

## **Deaccessioning: A Practical Handbook for Icelandic Museums**

*"Deaccessioning is very hard work, but it is important because it prevents museum collections from being at risk. Collection management and deaccessioning are part of being a healthy institution."*

- Stacie Petersen, Director of Exhibitions and Registrar at the National WWI Museum and Memorial in Kansas City, Missouri, USA

*"How the collections are registered in small museums is very uneven. It has not been a priority through the years. The question is "what are the priorities?"*

-Nathalie Jacqueminet, Conservation Manager, National Gallery of Iceland

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# Introduction to Deaccessioning

**Note:** This handbook is part of a pilot project aiming to approach deaccessioning in Icelandic museums in a sustainable manner by utilizing the circular economy concept. Museums should tailor the steps and guidelines in this handbook to best fit their unique needs. Different museums will have different approaches to deaccessioning, and it is important to take all options into account. Deaccessioning in relation to this handbook applies to registered objects that are part of a museum collection.

Museums in Iceland have been confronted with the task of defining a clear deaccession (also referred as decollection) strategy. The large number of cultural heritage museums, especially those that are accredited, all around the country contributes to widen the scope of difficulties when it comes to managing their collections. The limited possibilities of training museum professionals in deaccessioning practices, often due to scarce financial resources, results in a lack of expertise in peripheral museums which already deal with the issue of understaffing. At the same time, rural museums have the additional task of maintaining a certain relationship with the local community. This relationship is based on closeness, trust, and is heavily emotional. Despite the desire that the emotional and physical exchange between museum and community would ideally be mutually beneficial, it is not always the case when it comes to acquiring new artefacts from local donors and implementing them in the museum's collection. Museums are frequently taking in more artefacts than they can manage to maintain this relationship. Previous collecting in Iceland was often widespread, lacking a focal point in many cases. This is one of the reasons why many museum storage facilities in Iceland are full, with little space for new acquisitions, efficient reorganizing, or registering of objects. Many objects in Icelandic museum collections are in fact unregistered. It is hard for collection managers and museum directors to take a joint action which is common to all museum institutions in Iceland when it comes to beginning the deaccession process. This handbook strives to be a common guide for all museums in Iceland and particularly small cultural heritage museums, both in and outside of the capital area.

Deaccessioning policies and work cannot exist in a vacuum separate from other museum practices. It is important to point out that it is necessary to have deaccessioning practices in place, but the first focal point must be a transparent and **strong collections management policy**. In this sense, deaccessioning must be a long-term strategy and has to reflect the way

collecting is undertaken. For successful deaccessioning, it is essential that museums first update their collections policy, have a clear and decisive mission statement, and assess the current state of their collections. This is a process that would ideally be done in tandem with other museums to ensure that there is not an overlap in collections policies and strategies. Open communication and collaboration between museums will not only help to manage existing collections, but also has the potential to facilitate the deaccessioning process by sharing information and resources. Through this handbook, Icelandic museums will be directed towards the necessary steps for:

1. Updating collections policies and mission statements
2. Taking an overview of existing collections
3. Beginning the deaccessioning practices

Note that the deaccessioning steps should take place after the deaccessioning plan has been formally approved.

## Legislation, Guidelines, and Ethical Considerations

While deaccessioning is an important part of museum work, it is not something that can be entered into without careful consideration and knowledge about the legal framework, regulations, and ethical implications. Museum employees are the guardians of not only the objects themselves, but of how the heritage, culture, art, and natural history of the country is preserved, displayed, and used to educate. Deaccessioning is not something to begin lightly, and there are several discussions and legal steps that must be taken before beginning the process. While deaccessioning is a serious process, ICOM, Safnaráð, and Icelandic legislation all allow for deaccessioning, taking into account various ethical and legal obligations as part of the consideration.

### ICOM on Deaccessioning

ICOM provides information on deaccessioning in its *Code of Ethics for Museums* manual and elaborates further in their *Guidelines on Deaccessioning*. These guidelines state that when a museum decides to deaccession objects, they must do so keeping in mind the significance

and character of the object and consider the potential of loss of public trust that might occur. ICOM recommends that museums practice transparency wherever possible in relation to deaccessioning and disposal of museum objects. The guidelines state that a museum may consider deaccessioning for several reasons:

- 1- The physical condition of the object is so poor that restoration is not practicable or would compromise its integrity. Objects that are damaged beyond reasonable repair and are of no use for study or teaching purposes may be destroyed.
- 2- The object poses threats to health and safety to the staff and the public.
- 3- The museum is unable to care adequately for the object because of its particular requirements for storage or conservation.
- 4- The object is a duplicate that has no added value as part of a series.
- 5- The object is of poor quality and lacks aesthetic, historical and/or scientific value for exhibition or study purposes.
- 6- The authenticity or attribution of the object is determined to be false or fraudulent, and the fraudulent object lacks sufficient aesthetic, historical and/or scientific value to warrant retention. In disposing of a presumed forgery, the museum shall consider all related legal, curatorial and ethical consequences, and should avoid returning the object to the art market.
- 7- Another museum could more appropriately care for, display and provide access to the object, and it is the intention of the originating museum to assign ownership of the object to that other museum
- 8- The museum's possession of the object is inconsistent with applicable law or ethical principles, e.g., the object was, or may have been, stolen or illegally exported or imported, or the object may be subject to other legal claims for return or restitution.
- 9- The object is no longer consistent with the mission or collecting goals of the museum.

10- The object is being sold as part of the museum's effort to renew and improve its collections, in keeping with the collecting goals approved by the museum's governing body. (*ICOM Guidelines on Deaccessioning*, 2019)

Deaccessioning practices should be clearly displayed in the museum collections policy. As will be discussed throughout this handbook, it is imperative that museums have a strong collections policy. Collections policies should include a deaccession strategy that notes what kind of disposal options are acceptable and provides clear guidelines. All deaccessioning should be carefully documented and become a permanent part of museum records. It is also crucial to note that the decision to deaccession must be taken separately from the decision process on how an object will be deaccessioned. Each object must be taken into consideration objectively and independently.

The legal status of an object must be determined, including locating the original donor, checking to ensure the object was not accessioned under questionable circumstances, determining if there were conditions or restrictions tied to the object, and what the legal status of the object is. If there are conditions or restrictions attached to an object, they must be followed unless it can be demonstrated that it is impossible to do so. If an object is determined to be acceptable for deaccessioning, there are multiple ways of proceeding.

A deaccessioned object can be returned to its original owner (if applicable), donated to another museum, cultural, or educational institution, transferred or traded, auctioned, privately sold, or otherwise disposed of, including destroying it. This handbook operates under the belief that destruction of objects should be an absolute final resort, and that most objects will have an alternative way of being relocated or outsourced. ICOM supports first offering the object to another museum or public institution unless the object is suspected to be fraudulent or acquired under suspicious circumstances.

ICOM guidelines state that objects are allowed to be sold on the private market, though there are ethical considerations that must be taken into account. The monetary value of an object should never be taken into consideration as part of the motive for deaccessioning. Museum workers, members of the overseeing governing body, and family members or close relations of the former two categories should not be permitted to purchase an object that has been

deaccessioned. Funds from the sale of museum objects may be used to acquire new objects for the museum collection or used to care for the existing collection. The funds may under no circumstances be used to offset the cost of operational fees, salaries, or other expenses.

### Safnaráð and the Principal Museums

The three principal museums of Iceland are The National Museum, The National Gallery, and The Natural History Museum. These principal museums are responsible for being specialists in their areas of focus, and of collecting, preserving, and exhibiting artefacts and information. They are considered the leading force to guide and assist accredited museums in their respective fields. Each principal museum has its own piece of legislation that touches on collecting and handling objects (referenced in the appendix), but in relation to deaccessioning Safnaráð refers to 17. gr. safnalaga nr. 141/2011 (discussed below) and The National Museum's instructions.

The National Museum's instructions build on ICOM's guidelines, applying them in an Icelandic context. These instructions also include an emphasis that taking new items into the museum's collection is a long-term commitment and is not something that should be taken lightly. If a museum believes that it needs to begin deaccessioning, they must first create a deaccessioning plan and obtain approval from The National Museum. Once this has been approved, they can begin deaccessioning by carrying out the assessment of individual objects in accordance with the plan, applying for authorization for disposal from The National Museum (which coordinates with Safnaráð), and finally disposing of the object in accordance with the disposal plan. Again, this handbook operates under the principles that disposing or destroying an object should be the last and least preferable option, instead favouring an approach with the circular economy concept and sustainability practices.

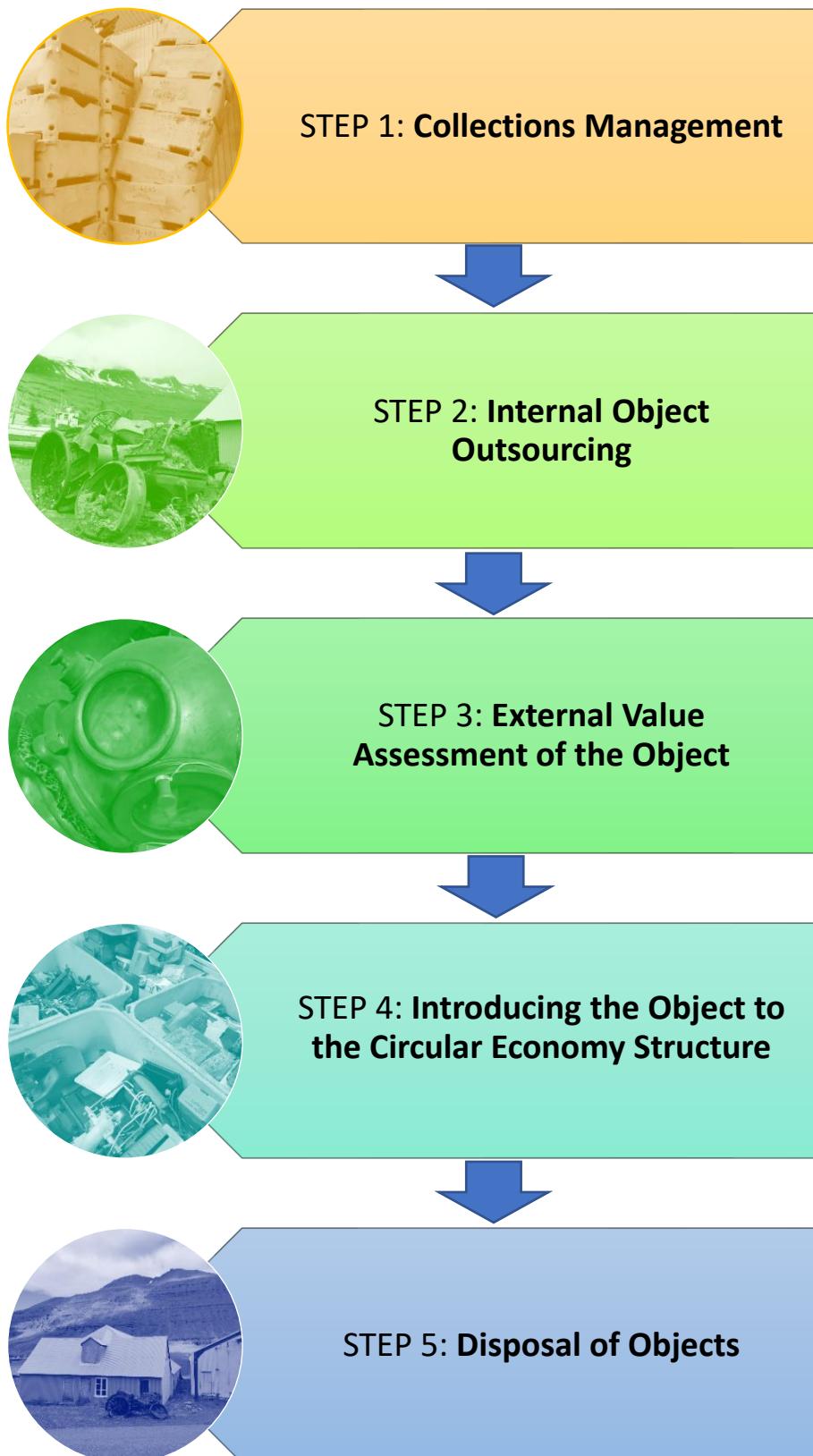
### Icelandic Legislation and Ethical Considerations

Safnaráð and The National Museum mention two specific sections of legal code, although links to the full legislation can be found in the appendix. Safnaráð and The National Museum's deaccessioning instructions refer to 17. gr. Safnalaga nr. 141/2011, which states that museums cannot dispose of items in their collection without good reason and requires museums to go through the appropriate legal process when deaccessioning (mentioned in

the paragraph above). The second section, Safnalög nr. 141/20115 í 9. gr. 7, states that museums must operate in accordance with ICOM Code of Ethics and Icelandic law.

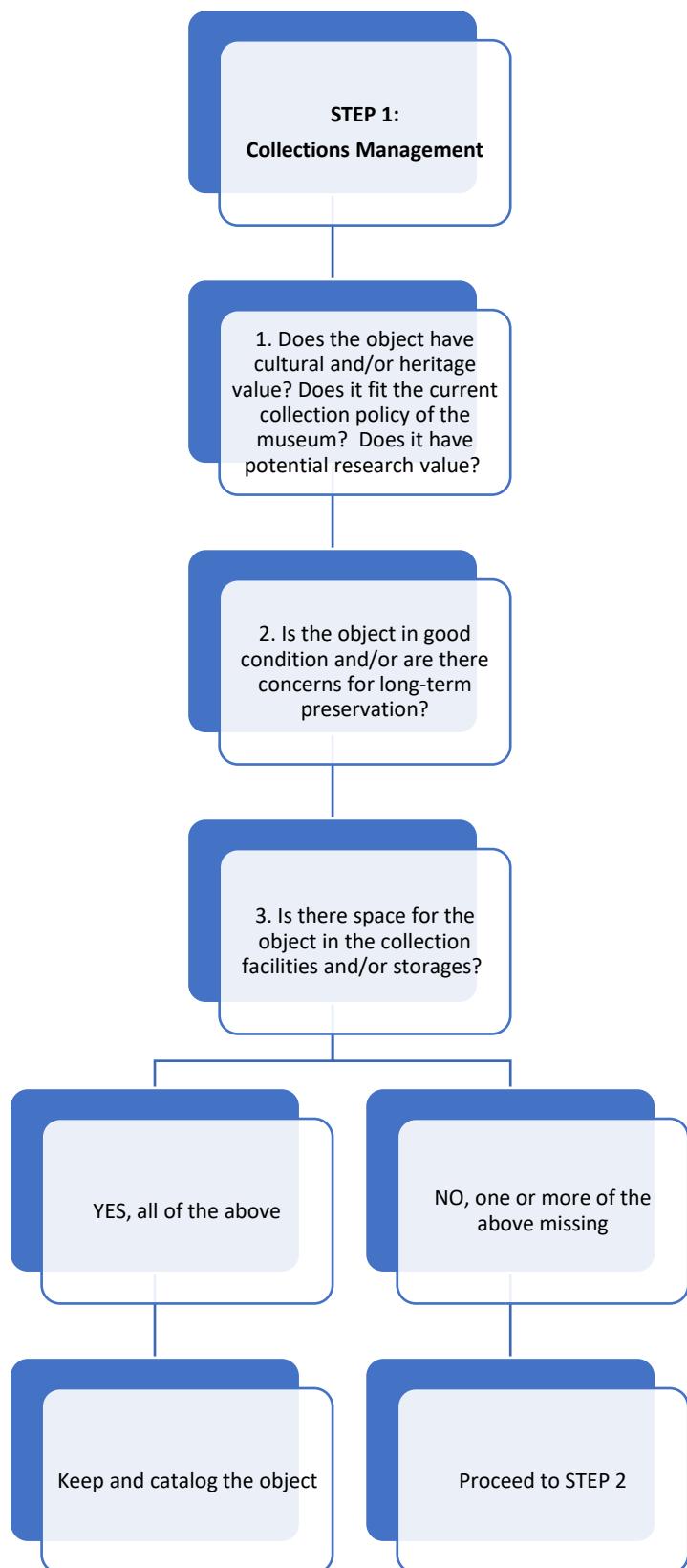
Deaccessioning must be an impartial and objective process, where personal opinions and bias are not allowed to interfere with or influence the decision-making process. Respect must be shown for museum collections and decisions made by previous directors and collections managers. At the same time, for many Icelandic museums to realistically sustain their collections for the future, deaccessioning is a necessary and valuable tool at their disposal. Museum workers should enter the deaccessioning process with a good overview of the subject, including a discussion on ethical and moral obligations as guardians of Icelandic heritage and culture.

## Deaccessioning Map



# Step-by-Step Process Description

## STEP 1: Collections Management



As mentioned above, it is counterproductive to talk about deaccessioning without focusing first on the collections management policy of the museum. The way museums collect in the present determines the extent they will have to deaccess in the future. In some cases, where collection is done with a short-term view, deaccession is both the consequence and the most logical solution to the over-collecting problem. It is important for museums, especially smaller and regional Icelandic museums, that the collecting process needs to be sustainable in the long run. Overgrown collections can cause a burden in different instances and may raise economic concerns related to storage facilities and manpower, environmental concerns related to climate control and deaccessioned waste and, finally, social concerns. The social implications include the potential emotional impact that an overwhelming and unchecked collection may have on the limited number of museum staff, and the emotional and engagement impact that the local community has regarding the museum's activities, authority and administration.

When a museum collection is too large to be sustainably managed, there is no longer space to acquire new artefacts which limits the future possibilities of the museum. Existing artefacts also run the risk of not being properly cared for, or even lost if the collection is large enough and items have not been registered.

The concept of sustainability entails refining the present practices for them to be durable to future generations. It is a core element of environmental preservation actions and can be applied to many other areas, including museums. The sustainable museum is a participative institution which is managed responsibly, taking into account environmental and social concerns. A sustainable museum administration needs to recognize the shortcomings of past collection practices, putting in place an effective deaccession strategy to completely reorganize the previous patterns of over-collecting. The concept of the circular economy is particularly helpful here. By keeping this in mind, museums can extend the life cycle of an object and reduce unnecessary waste. The absolute last resort when deaccessioning should be throwing an object away; there are many other routes that museums can try first to participate in the circular economy during deaccessioning.

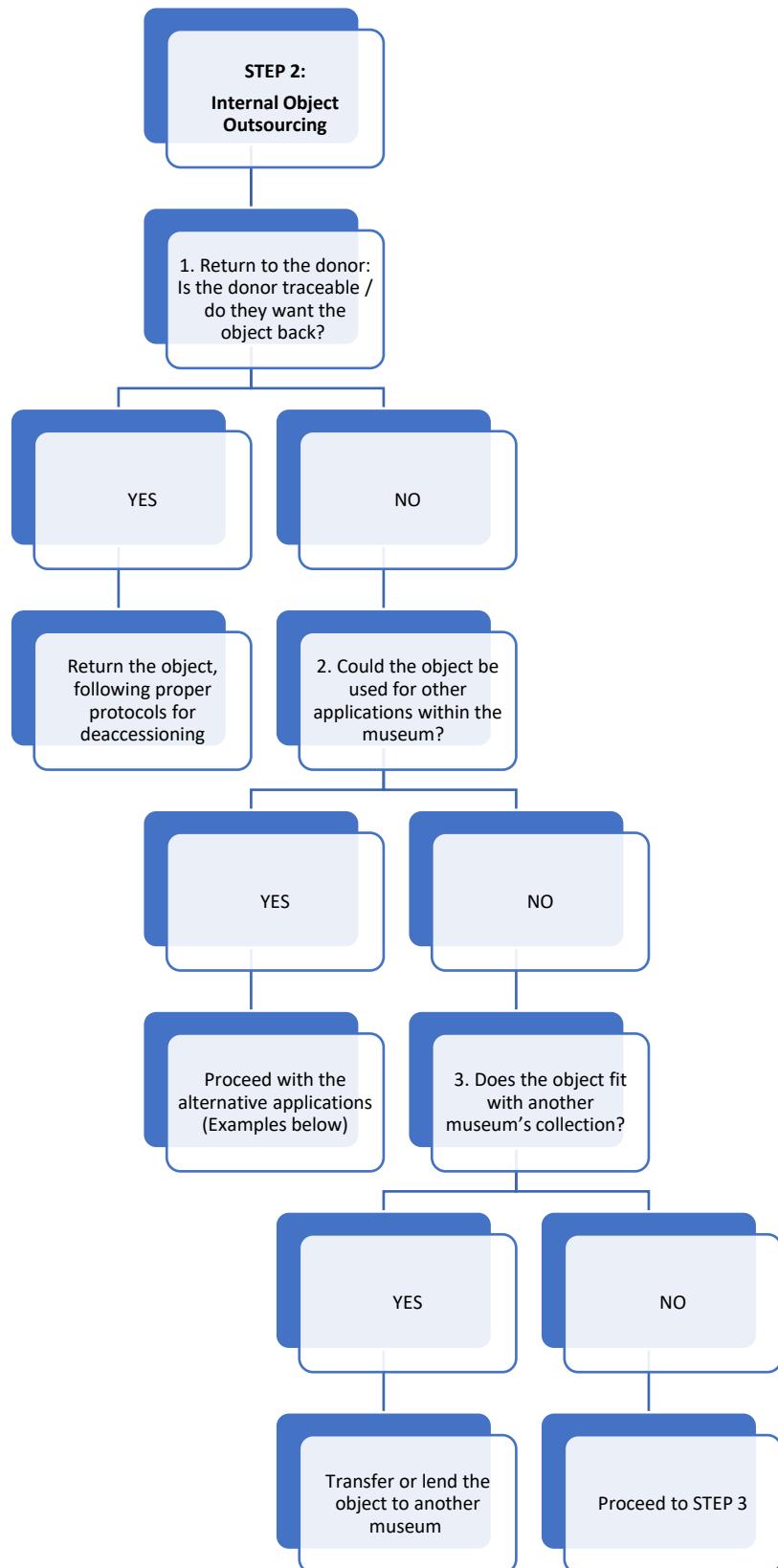
When confronted with an object, asking questions from within is the best way to find answers:

1. Does the object have cultural and/or heritage value? Does it fit the current collections policy of the museum? Does it have potential research value?
2. Is the object in good condition and/or are there concerns for long-term preservation?
3. Is there space for the object in the collection facilities and/or storages?

YES: Keep and catalog the object

NO: Proceed to STEP 2

## STEP 2: Internal Object Outsourcing



If an object no longer has a place in its current collection, there are still many other ways to extend the life cycle of the object. Object outsourcing allows the object to remain as it is (not disassembled for parts, recycled, or thrown away). Instead, the object can find a new life by being returned to the original donor or given a new application, either internally or in another museum. Good relationships, transparency, and open communication between museum professionals, and museums and their local communities, will be important for this step. The following options fall under the first recommended section for deaccessioning and can be customized by individual museums regarding the order they would like to have them in:

1. Return to the donor:

Is the donor traceable / do they want the object back?

YES: Return the object, following proper protocols for deaccessioning

NO: Continue

2. Could the objects be used for other applications within the museum?

Examples:

-Props (educational and accessible material)

-Interactive and guided workshops (bring the object to life)

-Art displays (if applicable, decorative art for common spaces within the museum).

-Social work (museum programs for nursing homes, hospitals, rehabilitation centers).

YES: Proceed with the alternative applications

NO: Continue

3. Does the object fit with another museum's collection?

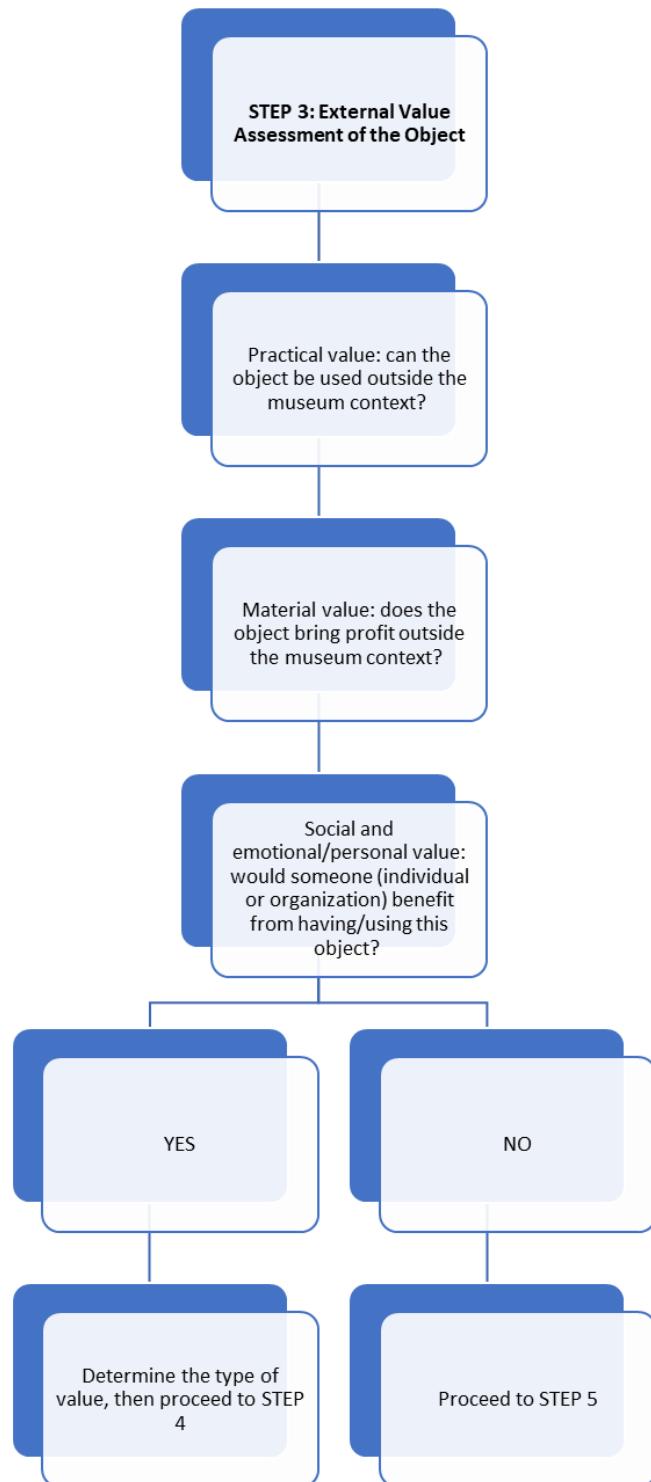
Note: For this to successfully work, there needs to be an increase in both cooperation and communication between museums. This includes a coordination of creating individual collection policies to ensure there is not an unnecessary overlap between collections, and a way for museums to quickly and easily be able to determine which museums are collecting what when going through the deaccessioning process. A centralized database which allows

loan and purchase requests for objects from another museum's collection would be beneficial for the purpose. This could be implemented in Sarpur.

YES: Transfer or lend the object to another museum.

NO: Proceed to STEP 3

### STEP 3: External Value Assessment of the Object



Value is subjective, intrinsically intertwined with personal, communal, emotional, and societal valuations; it is a social construct. There are different types of value that an object can be assigned, and this type can vary from person to person. These value types will often depend on an individual's emotional response or their feelings towards an object. Societal concepts of cultural value are visible in museum collections across Iceland, as many museums have collected the same objects over the years. Personal concepts of value are also visible, with a plethora of objects collected over previous decades that leave current museum directors in a state of confusion regarding what should be done with objects that have no obvious connection to current collection policies, or even the history of the museum itself. An object leaving a museum collection does not mean that it is no longer valuable. Indeed, an object that does not have a place in a collection has the potential to have greater value outside of the museum context. It is important to remember that the potential value of an object should never be a consideration when making deaccessioning decisions.

1. Does the object have value?

- Practical value: can the object be used outside the museum context?
- Material value: does the object bring profit outside the museum context? Keep in mind that ICOM guidelines state that funds from the sale of museum objects may only be used to acquire new artifacts or otherwise care for the collection, and never for salaries, unrelated projects, or other operational costs.
- Social and emotional/personal value: would someone (individual or organization) benefit from having/using this object? Museum workers, members of the overseeing institutions, and friends and family may not purchase or otherwise take objects being deaccessioned.

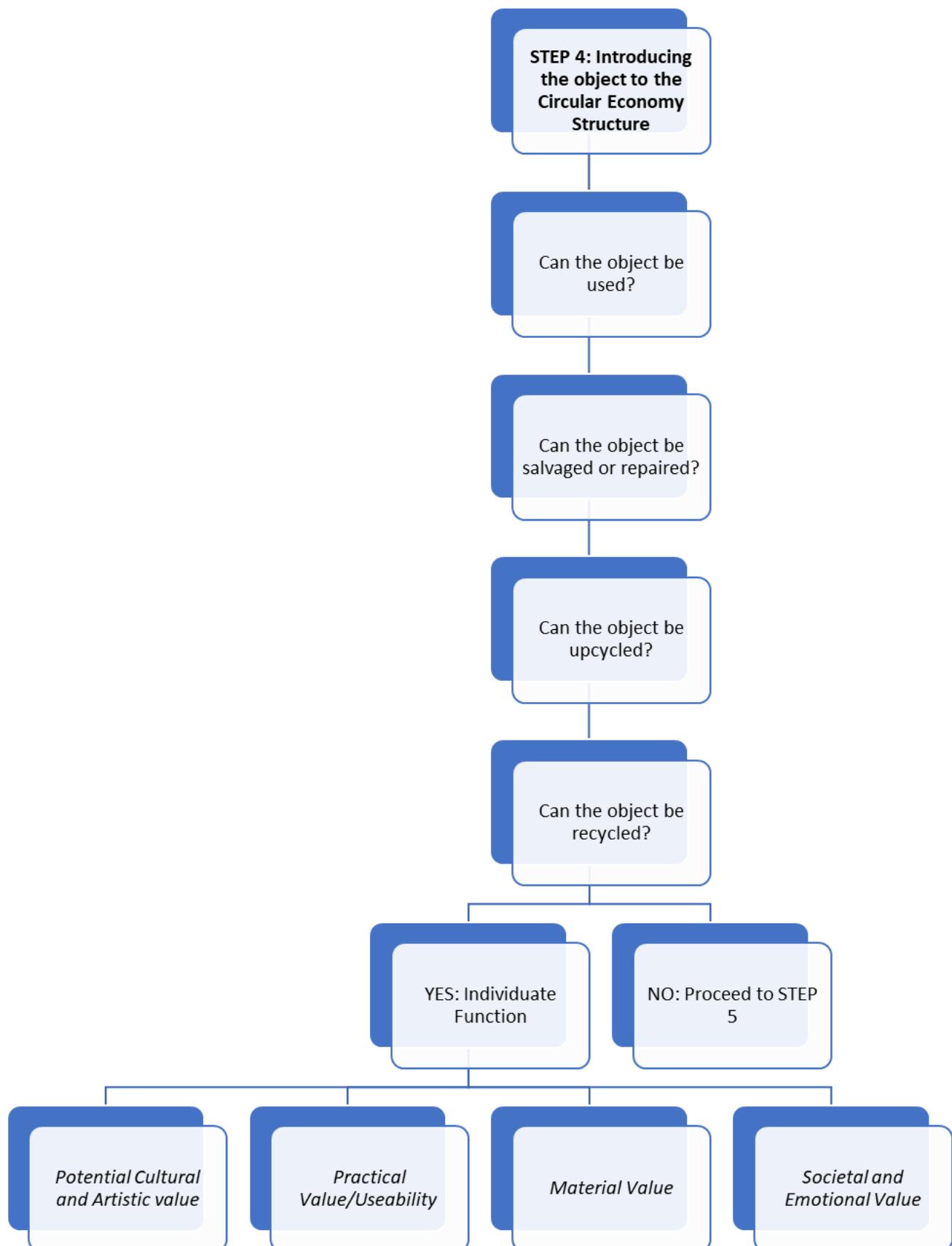
Take, for example, a woodworking plane (*hefill*). This object can be found in many museums across the country, often in collections that have 5, 10, or even 20+ of the same object. They can also be commonly found as decoration in homes, summer cabins, restaurants, and hotels. A single woodworking plane on its own has tangible cultural and heritage value from a museal perspective. In a collection of twenty, the value of one plane decreases within the museum collection, but still has potential value outside of the museum collection – arguably a greater value outside of the collection because of its privileged status as having been accepted into

an official collection in the first place. Depending on the condition of the plane, it may have practical value in its usability. This also implies a financial value if it could be used for practical applications. It could have material value when sold, or social value when taken by an individual or organization outside of the museum context. An individual might assign emotional, aesthetic, or their own form of heritage value to the object.

YES: Determine the type of value, then proceed to STEP 4

NO: Proceed to STEP 5

## STEP 4: Introducing the Object to the Circular Economy Structure



The concept of a circular economy aims to promote a more sustainable approach to economic principles and practices, separating economic growth from the mass consumption of various resources. The three common features of this concept include minimizing waste output, keeping products and materials in use for as long as possible, and finding ways to regenerate these products back into the system in new ways once they reach their end-of-life cycle. The circular economy has grown in popularity in recent years as it becomes increasingly obvious that our current methods of production and economic growth are unsustainable on a planet with finite resources. These concepts can be applied to the museum sector, especially in relation to museum collections. The three features listed above can be viewed as mirroring the steps in this handbook:

1. Minimizing waste output can be seen as starting with collections management: museums must learn how to do more with less by first limiting the unnecessary influx of objects into a museum collection. This goes against current trends of doing less with more in relation to huge collections that are unmanageable. A strong and updated collections policy will be beneficial for this step.
2. Keeping materials and products in use for as long as possible refers to removing an object from a collection but finding an alternative ‘life’ for the object that does not result in it being altered from its current form.
3. Regenerating products back into the system once it reaches its end-of-life cycle can be done by separating the object down into different parts, either for practical usage, salvage, upcycling, or recycling.

YES: Individuate Function of the Object

NO: Proceed to STEP 5

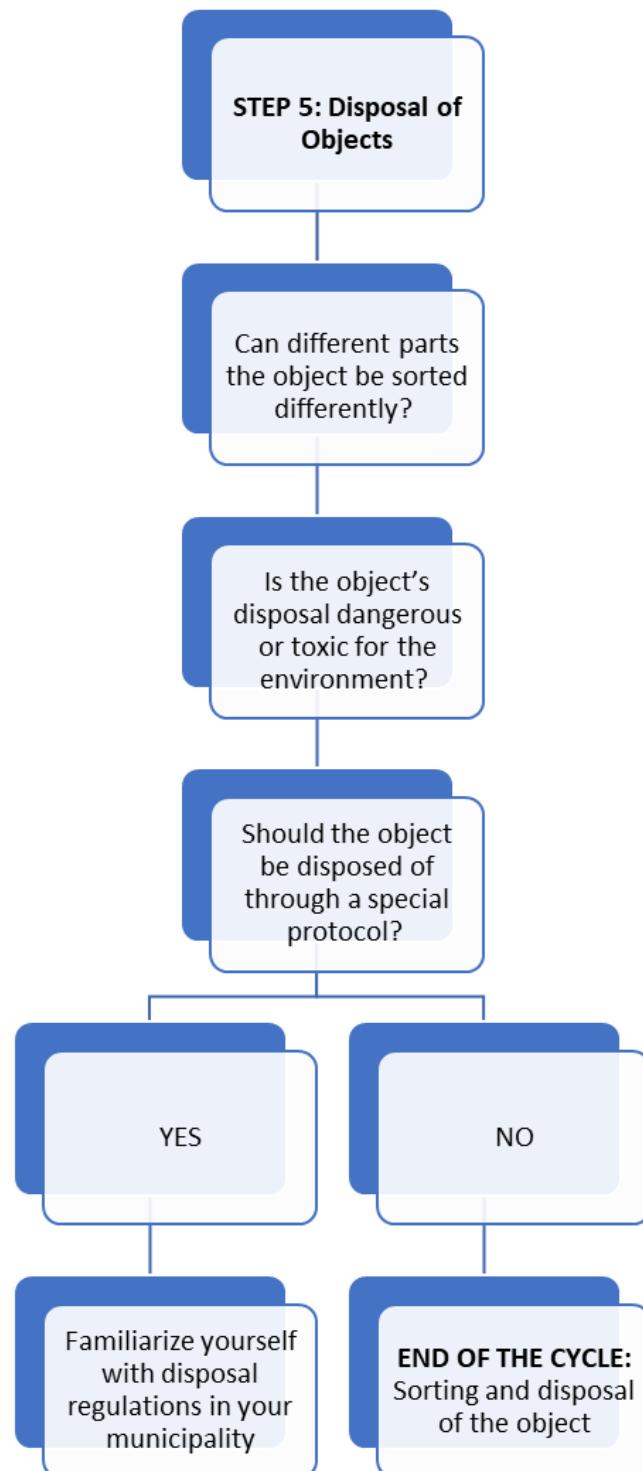
There are different levels of value that a ready-to-be-deaccessioned museum object can have.

To assess the object’s value, refer to the categories below:

- *Potential Cultural and Artistic Value*: Despite not having cultural or heritage value within the museum collection, the object can acquire a value when in another context. For instance, work with private (non-accredited museums), local artists, schools, or non-profit organizations to transfer/donate the objects.

- *Practical Value/Useability*: objects that are still in working order and can be used for their primary function.
- *Material Value*: scrap metal or other objects with industrial application that can be upcycled.
- *Societal and Emotional Value*: selling or donating to private collectors in Iceland or abroad, vintage stores or resellers, the public, or charitable organizations.

## STEP 5: Disposal of Objects



If a way of extending the life cycle of an object cannot be found, the final option is to dispose of it. This must be done with caution, and only as a last resort. Different types of materials must be disposed of or recycled responsibly to ensure safety for museum staff, workers in the field of disposal and recycling, and the public.

Environmental concerns need to be taken into consideration when disposing of an object that cannot be re-introduced in the circular economy model. Climate change is (or should be) nowadays at the core of every decision. Museums are pioneers and models for society to look up to, and for this reason need to consider climate change in the equation. For instance, below some useful questions:

- Can different parts of the object be sorted differently?
- Is the object's disposal dangerous or toxic for the environment?
- Should the object be disposed of through a special protocol?

YES: It is imperative to familiarize yourself with your municipal/local regulations on waste disposal. SORPA, Íslenska Gámafelagið, Hringrás, and other related companies provide an extensive insight and detailed information on how to deal with certain types of objects and materials.

NO: End of the life cycle of the object.

## Best Practices & Desired Outcomes

This handbook aims to provide general guidelines for deaccessioning in Icelandic museums using the principles of the circular economy and sustainability. The steps described in the handbook are meant to be as generic and flexible as possible to accommodate each specific situation in which different museums might find themselves in. Multiple variables and possible scenarios have been considered, but each case and each museum are different from one another and have different internal processes. The steps may then be followed and interpreted in several ways. Nonetheless, the outcomes of following the guidelines should be similar amongst the whole set of Icelandic museums that apply this handbook to their practice.

### Outcomes Summary

The ideal outcomes for this handbook are threefold – **updating collections policies and mission statements, taking an overview of existing collections, and beginning the deaccessioning practices**. As discussed earlier in this handbook, for sustainable and long-term successful operations, museums must work together, keeping the climate crisis and sustainability in mind. Deaccessioning has several steps outlined above, and each must be entered into with care and mindfulness.

We acknowledge that there are multiple variables at play in each museum, and there is no one approach that will exactly fit the situation in every museum. Each museum must chart their own deaccessioning path, keeping the different steps in mind throughout the process. There will undoubtedly be compromises made when working with the practical application of deaccessioning, and the relationship with local communities and other museum professionals must not be forgotten. Ideally, deaccessioning will become a standard practice that museums are comfortable not only working with, but also transparently discussing the importance of within the field and with local communities.

#### **1. Update collections policy and/or mission statement with the following goals:**

First, museum professionals should ideally reassess the current industry practices for collecting, collections management, and deaccessioning.

A few indicators of the process below:

1.1 Limit and control new acquisitions. Part of the decision-making process for new acquisitions should include both what can be preserved, and how.

1.2 Make it feasible to coordinate with other museums (on policy and transfer of objects).

1.3 Allow museums to prepare for deaccessioning with a set policy to refer to as needed.

**2. Take an overview of existing collections:**

Second, a greater cooperation and level of communication between museums will develop. This should occur both in updating collections policies and working together during the deaccessioning phases.

A few indicators of the process below:

2.1 To access the collection status (number of objects, storage conditions, potential damages, etc.)

2.2 Will aid museum staff in solidifying collection policy.

2.3. Allows for coordination with other museums – keeping in mind different collection policies for a potential transfer of objects.

**3. Begin deaccessioning practices:**

Thirdly, museums in Iceland will begin the process of deaccessioning, understanding that deaccessioning as part of museum practices will allow for successful and sustainable collections management for the present and future of the museum. It will also allow space for new and relevant acquisitions and present the opportunity for a better overview of the existing collection to better facilitate museum work and relationships, both within the museum sector and with local communities.

A few indicators of the process below:

3.1 Approaching the museum objects with the collections management policy and museum statement in mind.

3.2 Allowing for the outsourcing of objects for different purposes, giving them new life (either internally or externally).

3.3. Utilizing valuation assessments of the objects to determine the applicable practical, material, and/or social value.

3.4 Continuing with the circular economy structure to ensure that the object is used, salvaged, repaired, upcycled, or recycled where possible.

3.5 As a final resort, ensuring that objects that must be disposed of are done so in a safe and responsible manner according to local disposal regulations.

## Appendix

- A. [National Museum of Iceland Deaccessioning Policy](#)
- B. [ICOM Guidelines on Deaccessioning](#)
- C. Legal references
  - a. [Museum Law \(Safnalög\)](#)
  - b. [Legislation on The National Museum \(Lög um Þjóðminjasafn Íslands\)](#)
  - c. [Regulation on The National Museum \(Reglugerð um Þjóðminjasafn Íslands\)](#)
  - d. [Legislation on The National Gallery \(Myndlistarlög\)](#)
  - e. [Regulation on The National Gallery \(Reglugerð um Listasafn Íslands\)](#)
  - f. [Legislation on The Natural History Museum \(Lög um Náttúruminjasafn Íslands\)](#)
- D. Heritage and Culture Museum Policies and Guidelines: National Museum of Iceland and Museum Council of Iceland
  - a. [National Museum of Iceland - Instructions for Deaccessioning \(Leiðbeiningar um gerð grisjunaráætlana\)](#)
  - b. [Strategies for Museum Work in Icelandic Museums](#)
  - c. [Museum Council of Iceland](#)
  - d. [Safnaráð Instructions for Creating a Deaccessioning Plan \(Leiðbeiningar um gerð grisjunaráætlunar\)](#)