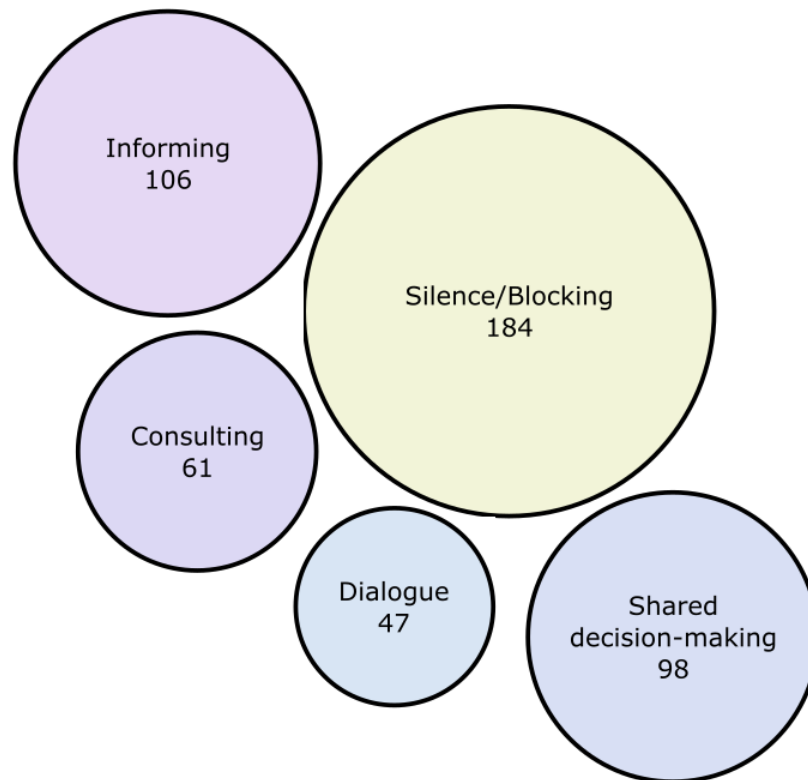
Figure 25: The number of communication modes reported in real-world disposal practice.

But the third most common experience was of 'Shared decision-making', and within these general findings it is important to look at the nuances of transparency for different audiences (Figure 26). For example, the use of transparency according to audience is clearly seen with the mode of Silence or Blocking. In total, practitioners reported this had occurred 12 times for the Profession, 81 times for the Public, and 91 for Stakeholders. It is therefore evident that disposal had often been hidden from Public and Stakeholder audiences, and far more than for Professional audiences.
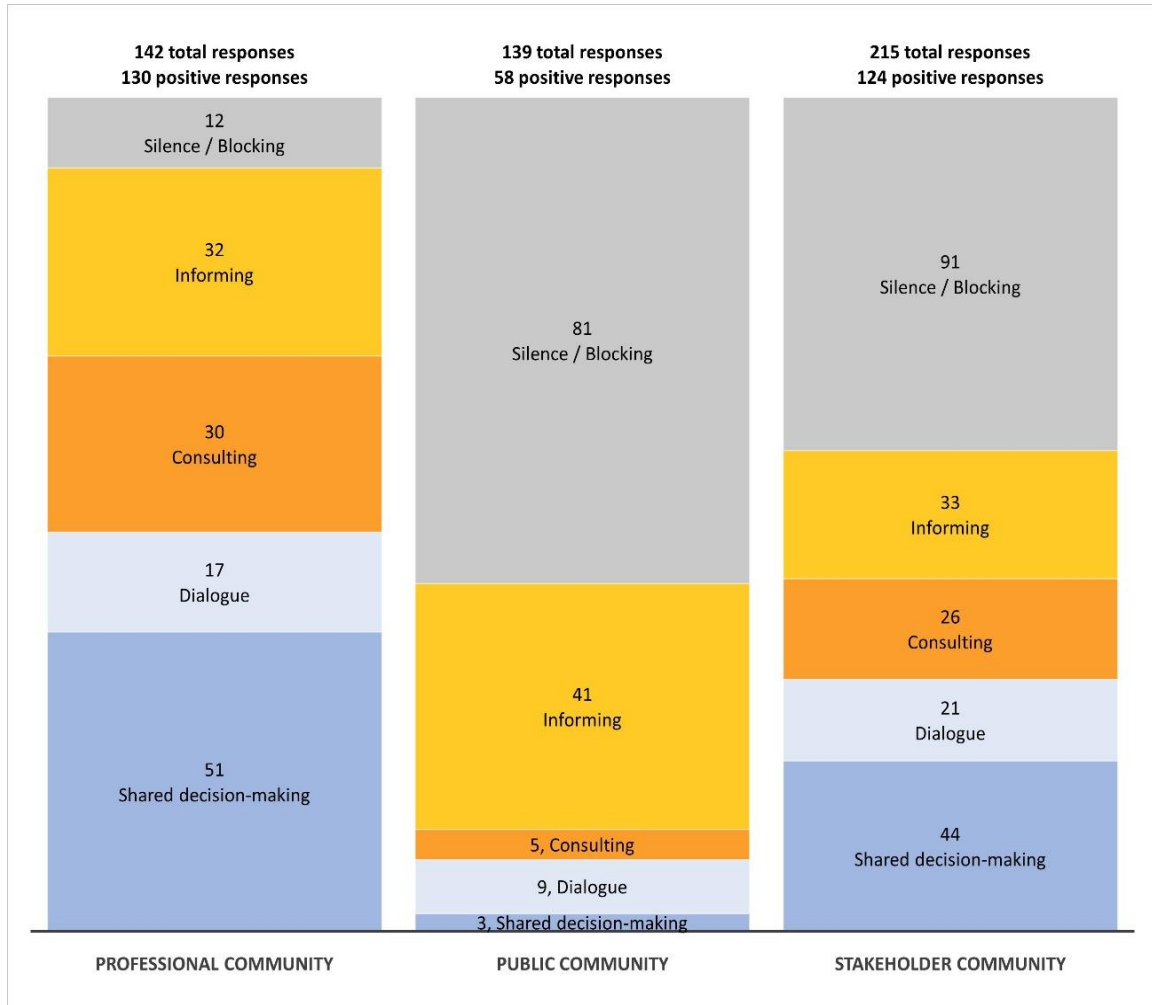
Figure 26: Disposal transparency as reported in the 'real world': the number of
communication events by Community of Practice.

While significant, this 'big picture' finding should be taken with caution. The number of
reported occurrences is numerically very different between the Professional and
'outsider' audiences. However, the Public and Stakeholder communities each contain
more constituent subgroups than the Professional community. Therefore, this will
have generated a higher number of responses. Nevertheless, the data for the positive
transparency acts (i.e. excluding Silence and Blocking) demonstrates this is not an
inevitable numerical difference. Here, despite their different number of audience
subgroups, there is parity between the Professional and Stakeholder communities.
Specifically, in the total number of positive transparency actions the Professional
audience received 130 instances, and Stakeholders 124 instances. By contrast,

transparency for Public audiences only occurred on 58 instances. This clearly reinforces the evidence that public audiences have been prevented from seeing or engaging with disposal.

These findings are very important as they demonstrate transparency has operated differently according to the target audience. The Profession has received the most transparency, Public audiences the least, with Stakeholders in a complex middle ground. I propose these contrasts are not numerical quirks but demonstrate that practitioners have tended to restrict visibility and engagement to those outside the sector. Unfortunately, it is not possible to identify whether the transparency absences were a conscious decision (Blocking) or an unconscious inaction (Silence). With these headline findings in mind I will now explore more deeply the real-world transparency for each Community.

5.4.1.1 Professional transparency

I begin this detailed exploration of real-world transparency with Professional audiences (Figure 27). Within the sectoral transparency is evidence of radical transparency through information revelation and the creation of understanding. Looking at the constituent Professional audiences, 'Internal: Collections staff' had the most recorded acts of transparency (54). Their engagement utilised all communication modes, with Shared decision-making the most common (27).

Transparency for 'Internal: Non-collections staff' and 'External professionals' were at similar levels to each other (a total of 37 and 39 positive actions) and utilised all communication modes. A low level of reported Silence or Blocking with these audiences (6 occurrences each) suggests disposal transparency had sometimes not extended beyond the immediate project team. Indeed, 'Internal: Collections staff' did not receive any reported instances of opacity.

This finding of professional transparency is unsurprising given the ethical imperative within the *Disposal Toolkit* to utilise expert knowledge. Indeed, the reported emphasis on transparency specifically with collections staff demonstrates the value placed on curatorial knowledge above that held by other sub-sectors, such as Visitor Services or Learning staff. This again is predictable, as collections-based knowledge is necessary

when making decisions about objects and their use. But this divide between museum sub-sectors, anecdotally known as 'silo working', could be detrimental to the disposal process. For example, non-curatorial staff may offer differing ideas of social value or potential new uses for objects.
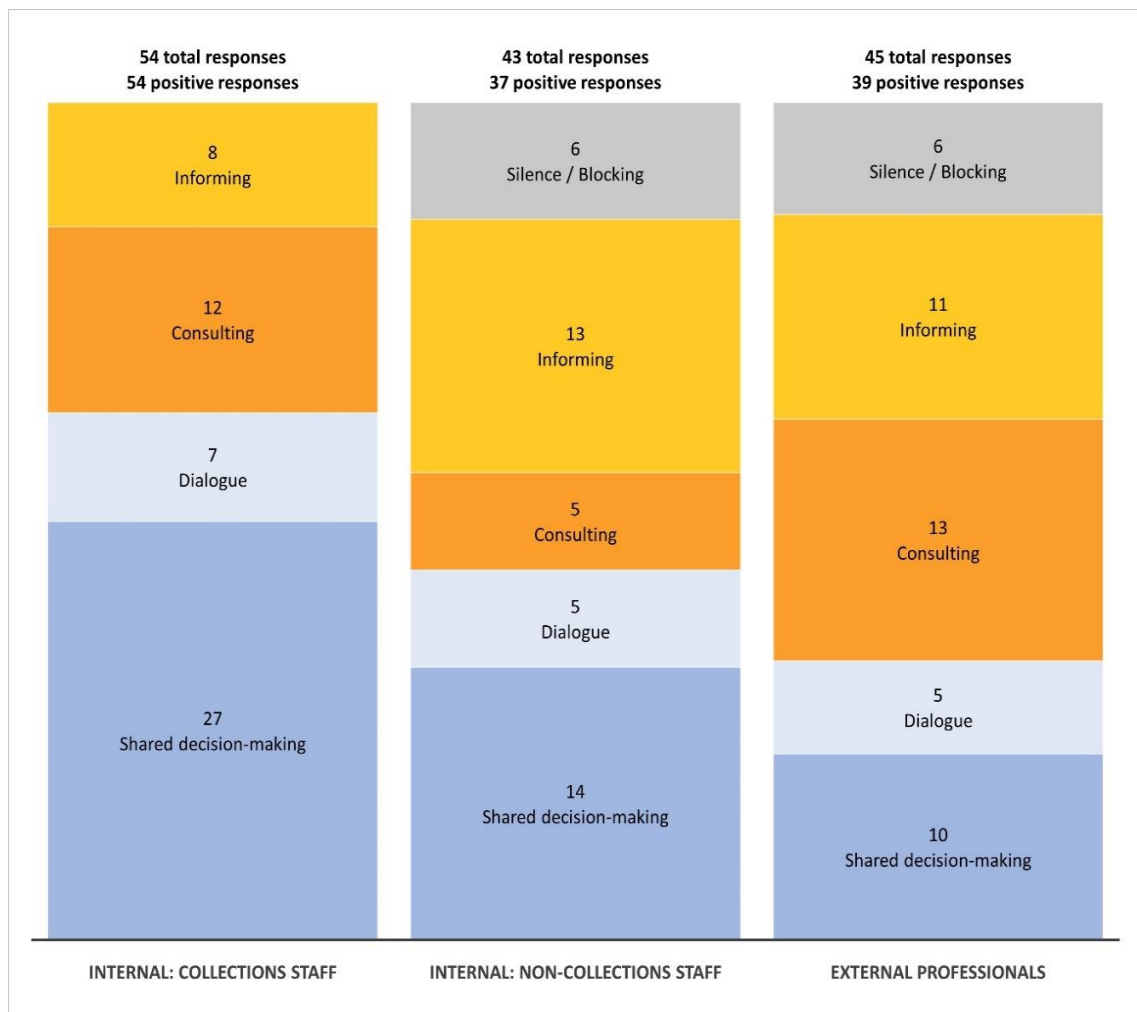
Figure 27: Professional Community audiences: the number of reported communication events in real-world practice.

Further, this curatorial transparency sheds light on the silence within the sectoral and academic literature, which I discussed in earlier chapters. It suggests that internal (institutional) transparency is more common than external (sectoral) transparency. Indeed, transparency may occur more readily at the local level, rather than the regional or national. This may explain why examples of disposal transparency in the national literature are so infrequent.

5.4.1.2 Public transparency

I now turn to real-world transparency with Public audiences (Figure 28). After the striking presence of 'Silence or Blocking' evidenced in the opening discussion (Section 5.4.1), the next most common form of Public transparency was 'Informing' (41 combined total). This was reported at similar levels for all Public subgroups. Indeed, this similarity of reported instances is seen across all the communication modes as Public audiences received a broadly similar number of transparency acts. This parity is especially evident between 'Visitors' and 'Journalists' who received identical reported actions within each type of communication.

The parity between Visitors and Journalists is a fascinating insight as they are typically regarded at opposing extremes of museum engagement: visitors a primary audience, and journalists a group to be distanced. Further, this data demonstrates that some visitors had been distanced from the disposal process. This is a jarring insight when compared to the limited national background discussed in the opening chapters of this thesis, in which transparency was typically demonstrated via display and exhibition. Only when the Public was regarded as a 'Local community' was transparency recorded to have occurred more often, with a total of 20 transparency acts. It should be noted that the difference between 'Visitors' and 'Local communities' was not clearly defined within my survey questions, and this may have affected the results. For example, for some museums the local community is also the dominant visitor group.

For Public audiences the least reported transparency was with 'Online audiences'. Only ten respondents recorded communication: nine instances of 'Informing', and one act of 'Dialogue'. Therefore, when transparency was attempted for this group, they were made aware of the disposal process but excluded from deeper engagement. This echoes the opacity for digital audiences highlighted in Chapter Three.
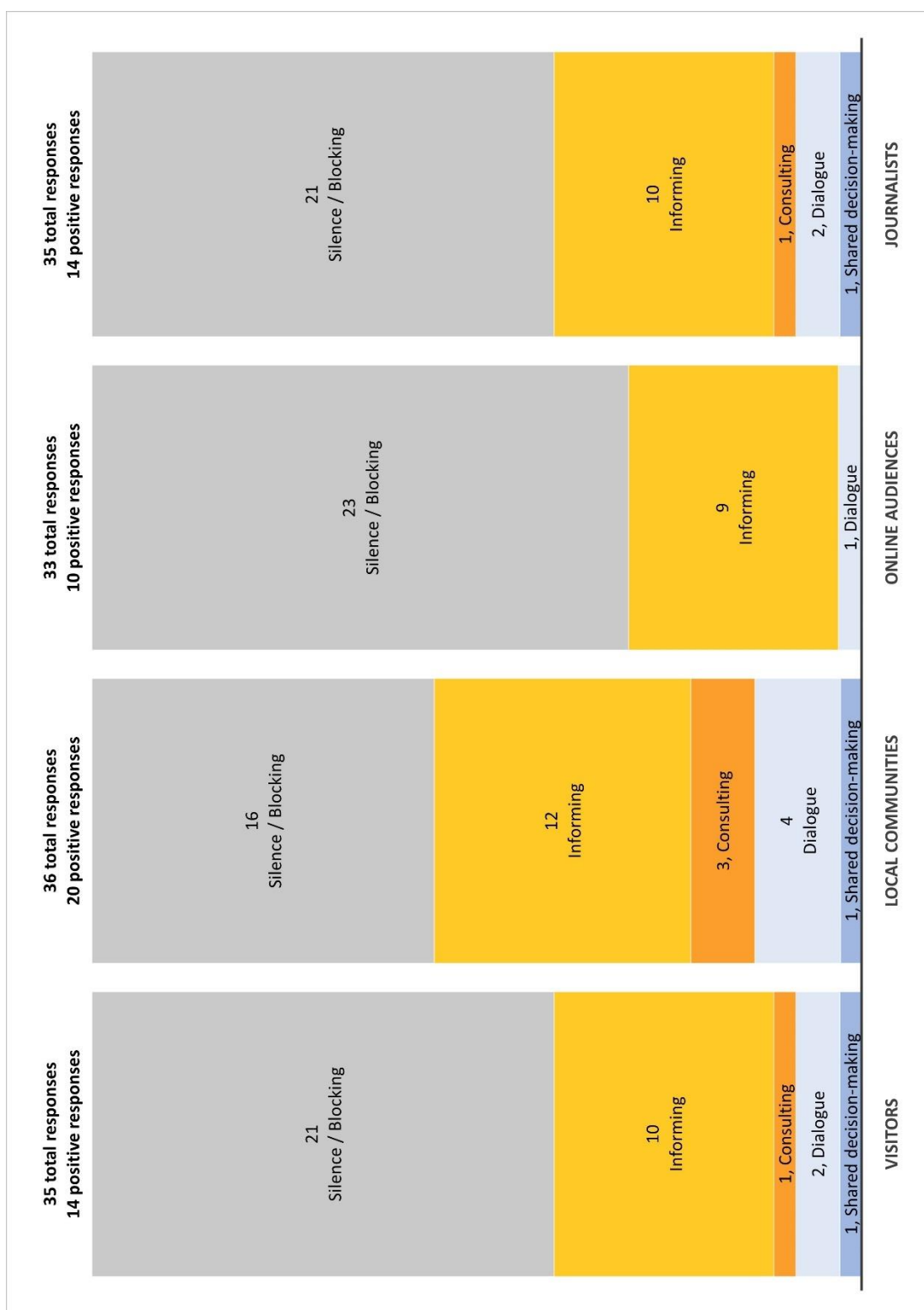
Figure 28: Public Community audiences: the number of reported communication events in real-world practice.

5.4.1.3 Stakeholder transparency

Stakeholders is the final audience to explore within reported real-world transparency (Figure 29). This Community is the most interesting as the data reveals dichotomies according to the relationship with the target audience. For example, as seen earlier in this chapter (Section 5.4.1, Figure 24), Stakeholders encountered the most opacity. Yet the next most common communication mode was 'Shared decision-making' (55 reported instances). This is a stark contrast between hidden practice and full engagement and is largely explained by interaction with the 'Governing body'. This audience accounted for nearly half the reported cases of Shared decision-making (26/44). Indeed, the Governing body was the second most engaged of the Stakeholder audiences with 43 recorded transparency actions, second only to 'Object donors' (38).

The multi-modal transparency with the Governing body is unsurprising, given their legal remit and relationship with museums. Indeed, in some situations this relationship may be more akin to the Professional community than the Stakeholder. For example, as the final signatory approver for the disposal process (Museums Association 2014) their role is as integral as the 'Internal: Collections staff' audience who lead the process. Yet the Governing body typically lacks the *daily* lived experience of museum practice and therefore within this research I chose to situate them within the Stakeholder Community.

Given their functional role within disposal it is alarming that two respondents reported excluding the Governing body from the disposal process though 'Silence or Blocking'. As this audience holds legal and ethical responsibility for the museum and its collection, their exclusion is at best a negligent oversight. At worst it is an example of how disposal processes and transparency decisions may generate questions of possible ulterior motives or unethical practices.
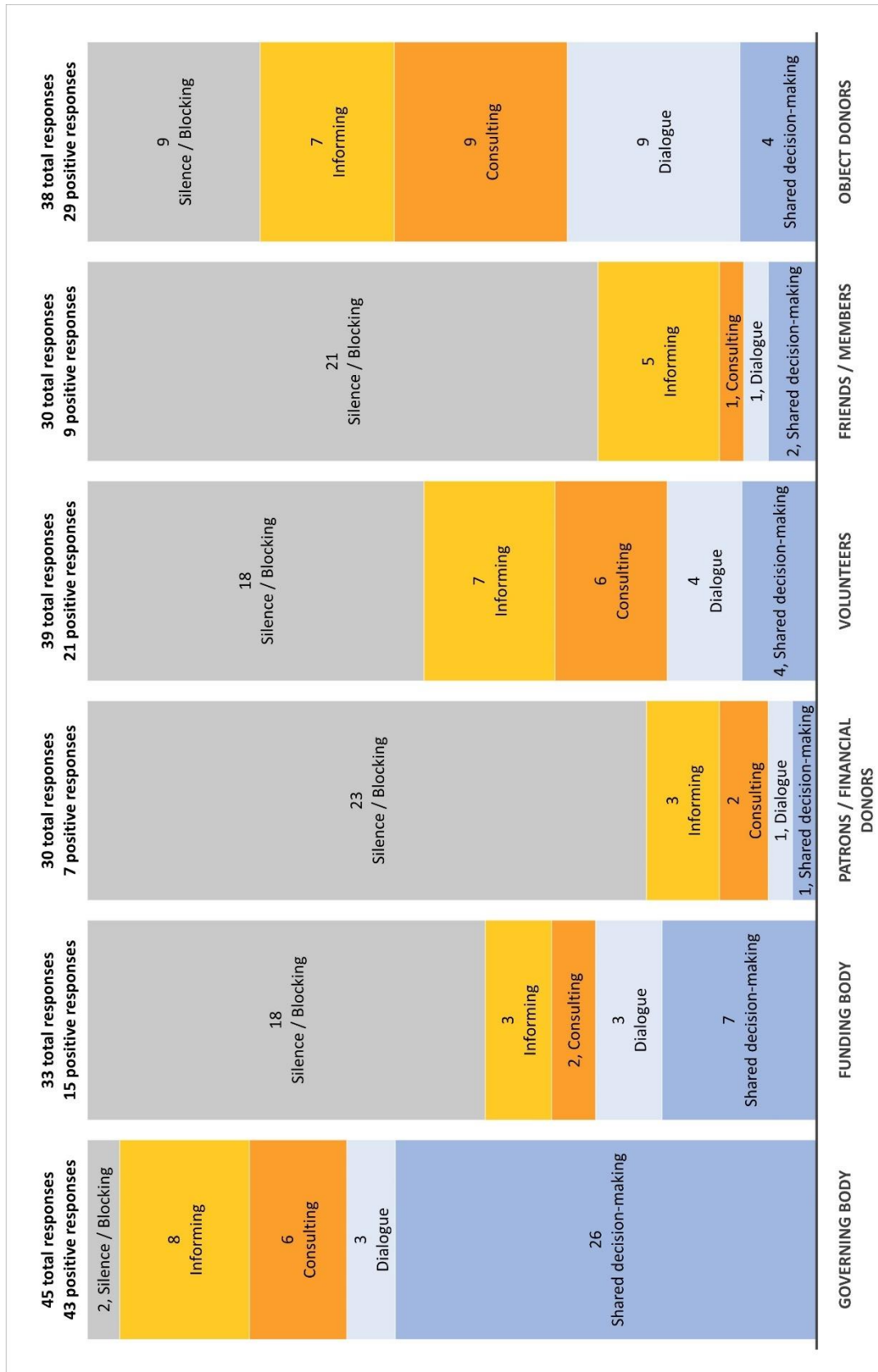
Figure 29: Stakeholder Community audiences: the number of reported communication events in real-world practice.

Turning to the other Stakeholder audiences, 'Object donors' received the most acts of radical transparency through 'Consulting' and 'Dialogue'. This likely reflects their relationship to the process, as the *Disposal Toolkit* suggests returning an object to the donor within the earliest considerations (Museums Association 2014, 17). Consequently, a Consultation between Practitioner and Object donor about future options could easily develop into sustained Dialogue.

Of more interest is the number of respondents who enacted 'Silence or Blocking' for Object donors – a number equal to those enacting Consulting or Dialogue (9 each). This difference may reflect practicalities such as the donor being unknown or untraceable. But the dichotomy between silence and radical transparency may also reflect the disparate legalities and ethics of object ownership, and thus reveal sight to the subtleties of interpreting ethical guidance. For in legal terms, the donation of an object to the museum transfers legal ownership to the governing body. Accordingly, the museum likely has the right to do with that object as they wish (Ulph 2015a; 2015b). In that situation, transparency is a question of risk management. It requires consideration of whether the disposal might create negative reaction and thereby cause reputational damage. Communication with an object's donor may therefore represent an act of courteous transparency: not a necessity, but a good idea.

Two Stakeholder audiences are found in the middle of the data: 'Volunteers', and 'Friends/Members'. Each has a museum relationship which combines vested interest and practical engagement. The higher total of transparency acts for volunteers (21) than Friends/Members (9) likely reflect their closer regular involvement with collections-based tasks, and a possible deeper knowledge of the collection and the museum. That relationship echoes the evidenced centrality of 'Internal: Collections staff' and would make transparency more pertinent, and practically useful, to the disposal process.

Finally within this Stakeholder community, the audience with the least reported transparency was 'Patrons or Financial donors'. This was evidenced by the most reported instances of Silence or Blocking (23), and the lowest number of transparency acts (7). This is another interesting finding, given their association with financial giving to the museum and their role as institutional advocates. The low level of reported

transparency may demonstrate museum staff attempting to distance disposal from the economic valuing of objects. It may also demonstrate an attempt to avoid reputational damage or jeopardising income generation, thereby presenting the risk aversion evidenced earlier in this thesis.

5.4.1.4 Practitioner insights

The evidence for reported real-world disposal transparency therefore suggests a strong preference for Professional transparency, and the distancing of Public and Stakeholder audiences (except for the Governing body). But a note of caution is required, as it is important to recognise limitations when drawing generalisations from the qualitative survey data.

For example, by asking respondents to remember previous practice some errors will have crept in through misremembrance or forgetfulness. Further, the nature of each respondent's role within the disposal process will have shaped their knowledge of it; those on the periphery may not have been aware of all considered or enacted communications. This may be especially true for communications with 'Patrons and Financial Donors' which may have occurred between more senior members of staff than the individuals responding to this survey. In addition, some responses present more than one practice experienced by the individual respondent. For example, three practitioners indicated they had been involved in processes in both their current and previous roles. Therefore, individual responses are not a portrayal of any single disposal transparency process but provide a general indication of practice. With this in mind, it is pertinent to briefly explore participant explanations of their experiences.

Importantly, the respondents' comments support my findings that transparency acts are chosen for different audiences, and for different disposal processes. The need for this flexibility was highlighted by several participants including one comment about the survey that, "Tick boxes don't really cover the complexities of the disposals I've known" (R36). This sentiment was echoed within another comment that:

> I think the nature of communication depends on the disposal. If you are considering disposing of one item for conservation issues, I don't think any communication outside of the museum is necessary. But if you are going to

undertake large-scale rationalisation of a collection, then that is completely different and there needs to be communication with the wider community in place. (R34).

Another participant affirmed this view by explaining:

Within the collections team, we have set up our recent disposal list. Our collections manager and museum manager both checked and agreed to the list. The list then is sent to the County Council Members who then publish it, available for members of the public. After a scrutinising period, we published our list with the MA [Museums Association], we contacted other museums who we believed might be interested in items on the list, we contacted the donors. (R12).

Therefore it is evident that disposal transparency in practice cannot be reduced to a single strategy or method. It requires a variety of processes that are relevant to the museum and the disposal process being undertaken.

An important consideration for creating transparency is the communication objective. For example, one participant inadvertently summarised the complexities of intent and action by stating, "All decisions on disposals are available on the council website, but we don't necessarily publicise them directly" (R28). This act, of making disposal visible by hiding it in plain sight, is evidence of 'tick box' transparency which creates action from duty rather than ethical consideration. Visibility cannot be regarded as transparency if audiences are not aware the information exists or are unable to interrogate it. This is a clear example of the 'dashboard' transparency described by Marstine (2013, 9-13).

Still, awareness of the ethical intent of transparency was in the minds of other respondents, for example:

It is necessary to have a clear communication plan in place if you want to make disposals public knowledge… We have had some success talking to volunteers as part of their collections induction about how and why museums dispose of items, so I'm confident it could be done on a wider public scale. It would make

the public feel more secure knowing it has a strong ethical framework for selection and final movement of objects into other collections. (R11).

This practitioner voices the view that transparency requires communication to be considered, planned, and actioned. Put simply, transparency is a proactive practice, not a reactive action. Radical transparency moves beyond consideration of what the *museum* needs, to a fuller reflection of what the *audience* needs.

5.4.1.5 Summary of 'real world' transparency practice

Within this section I have provided important evidence of how transparency has been attempted in the real world. Practitioners reported that transparency was most attempted for audiences familiar with museums and their workings (e.g. the museum sector and the Governing body). Specifically, audiences of Professionals, Governing body, and Object donors all have knowledge of museum processes and some awareness of the associated practicalities, ethics and legalities. Audiences without such prior knowledge were typically prevented from sight or understanding of disposal. When transparency was attempted it was typically limited to the presentation of information without opportunity for engagement.

This evidenced multiplicity of communication modes and audiences demonstrates the ethical 'grey' of disposal practice and the complexities of radical transparency. It also supports the core components of my Transparent Communication Model, with the proposition that transparency entails a variety of communication modes to be tailored according to intent and audience, and that transparency is a proactive action rather than a default reaction.

5.4.2 Disposal transparency in an ideal world

Continuing my exploration of practitioner attitudes to transparency, I now move to the second theme: how did practitioners think transparency *should* occur? This data set included all 40 respondents regardless of their practical experience. They were asked, "In your personal opinion, when making decisions during the disposal process how should these groups be involved?". As per the preceding question and exploration, the choice of communication options mirrored my proposed Spectrum of Modes (Table 2).

Type of communication	Equivalent Model mode
They shouldn't be involved	Blocking
Information sharing (e.g. press release, social media, display)	Informing
Consultation (e.g. survey, interviews)	Consulting
Dialogue (e.g. community panels, focus groups)	Dialogue
Shared decision-making (e.g. nominated representatives)	Shared decision-making

Table 2: Communication choices offered to participants for consideration within idealised practice, and their equivalent mode within the proposed Transparent Communication Model.

Importantly within this analysis, the mode of 'Silence' is not represented. This is because I propose Silence occurs from unconscious inaction, and this question of imagined practice asked participants to consciously consider their actions.

The headline finding from this question of idealised practice provides an important contrast to the real world experience: practitioners demonstrate a clear intent for transparency (Figure 30). This was apparent in a strong preference for audience 'Informing' and a perceived wider use of radical transparency modes. Respondents perceived a lesser role for 'Blocking' than was evident in practice. Once again, it is pertinent to explore the subtleties within this finding by target audience.
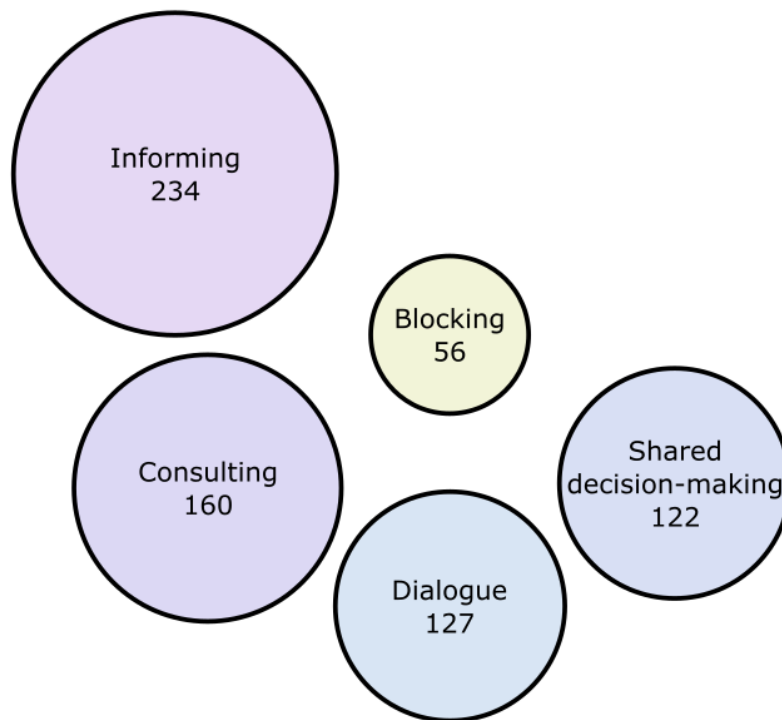
Figure 30: Disposal communication modes reported as idealised practice.

5.4.2.1 Professional transparency

Within this exploration of idealised practice I begin with envisioned transparency for Professional audiences (Figure 31). Here, respondents demonstrated a desire for sectoral transparency with all three Professional audiences strongly represented across all positive communication modes. Affirming the perceived importance of 'Internal: Collections staff' seen in the preceding analysis, this audience received the greatest number of proposed communication interactions of any Professional, Public or Stakeholder group (71). The preferred mode for this audience was 'Shared decision-making' (35).
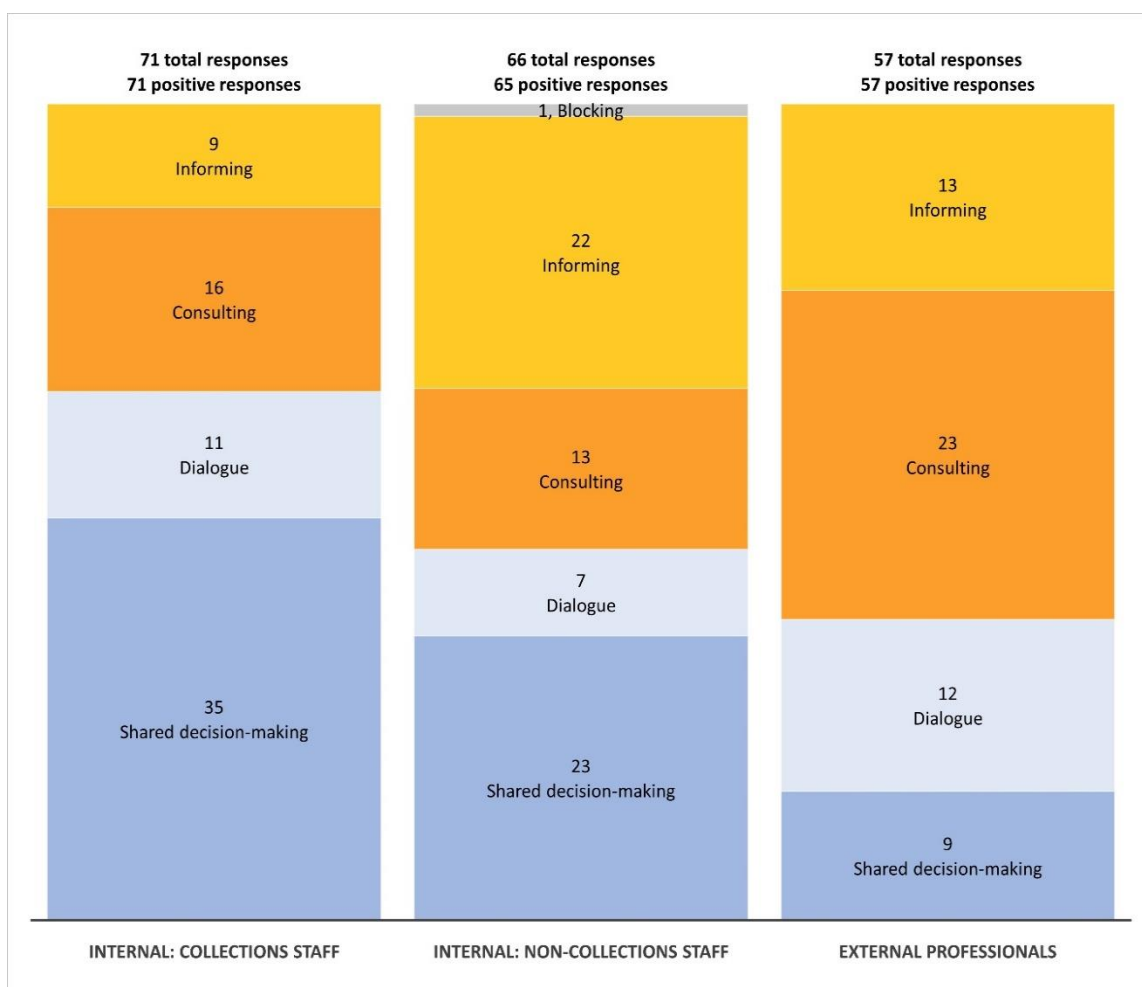
Figure 31: Professional Community audiences: the number of selected communication events in an ideal world.

This vision for sectoral transparency generally mirrored the real-world experience evidenced in the preceding sections. For example, transparency was thought suitable for 'Internal: Non-collections staff' and 'External professionals' across all communication modes. But one notable difference was a stronger desire to 'Consult' with 'External professionals' than was reported in practice. This suggests respondents desired deeper involvement from specialists beyond their institution. The reason for this disparity between reality and ideal is not known, but could reflect practical constraints such as time, or access to professional networks.

According with this strong desire for professional transparency was the perceived minimal role for 'Blocking'. This option received only a single selection, allocated to

'Internal: Non-collections staff', which contrasts with the 12 instances of 'Silence or Blocking' in real-world practice. This disparity suggests that aspirations for transparency may not transfer into practice.

Professional transparency was therefore perceived as a very desirable action through communication in which information was both shared and received.

5.4.2.2 Public transparency

In the exploration of idealised practice I now turn to the practitioner vision for transparency with Public audiences (Figure 32). Here too, the surveyed practitioners demonstrated a desire for more communication than they reported in practice. Specifically, across this Community they envisaged a total of 182 positive communication events, compared to the 58 reported in practice. In this idealised world the preference was for visibility by 'Informing', which had a large increase from the real-world situation (106 ideal, 41 reality). There was also a good representation across the deeper engagement modes. These demonstrate a belief in the necessity of public transparency, but with a preference for visibility rather than engagement to develop understanding.

But contrary to this transparency desire was the continuing perception that 'Blocking' was necessary in some circumstances. While this mode decreased in idealised practice from their experienced reality (30 ideal, 81 reality) it was still deemed most necessary for 'Journalists' (14) and least necessary for 'Local communities' (4). This perceived need for opacity is a significant finding as it clearly demonstrates that some practitioners believe it necessary to actively hide disposal from some Public audiences. This seemingly contradicts the ethical ethos in which disposal is framed and the explicit call for transparency within the *Disposal Toolkit.*
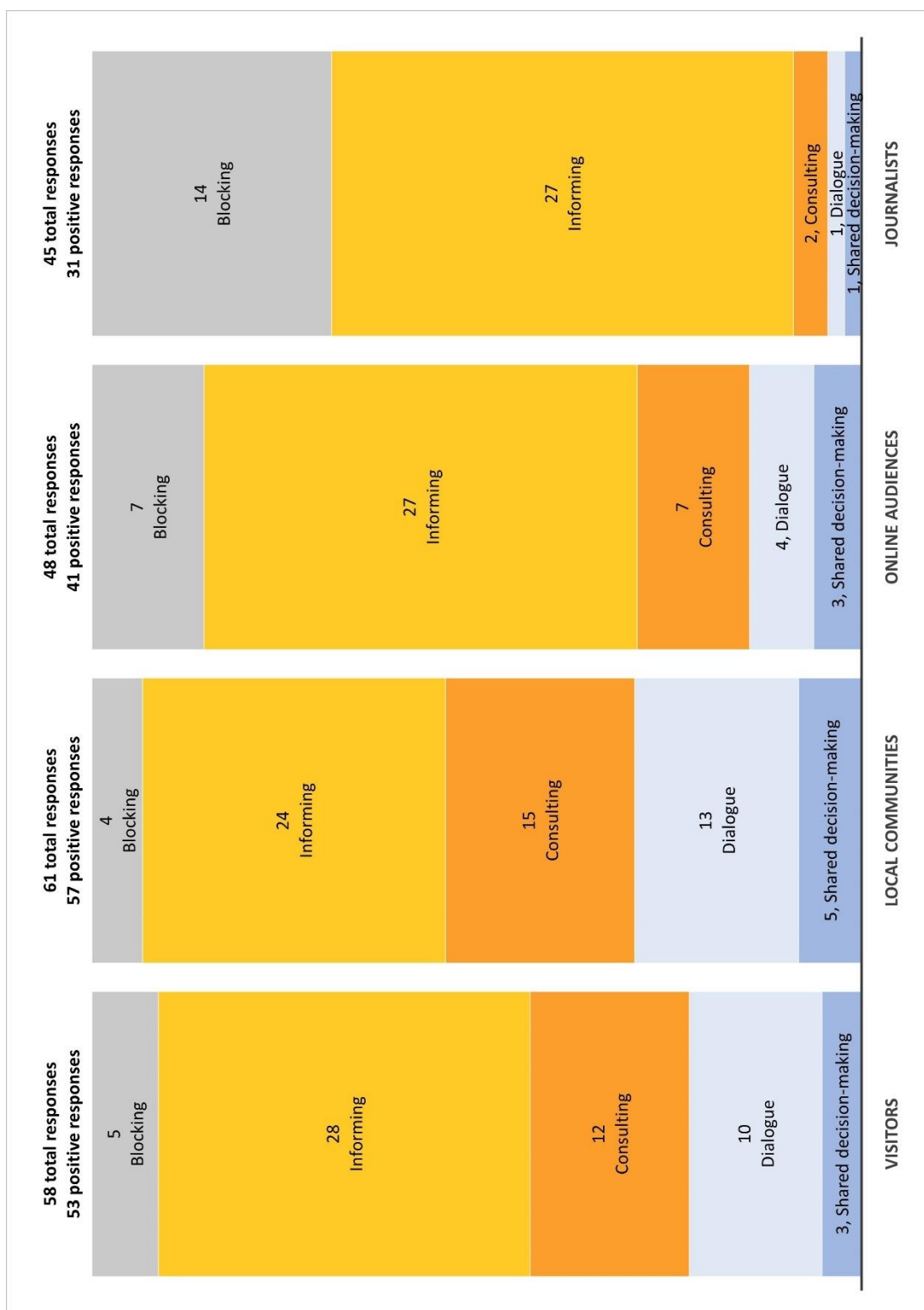
Figure 32: Public Community audiences: the number of selected communication events in an ideal world.

While it is important to note this finding of opacity it is again necessary to view it within the bigger context. Specifically, the total number of selections for Blocking (30) for Public audiences was comparable to the total number for the transparency action of 'Dialogue' (28). Opacity was therefore perceived as just one in a suite of transparency options. It is important to remember that respondents could, and typically did, select more than one communication mode for each audience, so these numbers are not direct comparisons. Still, the presented picture is of extremes of idealised perception from opacity to radical transparency. This indicates a practitioner desire to select a communication mode deemed most suitable for the audience and the unique situation of each disposal process.

One further notable aspect of Public transparency is the perception of 'Journalists', as they remained the least desirable audience. For example, transparency by 'Informing' was envisaged at a similar level to other public audiences but they were allocated the least 'Consulting', 'Dialogue' or 'Shared decision-making'. When taken alongside the preceding evidence of real-world practice, these surveyed practitioners therefore demonstrated a reluctance to reveal disposal to the media both in reality and idealised practice. An explanation for this situation was offered by one participant who suggested:

> Disposals should never be done in secret from anyone. But to involve press is quite risky, as you do not know how it will be interpreted. So, if it is being announced, better to do it from your own institution so that the reasoning and the whole process is explained properly. (R12).

In these words, the practitioner reveals the undercurrent of risk and its close association with the media. Further, they demonstrate that such risks can be mitigated by a clear communication intent which attempts to control the transparency process and enable visibility and understanding. These words echo the sentiment expressed earlier in this chapter by Respondent 11 (Section 5.4.1.4), who stated the importance of planned communication for transparency creation. These words demonstrate a conscious process of reflection and internal decision-making within the creation of transparency actions.

5.4.2.3 Stakeholder transparency

Finally, within this exploration of idealised transparency practice I turn to the Stakeholder audiences (Figure 33). Here, the participants desired more transparency than they reported in the real world, with good levels of proposed communication across the modes and audiences. Specifically, 'Informing' was deemed the most desirable mode (84 ideal, 33 reality), with slightly lesser levels of 'Consultation' (72/26), 'Dialogue' (69/21) and 'Shared decision-making' (55/44). Taken together, these demonstrate a desire to make information visible and seek audience input, but with lesser emphasis for fully radical transparency.

Alongside this vision for engagement, and akin to the idealised transparency with Professional and Public audiences seen in the preceding sections, participants recorded a decrease in the perceived need for opacity through 'Blocking' (25 ideal, 91 reality). Yet its presence as an acceptable practice remains of interest, for the same reasons identified above for envisioned practice with Public audiences. This data therefore demonstrates a strong desire to create transparency for Stakeholders but with opacity perceived as necessary in some situations.

It is interesting to ponder the reasons behind this general picture, as the communication modes contain an indication of the anticipated response from the audience. By implication, they therefore demonstrate the perceived knowledge (either shared or otherwise) held by each audience. For example, 'Patrons and Financial Donors' were the Stakeholder audience deemed to need the most opacity (9). This echoes the real-world hiding of disposal from audiences involved with income generation seen earlier in this chapter. Similarly, the 'Governing body' was the audience deemed most desirable for full transparency through 'Shared decision-making' (30). This was a small increase from real-world practice (26). Indeed, the Governing body was well represented across other communication modes, and no respondent regarded it necessary to hide disposal from them. It is therefore apparent within the vision for Stakeholder transparency that practitioners envisage involving audiences who have a shared understanding of the museum, its practices and mission, while distancing those for whom financial considerations are the dominant reason for interaction.
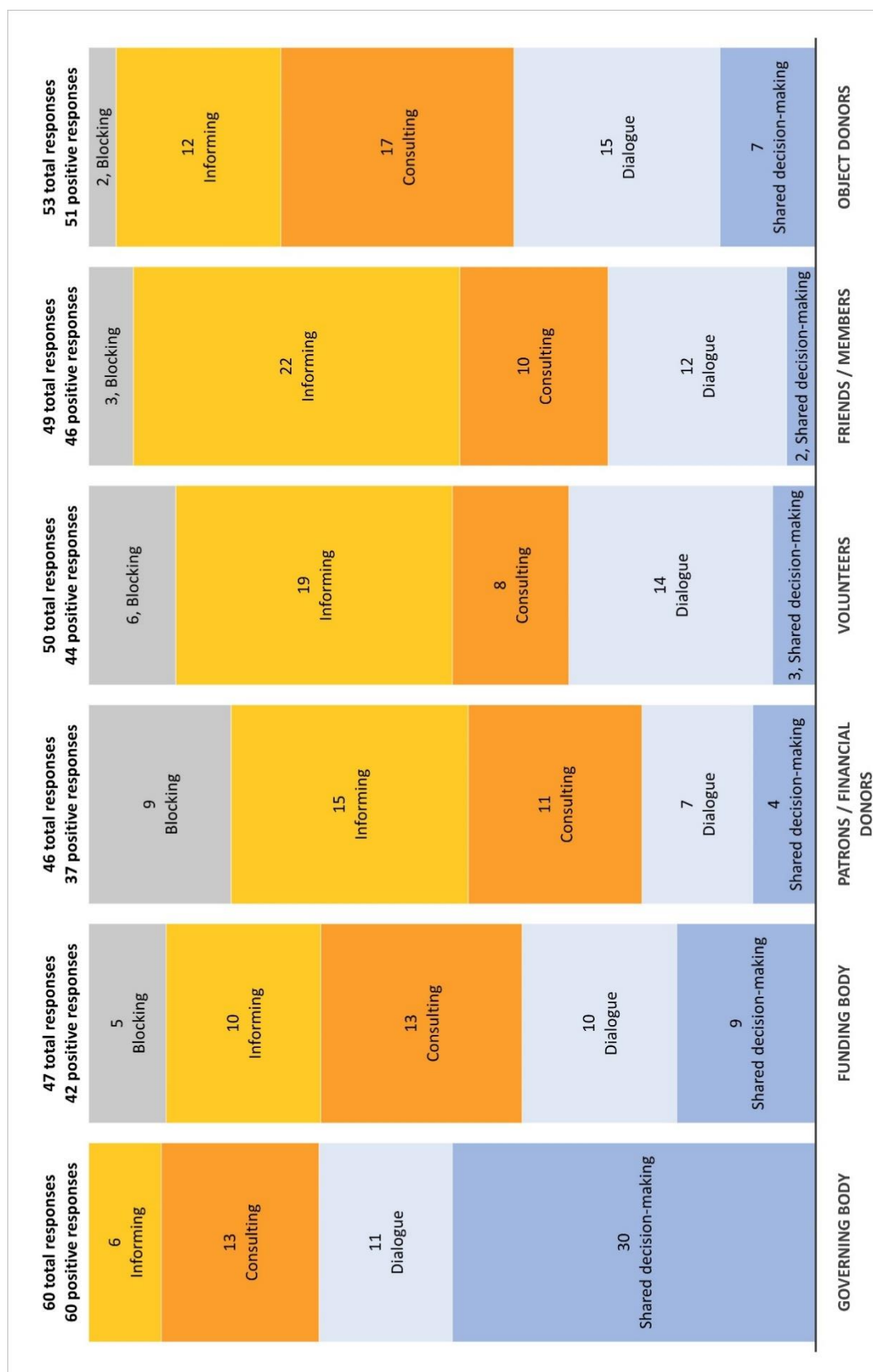
Figure 33: Stakeholder Community audiences: the number of selected communication events in an ideal world.

5.4.2.4 Practitioner insights

To conclude this exploration of idealised transparency practice I again turn to participants' explanations for their proposed actions. To begin, I recommend the suggestion that "[Disposal] is not a secret and it's not something we should be ashamed of!" (R39). These words speak volumes about the necessity for transparent practice and neatly present an underlying theme of this thesis. A similar clarity of vision was voiced by another individual who emphatically proposed that, "In an ideal world, certainly consultation and communication would absolutely be part of the process" (R41). This was supported by another participant who suggested, "If you can't resource appropriate consultation, then disposal should not be started. Consultation is as much a part of disposal as is documentation." (R39). The centrality of transparency to the disposal process was therefore firmly evidenced by some respondents.

However, for several respondents such radical transparency by consultation was not the preferred vision. Some participants instead regarded transparency as a one-way process of information revelation; of visibility without engagement. For example, one individual suggested the need for, "Trying to *communicate to* the public what the exact process is for disposals" (R11, my emphasis). Another suggested that transparency was for "Making the public better informed" (R4). Two others specifically imagined that an information-sharing process could utilise social media. Within their words they also inadvertently confirmed the digital silence evidenced in Chapter Three:

> "In *talks to* local groups and our museum society newsletter, I try to *talk about* what we do as part of the normal collections management process and why, and probably should start doing this on our social media as well." (R34, my emphasis*).*

> "Increased use of social media and more collections-focussed websites might make it *easier to share information* about disposals without being too time-heavy." (R9, my emphasis).

Within this emphasis on information presentation some individuals evidenced simple attempts to help their audiences understand the actions, but which fell short of full radical transparency. For example, one participant asserted the need to explain the

context of disposal by, "*Making it known* that museums have collecting policies which objects need to comply with" (R43, my emphasis). This proposal for declaration rather than dialogue suggests a willingness to aid audience understanding but without a fuller consideration of how this could occur.

Many of these cited respondents therefore share a similar view that information revelation has a purpose, or motive. Some demonstrated awareness that the communication intent was as important as the action. For example, "…expectations need to be managed, and motivations clearly communicated" (R18). The communication intent is vital to the relationship between practitioner and audience, and the absence of a clear purpose can generate the confusion and mistrust that practitioners fear. For example, Respondent 43 voiced this situation as, "I think it [communication] is a necessary task to make sure that the museum is acting transparently, and that it cannot be accused of underhand tactics." But it is perhaps unsurprising that the need for clarity of purpose was not acknowledged by all participants. For example, one individual portrayed a very contradictory understanding of transparency by suggesting:

> As long as the disposals procedure is undertaken ethically, there should be no reason either to share information with the public and stakeholders OR to hide it from them. In other words, if there's interest in the process and/or results, and time to communicate with public/stakeholders, then why not? (R9).

This comment neatly demonstrates the complexity of practitioner understanding of transparency creation. For transparency arises from positive action, not passivity. A default position of inaction creates the silence of hidden practice, or the ineffectual 'tick box' ethics of information display without engagement. Of further significance within Respondent 9's words is the view that transparency should occur only "if there's interest". For this presents a 'Catch-22' situation: how can audiences express an interest if they do not know a disposal is occurring? Transparency is not initiated by the audience, although it can be prompted by them in response to a discovery of hidden practice. Here is evidenced the situation presented within the sectoral guidance that disposal transparency originates from the professional sector.

Further, Respondent 9's words suggest that a decision to reveal disposal should involve consideration of the ethical suitability of the revealed practice. To envision transparency in this way will generate controversy. Indeed, as Respondent 34 noted, for some museums it is true that, "…disposals tend to get aired only when controversial or something goes wrong". In this light the same practitioner asked:

> How do we communicate sufficient information to the public in an engaging way? Otherwise, there is a risk of emotive but not necessarily well-informed reactions, which may not help much. (R34).

From this viewpoint, I suggest it is the lack of considered practice and communication intent that generates controversy, not the transparency act itself. For as another participant demonstrated, confident transparency can have real-world benefits:

> In practice, I've seldom had any public feedback to proposed disposals, indicating (hopefully) that we've made good decisions on what to dispose of and that our procedures are sufficiently open to stand up to public scrutiny. (R23).

Still, within this latter respondent's words is an important aspect of transparency that I had not fully considered: the audience's willingness to engage. This thereby moves attention from the museum as the communication speaker, towards the recipient audience. For example, one participant stated: "I have tried to engage them, and they were not interested" (R36). Sadly, this practitioner provided no context of who "them" referred to. Similarly, another individual stated: "...not everyone will be understanding" (R12). While this latter statement may reflect the differing knowledge held by the recipient audience, it also highlights the necessity of the audience *wanting* to understand the information being offered.

Within many of these comments is a recurring theme that transparency is regarded an onerous task. Indeed, this was explicitly stated by Respondent 38 as, "We really have to prioritise now, and have to keep processes as simple as possible, leaving us no time for more consultation on disposals". This comment thereby demonstrates that transparency was regarded as an additional task rather than a core component of the

disposal process. Similarly, another participant urged a partial transparency process, by stating:

> I think museums should communicate *some* stories of disposal. However, communicating repeatedly can give the impression of high levels of disposal, when in reality it is a very, very, very small proportion of the held collection. (R42, my emphasis).

This comment is important within this exploration of idealised practice, as it further emphasises the reluctance to make disposal fully transparent as an essential task. For in practice, if a disposal process is undertaken as a specific project, then the communicated message should reflect that. Alternatively, if disposal is to become a regular practice akin to acquisition, there is no reason *not* to make that known. The communication content reflects the activity; and an audience's perception of museum activities is firmly shaped by practitioner actions and portrayals. If practitioners are uncertain of the centrality of transparency to ethical practice, then the messages portrayed to audiences will also be confused and contradictory.

5.4.2.5 Summary of idealised practice

In their perceptions of how disposal transparency *could* be, the surveyed practitioners therefore showed a strong positivity to informing audiences about disposal processes. There was also a strong desire to aid audience understanding among those perceived to share a similar knowledge of the museum and its activities. Importantly, some practitioners felt it was acceptable to hide disposal from some audiences, particularly Journalists and those Stakeholders associated with a museum's income-generation.

Akin to my exploration of real-world practice these findings must be understood with caution. For example, these questions of idealised practice included more respondents than the real-world exploration, as it included those respondents who had no practical experience of disposal. The numerical counts for idealised practice will therefore be higher than for the real-world exploration. However, a brief assessment of the number of responses provided by these six participants demonstrated their broad consistency with the other respondents.

It is also important to acknowledge the ease of offering ideals in a fictional world free from constraint. But this should not be regarded as a limitation of the data but rather an optimistic vision to which the sector could aspire. For in their expressed desire for transparency many practitioners conveyed positivity and hope for what *could* be. This encouraging finding demonstrates a broad acceptance of transparency as a suitable practice. Evidenced within that inclination are nuances of desirable practice according to the target audience, and the unique needs of the disposal process being revealed.

With that observation in mind I will now turn to the third large area for exploration: how practitioners perceived their audiences. This topic has been glimpsed throughout this chapter and now merits deeper exploration.

5.5 Practitioner perceptions of audiences

In the preceding sections I have explored practitioner attitudes to the process of disposal, and to the creation of transparency. Among those findings are hints about the relationship between practitioner and audience and the impact on transparency creation. In this section I will more fully explore how practitioners view their audiences.

5.5.1 Relative importance of audiences

Two survey questions sought to explore how participants perceived their audiences. Both investigated the nature and timing of audience involvement with the disposal process. The first asked, "When making a final decision about the disposal of an object, whose views are ultimately the most important?". Recipients were asked to choose one of the three Communities of Practice (Profession, Public, or Stakeholder). The Profession were the most common choice (29/40 votes). The Stakeholder (7) and Public (4) communities were clearly regarded as less important (Figure 34).
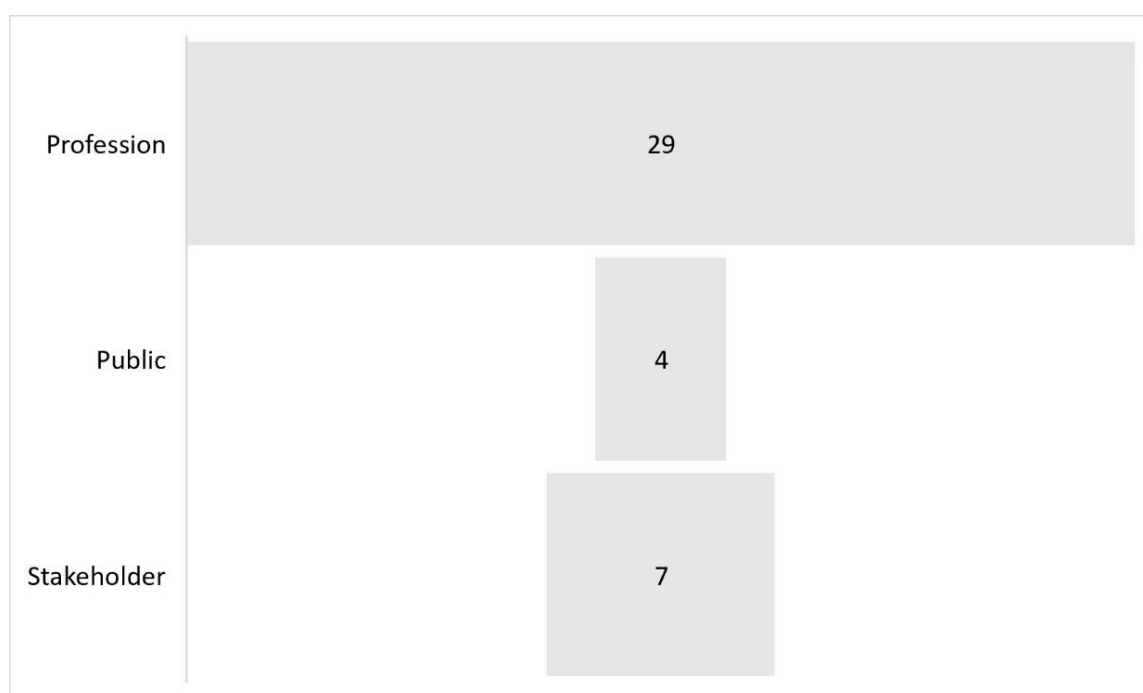
Figure 34: The number of responses to the question, "When making a final decision about the disposal of an object, whose views are ultimately the most important?".

This result thereby supports the views evidenced in the preceding sections with the clear prioritising of the Professional audience. This centrality is unsurprising given the framing of 'curatorially-motivated' disposal as an expert-led process. Of more interest are the eleven respondents who believed another community should take precedence within the disposal process. This is a very important subtlety, as it suggests those respondents supported full radical transparency for non-professional audiences: that the audience could fully engage with the disposal process, and the transparency would shape the outcomes of the process being revealed.

The second question asked, "In your opinion, which one of these groups is the most important to involve in the disposals process?". Recipients were asked to choose one audience from the list of thirteen options (comprising the three Communities and their subgroups). The results again demonstrated the strong preference for 'Internal: Collections staff', which was chosen by 33 of the 40 respondents. The only other selected audiences were 'Governing body' (3 votes), with 'Internal: Non-collections staff', 'External professionals', 'Object donors', and 'Local communities' all receiving a

single vote (Figure 35). The inclusion, and indeed equal regard, for 'Local communities' and 'Object donors' with the two Professional audiences was not apparent from the preceding findings.

Internal: Collections staff	33
Internal: Non-collections staff	1
External professionals	1
Local communities	1
Governing body	3
Object donors	1
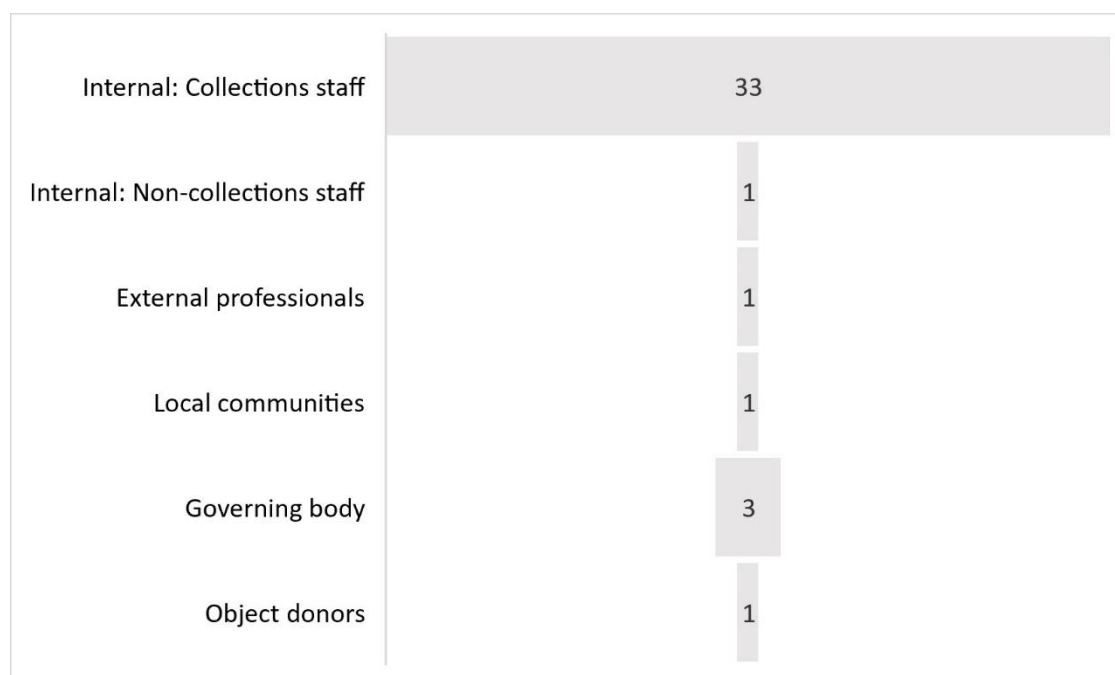
Figure 35: Responses to the question "In your opinion, which one of these groups is the most important to involve in the disposals process?".

Respondents were asked to explain their answer to provide insight to their thinking. The simplest explanation was a concern for legalities. For example, Respondent 36 chose transparency for the 'Governing body' as the most important, "Because in law we require their consent to any disposal". They therefore regarded transparency as a 'tick-box' exercise. Another individual explained their choice of 'Object donors' as, "We have a duty to let them know what is happening to their donations" (R3). On the surface this is a legal consideration, but the words also reveal the subtleties of ethical practice. For as expressed earlier in this chapter the inclusion of object donors may not be a legal necessity but rather a choice in the spirt of openness and integrity.

Three respondents were most concerned with risk management. For example, in their choice of 'External professionals' Respondent 42 explained, "To provide secondary

opinions from outside the organisation". This preference for outside expertise demonstrates due diligence as it enables accountability. The two respondents who chose 'Local communities' or 'Internal: non-collections staff' as the most important transparency audience offered more detailed explanations, perhaps seeking justification in anticipation of their answers being perceived as unusual or challenging. For their choice of 'Local communities' Respondent 27 stated:

> It is important to involve several stakeholders to ensure that the process is transparent and ethical. I think museums are frightened of engaging with local communities due to the reputational risk of disposal. However, if local communities are on board there is opportunity for greater engagement and re-purposing of collections.

In this answer they demonstrated the emotional burden associated with disposal. But they also counteracted its potential negativity through a positive attitude to risk management. In their view, transparency is a helpful tool for developing audience understanding. A similarly considered response was offered by Respondent 34 who selected 'Internal: Non-collections staff' as the most important audience. They stated:

> So much depends on the circumstances of each case. Discussing potential disposals with curatorial colleagues is essential (there are only 3 of us). But I would say it is just as important to discuss with our Learning Officer, and (if we were to dispose of something which has been on display) with other staff and volunteers in public-facing roles. My answers to all the above questions could vary a lot depending on what is to be disposed of, and why.

These words neatly voice the complexities of the transparency process: they demonstrate the need for appropriate communication with different audiences in different situations. Transparency, and the choice of communication process to create it, will vary according to the items being proposed for removal, and their perceived relationship to the museum, its staff, and audiences.

I turn now to the majority of respondents who selected 'Internal: Collections staff' as the most important audience to be involved in disposal. The common explanation for this choice was the perceived knowledge held by that group. For example Respondent

31 explained, "They have curatorial expertise to make the decision". This idea was expanded by Respondent 7 who explained:

> By 'collections staff' I mean curatorial staff who have in-depth knowledge of the objects, their contexts and histories, and their actual and potential uses. Therefore, they are the people best placed to evaluate the objects, and they would have the object's 'best interests' at heart.

These respondents demonstrated high regard for knowledge of objects and collections, viewing this knowledge important for the disposal process and for enabling its transparency. Such statements echo the proposition within the sectoral guidance that disposal entails an assessment of the significance of value, and that this role is to be undertaken utilising professional knowledge. It is therefore not merely *holding* knowledge that is important, but its relationship with other information and experiences which transform that knowledge into action. This evidences the position of many museum practitioners who regard 'object knowledge' as extending beyond factual information to encompass placing the object in relationship to institutional practices, and society. As one participant explained:

> They [collections staff] are best equipped to understand the collections development policy, how an object might or might not fit it, and be able to interrogate the information we have about it. They are also most likely to challenge robustly, but from an informed point of view. (R16).

This view was echoed by Respondent 2 who commented:

> … the collections staff have the experience, and knowledge, and research skills, to identify an object or collection's contextual significance and value, and to recognise an object's potential value to other communities.

These practitioners therefore deemed it most important to enact transparency for people most familiar with the museum, its collection, its mission, and its practices. Importantly, this transparency was envisaged as a two-way process of communication. For example, the words of Respondent 35 suggested disposal transparency creates an active challenge to ideas and assumptions. She stated:

> Because they [collections staff] have a professional overview of what disposals involve and can ask the tough questions with regards to justification, but also understand the need behind it.

Expert knowledge is therefore perceived by many practitioners as essential for disposal transparency. It forms the basis for visibility and allows deep interrogation with the process, and can generate additional reflection about its workings. In all its idealised guises — whether for the governing body, for object donors, or other professionals — transparency was perceived as enabling checks and balances to the work being undertaken. Implicit within this is an element of peer support for the practitioners undertaking the process.

5.5.2 How should audiences be involved in disposal?

Having explored their views of which was the single most important audience to involve in disposal transparency, I wanted to explore *how* practitioners thought each audience should be involved. This question retained the audience Communities and subgroups utilised throughout this chapter. It aimed to explore any differences in the perceived type of process involvement and subsequent transparency.

Participants were offered five options for the timing and involvement of audiences. They were asked to choose as many options as deemed relevant for each audience:

- They shouldn't be involved

- Early process: object selection

- Mid process: provenance and future potential

- Mid process: choosing new destination for objects

- End of process: approval for selected outcomes

The findings echo those in the preceding sections of this chapter. Once again, 'Internal: Collections staff' was the preferred audience, here allocated the highest total number of involvements, and 'Journalists' the least included audience (Figure 36). In summary of the most preferable tasks (Table 3), the Professional community was most strongly associated with 'object selection' and 'provenance'. The most desirable involvement

for the 'Governing body' was with 'approval' of disposal decisions (25). This was also the preferred involvement for Journalists (18). But while these two latter are similar in number, overall the media was distanced from the disposal process. For example, no respondent thought Journalists should be involved with 'object selection'. This last finding is unsurprising but provides helpful clarity on perceived transparency for the media. These responses further demonstrate that acts of transparency visibility and engagement differ according to the intended audience and purpose.

Audience group	
Internal: collections staff	82
Object donors	56
Governing body	54
External professionals	53
Internal: non-collections staff	48
Volunteers	47
Local communities	45
Funding body	43
Friends/Members	40
Patrons/Financial donors	36
Visitors	36
Online audiences	34
Journalists	26
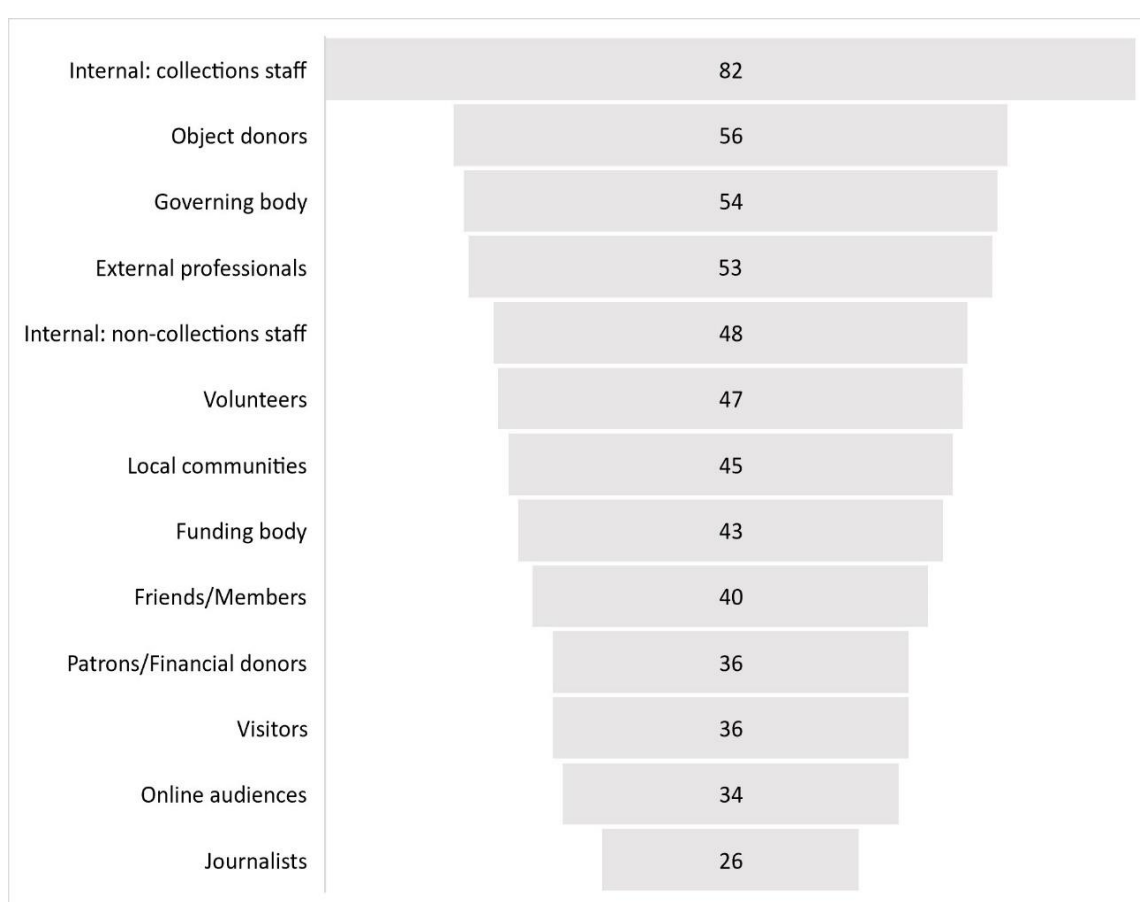
Figure 36: The total number of envisaged involvements with the disposal process, by audience group.

Community	Audience	Preferred method of involvement	Votes
Professional	Internal: Collections staff	Object selection	38
	Internal: Non-collections staff	Provenance	18
	External professionals	Object selection	16
Public	Visitors	Approval	14
	Local communities	Destination	17
	Online audiences	Approval	13
	Journalists	Approval	18
Stakeholder	Object donors	Provenance	21
	Governing body	Approval	25
	Funding body	Approval	19
	Patrons / Financial donors	Approval	16
	Volunteers	Provenance	18
	Friends/ Members	Approval	13

Table 3: A summary of responses to the question "How should audiences be involved with disposal?". The preferred option, by audience.

Two findings stand out from this general picture of conformity. First, was the perception of the 'approval' task. In total this received the highest number of selections from the method of involvement (Figure 37). This high regard for the approval mechanism is important as it requires the audience to interrogate the disposal process, either to accept or reject a proposed object removal. It requires transparency through visibility of process, but also radical transparency by audience understanding and information interrogation. This finding may therefore contradict the narrative contained in this chapter to this point, as it suggests practitioners want many audiences to have a deep insight to the disposal process. One explanation for this disparity is that the concept of 'approval' itself merits closer examination, to

ascertain whether practitioners regarded it an active discursive process or merely a tick-box exercise. Unfortunately, such exploration was not possible from this data; but within the context of other findings in this chapter the latter explanation may be implied.

Figure 37: Practitioners' vision for audience involvement with disposal: combined audience totals by task.

The second finding of note is the perceived role of Public audiences. First, the most desired task for their involvement was in disposal approval (Table 3, above), which as I discuss above may suggest deep transparency and involvement. But second, Public audiences were perceived as the Community to be least involved in disposal, evidenced by Visitors, Online audiences and Journalists being allocated the three lowest totals for involvement (Figure 36, above). Further, the Public audiences of Journalists, Online audiences, and Visitors comprise the top three groups whom practitioners believe should be *excluded* from the disposal process (Figure 38, below). These findings seemingly present a contradiction, as they set a desire for radical transparency against a desire for opacity or exclusion. This ambiguity thereby

evidences the nuances of disposal transparency: one audience might be deeply engaged in a process by one museum, and fully excluded by another.

Audience	Count
Journalists	18
Online audiences	12
Visitors	10
Patrons/Financial donors	10
Volunteers	9
Friends/Members	8
Funding body	7
Local communities	7
Internal: Collections staff	3
Object donors	3
Internal: Collections staff	
External professionals	
Governing body	
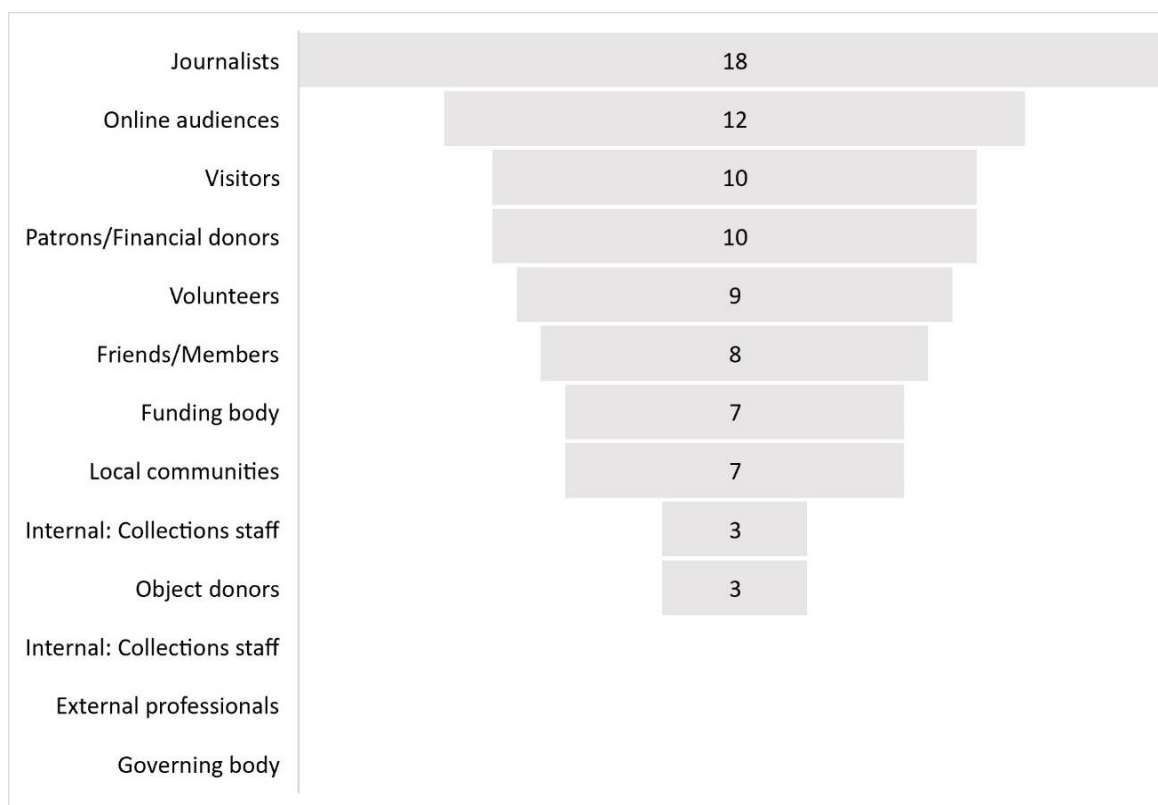
Figure 38: The number of practitioners who believed audiences should not be involved in the disposal process.

Some light is shed on this seemingly contradictory situation by examining the eight respondents who thought public audiences should be excluded from all disposal tasks (R1, R7, R13, R19, R20, R21, R31 and R42). Two of these individuals were currently employed by a National museum (R1 and R20). Their advocacy for 'no public involvement' may therefore reflect the institutional context in which the public is routinely, and sometimes legally required, to be distanced from disposal. Further, seven of these respondents had practical experience of the disposal process. Comparing individuals' answers with their stated experience, five of those had excluded all public audiences, and two had included the public solely by 'Informing'. This is therefore an important insight: a small proportion of the surveyed participants (5/40) did not think public transparency should occur, and this was reflected in their professional practice. This provides firm evidence that some practitioners do not

regard disposal transparency as an important goal, and do not attempt to enact it within their work. Yet this finding should be viewed within the bigger picture presented by these questions of audience involvement. The overarching finding is that most of the surveyed practitioners believed audience participation and transparency were appropriate and achieved through a variety of tasks and methods.

5.5.3 Summary: Perceptions of audiences

Practitioner perceptions of audiences therefore largely support the discoveries already presented in this chapter. Namely, professional audiences are regarded as the most desirable for disposal transparency, and the most important to involve within the radically transparent act of decision-making approval. Indeed, the act of approval was the most preferred task for audience involvement with disposal across the communities. While a small number of practitioners do not regard disposal transparency as necessary, and have seemingly enacted this in their work, the overwhelming message is one of encouragement. For most of the surveyed practitioners believe it is important to include diverse audiences with a variety of disposal tasks, and thereby enable transparency to the process.

Within this chapter I have now completed my exploration of practitioner perceptions of three important areas: the practice of disposal, the nature of transparency, and of museum audiences. The evidence suggests a disparity between vision and practice: the positivity of what could be has not been enacted by practitioners. In simple terms, something is preventing idealised vision becoming reality. In the following section I will therefore explore the fourth, and final, theme within this chapter: the perceived barriers to disposal transparency creation.

5.6 Perceived barriers to disposal practice and transparency

As evidenced throughout this chapter my survey sought to explore disposal transparency as a communication process between practitioner and audience, and provide insight to the effects of individual attitudes on that process. Indeed, the respondents have subtly evidenced that individual belief and experience creates and shapes transparency actions. Their responses have also hinted at some of the pragmatic constraints to transparency creation. But rather than taking proposed

'barriers' at face value I propose to explore a different perspective: whether it is the *perception* of such barriers that has affected transparency practices.

Participants were therefore asked to consider barriers to disposal transparency. They were presented with a list of fourteen suggestions and a free text option, and were asked two questions. First, to select all barriers they perceived to exist. Second, to propose the single biggest barrier. The proposed potential barriers were loosely grouped by similarity, for the participants' ease of use, and in the following analysis I have consciously grouped them into the following categories:

- Practical — Lack of staff

  Lack of time

  Lack of other resources (e.g. funding, materials)

- Knowledge — Lack of training or skills

  Uncertainty about decisions being made (e.g. accurate identification of objects, potential future use)

  Public and stakeholder audiences lack knowledge or skills to participate

  Uncertainty of legal issues

  Uncertainty of ethical issues

- Perception — Risk to institutional reputation

  Risk to personal reputation

  Fear of conflict (e.g. managing different expectations)

- Structural — Confidentiality

  Project team inclination (e.g. public don't need to be involved)

  Institutional barriers (e.g. management attitudes, internal structures)

- There are no barriers

- Other — please comment

The findings reveal that all proposed barriers were deemed relevant. In response to the first question to identify all perceived barriers, each was selected by at least eight respondents, except for the free text option 'Other' which received no responses

(Figure 39). Within the thematic groupings, 'Knowledge' barriers received the highest combined votes and 'Structural' the least, although each area was broadly comparable (Figure 40). These results provide an important insight to practitioner perceptions but, once again, it is important not to regard them solely as numerical data. For example, the popularity of Knowledge barriers may arise from it containing more constituent options (5) than the other categories (3 each). It is therefore important to explore the nuances revealed by practitioners' perception of the single biggest barrier, and their explanations for their choices.
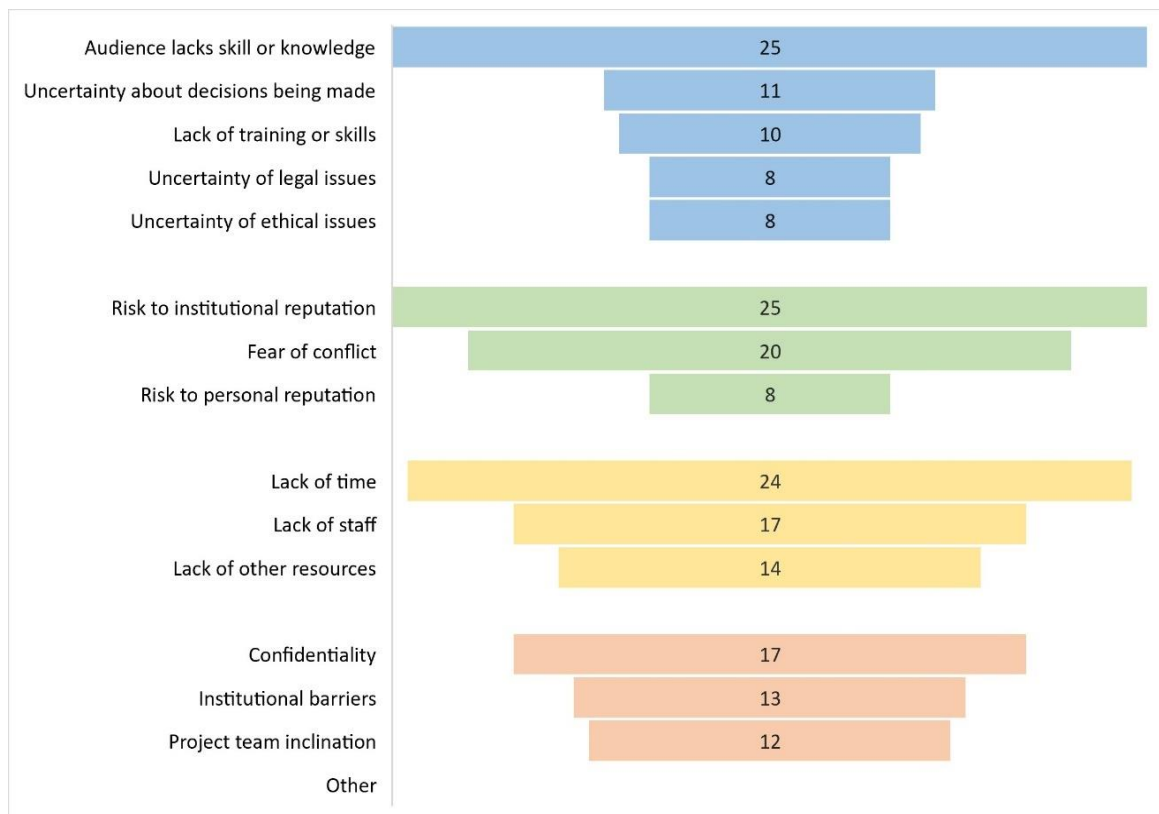
Figure 39: The perceived barriers to disposal transparency.

Blue = Knowledge. Green = Perception. Orange = Practical. Red = Structural.
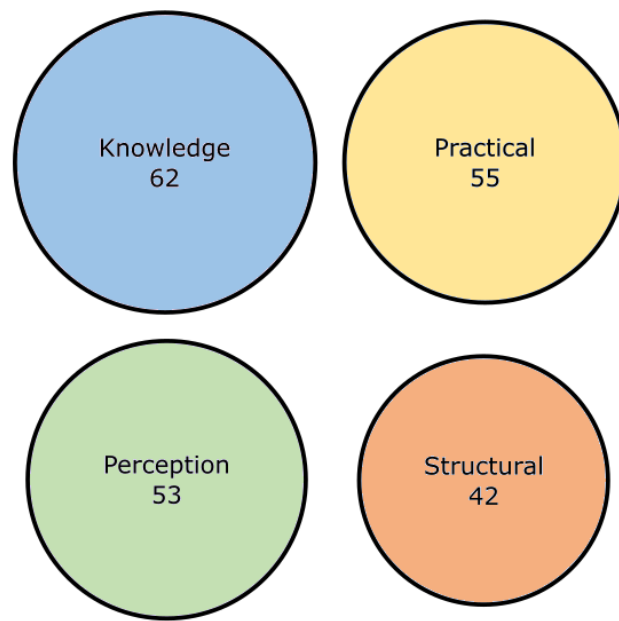
Figure 40: Perceived barriers to disposal transparency. The number of votes, grouped by theme.
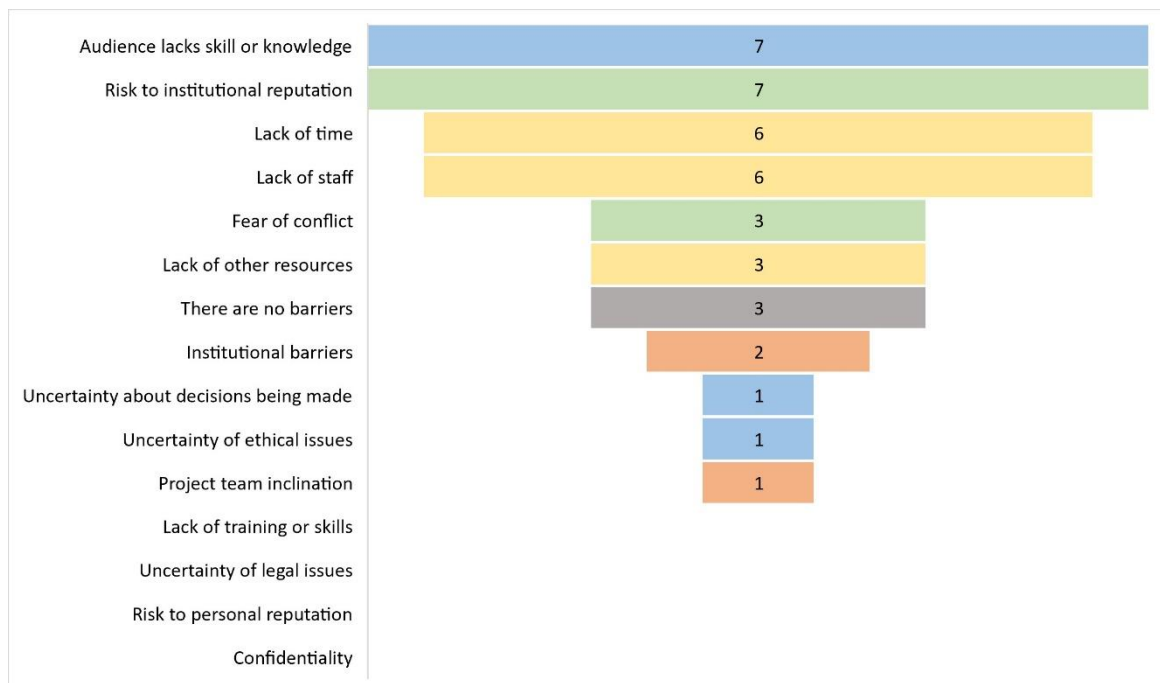
Figure 41: The perceived biggest barrier to transparency creation.

Blue = Knowledge. Green = Perception. Orange = Practical. Red = Structural.

To begin, it is relevant to examine the practical barriers. Despite the default 'blaming' of resources found in the literature, here the factors of time, staff, and other resources were not the perceived biggest barriers. Specifically, when asked to identify the single biggest barrier, 'lack of staff' and 'lack of time' were ranked in joint second place (Figure 41, above).

Explanations of 'lack of staff' and 'lack of time' are commonly linked to funding shortfalls within the museum sector. Indeed, 'funding' was offered by several participants as the solution to transparency barriers. For example, one individual suggested: "If the barriers are to do with staff time, then obviously more funding would help". This view was elaborated by another desire for, "More funding (very unlikely)". But a more nuanced reading of the situation suggests that funding is posited as a solution because transparency is regarded as an ancillary task. For example, one respondent declared, "Employ more staff! We are stretched very thin and don't have the staff or resources to undertake a large consultation every time we are considering disposal" (R35). In this view, transparency is regarded as an 'added extra' rather than a routine task utilising core funding, and thereby sets transparency apart from the museum's daily practice and running costs.

Further, the barriers of time and staffing were regarded by practitioners as more significant than the lack of funding. For example, 'Lack of resources – e.g. funding, materials' was ranked as the joint third biggest barrier (Figure 41). This indicates that money is not the problem *per se*, but rather its allocation to specific staff and the subsequent prioritisation of their daily tasks. I therefore propose that 'staff', 'time' and 'money' are issues of *perception* about the importance of these tasks, rather than solely practicalities.

It is interesting to consider this discussion of practical resources within the reporting of 'structural' issues (institutional barriers, project team inclination and confidentiality). Two respondents identified 'Institutional barriers e.g. poor internal structures, management attitudes' as the biggest barrier to transparency. As a combined group 'Structural issues' was the group of least concern (Figure 40, above). This is important as it may suggest participants did not perceive their institution as the source of funding constraints, but that the reason for 'practical' resourcing barriers lay outside their

institutional control. It is also important to note that the proposed 'Structural' barriers contained two examples that were themselves perceptions: 'Project team inclination', and 'management attitudes'. That some practitioners identified these as barriers further indicates that the perception of practice is as important as the practicalities.

Moving on to explore other barriers to transparency, the most unified data was found in the top-ranking results. Specifically, 'Risk to institutional reputation', and 'Public and stakeholders lack knowledge or skills to participate', received the joint highest votes as barriers to practice (25 each, Figure 39, above). They also shared the top spot as the biggest single barrier (7 votes each, Figure 41, above). This finding is interesting as these barriers are intertwined: they are both esoteric and reflect the relationship between museum and audience. The high practitioner concern hints at a lack of trust in museum audiences; for it is perhaps a lack of knowledge among the audience that creates misunderstanding of the disposal process, with reputational damage arising from miscommunication.

Further, the perceived lack of audience knowledge is an important finding as it supports the propositions within my proposed Transparent Communication Model. The application of differing knowledge was clearly articulated by one respondent as, "…decisions about disposal require a good knowledge of the museum's policies, resources, and collections…" (R15). As another explained, "…it is not possible for the public to have the knowledge of the collection that staff have" (R6). The impact of perceived knowledge absence was clearly voiced by another participant who suggested:

> I do not think there is a necessity to involve the public in disposal. A lack of understanding of museum operation (ethically and practically) will likely create confusion over curatorially-motivated disposal, and the introduction of 'too many cooks' will ultimately affect the process negatively. (R42).

It can therefore be speculated that the two perceived biggest barriers — 'risk of institutional reputation' and 'public and stakeholders lack knowledge' — are linked to a sense of fear. This emotion was itself evident in the ranking of 'Fear of conflict' as the joint third biggest barrier (Figure 41). Taken together, these suggest practitioners have

an emotional investment in the communication process. Indeed, the high concern for 'reputational risk' evidences the risk-averse sector explored within earlier chapters of this thesis. It shows a distinct awareness and concern for how the museum is perceived by other people. I therefore propose that subtleties of individual perception are important for both practitioner and audience within transparency practice. This also emphasises the relationship between practitioner and audience.

Further, the concern for institutional reputational damage demonstrates a clear regard for the employing institution. This is abundantly evident within a comparison of 'risk to *institutional* reputation' as the joint biggest single barrier (7 votes) and 'risk to *personal* reputation' among the least (0 votes; Figure 41). This was mirrored in the ranking for all perceived barriers with 'institutional reputation' at the top (25 votes, Figure 39) and 'personal reputation' at the bottom (8 votes). It is therefore a demonstration of professional loyalty, or duty, that practitioners were wary of undertaking tasks that might provoke criticism for their museum above any concern for personal protection.

It is also interesting to posit a more complex situation; that the lesser concern for personal reputation arises from an individual practitioner's identity being rooted within the collaborative organisation and its identity. For Collections staff, represented by most of the surveyed practitioners, are commonly the *literal* voice of their museum: their work communicates the collection through interpretation, and they routinely represent their institution through media and social activities. Yet any criticism will likely be directed towards the museum they represent, rather than the individual practitioner. Reactions to professional actions are thereby shielded by the institutional context.

Having explored areas of unity in the responses it is pertinent to briefly explore an area of dissonance. Specifically, a dichotomy is evident at the extremes of the results. In the first question of perceived barriers, two respondents suggested all fourteen barriers existed (R2 and R21) while four respondents perceived no barriers (R14, R23, R25, R39). To explore this difference of perception it is pertinent to explore the respondents' experience of disposal in the real world. Both individuals who perceived all fourteen barriers to exist had been involved with a disposal process initiated by someone else. By contrast, three of the four respondents who perceived 'no barriers'

had undertaken and initiated a disposal process (R14, R23 and R25). Put simply, three people who had initiated and undertaken disposal believed there were no barriers to transparency. From this interesting insight it can be speculated that a deeper involvement with disposal, through creation rather than simple participation, had affected practitioner perceptions of what was possible. In turn, this raises the possibility that opacity of practice arises from practitioners enacting their *belief* that barriers exist, rather than solely arising from actuality.

So, what then do these results suggest about practitioners' perceptions of the ethical need for transparency? First, the high concern for institutional reputational damage, witnessed earlier in this section, can be interpreted alongside the high concern about 'Confidentiality' (17 votes) and the middling concern for 'Project team inclination (e.g. public don't need to be involved)' (12 votes; Figure 39). In isolation these represent institutional logistical issues but viewed together they suggest hesitancy for transparency. Further, when viewed alongside the barriers of most common concern, 'Risk to institutional reputation' and 'Public and stakeholders lack knowledge or skills to participate', they present a picture of risk aversion. For as evidenced in Chapter Two, a requirement for confidentiality does not prevent transparency: while details may need to be restricted, it may be ethically pertinent to share the existence of information without divulging its contents.

But perhaps a most important finding from these questions is a demonstrable *certainty* of the ethics and legalities of disposal and its transparency among some participants. Only a single respondent chose 'ethical issues' as the single biggest barrier to disposal (Figure 41). Further, the barriers 'Uncertainty of legal issues' and 'Uncertainty of ethical issues' were regarded as those of joint least concern (Figure 39). Indeed, as one individual commented, "I think recent guidance and publicity has made disposal less taboo" (R27). It is therefore evident that, for some practitioners, the sectoral guidance has provided sufficient explanation and reassurance as to reduce the severity of these potential barriers. It therefore seems that familiarity with ethical codes, and their enactment into daily practice, alters practitioner perception, as ethics and legalities are no longer perceived as barriers to practice. Clear communication of ethics through the transparent sectoral guidance has affected some practitioner perceptions of

practice. Or put more simply, a positive attitude and pragmatic action has helped to counteract negative perceptions.

5.7 Chapter summary

Within this chapter we have encountered museum practitioners who generously offered their opinions and experiences of disposal and its transparency. These insights provide a picture of skill and knowledge; of practice and vision; of what has been and what could be. Utilising this data, I have explored extensive areas of perception about disposal, transparency, and audiences. By treating these areas separately I have teased apart some entwined complexities of disposal transparency. Further, by attempting to examine professional and individual perceptions as separate entities I have offered insight to how an individual's ideas may shape professional practice.

Through my exploration of practitioner views of disposal I have clearly demonstrated that the process is occurring within the UK. I have discovered it is generally regarded as a positive necessity for practical and legal reasons, and I asserted that any absence of transparency does not arise from practitioner negativity to the disposal process itself. I also discovered a prevalence for an inward focus which prioritised professional interaction above other audiences.

I then explored practitioners' attitudes to transparency, in both real-world practice and idealised vision. The minutiae of detail demonstrated recurring themes. Most clear is the high regard for professional transparency: those audiences for whom a shared knowledge and expertise offered an anticipated positive reception to communication. Collections knowledge is therefore deemed essential to successful transparency creation. In parity to this view is the perceived need for transparency for the Governing body, which arose from their knowledge of museum practices. But here transparency is regarded more of a 'tick box' exercise; a technicality for legal adherence rather than a desire for deep insight or engagement.

In accord with this preference for shared knowledge I uncovered another commonality: the practitioner's regard for Public audiences. This community received very low levels of transparency in both real-world and envisioned practice. Importantly, respondents demonstrated a view that it is sometimes necessary to hide

disposal from the public. Crucially, this view had seemingly been enacted into reality. For Public audiences I also discovered a link between perceived knowledge absence and reputational risk. This was apparent in the view that Journalists and Stakeholders associated with financial activities should be distanced from the disposal process. Yet within these generalised findings about disposal transparency, practitioners presented a dichotomy of thought and practice: of the common real-world hiding of disposal in contrast to a prevalent desire for radical transparency.

Having explored these areas, I moved on to the third aspect: practitioner perceptions of their audiences. These findings reinforced the view that transparency was most necessary for those with shared knowledge and familiarity with museum processes. Evident among respondent's words was the fear of transparency; most notably of exposing their institution to reputational risk. Indeed, within this chapter fear has been a recurring, but veiled, presence. It has lurked under the words and actions of many participants and evidenced itself as the perceived need to hide disposal from all but a select minority of people. But perhaps the transparency process could itself begin to tackle practitioner concerns and help them achieve the fully radical vision they claim to seek. For increasing transparency of transparency itself could demonstrate its nature and relevance, and thereby help practitioners to understand its complexities and application.

To conclude my exploration, I explored the perceived barriers which prevented transparency creation and found that many were believed to exist. I found a common concern for practical resources within the perceived lack of time, staff, and funding to undertake disposal transparency. But while I acknowledged such practical constraints exist I proposed the blaming of 'resources' demonstrated the perception of disposal transparency as an auxiliary task rather than a core activity. In this way we glimpsed the role of individual mindset shaping disposal transparency, as the undervaluing of disposal and its transparency created the absence of resource allocation. I also found further evidence of the role of audience knowledge and understanding, and the importance of the practitioner-audience relationship in creating or preventing transparency. The presence of fear was made visible through the strong concern for institutional reputational damage, and the subtle enacting of risk aversion.

This chapter has therefore offered a deep and challenging overview of practitioner mindset, and it is important to remember that it represents forty individuals who offered transparency to their thoughts and practices. Having created this picture of generalisations and insights it is time to progress the research story further, and explore how these findings are evidenced within contemporary practice. In the subsequent chapters I will therefore present two case studies. Both project teams undertook a transparent disposal process for their museum, and each utilised different strategies for communicating with their target audiences. Through a deep exploration of their actions, I will more deeply explore how the mindset of individuals and institutions shape the workings of disposal transparency.

Chapter 6: Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery

Stories from the Stores

"A different way to talk about disposals." (Jo Clarke)

6.1 Introduction

The volume and eccentricities of stored collections are characteristics, and perhaps embarrassments, of many UK museums and have been amply demonstrated throughout the preceding chapters. It takes a brave decision to put such material on show to reveal the inner workings of the institution. But this is what Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery (PCMAG) chose to do through their project *Stories from the Stores* (*SFTS*). By presenting the Social History collection to local audiences the museum chose to confront the inherited legacy of sporadic collecting and under-use, and sought lay expertise to inform the collection's future shape and use.

During the summer of 2013 a project team of professional and lay practitioners brought the Social History collection into the light of the temporary exhibition gallery and invited visitors to explore its realities. Their help was sought to identify, explain, and reminisce about the objects they saw. A team of volunteers guided visitors to record these local associations for posterity. To widen the reach of audience engagement a plethora of ancillary communications, including online blogs, traditional media, and focus groups, extended the consultation beyond the museum's walls. Local communities became the experts in assessing the social value of the collection, while the museum professionals became facilitators helping them understand why these considerations were important. Ultimately, visitors were asked what should be kept, and what might be removed.

The aims of this innovative task were clearly defined as the project team sought:

- To understand the public's appetite for accessing and engaging with stored collections.

- To undertake a full audit of an under-used and little understood collection.

- To reconnect objects with people and make collections relevant to people's lives.

- To foster sustainable use of the museum's collections.

(Smith 2014b, 3-6).

Disposal was not an explicit outcome but implied within the processes of audit, value assessment, and sustainability. Nor was 'transparency' a stated motivation; but I will evidence that it lay at the heart of this project.

In this chapter I explore how transparency for public audiences was envisaged and enacted by the professional team. I demonstrate how the Curators framed disposal within collections review and significance assessment, and sought to reveal hidden processes to develop understanding among their target audiences. In so doing this innovative project gathered valuable information which changed curatorial perceptions of the collection.

But I also witness the impact of public consultation and institutional factors on the team's later actions. While many unaccessioned objects were removed from long-term storage the desired rationalisation of accessioned material did not occur. Neither did the task to acquire a new sub-collection of toys; inspired by the public enthusiasm for Social History but stymied by their lack of willingness to donate items.

In this chapter I begin by exploring the intellectual context surrounding the project. Revealed through the museum's policies and practitioners' words is an awareness of differences between public and professional groups: of social knowledge held by the public, and of professional expertise held by museum staff. I set out how this perception shaped subsequent transparency acts.

I move on to explore the communications which created transparency: within the physical display, the exhibited word, and beyond the exhibition space. I discover curatorial humility which placed professionals as mediators between public and object in a unique temporal context. I then explore public responses to the transparency experience and the need for disposal. I witness their feelings of self-worth as valued

participants, but uncover indications for a belief that museums should safeguard rather than rationalise.

Within the final sections I assess how transparency affected the project outcomes. I discover important evidence for the separation of transparency from decision-making, and the complex interplay between public consultation and professional confidence. I conclude by setting the project and its team within the institutional context and assess the importance of stakeholder support.

This chapter offers an important case study of enacted transparency for, as I reveal in the opening sections, the formation of PCMAG's Social History collection is resonant to that within many museum collections; sporadic episodes of curatorial enthusiasm had combined with a lack of subject specialism and uncertain documentation processes to create an eclectic assemblage, whose content and boundaries were unclear. Rather than continuing a façade of denial, the Plymouth team acknowledged their professional duty for curation and access alongside their personal lack of association and expertise. Throughout this chapter I demonstrate how this reflexivity enabled transparency to occur. Recurrent through this chapter I uncover what it means to be both humble and brave, and I demonstrate the complexities of subjectivity and objectivity entwined within museum collections.

6.2 The development of reflexive practice

Located in the largest city in Devon (Encyclopaedia Britannica n.d.) the Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery was an established civic and regional museum. Funded by Plymouth City Council and Arts Council England (The Box, Plymouth n.d.), the museum placed local knowledge at the heart of its work as it aimed to:

> Endeavour to be a centre of regional excellence which provides a gateway to inspire curiosity about Plymouth's past, in order to inform understanding of the present and to explore the way the city has shaped, and been shaped, by the rest of the world.

> We do this by inspiring and engaging an active interest in our human past and the natural world, which is relevant to all of us, and in doing so, provide collections and memories for future generations. We aim to ensure that:

- Our users have access to a sustainable and quality service.

- Our users are inspired and enriched with knowledge and understanding.

- Our collections are well cared for. (Pitt 2013, 5).

By the time of *Stories from the Stores* the Edwardian museum was showing its age. Great plans were being developed to create a new city centre destination combining the museum, art gallery, and regional archives (Plymouth City Council n.d.). This new heritage institution sought to place "people at its heart, creating active participants" (ibid.). The museum with its 100,000 visitors per year (Lumley et al. 2015, 3) and over a million items in the collection (Plymouth Museums Galleries Archives n.d.b) was a central component within this vision. The Social History collection became a specific focus as it was perceived to be the physical representation of local people (Rachel Smith, Question 9). In 2021 this new heritage institution called *The Box, Plymouth*, opened to the public.

At the time of the *SFTS* project in 2013 associated discussions and changes were occurring. Following a recent restructure, the Social History collection had been assigned to Curators Tabitha Cadbury and Rachel Smith, whose job-share remit also included the World Cultures collection (TC, Q1; RS, Q1). In this new role they realised the intellectual and physical challenges presented by the Social History collection. In her end of project evaluation report Rachel recorded:

> The Social History collection includes some important local material, but in 2012 much of the collection was unprovenanced, uncatalogued, unresearched and poorly stored… There had been no previous opportunity to look at the Social History collection as a whole and consider the relative merits of the diverse aspects of the collection. (Smith 2014b, 2).

To address these issues the Curators devised the *SFTS* project "to assess the Social History collection at PCMAG and create plans and opportunities for its future use" (Smith 2014b, 2). They would do this through a collections audit, 'open stores' exhibition, and a pilot collections review (ibid., 1). An allied goal aimed to collect "object stories to add context and interest to items in the collection" (ibid.). This rationale was explained by Rachel, as:

> There was a lot of stuff we didn't know about… We were soliciting opinion about whether things should be kept, should be disposed of, and which things people liked, which things people thought should be in a museum collection. What they were surprised to see, what they were disappointed to see, what was missing; we wanted to know what their feelings were. (RS, Q12).

Her important words evidence the curatorial perception of their relationship to the collection and museum audiences. The expressed professional deference is essential to understanding the project and its workings revealed in this chapter. For despite their professional responsibilities neither Tabitha nor Rachel felt it their right to make decisions about the significance of the Social History collection. Their reason was a strong conviction that their life experiences did not represent the local population; they had both moved to Devon for their careers and lacked personal association with the city of Plymouth (TC, Q1; RS, Q1). They therefore believed that knowledge of the collection, its objects, and the people it represented, was held by members of the public rather than the museum. During interview Rachel expressed how this belief underpinned the project:

> Particularly because it was Social History, and it's *their* collection. Tabitha and I both felt [pauses]… We're not from Plymouth, it's not for *us* to say. It's quite a big responsibility when it's not your… when it's not about *you*. So, we really wanted to know what the people of Plymouth thought about it. (RS, Q12, her emphasis).

This perception of the curator-audience relationship clearly emphasised the importance of local communities as the Curators sought to combine professional expertise with public knowledge. This marked an important move away from previous curatorial practice, as Rachel explained:

> We were the first curators to ever have 'Social History' as part of our [job] title. So that felt like a bit of a responsibility… I guess we could see how much influence curators of the past had had, we wanted to shift that balance away from us personally. We really felt that Plymouth people should have more say,

should know what's there, should be aware of what we do have, and what we don't have. (RS, Q16 and Q37).

Within this focus is a reflexive consideration of the collection's formation and use. Developing these thoughts Rachel explained the development of the Social History collection:

Like most Social History collections, it started creeping in the early part of the twentieth century when curators started to realise that things were going out of use, and they should maybe hang onto things.

But the big drive here was in the post-war period. With the amount of building work going on in the city and the number of buildings that were being knocked down, it was a massive drive for the museum to collect architectural fragments. There are lots of those!

And then after that there was a big drive for photographing the city. And then in the late '80s, early '90s, there was more of a drive for contemporary social history. So, it wasn't just about what was being lost, it was about what was being used. I suppose that started in the '70s actually, because there is a paper bag collection also. Somebody saw fit to go around the city and collect paper bags from all the important shops in the city centre. So, there are lots of little patchy bits like that.

When Mark Tosdevin took over as Curator, I think he started a more contemporary look at social history, so it wasn't just about buildings and shops, it was about people and daily life.

Then Fiona Pitt, the next incarnation of Curator, did a Millennium project which was an exhibition about 100 years of the city. So that was the next collecting drive. And she collected a lot of items relating to the different areas in her exhibition, so it was kind of [about] working and playing, so it was quite holistic really. But it was about adding to the collection and not necessarily looking at what was there before — only in terms of what she could use for the exhibition, not necessarily looking at the collection holistically. Mainly because, who's got time really?

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And there was a big backlog of stuff that we knew was in there as well. At that time, we didn't really know what that included.

JD: What sort of 'backlog of stuff'?

RS: Half processed acquisitions. Abandoned enquiries, all that stuff. And I think when we looked at the statistics it was something like 25% of the whole collection had no documentation at all associated with it, which is quite a big number! (RS, Q14 and Q15).

This important narrative demonstrates the role of individuals in shaping collections, and consequently the stories a museum can share. Here, the extant collection had been created through deliberate but disparate actions by a series of professionals with different motivations. As Curators practicing within a reflexive mindset both Rachel and Tabitha felt a weight of responsibility to address the confusions and enable audience-centred use and interpretation. This vision shaped their own curatorial project and placed public transparency at its core.

The curatorial development of self-awareness and transparency is mirrored by the institutional policies. These demonstrate an important development in thinking and practice which occurred during the lifespan of *SFTS*. For example, during the project's creation the museum staff were guided by a *Disposal Policy and Procedure* of limited length and content. The expressed "strong presumption against the disposal of any items in the museum's collection" sought to uphold the "long-term purpose" of the museum (Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery 2011, 21). Further, disposal was regarded as solely a professional consideration. Specifically:

A decision to dispose of a specimen… will be the responsibility of the City Curator, acting under delegated powers from the governing body of the museum, upon the advice of the professional curatorial staff. (ibid.).

Within this articulation of permanence and expertise, disposal communication was not required, or even considered, for stakeholders, public, or other professionals (Figure 42). This policy thereby enabled accountability but confined transparency to internal professionals. Importantly, despite its use until 2013 the *Disposal Policy* had not been updated since 2005. It did not incorporate the *Code of Ethics* (Museums Association

2008) or the *Disposal Digest* and *Disposal Toolkit* (Museums Association 2004a and 2004b).

Significance assessment:

Keepers (Curators) — City Curator — Collections Manager

Approval:

City Council

Responsibility for disposal:

City Curator

Key:
Shading denotes different Communities of Practice   Professional   Stakeholder
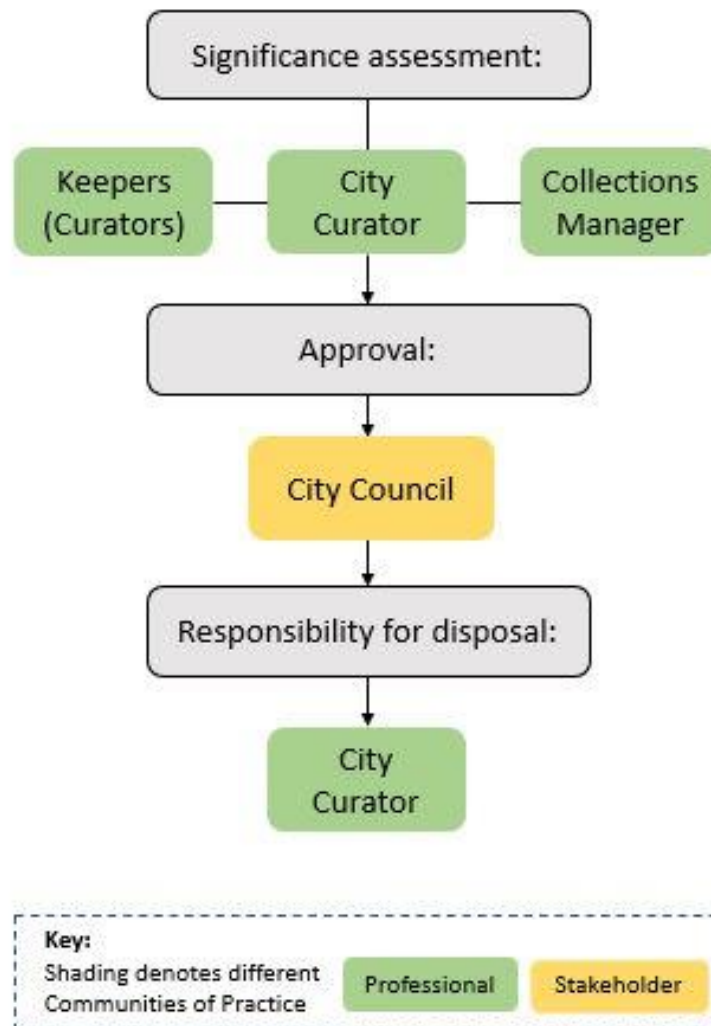
Figure 42: The communication process contained within the 2011 disposal policy at PCMAG. The narrow and opaque practice offered communication solely to curators and the governing body.

Concurrent with *SFTS* the museum developed a new *Collections Development Plan* which marked a significant change of direction and contained new explanations of the disposal process. An over-arching change was an understanding of the different sub-collection areas, with each regarded a separate entity with distinct considerations;

practice was to be tailored to the needs of each area. For the "Social, Maritime and City History" collection, partly comprising the material under consideration in this chapter, the policy stated:

> … all material considered for acquisition must have a suitable Plymouth provenance and/or, more importantly, a strong Plymouth relevance. PCMAG strives to avoid duplication within its collections, but an item in better condition might be considered for acquisition in conjunction with an associated disposal. (ibid., 40).

This statement presents two significant changes from the previous policy. First, is a new relationship between acquisition and disposal as interactional processes. Put simply, the acquisition of one object may necessitate the removal of another. This new interplay is voiced elsewhere in the policy with the removal of the notion of collections permanence. For example:

> It is normal for museums to have collection items where the decisions regarding their original acquisition are maybe unclear or are no longer thought to be relevant. Collections reviews allow the Museum to assess and research such objects and make an informed decision as to whether they should remain part of the Museum's collections. (ibid., 45).

Readers of the policy are thereby assured of a close link between disposal decision-making and institutional mission: disposal will only happen when pertinent to the museum's current or future needs.

The second significant change is the notion that object value stems from physical properties and allied stories, here voiced as "relevance". Although the difference between "relevance" and "provenance" is not explained the semantic difference is subtly raised in the reader's mind. This implicitly raises an important question: to whom must an object be relevant, and how is that assessed?

This notion — of object relevance and how it is assessed — also features elsewhere in the policy. Its centrality is evident in the new understanding of the curator-public relationship of roles and responsibilities. For example, transparency is now considered for audiences other than internal staff. Specifically, "the museum will be open and

transparent in the way it makes decisions" (ibid.,7). This marks a bold contrast to the veiled practices contained in the earlier policy, and is most simply demonstrated in reality by the naming of the document's authors and their professional roles (Pitt 2013).

Further, decision-making was envisaged as a process in which "informed decisions" (ibid., 46) would utilise knowledge and expertise from different sources (Figure 43). These included curators, Plymouth residents, a "Museum Disposal Committee", and sectoral bodies (ibid.). This new Museum Disposal Committee would:

> … generally contain members of the Museum Management Team and Senior Officers responsible for Heritage within Plymouth City Council. In cases where there might be a greater degree of potential controversy a committee might also draw members of the Curatorial Team and Friends of Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery. (ibid.).

Transparency was therefore at the heart of disposal with intentions for information sharing and use, although it was not clearly explained how such information would be utilised. I suggest it is not a coincidence that these ideological shifts between old and new policy occurred during the lifespan of *Stories from the Stores*. For the authors included Curators Tabitha and Rachel and, as I will examine throughout this chapter, the changes reflect the processes and practices they developed in their own work.

Having detailed the personal and professional attitudes underpinning the *Stories from the Stores* project, the institutional policies encasing it, and the important concurrent changes in mindset, I will now explore the workings of the collections review and rationalisation project. I begin by exploring how the project team attempted to create disposal transparency through a variety of communications with public audiences.
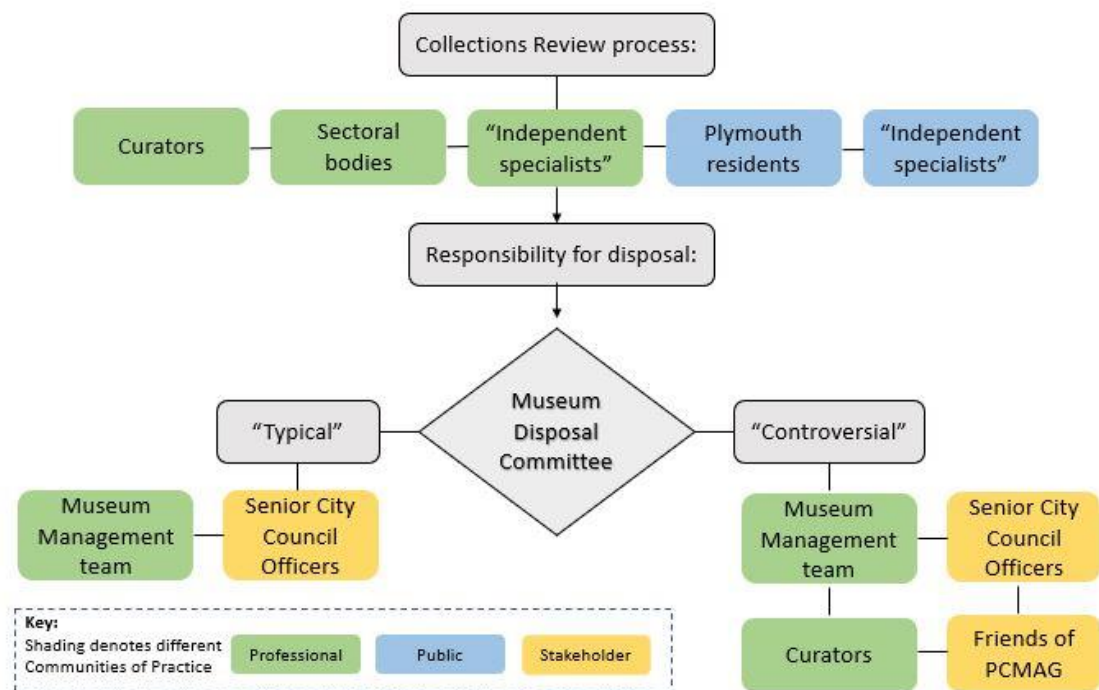
Figure 43: The communication process within the 2013 disposal policy. Transparency now included professional, public, and stakeholder audiences.

6.3 Public transparency in practice

As explored in the opening sections of this chapter, public transparency arose from a desire to seek and collect public information to inform professional practice. The impetus arose from the project Curators' professional humility, and belief in their intermediary role between the collection and the museum's audiences and stakeholders. As Rachel explained, "I am in between the public and what the museum is going to do with that collection" (RS, Q55). Accordingly, the Curators drew together a core project team containing varied professional and volunteer expertise (Figure 44) and drew on additional support as needed (Figure 45).

The Curators chose multimodal communications to connect with their audiences. Through exhibition, focus groups, and mass and social media, they sought to reveal behind-the-scenes processes of collections management, and engage in meaningful conversation about the future use of the collection. I will now examine these actions in turn and explore how they generated transparency.
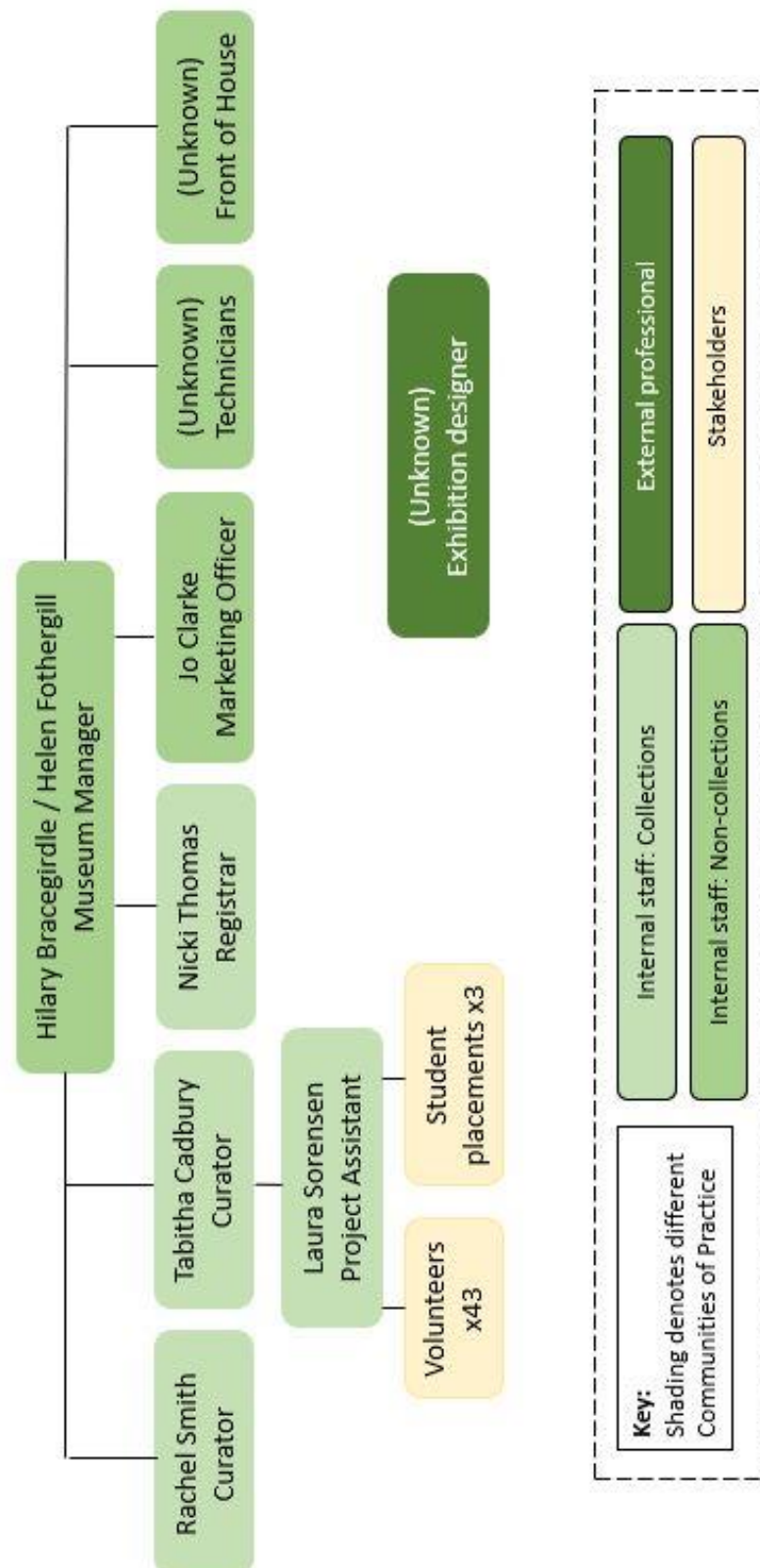
Figure 44: The core project team that developed, designed, installed, and marketed the SFTS exhibition.
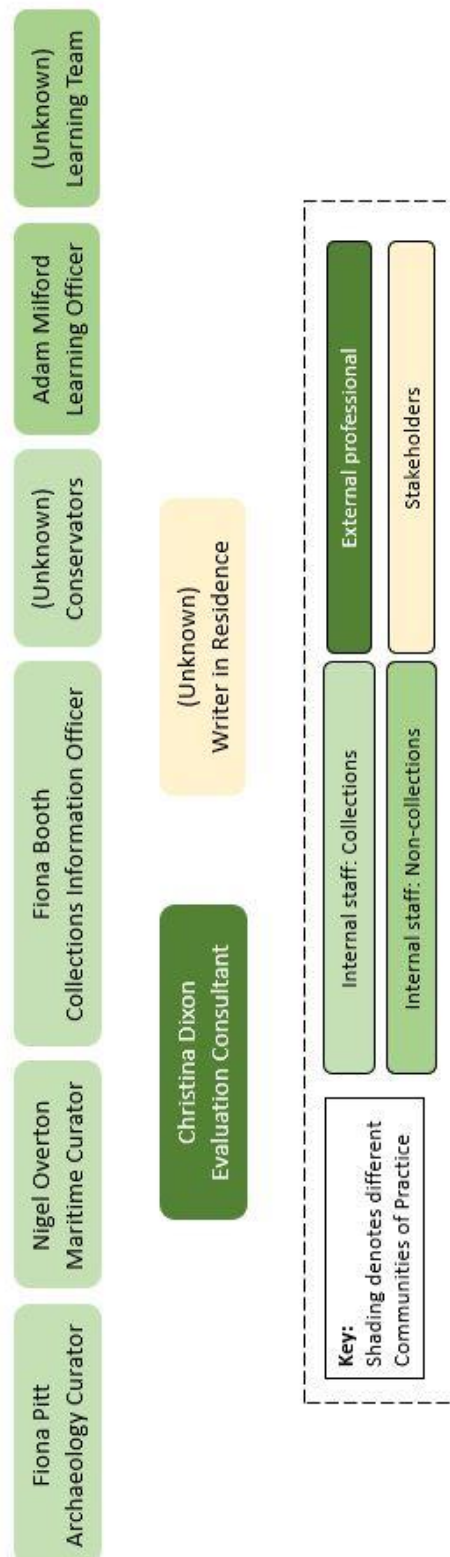
Figure 45: Supplementary expertise utilised during the SFTS *exhibition.*

6.3.1 The physical display

The *Stories from the Stores* exhibition ran between 8 June and 24 August 2013 (Dixon 2013, 1) and aimed to represent an "open store" (Smith 2014b, 2) to physically display the extent of the Social History collection. Around 3,000 objects filled the room (Smith 2014b, 2). Large items hung from the walls or were placed on floor-mounted plinths, while rows of locked metal cabinets contained boxed and individual smaller objects (Figure 46). The visitor experience was more akin to an antiques shop than a museum display. Spotlights drew attention to quirky or mysterious items, and visitors were encouraged to converse and perhaps exclaim, 'My Gran had one of those!'.

Figure 46: The Stories from the Stores *exhibition presented the Social History collection within a replicated storeroom. (Credit: Smith 2014a).*

Alongside this 'visible storage' the project team of Curators, Conservators, other Collections staff, and Volunteers (Smith 2014b, 4; Figure 44 above) worked at a series of tables. Here they undertook collections management tasks including object cataloguing, photography, and repacking (Figure 47). This format aimed to show visitors "what we actually do behind the scenes, [as] a lot of people don't know" (Nicki

Thomas, Q7). Central to this visibility was a team of volunteers (Figure 48) who received training "explaining why we do the things we do. It was sharing that knowledge and ensuring that they [volunteers] could talk to the public about that" (Laura Sorensen, Q9). The recruitment and training of this team was thereby an act of disposal transparency itself by revealing these 'hidden' processes and enabling volunteers to understand and explain them. To further aid visitor understanding several "Curator's Tours" provided sight to the 'real' stores in the adjacent building (Smith 2014b, 1).

Other physical elements within the exhibition included a table and chairs for visitors' use, and a series of 'props' related to questions of object value and retention. This latter element will be explored in subsequent sections in this chapter.

Figure 47: A working area within the gallery enabled visitors to see and explore 'behind the scenes' tasks of collections management and care. (Credit: Smith 2014a).

Figure 48: Volunteers June Beahan and Michael Moore during a project evaluation session with freelance professional Christina Dixon. (Credit: Smith 2014a).

6.3.2 The exhibited word

Alongside the physicality of museum exhibition it is written elements that present information about what visitors will see and explore. In this exhibition the Curators chose to minimise such interpretation (RS, Q28); a choice which clearly represented their own perceived relationship with the collection. The exhibition was not to be an expert-led journey but a voyage of discovery for all. Accordingly, the lack of specialist knowledge was voiced on each of the eight text panels. For example, the introductory "Welcome!" panel asked visitors:

> Which objects are most important for Plymouth's social history? What's missing? What's no longer relevant? Your comments will help us to carry out a collections review, to develop our future plans, to decide what to collect, and how to display it in the future. Tell us what you think! (Smith 2014b, 10).

Through these opening words the role of the visitor was brought to the fore. The emphasis on collaboration encouraged them to feel valued and comfortable with the interactions on offer. Further, these words offered a clear insight to the Curators' understanding of the professional-public relationship and the perceived knowledge held among the local community. By openly seeking opinions the museum offered a relationship in which the Curator and visitor both had meaningful contributions to offer. This egalitarian relationship was further emphasised by the conversational language, for example seen in the abbreviation "what's" instead of the grammatically correct "what is". This emphasised the museum-audience relationship as one of informal parity, akin to a conversation between friends.

But despite this offered equality of relationship the Curators demark a boundary between professional and public roles. Visitors were to be distanced from the decision-making process, as their information would "help us" (i.e. the Curators) carry out the review process. This project was therefore to be a process of reciprocal information sharing, which would inform the museum's professional work, and ultimately benefit future visitors through collections use and access. This separation of public and professional roles and responsibilities was further evidenced on a panel entitled "What do we collect?" (Figure 49), in which the Curators presented the complexities of assessing object value:

> Our social history collections should represent the everyday lives of people in Plymouth, today and in the past. They should keep the things we value, for the future. But we can't keep everything in Plymouth! So we have to make difficult choices about what to store and preserve.

> The Museum and Art Gallery has been on this site for just over a century, and different curators have collected different things for different reasons. Today people offer us objects, photographs and ephemera (papers like posters and tickets), and we have to decide whether or not to keep them. Here are some of the things we consider:

> Does the object come with an interesting story?

> Does it have local relevance?

Is it significant to lots of people, or just one person?

Is it in good condition?

Would it be difficult to find another one?

Do we already have examples in the collection?

Do we have room for it? Size matters!

(Smith 2014b, 12).

Figure 49: The text panel entitled "What do we collect?" explained the museum process of assessing social significance. (Credit: Smith 2014a).

These words presented a useful explanation of how museums assess the social value of an object, and thereby revealed an important aspect of the disposal process to visitors. But within the repetitive emphasis of "we" the Curators separated themselves from their visitor audience and denoted such decisions would ultimately be a matter for professional consideration and action.

Having assured visitors of their role as valued participants for information-sharing the museum offered them different communication options to respond. The first was conversation (i.e. dialogue) with staff and volunteers. Nicki Thomas, the museum's Documentation and IT officer, described the informality of this visitor-staff conversation as:

> … especially the elderly generation, they were so lovely. They'd just see something, and they would go 'ooh!'. And they'd come and sit down and have a chat. It was a great interaction with the public. (NT, Q7).

Her words demonstrate the ease many visitors felt with this process. This feeling of enjoyment sometimes extended to physical engagement, with visitors able to help with simple object cleaning or repacking. Nicki recounted:

> … most of them [visitors] were asking what we were doing at the tables. We were doing a bit of conservation. So, we had these very robust stamps, or seal makers. They are iron. We got the visitors interacting with that, [using] a bit of 'smoke sponge' and cleaning them. (NT, Q10).

Visitor understanding of museum processes therefore moved from physically distanced observation to hands-on engagement supported by informal chat. As Curator Tabitha explained, this informality was an essential component of the transparency process as objects became the catalyst to conversation:

> It was an exhibition entirely required to have explainers in the gallery really… It was a conversation... It was an opportunity for us to actually meet the visitors, which we don't often have the chance to do in our behind-the-scenes jobs. (TC, Q27).

Her words reveal an important aspect of the transparency enacted through this exhibition: communication benefitted *both* parties. For the public, it offered visibility to hidden museum practices, developed their understanding of curation of the Social History collection, and provided an opportunity to reminisce and share information. For the Curators, these conversations offered the chance to explain their daily professional workings to aid public understanding, and to learn about objects in their care. It also enabled in-person encounters with the public: the very people whom their decisions and actions would affect in the future.

The second communication option was to provide a written response. A "Visitor Survey" (Appendix 2) could be completed in-person, or in conversation with volunteers who transcribed their words. The survey asked visitors for their views about the collection and the style of display. They were also asked to record their favourite object in the exhibition, but not their least favourite or for disposal suggestions.

Alternatively, visitors could complete a form entitled "Treasure, Trash or Missing?" (Figure 50). On this 'object proposal' visitors could propose their favourite item in the exhibition, their least favourite, or an item they thought was not represented within the collection. These forms were available next to a text panel and physical props comprising a treasure chest, a dustbin, and a shopping trolley.

STORIES FROM THE STORES
Treasure, Trash or Missing?
Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery

PLYMOUTH
CITY COUNCIL

Imagine that you are the curator…

What do you think of the objects we have? What should we keep? What should we collect in the future? Here's your chance to have your say.

Object number/name:
Please describe the object, or draw it:

Ceiling plaster.

Why is this object treasure or trash? Or why should we collect it?

If it's in pieces & not able to be displayed pretty much in one piece, it's not worth the space. Loads of examples are still available in situ, with increased access to old Romes etc. Chuck, especially if original location unknown.

Please put this paper into the treasure chest, trolley or bin. Thank you!

Version 1 5th September 2012

Not protectively marked

Figure 50: Example of a completed "Treasure, Trash, or Missing?" form. This visitor has proposed an item for disposal. Source: SFTS project archive. (Credit: Author).

The accompanying text panel (Figure 51) was entitled, "Treasure or trash? Tell us your views!". It stated:

Imagine that you are the curator…

What do you think of the objects we have? What should we keep? What should we collect in the future? Here's your chance to have your say.

Treasure Chest

Choose your favourite item from the exhibition, and describe it or draw a picture. Tell us why you like it, and drop your paper into the treasure chest.

Do you have a story to tell about any of the objects on display? Perhaps you can identify a mystery object, or remember how something was used. Please help us by writing down your story and posting it into the treasure chest.

Rubbish Bin

Choose the object which you like the least, and tell us why we should get rid of it. Drop your paper into the rubbish bin.

Shopping Trolley

What's missing? Tell us what objects we should have to represent the people of Plymouth, today and in the past. Drop your paper into the shopping trolley.

Your views will help us decide what we keep and what we collect in the future. Thank you!

(Smith 2014b, 16).

Figure 51: The text panel "Treasure or Trash?" invited visitors to consider the social value of objects. (Credit: Smith 2014a).

This interpretive element of text panel, props, and written response forms merits detailed consideration as it is a core element in understanding how disposal was portrayed.

First, by framing disposal within wider collections management processes the public were presented with a holistic understanding of acquisition and disposal. It suggested that disposal should not be regarded in isolation. This symbiosis became enshrined within the new *Collections Development Plan* examined earlier in this chapter.

Second, the language offered an emotive, and perhaps negative, portrayal of the disposal process. For example, object removal was framed within the conscious decision to *keep* items ("what should we keep?") and thereby implied other items may not be retained. This may have inadvertently suggested a large-scale removal process was to be undertaken. The importance of assessing an object's value was reinforced by the invitation for visitors to write down the item they "liked the least". This portrayed the disposal process as a subjective assessment of significance and emphasised visitors' emotional responses.

Further, the professional term "disposal" was not used within this text panel. Instead, the instruction for visitors to "drop" their suggestion into the rubbish bin offered a physical representation of waste, with the phrase "get rid of" an emotive colloquialism for this. The associations of a dustbin and the words "trash", "rubbish" and "get rid" emphasised the physical outcome in which objects are thrown away as worthless items. Nothing in the text or its associated actions suggested other possible outcomes, such as transfer to another museum or reuse within a handling collection. Still, while this seems an important omission it must be remembered that this exhibition occurred before the 2014 *Disposal Toolkit* had been published.

While this physical portrayal of disposal offered a narrow and potentially misleading representation of professional practice, it demonstrates the complex interplay between written, verbal, and physical communication for creating transparency. For this method was successful in creating a dialogic process, as the text and associated props prompted conversation between visitors, volunteers, and the project team about object value and retention or removal decisions. For example, some visitors

questioned the workings of the collections review and disposal process by asking "what are you going to do with all this stuff?" (NT, Q10). Others expressed consternation at the museum's actions which had generated the collection, remembered by Laura Sorensen as visitors asking, "why have you got all those glass bottles?" or "What's the point of having all those clocks?" (LS, Q10). This interplay is an important demonstration that transparency is more than simply a choice of words or an act of making visible. Visual and kinaesthetic elements can contribute, or indeed detract, from the information being conveyed and how it is understood by the recipient.

The exhibition therefore offered an innovative approach to transparency by placing disposal within the context of 'hidden' collections management processes. It enabled visitors to see and interact with the collection and the practitioners involved in its curation and emphasised the public's role in understanding social value. The Curators' own reflexivity was evident throughout and enabled the formation of new relationships built on mutual trust and honesty within an attitude of openness.

6.3.3 Beyond the exhibition space

The exhibition thereby provided opportunities for meaningful interaction with visitors and enabled radical transparency to occur. But the team realised these methods would not engage all audiences: while 75% of the museum's visitors were from the city or 'travel-to-work' area, not all those demographics would be represented by visitors to the summer exhibition (Jo Clarke, Q12). The project team therefore developed an array of communications to reach audiences beyond the exhibition space. Some were familiar practices including articles in the Friends newsletter (e.g. McCoryn 2013, 7), local press releases (e.g. Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery n.d.a and n.d.b), and a local radio interview (Sorensen and Smith n.d.). Others were new formats including reminiscence sessions, and a 'pop-up museum' at the local hospital (Smith 2014b, 1). The team thereby generated wider visibility by informing and explaining the purpose of the exhibition and inviting audiences to the museum exhibition.

The use of digital media extended this transparency reach. For example, on the social media platform *Flickr* the team shared a photographic record of the exhibition installation process (Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery, n.d.c). This provided

visibility to the 'hidden' processes of object selection and display but retained some
opacity as the associated descriptions did not explain the roles of the people depicted
(Figures 52 and 53).

Figure 52: Visibility of practice generated through a Flickr *photo album. Here, Curator
Tabitha Cadbury and team are moving objects from the storeroom. (Credit: Plymouth
City Museum and Art Gallery).*

Figure 53: Visibility of practice generated through a Flickr *photo album. Here, Curator Rachel Smith and team are discussing the placement of objects within the gallery. (Credit: Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery).*

Digital visibility was further enabled by a series of blog posts written by the curatorial project team (e.g. Morgan-Richards 2015), other internal staff (e.g. Booth 2013; Milford 2013), volunteers (e.g. Glew 2013), and student placements (e.g. Anušauskaitė 2013). These described aspects of the project and encouraged audiences to leave written responses. For example, one blog asked, "Can you help us find out about this month's mystery object?" (Smith and Cadbury 2013a). Another explained "Some objects have been found in the social history stores with no associated information, so we don't know what they are" (Smith and Cadbury 2013b). In this way the project team openly revealed their lack of knowledge about the collection. Indeed, the importance of 'non-professional' expertise was a common theme, typified by a statement that, "We would love to hear any memories, stories and knowledge you have relating to these objects" (Cadbury 2013a). While today such social media formats are common practice at the time of *SFTS* they were an innovation instigated by the project team (JCe, Q17). Indeed, their understanding of professional and lay

expertise was the catalyst for creating these new practices. Jo Clarke, the museum's Communications Officer, explained:

> *Stories from the Stores* was the exhibition that kick started the blog really… We were looking for people to feed in ideas. It's such a different way to interpret a collection, isn't it, by actually asking people to write about it themselves, rather than it coming from somebody that is employed by the organisation. You get a totally different take on things. (JCe, Q17).

The blogs proved a useful tool for linking project tasks together and presenting the exhibition as one element of the wider collections management process. Within the broader scope of the project these multi-modal communications demonstrate a project team that strove to make their work visible and open themselves to scrutiny; and sought to help their audiences understand the collection and the topics in consideration, while gathering and listening to their views.

Other project communications demonstrate a more complex transparency, as the information shared with visitors was itself created by individuals from the project's audiences. For example, local university students curated a small display of Social History items in the museum foyer (ibid., 7; Figure 54). In this way, the student curators directly experienced the processes underpinning museum display and interpretation. They then shared their understandings and stories of object value with museum visitors. Here, transparency had moved from simple visibility, to generating understanding through action, which generated subsequent acts of visibility and knowledge-sharing to additional audiences.

In another example, the team used *Flickr* to share graphical representations of the Social History collection (Figure 55) which had been generated through a student engagement process (Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery, n.d.d). In parity with the students' display in the museum foyer, this action presents a complex communication chain between Professional—Audience One—Audience Two. Information was passed from the professionals; received, interpreted, and shared by the students (Audience One); and subsequently received by individuals via digital means (Audience Two). Collections information was thereby presented in a new and meaningful way, and in a

format which moved beyond the 'museum norm' at that time. Further, the digital *Flickr* accounts provided a legacy to the project's transparency as they remained accessible many years after the project ended.

Figure 54: A small display of items from the Social History collection. Curated by local students and displayed in the museum's entrance foyer. (Credit: Smith 2014a).
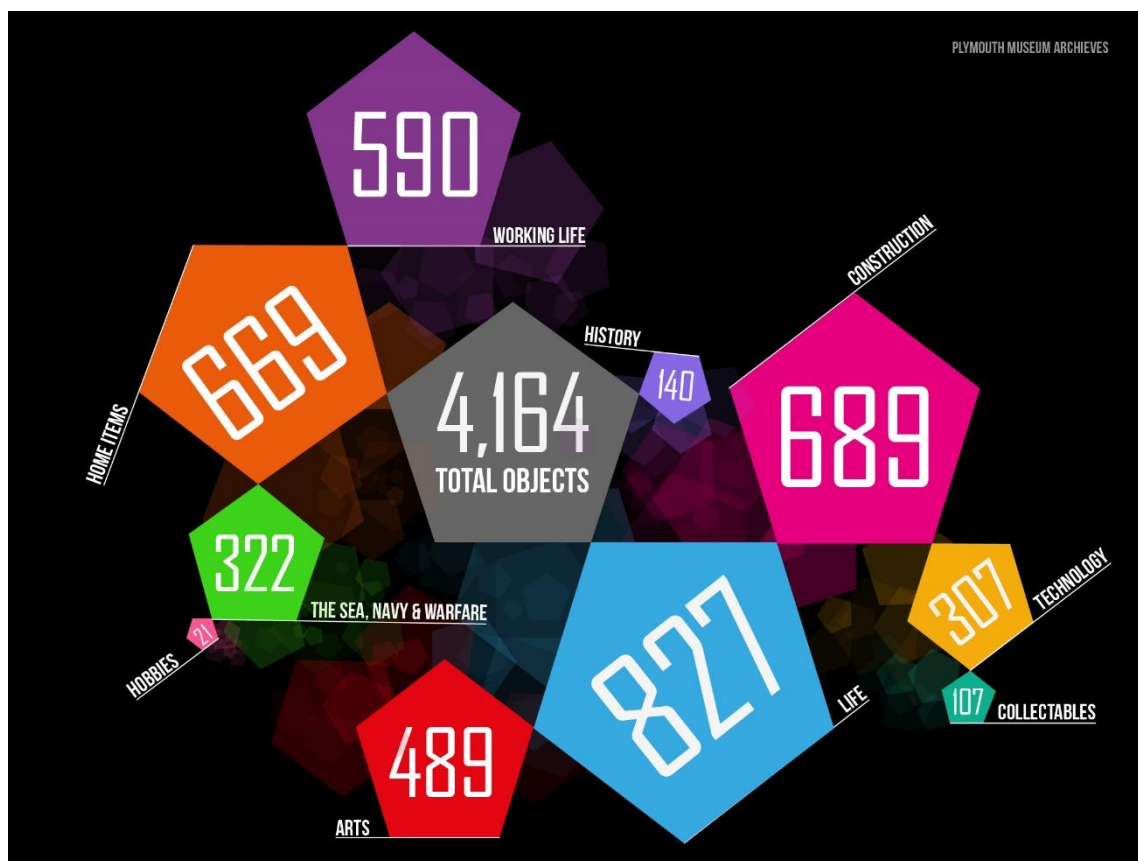
Figure 55: Example of the graphical presentation of the Social History collection, by student Nicola Sprague. (Credit: Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery).

But within many of these communications the disposal process was not as prominent as it could have been. This likely reflects its absence as an explicit aim within the project. Despite its presence in the gallery, these silences demonstrate a reluctance to engage audiences with disposal or its role within collections management. This is seen most clearly in the emphasis of five focus groups for "Young people; University of the Third Age; Friends of PCMAG; PCMAG Traditional Crafts Group (multicultural); [and] Plymouth workers (adults)" (Dixon 2013, 1). These sessions aimed "to encourage ideas with regard to future collecting in terms of themes, styles of display and interest in specific [project] objectives" (ibid.). Participants were asked to name their "favourite object" and suggest objects to fill perceived 'gaps' in the collection (Dixon 2013). These mirrored two of the three topics on the in-gallery "Treasure, Trash or Missing?" forms. By addressing the topics of 'gap filling' and 'favourites' the emphasis was adding to the collection and ensuring its relevance. The opportunity to explicitly discuss the need for

object removal, and its relationship to the acquisition process, was not utilised. But despite this absence some focus group participants demonstrated awareness of disposal concerns. It is possible to group their words into different themes:

- Space: e.g. "It gives us an idea of the problems faced by the museum staff, and how much storage they need".

- Intellectual and physical access: e.g. "It's all a bit of a jumble".

- Object condition: e.g. "Some of the items look in terrible condition, an issue?".

- Object value: e.g. "The everyday items… are not financially valuable, good to see the ordinary in the museum". (ibid., 27-37).

These focus groups were therefore consistent with the project aims to assess the content, potential, and future use of the collection, within which disposal was a minor element. Importantly, despite disposal being withheld as a discussion topic it was clearly present within some participants' minds. Further, their motivations for disposal mirrored the professional concerns which soon became national guidance in the *Disposal Toolkit*.

Having explored the transparency created by these in-gallery and external communications I will now explore the consequences of those actions. I begin with the primary targeted audiences, and explore the public experience of transparency.

6.4 The public experience of transparency

Among the preceding discussions I have demonstrated the use of varied communication modes to gather knowledge from the public, to complement expertise within the professional team and inform the significance review of the Social History collection. Through this multi-modal strategy the team successfully achieved radical transparency. It is now pertinent to explore how this transparency was received by the public audiences, as evidenced by their words and actions.

At the simplest level of analysis, transparency can be deemed a success as 436 visitor surveys were collected within the exhibition (Dixon 2013, 1). These comprised "over 300 stories" including "memories of how and why objects no longer common in everyday life would have been used; and personal anecdotes relating to individual

objects" (Smith 2014b, 2). This public knowledge now has enduring social value as it is recorded for posterity within the museum's information systems (Smith 2014b) and was "still being used" after the project had concluded (NT, Q14). The target public audiences therefore responded well to the offered engagement opportunities.

Beyond this knowledge transfer and recording the conversational modes created an emotional sense of well-being among visitors and the project team. For example, this was enthusiastically recounted by volunteer June Beahan during the research interview, several years after the project had concluded:

> I remember one young girl coming in and said, 'oh my Mum and Dad met there, I know about that place!' So, there were lots of little stories that were really fascinating. It was great, it was great talking to people. It really was. (JB, Q11).

The transparency process, which centred around conversation about museum objects, thereby created a powerful intellectual, aesthetic, and emotive experience for both visitor and volunteer. Central to this enthusiasm was the sense of personal validation, which arose from the museum's affirmation of the importance of the social information being offered. As one focus group member commented, "I like to see that visitor's comments are valuable to the museum" (Dixon 2013, 8). Another focus group participant felt personal investment in the collection as, "It was interesting and mutually helpful, because I helped to identify some objects for the collections specialist" (Dixon 2013, 3). Indeed, the value of public knowledge was evidenced by a visitor's identification of a 'ship's chronometer' which the museum had incorrectly catalogued as a 'clock' (JB, Q10). This identification was subsequently confirmed by external professional expertise who declared it an "exciting find" (Sorensen 2013).

Through the exhibition process the project team therefore successfully moved beyond the role of curator-educator to become a receptive ear to collective expertise. This process was of reciprocal benefit to museum and visitor, enabling information sharing, creating new understandings of object significance, and instigating new museum-audience relationships. These are important outcomes and firmly demonstrate the benefits of allowing public sight and input to 'hidden' practices.

But it is too simplistic to hail the public experience of transparency as wholly successful. For the unfamiliar dialogic strategy proved unsettling for some visitors and they needed encouragement to join in. For example, Nicki Thomas recollected:

> Some people just rocked up and talked and said, "What are you doing?". But there were [other] people you could see hovering. So, you'd go up to them and have that conversation. But yeah, you could see with the body language they want to ask you a question, but they're not sure: are we just working, or can we be approached?. (NT, Q8).

This visitor hesitancy reveals an important aspect of transparency: the communication recipient, for example the partner in a dialogic process, needs to be willing and confident to engage. Without the recipient's consent — whether conscious or unconscious — the message being transmitted may not be received, understood, or acted upon. Radical transparency therefore requires openness and vulnerability from all parties.

This audience hesitancy is further evidenced by the difficulty in recruiting focus group participants. While the exhibition was deemed to have successfully reached its core audience (RS, Q13), Curator Rachel explained:

> It was hard to attract certain groups of people to the focus groups… I don't know how to describe them. I suppose 'working people', people who have a working life. It was really difficult to attract them… we wanted an ordinary group, not defined by anything other than the fact they have a working life…. Getting an opinion out of them once they're there is easy. Getting them to actually turn up is the difficult thing. (RS, Q38 and Q41).

Indeed, this participant reluctance prevented engagement with specific target audiences whose views and values remain under-represented within the collection. In further describing the difficulty of focus group recruitment, Rachel explained:

> We didn't consciously exclude anyone. We could have done a hundred different focus groups, targeting different people… and we felt like we were catching lots of people through the exhibition… [But] We felt there were people in the city that weren't necessarily represented by the collection.

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Mainly because those groups hadn't been in the city that long. And I think that's one thing that we didn't quite get to the bottom of within the project. (RS, Q43 and Q44).

Further, recipient hesitancy is evident among the in-gallery oral and written communications. For example, some visitors were reluctant to commit their stories to paper as they felt their story was not of enough value. Volunteer June recalled:

As people came in [to the gallery] we had information forms asking questions like 'what area do you come from, what religion are you' *et cetera* and 'what do you find interesting as an object?'…. They would tell you a story and I would say 'would you like to write it down…?' [and they would reply] 'well no I haven't really got anything to say'. I said, 'but you've already told me a story — write it down!'. (JB, Q3).

Some level of audience hesitancy was perhaps predictable given the novelty of the exhibition format. But it also extended beyond the exhibition space. For example, only five of the eighteen project blogs received responses. Further, these comments varied in nature with several being largely unrelated to the blog content. For example, one individual sought information about a family antique (Booth n.d.), while another requested to purchase the museum object described in the blog post (Smith 2013). These evidence another important aspect of radical transparency: that the conveyed message can be interpreted in unexpected ways by the recipient. It is not possible for the communicator to control, or predict, how a message will be heard, understood, or acted upon.

Moving beyond the exhibition and its audiences, one notable success of the project's strategy was the use of local media as a supportive communication recipient. This attitude directly contradicts the purposeful distancing of journalists evidenced by survey participants in the previous chapter. Important to this success was the established relationship of mutual positivity and understanding. Communications Officer Jo Clarke explained, "We've always had a pretty decent relationship with the local media — because we are a good news story as far as the [City] Council goes" (JCe, Q19). Her words demonstrate the framing of the museum's activities was important:

the Local Authority structure provided a known context for the museum and its perception by the press, and the project team were confident of a positive portrayal. Still, this transparency required careful consideration to ensure it would generate accurate public understanding. In her reflections about the museum's relationship with the media Jo Clarke explained how the choice of language was essential:

> With some projects we might have to do a bit more to warm them [local media] up. We might have to spend a bit more time and a bit more thought about how we talk about the stuff — what kind of language we use, and how we talk about it to try and break down some misconceptions or preconceptions…

> If you were talking about disposals maybe that's not the word you'd use for the public, because it does have some negative connotations. Maybe if we were talking about 'streamlining' or 'rationalising', or if you turned it on its head and you talked about how you were 'creating space for new collections'. So maybe there's a different way to talk about disposals, rather than just talking about disposals, if you see what I mean. (JCe, Q10 and Q37).

Jo articulates the importance of using communication to convey a specific message, and the subtleties of language which affect understanding. This is a vital consideration for disposal transparency, wherein, as evidenced by the lack of visitor written responses, the concept itself challenges societal expectations of museum practice and purpose. The utilisation of the media in this way evidences a positive attitude to risk which ran throughout the project. Using this established relationship not only minimised the risk of negative portrayal, but offered a positive opportunity for potential audience engagement.

Having explored various audience reactions to disposal transparency there is one remaining aspect which merits consideration: the museum's choice of target audiences. As seen above, the team consciously dedicated their efforts to engaging residents and workers within the city of Plymouth. Transparency for other groups was inevitably restricted by the aim to collect local knowledge about the collection. However, this did not mean other audiences were totally excluded. For example,

transparency with the wider museum sector became an unexpected but beneficial outcome. During our research interview volunteer Michael enthusiastically described his experience of this professional engagement as, "We had curators come up from Cornwall… they stood in the doorway and said, 'Why don't we do something like this?!' It was brilliant." (MM, Q8). From this initial visit developed fuller knowledge-sharing and insight. Curator Rachel recalled, "they asked me if I'd go and talk to them about how we'd organised the audit, what the project was about, and what we planned to do" (RS, Q45). This "sharing knowledge with professional bodies" engaged nearly fifty regional professionals (Smith 2014b, 2).

This unexpected professional transparency demonstrates two aspects. First, that the project team were willing to share their work and insights with the regional sector. These communication processes developed beyond an information-seeking visit by the audience to a process of informed knowledge sharing and insight. In simple terms, the process moved from visibility to radical transparency. Second, it demonstrates that transparency acts can be received by people beyond the target audience. In this example the unintentional communication was of benefit to both parties. But within these 'unknowable' engagements and outcomes lie the origins of the perceived risks of disposal communication, and the resulting hesitancy, which has been evidenced among practitioners in the preceding chapters.

From this exploration of public transparency are two key findings: conversational modes enabled intellectual and emotional engagement; and transparency acts failed to reach some target audiences but engaged other unexpected groups. It is now important to explore what transparency revealed about public engagement with the disposal process itself.

6.5 The public view of disposal

Within this project there is one obvious source of evidence for exploring the public perception of disposal: visitors' written responses, especially those on the "Treasure, Trash, or Missing?" forms. Summarised in Figure 56 these demonstrate a strong preference for proposing items of significance within the collection ("Treasure"). Suggestions for collection gaps ("Missing?") and items for disposal ("Trash") were far fewer in number.
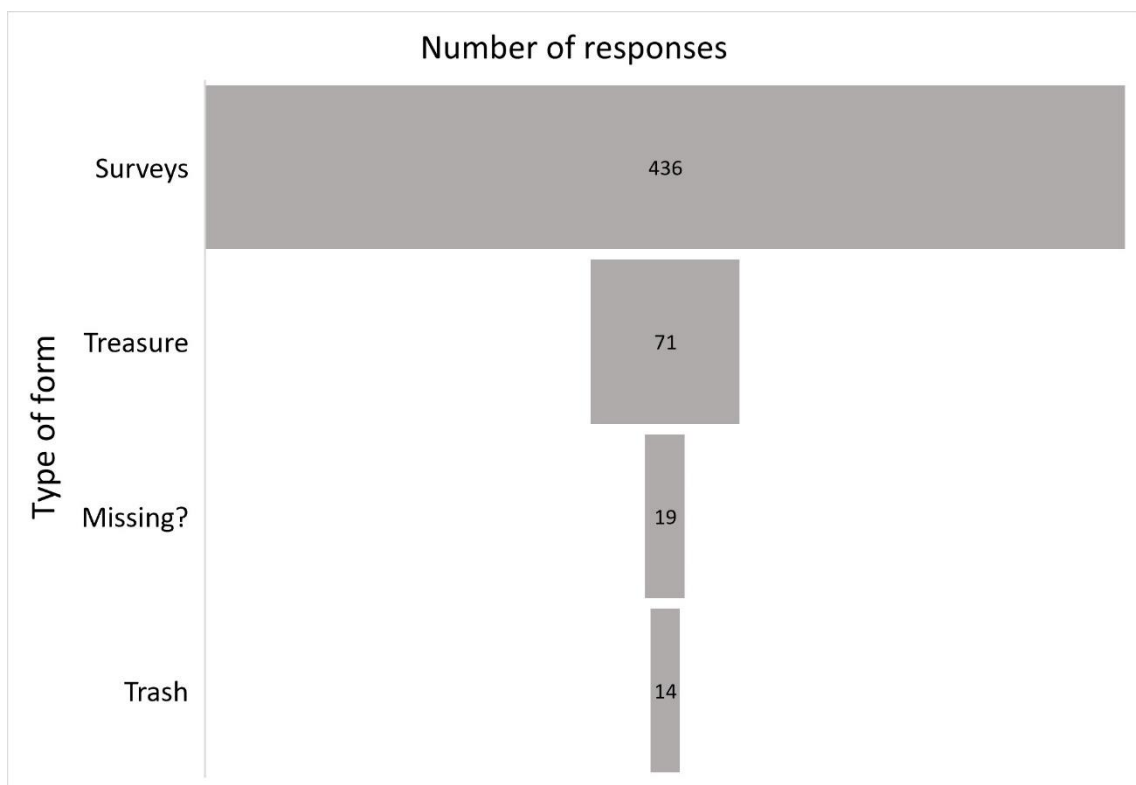
Figure 56: The number of written responses to the Visitor survey and the "Treasure, Trash or Missing?" forms.

This important finding suggests visitors regarded disposal as a less relevant, or less desirable, task. It therefore indicates the exhibition's visitors did not desire a widespread cull of the collection. But equally it does not indicate that visitors were against disposal. For it is not possible to identify the cause of the low response rate for the "trash" proposals. Perhaps disposal was overlooked in visitors' enthusiasm to record their proposed 'treasures'. Or perhaps disposal had not been well communicated or understood by visitors. Indeed, given the confused messages

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associated with these props, as seen earlier in this chapter, a lack of strong explanation of, and rationale for, disposal is likely a significant factor in the low response rate. But against this backdrop must be considered the visitor preference to preserve socially important objects, evidenced by the dominant number of "treasure" forms: the museum was regarded as a guardian storehouse for important objects, and visitors perceived they had valuable information to aid that purpose. In simple terms, visitors were more comfortable aligning themselves to the task of preservation than removal.

Although low in number, the detail within the visitor "trash" forms reveals a rich awareness of disposal and collections management. This is most evident among the reasons for the proposed disposal (Cadbury 2013b, 2), and it is possible to group these by motivation:

- Condition: e.g. "poor condition".

- Duplication / Mass-produced: e.g. "common, we had one".

- Relevance: e.g. "not old enough to be interesting".

- Space: e.g. "make room for better".

- Emotive: e.g. "ghastly"; "creepy".

Visitors therefore utilised different value assessments to justify their proposal. These practical, intellectual, and emotional reasons validate the multimodal human— material world interactions proposed by museologists and evidenced in the opening chapters of this thesis. Further, they again echo the motivations outlined in the *Disposal Toolkit*. This parallel between public and professional disposal motivations demonstrates an important correlation between public and professional views of the material world. But it is especially important to note one aspect: the emotional justification offered by visitors. It is this guttural reaction which the professional guidance seeks to minimise, but which the exhibition sought to promote through the request for memories and recollections.

From the visitor responses it is also possible to discern that they did *not* promote object retention above considered collections management. Instead, the visitors represented a dichotomy of ideas: while one person suggested "nothing here is trash",

another proposed there were "many objects" they regarded as disposal candidates (Cadbury 2013b, 2-3). This dichotomy is perhaps best summarised by a focus group participant who suggested it was, "Important to get the purpose of the collection clear, the criteria" (Dixon 2013, 37). In this acknowledgment of the collection's disjointed nature is an awareness that objects should have an intentional use, and that the collection contained objects of less relevance.

The complex public reaction to disposal was also mirrored by the Volunteer team. Despite their training and exhibition experience some individuals struggled to understand the need for a formal disposal process. As Curator Rachel recounted:

> Some of the volunteers couldn't understand the point of the process — of museums, of disposals, potential disposals. They'd say, 'Why don't you just throw them in the bin?'. They couldn't see the point of the process. (RS, Q57).

Indeed, the preference for 'unregulated' disposal was voiced by volunteer June:

> There was a nurse's bag from the First World War. In it, it had the corner of an envelope — and we'd accessioned all this — a corner of an envelope, a stub of pencil — a little stub of pencil – and a hair grip. And it was like when you turn out your handbag, and you've always got grotty bits in the bottom, and you shake it in the bin. Well, it was bits like that. But we had to put it all back and we felt - 'bin it!' [laughs]. (JB, Q18).

June had undertaken volunteer induction training into museum processes, spoken with visitors, and experienced first-hand the realities of the collection. But years after the project had ended she remained convinced that disposal could be an adhoc and personalised decision-making process. Her persistent attitude again demonstrates that it is not possible to control audience response within a radical transparency process.

Further, these insights demonstrate the difficulties for professionals when utilising consultation responses. For it remains the professional duty to decide whose opinions and values take precedence. With this point in mind, I will now investigate the consequences of the project's transparency actions on the collections review and disposal process. Specifically, how was public information used within the context of professional skill and expertise?

6.6 The impact of transparency on the disposal process

In the preceding sections I have examined the rationale for transparency and its creation through varied communication modes, and explored the audience reactions to transparency and disposal. I will now turn to the most important question within this chapter: how did transparency affect the disposal outcomes?

It is essential to frame this analysis within the *SFTS* workplan. Specifically, the exhibition and allied transparency explored thus far was the first element in the collections review process. During the post-exhibition phase the newly gathered information needed consideration and implementation by the professional team. As Jo Cairns, temporary Project Curator explained:

> They'd done a lot of the consultation with the public, and then it was looking at the findings and deciding, 'how do we now interpret that and use it to think carefully about the collection and the collecting policy going forward?'. (JCs, Q2).

Accordingly, the post-exhibition stage aimed:

> … to look at where the museum wanted to go in the future — what the collections policies, or collections directions, would be. It was more a chance of review for the future rather than a large scale disposal. (Laura Sorensen, Q12).

It is also important to note that the post-exhibition team comprised different individuals than during the preceding exhibition (Figure 57). Specifically, Curator Tabitha's maternity leave was covered by Jo Cairns, and Project Assistant Laura Sorensen was superseded by Florence Morgan-Richards. Each brought their own experiences and ideas to the task.
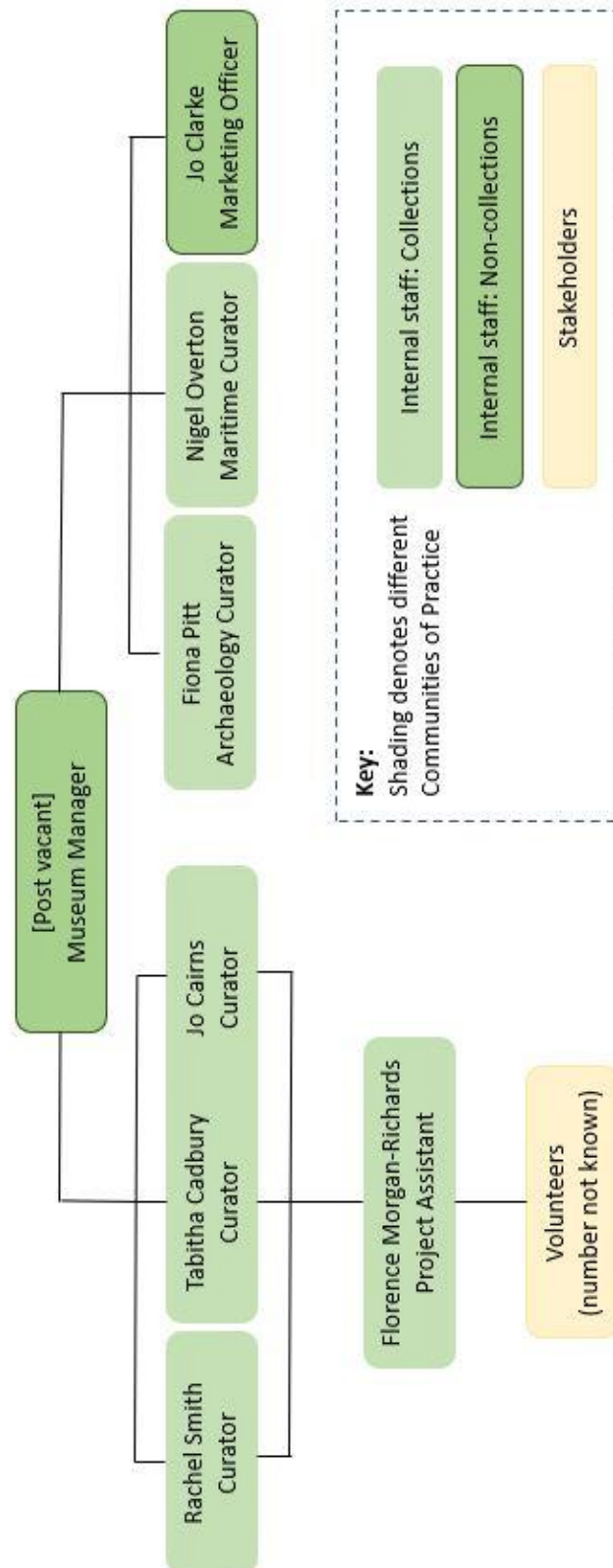
Figure 57: Formation of the Stories from the Stores *project team during the post-exhibition phase.*

6.6.1 Post-exhibition review

Transparency through exhibition had therefore successfully gathered public knowledge: visitors provided information the museum lacked and offered social context to — or implied its absence among — the collection. In some ways this combined knowledge development aided the disposal process. For example, the removal of an unaccessioned item, irreverently described by Curator Tabitha as "The Jesus" (Cadbury 2013b, 2), was enthusiastically recounted by Volunteer June:

> They [the museum] had this big cradle type thing with a full-size Jesus figure in it. And they didn't know where it came from, or anything about it. And they were hoping that with it being on display people would say: 'oh yes!'. Well a few people said, 'oh, I remember when we were in Greece seeing something like that in a church', and a few little stories came out but never actually pinpointed [where the object was from]…

> Then an accession form turned up in the back of a cupboard or something. And it had actually come from Syon Abbey, which was a closed Order, not far away from here. And it had been loaned by Father Sam Philpot… from St. Peter's Church, which is up in Wyndham Square by the Catholic Cathedral. So, I said to Florence, 'ring the Cathedral and see if they can find out'.

> So, the end of the story was she contacted Father Philpot, who had by then retired. And he said 'oh yes, he wanted it back'. So, it got moved on. (JB, Q1).

The utilisation of public reminiscence, volunteer knowledge, and the discovery of lost documentation thereby enabled the museum to better understand this object and successfully remove it from the storeroom. Transparency therefore aided the significance assessment and also practicalities including identifying legal ownership. Such processes enabled the museum to put some objects in the perceived "right place" (Florence Morgan-Richards, Q5).

To further aid their decision-making and actions the team chose to seek additional knowledge. In so doing they enacted the transparency practices contained in the new *Collections Development Plan,* which by that time had become policy. For example, external museum professionals offered experience of rationalisation strategies and

procedures (JCs, Q5), and other professional sectors including a "data protection agency" ensured due diligence of legal requirements (NT, Q22) and created accountability.

The team also consulted others about specific objects. This began with the internal professional expertise of colleagues beyond the core project team, such as the Curator of Maritime History (FMR, Q14). Some items were consequently moved from the 'Social History' collection into the curatorial remit of 'Maritime History', including a naval cannonball which had been in store since the 1970s (FMR, Q14). This example neatly demonstrates how curatorial boundaries and perceptions change through time.

The widest of these consultations was with stakeholder object donors and their families. Individuals were reached through appeals in the local press, museum website, and social media (FMR, Q12). Project Assistant Florence explained:

> Rachel Smith… had identified the objects which were likely candidates for disposal. Or to put it another way — objects that we didn't know who they belonged to… My role was doing a bit of research about these objects, in collaboration with the Curators. Trying to decide whether we'd want them or not. Then pursuing the owners of that object to either get permission to accession them, or to ask [instead] 'would you like this back?'. (FMR, Q5).

Through this process of consultation and shared decision-making many unaccessioned items were returned to donors, transferred to other public institutions (FMR, Q11), or disposed of by destruction (FMR, Q5). Transparency thereby shaped the disposal and retention decisions being made. It also changed the perceived value of the objects under consideration, as recounted by Florence:

> Some things we started off thinking, 'we might want [to keep] this, we don't know?'. We did some research and then asked people, and it went through phases of thinking, 'Oh my God, this is amazing and we really want this', to 'No!'. (FMR, Q9).

Her words thereby demonstrate that the disposal decisions required complex assessments of multiple information sources, set within a contextual understanding of institutional mission and priorities. It was only through this combined information and

expertise, generated from acts of radical transparency, that disposal decisions could be made, enacted, and made accountable.

In addition to individual object disposals the team sought to review four sub-collections identified as "crying out for rationalisation" (Smith 2014c, 1). The intention was to reduce "multiples… that take up an appreciable amount of space" (Cadbury 2014, 3). Knowledge about these assemblages was again perceived to exist beyond the professional domain. For example, Curator Jo Cairns recalled:

> We had a volunteer who had expertise in records… and he was helping us to understand the significance of the collection so that we could make informed decisions. (JCs, Q4).

But their admirable goal for targeted rationalisation masks the outcome: the museum did not dispose of any accessioned objects (TC, Q14). Indeed, regardless of her leadership role in *SFTS* Tabitha reflected, "Despite being on this project I do not have any experience of disposing of Social History objects" (Q36).

An important factor in the failure to dispose of accessioned objects was the demonstrable public support for the collection: visitor perceptions of value had challenged the Curators' own preconceptions and demonstrated its strengths and potential. Curator Rachel explained:

> I think the most surprising thing was how interested the public was, to be perfectly honest! I mean, you look at the collection and you kind of dismiss areas of it. But actually inviting the different groups in to do store tours and seeing the public interact with staff in the gallery — it validated a lot of the collection that we'd sort of dismissed ourselves. (RS, Q34).

This public affirmation was further witnessed by Curator Tabitha, who at the outset of the project had been keen to undertake disposal. Indeed, she quipped wryly about the difference in curatorial approach at the project outset as, "…it was kind of me versus Rachel. Rachel collects a lot of generic twentieth century stuff and I'm on the side of 'put it all in the skip', so to speak!" (TC, Q14). Her words echo Volunteer June's view of disposal expressed earlier in this chapter. Tabitha went on to explain:

The trouble with disposing [pauses]… The stuff we want to dispose of is the stuff that is *not* important and significant. We want to find out how *unimportant* and how *insignificant* it is. (TC, Q34, her emphasis).

Tabitha's insightful perception of disposal turns the question of value on its head by approaching it from the opposite direction: she seeks to *disprove* the idea that every museum object has a valuable story. Her approach brings an aspect of scientific objectivity to the disposal process — via the disproving of theory — to what is inherently a subjective significance assessment. Her perception of disposal also verbalises a fundamental aspect of the *Stories from the Stores* project: the transparent process of information-gathering generated new object understandings and values and it was necessary to assess those to decide retention or removal. Indeed, Tabitha spoke directly of this complexity by explaining:

I was slightly converted to realising how much the public like generic memory sort of stuff. But that doesn't sort out what should be in the handling box collection, or what should be accessioned. So those things are still difficult. (TC, Q14).

Tabitha's words are crucial for understanding the outcomes of the transparency process, as she demonstrates the team had not resolved how to utilise the visitors' expressed social values. Even after the project had ended the Curators regarded disposal as their professional duty, with Tabitha stating at interview that "It is something that ought to be done" (TC, Q33). But when asked about the project's legacy for disposal Tabitha despaired, "That's where it all falls down!" (TC, Q13). The act of public consultation had seemingly failed to develop curatorial confidence to undertake decision-making on behalf of the public. This is an important finding to which I will return later in this chapter.

Still, the workings of the post-exhibition phase do evidence an important success: the individual and institutional openness to risk. For the team judged the benefit of disposal outweighed the possible negative reactions to the process. This risk management was a conscious task involving consideration and approval from within the institution. In her description of media communications Florence explained:

There were people in the museum who were cautious… that the museum didn't come across as careless — like we'd lost the details of who owned it [the object], or that we were having a chuck out. So, we were wording that very carefully. (FMR, Q12).

The post-exhibition stage of *Stories from the Stores* is therefore essential for understanding the museum's disposal transparency. Through a combination of professional and lay expertise, accountability, and risk management the team successfully reviewed and disposed of unaccessioned stored items, but failed to rationalise the accessioned collection. This process was visible to a variety of public and professional audiences. But against these notable successes the limitations of transparency warrant closer analysis, for they also reveal important insights. In the next section I will turn to the most important aspect: how perceptions of the professional-public role shaped the decisions made by the team.

6.6.2 Professional and public roles

Throughout the post-exhibition tasks the project team continued to maintain the mindset — evidenced by their earlier working and institutional policies — that public knowledge needed the application of professional expertise. Indeed, during interview this perception was voiced by several individuals. For example, Project Assistant Laura felt strongly that professional skill provided an objectivity which was absent from lay knowledge. She explained:

Your train enthusiast might come in [to the exhibition] and just hate absolutely everything that wasn't to do with trains — 'It's ridiculous you're keeping that. This is the most important seat cover in the history of train seats, and you should be recording these' — and they don't see the value in anything else…

I think it [disposal] has always got to be led by the curator, because what might be popular now, or unpopular now, might become really popular in twenty years' time. People don't see the value in it now, because they're not thinking about the future. I think museum people spend an awful lot of time thinking about the past and thinking about the future. And a lot of people don't do that, they just live their daily lives. (LS, Q12).

This sentiment was echoed by Curator Rachel who explained the professional complexities of collections management:

> … by accepting an object, you are taking responsibility for it and you have responsibility to that person who donated it in good faith. And that's the element that the public don't understand unless you explain it to them… If it was [donated] fifty years ago you need to explain that it's *still* the same responsibility to that person [donor].

> Some people don't see the value if it's not historically significant. And some people really see the value if it is *not* historically significant, because it's personally significant. It is completely subjective. But it has to be, particularly with social history, because it's about people. It's not just about rocks or teapots. (RS, Q58 and Q59, her emphasis).

In these examples Rachel and Laura demonstrate the notion of curatorial looking forward and backward, of placing information within a temporal realm. Indeed, this view can be found throughout the team's working — from the explanation of the formation and shaping of the collection, to the contemporary assessments of significance, and the perceived future needs of the museum and its audiences. It is even apparent within the curatorial hesitancy for decision-making which underpinned the project's creation. For example, Tabitha recounted a tale from her wider professional experience that revealed her fear of making a 'mistake' through a lack of knowledge, and also the legacy of curatorial decisions:

> I have a favourite little anecdote about a catalogue card in [names museum], which said 'Destroyed, this is simply a stick' — you know some time back by somebody who had not known the cultural significance of this 'stick', or whatever it was. So later I asked a Nigerian anthropologist about it. And he said it [the catalogue card] had the local name on it — he said it was for stirring porridge, possibly with ritual intent. (TC, Q3).

But rather than providing clarity on which to base their decisions in the present day, the public consultation had added confusion to the enaction of duty. Curator Rachel explained:

RS: My personal feelings about areas of the collection definitely changed. Because I could see a use for them where I couldn't before.

JD: So how far did public views alter how the museum changed its practice?

RS: Well, I think we would have found it a lot easier to dispose of things without doing this project… If it was just members of staff doing it, then a small group of members of staff might have gone, 'Well no one's interested in that, we'll get rid of it'. But that turned out not to be true. So, it might have been easier. (RS, Q51 and Q52).

Rachel's words provide important evidence that transparency of practice and decision-making are intrinsically connected. When undertaken with an openness to engage and listen, a public consultation will affect the workings and outcomes of disposal by altering — or affirming —professional understanding and knowledge. Through transparency the Curators had attempted to bring objectivity by neutralising curatorial feeling. But by adding *public* feeling they added new intricacies of subjectivity. Put simply, consultation had provided information on which the professionals needed to act but did not lead to a shared decision-making process. Without a plan to utilise new information the task of disposal was placed to one side to become an idealised future task (Smith 2014c).

It is here interesting to note that alongside the stalling of the disposal process arose a quest to acquire toys for the collection (RS, Q31). This avoided addressing the intrinsic problem of retrospective decision-making for disposal, as it directly sought input from the public through offers of new donations. However the process only led to the single acquisition of a "Buzz Lightyear" figure (NT, Q21). While acquisition and disposal were both possible outcomes within the project design, it is notable that curatorial attention fell on collecting instead of removal, but that neither came to fruition. This also evidences the sectoral trend witnessed throughout the last forty years, and discussed in the opening chapters of this thesis, in which museums continue to collect in preference to resolving issues within the existing collections.

Indeed, rather than neutralise curatorial emotions the process of professional collections management still encompassed strong personal feelings. As Curator Rachel

commented, "[disposal] is difficult because there's a balance… between what's achievable and what's desirable" (RS, Q50). For other staff the word 'disposal' itself created an emotive response including Laura's reaction during interview that, "Ergh, I don't like the word disposal! Streamlining? Making better? But disposal always sounds so harsh" (LS, Q20). Laura's words echo those of Jo Clarke and Florence Morgan-Richardson, seen earlier in this chapter, for the considered use of language with the media. Within collections management it is therefore seemingly easier for Curators to confirm or deny public values at the time of acquisition rather than retrospectively through the lens of historical practice and self-doubt.

The complex interplay of personal feelings and professional practice was most clearly voiced by Project Assistant Florence. The source of her conflict was a notion of a "cult of heritage" which created object value through mere association with the museum. Her view echoes Susan Pearce's notion of 'sacredness' evidenced in Chapter Two. Florence explained:

> [The object's] association with the museum means it takes on something of it a little bit. It's like the 'Cult of Heritage' – if it's in a museum, it must be special. (FMR, Q33).

But despite this awareness Florence acknowledged her subscription to the 'cult' had affected her professional working, as "There were some things being thrown away that made me feel sad." (FMR, Q36). In voicing her experience of the "overwhelming complexities" (FMR, Q32) of the post-exhibition review and disposal of unaccessioned material, she revealed the internal conflict between personal feeling and professional necessity:

> … my instinctive feeling about disposal, that maybe I've had all along, [is] that it shouldn't really be happening, it's bad. Rationally I shouldn't be thinking about this. But museum collections being thrown away just seems so heart-breaking.
>
> JD: So even after the process you've been through…
>
> FMR: …I still have that instinct. I think. Ever so slightly. I mean, it's more the positive one. I can definitely see the point, but in another way, I have a little pang. (FMR, Q32).

Her words demonstrate the internalised ethical and emotional complexities raised by the disposal process, which for Florence arose from the challenge to the museum norm of retaining objects for the long term. Her words represent the reflexivity and complex emotional connection to museum work that is typically found within museum practitioners (BOP Consulting 2016, 9) and was evidenced with the *Profusion in Museums* project discussed in Chapter Three. More importantly, Florence's active professional engagement with disposal had only gently modified her emotional response. Perhaps in this way her experience is most relevant in exploring the impact of transparency on disposal practice, for she was the only member of staff to have physically undertaken the disposal process within the project; and the only individual to openly acknowledge her ongoing reluctance towards it.

It is therefore abundantly evident that the project team struggled to develop professional self-confidence to make difficult decisions; transparency had seemingly hindered not aided this personal process. Yet the expectation for professional action on the public's behalf was clearly voiced by different audiences within this project. For example, an extreme view was offered by Volunteer Michael Moore, who as Chairman of the Friends also had a Stakeholder relationship with the project team. About disposal he proposed:

> MM: If you don't need it — get rid of it. Or, if it's not in a good condition to be on display — get rid of it. Because I've always asked the question.
>
> JD: What question?
>
> MM: The question is: you don't do any rotation in your galleries — so, what happens to the stuff that's lying around? Do you get rid of it, do you sell it off? 'No'. Do you put it up for auction? 'No'. Do you put it on *eBay*? 'No'. [Laughs] And these were all my questions.
>
> JD: Do you think museums should do that?
>
> MM: Why not? Why not! If you can't flog it off to another museum and you have no history of it, stick it on *eBay* and see if you can get a good price for it. And then you can buy something that is worth presenting. Why not?. (MM, Q37, Q38 and Q39).

Although Michael's preferred method of removal challenges professional ethics, he clearly expected collections review and disposal to be undertaken regularly as a core professional duty. His framing within the view that object value stems from display-ability rather than social value does not lessen the value of his words.

Further assurance of the professional duty to rationalise is found within a detailed plea from one visitor on a "Treasure, Trash or Missing?" form:

> Over the years I have occasionally donated items to Plymouth Museum — as have many other people. These are things that I think are, for some reason, significant but which I no longer want to keep but am reluctant to throw away. Should they happen to have any monetary value, that has also been donated with the item.
>
> Consequently, the responsibility for what to do with the items has been transferred to the Museum Curators.
>
> If an item is superfluous to your needs, you are at liberty to dispose of it in any way you choose: You could sell it and use the money for purchasing something you need; you could lend it to another museum — or swap it — or even get rid of it to a charity shop or a car boot sale — it is entirely up to you.
>
> Please don't just hang onto things you don't want simply because you have been given them. Use some discretion and clear out your shelves just as you would in your attic or scullery at home. I feel sure other donors feel the same about their gifts. (Anonymous 2013).

This adamant assertion of the professional duty to make decisions could have offered reassurance to the project team. Given the opportunity to be involved, this individual had returned responsibility to the Curators. But as one voice among hundreds the words did not receive the resonance they merited. Further, this visitor's response importantly demonstrates awareness of other aspects of museum work: the subjectivity of assessing significance; the perception of museums as a suitable home for objects otherwise destined for the bin; emphasis of the financial value of objects; and the nature of 'gifts' and the transfer of ownership. In this way one visitor amply

demonstrated the entangled considerations and messes of the professional disposal process.

It is of note that both these pleas for professionalised object removal came from individuals with established relationships with the museum: one involved with the Friends, and one a long-term object donor. This may suggest a deeper familiarity with museum practice affects an individual's reaction to the concept of object removal.

6.6.3 Summary of the impact of transparency

From the process of public transparency it is therefore possible to identify both tangible and intangible impacts on the practical workings of the review and disposal process. Process revelation and the acquisition of new information positively aided professional understanding of the collection and its social value, and aided the removal of unaccessioned items from the stores. But it is significant that the Curators chose not to attempt disposal from the accessioned collection: public views gave no clear guide for their actions, and without a clear strategy for decision-making the team's own attitudes and emotions shaped the post-exhibition priorities and outcomes. Transparency had not enabled the desired curatorial confidence to enact disposal. Here is found the clear division between transparency and decision-making, as evidenced in Chapter Two of this thesis.

In this analysis it is now important to take a step backwards to view the project in its wider context. For the project team did not work in isolation: they acted within an institutional framework of processes and attitudes. It is necessary to assess how these affected the disposal transparency and outcomes.

6.7 The creation of transparency within the institutional framework

Having explored the detailed nuances of disposal transparency within *Stories from the Stores,* and being mindful to present reliable and valid research conclusions, it is important to explore the project's workings and legacy from a wider view. By placing the project team's actions within the institutional context it is possible to identify two areas, or 'barriers', that shaped the workings of the transparent process. For simplicity these can be labelled as 'practical' and 'conceptual' barriers, but their overlap further

evidences the subjective entanglements when analysing and understanding disposal transparency.

6.7.1 Practicalities and conceptualisations

In this institutional context it is pertinent to begin by exploring the barrier of 'resources' as it seems to be a practical constraint. Specifically, time and staffing affected how transparency was created and information utilised. The interviewees presented constraints such as the "lack of time" (TC, Q12), or the limitations of part time employment status or short-term contracts (JCs, Q7) as having impacted their work. Indeed, as witnessed in the preceding chapter these are common sectoral explanations for failures of practice. In some ways these barriers are an inevitable reality for externally-funded museum projects, and demonstrate the nature of *Stories from the Stores* as a time-limited and stand-alone process rather than an embedded practice.

But this barrier of 'resources' merits closer examination. For example, 'time' is an abstract concept (Falk 2009, 3) which cannot affect an outcome. Rather, it is the prioritising of tasks within a given timeframe which affects what can be achieved: it is a conceptual matter. In this case study, time allocation and task prioritisation required buy-in from individuals beyond the project team, specifically the governing body and senior management. For example, Curator Tabitha explained the impact on her work of the bigger institutional priorities:

> We had hoped to have a big rationalisation before moving [stores for the redevelopment] but just the work pressure means that, sadly as you know, disposing takes a lot of time… So the [*Stories from the Stores*] project has a legacy in that we will be able to move everything across the road quicker [to the new store]… So it's got that legacy that it allows us more time to do something else. (TC, Q19).

Her words demonstrate that for the governing body and management team the collections review was principally a precursor to the museum redevelopment project. Therefore, while time constraints and staff allocation were factors to the limited disposal outcomes, a more nuanced reading suggests the primary constraint was the

perception of institutional priorities. Specifically, the rationalisation task after the public-facing exhibition was not prioritised by senior managers and City Council stakeholders. Rachel expressed her dissatisfaction with this, as:

> … that makes it even more frustrating. That the aims of the project necessitate this work that we'd started, and then it gets put on the backburner because it's not the 'sexy' bit of the project…. (RS, Q21).

Indeed, the institutional context and the individual perceptions it represented had shaped the entire course of the project. For as Tabitha observed, "unless managers decide that people are working together, we can't decide it" (Q22). For example, the project had occurred sooner than the Curators intended, as recalled by Rachel:

> It happened much quicker than we imagined it would… The timescales were very pushed, and it was because it was partly driven by this desire to have some extra evidence for the bigger project [redevelopment]. (RS, Q10).

Therefore the *Stories from the Stores* project only occurred because managers agreed with the need for the project and consented to allocate curatorial time to its creation, to seek funding, develop innovative communication processes, undertake the tasks, and they enabled colleagues to support this curatorial endeavour. Once the stakeholders had achieved their primary goal — of assessing the public reaction to visible display for use in the major redevelopment project — the completion of the pilot rationalisation process was removed from the curatorial work schedule. Rachel recounted:

> Because they [Governing Body] were focusing on this bigger project further down the line there was a lack of focus from them… other than the thing [outcome] they wanted to take away. (RS, Q49).

Despite the new *Collections Development Plan* advocating collections rationalisation it seems the institutional reluctance for disposal remained an embedded attitude. For example, when speaking of a subsequent disposal process Documentation and IT Officer Nicki Thomas recounted:

Management stepped in and said, 'Oh, we can't just get rid of that!'. The item was given to the Friends [of the museum] to try and sell for us, but it never happened. So, it's still there. Management put a stop on us giving it to an organisation or other interested person… So, there's another example of why we can't get rid of things — because management have put a stopper on it. Because we might be able to get some money from it. But it's now been there for nine years. In a box. [Sighs]. (NT, Q23).

Without institutional consent and understanding for the necessity and ethical workings of disposal, the *SFTS* team were unable to create embedded practice. But despite their expressed dissatisfaction the stakeholder attitude perhaps inadvertently reinforced the curatorial hesitancy to dispose, as it failed to create the arena for confident professional decision-making.

The practical issue of 'staffing' also shaped this project, as evidenced by the disjointed nature of the project team and its line management (Figures 44, 45, and 57 above). This caused significant disruptions to communication and practical action. Specifically, the core project team comprised five different individuals within the two project phases, with changes arising from short-term contracts and Tabitha's maternity leave. As Rachel explained:

We had planned a pilot project of the vinyl record collection, and we got quite a long way through that. But once the maternity cover left there just wasn't the staff available to help maintain that. (RS, Q29).

Further, the Curators encountered two changes of line manager before the role was subsequently left vacant resulting in an absence of curatorial management (RS, Q48). The flow of information to stakeholders was therefore disrupted as:

The perceived lines of communication would have been through our line manager who we met with regularly, and then to the wider stakeholders above her. But obviously once she left, and there was no direct replacement, those channels did break down. (RS, Q48).

A second significant disruption arose to the legacy of the project from the loss of both instigating Curators at different stages of the project: Tabitha during the post-

exhibition phase and Rachel's departure from the sector after the project had concluded. Jo Cairns, employed as Project Curator during Tabitha's absence, revealed the impact of these interruptions:

> So, I came and went. And obviously Rachel doesn't work there anymore, and I'm not sure how long she was there after [the project ended]. I'm not sure how much of that next stage happened. If it didn't happen it's a real missed opportunity. It would have been really good to have a really robust disposal project as a result of it. (JCs, Q9).

This team disjoint is significant to the workings of transparency as some of the knowledge and nuanced understandings gathered during the exhibition phase, gained through verbal interaction with visitors, was not carried into the implementation stage. For example, the team creating the Social History collection *Forward Plan* did not include Tabitha Cadbury or Laura Sorensen, both of whom had spent time in the exhibition with visitors. Also, the team undertaking the disposal of unaccessioned objects included Jo Cairns and Florence Morgan-Richards, who had not been present during the exhibition but brought previous professional experience of Plymouth Museum to their post-exhibition tasks (JCs, Q1; FMR, Q1). They therefore brought expert knowledge to the process but lacked the first-hand visitor engagement that Curator Tabitha had stressed as so important to the process.

Still, the residue of each team member's expertise and knowledge remained after they had departed. For example, information was collated into a collections spreadsheet and retained for future use (Cadbury 2014). The legacy of this information was voiced by Curator Rachel:

> I think that in terms of doing it [disposal] in the future, I feel like any member of staff who tries to go about it now should feel better informed. It should feel, hopefully, like there's more to go on. (RS, Q52).

But this legacy was itself disrupted by Rachel's career move away from the museum sector (Sorensen and Smith n.d.) and the loss of her accrued curatorial experience. By the time of my research interviews only two members of the core team remained in

post — Tabitha Cadbury and Nicki Thomas — who had first-hand potential to develop the project's legacy.

Within the disjointed post-exhibition team, the authority to propose disposal items rested with the Curators in accordance with the new *Collections Development Plan*. Following Rachel's subsequent departure this responsibility fell solely on Tabitha, as the job-share role was left vacant (TC, Q1). During interview she explained the complexities and weight she felt from this individual responsibility saying, "I am loath to get rid of things just in case it's the only one left in the country because everybody has rationalised their collections" (TC, Q36). Alongside the emotional impact of the task, her words reveal an important aspect of professional practice: the need for professional support. Its absence further compounded her lack of curatorial confidence.

Further, within the project aims seen earlier in this chapter was found the Curators' uncertainty to make subjective value judgements on behalf of the museum's core audience. Tabitha's words demonstrate that within the post-project legacy the curatorial hesitancy extended beyond actual local audiences and included potential future audiences within the region, and even nationally. The *Stories from the Stores* consultation had widened Tabitha's sense of professional responsibility from the local to a wider obligation, but the staffing situation prevented the assuredness of a collaborative professional decision-making process to enable it.

The impact of the disjointed team is also apparent in Rachel's decision to prioritise acquisition rather than disposal in the post-exhibition phase, as seen earlier in this chapter. For 'toys' was merely one collections gap identified by visitors and focus group participants (Dixon 2013, 8), and it was a curatorial choice to focus on this theme. Rachel acknowledged her personal input in selecting this acquisition priority:

> JD: So why did you choose the 'toys' aspect to collect — because there were two or three strong areas [suggested by the public]?
>
> RS: It's a personal thing. We could have picked any one of those things, but it was me [making the decision], so that probably influenced the decision. (RS, Q33).

Her words demonstrate the relationship between curatorial authority and peer support, for at this stage of the project Rachel was working with her temporary Curator colleague Jo Cairns, whose primary task was to begin the project evaluation (JCs, Q2). Further, in her chosen action Rachel continued the curatorial practice of personally shaping the collection which had begun with her predecessors. As seen earlier in this chapter, she had acknowledged this subjectivity within the formation of the collection. Without the established curatorial support from Tabitha, and mirroring her predecessors' actions, it was easier to shape the collection by 'gap filling' than by removing extraneous material. Indeed, within a project blog Rachel commented, "the fun part will be to begin collecting some of the objects that you told us were missing from the collection" (Smith 2014d). Her words demonstrate that the public view was informing her actions, but the prioritising of those views was her subjective choice.

But as stated earlier in this chapter the acquisition drive was unsuccessful. This primarily arose from the public perception of subjective object value, as the potential donations lacked the associated stories that the museum sought. Rachel reflected:

> It's like with every social history collection, there are a lot of things that get offered all the time — typewriters, flat irons etc. People are quite happy to give those up. But things that have a little bit more of a sentimental value, we don't get offered as much. And when we are offered them, what we really want now is to collect the item and the story that goes with it. But if the story's there it makes people less inclined to get rid of it, because that's the addition of the sentimentality. So, I think it is more difficult than we thought from that point of view. (RS, Q31).

Her words suggest that museum disposal actions mirror the 'real world'. For example, stories and associations are central to an objects' perceived social value. Second, subjective attachments to objects can prevent their removal; the individual personal connection to an object seemingly caused a reluctance to transfer it (i.e. dispose) to a new home (i.e. the museum). Third, this disposal reluctance occurred even when the destined new home was perceived to be of wider benefit: despite the evidenced public support for the role of the museum as guardians of important objects, potential donors did not regard that public role as outweighing the value of retaining the objects

themselves. This revelation demonstrates the value of this thesis research and its exploration of the connection between personal views and professional practice, as the two may not be easily separated.

Further, in a circuitous fashion the *Stories from the Stores* project has demonstrated the interplay between acquisition and disposal. Specifically, the significance review affected the acquisition process as the Curators became more stringent in identifying the value of potential donations. Reflexive consideration of the collection, despite not actually generating disposal, had strengthened their professional resolve to decline objects which did not meet the relevance requirement. They thereby prevented compounding future rationalisation tasks.

6.7.2 Institutional vision and support

It is now pertinent to step back further to view the project's wider legacy, as the team's transparency and disposal actions were both constrained by, and influenced, the institutional context. While the failure to embed disposal was discussed earlier in this chapter, arguably the most important legacy was the embedding of the transparency mindset. This has already been witnessed within the new *Collection Development Policy* and was also enacted in practice. For example, the team's innovative communication practices instigated a willingness to engage audiences in other behind-the-scenes activities. For example, Jo Clarke explained how transparency through exhibition was used in later years:

> When we were about to close [for redevelopment] we did an exhibition called 'It's a Wrap'. There were a lot of ways in that exhibition that people were asked to provide feedback on the museum and what they were hoping we would be achieving with the redevelopment project. (JCe, Q18).

But it is important to acknowledge that the outcomes of consultation did not always enact the public's preferred choice. For example, despite strong public support for 'visible storage' voiced during the exhibitions *Stories from the Stores* and *It's a Wrap*, the governing body did not include it within the redeveloped institution. Indeed, this absence within *The Box, Plymouth* was noted by the national press:

[*The Box*] is a fitting name for a big clumsy box that has been plonked on top of the city's Edwardian museum and art gallery, as if an out-of-town storage shed got blown here in a gale… But Plymouth's vault won't be open to the public; it is back-of-house thrust centre stage. Given it is the primary visible gesture of the project – indeed the very feature that gave it its name – it seems perverse not to make it accessible. (Wainwright 2020).

The transparency process for the redevelopment project demonstrates that consultation was used to gather opinion, but the later actions did not enact the most common desired outcomes. This approach is entirely valid, for as I have asserted earlier in this thesis a 'consultation' does not equate to 'decision-making'. But this distinction needs to be well communicated to the audience, as:

There is that danger with consultation — people think being consulted means you're going to do everything they said, and that's not actually what consultation is… We are just trying to find out what people's views are. (JCe, Q33).

The role of the governing body is thereby evident within the enacting, or not, of public preference. For despite *SFTS* evidencing the strong public valuing of social history, its central prominence within *The Box, Plymouth* was removed by stakeholder decision-making. Speaking during interview, while in the process of developing content for *The Box*, *Plymouth*, Tabitha commented:

We were hoping that the new museum would have a bigger Social History element, which actually it doesn't… Collections-based display is not particularly valued at the moment. (TC, Q28).

Stories from the Stores therefore evidences the complex layers of transparency and decision-making in theory and practice. Through visibility to public audiences the museum staff gained knowledge which informed their decision-making; but their acts of transparency for the governing body failed to affect institutional outcomes. This is an important aspect for understanding enacted transparency, as the intent does not guarantee the anticipated outcomes.

The institutional context is also evident in another area as there was one audience from whom practice was actively concealed: the professional sector. Despite the success of regional sectoral transparency seen earlier in this chapter, the project team later chose not to share their experience on a national basis. This decision starkly contrasted the openness of the exhibition format. With brave honesty Rachel explained this professional opacity:

> JD: Did you write up the project for any professional audiences?
>
> RS: No. It would have been nice to be able to do that, but at the end of the project there really wasn't any time. Apart from the fact that it was just me at the end of the project and having to write it all up [project evaluation documents], you need to have a bit of a breather from having to write it up for a different audience.
>
> And then the further we got from the project, to be honest, the more embarrassing it got to write it up. Because I felt we weren't addressing the things we had wanted to address.
>
> JD: Isn't that the reality of museum work, though?
>
> RS: Oh it is, it is. Totally. But I think also, it felt a little bit to me, like the evaluation of the project said one thing with a view to lead into this bigger project [redevelopment]. And the bigger project wasn't taking any of that on board. So, it was doubly embarrassing. (RS, Q46 and Q47).

While clearly evidencing the role of the institution in shaping the transparency legacy, Rachel's candid insight also reveals another transparency truism: communication messages are altered according to the intended recipient. Here, for selected audiences such as the external funding body, the project was reported as a success through the project summary and evaluation reports (Dixon 2013; Smith 2014b). But the message to the wider professional audience required additional openness and reflection; it was not a 'tick box' requirement but a chance for sectoral learning.

Rachel's reluctance to create this transparency thereby reveals an aspect of risk: of potential reputational and professional damage. Within *SFTS* the biggest risk was not

deemed to be opening the institution to public scrutiny of historic or contemporary collecting practices. Instead, the risk was of professional reputational damage from seeming to have failed in the project's goal of review and rationalisation. For Tabitha this legacy of opacity stemmed from the governing body's persistent uncertainty about the mission of the museum, and the Social History collection therein:

> TC: One of the things that's always a question here is whether it's a city or regional museum. And really, I suppose, for our 'high ups' [governing body] it's about Plymouth. But we've got quite a lot of stuff that isn't just Plymouth. It is the region.

> JD: So, are you still having that debate internally about what the focus is for the Social History collection?

> TC: Yes, it is not entirely clear. I know, I've been here ten years and I should have worked it out by now!. (TC, Q39 and Q40).

The radical transparency created through *Stories from the Stores* had demonstrated the social value of the Social History collection. But this transparency had not clarified the purposes for which this value could be used, and had failed to generate positive stakeholder actions to support the new-found public enthusiasm.

6.8 Chapter conclusions

It is tempting in the analysis of this project to identify binary opposites: the successes and failures of disposal practice; the practicality of tasks versus the ideological vision; the role of personal perception versus institutional vision. In some regards this black and white understanding is indeed evident and most strongly witnessed by the different knowledges held by the museum and its audiences. But this simple view misses the nuances. For what *Stories from the Stores* clearly evidences is the complex interwoven strands of contemporary curation: the threads linking individuals and objects, and the complex tangle of professional practice, individual personality, and institutional context.

As an example of a transparent disposal practice, *Stories from the Stores* provides important evidence that multi-modal communication can enable public visibility and

generate understanding. Through exhibition, focus groups, social and mass media, the 'hidden' practices of collections management were made visible. For Curators Tabitha and Rachel, transparency needed more than written words to reveal information; they believed in the physical experience of the museum world, and the centrality of conversation to human interaction and understanding. From their vision arose unforeseen benefits to people beyond the project team. To the public, transparency brought chances to reminisce and created a feeling of self-worth by contributing to the museum's function and purpose. To the volunteers, transparency enabled practical experience, formal training, and informal insight. Stakeholders gained evidence of the social value of the museum's collection and its activities.

But this case study reveals important deeper insights to transparent practice. For more important than the communication acts was the practitioner mindset which enabled radical transparency to occur. The core ethos, of both institution and individual practitioner, was a consciously considered relationship between museum and audience: the museum existed for the local population, and these audiences were valuable for informing professional work. Throughout the project this strong divide between practitioner and public was maintained; a delineation based on familiarity with professional expertise, versus familiarity with an object's social context. The public support for this demarcation enabled the embedding of the transparent disposal process within new institutional policy. Therefore, while disposal was perceived only as an ancillary outcome, the transparency processes generated a new institutional ethos which informed later practices. A new embedded legacy of communication and transparency exists between the museum and its audiences.

Of equal significance was the evidenced delineation between stakeholder and professional. Here, acts of transparency did not produce the desired outcomes for rationalisation or use of the Social History collection. Indeed, this relationship reveals two important truisms of transparency: that the communication recipient must be willing to listen and engage; and it is impossible to control how the messages they hear will be heard or utilised. In this way the openness mindset is necessary from both speaker and recipient within the transparency process.

This case study also evidences another important delineation: between consultation and decision-making. But here it remains a jumbled complexity. Within the failure to dispose of accessioned objects the team evidence that consultation does not provide an easy route to decision-making. The diverse information received from the public, combined with the disjointed team working, failed to develop the curatorial confidence to enact disposal. While the team had a clear vision for engaging the public to identify social value, they failed to consider how these diverse opinions would be enacted by their professional selves. This demonstrates yet another important finding: that transparency does not generate professional self-confidence but may hinder practical action. Here the role of individual perceptions directly affected professional practice.

This professional hesitancy was further evidenced by the subsequent hiding of the project from sectoral audiences beyond the local region. Within this professional opacity was evidence of a risk management strategy which was never formalised but arose from the personal practitioner desires to protect the reputation of individual and institution. It is here that the Plymouth team make a most significant positive contribution to the understanding of disposal transparency. For through actions of deep revelation and engaged communication the museum chose to risk damaging its reputation. The Curators did not let fear stymie their actions but chose to manage the perceived risks by choosing their audiences carefully, by utilising established relationships with public and stakeholders, and by targeting their communications according to the audience and desired outcome. In so doing they generated significant support for the museum, its practices, and its mission.

Within the evidenced differences between practitioner and public, between practitioner and stakeholder, and between professional and personal self, the Plymouth team present a positive understanding of a 'them' and 'us' mentality. The workings and ideas evidenced by *Stories from the Stores* demonstrate the benefit of knowledge seeking and sharing, and of open and reflexive practitioners shaping the museum collection. They provide an excellent witness for the benefits of public transparency, and the conscious consideration of actions and context.

Chapter 7: Museum of London

Collections Review and Rationalisation
(Social and Working History Collections)

"It's important for people to be a little bit brave and talk about the work they're doing." (Kathy Richmond)

7.1 Introduction

The Museum of London (MoL) is truly at the heart of England's capital. Mere steps away lie the bustling streets of the City with its ancient and modern institutions of business and law. But a stroll ten minutes from this powerhouse of wealth lies Clerkenwell with its history of monasteries, social squalor, prisons, and clockmakers. Sitting amid this contrast of historical fortunes the museum presents a severe face to its visitors; a brutalist physical and mental block to engagement with concrete entrances more akin to an under-used car park than a social institution at the beating heart of the metropolis.

This austere first impression masks the museum's mission to help Londoners feel they belong within the history, and future, of the city. In its vision the museum declares:

> Our passion for London is infectious and is born out of commitment to exploring the ever-changing story of this great world city. We want to inspire such passion in others, and get people thinking about London in new ways. Our goal is to be a part of every Londoner's life from an early age and to contribute to the city's international, educational, cultural and economic impetus. (Museum of London n.d.a, 1).

The desire to connect with local communities is reflected by the museum's visitor demographics. While being among the top twenty London attractions for international visitors (London and Partners n.d., 53), the museum's 1.1 million annual visitors (Museum of London n.d.b) largely comprise UK residents (Museum of London n.d.a, 3). More specifically, in its *Strategic Plan* the museum asserts its goal to become "...the 'go

to' place for knowledge about London… We will reach out and grab every type of Londoner there is…" (ibid., 7). At the heart of this five-year vision is the institution's collection of objects which it regards as "the 'DNA' of London" (ibid., 4). At the time of writing this social vision is being enacted with a timetable to physically move the museum to a new location in West Smithfield (Museum of London n.d.c). At the time of my field research these plans were in the early stages of development.

Within this contemporary vision the museum embraces its historical roots. Its founding collection combined the Georgian-era Guildhall Museum assemblage of "Antiquities as relate to the City of London and Suburbs", and the Edwardian-era London Museum collection with its wider range of "curiosities and general bygones… and historic items associated with City livery companies or churches" (Museum of London n.d.d). The opening of the Museum of London in 1976 (ibid.) cemented the emphasis on the city's history and was stipulated within the *Museum of London Act 1965*. By law the museum is:

> To care for, preserve and add objects in their collections… To secure that those objects are exhibited to the public and made available to persons seeking to inspect them in connection with study or research… Generally to promote the understanding and/or appreciation of historic or contemporary London or of its society or culture, by means of its collections or such other means as it considers appropriate. (Museum of London n.d.e).

The intention behind this statement is clear: the museum is to store and protect objects that tell stories of London and its people, and make them accessible for display and research. The collections rationalisation project explored in this chapter demonstrates that this requirement for preservation and use can be achieved through a considered process of rationalisation.

Returning to the time of my research in 2017, the London-centric vision was encased within the concrete shell of the museum building. Behind the bustle of visitors and excited schoolchildren were hints that some things were not in public view. Those visitors who looked beyond the displays saw window-lined corridors which could be glimpsed but not accessed, and suggested people and activities behind closed doors.

With my researcher gaze I intended to step into those areas, both physically and intellectually. I wanted to explore how the Museum of London had chosen to make visible its large-scale collections review and rationalisation project, as outlined in Chapter Four, through its core team of seven staff (Figure 58). In my intellectual wanderings behind the scenes, I will demonstrate how this project became a notable example of disposal transparency. For the success of the practical goal to "create a refined collection that was better managed, stored and documented and more physically and intellectually accessible" (Cook 2017, 1) is clearly demonstrated by the number of object removals. From 6,000 objects deemed suitable for disposal, over 5,000 were removed from the stores (Cook 2018) including "3,338 transferred to 80 museums, charities, archives and educational institutions" (Cook 2017, 11). These new homes included Accredited museums, academic institutions, charities, archives, craftspeople, and the museum's learning and outreach teams (Cook 2017, 6-10).

In my exploration I will move beyond these quantifiable successes to explore how the rationale to "share the experience of review and rationalisation with other museum professions" (Cook 2017, 2) created different aspects of transparency. I examine how close management and systems shaped transparency for museum professionals and the governing body through a hierarchy of trust, and how tightly controlled messages provided visibility to other stakeholders, including object recipients. I explore the implications of this strategy for public transparency, and discover that information for these groups was shared through modified messaging, or withheld completely. For my perception of behind-the-scenes busyness at the museum was apt: behind the visible successes and exemplary sectoral transparency was a complexity of public veiled practice.
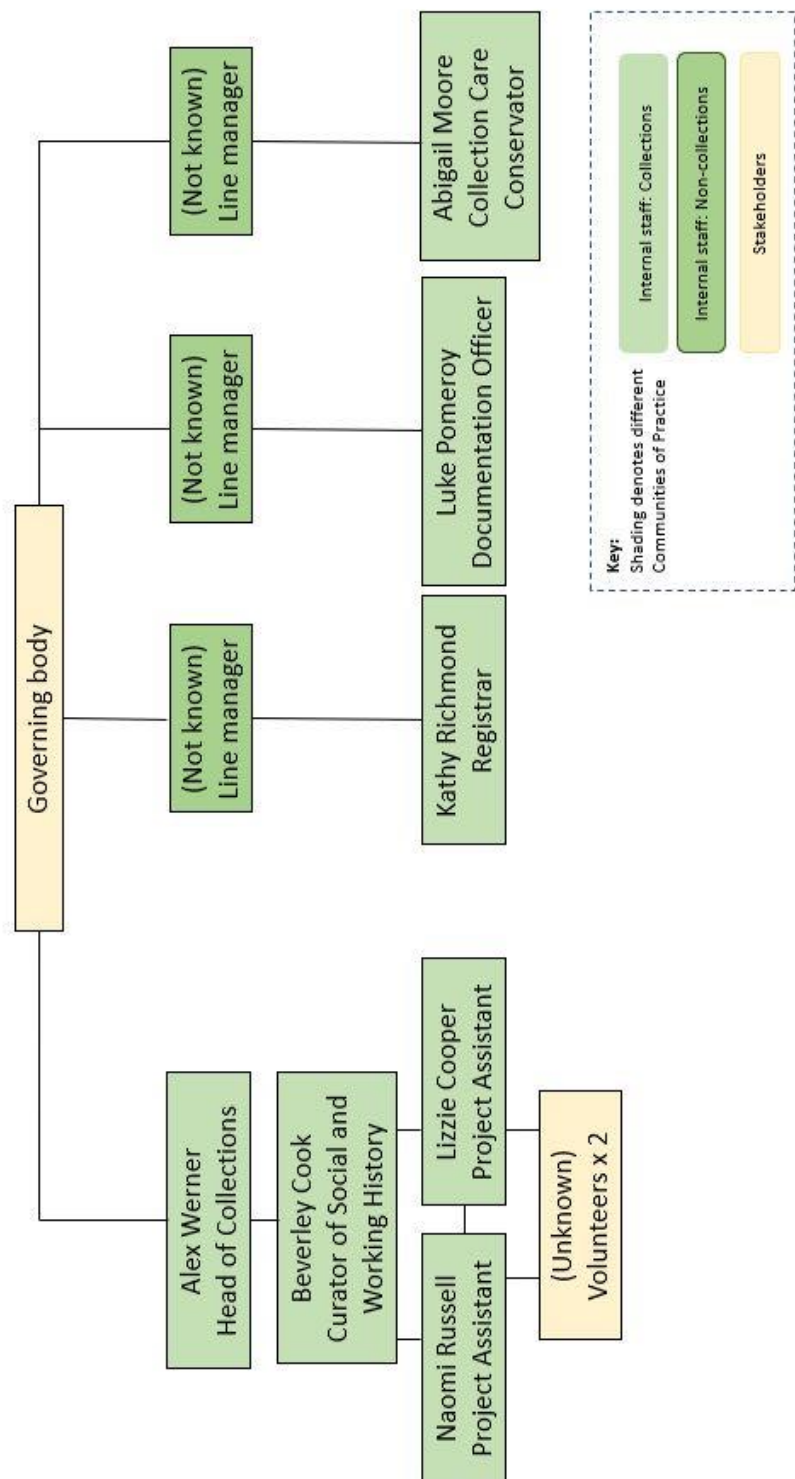
Figure 58: The core project team for the Museum of London Collections Review and Rationalisation *project.*

In this chapter I further examine the practical workings of transparency and present a contrasting rationale and practice to those presented within the previous chapter. I explore the centrality of professional responsibility and teamwork to the creation of individual and institutional self-confidence. I discover how the positive embracing of risk through careful consideration and management enabled the reputation of the museum to be protected. But to begin, I will explore the institutional framework in which the review and rationalisation project was devised and operated. In the following sections I reveal how the strong institutional vision, and the centrality of professional knowledge to successful practice, encouraged and supported the ideas and workings of the project team.

7.2 The collections review within the institutional view of object value

When the *Review and Rationalisation (Social and Working History Collections)* project began in 2014 the entire museum collection comprised two million objects (Museum of London 2015, 3). This was divided into 13 sub-collections (Museum of London n.d.f), with responsibility for Social and Working History residing with Beverley Cook, Curator, under the supervision of Alex Werner, Head of Collections (Figure 58, above). A sister organisation, the Museum of London Docklands, had opened in 2003 to tell stories of the city's working history and industries (Museum of London n.d.d).

Overseeing both museums is a Board of Governors comprising 18 individuals appointed by the Greater London Authority and the City of London Corporation (Museum of London n.d.g). The museums receive additional financial support from Arts Council England as a Major Partner Museum (Museum of London n.d.a, 3). The MoL also houses the Museum Development London team, whose sectoral remit is "to drive development and deliver sustainability, resilience and innovation in non-national museums in the capital, so they can maximise their benefits to audiences and communities" (Museum of London n.d.h).

By 2014 the Social and Working History collection contained approximately 61,000 objects (Museum of London 2015, 4) organised under an "incredibly complex catalogue system" (Stephens 2015). The collection was expanding "significantly" to encompass the vision for local relevance and "bring other voices and perspectives into

the collecting process" (Museum of London 2015, 5-7). This rapid increase began in the 1970s during a phase of "rescue collecting", itself an innovative and aspirational ideal, to gather mass evidence of industries and crafts no longer viable in the modern world (Beverley Cook, Q1). Through this process a team of early-career practitioners removed the contents of workshops and businesses at the point of closure. Curator Beverley described her personal involvement with this salvage operation explaining, "the museum team would go in and rescue virtually everything from the workshop, including the mug that someone had left on the desk" (BC, Q3). These new acquisitions were destined for display in reconstructed workshops in a new working history and docklands museum (BC, Q3).

While this mass acquisition process had ostensibly saved items of future cultural value it created a voluminous legacy of undocumented items, often without social context or clear legal ownership (BC, Q6). By 2014 many items lacked a clear purpose as display was no longer an option. Due to issues with funding and finding a suitable location, the Museum of London Docklands encompassed a much smaller site than had been anticipated, and its smaller number of reconstructed workshops offered fewer display options for the 'rescued' material (BC, Q3). The perceived value of the mass acquisition collection had therefore changed during the time lag from acquisition to the present day. The 'rescued' objects were now perceived as lacking purpose, or as Registrar Kathy Richmond contextualised, these items were not "functional" (KR, Q7). Her words thereby reveal an important institutional regard for object value: that an item must be *fit* for purpose and be able to *work* to that purpose. The duality of this ethos underpinned the rationalisation and disposal project: useability must be both potential and realistic.

Alongside the significant expansion of the Social and Working History collection from the 1970s until the 2010s was the significant change in mindset about its purpose and functioning. The contemporary MoL regards its collections as a living entity; a constantly evolving group of items curated to tell stories of London life through the ages. This bold understanding is evident in the categorisation of objects as "core" or "support" collections within the broader curatorial boundaries. Within the 'core' are objects destined for use through display or research. Items within the 'support'

collection are "acquired or produced to support public or museum activities such as handling sessions…", which "may have a limited life span" within the museum setting (Museum of London 2015, 8). This innovative delineation contrasts with many other museums' practice, as an object's presence within the collection does not guarantee its permanent retention. Instead, the museum regards it a professional duty to mould the collection according to the changing use and perception of objects. The result is a professional team with a "very healthy view of collections development" and an "active programme of disposals" (Kathy Richmond, Q5).

The rationalisation project examined in this case study occurred within this context of changing perceptions and practice. The review sought to remedy the legacy of reactive and chaotic acquisition process by bringing order, objectivity, and potential to the collection. Mirroring the institutional view of collections fluidity, the project itself changed shape by moving from an "inward focussed project" (Cook 2017a, 2) arising from the need to move objects to a new store (BC, Q3), to an externally funded project "that had the potential to benefit the wider museum community and beyond" (Cook 2017a, 2). In her summary report Curator Beverley explained the project's aims:

> As well as providing the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the significance of the Museum's social and working history collection, review and rationalisation was also intended to create a refined collection that was better managed, stored and documented and more physically and intellectually accessible. (ibid., 1).

The associated "innovative and inspirational disposals programme" (ibid., 2) therefore sat comfortably within the wider institutional practices and ethos of collection shaping.

This institutional understanding of collection, composition, and purpose is essential for understanding the transparency evidenced later in this chapter. Institutional ontology embraced the nuances of object significance and value and asserted the importance of human stories for providing social value; the physicality of an object alone did not justify its place within the collection. Indeed, this view was expressly stated by the museum as the:

… historical context of an item, together with the information associated with it, is of fundamental importance. It is this that determines the item's value to the Museum rather than aesthetic or technological criteria alone. (Museum of London 2015, 1).

An internal Collections Committee ratified individual curatorial proposals for disposal and acquisition (ibid., 3) and thereby provided some objectivity to the curatorial subjectivities of object value. In addition, the disposal process was outlined in the *Museum of London Act 1965* which enabled the Board to "sell, exchange, give away of otherwise dispose of any object… if it is a duplicate" (ibid., 10). The institutional considerations for disposal therefore provided legal requirements in addition to sectoral ethics. Such legal regulation of object removal is typically only created for National museums (Herman 2020), and therefore the Museum of London may be regarded within a unique context as a quasi-national institution. These legalities also provided a clear policy framework for the museum's practices (Museum of London 2015, 10-11). Rather than constraining practice these regulations seemingly empowered the institution towards innovation. This is evident, for example, in the museum's "bold ambitions" for the future (Museum of London n.d.a, 1) in which "We will make tough decisions rationalising the collections…" (ibid., 4). This statement demonstrates a strong leadership vision which empowered staff within this subject-specific project to "get that collection in a really healthy state" (KR, Q7).

Further, the leadership vision is important for understanding the disposal transparency enacted within this specific project. For it evidences a belief that museum professionals act on behalf of the public. Indeed, the "huge range of expertise" held by the museum's staff was central within decision-making as they "know how to bring the value of the past into the present" (Museum of London n.d.a, 4). As evidenced above, the museum perceived social value as essential to object use, and within their expression of professional knowledge the museum's leaders express the essentiality of staff in capturing and releasing that value. For as the museum stated, "Our knowledge gives meaning to our collections and is an invaluable resource" (ibid.).

Within these words is an important demonstration of the perceived relationship between practitioner and public: despite the stated centrality of public audiences to

the museum, the institution emphasised the unique role of professional expertise. A distinction was therefore made between public and professional groups. Indeed, this vision was cautiously voiced by Registrar Kathy. When asked about public and professional perceptions of museums she stated, "I think of myself as a museum professional, so I have a greater insight into issues than some members of the public. [But] I don't like to think that members of the public don't fully understand what's going on in a museum, because I think most people have a good imagination" (KR, Q17). Both the Museum and the project team therefore regarded professional and public knowledge as separate entities, and this view was enacted within the disposal process and its transparency.

For the project team, professional knowledge was perceived to arise from first-hand knowledge of the museum. Project Assistant Naomi Russell explained this interplay as, "There is so much behind the collection that the public don't know about" (Naomi Russell, Q17). For Naomi, practical insight offered in-depth knowledge. Indeed, it is possible to witness this professional expertise among the project team (Figure 58, above). For example, Registrar Kathy Richmond and Documentation Officer Luke Pomeroy had experience of disposal at other museums (KR, Q3; LP, Q1). All the team had a longstanding association with the Museum of London which enabled understanding of, and personal association with, its innovative institutional goals. This included the two volunteers who were involved with the project for a period of six weeks (NR, Q30). For example, Naomi and Conservator Abby Morgan had volunteered with the museum before their subsequent employment (AM, Q1; NR, Q1). But most important to the professional expertise was the very deep collections knowledge held among the senior project team. Specifically, lead Curator Beverley Cook had a 31-year-to-date employment with the Museum of London which began with the rescue collecting process and resulted with her progression to the role of Curator (BC, Q1). This length of service was mirrored by her line manager (NR, Q5). Consequently, individual practitioners within the project team had a broad familiarity with the museum sector, and a deep understanding and knowledge of the Museum of London, its processes, its mission, and its collections.

The centrality of perceived professional knowledge to the working of the project's disposal transparency cannot be underestimated, for the successful disposal of over 5,000 objects (Cook 2018) was undertaken solely by the professional team. Beverley explained her rationale for this situation as:

> I personally think it [disposal] is something that should be done by Curators. Professional Curators. Because of the responsible task. And only Curators would have access to all the background information, all the files… I think it's our duty as Curators to take on that responsibility, and I don't think that responsibility should be shared. (BC, Q23).

Beverley's word evidence the opinion that professional knowledge arises from experience and creates a duty to act on the public's behalf.

Within this context of defined boundaries, responsibilities, and separation of practitioner from public, it is time to explore how the team's perceptions were enacted into their transparency practices. In the following sections I will explore how the project team controlled these boundaries by allowing or denying sight to, and understanding of, their review and disposal process for different audiences. For sectoral colleagues the team enabled radical transparency; for selected stakeholder groups they exercised considered control of information-sharing; for the public the team presented opacity by revealing only partial insight to their workings. I will begin the exploration of these three audiences with the area of most activity: transparency to other museum professionals.

7.3 Sectoral transparency: altruism and risk management

In the preceding section I evidenced the high regard held by the project team for professional knowledge and its role within curatorial work. It is therefore unsurprising that professional audiences were the primary target for transparency.

The team undertook a multi-faceted approach for their professional audiences which can be categorised as three distinct communication practices. All aimed to create transparency through knowledge sharing. The two most prolific actions were outward facing to the sector. Firstly, through written reports in sector magazines and journals and oral conference papers, the team transmitted specific messages of information

sharing. This was supplemented by the second transparency action of allowing visibility to the project through hosting training sessions, with a deeper transparency enacted by aiding recipient understanding through conversation and practical experience. The third transparency act was an inward-looking process of information gathering into the team's repertoire, through consultation with targeted external practitioners and internal staff predecessors. Each of these transparency practices made visible four core messages: the existence of the project, its purpose, methods, and outcomes. I will now examine these transparency actions in turn.

7.3.1 Outwardly projecting knowledge sharing

Information-sharing with the museum sector was the most vociferous transparency mode and demonstrates how information can be closely controlled and targeted to specific audiences. This act of revelation comprised a conscious attempt to provide visibility to their work, with the Communications Team deciding to "proactively announce the project through the Museums Association website" (BC, Q12). The utilisation of the Museums Association as a communication channel became a key tool for Curator Beverley, whose role was the project lead and spokesperson. The focus of these communications developed during the duration of the project. For example, in a "Q&A" in *Museums Journal* (Stephens 2015) she explained the project's rationale with a strong emphasis on its relation to institutional mission:

> This specific project will create a social and working history collection fit for the needs and demands of the new museum that fully relates to and supports our collecting policies and strategic aims. (Stephens 2015).

During a presentation at the 2016 Museums Association *Annual Conference* Beverley discussed the ethical application and necessity for the task (Cook 2016). In a presentation to the Museums Association *Future of Museums: Collections* event in 2018 (Figure 59) Beverley presented the innovative practices and outcomes developed during the project. These included the:

> Creation of new procedures around large-scale rationalisation and disposal and the creation of a robust collections significance methodology… [with the]

transfer of 3,339 objects to over 80 museums, charities, archives and educational institutions. (Cook 2018).

Her words sought to encourage the practitioner audience to develop a curatorial responsibility to "push things forward" (Cook 2018). Further publications in subsequent years evidence the longevity of professional transparency even after the project had concluded (e.g. Atkinson 2019a; Atkinson 2019b). They demonstrate a personal commitment to transparency of practice.

Similar acts of transparency for sectoral bodies, including blogs by the Project Assistants for the Collections Trust and the UK Registrars Group (Russell n.d.; Cooper and Russell n.d.) evidence a willingness to enable wide-ranging professional visibility. Project Assistant Naomi voiced this aspiration in her blog for the Collections Trust, stating, "The intention of the project was not only to improve our own collection, but also to explore what benefit our disposed objects could have to the wider heritage sector" (Russell, n.d.).

Figure 59: Curator Beverley Cook presenting the Review and Rationalisation *project, at the Museums Association event* The Future of Museums: Collections*. 20 March 2018. (Credit: Author).*

The impetus for this high visibility was the team's perception of their unique situation: they believed they were able to be transparent, unlike other museums, and thereby help shape the sector. Curator Beverley explained this enthusiasm as, "we were happy to share our experience, which I think maybe others are not in a position to do" (BC, Q14). Her words importantly demonstrate that the team felt comfortable in sharing their experiences, and felt confident of a positive reception from this target audience. It also reveals an influential attitude of altruism in which their perceived unique status could be of benefit to the wider sector. Indeed, confirmation of the sectoral reception is evident as the team became unofficially adopted as the 'go-to' commentators for disposal practice, ethics, and legalities, by the sectoral bodies whom they were using to facilitate the communication. As Beverley explained:

> … the Museums Association were really pleased because they knew we had very high standards, and so they felt comfortable recommending others to speak to us… we were tapping into something that was happening within the broader sector. (BC, Q13 and Q14).

The high impact of the team's approach to visibility is perhaps best witnessed by their inclusion in the influential *Mendoza Review* of museum practice (Mendoza 2017). The inclusion as a short case study emphasised the "new procedures around large-scale rationalisation and disposal, including a new way for the museum to assess the significance of objects" (ibid., 45). The validation of their transparent actions offers reassurance and encouragement to other museums seeking to undertake similar processes.

The self-perceived uniqueness of their situation thereby enabled the London team to acquire a position of authority and generate wide-ranging influence through acts of information sharing. Within these regular and highly visible actions the team demonstrate an important insight to the nature of transparency. For their confident acts created a cycle of transparency arising from reinforcement and encouragement: the perceived uniqueness of the opportunity to be transparent enabled acts of transparency to occur; this generated positive reinforcement from their audience; and thereby led to further acts of visibility. Transparency therefore became both a proactive and reactive communication process, as the outward messages instigated

inward requests for advice and information, which in turn generated further outward messages.

Importantly, the inward communication provided personal reassurance to individual practitioners of the ethical validity of their work. As Beverley commented, "It was really nice for me, personally, to raise my profile within the profession in that way and feel like it was actually helping" (BC, Q13). She continued, "you have to have the support of your profession when you're undertaking a disposals project, and you have to have the support of the Museums Association" (BC, Q13). Her words therefore demonstrate that positive reinforcement aided her confidence in enabling other professionals to see and understand her disposals work.

The altruistic goal to aid sectoral change is also evident in the second type of communication: sectoral development through practical training events. These sessions were run by the Project Assistants, Conservator, and Registrars (AM, Q37; KR, Q25; NR, Q15). From an initial target audience of professionals within the London Museum Development region, the team extended their target audience with subsequent sessions for the Collections Trust, and staff at institutions including Colchester Museum (NR, Q15). These sessions offered a deeper transparency by setting the training in the physical environs of the museum store and offices, examining items which had been proposed for disposal, and including allied practices of conservation assessment and collections care (AM, Q37). For their audiences the team enabled a physical and intellectual interrogation of disposal practice. Further, they placed their work within its regional and national context, and demonstrated the interconnectivity of collections management and conservation practices. In so doing they offered radical transparency by enabling audience understanding.

From their words and evidenced high-profile acts of transparency it is apparent that an altruistic vision to aid sector development underpinned the team's actions. But it is important not to view this vision through rose-tinted glasses. For the transparency motivation was two-fold, combining altruism with a strategy of risk management to prevent reputational damage. Indeed, Registrar Kathy acknowledged this important motivation:

> People worry about sharing what they're doing, even if what they're doing is really straightforward. Because it could be misinterpreted. So, I think a part of this strategy is about sharing things in a positive way first. Your options are: don't share it, keep it behind closed doors; or in my view share it, and make sure you've got your messaging set up, and make sure you're talking to key people and explaining all the positive benefits of the project. So that's what the team did. (KR, Q14).

The motivations of altruism and self-protection are therefore closely intertwined. By being open and visible about its practices, and by opening both institution and individual practitioners to scrutiny, the museum proactively controlled the messages and information being made visible. By so doing they protected themselves from misunderstanding through sectoral hearsay. That this duality was successful is witnessed by the team only receiving a single negative professional response during the project (BC, Q12).

Importantly, the portrayed confidence of action arose from a conscious choice to develop considered, logical processes and decisions, which could be justified if challenged. Beverley explained her confidence in this curatorial professionalism and certainty by saying:

> I think that museums are their own worst enemy, to be honest, and just a little thought about the language that you use or the way you transfer or dispose of things doesn't take much, just to reassure and to justify. Always be very clear in your own head why you made a specific decision about an object, be very confident about that, and then that confidence and sense of authority will shine through and people will respect that. (BC, Q15).

In her reflexive attitude Beverley demonstrates confidence in her own professional practice. Yet despite her transparency actions she remained hesitant of the reception by the sector. She continued:

> There is still concern about disposals, there is still negativity around disposals in the profession… One of the reasons I wanted to go and talk to others, especially curators, I think they're probably quite negative sometime about

disposal because they're frightened of making the decisions. I wanted to reassure them that you can make responsible decisions that you're not just comfortable with, but that you can relay that information to the wider audience. (BC, Q22).

For Beverley a conscious consideration of professional responsibility therefore underpins successful transparency. By testing established sectoral boundaries the team successfully shared their messages with the sector and helped influence sectoral change: not only was their message carefully controlled and sent, but it was heard and understood by recipients.

7.3.2 Inwardly focussed information seeking

The third area of professional transparency was the seeking of information from external professionals. While low in number, these transparency acts sought information at the micro level about the significance of individual objects, and thus demonstrate the team's awareness of gaps in their own knowledge. For example, Beverley sought advice from the Science Museum about the uniqueness and potential display of a set of theatre lights. The information received, that they were duplicated in other museum collections and that they contained asbestos, subsequently informed her decision for their proposed disposal (BC, Q12).

These small acts of information seeking provided visibility to the project and its aims in a format different to the sectoral sharing of information, and present a deeper level of interaction. Yet the motivation underlying these acts is more complex than simple altruism for public benefit. For it also combined personal attitudes. For example, this complexity is apparent within Beverley's decision to involve a previous Curator in the object significance assessments, which arose from respect for others. She explained:

> I was very conscious of previous curators and previous donors, and I respected them, and I respected the decisions they took at the time. I think my respect for previous curators was always at the back of my mind, and I felt it was very important to understand why they collected things at the time, if that information was available. (BC, Q9).

In these words Beverley demonstrates the personal weight of her role in shaping the collection, and the necessity of the curatorial temporal gaze which was evidenced at Plymouth Museum in the preceding chapter. From this gaze she developed a new insight to the relationship between acquisition and disposal, regarding a close parity between the value assessments required for making decisions to acquire or to dispose. This insight became an important part of the message shared with other professionals, as she explained:

> Once they [museum professionals] understand that acquisition and disposal are quite similar activities they become less scared about it, and it becomes more a part of the day-to-day curatorial way of thinking. And I think that is helpful going forward… Because I think we should continue with a disposal procedure in the same way — we've got everything set up now and just embedding that in our day to day life will be very beneficial to us as curators.
>
> JD: So it's a more holistic approach to collections?
>
> BC: Yes that's right, it's just like a full circle really, you know — Acquisition, Use, Don't Use, and then Disposal. (BC, Q11).

This was an important aspect of the project's transparency, as Beverley subsequently developed ideas which could be made externally available to the sector. Specifically, the information gained from the inward information-seeking process combined with her practical experience, and her knowledge of museological ideas of object life cycle, to generate a nuanced understanding of the role of disposal. While it is a controversial proposal to regard disposal as the natural end point for many museum objects (Figure 60) the context of open and honest information sharing enabled the wider sector to consider Beverley's ideas as a practical reality.

Indeed, her ideas of the parity of acquisition and disposal became adopted by the rest of the project team, with Naomi reflecting, "if you have a really tight acquisition procedure and a really tight disposal procedure then they will really complement each other" (NR, Q10). This innovative insight thereby provided a new theoretical justification to the work being undertaken. Within the controlled boundaries of their work, and the need to be confident in the proposals being made for disposal, the

inclusion of external professional voices thereby provided an extra check and balance to her subjective assessments. By seeking input from trusted professional allies, the team was able to navigate this process with considered intent and integrity, and develop their own thinking and understanding of wider museum collections practices.
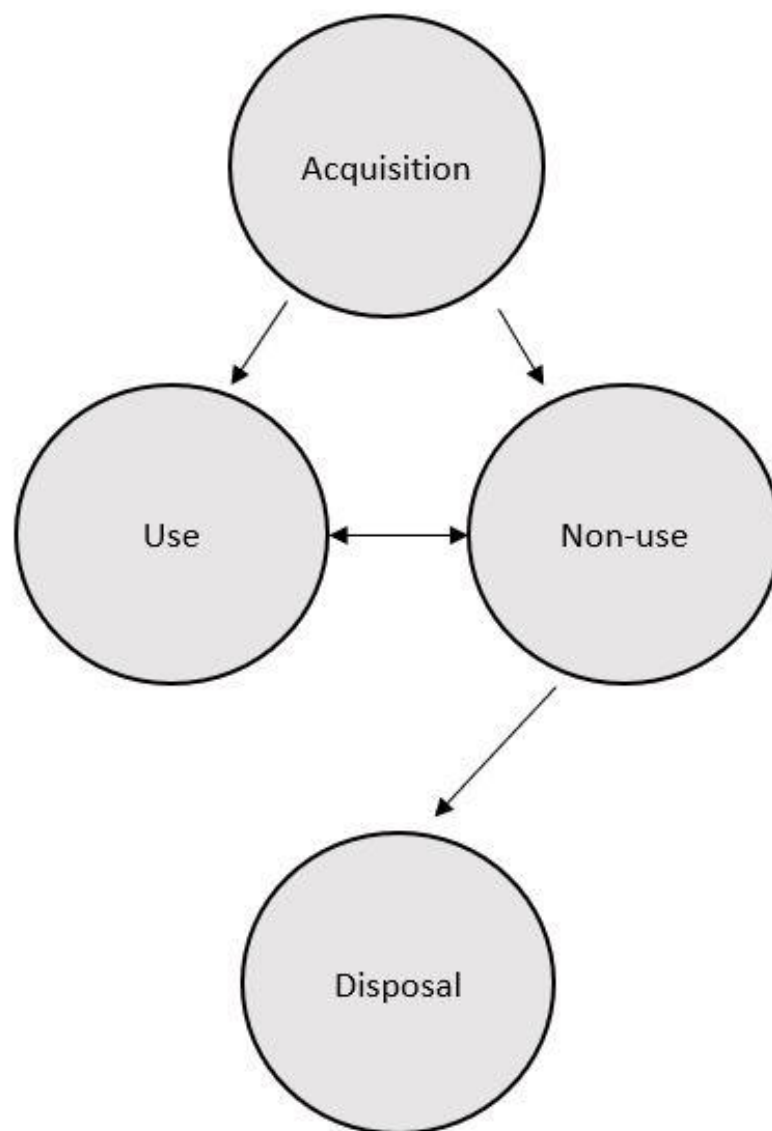
Figure 60: Representation of Beverley Cook's proposed life cycle of museum objects. Disposal is regarded as a natural end point for many objects.

From their acts of professional transparency the team therefore enabled high profile visibility to the disposal process by sharing information at regional and national levels. In addition, they enabled a deeper understanding through practical demonstration and dialogue in the physicality of the stores. These core messages were well received and generated deeper communication processes than had been anticipated. This professional transparency also enabled the team to supplement their own expertise, and generated checks and balances to their practices. In their actions the team therefore evidence an important attitude of reflexive awareness and openness with their professional audiences.

I will now turn attention to transparency generated for the museum's stakeholders. While these actions echoed some aspects of visibility and understanding, the team presented a more closely-managed process of information control, and exclusion for some stakeholder audiences.

7.4 Stakeholder transparency: considered control

In their actions with stakeholders the project team present a different type of transparency: of carefully managed messages within a rigorous development of internal controls and systems to regulate information. Their actions suggest a considered selection of communication mode for different audiences. For two audiences, the governing body and the recipients of objects removed from the collection, the interviewees provided detailed insight and explanations. By contrast, other stakeholders, including financial donors and museum friends, are conspicuous by their absence in the research data. It has not been possible to explore these silences more fully to understand the underlying rationale; but it could perhaps be inferred that their omission from process visibility was a conscious decision akin to the other audiences.

7.4.1 Governing body

As the approval signatories for any object disposal, it was essential that the governing body understood the necessity of the project, its wider remit within institutional mission, and the practical decisions being made. Earlier in this chapter I outlined the strong vision for the shaping of collections presented by the senior management team

and governing body. The disposal project seemingly offered a test of this ideal, and indeed of the staff-trustee relationship, as it required the governors to understand and support the innovative and sector-challenging processes generated by the project team.

Radical transparency was therefore of vital importance for creating and maintaining the staff-governor relationship, by providing insight and enabling understanding. As Registrar Kathy explained, the project team:

> … quickly realised that we needed quite a high-level regular meeting with key stakeholders. Because the level of information around the risks in the project and the kind of key decisions was quite large, and we needed to keep on top of that. (KR, Q12).

Further, as Curator Beverley reflected:

> Normally the museum disposes of objects one at a time, and we were disposing potentially of over 5000 objects. It quickly became apparent that the existing documents and procedures and policies in place were not adequate. (BC, Q8).

The team therefore developed a complex structured system of reporting and committee approvals (Figure 61). Rather than providing full details of each object proposal to every committee, the system ensured only the most pertinent information was presented to each audience (LP, Q29). As Conservator Abby explained, the depth of information was carefully managed to "keep them on board and focussed on what we were trying to achieve, rather than frighten them" (AM, Q23). The hierarchical system allowed each audience to make "informed decisions" (LP, Q26) based on the work of those lower down the structure.
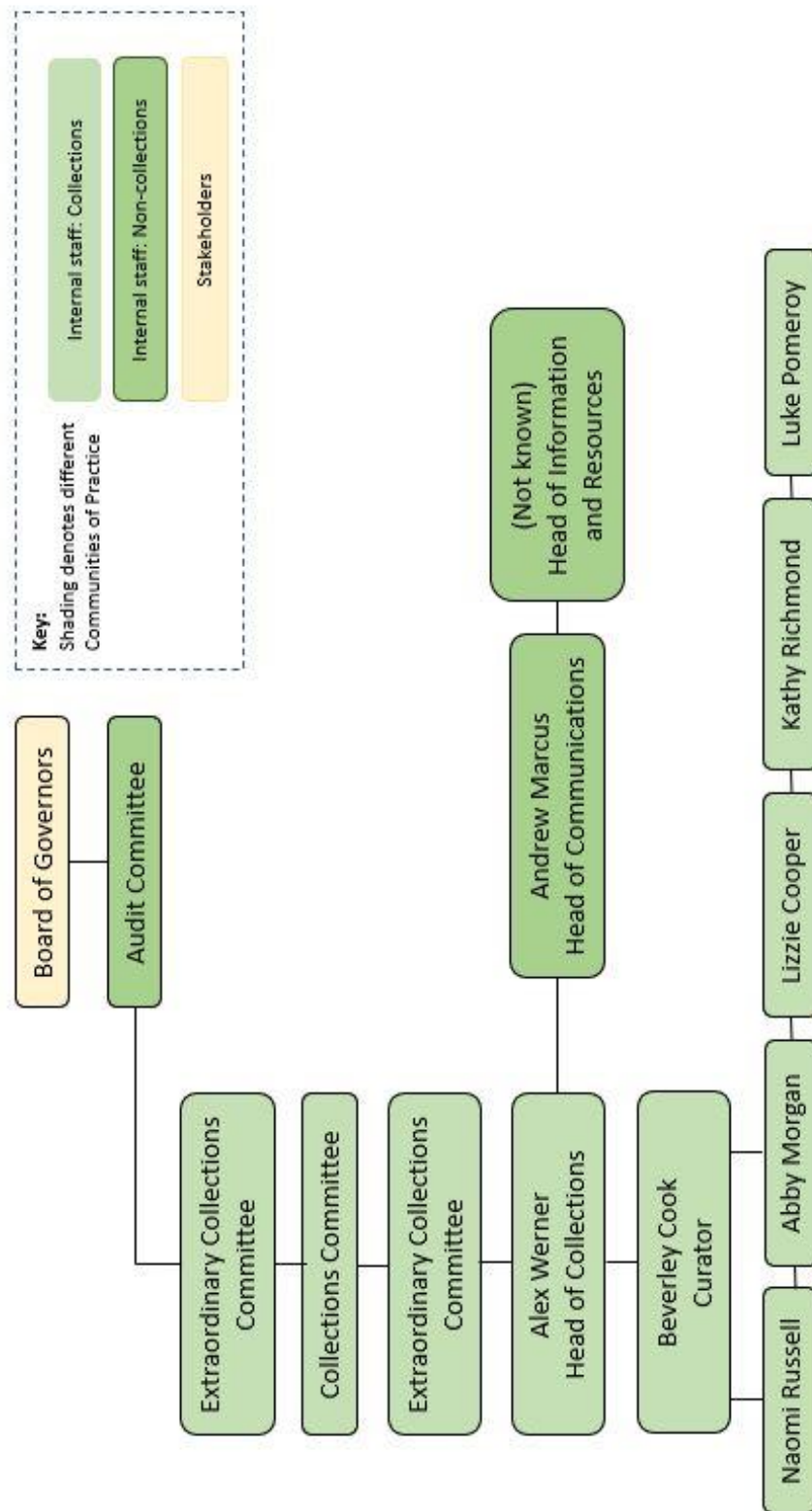
Figure 61: The structured reporting system during the Museum of London Review and Rationalisation *project.*

The transparency process largely comprised one-directional information flow starting with the project team, upwards to the various approvals committees, and finally to the Board of Governors. For example, the Collections Committee was regularly provided with updates of the number of disposed objects (Figure 62) and the workload for the subsequent period (Anonymous 2016a). More senior audiences were asked to approve actions, for example "Committee is asked to approve the proposal to move to destruction" (Cook 2017b). The clear roles and responsibilities empowered participants to know what to expect and easily understand and utilise information.
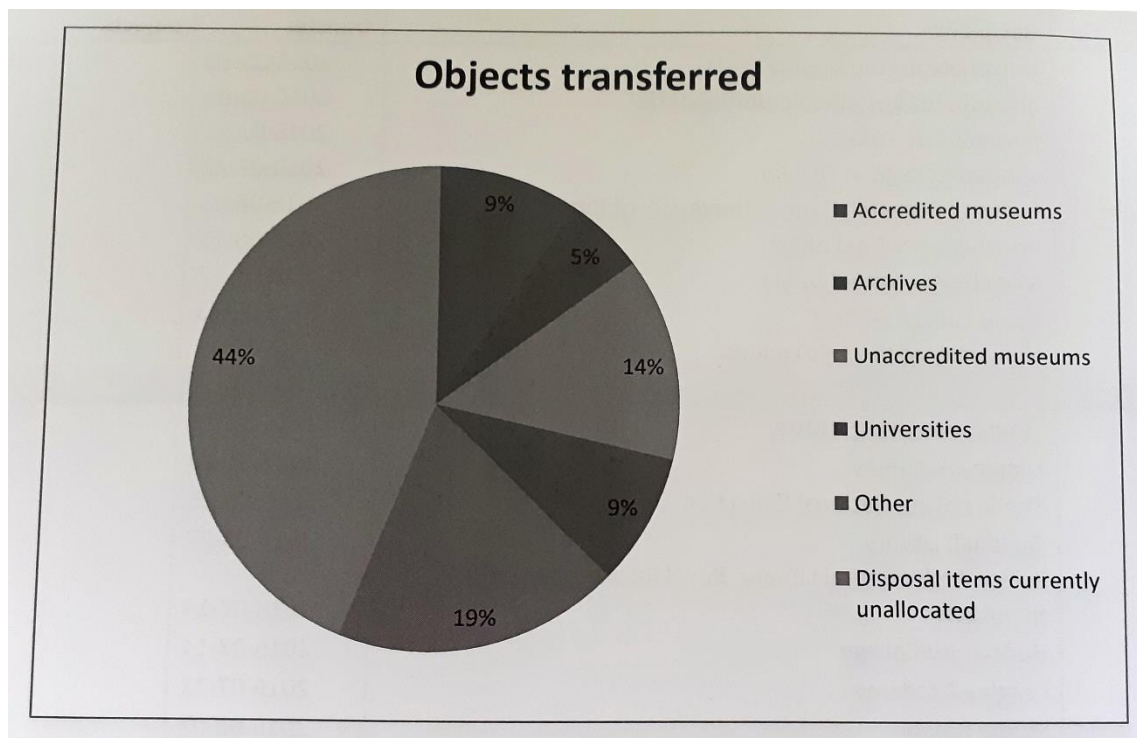
Figure 62: Example of disposal data presented in the regular project reports. (Credit: Museum of London, Collections Committee Minutes, 1 October 2016).

This process was not simply linear as it allowed for feedback and modifications. For example, the project team accommodated a request from the Collections Committee to include additional information in their reports (LP, Q26). Further, the rigorous system of meetings enabled lively conversation among participants before jointly deciding their recommendations. The minutes of one Extraordinary Collections Committee records that, "after a number of discussions regarding the best way to

offer items for sale the following process was agreed" (Russell 2016). Transparency was therefore a process of speaking and listening.

The resulting transparent reporting structure developed into a hierarchy of trust, in which each executive decision was based on certainty of the ethics and legalities of those preceding it. For Curator Beverley it was important that the project was presented to the governing body within the wider context of sectoral ethics, as "curators have a responsibility to reassure stakeholders by making them aware of the MA's [Museum Association's] support to ethical and responsible rationalisation" (Atkinson 2019b). The centrality of this ethical practice, and maintaining trust, was further evidenced in Beverley's explanation that, "if there was any doubt, any query, then it had to be pulled from the disposal" (BC, Q7). Accordingly, several proposed disposals were retracted before seeking governing body approval, due to concerns about specific legalities or ethical concerns (BC, Q7). These actions therefore reveal another important aspect of transparency: that the openness mindset required participants to carefully examine their work, or undertake 'due diligence' (KR, Q23). These checks and balances aimed to "make sure that we were staying on the right side of the legal and ethical considerations" (KR, Q12) and enabled a confident message to be conveyed upwards within the communication process. These actions presented a context of professional acceptability which ultimately increased the likelihood of the proposed disposals being approved.

The information presented to the governing body was therefore carefully managed and presented within a spirit of diligence and openness. The goal was to provide easy reception of information by the recipient and enable easy confirmation of the desired disposal process outcomes. Central to this process was a relationship of trust built on professional practice and presentation. The success of this approach is witnessed by the team receiving approval to dispose of thousands of objects.

7.4.2 Object recipients

The formalised strategy of rigorous trust and openness, which was witnessed in the relationship with the governing body, is also evident with the second stakeholder audience: the recipients of items removed from the collection. In these actions is also

evidence of the innovation and creativity arising from the professional interpretation of ethical guidance.

Not all the process was innovative, as the team undertook established disposal outcomes including transferring items to the museum's support collection for handling and schools' use (Anonymous 2016b). They also transferred items to other museums, including the Museum of Brands and the Jewish Museum (Anonymous 2016c). But the team were inspired to seek new homes beyond the museum context. This aspirational goal, which is advocated by the sectoral guidance (Museums Association 2014, 17-18), enabled the team to develop "bold, innovative and creative" (Cook 2018) opportunities for rehoming. These included:

- Returning objects to donors. For example, "a transfer of architectural and domestic items to the Brooking National Collection… some of which were originally donated by Mr Brooking." (Anonymous 2016c).

- Transfer to schools and universities for teaching. This included "a large number of items have been transferred to the Langley Academy in Slough. This, the first 'museum learning school' in the country, is aiming to build a permanent collection." (ibid.).

- Donating objects for practical use in craft industries, for example "two girls who are working together had just started up their own weaving company… and we were able to transfer some objects to them." (NR, Q23).

Within these creative outcomes is the embodied institutional understanding of object value stemming from social purpose and use, and the possibility that such value sometimes lay within a social context beyond the museum. As Curator Beverley explained she saw disposal as "an opportunity of giving new life to objects" (BC, Q19). Indeed, her words accord with her new understanding of the museum object life cycle discussed earlier in this chapter.

Transparency was essential to enable the successful completion of these tasks without creating misunderstanding or controversy. For in their desired innovative object rehoming was a significant risk for the project to be misconstrued by the recipient, or

in turn misrepresented to other audiences. It was also necessary to test whether the perceived potential values did exist beyond the museum. The team therefore regarded it necessary to both reveal and explain the aims and methods of the project to each potential recipient. Through considered communication they enabled understanding by again targeting focussed communication to specific audiences, who had themselves been carefully researched and chosen. Beverley explained,

> We had a very clear framework of how and when we were going to approach different organisations... The benefit of this was one of professional and personal risk management. I just felt much more comfortable about us proactively contacting people that we had selected. (BC, Q19).

Importantly, this consideration for transparency extended beyond the initial contact with possible recipients into the later stages of interaction. This is best evident in the process with the architectural reclamation and salvage company *Retrouvius*, who purchased pieces of unidentified architectural wood for upcycling into vintage homewares (NR, Q7). As this process had significant potential for reputational damage the communication was given careful consideration. Naomi explained, "We only approached companies that we had researched, and we were happy with. We didn't just put out an open call to anyone to come in" (NR, Q6).

After their selection of *Retrouvius* as a potential recipient the project team gave further thought to the physical experience of the company's representatives in the museum storeroom, and the non-verbal messages being portrayed. Naomi continued:

> Alex, Beverley's manager at the time, didn't want these people from architectural salvage traipsing round our stores... So Lizzie and I had to move everything to a store with more space that just contains archaeological stone, and we thought 'well they're not going to look at that in quite the same way'... Goodness knows what the architectural salvage people must have thought because it is obviously very different for them...
>
> When he came in, we sat him down and told him the whole project. We didn't want there to be any misunderstanding of 'oh we are just ushering you in

quietly and selling you things'. We wanted him to understand that it was actually the end of a really, really, long process. (NR, Q6).

Therefore, transparency here was of partial revelation through considered opacity: the recipient was provided with enough detail to inform the decision-making process, while the team chose to prevent sight of allied collections areas and museum processes. But it is important to note that individual perceptions still crept into their thinking. This is seen for example in the assumption that the archaeological stone store would be of less potential value to the company than the social history store: an interesting notion given the architectural salvage nature of their work.

The project team further chose to extend their control of the transparency process by restricting what messages the company could themselves share with their customers. For example, the team made a binding request that the company did not advertise the wood as sourced from the Museum of London. This aimed to prevent any association of sales from the museum collection. Beverley explained the importance of this decision as:

> Perhaps in the past we and other museums have disposed of things to other organisations, and if they say 'this comes from the Museum of London' it can enhance the value, the financial value, as well as all the potential repercussions that might bring. (BC, Q20).

This use of information control extended into regulating information shared by the receiving institutions to their own audiences. For example, the project team retained editorial approval of social media Tweets from recipient museums, with Beverley commenting that "all of those tweets were always checked first" (BC, Q21). Where communications were approved the subsequent transparency revealed different aspects of the project. For example, the author of a blog by a recipient organisation, the Institution of Engineering and Technology (2016), explained their experience of the disposal process. They also revealed the historical context of the Museum of London's practices:

> This was not the first time the IET [Institution of Engineering and Technology] has been given collections by the Museum of London… we have a history of

working with the Museum of London and accepting key deposits that form an important part of our collections and record the history and development of engineering and technology in London.

Within the close control of information sharing is evidence of the centrality of risk management to the project, and its relevance to the nature of transparency. But this control raises a question of ethical suitability. For within their influence over other organisations' communications the London team asserted their own values for transparency onto those institutions. While the situation did not occur here, it raises a question of what would have happened if the recipient museum did not want to allow editorial control to this outside organisation, or inadvertently flouted the agreement. This high level of transparency control could therefore be seen as an act of professional silencing.

Further, these transparency processes demonstrate that control over communication is of finite duration. For in the transfer of objects for university teaching in Manchester is evidence of the failure of communication. Naomi recalled, "I got a phone call and the person who was responsible for taking all that material had left. And they said she hadn't fully explained her intention for all of the material" (NR, Q28). Despite the team's best intentions for the objects to receive a new use their fate is unknown, but it is thought they were disposed of by the university (NR, Q28). In this example the longevity of the communication process had failed, despite the team's rigorous thought and actions.

Within their communication practices with these stakeholder audiences the team therefore evidence the important underlying motive of risk management. By selecting only two groups for transparency, the governing body and object recipients, the team consciously attempted to mitigate the risk of reputational damage. They carefully chose their audiences, undertook a conscious and controlled revealing and concealing of information, and retained influence over the portrayal of the museum and its processes by others. Against this transparency of considered control I will now examine how transparency was enabled for the museum's public audiences. This will reveal even tighter control of communication messages and a notable opacity for these audiences.

7.5 Public transparency: considered opacity

In contrast to the certainty of message and reception evidenced between the project team and their professional and stakeholder audiences, communication with the public presents a very different starting point. Here the team began with a doubt that their message would be well-received, based on a presumed lack of public knowledge. The resulting contrast of practice merits detailed attention.

In similarity to the transparency enacted for the profession and stakeholders, control played a role element in shaping the messages to the museum's public audiences. The formalised plans and structures contained within the Communications Plan (Marcus 2015) constrained information sharing to targeted outputs for specific reasons. For the public, the only visibility was to be a series of blogs authored by Curator Beverley and "written in a way that is of interest to both our visitors and general blog users, as well as museum professionals" (ibid., 1). This emphasis is intriguing as it suggests a perceived parity between public and professional audiences. This contradicts the perceived separation of these groups evidenced elsewhere in the museum's documents and mindsets.

In other areas social media communication was restricted as the institution sought "to always fully explain the Museum of London's position" (ibid.). This mindset explains the actions to control the content of Tweets by recipient museums which was evidenced in the preceding section. While this action retained control of the information being shared, by removing the museum from the immediacy of social media the senior professional team chose to silence their public audiences. Social media became a tool for reactive response to "protect the reputation of the Museum of London [by] mitigating the risks associated with collections rationalisation" (ibid.). These perceived risks were described by Documentation Officer Luke, who explained:

> We didn't particularly want to publicise that we were undertaking a large disposals project. Because we might be worried if someone might be considering donating some objects to the museum and then [they] think, 'oh they're getting rid of loads of stuff, they're going to get rid of my things'. So, I

guess there's that worry that the public might misinterpret what you're doing because they think 'disposals' is chucking everything out. (LP, Q17).

To respond to any public awareness of the project the team were issued with a 'Question and Answer' document to "respond to issues" (Marcus 2015). Beverley explained the rationale saying:

> The public perception of disposal projects, we know, can cause unfavourable publicity for any organisation and the museum were very keen to mitigate that risk... It was very important that we controlled the information coming out of our project. (BC, 12).

Within this framework of considered information blocking it is very significant that the planned Curator's blogs did not occur. Instead, a blog by Project Assistant Naomi was begun but not completed. In her recollection of sharing the project with public audiences she recalled:

> It is something that we could have, should have, done more. But it is really hard. I started writing a blog post for our 'Discover' [web]page. And it's really hard, because there is so much information that I want to say, that I don't know where to start... I don't want people to not know about all of the ethical wrangling we have done throughout the whole thing. I don't want it to just be in summary — 'we have transferred this many things'. I don't think that is the right way to communicate it. I think, perhaps, if we did it again I would do it as a series from the beginning. (NR, Q16).

Naomi's words demonstrate the perceived difficulty in aiding audience understanding. The team wanted to present disposal as a reality; as a comprehensive and complex process which comprised practical workings, ethical considerations, and resulting outcomes. When this context was perceived as too difficult for the public to understand it was instead hidden from view, rather than risk their misunderstanding.

This conscious blocking of transparency was perhaps a missed opportunity to begin the task of changing public perceptions. For a blog authored by a 'junior' team member, such as Naomi, could have enabled insights from a perspective more akin to the public understanding than that of the long-established curator. In turn this may have enabled

the public to journey alongside the team as they discovered the intricacies of the disposal process. Indeed, several interviewees reflected on how their own attitude to disposal had changed through their project experience. For example, Naomi's experience developed "quite a lot" as she explained:

> At the beginning both Lizzie and I, the other Project Assistant, felt we will never get to the point of putting objects in the skip, that will never happen. And then that did happen right at the end of the project. (NR, Q5).

If made public, this changing individual experience could have instigated a similar evolving public understanding of the process. This thereby would have enabled visibility to the museum's online audiences. This idea was even proposed by Naomi who commented:

> We have lots of visitors and blog readers and people who come to our website who I am sure would like to know more and would like to see things through a museum person's eyes. (NR, Q19).

That this process of challenging ideas and norms can occur in the social media format has already been witnessed through its use for professional audiences. It evidences the social media as an arena for question and conversation between speaker and recipient. But instead, the conscious blocking of social and digital media for public audiences prevented visibility and understanding of the museum's activities.

This controlled silence also further demonstrates the centrality of professional certainty to the project. Rather than reveal themselves as individuals on a professional journey of exploration and development, which may have presented perceived flaws or uncertainties within the process, the institution and project individuals required communications to present certainty and detached professionalism. The personal regret this created was expressed by Naomi as, "If we'd had more time and maybe more confidence in being able to engage the public with it, these are all things that we could have done" (NR, Q19). Within her words is evidence of a personal entanglement with the project even after its completion.

Perhaps this digital silence is of little importance. For as seen in the opening sections of this chapter the museum's target audience was local Londoners, rather than national

or international audiences. But a closer examination of the Communications Plan reveals that even the core public audience of museum visitors was omitted from consideration, with the plan's targeted audiences specified as "Museum professionals" and "Industry bodies" (Marcus 2015). This absence is an important reflection of the envisioned transparency as it demonstrates the public were not considered.

Within the closely controlled planning for the project was therefore a significant silence within institutional vision. However, evidencing an element of flexibility the team utilised an opportunity for a temporary public display entitled *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (Anonymous n.d.c) within the museum's *Show Space* area (NR, Q16). Comprising three display cases (Figure 63) and an accompanying audio commentary, this mode engaged the core museum audience of physical visitors.

Figure 63: Displays about the Collections Review and Rationalisation *project in the Museum of London's* Show Space*. (Credit: Museum of London).*

Unfortunately, no data was available to explore the visitor demographics for this display. Neither was it possible to gauge how it was received, as the display finished before field research began. Indeed, the location of this space within the museum is itself unclear as it is not located on the museum map and floorplan (Museum of London n.d.i). However, Beverley recalled "we didn't get any comeback from that at all" (BC, Q15), while Naomi offered a more positive recollection that "we got some good feedback, people were interested" (NR, Q16).

Still, it is important to explore the content of these displays and understand the messages contained within this public transparency. Most important is the slightly different emphasis told to the public than to the profession and stakeholders. Here, the collections review was the most prominent message, with the public strongly assured of the value of the collection. For example, each of the three cases addressed a different theme, beginning with an examination of social value in *What treasures are hiding on the shelves?*. Visitors were told the display "includes a few of our favourite treasures researched during the review" (Anonymous n.d.c). In the next case visitors were told of the practical restrictions of storage in *What lies within the crates?*. Visitors were informed, "The review provided the opportunity to open all the crates and assess and appreciate our wonderful model collection in its entirety" (ibid.). The third display case revealed the refining process in *What could we do with a little less of?* (ibid.). Here visitors were informed, "During the review we discovered many duplicate, identical items… Many duplicate items have now been transferred to other museums to enhance their permanent collections and reach new audiences", while others "have been offered to universities, art colleges and charities training a new generation of skilled craftspeople both in the UK and Africa" (ibid.). The text and object labels, written by Project Assistants Naomi and Lizzie (NR, Q16), thereby focussed visitor attention on the purpose and value of museum objects, and helpfully placed disposal within its wider collections management context.

In an accompanying audio available through an attached set of headphones, visitors discovered who the 'we' referred to in the physical displays: Project Assistants Naomi and Lizzie (Anonymous n.d.d). Voicing their own words, they described their experience of the project and the disposal process. For example, Naomi described:

This project was very rewarding to work on, and I feel that it shows a very positive side of transferring items to another museum. It is fantastic that items of which we had many duplicates in our collection are able to make such a positive contribution to the project at Conwy Museums Service. (ibid.).

The language within both the display and audio reinforced the museum's positive framing of disposal. For example, the emphasised transfer of objects to other museums suggested a mutual benefit for both the Museum of London and the recipient museum. This positivity also subtlety evidenced the innovation of creative use by craft and industry. This framing thereby portrayed the relationship of the museum with its communities as one of benefactor-recipient and showed the nuanced changing value of cultural objects from 'hidden' museum item to renewed creative tool with economic value.

This public portrayal of disposal is important as the message subtlety differed to that conveyed to the profession and stakeholders of the practical workings and necessity of removing objects. Specifically, the emphasis lay in finding a new object purpose; a more colloquial expression of the concept of 'social value'. Beverley explained:

One of the reasons for doing that [display] was to emphasise we have these wonderful collections and we've been doing a review — so we focussed more on the review — and what we'd discovered in the stores. (BC, Q15).

Beverley further explained this conscious choice of focus as:

I think there was some concern that the public might think 'well why didn't you know you had these things?'. So, we had to word it in a way that these things hadn't been lost, or that we didn't know we had them, it's just we were rediscovering their potential and their significance and learning more about them. (BC, Q15).

Therefore, the project team predicted a lack of public familiarity with the workings of the museum, and this notion caused portrayal of the process to minimise misunderstanding or negative response. For example, the word "disposal" was mentioned only once, located within the accompanying audio (Anonymous n.d.d) that

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many visitors likely did not hear. This restriction was a conscious choice, as Beverley explained:

> Language is really important when you're talking to members of the public. They don't know what museum disposal is. So, if you say 'we're transferring these to new homes' then it sounds more responsible. (BC, Q15).

Indeed, Beverley's dislike for the word 'disposal' was reflected elsewhere in the project and inspired her to use the term "refining" extensively when describing her work:

> I like to use the term 'refinement' rather than 'disposal' because I believe that is what we were doing, I believe that's what museums should be doing. And I don't like the word disposal. (BC, Q9).

Beverley's words further demonstrate her perceived importance of professional duty and curatorial responsibility. That this was clearly evoked in the displays, created by the two Project Assistants, shows a consistency of message. It also again evidences the centring of the profession within the decision-making process.

It is within this context of controlled understanding and professional expertise that the team chose to prevent any form of public consultation with these displays, despite the notion that "we're publicly owned, and I think the public can get involved in anything" (KR, Q16). For Naomi, the prevention of public involvement avoided creating conflicting viewpoints:

> I suppose the tricky thing is — if you've made up your mind that you need to do a disposals project, [and] if you talk to lots of visitors and they say 'we don't want you to do it', then you're in a really tricky spot, aren't you?. (NR, Q22).

Naomi's words again reveal the team's self-assuredness in the importance of their professional responsibility to act on the public's behalf. Decision-making was a professional requirement devoid of public input. Beverley confirmed this view, explaining:

> I understand that external consultation is quite a big thing for a lot of museums. But we were not getting rid of anything that we didn't know what it was and didn't understand the significance... . (BC, Q12).

She continued:

> Curators are too scared to make those decisions and if they feel that the
> community has made them it makes them feel better. I just don't feel that it
> should be their responsibility…. We wouldn't consult members of the public
> about what we acquire, so why should we consult them about what we dispose
> of, which is actually a much trickier situation? So, I think that it's a curatorial
> responsibility. (BC, Q23).

This certainty and confidence to work on the public's behalf is a strong recurring
theme throughout the team's communication with the public, stakeholders, and wider
profession. It encompasses a strong individual feeling of professional duty and
responsibility arising from the knowledge and expertise accrued through professional
working, and is evidenced by the highly regulated and controlled messages targeted to
each of the different audiences.

Having examined these evidenced acts of transparency it is time step back to explore
the actions from a wider view. In the next sections I will explore more closely how this
professional certainty and control was evidenced among the team, and the impact of
professional confidence on risk management.

7.6 The importance of teamwork: expertise and communication

From the evidence examined in this chapter, the Museum of London's rationalisation
project presents a coherent and structured process. From concept to implementation
the project seemingly enacted ordered and controlled steps and procedures. However,
this portrayal is too simple, and a closer reading evidences the iterative nature of
curatorial work within a conscious attempt to create order from chaos.

The clearest evidence for this iterative process is within the team's formation. For
despite becoming a substantial project it was never assigned a designated project
manager. Beverley reflected:

> The thing that was a real issue with this project was that it was never formally
> project managed. And I feel that was a real downside. Most projects of that
> scale in this museum would be highly managed — there'd be schedules, there'd

be timetabling, there'd be milestones. Without a project manager, and I didn't see myself being project manager — I didn't want to take on that role — nobody was really sure of their roles initially when we brought people in, and what they were expected to do, how much time they needed to spend on it. (BC, Q17).

It is unclear from the interviewees why this lack of formal management pervaded, but the freedom it enabled was of significant benefit to the team's working.

First, this free-flow process enabled open communication. For example, Luke explained: "I'd suggest a solution, discuss it as a group, and then we'd agree what was the best way forward" (LP, Q7). This method allowed the team to make "lots of decisions" (LP, Q6) according to the required tasks, and generate creative ideas and policies which the team "would send back and forth until we ended up with a version that was suitable to go to committee" (LP, Q8). It is significant that many of these processes later became enshrined as institutional policy, such as the "disposal procedure" which "we redrafted entirely" (LP, Q19). The outcomes of the project have been incorporated into institutional learning and practices, thereby creating another legacy.

Second, among the free-flowing process the team developed boundaries of roles and responsibilities. This brought objectivity by utilising different ideas and experiences. As Beverley commented, "We're very lucky at the museum that we have lots of professionals who are expert in their own field. You don't necessarily understand someone else's role!" (BC, Q31). Indeed, her words echo the institutional understanding of professional knowledge examined within the opening sections of this chapter. She continued:

We did rely a lot on our experience, and I think that was hugely beneficial to the progress of the project. I think that if we'd had a team of people who didn't know the collection, who'd only been working with the collection for a few years, the review stage would have actually taken a lot longer. (BC, Q5).

The combined team knowledge provided the 'junior' team members with reassurance, most especially that their work was ethically and legally justified. Project Assistant Naomi reflected:

> We were really confident that we had been so thorough, and that Beverley had made such good, considered decisions… We felt that we were doing the correct thing. So that was really reassuring for me…. You really need to be confident that Beverley knows what she is doing, and the Registrar know what they're doing. But I always had complete faith in them, so that was really nice. Because I think otherwise that would have made life really impossible. (NR, Q4).

Naomi's words therefore also demonstrate an important third aspect of the team's strength: the role of individual practitioners within relationships of trust. For example, Conservator Abby explained:

> I think we all really believed in the project and we all really wanted to make it happen. And because I think I have a lot of respect for all my colleagues I was working with. I think we all believed in the project, and we believed in each other, so when an issue was raised it was dealt with seriously, and it was dealt with as a team. So, I always felt really supported. (AM, Q19).

At the micro level, individual team members valued each other's personal qualities including "resilience and tenacity" (KR, Q19) and Naomi's description of Registrar Kathy as "really diligent" (NR, Q5). Some team members moved beyond a professional colleague status to become "very good friends" through the project (NR, Q8). Importantly, the strength of the team's mutual trust as individuals enabled conflicts to be resolved. Indeed, an important mindset throughout the team members was that conflict was not to be feared as an inevitable part of the process (BC, Q18) as it showed "that we can challenge each other" (KR, Q12). This courage to tackle the difficult issues was enabled by the strength of certainty in the team's ability, mutual encouragement, and support from senior leaders.

It is the strength of the leaders that is the fourth and arguably most important aspect of the success of this project team. For many large projects without formal leadership

fail, but in this example it allowed the development of the cooperative team under Beverley's assumed *curatorial* leadership. Naomi reflected:

> Beverley always had quite a strong plan of where she wanted to go with things. I think people gradually came on board with that. But I think at the start, it was due to her focus, otherwise it wouldn't have happened. (NR, Q5).

Given the perceived potential controversy of large-scale rationalisation the project's success was not guaranteed. Indeed, its early stages were a small and freely developing process led by Beverley, which arose from her being "asked if I would undertake a small pilot study for a potential rationalisation project" (BC, Q1). The impact of Beverley's foresight cannot be underplayed. For example, it was her vision that initially led to small internal funding to employ a fixed term, part time Project Assistant to help with the review (BC, Q3), and the subsequent decision to apply for external funding. The project therefore grew from small beginnings, as "for the first year of the review I was working on my own… identifying objects that I believed were surplus to requirements." (BC, Q3).

While Beverley was the unofficial lynchpin of the project her strong direction was strengthened by her line manager's support. This created macro-level leadership with extensive knowledge of the collection, in which the team found reassurance. As Naomi commented, "that lent extra confidence, because they were two really, really experienced people" (NR, Q5). The centrality of this leadership was further explained by Naomi, who stated, "It was a risk at the beginning. With different people in charge of it, and different processes, it could have been really difficult." (NR, Q28).

But the leaders' relationship was not one of simple acquiescence, and in practice they were unafraid to challenge each other. For example, Kathy recalled:

> Beverley made an initial first pass at everything, and then sent everything to her manager Alex, the head of the history collection, so he could agree or disagree with her reasoning. And I believe there were some cases where he felt there was something that he would prefer to retain, and they had a discussion about it, and they agreed either he would support her, or she would support him. (KR, Q12).

Indeed, it is mistaken to view the whole team as uncommonly content and harmonious, for human dynamics and personality traits did create conflict. Beverley recounted, "individual personalities always play into these things, but if you understand your colleagues and you understand how they work, there's usually a way around it" (BC, Q18). Conflict also arose from the nuances of how subsectors of the profession regarded necessary tasks within the process. As Luke observed, "some of us are quite grounded in our areas, we look at things from quite different perspectives" (LP, Q38). His words thereby evidence distinct and diverse subdisciplines within the museum profession. Communication between these subdisciplines was the essential tool for resolving difficulties, as Naomi recalled:

> When it came to the really big questions, like selling objects and putting items in a skip, we had those big, round the table discussions, and then just really talked them through. I think my mind was not changed in that, but became changed through that process, through discussing things. (NR, Q8).

The determination of the team to make it work was summarised by Beverley who stated, "at the end of the day we work together, and we work it out" (BC, Q18). Her words neatly summarise the team's positive attitude to addressing challenging situations through confident and considered action.

This confidence from mutual support and knowledge was not an inevitable development. For while Beverley emphasised the importance of individual expertise to this task, individual confidence was boosted by the sectoral support she encountered (BC, Q13) as evidenced earlier in this chapter. Indeed, perhaps 'confidence' is the wrong term for the team's self-assured actions. As Registrar Kathy commented:

> I wouldn't necessarily say it's confidence… I think it's more like a kind of aspiration to not be afraid… I don't necessarily know if we did have confidence in that sense, but I think the team here is very proactive, and we knew we had the expertise to assess the collection. We had the resources to rehome it. And we knew we had to make the best use of that and get this project done. So, I think having a real driven team that all are on the same page with the same motivation has helped us through the project. (KR, Q8).

Her words demonstrate the perception of projects and tasks, as much as of object significance and cultural value, is a subjective process viewed differently from personal viewpoints. In this instance the aspiration to be bold created mutual trust and generated belief in the team's actions to be open and visible, and to address the risks arising from their actions.

Within the generated dynamics of strong leadership and roles, and with openness, trust, self-belief and communication, the team felt able to be bold in their vision and their actions. Moreover, this enabled confidence to reveal their practices to select their audiences. Despite the positive affirmations and actions within the team this transparency of practice remained a significant risk both to the institution and to the individual practitioners. The positive attitude to risk management is a core component of the team's enacting of transparency, and I will now further explore how it affected the team's practices.

7.7 Attitudes to risk and the impact on transparency

As witnessed earlier in this thesis the museum sector is generally risk-averse, with disposal perceived among the riskiest actions any museum can undertake. The Museum of London team therefore evidence a stark contrast to this norm, by evidencing a professional responsibility to both undertake disposal and make it visible to select audiences. As seen in the preceding section, it was this belief of professional duty that enabled the team to carefully manage the associated risks. But it is again necessary to peer beneath this facade of certainty. For the team's risk management strategies present a complex situation of utilising both openness and opacity to achieve their goals.

Akin to many museums the biggest perceived risk was of damage to institutional reputation, likely to arise from audience perception of disposal as legally or ethically questionable. Indeed, this risk was genuine as the innovative practices, including the reuse of tools by craftspeople and the upcycling and sale of material, sought to challenge established norms. Therefore, the team were challenging risk on two fronts: by testing the nature of transparency, and by testing the boundaries of the very

practice that was being revealed. The team therefore anticipated they needed to share messages which legitimised their actions. Registrar Kathy explained:

> I think all of us felt that the risk was to our reputation. And that was always at the forefront of our minds, because it's so important to us that people feel confidence in our organisation, or if they're going to work with us that we are a really good, ethical organisation, and we care for our collection well, and we do things properly. (KR, Q13).

Central to their considered control was viewing risk not as an abstract concept but as a tangible entity which arose from the relationship between the museum and its audiences. For example, when reflecting about potential reputational damage Kathy explained:

> I think you have to be very engaged with the risks and make sure that you're managing them effectively. Where it tends to be problematic is where the link person, so the member of staff who's managing that relationship, hasn't given sufficient guidance or thought about how it should be managed. (KR, Q16).

By perceiving risk in this conscious manner, it could be managed through further reflexivity and considered action.

Strategies to manage the risks included practical elements, including the communications plan explored earlier in this chapter, and a "risk register" (KR, Q12) to record decisions and actions taken. In addition, detailed work schedules included a "Rationalisation Disposal/Transfer Plan" which reiterated the centrality of "active and open dialogue" (Anonymous n.d.e, 1). The team developed extensive new procedural documents including a "Sale/Recycling/Destruction checklist" to provide practical steps to "minimise reputational risk" (Anonymous n.d.f, 1). While innovative, this process of control fitted naturally with the regular work of the museum. For example, Kathy explained the role of her Information and Resources team as "very much helping our colleagues to use the collection and use it in a risk-free manner" (KR, Q2). It is therefore evident that the careful innovation of workflows and procedures became a controlled risk within the institutional context of understanding and support for their work.

The potential for reputational damage was not solely an institutional concern as it was also regarded as a practitioner reality. For example, Documentation Officer Luke explained:

> I think there is a kind of attitude, maybe not necessarily just here, where disposals are not really something you talk about outside of work, as you're worried if you do discuss it [doesn't finish sentence]… Because there is basically a risk in terms of reputation. If you're disposing of a large amount of objects, or specific types of objects which are high value or something like that, then there is a risk of reputation to the museum. So, it's not generally something I discuss with people outside of work. (LP, Q16).

The personal weight of managing institutional risk therefore extended into Luke's personal life as he did not feel comfortable talking about the project with his friends or family. The emotional burden of this personal risk adoption was voiced by Naomi as the concept of fear. She recalled:

> … you don't want to lose the trust of your visitors and the public in general. That was one of our biggest fears, that you would lose that public trust and reputation and then there is no going back really. (NR, Q17).

In using the word "fear" Naomi evidences the notion that risk is not purely a theoretical concept but is personally felt and embodied as an emotional response to a situation. For Kathy, who through her daily work was more familiar with risk management, the personal adoption of professional responsibility was a recognisable but controllable aspect of museum work. She explained:

> Work of this nature has the potential to affect both your health and your effectiveness at work if you don't recognise and manage the impact. The myriad of complex risks can be a cause of anxiety across the team, and take up valuable headspace, especially as colleagues tend to be very diligent, and therefore it's hard not to worry. We had to do a lot of work to make sure we were engaging with all those risks, capturing them and managing them really effectively. Using the risk register and agreeing and reviewing mitigation at Committee level helped us to depersonalise those risks and agree pathways for

mitigation that were suitable and reasonable. It also allowed us as individuals to know that the risks were collectively identified and assessed, so we could mentally step away from them at times, knowing they were actively being managed. (KR, Q21).

Therefore, rather than letting fear inhibit their professional practice the team chose to use it as a catalyst for change. Indeed, Kathy further reflected:

"It's important for people to be a little bit brave and talk about the work that they're doing, and take ownership of that, and sell it as a success story" (KR, Q22).

Rather than a paralysing emotion, fear became the spur to challenge professional norms and question public expectations, through the portrayal of the positive benefits of their disposal actions.

Within this positive utilisation of risk management, it is important to recognise that the type of risk was not universal across the project. Reputational risk was the over-riding concern, but it was nuanced according to the specific practices and stages of the work and did "vary slightly" according to the recipient audience (LP, Q17). For example, in her talk to members of the Museums Association in 2018 Beverley identified the multitude risks as "legal, ethical, professional, reputational and failure" (Cook 2018). Kathy expanded on these perils explaining:

Obviously, there's a financial risk. And there's a legal risk in being pursued if somebody feels they've got a case against you because you've disposed of an object they'd donated. But all of those things are much simpler for us to work through and make decisions on than the kind of ethical risk of somebody feeling upset because they feel they haven't been treated properly. (KR, Q13).

It is apparent then that risk is affected by its origin: whether arising from a legal or ethical uncertainty. Their mitigation required different techniques, with those arising from legal questions perceived as more easily managed. This control was strongly evidenced by the team's actions, for example in the processing of objects hazardous to human health such as those containing asbestos (AM, Q6). Clear legal and professional obligations meant these objects could be readily identified and controls enacted to

minimise the danger. But even within this niche area the risk was subcategorised, as Conservator Abby explained:

> The report I wrote was breaking that group of objects into subgroups of the really high risk things, medium risk, and low risk. And we came up with a different way of dealing with each of those groups. (AM, Q6).

Transparency of this risk management was generated by reporting structures to the rest of the team, stakeholders involved with process sign-off, and the external company employed to tackle the asbestos (Figure 64). Abby explained the centrality of this transparency:

> I did explain the project to them [asbestos removal contractor] and I was quite open with them. It's the contractor we use really regularly and have used for about ten years. They know our collection really well, and our stores really well; the kind of objects we have here, and some of the issues.

> So, they were inspecting the objects with the knowledge that it was for a disposal project. I think it was important for them to know that. I could be really clear and say 'is this object safe for transfer? We are looking at transferring it to another museum'. And they would give really specific advice about what we needed to do, and make sure we could do that process legally and safely. (AM, Q7).

Transparency of this asbestos risk extended to the potential recipient museum for the affected object, with a shared decision-making process to decide if the transfer would proceed. The success of these confident communications was enthusiastically recalled by Kathy, who recounted a recipient museum's response to an object treated for asbestos:

> There was a cooker... and we had the one that they'd been looking for forever. [The recipient museum] had written Beverley an email saying, 'there's literally a bunch of grown men jumping around the office here, getting excited!'. (KR, Q10).
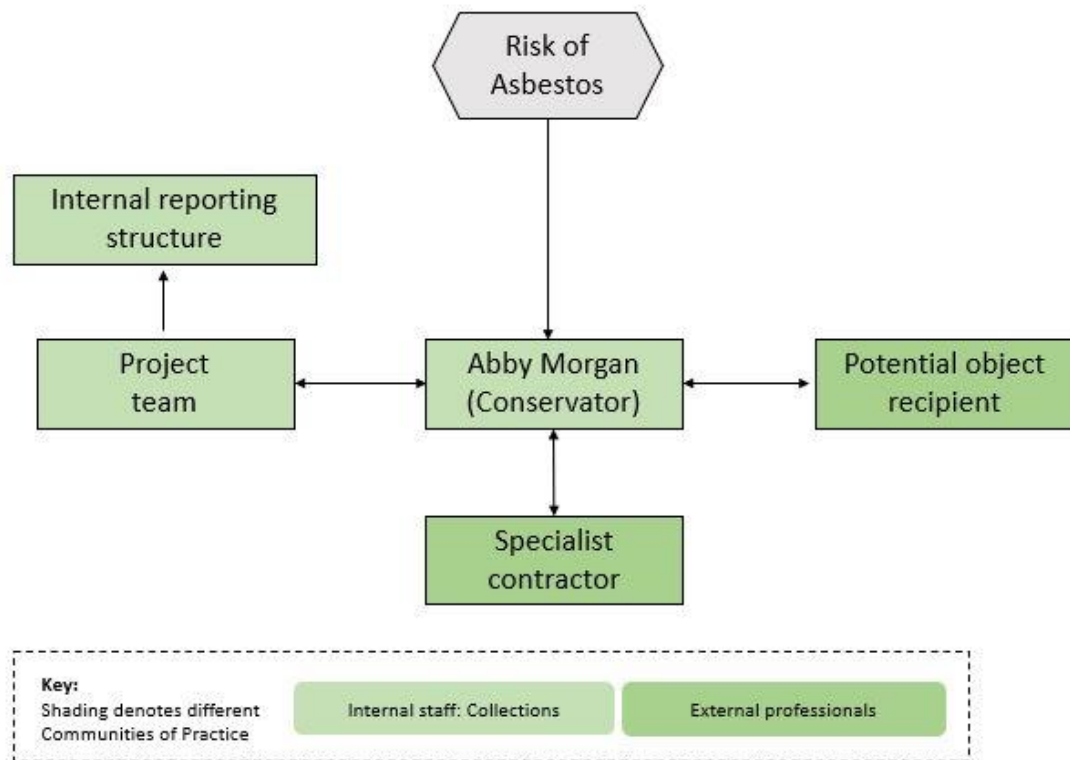
Figure 64: Transparency of the asbestos risk management process.

The black and white rules of legalities made risk management easier, as "we have legislation surrounding how we manage these things, it's less contentious. We have to do what we have to do" (AM, Q10). This made transparency simple as the legal requirements offered clear boundaries of acceptable practice. By contrast the grey areas of ethical questions presented more uncertainty. Kathy explained:

> The legalities were complex, but they were easier — you can see what the situation is, you can do some more research, you can talk to people, you can make a decision. Ethically, I think you're always trying to balance that kind of feeling of 'you've got this much resources, we've got these particular ethical issues, we need to explore them'. But often you don't get to a point where there's an obvious answer. (KR, Q20).

Despite the uncertainties presented by ethical dilemmas, rather than deciding to avoid the issues and abandon the disposal process the team made a choice of:

… not being afraid to take those decisions… trying to do a project in the best way that we could, and be cautious. But also try and push some of the boundaries to make sure that we were being really effective and that we weren't being held back by fear of making a decision, or things like that. So, we could then say, 'it's possible to do this project'. (KR, Q5 and Q7).

The control of risk and the ethical uncertainties encompassing disposal has therefore circled back to the motivations seen earlier in this chapter, of the complex interplay of altruism and self-protection. For the team wanted to test the boundaries, and share what they were doing to guard themselves against damage, but also encourage the sector to develop similar practices. That this was possible was due to the interplay between practitioner and institution. When acting as individuals they regarded themselves as part of a strong team which offered support, encouragement, and justification to develop their innovative disposal and transparency practices.

Finally, it is necessary to return to the complexity suggested at the start of this section: the interplay within risk between controlled visibility and veiling. While the team spoke clearly of their actions to provide visibility to professional audiences their silences about public and stakeholder transparency, contrarily, speak volumes. For in the feelings of the individual weight of responsibility that caused silence among friends and family, and the regrets of 'could have, should have' about missed social media opportunities, the team evidence a strong opacity for public audiences. Put simply, disposal was hidden from the public through a conscious blocking of information. Where it was revealed, through the positive and opportunistic chance for temporary display explored earlier in this chapter, the message of disposal was lost amid the framing of object retention and use. Perhaps this opacity was inevitable as the museum sought to keep public support. It offered a strategy of risk minimisation through a conscious message blurring: subtly introducing the disposal process to visitors, but perhaps without offering opportunities for full understanding. Still, the success of this combined strategy of risk management demonstrates the subtleties and complications inherent in applying sectoral ethics to real-world practice.

7.8 Chapter conclusions

This case study provides a firm presentation of the value of mutual professional support: among a team; within an institution; and among the sector. As individual practitioners the interviewees demonstrated their shared clarity of purpose in the need for the disposal task, and the mutual vision to share it widely with other professionals to aid sectoral change. Their actions aligned with their vision, and the Museum of London team successfully made their work visible and understandable by other museum professionals. In turn this transparency generated sectoral affirmation as they became the voice for transparent disposal practice within the UK.

These successes were firmly rooted in a strong institutional mission and leadership which contextualised and supported individual practitioners' work. The museum's status as a quasi-national museum offered a strong context to become sectoral leaders: neither a national nor local museum they came to represent 'every museum'. Yet individual professional expertise was at the heart of this success, with a closely-knit team growing from a backbone of individuals with established museum careers, associations with the collection, and familiarity and subscription to the ethos, ideals, and working practices of the museum.

Within this summary emerge two recurring concepts from the interviewees' words and actions: responsibility and risk. For the team viewed the shaping of the collection as their professional responsibility, undertaking rationalisation on behalf of their audiences to enable future use as a meaningful and functional resource; and they utilised risk management as a tool of control rather than fearful inaction. These two aspects formed a nuanced interplay which shaped the acts of transparency.

The success of this relationship of risk and responsibility was due to another concept: trust. This was evident in many facets. Through their practical knowledge and skill development the team formed a deep faith in each other's practices. In turn this enabled honest discussion, conflict resolution, and creativity. This mutual team trust created the confidence to be transparent with the museum sector, in whom they placed trust of a positive, or at least receptive, ear to the challenging ideas and innovations. In turn, the mutual trust generated between the team and sectoral bodies

enabled further high impact and far-reaching transparency. This trust also extended beyond this professional audience, as the team placed trust in the museum's governing body to make suitable decisions to support the disposals process. In return they were trusted by the governing body to undertake the project in a manner which protected the museum's reputation. Further, at the smallest level of the process, trust was placed in the object recipients that they would honour the individual objects newly in their care, and provide them with a new life outside of the museum's collection.

But within this case study trust is importantly evident by its absence. Most notable is the lack of trust in the audiences from whom the process was obscured or hidden: the museum's online audiences, the Friends of the museum, and financial donors. It is also visible in the opacity offered to museum visitors in the temporary display, with its subtle but importantly different emphasis. It is therefore important to move beyond a simplistic view of the project's successes with transparency to acknowledge the role of caution. For the museum's stated core audience — its local residents — was regarded with a mistrust in their ability to understand the disposal process. The trust relationship between practitioner and recipient is therefore an essential component for creating transparency of practice: its presence enables confidence of practice and communication, while its absence creates uncertainty and obfuscation.

To move further into the insights offered by this case study I have demonstrated the relevance of theoretical concepts to applied practice. For the three concepts of responsibility, risk, and trust are not solely for abstract consideration in best practice guidance but can become tangible aspects which generate practical action. Through considered and reflexive practice abstract concepts can be made real, and their utilisation can successfully enable access to, or conversely hide, the sharing and understanding of information. In so utilising these ideas the Museum of London team maintained close control of the project, its aims, workings, and outcomes, and achieved a substantial disposal process which ultimately changed perceptions within the sector. That this transparency was of less success with the public audience is an important finding but can be explained through the embodied professional responsibility to act with certainty and confidence on the public's behalf.

Chapter 8: Discussion

"We are the future generations of the past, and decisions must always be made in the present." (Fredheim et al. 2018, 31).

8.1 Introduction

This research story has now reached a turning point; a moment to pause and reflect about where we have been, and what lies ahead. At the beginning I aimed to delve into curatorially-motivated disposal practice within UK museums and explore how, and why, it is important for practitioners to make this process visible to those beyond its daily workings. Through my conscious choice to examine positive practices I sought to explain and challenge the prevalent sectoral reluctance for visibility. At the heart of this research sit questions of knowledge management, communication processes, and individual attitudes within the practical constraints of contemporary museum operations.

In the preceding three chapters I have explored how disposal transparency is perceived and enacted within a variety of UK museums. In Chapter Five I provided an overview of practitioner experiences and perceptions. The surveyed individuals demonstrated their belief in transparency as an important aspiration and had communicated with audiences containing professional expertise or knowledge. But they evidenced the complexities in which a desire for dialogue and shared decision-making with some audiences was countered by a strong action to distance others. Where the bedrock of professional knowledge was missing, 'dashboard' transparency of information revelation rarely moved into the 'radical' transparency of enabling audience understanding. These surveyed individuals also demonstrated the lurking presence of risk, with the danger of institutional reputational damage a common explanation for their enacted opacity. This combination of audience knowledge and risk aversion seemingly created an inwardly focussed practice. This was justified by the perceived professional duty to protect public trust in their institution.

In Chapters Six and Seven we encountered two museums whose practices challenged the prevailing norms as they attempted a deeper, more radical, transparency to their disposal actions. The teams at Plymouth Museum and the Museum of London utilised diverse transparency strategies which combined institutional motivations and ways of working, and arose from the vision of the professionals leading the work.

In Plymouth, the team operated from professional humility and were inspired to seek knowledge about the collection. Working alongside volunteers, they chose to make visible their behind-the-scenes collections management processes to their core public audiences. Utilising familiar communication methods their exhibition, focus groups, local media, and social media communications presented information and tasks, and enabled public consultation and discussion. While successfully demonstrating the public's perceived value of the collection the desired disposal outcomes were affected by institutional and individual constraints.

The practices at the Museum of London offered a contrasting vision of transparency. Here, the team demonstrated that transparency could be created within a regime of closely controlled revelation. Assured of their own expertise, the team chose a focussed visibility for the museum profession to encourage sectoral development, and for the governing body to ensure accountability. The carefully crafted messages to their visitors, and the silences for other audiences, portrayed a very different example of transparency in which opacity was deemed to play an important role. The disposal outcomes were a significant achievement which remained hidden from public sight.

Within my analysis I have touched on some differences between my research sources. These include practitioner motivations; the institutional governance structures and audiences; and the goals for the collections review and disposal tasks. These are important considerations, and it is tempting to focus on difference as the explanation for varied practices. However, the commonalities of practice are more important as they offer opportunities to learn and move forward. In this chapter I offer a contribution to sectoral development — one of the primary aims of this research — by exploring the opportunities of disposal transparency. I propose how the sector could help itself move towards a stronger relationship with museum audiences and stakeholders.

Accordingly, this chapter will now look forward. I will draw out four commonalities from my research data: the institutional context, the role of individuals, trust relationships, and the role of risk. I will demonstrate that 'disposal' and 'transparency' need to be considered as different tasks to create successful practice. I will conclude by proposing a model that places risk, trust, and relationships in a 'transparency triad' to create transparency to disposal, or indeed any museum practice.

8.2 Institutional context

The first commonality arising within my research is perhaps obvious but important to state: institutional support is essential for enabling the chosen modes of transparency to occur. Put simply, without institutional assistance transparency will not happen. This aspect was first discovered among the survey participants, who voiced their experience that a lack of resources prevented transparency. Transparency needs the institutional allocation of time, money, and staff.

The case study museums presented a fuller and more positive understanding of this aspect. Here, the selection of communication modes and audiences arose from their normal practices. Specifically, to counteract the novelty of revealing the disposal process, each team chose audiences and communication modes that conformed to established ways of working. Tradition offered a balance to innovation.

This insight is emphasised by the similarity of institutional mission. Both Plymouth City Museum and the Museum of London regarded themselves as institutions for 'local' people. They sought to represent and serve people living or working within the city in which they were based. When tasked with disposing of objects that represented those audiences, the teams adopted modes familiar to their collections history and contemporary working practices. For example, in Plymouth the temporary exhibition and local media modes were familiar practices to reach local audiences. By contrast, the Museum of London team desired a regional sectoral impact, seemingly representing their self-view as a quasi-National museum. They largely dismissed their online and media audiences in preference for professional communications.

Within these chosen communication modes is another similarity, which at first seems an area of difference: the geographical location of each museum. For example, at the

Museum of London the desire for regional impact was realistic through the 'London effect'. The project team was easily able to access professional networks and national bodies through their shared location in the capital city. In turn this reinforced their institutional vision as a national sector-leading institution. The geographical aspect is also present within Plymouth Museum's actions. For it was easier for that team to step back from sharing their project learning with the sector, given their geographic remoteness from the London-dominant sector leaders. It was easier for Plymouth Museum to present professional opacity as the museum itself was less visible within the sector. These examples show that the knowledge of institutional context, both internally and within the wider external sector, were essential for creating the successful visibility, or indeed opacity, of disposal processes.

Within the case studies is another commonality of institutional setting: the organisational context enabled innovative testing of boundaries. In Plymouth this was through the development of social media, while in London it was the development of disposal outcomes. Further, through this innovation both project teams embedded their legacy within new institutional policies and processes. The entrenching of these ideas and processes thereby informed and shaped wider institutional working, and demonstrated the positivity of transparency and the benefits of testing established boundaries.

The institutional context was therefore essential for creating and supporting disposal transparency at both case study museums. But it is important not to oversimplify this aspect. For while transparency was enabled, the disposal outcomes were also directly affected by the stakeholders' actions. For example, at the Museum of London the support from the governing body enabled the disposal of thousands of objects. By contrast, the governing body in Plymouth constrained the museum's practices. Superficially, curatorial work to utilise the local public positivity for social history was dismissed among the wider vision for the new heritage attraction for national and international tourists. The differing vision and lack of governing body support thereby prevented the disposal process from being fully implemented. Therefore, transparency directly affected the disposal process: not from audience negative feedback or

reputational damage, but from different understandings of institutional mission within which the disposal process was planned to occur.

Stepping back from these details we discover an important finding: that there is no single method for creating disposal transparency. Specifically, no single combination of audience and communication mode generates transparency. Instead, each unique museum mission will inform and shape the rationale for every disposal process, its aims, and the modes chosen to make it visible to and understandable by specific audiences. However, one very important commonality is evidenced by the Plymouth and London teams: transparency was a 'bottom up' process, rather than being imposed from above. The desire for transparency stemmed from individual curators; the communication modes and audiences were chosen by the project team; and they subsequently gained support from the governing body through acts of visibility and explanation. Curatorially-motivated disposal truly starts from a basis of collections expertise. Further, it suggests that to achieve external transparency a museum must be *internally* transparent. This internal transparency requires revealing and explaining the intent, methods, and outcomes of the proposed outward-focussed communications. It is through this conscious act of internal revelation that institutional and practitioner visions can begin to align.

The institutional context and the mindset of the governing body therefore affect how successful, or otherwise, the acts of transparency will be. They also affect the outcomes after the disposal process has been made visible. It is also evident that the organisational context can be affected by communication from individual practitioners. With this in mind, it is now important to explore the revealed commonality of individuals working within their institutional framework.

8.3 The role of individuals in transparency creation

It is clear, then, that the institutional framework enables and shapes the acts of transparency and the outcomes of the process being revealed. But I want to move in closer to explore the detail. For throughout the survey and case study findings I have amply demonstrated that museums are socially created through individuals working to achieve collaborative mission and goals. Put simply, professional practice occurs by

individuals working in their institutional framework. Again, this may seem an obvious point but it is pertinent to explore the nuances revealed within this research.

8.3.1 Ideals versus reality

Looking more closely at this area, the first insight is that ideals do not inevitably generate corresponding activity: what practitioners think should happen does not necessarily occur in practice. Instead, there is a complex tension between ideals and pragmatism. This was clearly evidenced within the survey data, for example in the expressed desire for transparency but its absence from reported practice. This discord was further witnessed within both case studies, perhaps most clearly seen at Plymouth Museum with the unsuccessful disposal of accessioned material.

The cause of the conflict between ideal and reality needs examination. For the recurrent explanation within the sector and this research was 'resources'. For example, the survey respondents proposed disposal was not possible without time and money; or if it did occur the associated transparency was prevented. But looking with a critical eye reveals a different interpretation. By blaming constrained practice on 'resources' practitioners direct attention away from themselves and identify the barrier to practice as a structural issue beyond their control. However, my research demonstrates this response is too simplistic to explain constrained disposal transparency. Further, within the professional framework of 'Everyday Ethics', this justification for silence is ethically questionable. What my case studies powerfully demonstrate is that practitioners can overcome resource barriers by adopting an outward gaze. Instead of distancing themselves from the problem, individual staff with a positive and tenacious attitude sought to address the practical constraints. By so doing they obtained external funding, and generated the necessary staff and time.

Still, it is important not to oversimplify this matter as the complexity of resources may persist. Indeed, this was evidenced by Plymouth Museum. Despite obtaining funding to enable the project, the disjointed project team — caused by fixed term contracts and personal circumstances — contributed to the stalling of the disposal task. Therefore, it is an important finding of this research that the outward gaze of individual practitioners is essential to overcome resource issues, but practicalities may still negatively affect the desired outcomes.

Further, within this truism of practitioner mindset is seen another very important finding: the resources needed for the disposal task are separate to those required for enabling its transparency. Or more simply, the process of disposal is different to the process of transparency. Accepting this distinction presents two aspects for practitioners to consider and action. It breaks down the task of 'disposal transparency' into smaller, more manageable, components. Therefore, when practitioners suggest 'resources' as the default explanation for disposal transparency failures they demonstrate a failure of understanding this distinction.

Indeed, transparency does not need significant additional resources as it can stem from embedded practice. Visibility and understanding can be achieved by utilising existing communication networks and structures. As evidenced by the two case studies, the choice to create transparency does not require expensive investment. Specifically, the Plymouth team demonstrated the benefit of using local media and volunteers for sharing and generating information. In London, the team utilised existing professional networks as their primary route to visibility and knowledge sharing. Further, in both cases transparency moved beyond visibility to the enabling of understanding advocated by Janet Marstine's provocation for Radical Transparency, which I examined earlier in this thesis. The similarity between the diverse transparency modes at Plymouth and London is again the practitioner mindset: individual staff regarded transparency as central to their working and identified opportunities for its creation. These case studies therefore clearly demonstrate that transparency can be enacted without expensive, or extensive, additional resources, if practitioners are so inclined. The starting point is the belief that transparency is a professional obligation: without it, transparency will not be attempted.

Within this discussion we now find ourselves returning to a central research question: if resources are not to blame, what is the cause of disposal opacity? One important insight, apparent throughout this thesis, is the conflation of transparency and consultation. This erroneous intertwining demonstrates the error reported across the wider public sector (Hood 2006; Farrell 2016) explored in Chapter Two. Here, the survey respondents demonstrated uncertainty about whether it was acceptable to exclude non-practitioners from disposal through a 'closed' decision-making process.

Further, the complexity was firmly evidenced in the Plymouth case study where the team sought an 'open' decision-making process between professional and public. But the numerous visitor opinions prevented any decision-making process from occurring. Public opinion offered much support for the collection and directed curatorial attention from disposal toward the process of 'gap-filling' acquisition.

But this interpretation is again too simplistic, for it was not the multitude of responses in Plymouth which stymied practice but the lack of clarity about how to *use* that information. While the team had consciously desired a diverse opinion to inform the significance review, they had not considered how public views would inform subsequent decisions. Instead of developing a fully open process of shared decision-making in which members of the focus groups or volunteer team shaped the project outcomes, the decision-making was drawn back into the core professional team. Consequently, after the relatively simple task of removing unaccessioned objects had occurred the disposal of more complicated accessioned items stalled, as the team felt unable to make decisions on behalf of their audiences. They had no criteria against which to judge the value of the public feedback.

This discussion thereby brings us to another important insight: clarity of purpose is needed to enable clarity of action. Before disposal transparency can be enacted it is necessary for individual practitioners to have consciously considered what information they need to gather, what form the information should take, and how and by whom it will be utilised to achieve the project goals. Decision-making is the tool for generating those outcomes. Only through a conscious process of reflection and clarity-making, proposed here as 'inward transparency', can practitioners provide the foundations to reveal and explain their actions through *external* transparency acts.

Supporting evidence for this proposition is seen in the conscious choice by the London team for closed decision-making. Individual people outside the core project team were only involved according to well-defined and controlled boundaries. The process of decision-making was retained within the team, with final ratification by key stakeholders. Within this choice of process, and conversely evident by the Plymouth team's unintended choice, both case study museums demonstrate the importance of conscious consideration within the transparency process. The nature of outsider

participation in a disposal process, or the nature of communication and engagement with them, is closely related to the desired outcomes, and the specifics of who will be making the decisions for retention or disposal. Without this clear vision either the disposal process, or the associated transparency acts — or both — may fail.

8.3.2 Object significance, knowledge, and the temporal quandary

Returning to the consideration of individuals operating within the institutional framework, the complexity of transparency, consultation, and decision-making is accentuated within disposal. For these are applied to the deeply emotional process of assessing object significance. Among the transparency silence evidenced by the survey respondents is an important indication that some practitioners lacked confidence: not in the necessity of the disposal process itself, but in making visible their own value assessments. It is clear from the literature review, the survey, and the case studies that this question of assessing object value is a fundamental concern within the disposal transparency debate. Indeed, the subjective value of objects is the fundamental focus for collections staff who regard objects and their relationship to humanity as the central tenet for museums and their work within. For such professionals, the removal of an object from this semi 'sacred' relationship requires a clear and conscious process of reflection, as specified in the ethical guidance. The emotional and intellectual conflicts this generated was clearly voiced within both case studies, and the personal impact most clearly witnessed by the Plymouth team within Chapter Six.

The practitioner hesitancy to reveal, and thereby justify, the social valuation process presents a complex question: how best to balance the varied understandings of an object's importance in the present day, while considering the past and the future of the item? For as asserted throughout this research, it is the object's interaction with humanity that requires full practitioner consideration. It is both the physical and ethereal aspects that represent an object's value. These human-object relationships are diverse and include the stories and requirements of past owners or users, object interactions in the museum realm by both professional and lay person, and consideration of the context of institutional history, purpose, and future mission. These objects represent many temporal realms. As evidenced throughout the professional literature, the survey data, and the actions at both case study museums,

the lack of practitioner confidence to explain their considerations of these temporal quandaries is a significant block to transparency.

For the Museum of London practitioners, the starting point to addressing this temporal quandary was the clear vision that they could act today on behalf of their audiences. To do so required the use of information acquired through professional expertise. Further, they perceived it was their responsibility to do so. Their communal professional knowledge provided confidence to make and explain those decisions. Importantly, many of the team personally identified with the local target audience and shared a familiarity through their daily lives as Londoners. By contrast, the Plymouth Museum team enacted the vision that additional information was needed from the public to provide the temporal context for the objects. They perceived the stories held within the professional community to be insufficient. Further, most Plymouth team members did not self-identify as allied to the core local population audience. I therefore propose that the temporal complexities of object significance are rooted in the perceived location of knowledge, and this affects the nature of the decisions made in the present day.

The process of assessing an object's significance within disposal is therefore a question of how to utilise knowledge in the present day, while honouring the object and its past and future audiences. Participants in both case studies presented awareness of this complex temporal decision-making. Indeed, it was the awareness of this temporality that several individuals offered as the main demarcation between professional and public communities. As seen in Chapter Six, this was clearly voiced by Plymouth's Laura Sorensen as, "I think museum people spend an awful lot of time thinking about the past, and thinking about the future" (Laura Sorensen, Q12). However, as practitioners pivot between the forward and backward gaze they become entrenched in contemporary indecision about the best course of action. This immobility is further compounded by the fear of being vilified for their actions by future staff or audiences, as witnessed within the survey and the literature.

My research offers an important contribution to the temporal difficulty within the disposal process. I assert that to achieve transparency within the present day requires professional acceptance that the entanglement of emotions, analysis, and knowledge

can never be 'resolved'. This quandary of social value is not a mathematical equation with a single correct answer. Practitioners today are merely the latest in a long line of individuals with a subjective interactional relationship with each object. While there is no easy answer, and to continue the mathematical metaphor, practitioners can show their workings that led to the 'answer' they reached. Transparency reveals the disposal process, decision, and outcome.

This complexity of time and knowledge is further complicated by a 'known unknown' that it is impossible to anticipate the needs of future audiences, or the institution. As most clearly evidenced by the huge volume of objects in London collected through the historic 'rescue collecting' process, it is impossible to predict the future needs of the individual museum. It is also impossible to know what future knowledge or human-object relationships will develop if an item is retained within the museum collection. But the ethical duty remains for contemporary practitioners to act with professional intentions, and to reveal and explain their processes. I assert that the temporal quandary cannot remain a justification for keeping disposal hidden. Instead, an acceptance of its presence and nature offers the opportunity to manage collections and make accountable decisions.

8.3.3 The renewed centrality of ethics within disposal

The solution to this temporal quagmire is therefore found by returning to the ethical context in which the contemporary sector operates. For the past and the future are unreachable. It is only the attitudes and actions of *today* which can be reflexively explored and recorded. It is therefore of paramount importance that practitioners accept that "We are the future generations of the past, and decisions must always be made in the present" (Fredheim et al. 2018, 31). The ethical underpinning of contemporary practice provides the necessary grounding for transparent disposal decision-making. Acting confidently within the ethical frameworks can provide affirmation of the suitability of the consequent actions. Indeed, this was clearly witnessed by the Museum of London and the consequent support from leading sectoral bodies.

Specifically, as evidenced by the historical charting of disposal practice in Chapter Three, the present day is the only context in which the sector has a solid underpinning

for transparency. The Code of Ethics, specific ethical guidance for disposal (Museums Association, 2014), and practical step-by-step guidance for the required collections management processes (Collections Trust 2017), are all set within the theoretical need for 'dynamic' collections (Mendoza 2017). The contemporary situation is significantly different than for our predecessors and actively demonstrates the creation of disposal transparency is a necessary practice. The pace of change towards this proactivity has increased during the last twenty years, evidenced by the regular development of sectoral ethical guidance discussed in Chapter Three, and it is perhaps unsurprising that some in the profession remain delayed in their adoption of these new ideas and practices. This was evidenced within the practitioner survey in Chapter Five.

It is within the contemporary setting that the fear of judgement is situated, evidenced strongly in the words of the survey participants and the Plymouth team, and in the messaging within the public display at the Museum of London. This situation has arisen from the legacy of professional practice and the 'unknowable' reasons for decisions made in the past. As 'the future' becomes the present day, and the 'unknowns' become 'known', it is inevitable some contemporary disposal decisions will be questioned. But through this research I have demonstrated it is unhelpful to fear that theoretical moment, as it prevents acts of disposal and transparency now. I assert it is necessary for practitioners and audiences to understand that transparency does not mean agreement about the decisions taken, but that it is possible to understand why and how they were made. My case studies amply demonstrate how this explanation process can occur.

For any practitioner assessing the significance of an object, and therefore its possible retention or disposal from the collection, the contemporary context is the temporal space to be given the most value. It is within a contemporary clarity of the necessity for disposal, set within institutional sustainability, audience representation, and mission, that practitioner decisions can be made, recorded, and explained for the future. Transparency therefore not only concerns people today, but also those future unknown audiences. From this viewpoint the need for the 'sustainable museum', as proposed by Nick Merriman and discussed in Chapter Three, becomes highly relevant. For transparency encompasses sustainability of *information*. A lack of knowledge can

prevent disposal occurring, while the presence of permanent information will aid future understanding of what will have become 'historic' decisions.

Disposal transparency therefore entails recording clear and tangible information which lasts beyond the memory of current staff, and thereby alleviates the feared 'future unknowns'. That this possibility exists was again demonstrated by both case study museums. For the London team, the innovative record-keeping and creation of collections management systems have ensured sustained information legacy. In Plymouth, the innovative intellectual framework has become embedded within institutional policies and will shape future practices. Further, practical information provided by visitors has been recorded and maintained in the years following the project's conclusion.

Within this discussion we have therefore moved away from the 'big picture' of institutional context and examined the minutiae of individual actions and perceptions. I propose individual practitioners are central to the creation of disposal transparency: communication acts are created and shaped by their mindset, vision, perceptions of the museum, its objects, and audiences. By embracing, not fearing, the temporal and subjective complexities of disposal, practitioners can focus on the ethical 'now-ness' of the task. They are validated in working towards their institutional goals and needs. But despite their role, individuals do not work alone in their endeavours. They form collaborative teams with shared vision and goals. Accordingly, from this exploration of the minutia of individual practice it is now pertinent to step into the middle ground, and explore the role of individuals within their project teams.

8.4 Relationships of trust

This research has evidenced the institution and its constituent individuals as important factors in the creation of disposal transparency. But the middle area now needs examination, in which these individuals collaborate to form relationships as teams, and with audiences. Specifically, I propose it is the presence or absence of trust which generates transparency or opacity.

8.4.1 The formation of team trust

It is a museum's constituent staff who enact the social vision constructed and validated by social audiences. Within disposal, the starting point for trust relationships is therefore the project team. This was demonstrated by the survey respondents within Chapter Five, although not openly voiced as 'trust'. I suggest its presence was instead apparent in the idealised vision for transparency to internal staff, and its strong enaction into practice. The lack of verbalisation of 'trust' may represent the survey demographics, with individuals from institutions with smaller professional teams, or indeed employed as the only professional without wider team support. Consequently, the allied desire to seek external professional support may represent a desire to create intra-team trust with like-minded individuals. I therefore propose that inwardly generated trust is essential for creating outward acts of transparency. Further, this trust arises from the shared knowledge and skills held by practitioners.

Such intra-team trust was strongly evidenced by the case study museums and neatly summarised by the Museum of London's Abby Moore as, "we all believed in the project, and we believed in each other" (Q19). Through their shared vision, experience, and attitudes, each team worked towards the practical task of disposal and undertook their outward acts of visibility and generating understanding. Despite the different formation of the project teams within the two museums, seen in the varied roles and responsibilities, the teams demonstrate commonalities. For example, team trust developed within the specific project rather than as a continuation of existing teams or working patterns. While individuals were familiar with colleagues' ways of working, neither team was an established entity but arose specifically for the disposal project according to the required tasks and goals. Intra-team trust therefore developed rapidly in new circumstances.

Second, this trust arose within multi-generational teams and was not dependent on individuals having a long professional career, and therefore deep expertise. For example, both teams were led by individuals with established museum experience (Beverley Cook in London, and Tabitha Cadbury and Rachel Smith in Plymouth), but also included early-career professionals (Naomi Russell in London, and Florence Morgan-Richards in Plymouth). The consequent combination of long-term experience

and early career enthusiasm generated a spirit of openness, honesty, and self-learning. The multigenerational experience, knowledge, and skills among the team also brought objectivity to the object significance assessment, as required by the ethical guidance, and provided an important source of peer reassurance to team members.

Indeed, team diversity was also evidenced in the third similarity of trust: the interdisciplinary composition. For both teams contained specialists in curatorship, collections management, and object conservation. This broad combination brought insights from sub-areas of museum practice and expertise, further enabling the team's reflexivity of subtleties of practice and mission. In turn, these nuances of understanding offered additional objectivity essential for the collaborative disposal process. However, within the context of the realities of museum practice, it is important to observe that these staff combinations were viable only because most of the jobs already existed within each institution. The diverse professional roles were a basis for the creation of each disposal project, and are an important reminder of the reality of practical resources and its impact on transparency.

The leadership of each team offered further reassurance to its members, as their experience provided team confidence in the ethical suitability of the task being undertaken. This was most clearly articulated by Naomi Russell as, "We were really confident that we had been so thorough, and that Beverley had made such good, considered decisions" (Q4). In both case studies this leadership arose naturally, and was thereby self-generated, in the absence of imposed external controls. For example, at the Museum of London, Beverley Cook became the project lead due to a lack of formal project management. At Plymouth Museum an absence of senior line management generated a lack of supervision and external control. Further, I suggest it is significant that these team leaders were the same individuals who had initiated the disposal project and obtained the external funding for it to proceed. Consequently, they each offered a strong understanding of the vision and purpose of the project. These leaders were able to communicate that mission to their colleagues, who in turn were willing to listen and offer collaborative support. Communication was thereby essential for establishing and maintaining these trust relationships through the sharing and receiving of information, whether by the formal discussion and project meetings

at the Museum of London, or conversation and physical demonstration at Plymouth Museum. The value of this team communication was most evident within the London team, whose individuals were able to raise and respond to questions about the process and decision-making. In turn this successful conflict management further strengthened mutual respect.

The final similarity of team trust was the dynamic and responsive nature of the teams, which utilised reflexivity to recognise where expertise was lacking. For example, in Plymouth the team brought in a specialist staff member to engage students, while in London the team brought in specialists to advise with practical questions of asbestos management. This embodied reflexivity, which considered the strengths and weaknesses of the team, was truly undertaken in a spirit of openness.

The case studies therefore demonstrate five commonalities of team trust: newly formed teams, which were multigenerational, contained skilled sub-sectoral knowledge, had engaging leadership, and a reflexive dynamic nature to seek 'missing' knowledge. Within these traits it is possible to identify two further important overarching themes.

First, team trust and openness to action and communication were underpinned by *individual* reflexivity and self-awareness. This individual reflection became a team process through 'internal transparency'. Each team's shared vision stemmed from the shared adoption of the purpose of the project. It was only from that basis that the outward communication processes for transparency could occur.

Second, while professional knowledge was central to generating trust, specific knowledge was not required to already exist within individual team members. Rather, the *potential* for knowledge development bonded the team. Each team expected its individuals to be amenable and able to source or acquire the necessary expertise in the professional context, and apply it to the team, the project, and its outcomes. Shared knowledge and understanding were therefore a fundamental aspect for generating trust and provided the firm basis for internal and external acts of transparency.

But within this commonality of professional expertise is found a significant difference between the two case studies and their attitude to generating intra-team trust. For

while both teams evidenced a clear demarcation between the profession and the public, they used different approaches to fill the knowledge gaps. For example, the London team called upon allied professionals including the hazardous waste specialist and the former curator. By contrast, the Plymouth team called on non-professionals, specifically the volunteers, to fill a key role in transparency creation. This difference of approach is very important as it demonstrates disposal transparency was *not* negatively affected by trusting individuals beyond the core professional team. Instead, the Plymouth team successfully brought non-professional 'outsiders' into the team structure and developed a mutually-trusting relationship. That this was possible reinforces the evidence seen earlier in this chapter that it is pertinent for transparency to utilise existing ways of working: through previous experience of working with volunteers the Plymouth team trusted the disposal process could be successfully revealed to, and understood by, this group. The existing regard for volunteers as a trusted audience enabled the successful professional-volunteer team relationship to develop. This evidence is important as it counteracts the perception presented in the survey and the Museum of London case study that disposal transparency should solely be a professional process.

This insight is important as it demonstrates trust emanating from the team to outside audiences. Indeed, the volunteers' role within the Plymouth project was as a communication bridge between professional and public: through trusted integration volunteers placed one foot in the professional realm and kept one foot outside. In this light it is now pertinent to explore how the presence or absence of trust was demonstrated with other stakeholder groups.

8.4.2 Trust in stakeholders

Internal team trust is therefore a core requirement for transparency as it creates the potential for openness with others. But as evidenced throughout this research, such team relationships alone do not guarantee transparency. Each museum-audience relationship also embodies trust, and most importantly the trust that the audience will be receptive to hearing and understanding the communication.

Within the case studies the predicted stakeholder response was clearly evidenced to affect the choice for transparency or opacity. For both museums, the most trusted

stakeholder was the project's financial supporter. This assertion may appear a surprising observation, as this audience has been rarely mentioned thus far. But it is precisely this silence which evidences the simplicity of the trust relationship: the funding body had a proven support for the project goals and aims, and the team had a professional duty for radical transparency with them. The clear communication structures of reporting, evidenced in the preceding chapters, demonstrate the simplicity of the predicted communication and response process. It thereby reveals implicit trust arising from reciprocal professional obligation. Indeed, this simplicity further supports my proposition for the importance of shared knowledge within transparency.

By contrast, other audience relationships were characterised by mistrust. Here are found the silences for financial donors, and Friends or members groups. While the reason for this information blocking was not vocalised by the research participants, it is possible to surmise the cause as a desire to separate the collection's social value from ideas of economic worth. But it is important to note that this may not have been based on a proven past relationship, but rather the *anticipated* mindset of those audiences.

Within the case studies, a middle ground of stakeholder trust was witnessed with object donors, evidenced by the shared decision-making about the future use of objects. This aspect is a surprising insight, as many of the objects had an unclear acquisition route and accession status. Specifically, in London uncertainties arose from the rapid collecting process, whilst in Plymouth many objects had been left with the museum for possible acquisition but lacked associated paperwork. For many museums such situations generate veiled practice. But contrary to this sectoral norm, both museums utilised audience trust as an innovation for disposal transparency. They thereby demonstrate that the temporal complexity, discussed earlier in this chapter, can aid the disposal process. Both project teams acted from a contemporary state of duality by looking forward and backward. They also had a combined state of confidence and deference: confidence in the need for the rationalisation process, and deference in acknowledging that previous practices had not created the required information legacy. Openly acknowledging this quandary enabled a trusting relationship to be developed with object donors: practitioners trusted each donor

would be amenable to involvement in the decision-making process, based on their previous relationship with the object under consideration. While this trust was uncertain given the passage of time, the practitioners perceived the donor would be interested in the object's future.

A further commonality in the case studies reinforces the centrality of the relationship with the governing body. For in London, the team respected the governing body and provided clear communication based on the shared institutional vision. By contrast, the relationship between museum and governing body in Plymouth was less trusting. In stark contrast to the clear reporting evidenced in London, the Plymouth team provided minimal transparency to their actions. This lack of shared vision ultimately caused the failed disposal process. But within the context of transparency this absence of shared vision also reflects the nature of the trust relationship between project team and governing body; neither side believed in the other's mission and purpose. Put simply, they did not trust each other.

Stakeholder relationships therefore demonstrate that trust is important for transparency through both its presence and absence. The presence of trust enables transparency, while its absence causes silence. It is also apparent that the knowledge held by the recipient audience, as perceived by the practitioner, is of importance to establish or maintain these trust relationships. Where the stakeholder is believed to understand the social role of museums they are perceived to hold a commonality of knowledge on which to base transparency. For those stakeholders whose perception of museums revolves around financial giving, the lack of perceived shared understanding creates an absence of trust and thereby the silence of non-communication. I propose this further demonstrates that shared knowledge, or its perceived presence, is fundamental to generating transparency.

8.4.3 Trust in the public

If, then, transparency with professional audiences is based on shared knowledge, and transparency with stakeholders is based on a perceived shared purpose, what is the situation with the public? For this audience is arguably the most significant; it is they for whom museums exist and for whom practitioners have a duty to serve.

The research findings for these relationships is messy and uncertain. As revealed in Chapter Five, it is a significant finding that nearly a quarter of the survey respondents did not think the public should be involved in disposal, and that this belief was enacted into practice. It is also an important finding that despite the sectoral aim to maintain public trust, as evidenced in the ethical guidelines, the word 'trust' was not explicitly mentioned by any of the survey participants. However, public trust is glimpsed through its absence: in the distancing of museum visitors, online audiences, and journalists from disposal and its communication.

The lack of public trust was also seen in the actions of the Museum of London team. Yet they present an important example of how public trust can begin to develop. Specifically, alongside the silence of local media and limited opacity of social media communication, the team grasped the opportunity to utilise the *Show Space* display for their physical visitors. Despite portraying a different message to that shared with their professional audiences, the display generated public visibility to various collections management processes which were otherwise hidden. This action therefore evidences the formation of public trust by the testing of boundaries.

It is Plymouth Museum that presents the most important challenge to the sectoral trend of public mistrust. They provide a fascinating demonstration of sustained radical transparency with local audiences. By utilising a plethora of communication modes the team demonstrated strong trust in visitors, online audiences, and local journalists. Further, this trust is especially significant within the sectoral evidence for online audiences and journalists as the least trusted audiences. Yet the Plymouth team trusted that their core messages would be well received, and they chose to reveal them through words and physical action. For visitors and local media, the reciprocal trust arose from established relationships and ways of working. The Plymouth examples therefore evidences that these audiences can understand the purpose and necessity of disposal, and are willing to engage with radical transparency. This important finding proves that transparency can be successful with such 'troublesome' audiences. Further, the successful reception of transparency enabled the team to move beyond known and tested relationships, and develop the institutionally

innovative use of social media. This visibility widened interest in the tasks being revealed and started to develop trust relationships with new audiences.

Therefore, despite offering different transparency practices for public audiences there is a commonality between the two case study museums: of established trust generating trust innovation. Each team utilised the positivity of known relationships to generate a boldness to develop new ones. Here too is found another commonality: the strength of the trust relationship directly affected the disposal process. For in London the newness of the public relationship prevented sight and involvement with the disposal process, while in Plymouth the team opted to undertake acquisition rather than disposal. In this way we have circled back to the opening sections of this chapter, and the role of individual perception and actions within institutional practice. I will now conclude this section with a brief exploration of the interplay of the relationships of trust.

8.4.4 The centrality of trust

Within the contrasting approaches to public transparency is further evidence that the professional perception of how communication will be received underlies the decision of how, or if, transparency is attempted. That this is present among all three areas of trust relationships — namely the professional team, stakeholders, and the public — indicates its centrality for understanding how transparency created. Put simply, trust in the audience's knowledge is essential for the creation and shaping of transparency.

The core component of trust begins with the team. It arises from practitioner certainty about their combined knowledge and expertise. Within the case studies this arose from a shared subscription to the purpose and values of the project, specialist knowledge of museum sub-practices, and the potential to generate further skills and expertise. Other relationships radiated outwards from the project team. Where trust already existed, through previous contact or subscription to institutional mission, practitioners felt confident to make visible and generate understanding of their work. Where trust was more tentative, through a likely but uncertain subscription to the shared vision of the museum, transparency was modified to avoid jeopardising that limited trust. Where trust was absent, either through previous experience or practitioner perception, transparency acts did not occur.

What remains less clear is how *consciously* these choices were made by practitioners. It is easy to identify the conscious actions as they created the communication acts witnessed in this research. It is more difficult to identify whether silences arose from a conscious or subconscious basis. However, such it is clear that silences arose from practitioner and institutional preconceptions and experience.

Whether they are revelations of conscious or unconscious thought, both the transparencies and silences evidence an assessment of risk. Specifically, revelation to trusted audiences was perceived to pose less reputational risk than to the unknown and unpredictable audiences. Therefore, perceived risks emanate from the nature of each professional-audience relationship. This is an important aspect of disposal transparency, and it is pertinent to explore this third component of transparent practice more deeply.

8.5 The consideration of risk

The diverse relationships of trust demonstrate that risk underpins transparency: in communicating solely with audiences for whom a positive reaction was predicted, practitioners acted with a deep concern to protect their museum's reputation. Such risk management is an important finding of this research as it provides firm evidence, rather than anecdotal, that risk underlies decision-making in museum practice. This is perhaps unsurprising, for as seen in Chapter Two risk is evident within the need to 'maintain public trust' advocated by the *Code of Ethics* and the *Disposal Toolkit*. Indeed, the centrality of risk to disposal transparency was voiced by participants among the *Profusion in Museums* project (Fredheim et al. 2018). But words are not actions: this research has moved beyond the notion of a generalised culture of risk *aversion* (Marstine 2020, 10) to demonstrate that risk *assessment* can be a positive transformative process. Further, the revelation of this research is that 'risk' is not a tangible entity. Rather, risk is the *perception* of how an action will be received by others. From this nuanced position it is essential to identify what the *perceived* risks are within disposal transparency, and understand whether they are likely, anticipated, or feared.

First, this research has confirmed the biggest perceived risk within disposal transparency is to institutional reputation; of damaging the trust in which a museum is held by its audiences. This stance of self-protectionism reflects the nature of museums as public bodies funded by social subscription. But I propose the risk is not to the reputation *per se*, but that future funding and therefore the long-term survival of the institution may be jeopardised.

By contrast, the risk to personal reputational damage was of less concern for both the survey respondents and the case study participants. And yet the fear of being judged by future colleagues remained within participants' words and actions. It was most clearly seen in the Plymouth team choosing not to share their work with the national sector. Within the museum sector and its focus on institutional public duty, the research participants found it more acceptable to express concern for their institution than themselves. But I suggest that in common with institutional reputational risk, the risk to individuals is not one of reputation *per se* but of its consequences: the potential loss of employment.

To better understand these risks it is necessary to identify their origin. The risk of reputational damage from disposal arises from the betrayal of the duty to safeguard socially important objects, as specified in the definition of 'the museum'. As evidenced by the survey participants, many practitioners upheld the view that disposal jeopardises a museum's status as a knowledge and memory repository. But to understand the risk to reputation it is necessary to challenge the assumption that this is also the dominant *public* view. For this research demonstrates the predicted 'outsider' response is too simplistic. The public and stakeholder visibility enabled by the case study museums did not result in a negative public response to disposal, and in Plymouth generated some positive responses to the idea for rationalisation. I therefore propose it is the enduring *professional perception* of the *predicted* public response that causes disposal opacity.

Developing this proposal this research offers two important findings about risk. First, the professional perception of an audience's attitude directly shapes how the risk of disposal is assessed and acted upon. As demonstrated within both case studies, the conscious *assessment* of risk originated from the practitioner willingness, or openness,

to attempt transparency. Instead of regarding every audience as potentially hostile, both teams started from a baseline view that each audience had different understandings of the institution, and thus targeted communication was required to ensure when, or if, transparency was enabled. This demonstrates that risk assessment was the professional perception that each audience needed consideration for transparency, with communication as a possible outcome. In this mindset the practitioners demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of professional duty: rather than retaining items in perpetuity, their obligation was to reveal and explain the rationalisation task. This collections management process was undertaken on behalf of their audiences, to achieve their missional goals as institutions of perpetual social memory.

More specifically, and as evidenced within the case studies, where a positive reception was predicted — based on shared understanding and knowledge of the mission, purpose, and functioning of the institution — the risk assessment generated communication. That communication empowered the audience to adopt and integrate new knowledge with minimal jarring to their existing understandings. By contrast, where the audience response was assessed to be of negativity or misunderstanding, visibility was avoided. Such silences typically arose with audiences for whom relationships were new and therefore unpredictable, or founded in other aspects of museum life such as the economic workings of the institution. In other words, in their risk assessments the practitioners found it preferential to communicate with audiences whose positive reception could be confidently predicted. The risk of misunderstanding with that audience, and therefore any damage to reputation or relationship, was reduced. This targeted transparency generated the diverse range of communications evidenced within the case studies. Their actions demonstrate that risk assessment and the consequent outcomes must be tailored to the specifics of each institution and audience.

The second finding is that considered risk management can generate successful transparency. This is important as it can temper the feelings of fear expressed by practitioners. Neither case study museum had previously attempted disposal on the scale evidenced within their projects; it was therefore a 'risky' process with the

potential for audience misunderstanding and professional criticism. But by creating visibility to their practices the teams successfully managed this risk. Through their targeted communications each museum demonstrated disposal could be understood as a positive and necessary practice. Therefore, by exposing their actions to a closely controlled risk of reputational damage they proved the benefits of disposal transparency. The simplest of these benefits was that the transparency revealed hidden practices and made them accessible and understandable to various audiences. But a more nuanced reading is to realise that in doing so, the transparency confirmed the centrality of shared social value to the mission and functioning of the institution. This was seen, for example, at Plymouth in the confirmation of the collection's centrality to their core local audience.

Some may question whether the practices at Plymouth Museum truly demonstrate this successful assessment of risk, given the absence of disposal from the accessioned collection. Indeed, the London team were more overtly successful in their disposal of thousands of objects without controversy. But it is too simplistic to contrast the museums' use of risk and the number of disposals made. For the Plymouth team achieved many of their project goals, including disposal of unaccessioned items from the storeroom, gathering object information, and uncovering a public passion for the collection. The weakness in the Plymouth scenario was the mismatched vision for the museum held by the practitioners and governing body. Rather than a transparency failure, this reiterates that the actions of the receiver cannot be predicted, even when the risks are assessed as minimal or manageable.

Therefore, a practitioner acceptance of risk and the subsequent actions affect the relationships of trust between museum and audience. Many of the explored relationships were deepened. For example, in London the sectoral transparency demonstrated an object's social value outside of the museum context, and caused other practitioners and sectoral bodies to accept this challenging understanding of object use. In Plymouth, the museum deepened its relationship with local residents by openly welcoming their contributions to the museum as a knowledge repository. Rather than causing reputational damage each museum used transparency to strengthen relationships with its core audiences.

Further, both museums demonstrate that considered risk management can positively affect internal relationships and practice, and generate institutional change. In both case studies, the knowledge and skills generated through transparency were incorporated into institutional policies and procedures. This was most evident in Plymouth, as discussed in Chapter Six, where the innovative epistemology became encapsulated within the new collections management policy. In turn, this unanticipated outcome reinforces the view that challenging perceptions of risk can bring significant positive outcomes.

The overarching conclusion to be drawn from this new understanding of assessing risk is that enabling transparency does not cause a disposal process to fail. Both case studies clearly demonstrate that the risk of disposal transparency does not arise from the disposal act itself, but from how that action will be perceived. Through a reflexive identification of audiences and their nuanced understanding of the museum, and the associated risks to reputation thereby envisaged, transparency can generate deeper understanding and support for the institution. It can also strengthen internal professional practices.

Further, what the two case studies most importantly demonstrate is the necessary separation in practitioner minds of 'transparency' from 'disposal': that they are separate concepts requiring separate actions. Disposal is a process to remove objects from a museum. Transparency is an act to reveal or hide those actions. Whether disposal is perceived as a risk arises from the practitioners' perception of their audiences. In turn, 'risk' is not an inherently negative concept. The awareness, assessment and management of perceived risks can generate successful transparency acts which in turn bring significant benefits to museum and audience alike.

8.6 The transparency triad: relationship, trust, and risk

What is here proposed is the necessary separation of 'disposal' from 'transparency': one a museum practice, and the other a process of communication. How these elements combine to generate the culture of secrecy is the topic of this thesis. As the technical process of disposal is well-guided it is not necessary to examine it further. My task now is to attempt a new theoretical understanding of how the constituent

elements of transparency combine to shape its practice. Specifically, how do relationships, trust, and risk interact to create transparency?

I propose that the three elements of relationships, trust, and risk form a 'transparency triad' (Figure 65). At the centre of the trio is the museum practice which needs to be made transparent. Within this research the central element is the disposal process. Each component of the triad contains nuances specific to the nature and context of the core process to be revealed. I propose it is the practitioner consideration of these triad elements that represents the 'open and honest' attitude dominant in the parlance of transparency. Indeed I have evidenced 'openness' and 'honesty' to be the reflexive mindset found throughout this research. This consideration requires practitioners to assess their perceptions of each triad aspect, and how they affect each other within the context of the central core task. Each aspect needs to be considered: relationships can be identified, the nature of trust can be assessed, and specific risks identified. The result is a considered and targeted communication about the central core practice: this is 'transparency'.

Further, this research evidences the uniqueness of the transparency triad to each museum, its constituent practitioners, and the core process. This is not merely a theoretical observation but an important reality. For it is this uniqueness that means there is no single transparency method to be adopted across the sector. Rather, the different relationships, trusts, and associated risks necessitate reflection by individual practitioners, and these develop within the institution at that point in time and in that context. Transparency is not imposed by outside sources. Openness and honesty, through internal self-reflection, is a conscious process for generating transparency. It is the failure to consider one or more of the triad components that generates practitioner fear, as that element will encompass unknowns and perceived risks. In turn it causes the silences evidenced in the real world of disposal transparency.
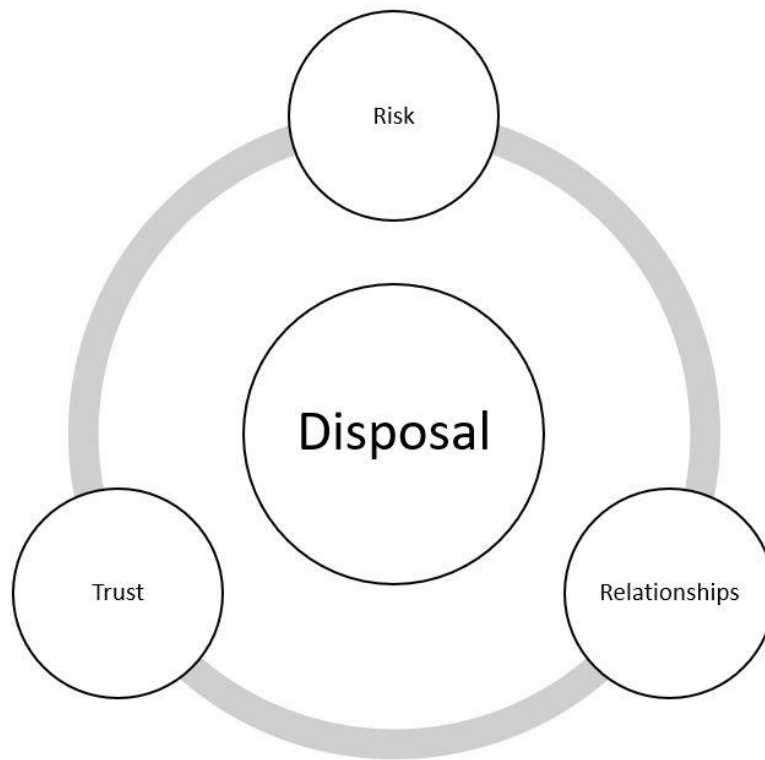
Figure 65: The proposed transparency triad, in which the core museum activity or process is successfully revealed through practitioner consideration of the three encompassing elements.

Further, the transparency triad will be unique to *each* disposal process undertaken by an institution. Whether a stand-alone project or an embedded collections management practice, every disposal process will necessitate considered thought and action relevant to the specific context. For each act of transparency alters the museum's relationships with audiences and will cause the associated trust and risks to change. These three linked aspects are therefore constantly shifting, and practitioners need to adjust their actions accordingly.

This, then, is arguably the most important finding of this research – that 'disposal transparency' is not primarily concerned with disposal, but how museums regard and understand transparency. For the practice of disposal can be placed at the core of this triad. But it is merely one of many museum tasks that require visibility and explanation. Instead of becoming fixated on the multifaceted values and significance of an object, which leads to stymied practice and fear, 'disposal transparency' asks

individual practitioners to assess themselves in relationship with other people: with their professional colleagues as an institution, with the wider museum sector, and with the diverse audiences for whom they have a duty to serve. Therefore, ultimately 'disposal transparency' is how practitioners perceive communication: whether required or merely desirable; whether possible or impossible. Here is situated the clear divide and choice between visibility or opacity to the professional practice of disposal.

8.7 Chapter summary

In this chapter I have explored the intricacies of disposal transparency, and suggested similarities between 'disposal' and 'transparency': both are professional obligations; each is complex and nuanced; and each begins with an idea that consequently shapes practice. But rather than representing a single entity I have proposed the need to separate the elements and address them individually. To accept this proposal is to begin the journey towards transparency creation.

The starting point for disposal is a vision for a museum's collection; an idea which generates the practical process of assessment of human-object relationships. The disposal process is encumbered with professional duty and expectation within a temporal complexity to consider the past, the present, and the future. Contemporary practitioners are the only ones within professional history to be offered clear guidance for undertaking disposal, and the ethical approval for its necessity. I have demonstrated the relevance of disposal, and it is imperative that the profession attempts to communicate this among themselves and their audiences.

For transparency, the starting point is an inclination to be 'open and honest' with audiences. But the process to achieve transparency is less clear and lacks a sectoral guide. Indeed, this research has demonstrated that a step-by-step procedure is not possible. Enabling visibility and understanding combine the complexities of institutional context and mission, the pragmatics of reality versus perceived ideals, and an intricate interplay between practitioner and audiences. Transparency is no less a process of assessment and review than the disposal process. But instead of assessing and reviewing the human-object relationship, transparency requires the assessment and review of human-human relationships.

Within disposal and transparency is a further similarity, as both require the inclination of the individual practitioner to attempt it. It is individuals who make and enact decisions to create visibility and understanding. In this they do not work alone, and their mindset and vision require institutional support, without which their actions may themselves be suppressed. Both disposal and transparency also require a willingness for self-reflection, to understand and assess the relationships between different communities and groups of individuals, so to meet their needs. It is here that is found the dominant risk within the disposal transparency process: of misunderstanding leading to mistrust, or vice versa. By identifying the possible tensions associated with each audience group the nature of 'risk' is changed. No longer a generic excuse for opacity it becomes a catalyst for deeper relationship between museum and audience.

While there can be no procedural manual for creating disposal transparency this research offers potential for sectoral development. First, in the proposition of the transparency triad: of relationship, trust, and risk in an inter-relational dialogue. I assert the application of this insight to practices other than disposal. For at the heart of this triad can be placed any museum practice, whether it be a 'controversial' topic such as repatriation, representation, or sponsorship; or more prosaic topics such as opening hours or shop stock. Transparency does not apply solely to perceived 'difficult' topics. But when practitioners perceive a topic might be understood in that way the triad offers a prompt to address each area from a mindset of openness: to assess the nature of the relationship with each audience, to assess the trust which is extant or potential, and to assess the risk, *and benefits*, of communication.

Chapter 9: Conclusions

"We shall not cease from exploration, And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started, And know the place for the first time."

(T.S. Eliot)

9.1 Arriving where we started

This research began with a moment of insight. In removing a typewriter from a museum store and placing it on a skip I experienced feelings of hope and fear, of certainty and doubt. Through the long research journey to this concluding chapter, I have demonstrated those feelings echoed a common practitioner experience of curatorially-motivated disposal. Underpinning this academic research was my professional certainty of three things: that curatorially-motivated disposal practice was occurring in the UK sector; that it was necessary; and that enabling transparency to it was an essential component of ethical professional practice. This research has confirmed all of these to be accurate insights to contemporary practice.

Throughout this research I sought to explore the practitioner experience of disposal transparency, as reality and ideal. I let museum professionals speak of their experiences and vision and have learnt from their insightful words. I aimed to explore the practitioner understanding of 'transparency', and its perceived relevance to the disposal process. What was the interplay between people and communication in creating or preventing transparency? And what barriers prevented its successful creation?

My answers are complex and nuanced, but they contain two simple findings. First, I have conclusively demonstrated that curatorially-motivated disposal is occurring within the UK. Second, I have demonstrated that disposal processes are commonly hidden from all but a few audiences. These are not radical discoveries. But they are the basis from which to step towards my goal of aiding sectoral progress.

9.2 Knowing the place for the first time

My survey and two case study museums have provided detailed insights of reality and perception. Importantly, the case studies demonstrate that curatorially-motivated disposal is an acceptable collections management tool: by revealing their processes neither museum received negative reaction or outcomes, but instead developed stronger and more trusting relationships with different audiences. These relationships have the potential to be of lasting benefit to the museum and its workings. More emphatically, both museums demonstrate the significant benefits of making disposal visible to audiences. The evidenced subtleties are within the choice of audience, and the messages conveyed.

Within every potential transparency *goal* is a plethora of communication options. Within every transparency *action* is a communication in verbal, written or physical form. I have demonstrated that these transparency acts between a museum and its audiences are complicated, nuanced, and institutionalised processes. Each utilises previous practices, relationships, and trust. Within disposal, the case study participants demonstrated communication is selected and utilised for micro and macro interactions with audiences at every step before, during, and after the disposal process. It is the practitioner awareness of the available communication modes and the intended audience that generates successful visibility to, and understanding of, the disposal process. It is the practitioner positive inclination to generate transparency that creates it. It is their institutional framework which shapes the format and selection of audiences for those transparency acts.

I propose that disposal transparency is like many 'problems' in life. It is sometimes more a *perception* than a reality. Acknowledging and accepting that a problem exists is the first step towards its resolution. Tackling the 'problem' of disposal transparency requires practitioners to embrace a reflexive mindset. Indeed, this is advocated within the sectoral guidance but has yet to filter into real-world practice. In this process of consideration, the first step is to realise that 'disposal' and 'transparency' are separate concepts. The case study museums demonstrated that considering these entities separately enables practitioners to identify opportunities for change.

Concurrent with the view of disposal transparency as a 'problem' are the barriers to its successful creation. Within this research I have evidenced that time, staff, and money affect the ability to enact disposal in a transparent manner. But I firmly refute the common assertion that resource issues are the *cause* of disposal opacity. Rather, I suggest it is the mindset — a lack of vision of what is possible — that causes the hiding of disposal practice. I have witnessed in some practitioners a defensive mindset which seeks to blame anyone but themselves — the public for their negative reaction; the institutional context; or future practitioners for their possible acts of judgement and condemnation. But I firmly propose these projections stem from practitioners themselves.

Further, I have demonstrated the temporal dislocation of subjective object valuing has perpetuated the practitioner culture of fear and grounded some practitioners in a static position of indecision. I propose these fears arise from a fear of taking risks: of exposing their subjective own object value assessments to critique; or of causing damage to their museum's reputation.

Within the complex personal and professional emotions provoked by the disposal process, practitioners thereby seek to blame external pressures or institutional failings for their individual failure to create transparency. But the insights presented by my case study participants have demonstrated that fear can be used as the justification *for* transparency. Fear can inspire emboldened practice. The starting point for action is individual reflection and a positivity for what *could* be. The starting point is an inclination to be brave.

For one of the most important discussions within this research has been the exploration of risk management and its role in enabling successful transparency. Against the practitioner fears — of reputational damage, of judgement, of making a 'wrong' decision, of failing visitors and audiences — I have evidenced that positivity arises by addressing these fears, of naming and acknowledging the risks. In acting with consideration, optimism, and clarity of purpose, my case study participants demonstrated transparency can be created without negative repercussions or reprisals. Indeed, being 'open and honest' can strengthen relationships with a museum's audiences, stakeholders, and the wider profession. The project teams in

Plymouth and London evidence that risk is not to be feared or avoided, but that a practitioner mindset of hope and optimism can move practices from risk aversion to risk adoption.

For transparency to be successful also requires reflexive assessment about the situation of the speaker and the recipient: of the individual professional, their museum, and the particularities of the audience. This acknowledges the similarities and differences between the speaker and the recipient, and reflects the knowledge, skills, and experiences of each party. As evidenced throughout this research, for those with a shared commonality, the acts of visibility and understanding will be easier to instigate and more successful. The starting point for interaction is one of trust and understanding, and the potential risks are thereby minimised. By contrast, for audiences and speakers from divergent foundations, the prevention of visibility can be a legitimate museum practice. For transparency does not seek full engagement with every potential audience member. Opacity may have a place within ethical practice. But to be truly ethical, this opacity must be proactive: not a default state of unconscious inaction, but a considered and conscious choice in response to a valid assessment of risk.

9.3 Disposal within the Transparent Communication Model

With these conclusions in mind, and in accordance with my research aim to help alter real world practice, it is fitting to explore how these findings could be applied more widely. It is therefore time to return to the Transparent Communication Model which I proposed in Chapter Four, and which underpinned my research strategy.

Importantly, I reiterate that there is no single method for creating transparency to disposal, or indeed any other museum practice. I propose that my Transparent Communication Model offers a way for practitioners to *consider* the necessary components. It presents a tool for reflexive risk assessment, by identifying a museum's audiences and the areas of shared knowledge or commonality. From this basis it offers a choice of possible communication modes, whose conscious selection and utilisation is based on existing, and potential, relationships with audiences.

9.3.1 Museum Communities

As witnessed throughout this research, people are the first component for consideration within transparency creation. Within this research I have witnessed the existence of my three delineated Communities in real world practice – Profession, Public and Stakeholder (Chapter Four, Figure 17). The demarcations are based on commonalities of knowledge, expertise, and skill.

To acknowledge subtleties of knowledge and expertise I also proposed the existence of smaller subgroups. I suggested their membership was not fixed, and an individual could belong to different subgroups according to situational context. This proposal has also been evidenced within this research. The case studies demonstrated the dynamism of knowledge within these groups. For example, in London, members of different professional groups brought knowledge which was acquired and absorbed by the project team and became *new* shared knowledge (Figure 66). While this illustration presents an overly simplified example, it demonstrates the process of knowledge creation that occurs within each Community of Practice.
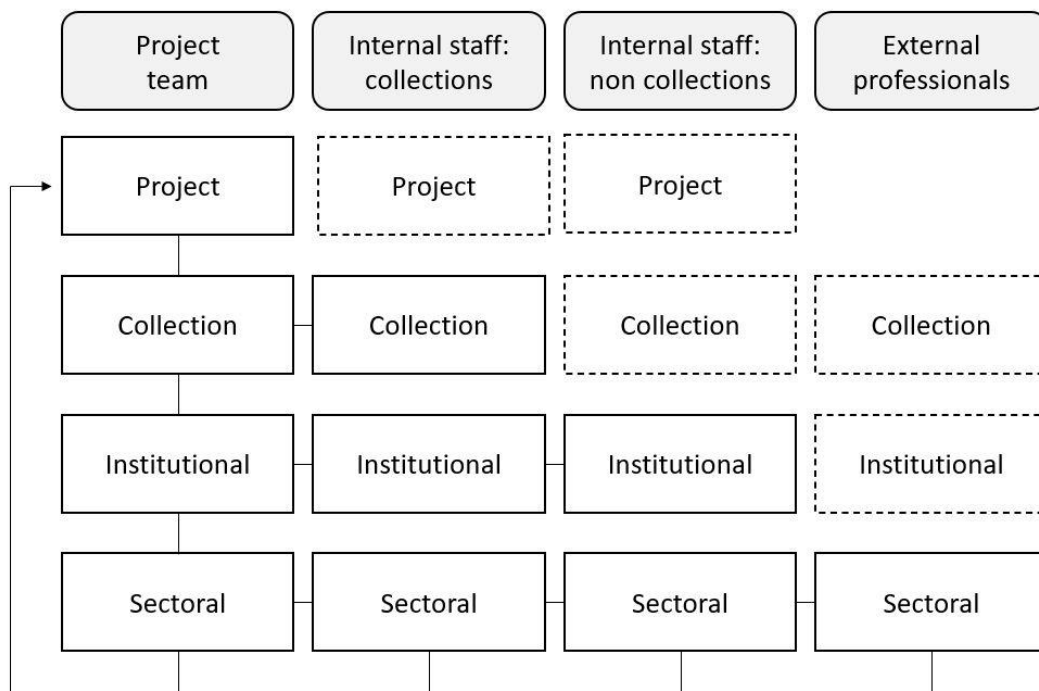
Figure 66: The creation of shared knowledge by the Museum of London Professional community (dashed lines represent partial or historical knowledge).

However, my findings suggest community subgroups may be more nebulous than I envisioned and may arise for limited durations in specific situations. For example, within the Plymouth project arose a community of 'students' with shared experience and skills learnt through the project. As an aside, it is interesting to imagine that these dispersed groups themselves form and shape new subgroups in new contexts. As the students disperse into new roles and careers, the skills and expertise they developed in one small group can take root in new ones and grow in strength. In this way, the seeds of disposal transparency may disperse and plant themselves in any Professional community context.

To demonstrate the real-world application of my model to disposal transparency it is possible to propose some of the 'information packets' held by the Professional community, and map them against those held by the Public (Figure 67). While the Professional community contains more, and wider, aspects of knowledge than the Public community, there are overlaps and commonalities which provide a basis for shared understanding.

While this appears purely theoretical it is important to emphasise the relevance for sectoral use. For it is these commonalities that generate the trust-relationships discussed in the preceding chapter. Such commonalities enable the speaker to confidently attempt communication. For the recipient audience, areas of shared understanding, or a willingness to develop them, enables a communicated message to be successfully received. In real-world use these Community groupings thereby provide a basis to consciously identify potential audiences for transparency actions. Further, identifying areas of commonality and difference identifies the possible risks: areas of potential misunderstanding, or where understanding is not possible as knowledge is currently absent.
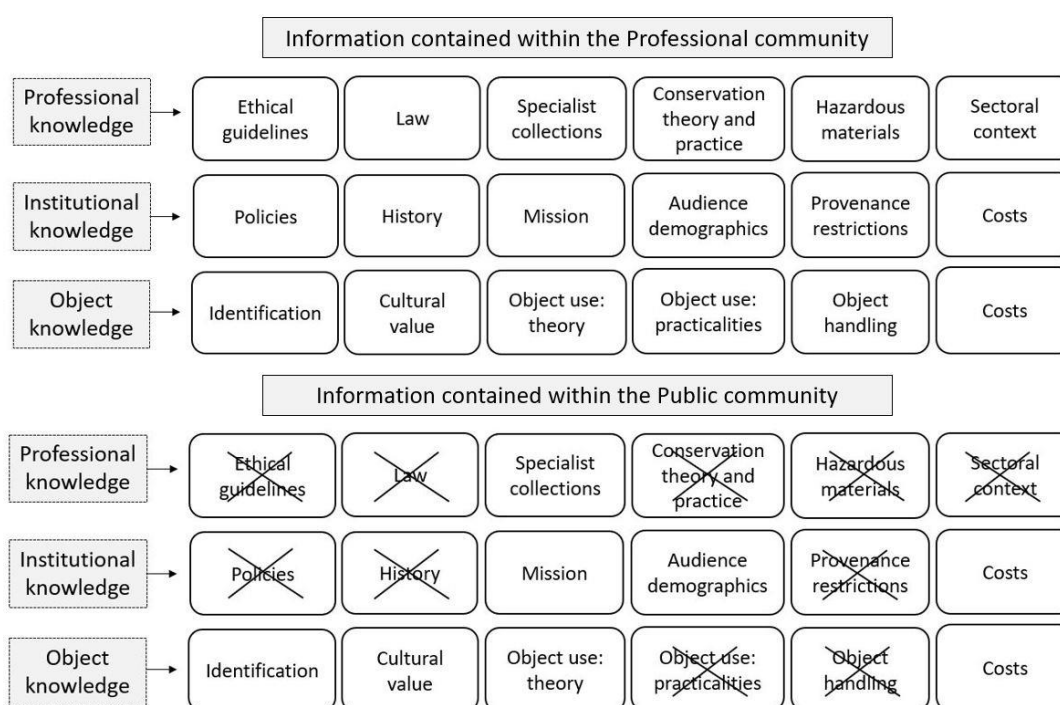
Figure 67: 'Packets' of information required to undertake disposal. Some areas are shared between the Professional and Public communities, but the Profession also holds knowledge and expertise unique to their community.

When turning to the Stakeholder community, the demarcation of subgroup communities is more nuanced and my findings suggest that the Stakeholder community is less well defined than I proposed. For example, the grouping together of 'Governing body' and 'Object donors' within this community may appear erroneous: they each have a formal stake in the museum, but their specific information packets are very different. However, it is both the *knowledge* held and the *relationship* with the museum which are defining factors for Communities. So, while the 'Governing body' hold similar information to the Professional community, they are distanced from the daily practicalities of museum work; they lack daily lived experience. Similarly, 'Object donors' lack detailed knowledge of museums, but have a vested interest in museums which separates them from the Public community. These blurred boundaries reinforce the proposal that for real world application it is necessary to look closely at

the unique context and definition for each audience group, and the identification of any audience which exists solely within the local context.

I therefore propose the grouping of Communities and subgroups offers practitioners a guide to potential audiences. A conscious awareness of these will enable practitioners to identify their target recipients, by stepping into the reflexive mindset advocated throughout this research.

9.3.2 Communication Spectrum

Having identified the intended audiences it is necessary to utilise the second part of the Transparent Communication Model. The Communication Spectrum contains the possible modes, or methods, for creating transparency. In Chapter Four I proposed this as a scale, with communication blocked at one extreme, and shared decision-making at the other (Chapter Four, Figure 18). The Spectrum therefore presents the options for creating dashboard transparency through visibility, or radical transparency through understanding.

Importantly, my research clearly validates my proposal that transparency is more than a single communication trait. Within the survey and case studies were witnessed a plethora of communications which were selected according to the target audience and underlying intent. For example, at the Museum of London the team chose to prevent social media for digital audiences, demonstrated silence with financial donors, informed the sector through conferences, consulted with a former curator, engaged in dialogue within the project team, and enabled shared decision-making with object recipients (Figure 68). At Plymouth Museum the team blocked information to the wider profession, enacted silence for financial donors, informed visitors through exhibition, consulted visitors through surveys, engaged in dialogue with focus groups, and shared their decision-making with object donors (Figure 69). These illustrations do not demonstrate the full number and range of communication outputs undertaken by each museum but are a simplified representation of the enacted transparency process. While they present some similarities such as the silence for financial donors, the overwhelming evidence is of communication modes being chosen according to the local situation. Transparency is therefore a multifaceted programme of communication choices selected to either enable or prevent visibility and understanding.

Disposal transparency through multimodal communication: Museum of London

Financial donors

Former curator: conversation

Object donors: removals

-1	0	1	2	3	4
Blocking	**Silence**	**Informing**	**Consulting**	**Dialogue**	**Shared decision-making**
←	-	-	-	-	→

Digital audiences: Social media

External professionals: conferences

Project Team: meetings
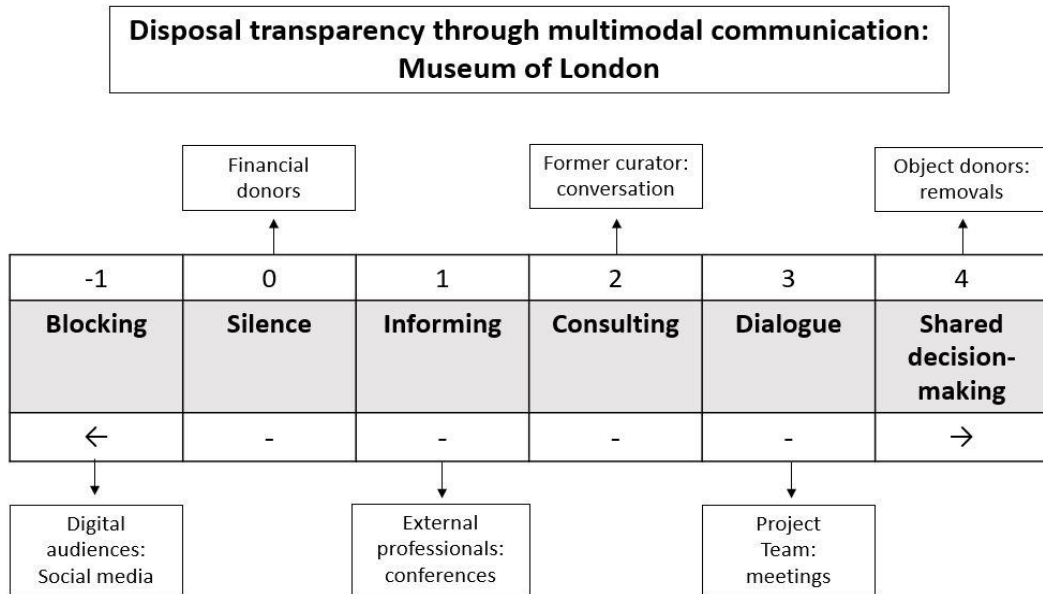
Figure 68: Transparent communication as evidenced by the Museum of London.

Disposal transparency through multimodal communication: Plymouth City Museum & Art Gallery

Financial donors

Visitors: survey

Object donors: removals

-1	0	1	2	3	4
Blocking	**Silence**	**Informing**	**Consulting**	**Dialogue**	**Shared decision-making**
←	-	-	-	-	→

External professionals

Visitors: exhibition

Local communities: focus groups
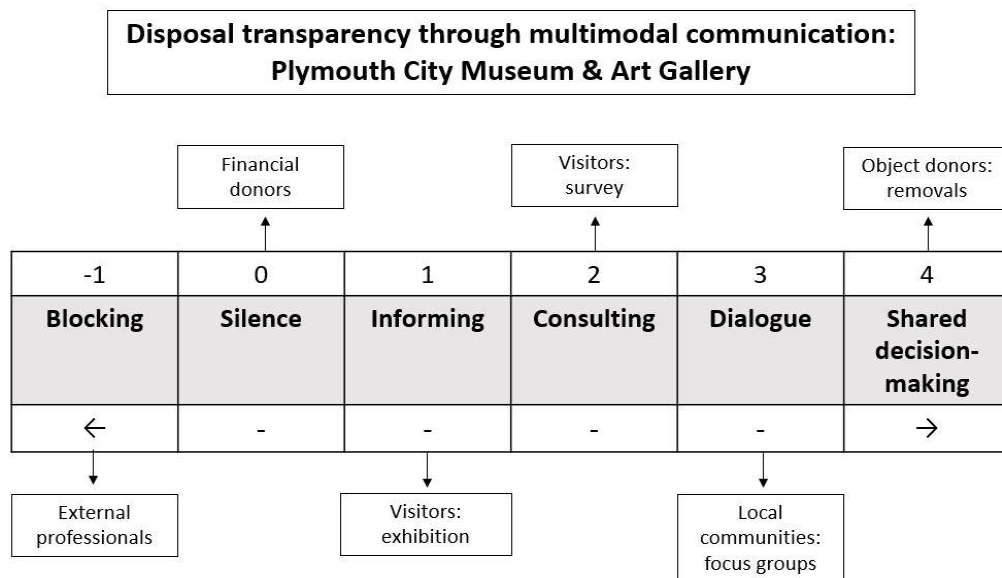
Figure 69: Transparent communication as evidenced by Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery.

Within these modes it is the difference between 'Blocking' and 'Silence' that merits further comment, for this separation was not clearly discernible in the research data. For example, while the Plymouth team spoke of their conscious blocking of information from the wider sector, they did not verbalise the absence of communication with financial donors. It is therefore impossible to identify whether the opacity arose from a conscious or unconscious decision. I propose it is within the areas of silence that practitioners need to undertake most conscious reflexive assessment, for these silences may conversely speak volumes about their own preconceptions. Moving from silence to a consciously chosen mode of visibility could challenge preconceptions and offer an opportunity to improve that practitioner-audience relationship, or generate a new one founded on openness and trust.

The research also demonstrated two important areas which were missing from my original proposal. Firstly, the role of physical communication – the subtleties of non-verbal or non-written information revelation. For museums this is most clearly witnessed in exhibition and display. It is temptingly easy to focus on the language of texts and labels as information conveyors, but information is also transmitted through the selection of objects on display, the format in which they are organised and mounted, or the location and association of props within the gallery space. The importance of these aspects has been evidenced within this research, and indeed they are themselves a vast area of museological thought. They therefore merit inclusion within the choice of communication modes (Figure 70).

The second revelation was the role of the audience: for transparency to occur successfully requires the recipient to be willing to engage. But a failure of message reception does not necessarily represent a failure of ethical practice: if undertaken in a thorough and conscious process it might be sufficient to *attempt* transparency. For I reiterate the important point that transparency does not mean the involvement of every person within every audience. However, within my advocated reflexive mindset it is important to consider *why* the communication process failed, and whether a different mode or message would be better received.

**Amended Transparent Communication Model:
Examples of Modes of Communication**

-1	0	1	2	3	4
Blocking	Silence	Informing	Consulting	Dialogue	Shared decision-making
←	-	-	-	-	→

- Report
- Press release
- Exhibition
- Presentation
- Training
- Social media

and:
- Gallery space
- Object selection
- Object display
- Props
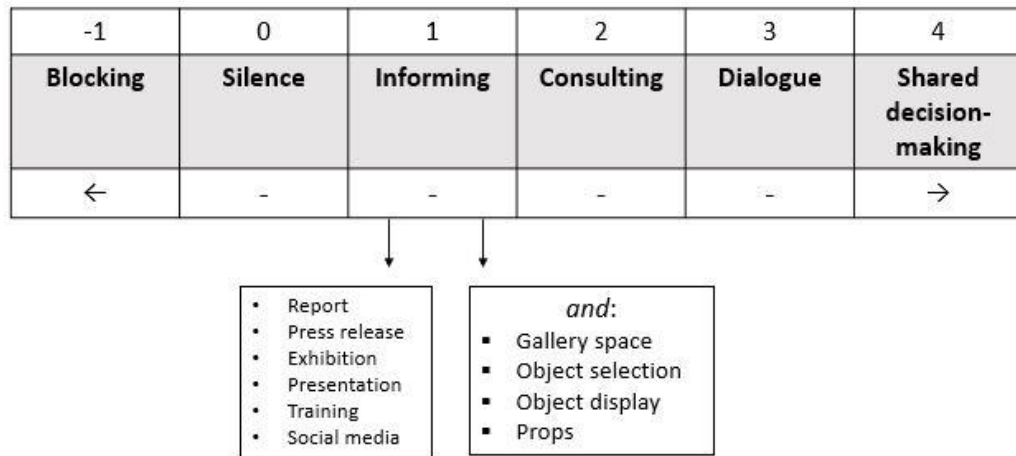
Figure 70: Amended Modes of Communication, to include the physicality of museum work.

My proposed Transparent Communication Model is therefore relevant and applicable in the real world. It offers practitioners a tool for considering how they enable visibility and understanding of their disposal process. The starting point is the practitioner, or the collaborative practitioner team, who identifies their audience subgroups. The process encompasses a conscious identification of the nature of museum-audience relationships, and asks practitioners to assess their attitudes towards those groups. From this can be identified the perceived risks of communication with each group.

Indeed, it is apparent that the Transparent Communication Model has application beyond the disposal context: for in similarity to the transparency triad proposed in the preceding chapter, it can be utilised for any museum process in which transparency is necessary, or desired.

9.4 Looking to the future

Throughout this research I have evidenced reflexivity to be the foundation from which ethical practices arise. It is this mindset which embodies the 'open and honest' elements so frequently euphemised for transparency. That this understanding of

transparency is relevant for *any* museum process is, I hope, a simple proposal. The relevance and its application are essential to collections management processes from acquisition to disposal, to object use from conservation to interpretation, and to relationships with audiences from representation to censorship. But transparency is not only relevant to areas which are commonly deemed as 'controversial'. This model of transparency is as useful for explaining the brand of tea sold in the museum café, as for deciding which teapot should be disposed of from the collections storeroom.

My Transparent Communication Model offers a starting point for practical change within the sector, helping practitioners identify their unique audiences and relationships, and develop the considered choice of communication practices required for transparency, and thereby deepen relationships. In moving away from risk *aversion* towards risk *adoption* the sector can become more risk *savvy*: removing the dominance of fear by taking considered and knowledgeable control of situations. As trusted public institutions, museums already have a firm basis to make this transition. Now, rather than fearing jeopardising their relationships of trust, museums have a chance to strengthen their position as guardians of social memory. This only requires a little self-confidence, a little reassurance from colleagues, and a little boldness to enact the open and honest attitude many professionals desire to embody. In failing to take risks museums truly risk failing their audiences.

Arising from this paradigm shift emerges a significant area for future research: a coherent, and reflexive, exploration of removal processes from museums. For as highlighted in Chapter Two, curatorially-motivated disposal is just one action through which objects may leave a museum collection. Surrounding many of these processes — whether formalised process of disposal, repatriation and restitution, or informal processes of theft, misplacement, damage, or decay — are practitioner feelings of fear, guilt, and loss. These resonate with the risk aversion and self-protection that currently surrounds curatorially-motivated disposal. Telling the united historiography of museum loss is essential to help the sector address contemporary issues and practices, and move forward to develop sustainable transparent practices.

For the fundamental truism evidenced by this research is that ethical practice considers people and perceptions and ethical quandaries arise from conflicting views.

Within museum practice these subjectivities of personally perceived reality will always be present, for they are intricately intertwined in human relationships with the material world, and with each other. As museum professionals, our personal subjectivities are enmeshed in the present day as we look backwards and forwards to locate museums, and our practitioner selves, within social history.

But these subjectivities must not remain the justification for keeping disposal practices hidden. Disposal need not remain in the dark. It can, and should, be made visible by bringing our thinking and actions into the light. Indeed, disposal need not remain a bland grey of ethical conflict, but can be coloured brightly through practitioner action, so its vividity can be seen far and wide. In this way, a fully developed disposal transparency can become a beacon which guides the museum sector towards sustained, and truly, ethical practices. In this new light we will find meaningful and trusting relationships between practitioner, institution, and audiences.

Appendix 1: Survey of Practitioners

Developing transparency of practice within curatorially-motivated disposals

This survey will take approximately 15 -20 minutes.

Who is doing this research?
Jennifer Durrant, PhD Researcher in Museum Studies, University of Leicester

Email: jmd53@le.ac.uk
Supervisors: Dr Janet Marstine and Prof Janet Ulph

Who is this survey for?
This survey is for people who work (paid or voluntary) in the UK museum sector in a role closely related to the collections. These roles could include Curator, Collections Officer, Documentation Officer, Registrar, Manager with responsibility for collections, or a Freelance collections specialist.

What is this survey for?
This survey records attitudes to 'curatorially-motivated disposal' to assess how personal attitudes may affect professional practice. The survey is part of the 'Developing transparency of practice within curatorially-motivated collections disposal' research project, which explores the role of communication in curatorially-motivated disposal practice in UK museums.

What does 'Curatorially-motivated disposal' mean?
This means the permanent removal of an object (accessioned or unaccessioned) from a museum collection, for reasons including lack of relevance, duplication, deterioration or inability to care for the object. These disposals may be undertaken through a formal project, or on a more adhoc basis. Disposal methods can include transfer to another museum or public body, use for handling collection, destruction, recycling or sale (as a last resort). This survey does NOT include disposal with the aim of releasing monetary value from an object (known as 'financially-motivated' disposal).

Will my answers be anonymous?
Yes, your responses will be anonymous and no identifying information will be gathered. For this reason it will not be possible to withdraw from the research once you have completed this survey.

After completion of the survey you will be offered the opportunity to contact me by email, to indicate your willingness to participate further in this research. If you are invited to take part in further research you will be given additional information about your rights and participation.

What will you do with my answers?
This survey data will be analysed for common experiences or themes, with selected data and analysis presented in my PhD thesis and other academic or professional uses. This research is being carried out in accordance with the University of Leicester's Code of Research Ethics, and the information provided in this consent statement.

If you have any questions about the ethical conduct of this research please contact the Museum Studies Research Ethics Officer, Dr Giasemi Vavoula at gv18@le.ac.uk

Thank you,
Jenny Durrant

School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester
jmd53@le.ac.uk

* Required

1. **I consent to take part in this survey and for my data to be used for research purposes** *
   Mark only one oval.

   ( ) Yes

About you

If you work at more than one museum, please think of the museum in which you spend the most time.
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1gZ5WNe7W_Y6GFlc66yS4kS22i...

2. **In which region do you work?** *
   Mark only one oval.

   ( ) England: North West England: North East England: Central

   ( ) England: South West England: South East England: London

   ( ) Scotland

   ( ) Wales

   ( ) Northern Ireland

3. **What is your job title?** *

   _____

4. **Is this role...?** *
   Mark only one oval.

   ( ) Paid

   ( ) Voluntary

   ( ) Freelance

5. **What type of collections do you have responsibility for, or work with, on a regular basis?** *
   Check all that apply.

   [ ] Archaeology (foreign)

   [ ] Archaeology (local)

   [ ] Contemporary Art

   [ ] Costume

   [ ] Decorative Art

   [ ] Fine Art

   [ ] Historic House

   [ ] Industrial, technology, scientific

   [ ] Local or social history

   [ ] Military

   [ ] Numismatics

   [ ] Textiles

   [ ] World Cultures

   [ ] Other: _____

6. **What is your highest level of qualification?** *

   Mark only one oval.

   ( ) Doctorate or above

   ( ) Postgraduate

   ( ) Undergraduate

   ( ) A Level or equivalent

   ( ) GCSE or equivalent

7. https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1gZ5WNe7W_Y6GFlc66yS4kS22i...3**Please indicate your gender** *

   Mark only one oval.

   ( ) Female

   ( ) Male

   ( ) Non-binary

   ( ) Prefer not to say

8. **How long have you worked or been involved in the museum sector?** *

   Mark only one oval.

   ( ) 0-5 years

   ( ) 6-15 years

   ( ) 16-25 years

   ( ) 26+ years

9. **Have you previously worked or volunteered in a library or archive?** *

   Mark only one oval.

   ( ) Yes

   ( ) No

10. **Have you previously worked or volunteered in a commercial art gallery or auction house?** *

    Mark only one oval.

    ( ) Yes

    ( ) No

11. **Are you an individual member of the Museums Association?** *

    Mark only one oval.

    ( ) Yes

    ( ) No

12. **Have you read the Museums Association's "Disposal Toolkit" published in 2014?** *

    Mark only one oval.

    ( ) Yes

    ( ) No

13. **How did you hear about this survey?** *

Check all that apply.

☐ Museum Development Network

☐ Social media (e.g. Twitter)

☐ Subject Specialist Network

☐ Word of mouth / recommendation

☐ Other: _____

About your museum

Please tell me about the museum in which you currently work or volunteer. If you work at more than one museum, please think of the museum in which you spend the most time.

Please remember your answers are anonymous.

14. **What type of museum do you work for?** *

Mark only one oval.

◯ Independent - with paid staff

◯ Independent - no paid staff

◯ Local Authority

◯ University

◯ National

◯ Historic House

◯ Private

15. **Is this museum Accredited?** *

Mark only one oval.

◯ Yes: Full

◯ Yes: Provisional

◯ No: Working towards it

◯ No

16. **Has this museum ever undertaken "curatorially-motivated" disposal? Please choose all that apply.** *

Check all that apply.

☐ Yes: current

☐ Yes: 2014 to 2016

☐ Yes: 2000 to 2013

☐ Yes: 1970s to 1990s

☐ Yes: 1950s to 1960s

☐ Yes: 1900s to 1940s

☐ Yes: before 1900

☐ No

☐ Not sure

17. **Has this museum ever undertaken "financially-motivated disposal" (disposal for the purpose of gaining monetary value)?** *

Check all that apply.

☐ Yes: while I've worked here

☐ Yes: before I worked here

☐ No

☐ Not sure

18. **Do you have any comments about the issues raised in this section?**

_____

_____

_____

_____

Your professional experience of curatorially-motivated disposals

This section asks about your PROFESSIONAL views and experience of curatorially-motivated disposal.

Please remember your responses are anonymous.

19. **Please write three words or phrases which best reflect your professional attitude to curatorially-motivated disposal.** *

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

20. **Have you initiated a curatorially-motivated disposal during your museum career?** *

Check all that apply.

☐ Yes: In current role

☐ Yes: In previous role

☐ No

21. **Have you been involved with a curatorially-motivated disposal during your museum career?** *

Check all that apply.

☐ Yes: In current role

☐ Yes: In previous role

☐ No

22. **If you answered 'yes' to either of the last two questions, did the disposals process include communicating with any of these professional groups?** *

Check all that apply.

	Group was not involved	INFORMATION SHARING (e.g. press release, social media, display)	CONSULTATION (e.g. Survey, interviews)	DIALOGUE (e.g. community panels, focus groups	SHARED DECISION-MAKING (e.g. nominated representatives	Not applicable – I have not been involved
Internal museum staff: Collections	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Internal museum staff: Non-Collections	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
External professional contacts	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

23. **Did the disposals process include communicating with any of these public groups?** *

Check all that apply.

	Group was not involved	INFORMATION SHARING (e.g. press release, social media, display)	CONSULTATION (e.g. Survey, interviews)	DIALOGUE (e.g. community panels, focus groups	SHARED DECISION-MAKING (e.g. nominated representatives	Not applicable – I have not been involved
Visitors	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Local Communities	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Online audiences	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Journalists	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

24. **Did the disposals process include communicating with any of these stakeholder groups?** *

Check all that apply.

	Group was not involved	INFORMATION SHARING (e.g. press release, social media, display)	CONSULTATION (e.g. Survey, interviews)	DIALOGUE (e.g. community panels, focus groups	SHARED DECISION-MAKING (e.g. nominated representatives	Not applicable – I have not been involved
Governing body	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Funding bodies	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Patrons or financial donors	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Museum volunteers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Friends or Members group	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Object donors	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

25. **Do you have any comments about the issues raised in this section?**

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Your personal thoughts about curatorially-motivated disposal

This section asks questions about your own PERSONAL attitudes to disposal. Please be honest as your responses are anonymous.

Remember "curatorially-motivated disposal" means the selection of objects because they do not meet the needs of the museum's mission, or are damaged or duplicate, or the museum is not able to care for them.

26. **Which of these words best reflect your personal attitude to curatorially-motivated disposals? Please choose all that apply.** *
   Check all that apply.

   ☐   Unnecessary

   ☐   Liberating

   ☐   Difficult

   ☐   Opportunity

   ☐   Revitalising

   ☐   Controversial

   ☐   Essential

   ☐   Boring

   ☐   Unnecessary

27. **In your personal opinion, when making decisions during the disposals process how should these professional groups be involved?** *
   Check all that apply.

	They shouldn't be involved	INFORMATION SHARING (e.g. press release, social media, display)	CONSULTATION (e.g. Survey, interviews)	DIALOGUE (e.g. community panels, focus groups	SHARED DECISION-MAKING (e.g. nominated representatives
Internal museum staff: Collections	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Internal museum staff: Non-collections	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
External professional contacts	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

28. **In your personal opinion, when making decisions during the disposals process how should these public groups be involved?** *

Check all that apply.

	They shouldn't be involved	INFORMATION SHARING (e.g. press release, social media, display)	CONSULTATION (e.g. Survey, interviews)	DIALOGUE (e.g. community panels, focus groups	SHARED DECISION-MAKING (e.g. nominated representatives
Visitors	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Local communities	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Online audiences	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Journalists	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

29. **In your personal opinion, when making decisions during the disposals process how should these stakeholder groups be involved?** *

Check all that apply.

	They shouldn't be involved	INFORMATION SHARING (e.g. press release, social media, display)	CONSULTATION (e.g. Survey, interviews)	DIALOGUE (e.g. community panels, focus groups	SHARED DECISION-MAKING (e.g. nominated representatives
Governing body	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Funding bodies	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Patrons or financial donors	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Museum volunteers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Friends or Members group	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Object donors	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

30. **When is the best time to involve these professional groups?** *

Check all that apply.

	They shouldn't be involved	EARLY PROCESS: object selection	MID PROCESS: provenance and future potential	MID PROCESS: choosing new destination for objects	END OF PROCESS: approval for proposed outcomes
Internal museum staff: Collections	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Internal museum staff: Non-collections	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
External professional contacts	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

31. **When is the best time to involve these public groups?** *

Check all that apply.

	They shouldn't be involved	EARLY PROCESS: object selection	MID PROCESS: provenance and future potential	MID PROCESS: choosing new destination for objects	END OF PROCESS: approval for proposed outcomes
Visitors	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Local communities	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Online audiences	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Journalists	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

32. **When is the best time to involve these stakeholder groups?** *

Check all that apply.

	They shouldn't be involved	EARLY PROCESS: object selection	MID PROCESS: provenance and future potential	MID PROCESS: choosing new destination for objects	END OF PROCESS: approval for proposed outcomes
Governing body	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Funding bodies	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Patrons or financial donors	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Museum volunteers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Friends or Members group	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Object donors	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

33. **In your opinion, which one of these groups is the most important to involve in the disposals process?** *
    Mark only one oval.

    ◯ Internal museum staff: Collections

    ◯ Internal museum staff: Non-collections

    ◯ External professional contacts

    ◯ Visitors

    ◯ Local communities

    ◯ Online audiences

    ◯ Journalists

    ◯ Governing body

    ◯ Funding bodies

    ◯ Patrons or financial donors

    ◯ Museum volunteers

    ◯ Friends or Members group

    ◯ Object donors

34. **Why is this the most important group to involve?** *

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

35. **Are there barriers to involving the public and stakeholders in the disposals process?** *
    Mark only one oval.

    ◯ Yes

    ◯ No

36. **If you answered 'yes', what are the barriers to involvement? Please select all that apply.** *

Check all that apply.

☐ Lack of staff

☐ Lack of time

☐ Lack of training or skills

☐ Lack of other resources (e.g. funding, materials)

☐ Risk to institutional reputation

☐ Risk to personal reputation

☐ Confidentiality

☐ Project team inclination (e.g. public don't need to be involved)

☐ Fear of conflict (e.g. managing different expectations)

☐ Institutional barriers (e.g. management attitudes, internal structures)

☐ Uncertainty about decisions being made (e.g. accurate identification of objects, potential future use)

☐ Public and stakeholders lack knowledge or skills to participate

☐ Uncertainty of legal issues

☐ Uncertainty of ethical issues

☐ There are no barriers

☐ Other: _____

37. **Which one of these barriers is the biggest?** *
   Mark only one oval.

   ( ) Lack of staff

   ( ) Lack of time

   ( ) Lack of training or skills

   ( ) Lack of other resources (e.g. funding, materials)

   ( ) Risk to institutional reputation

   ( ) Risk to personal reputation

   ( ) Confidentiality

   ( ) Project team inclination (e.g. public don't need to be involved)

   ( ) Fear of conflict (e.g. managing different expectations)

   ( ) Institutional barriers (e.g. management attitudes, internal structures)

   ( ) Uncertainty about decisions being made (e.g. accurate identification of objects, potential future use)

   ( ) Public and stakeholders lack knowledge or skills to participate

   ( ) Uncertainty of legal issues

   ( ) Uncertainty of ethical issues

   ( ) There are no barriers

   ( ) Other: _____

38. **How could the sector overcome these barriers?** *

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

39. **When making a final decision about the disposal of an object, whose views are ultimately the most important?** *
   Mark only one oval.

   ( ) Museum professionals

   ( ) Public (visitors, online audiences etc)

   ( ) Stakeholders (governing body, funding bodies, volunteers etc)

40. **Do you have any comments about the issues raised in this section?**

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Final thoughts or comments

Please remember your answers are anonymous.

41. **Do you have any other comments about how museums communicate the disposals process to public and stakeholders, or whether this is a necessary task?**

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Thank you!

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey, your input is essential to my research. I am both a PhD researcher and a museum curator and I hope this research will bridge a gap between theory and practice.

If you would like to be involved in later stages of this research, perhaps for an interview or to offer your institution as a possible case study, please contact me at jmd53@le.ac.uk

Thanks,
Jenny Durrant

School of Museum Studies
University of Leicester

Appendix 2: Visitor Survey

Stories from the Stores, Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery

STORIES FROM THE STORES VISITOR SURVEY
Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery

PLYMOUTH CITY COUNCIL

1. How interesting has this exhibition (Stories from the Stores) been to you today?

☐ Very   ☐ Somewhat   ☐ A Little   ☐ Not at All

2. What is your favourite object on display here?

☐ There is nothing of interest here for me (skip to Q3)

2a. Can you tell us why it is your favourite?

☐ It reminds me of things I used to see and do   ☐ I am interested in those sorts of objects or items
☐ I am interested in how people used to live   ☐ There is no particular reason

2b. Do you have any specific memories of this object you'd like to share with us, or anything else you'd like to add?

3. How important is it for you that the objects on display here are connected with Plymouth and its surrounding areas?

☐ Very   ☐ Somewhat   ☐ A Little   ☐ Not at All

4. Do you like the way the collection is displayed here today?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

4a. If you answered No, please tell us why.

5. Thinking about the information displayed with the collection, is it...?

☐ Too much   ☐ Just right   ☐ Not enough

6. What items, objects or stories would you like to see added to our collection?
Please name two, and tell us why.

☐ I can't name one

6a. ...and WHY is it important for the museum to add your item, object or story to our collection? (tick as many as you like)

☐ It is part of my identity   ☐ It will bring back memories for museum visitors
☐ It is an important part of local history   ☐ It will make people smile
☐ It is a forgotten piece of local history   ☐ I didn't name an item, object or story

7. Does the style and content of this exhibition make you want to visit a museum store?

☐ Yes   ☐ No   ☐ I don't know

8. Did you speak to one of our collection specialists today?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

8a. If you answered Yes, please let us have some feedback: did you find it interesting or helpful or not?

```


```

A little bit about you

Note: all information is completely confidential and will NOT be shared with any other organisation or individual.

9. Where have you travelled from today?

☐ I'm a Plymouth resident
☐ I live in the area, but not in the city
☐ I'm just visiting (making a day trip from home)
☐ I'm on holiday (staying in Plymouth or making a day trip from my holiday accommodation)

10. How old are you?

☐ 15 or under	☐ 35 – 44	☐ 65 - 69
☐ 16 – 17	☐ 45 - 54	☐ 70+
☐ 18 - 24	☐ 55 – 59	☐ Prefer not to say
☐ 25 – 34	☐ 60 – 64	

11. Your gender – are you...?

☐ Male   ☐ Female   ☐ Prefer not to say

12. Are you a person with a disability?

☐ Yes   ☐ No   ☐ Prefer not to say

13. Your ethnicity – are you...?

A. White
☐ British
☐ Gypsy/Traveller
☐ Irish
☐ Other white background (please state)

B. Mixed
☐ White and Black Caribbean
☐ White and Black African
☐ White and Asian
☐ Other mixed background (please state)

C. Asian or Asian British
☐ Bangladeshi
☐ Indian
☐ Pakistani
☐ Other Asian background (please state)

D. Black or Black British
☐ African
☐ Caribbean
☐ Other Black background (please state)

E. Chinese or other ethnic group
☐ Chinese
☐ Any other ethnic group (please state)
☐ Prefer not to say

14. How would you describe your belief, faith or religion?

☐ Buddhist	☐ Jewish	☐ Other religion
☐ Christian	☐ Muslim	☐ No religion
☐ Hindu	☐ Sikh	☐ Prefer not to say

Date: _____   Time: _____

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