

**JOINT MUSEUMS COMMITTEE
21 JUNE 2017**

HAZARDOUS MATERIALS IN MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

Recommendation

- 1. The Museums General Manager recommends that:**
 - a) the work undertaken to protect staff working with museum collections containing hazardous chemicals be noted;**
 - b) the disposal for Health and Safety reasons of a fire hose from the Worcestershire County Council collection of early twentieth century firefighting equipment be noted;**
 - c) he be authorised to commission advice from a specialist asbestos testing company; and**
 - d) £5,000 be released from the Joint Museum Service's reserves to fund this work.**

Background Information

2. The historic nature of museum collections means that chemicals once freely used in manufacture and in pest control, but now banned from normal use, can frequently be found in museum objects. Examples include arsenic used on taxidermy specimens to protect them from insect infestation, and asbestos used in a wide variety of both domestic and industrial items as fire protection. Although presenting a hazard in some form, many of these objects tell valuable stories of Worcestershire's heritage.
3. The museum profession has invested and shared considerable knowledge on these hazards and Museums Worcestershire's curatorial team have stayed abreast of new research. Each activity is risk assessed and expert advice is regularly sought. Appropriate personal protective equipment is routinely used by staff and volunteers to handle collections.
4. The Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012 act requires museums to make a suitable and sufficient assessment of their collections to be carried out in order to determine the likelihood of asbestos being present. Examples of museum objects potentially containing asbestos include WWII gas masks, where the filter is often made from asbestos; insulation seals on washing machines and cookers; brake pads in industrial machinery and insulated wires on domestic appliances.
5. Museums Worcestershire sought advice from Worcestershire County Council's (now part of Place Partnership) Asbestos Officer and Risk Manager. Their advice was to create a

register of anything in the collection that could potentially contain asbestos, in preparation for more detailed testing and sealing or disposal. A significant portion of the collection has now been inspected by museum staff and items that may potentially include asbestos that is not degrading logged on a register. This register contains several thousand items.

6. During the inventory process, a fire hose from the Worcestershire County Council collection of early twentieth century firefighting equipment was identified as degrading, shedding asbestos dust. The Management of Asbestos in Museum Collections policy and the Museums Worcestershire Disposal Framework were immediately followed, resulting in the safe collection and disposal of this object by a specialist contractor.

7. The next stage of assessment needs additional expertise and testing to enable it to be completed accurately. The specialist contractor advised that this could be done over a series of day inspections by someone of his level of experience of working with asbestos.

8. It is proposed to use £5,000 of museums reserves to commission a specialist contractor to inspect the collection and dispose of any items that are considered an immediate hazard to health. Following this inspection, the asbestos register can be completed and a policy decision made on the protection to enable the object to be safely moved and displayed or the disposal for those objects where this is impossible.

Supporting Information

- Appendix - Museums Worcestershire Acquisition and Disposal Procedures

Contact Points

County Council Contact Points

County Council: 01905 763763

Worcestershire Hub: 01905 765765

Specific Contact Point for this report

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Background Papers

In the opinion of the Museums General Manager the following are the background papers relating to the subject matter of this report:

Agenda papers and Minutes of the Joint Museums Committee, on 23 November 2015