

SERVICE UPDATE

<u>Name of Function:</u>	City Growth
<u>Date:</u>	12 January 2024
<u>Title of Update:</u>	Service Update to COM/22/028 - Review of Items Recorded as 'Missing' from Art Gallery & Museums Collections
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UPDATE:

This Service Update outlines progress made reconciling items recorded as 'missing' from the collections at Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums (AAGM). It sets AAGM's progress in the broader context of the UK museum sector, as the sector responds to heightened interest in items categorised as missing in museum collections.

1. Background

AAGM responded to an FOI in 2021 asking for the number of items 'lost' from the museum collections. Officers were able to report exact numbers of items at the time of the enquiry categorised as 'missing.' This is a direct result of extensive and sustained efforts to fully digitise the collections. Subsequently, based on further research officers have re-categorised 'missing' items more accurately as 'stolen,' 'historic loss', or 'unlocated.' In December 2022 officers published 100% of the collections online. The resource is fully accessible to the public and holds location search terms 'stolen', 'historic loss' and 'unlocated' enabling users to access up to date information on the location status of all collection items.

In August 2023, the British Museum (BM) announced the theft of more than 1,500 items from their collection. These items were stolen by a member of staff. The individual is accused of having altered collection records to cover up the thefts. The BM has subsequently embarked on a multi-million-pound plan to fully digitise their collections and understand the status of all items that should be part of their collection.

In October 2023 Glasgow Life reported they are unable to locate a sculpture in the collection worth over £3 million. It is known to have been displayed in 1949 but is part of a list of almost 1750 items in the Glasgow city collections currently unlocated, missing or stolen. The Museum service cites

improvements to and increased centralisation of cataloguing procedures as the reason for being able to list what is missing.

These high-profile cases focussed attention on further cases of items missing from other UK museum collections. Unlike the BM most organisations have not cited criminal activities as the main causal factor, instead responding that poor historic record-keeping, and the enormous on-going journey of digitising these records, means most missing items were more likely to be misplaced in museum stores than stolen.

2. Summary

Responding to the 2021 FOI enquiry officers reported 1577 items categorised as missing in the collections. In February 2022, in COM/22/028 officers reported 1330 items recorded as missing from the collections. In a Service Update in September 2022 officers reported 1235 items recorded as missing. In November 2023 1,209 of the original 1577 items remain categorised as missing.

Table 1 below summarises all progress made to date on the reconciliation of items previously recorded as missing. It shows the items broken down into more accurate categories of 'stolen,' 'historic loss', and 'unlocated.'

Table 1. Missing Items by Category

Report Date	Stolen	Value	Historic Loss	Value	Unlocated	Value	Total items missing	Total Value
02/2022	92	£53,552	713	£106,461	525	£35,430	1,330	£195,443
09/2022	92	£53,552	699	£103,760	444	£32,926	1,235	£190,238
11/2023	93*	£53,652	692	£103,149	424	£32,304	1,209	£189,105

**The increase does not represent a theft from the collections between Sept 2022 and Nov 2023. On checking the detail of all database records for those items listed as 'historic loss', officers were able to re-categorise a bronze replica statue previously recorded as 'historic loss' to 'stolen' from the Art Gallery memorial court circa 1984.*

3. Review of progress

Officers have continued to follow the committee approved work programme (see **Tables 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3**). The focus has been on resolving administrative errors, improving records, reconciling historic losses, and missing items:

- All physical audits of the stored collection reviewing every item in specific locations scheduled to take place by November 2023 have been completed. Officers have reviewed and checked the location of approximately 28,000 items. And have resolved 23%, or 368 of the original

list of 1,577 items recorded as missing from the Museums and Gallery collection.

- The rate of reconciliation has slowed down. This is because the first batch of reconciliation activities (carried out up to September 2022) concentrated on areas of the collection and storage locations most likely to yield results.
- To assist in reconciling remaining historical losses and missing items or confirm their status as no longer in the collection due to disposal, theft or transfer to another organisation, work to catalogue the institutional paper archive has been brought forward from April 2024 (as per the work programme in table 2.3) and commenced in April 2023. To date an estimated 20% is complete*.

**Estimate based on physical volume of the paper archive.*

In addition, officers have:

- Participated in an Internal Audit review of collection management processes in October 2022 led by Chief Internal Auditor. Report AC2305 was presented to Audit, Risk & Scrutiny Committee in February 2023. Overall risk level was assessed as moderate, and assurance assessed as reasonable. The Report recommended officers enact a series of mitigation actions.
- Implemented the mitigating actions recommended by the Internal Auditor. A full assurance mapping exercise on object location security and controls and compliance levels has been completed. Officers have received confirmation from Internal Audit that all report recommendations have been met.
- Published all collection records. These can be accessed via e-museum on the Museums & Gallery website. This gives a clear indication of the current location status of all items in the collection.
<https://emuseum.aberdeency.gov.uk/collections>

4. Resources

The Committee noted the resource implications of accelerating the work required for the audits and the potential to lever in any additional funding to support this work.

Additional support had been available through the Department for Work & Pensions Kickstart and Long-term Unemployed six-month intern schemes delivered by the Council. The temporary positions ended in March 2023.

Officers have applied to the Museum & Gallery Scotland Develop Grant to fund a 15-month fixed term 1 FTE contract to focus on review and rationalisation of specific collection themes as part of business-as-usual activities.

No other funding to support further additional resources has been secured to date.

5. Conclusions

The digitalisation and publication of the collections means Aberdeen City Council officers will be able to respond swiftly and accurately to any future media and public scrutiny of items in the museum collections categorised as missing.

The completion of audits of storage locations most likely to yield results has been completed. As a result, officers expect reconciliation rates will continue to decline.

Based on experience of the reconciliation activities carried out to date, officers now assume most remaining items previously recording as missing are likely to be historic losses.

6. Future programme

Officers to move away from broad based store location physical audits and re-focus on collection themes and groups of items the outstanding missing items sit within, (outstanding store location audits detailed in **table 2.2**).

Officers to continue to focus on the resolution of missing items now assumed to be historical losses and the potential that some may be in other museum and gallery collections. This will be facilitated by on-going work to catalogue the institutional paper archive.

Officers to continue to update the status of items previously recorded as missing should any of these be identified or information confirming status be found during business-as-usual activities.

The status of individual items categorised as missing from the collections will be available via the publicly accessible museum database on the AAGM website.

Table 2.1: Resolving of administrative errors

Est. time frame	Activity	Number of items to be reviewed	Progress	Number of missing items found	Comments
On-going	Unpacking following major moves	N/A	Ongoing	97	Part of standard location control processes
Jan-Apr 2022	Treasure Hub - Metal store audit of coins & medals	6,000	Complete	13	
Feb 2022	Loans audit	38	Complete		Confirmed all current loans out from AAGM collections are accurately recorded
Feb-Mar 2022	Treasure Hub - Fine Art temporary numbers	186	Complete	3	
Feb-May 2022	Maritime Museum - store	2,000	Complete	3	
Feb-Apr 2022	Torry store – Metal store	600	Complete	40	
Feb-Aug 2022	Torry store mezzanine	2,400	Complete		
Feb-Nov 2022	Treasure Hub - Paper Store drawers	5,222	Complete	8	

Table 2.2: Improving records

Est. time frame	Activity	Progress	Comments
Feb 2022 -Mar 2024	Publish new records for collection items online via https://emuseum.aberdeency.gov.uk/collections	100% of all accessioned items published online	Missing items searchable online Location field and status appears in individual records Status reads: “Location: Historic Loss - research into this object's history and current status is ongoing”

Est. time frame	Activity	Progress	Comments
			Status reads: "Location: Stolen - If you have any information relating to the current whereabouts of this work please get in touch"
Feb 2022 - Mar 2024	Increase digitisation & photography programme	7,631 items digitised or media enhanced	Museums Galleries Scotland grant funded purchase of large format scanner
Ongoing	Research into database vs. historical records	54 records for items recorded as missing now resolved	Confirmed deaccessioned or cataloguing error

Table 2.3: Reconciling historic losses and missing items

Est. time frame	Activity	Number of items to be reviewed	Progress	Result	Comments
Apr 2024 - Oct 2027 (started due to officer capacity in Apr 2023)	Catalogue institutional archive	N/A	28 bequest files have been catalogued covering 1920-1991 12 historic Accession Registers and stock books have been catalogued 300+ index cards have been catalogued and digitised 318 purchase files have been catalogued covering 1959 - 1987		This allows object records to be matched to missing items to help with identification, recovery or reconciliation of items with temporary identification numbers
Apr 2024 – Jun 2026	Treasure Hub - Hub 9 store	90,000		N/A until April 2024	

Est. time frame	Activity	Number of items to be reviewed	Progress	Result	Comments
Apr 2024 – Jun 2026	Treasure Hub – costume store	18,576	9,748 items audited	9 missing objects found during Costume Store audit	Work package brought forward to combine with other store monitoring activities
Jul 2026 – Aug 2028	Torry collection store - main store	39,000	Started Jun 2022 1,782 items audited to date	Work to date based on business-as-usual activities N/A until July 2026	Temporary additional capacity provided by Kick Start and Long-Term Unemployed schemes enabled this work package to be brought forward Progress slowed as access to items severely restricted by exceptionally large items that require forklift to access
Sep - Nov 2028	Maritime Museum - displays	4,000		N/A until Sep 2028	