ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE	Audit Risk & Scrutiny
DATE	22 Feb 2022
EXEMPT	No
CONFIDENTIAL	No
REPORT TITLE	Review of Items Recorded as 'Missing' from Art Gallery & Museums Collections
REPORT NUMBER	COM/22/028
DIRECTOR	Gale Beattie
CHIEF OFFICER	Richard Sweetnam
REPORT AUTHOR	Helen Fothergill
TERMS OF REFERENCE	5.2

1.   PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1   To provide assurance on the current position of items recorded as 'missing' from the Art Gallery and Museums' collection; to identify the steps being taken to continue to review their status; and to report on the robustness of processes in place to reduce risk to the status of collections going forward.

2.   RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Committee:-

2.1   Notes the controls in place for the management of the Council's art gallery and museums' collections;

2.2   Notes the improvement actions at Section 3.28 of this report and that the Chief Officer City Growth intends to undertake research, reconciliation, recording and re-location (where possible) of missing items in the collection; and

2.3   Notes that the Chief Officer City Growth is to apply for external funding to support the work highlighted above.

3.   BACKGROUND

3.1   The report was prompted following a number of Freedom of Information requests and media requests about art work belonging to the Council and items that had been identified as potentially being lost and/ or stolen. The Chief Officer City Growth agreed to report to Committee to provide assurances on the processes in place for ensuring security of such works and to update on the work being done to trace missing items.

3.2   As of July 2021, at the time of the initial FOISA request, the catalogue recorded 1,577 objects as "missing", "not located" or "stolen" from over 150,000 records. Appendix 1 to this report provides a current list of items

recorded as missing, when they were recorded as missing and the latest status of items that been subsequently located through the service's established audit process.

3.3   Officers follow rigorous audit, cataloguing and location/ movement processes. Within the sector it is not unusual for museums and galleries with historic collections to have limited knowledge about items that may be missing from their collections. Despite the discrepancies highlighted in this report, extensive modernisation work since 2002 has provided a clearer picture of what was once held by the organisation and is now deemed missing or not located currently.

3.4   PLA/18/255 Aberdeen City Council Museums and Galleries Collections Development Policy approved 27 November 2018 sets out the background to the creation of the collection, how items enter and leave the collection and areas for future development. The policy references additional action plans including Future Collecting priorities, Review and Rationalisation, Documentation, Care and Conservation. The content of the policy and appended plans are in line with Museum Accreditation requirements, are fit for purpose and underpin the processes referred to in this report.
The Policy is renewed at least every 5 years.
https://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/AAGM/collections/highlights/collections-development-policy

Cataloguing process

3.5   Up to the 1980s, cataloguing processes were paper based with manual recording. A collections database was subsequently introduced that operated up until 2002. Since then, the Art Gallery & Museums service has used a modern collections management system that provides unique digital records for each object in the collection. As a minimum these modern standards record, within seven days of becoming part of the collection:
  • the object name and description;
  • method of acquisition (donation, gift, bequest, purchase);
  • source (provenance);
  • current location;
  • any associated funding (benefactors, financial bequests, national and international funding bodies);
  • transfer of title (of ownership); and
  • for insurance purposes, current estimated value.

3.6   Details of current cataloguing process are provided in Appendices 2 and 3.

3.7   Pre 1980s paper records provide information about objects that have been in the collection for some time. Work to digitise and reconcile these *historic* paper records is ongoing. Further details of the processes to manage the collection are provided in Appendix 4.

3.8   Following the introduction of more modern standards, officers also complete an entry form for any item entering Art Gallery and Museums' premises

(Appendix 5), also within seven days. Additional information that is recorded will also include:

- correspondence with donors;
- research on the artist/ maker/ provenance;
- condition;
- photography or scanning;
- approval of an internal Acquisition Panel; and
- the object meets the Council's Collections Development Policy PLA/18/255 (for example, the item will be used in the collection).

3.9   If approved, the object then enters the collection. This depth of information is becoming a standard without which the majority of items offered to the collection are declined.

Data Standards

3.10   Data standards have changed since the introduction of electronic collection management databases in 2002. Data transcribed from earlier paper records do not comply with current standards, and information may be incomplete or cannot be verified.

3.11   An earlier version of an electronic collection database was converted to the current system in 2002 and in the process, some data was lost and transposed into incorrect fields. These administrative errors have not been fully resolved and officers continuously resolve any historic records that do not meet the current standards.

3.12   Industry standards for the sector are set in partnership by Arts Council England, the Welsh Government, Museums Galleries Scotland and the Northern Ireland Museums Council through the Museum Accreditation scheme (established in 1988 and updated in 2008, 2011 and 2018) that covers all aspects of museum and gallery work including:

- governance;
- operations;
- collections management and care;
- engagement and learning; and
- visitor services.

Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums has been part of this scheme since 1991.

3.13   Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums is also compliant with Spectrum, the UK collection management and data standard operated by the Collections Trust. It aims to raise museum standards in the UK and was established in 1994. It identifies key pieces of information that should be recorded for every item entering a museum collection and sets guidelines for consistency of data recording across the sector. Previously Museum Documentation Association and the Information Retrieval Group of the Museums Association set guidelines for data consistency approaches in the 1960s.

3.14   Despite these robust systems, there is always potential for administrative errors, over many years of operations. For example, this may be through an object location not being updated within the required 48-hour timeframe,

inaccurate recording of location, reliance on manual recording if mobile WiFi is not available, or transcription errors due to misreading original handwritten records.

3.15   In such cases, officers normally apply a 'missing' status to an object if its physical location cannot be determined.

3.16   The number of 'missing' objects will reduce as day-to-day work, including research, reconciliation and regular audits, continues (Appendix 1). Table 1 below summarises the categories of 'missing' items and indicates that as of February 2022, there are now 1,330 items recorded as missing with an aggregate value of just under £200,000.

Table 1: Summary of 'Missing' Items by Category

Category	Recorded Missing Feb 2022	Aggregate Value (£)
Thefts	92	53,552
Historic Losses	713	106,461
Location to be confirmed	525	35,430
Total	1,330	195,443

Thefts

3.17   Any suspected thefts are investigated and confirmed losses reported to Police Scotland. Details may also be circulated to other art galleries, and online databases (such as Art Loss Register) so that nationally and internationally recovered art can also be searched.

3.18   92 objects are categorised as 'thefts'. The most significant incident was in 1989, where 76 objects (predominantly silver and ivory) were stolen. This theft was reported to and investigated by Grampian Police. Although officers regularly check auction catalogues where items may appear for sale, it is unlikely that remaining stolen objects will be recovered.

3.19   CCTV and key control operates in all premises. Barriers, alarms, and regular staff patrols are also used to reduce risk of theft. Locations of objects on display are checked on a weekly basis against the unique referencing in database records.

Historic losses

3.20   Before the 1980s, any objects that entered the collection were recorded on paper records. As part of a digital transformation exercise within the sector, these records were subsequently transcribed to the current digital database. However, as a digitalisation exercise only, no systematic cross check of actual holdings was undertaken. Following research and ongoing audit processes, officers now understand that there are a number of objects that were recorded but were not actually on the premises or physically in the collection at the

point of data transfer, and little or no information exists to indicate where these items may now reside.

3.21   As these losses have occurred over many years and decades, only about 10% of the items currently recorded as missing have been photographed, which means subsequent identification is difficult.

Location to be confirmed

3.22   Administrative errors associated with mass moves will be targeted for reconciliation by officers during 2022. However, objects recorded as missing prior to the creation of Aberdeen Treasure Hub and the closure of the Art Gallery for refurbishment will take more time particularly for older records.

Location control

3.23   The collections database records the current location for each object in the collection, and for audit purposes retains a location history for each object identifying each time the object is moved and by which officer.

3.24   Updates to object location must be notified within 48 hours of a move to the responsible recording officer. This process is currently managed through a system of Object Movement Forms (OMFs) which record current location, reason and date of move, officer name instigating move and new location. Just three officers have edit permissions to update this information on the database record.

3.25   For location audits, randomly generated check-lists of objects are created via the collections database, and confirmation by officers physically locating objects must be completed and reported to Team Leader Collections within two weeks of issue.

Loans management

3.26   All loans to and by the collection are based on legal contracts. Officers record details on the collections database and further details are provided in Appendix 6.

Impact of mass moves

3.27   'Mass moves' refers to the relocation of large sections of the collection. There have been two in the last nine years with a third currently underway at Kittybrewster. All were associated with the redevelopment of the Art Gallery and establishment of Aberdeen Treasure Hub. Officers have moved around 123,080 objects. Around 240 of these object records required further investigation due to issues including errors in handwritten recording of tracking numbers for groups of objects, reliance on existing box contents lists, switching between handwritten paperwork and digital.

3.28   Until these locations are resolved the objects are recorded as 'missing', 'not found' or 'requiring further investigation' to ensure they are flagged for

reconciliation. These are now at Aberdeen Treasure Hub, where officers are able to resolve these discrepancies as the extensive unpacking and storage work continues.

Current systems and resources

3.29   The work to date has highlighted a number of areas for improvement in the management of the collections that will reduce future errors, detailed in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Areas for Improvement

Improvement	Impact	Officer	When
1. Share information about stolen or confirmed missing items more widely	Increase likelihood of recovery	Team leader - collections	2028 (or 2024 based on accelerated programme in Appendix 6)
2. Annual staff re-fresher training for documentation processes	Reduce admin errors	Documentation officer	Apr 2022 (Apr 2023)
3. Annual review of *Object Movement Forms* and process	Reduce admin errors	Documentation officer	Apr 2022 (Apr 2023)
4. Bi-annual Documentation Plan to improve quality of data held	Improve records	Documentation officer	Apr 2022 (Jan 2024)
5. Reinstate regular random small-scale audits (suspended during periods of mass moves)	Reduce future risk	Team leader – collections; Service manager – archives, gallery & museums	Apr 2022 (monthly thereafter)
6. Review, update and reissue Collections Management Manual including documentation procedures to ensure: - Consistency and continuity of team for mass moves - Audit prior to any mass move - Object number written or printed & affixed directly onto the surface of the object using conservation-grade materials - Temporary reference numbers assigned to any object with no visible associated accession number - Assumptions recorded for missing status to provide context and consistency	Reduces risk of errors	Lead curator – collection access	Mar 2022

3.30 Officers will also undertake key pieces of work to resolve administrative errors in 2022 as detailed in table 6.1 in Appendix 6.

3.31 Curatorial resources are currently allocated to finalising the mass move from the Kittybrewster store to the Treasure Hub, to broader collection reviews and documentation plans as part of Museum Accreditation requirements and delivery of the public engagement and exhibition programme. Therefore, officers estimate that confirming the status of all 1,330 objects recorded as missing could take up to seven years, concluding in November 2028 (Appendix 6, tables 6.1 and 6.2).

3.32 To complete the work, will require 1.2ftes from a team of 8.0ftes. However, with additional resources of 2.0ftes for a fixed term period of 24 months, completion would be accelerated to June 2024 (Appendix 6, table 6.3).

3.33 Collection reviews which may result in removing items from the collection (deaccessioning). Such reviews are in line with the Museums and Gallery: Collections Development Policy (PLA/18/255). Deaccessioning and disposal adheres to sector standards included in the Museums Association *Ethics* and *Disposal Toolkit* and Museum Galleries Scotland *Museum Accreditation scheme*.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Existing staff resources could deliver the work to locate or clarify and confirm the status of missing items by November 2028.

4.2 To accelerate the programme to June 2024 will require appointment of two fte (fixed term) G10 collection documentation assistants for 24 months at a cost of £70,862 per annum as indicated below.

FY22/23	FY23/24	FY24/25
Appoint in May 2022	Full year	April & May only
59,052	70,862	11,810

4.4 Officers will seek to recover 100% of these costs from external funding such as Museums Galleries Scotland (MGS) and will not recruit additional staff to undertake the work unless that funding is secured.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 While there are no direct legal implications arising from the recommendations contained in the report cataloguing the collection must comply with Data Protection and Public Records legislation.

6. MANAGEMENT OF RISK

Category	Risk	Low (L) Medium (M) High (H)	Mitigation
Strategic Risk			
Compliance			
Operational	Meeting statutory duties impacts on time available to improve the catalogue	L	Publish report; ensure records are up to date and well researched; publish relevant collection information online https://emuseum.aberdeencity.gov.uk/collections
	Staff morale undermined due to reputational damage	M	Acknowledge legacy issues; establish considered & resourced work programme to resolve
	Delivery of public programme negatively impacted by reconciliation activities	M / L	Additional resources to ensure business plan / public engagement programme continues to be delivered
Financial	Impact on future grant funding for acquisitions to enhance the collection	L	Understanding within the museum sector is that current collection management system is robust; submit annual Museum Accreditation review; continue discussions with Museums Galleries Scotland (MGS) about lessons learnt and programme of work to address issues highlighted
	Impact on future bequests and financial gifts to Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums	L	Rebuild public trust following on from negative press coverage through public engagement, behind the scenes tours and online publication of collection information
	Theft of items from the collection	L	Maintain security standards as advised by ACC Insurance and Arts Council England Government Indemnity Scheme; act on any recommendations for improvement from Insurance reviews; invest in further theft

Category	Risk	Low (L) Medium (M) High (H)	Mitigation
			detection systems and alarms as appropriate
Reputational	ACC perceived as not fulfilling obligations relating to care of collections	L	Publish report; ensure records are up to date and well researched; publish relevant collection information online; acknowledge legacy issues; established considered & resourced work programme to resolve; provision of behind the scenes tours and online publication of collection information.
	Future data recording errors related to location of items in the collection	L	Staff training and re-familiarisation with existing processes; monthly random audits of selected items to check for errors; programme of research and data reconciliation (see Appendix E); complete full collection audit based on venue/storage site.
Environment / Climate			n/a

7.   OUTCOMES

7.1   The proposals in this report could impact on the delivery of public programme commitments at Aberdeen Art Gallery and Provost Skene's House.

8.   IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

Assessment	Outcome
Impact Assessment	Not required
Data Protection Impact Assessment	Not required

9.   BACKGROUND PAPERS

9.1   None

10. APPENDICES

10.1   Appendix 1 – List of missing items (as of July 2021, updated January 2022)

10.2   Appendix 2 – Cataloguing checklist

10.3   Appendix 3 – Cataloguing guide

10.4   Appendix 4 – Collection Management Manual 2020

10.5   Appendix 5 – Entry Form

10.6   Appendix 6 – Loans Arrangements

10.7   Appendix 7 – Proposed work programme

10.8   Appendix 8 – Glossary

11.   REPORT AUTHOR CONTACT DETAILS

Name	Helen Fothergill
Title	Service manager – archives, gallery & museums
Email Address	hfothergill@aberdeencity.gov.uk
Tel	01224 523676 / 07920 275 612