

Session 4

Rationalisation and

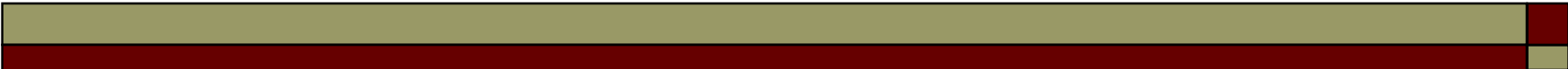
Disposal

(Deaccessioning)

HPHE7009 Skills in the Museum

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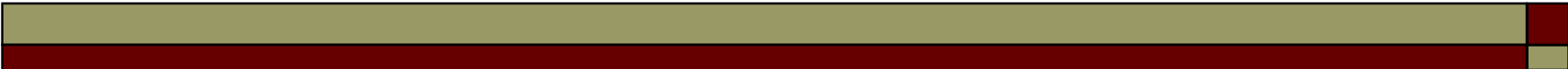
What do we mean by rationalisation?

“Collections rationalisation is a procedure whereby a museum improves its understanding of a collection so that the collection can be used more effectively for the benefit of its users.”

Collections Trust 2016

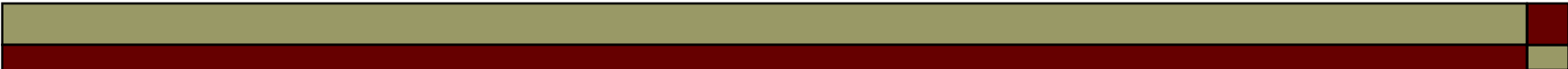
What is rationalisation in collections?

- ❑ Rationalisation is NOT simply about DISPOSAL
- ❑ Reassessment of collections that falls in line with the ethical and legal considerations that are outlined by Museums Association
- ❑ Storage issues, relevance, duplication
- ❑ Making collections more accessible and more effective – public benefit



Why do museums rationalise collections?

- ❑ To resolve an historic and unsystematic approach to collecting, which has resulted in an accumulated backlog of items and a need to decide what should remain in the collection
- ❑ To improve knowledge about an area of the collection that you have little information about and may want to add to
- ❑ To understand the storage and care needs of your collections

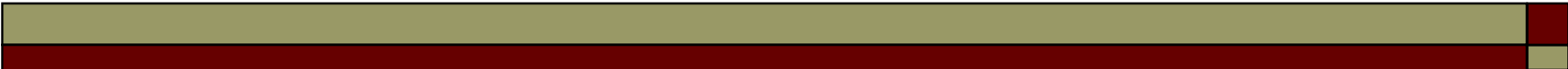


Before rationalisation can occur...

- ❑ Undertake overview of the collections – audit
- ❑ Set out process for assessing objects
- ❑ Relevance – does object fit within collecting policy of museum?
- ❑ Quality – is object a good example of its kind?
- ❑ Duplication – several versions of the same object?
- ❑ Condition – is object in good working order / decent state
- ❑ Health and safety – handling, heavy weights, dust, spores, harmful chemicals
- ❑ Ownership
- ❑ Size

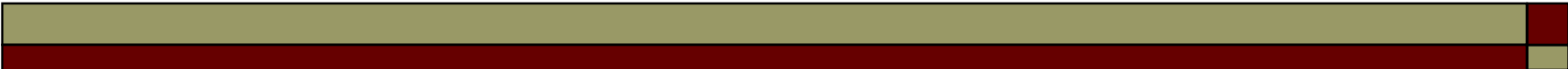
Reassessment of collections for what purpose?

- Handling collections
- Display
- Return loaned objects
- Recall loaned objects
- Repatriation
- Converting loans into gifts



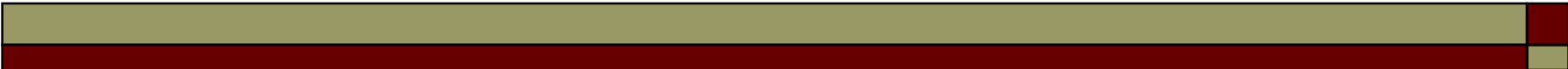
What is disposal in museum context?

- ❑ discarding of material / objects that belong to the museum, but no longer fit with the collecting policy



What can disposal look like?

- ❑ objects damaged beyond further use
- ❑ repatriation of human remains or sacred objects
- ❑ Return of objects with colonial past
- ❑ transferring duplicate objects to another museum
- ❑ Sale to another organisation or individual
- ❑ Recycling
- ❑ Full or partial destruction



Who authorises this?

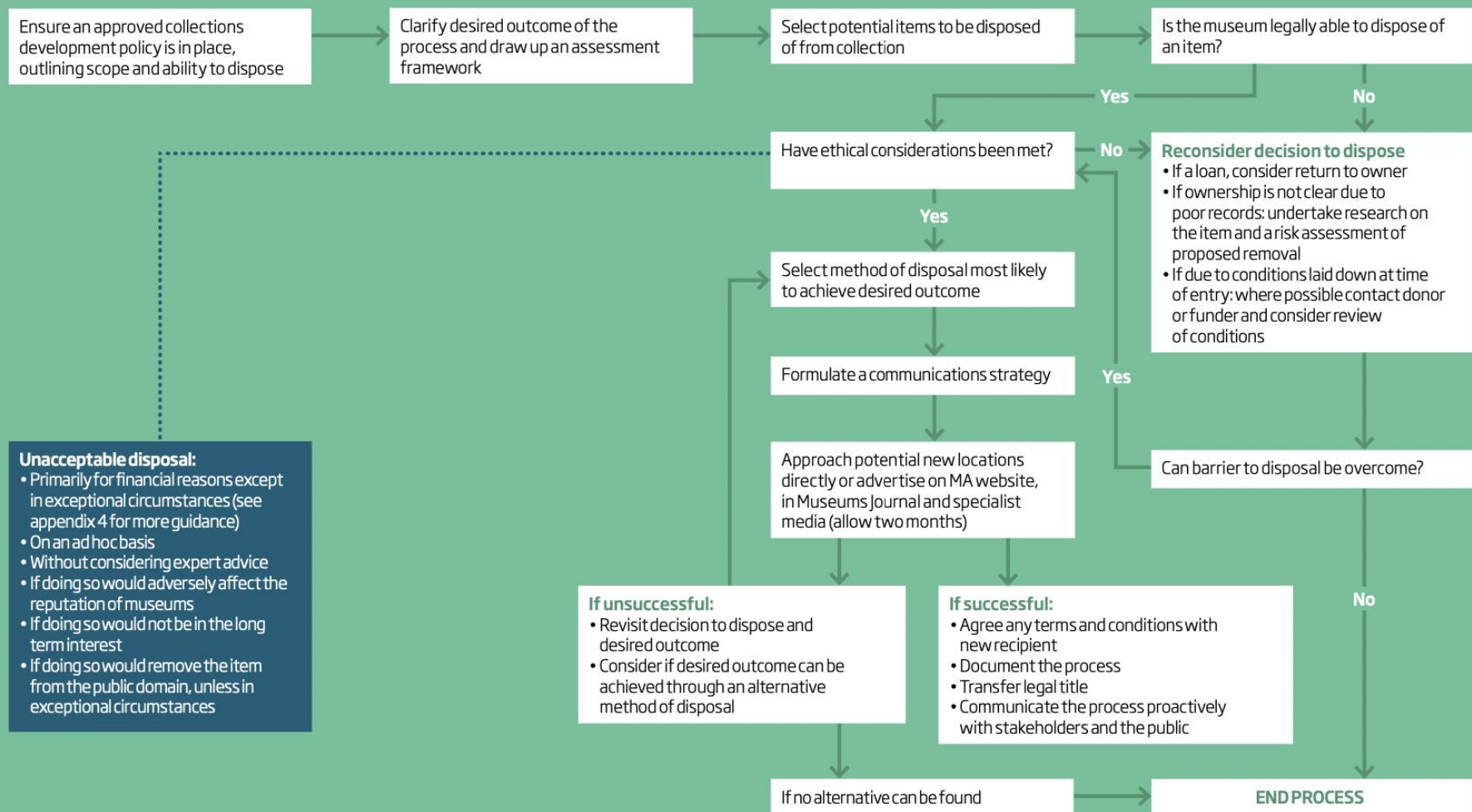
- ❑ Rationalisation is carried out by curators
- ❑ Disposal is carried out by the governing body and approved by all legal institutions / bodies within / attached to the governing body as outlined

What systems are in place to manage rationalisation and disposal?

- Policy Statements
- Code of Ethics

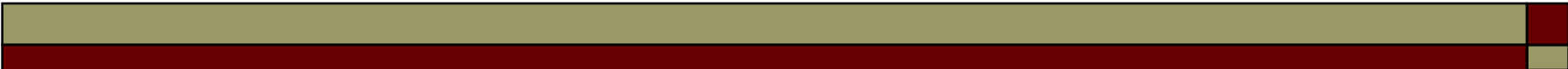
- Some helpful guides uploaded on MOODLE
 - MA Disposals Toolkit
 - Share Museums East: Planning for Action publication

Disposal Flowchart



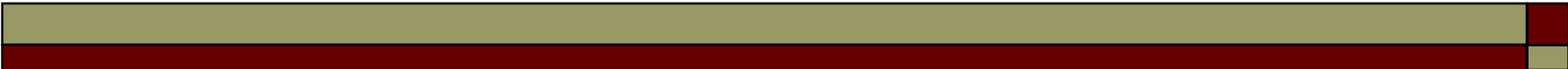
When is not acceptable to dispose of an object? (Museums Association Toolkit for Disposal)

- ❑ It is unacceptable to dispose of an item:
 - for financial reasons (unless in exceptional circumstances, in which case the additional guidance in appendix 4 should be followed)
 - on an ad hoc basis (i.e. other than as part of an approved collections development policy)
 - without considering advice from someone with specialist knowledge of this type of item
 - if the disposal would adversely affect the public reputation of museums
 - if the disposal would not be in the long-term public interest
 - outside the public domain, except in exceptional circumstances.
- ❑ Museums disposing of items with the overriding aim of achieving any of the incidental outcomes should proceed with caution.
- ❑ Significant consequences may arise from an unethical disposal. If you are concerned about a proposed disposal, especially where an incidental outcome is a significant motivation, please contact the MA for additional advice and guidance.



What happens next?

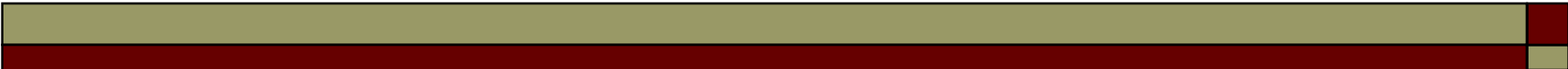
- ☐ Loan
- ☐ Purchase
- ☐ Donation/Bequest
- ☐ Unaccessioned or unknown method of entry into the museum
- ☐ Legal ownership



Ethics and Risk

Unethical decisions to dispose of an item may have significant consequences for a museum. These are likely to include:

- loss or damage of public trust in all museums
- adverse publicity and long-term negative perceptions of the museum
- loss of Accredited status
- disciplinary action from the MA (if a member)



Records

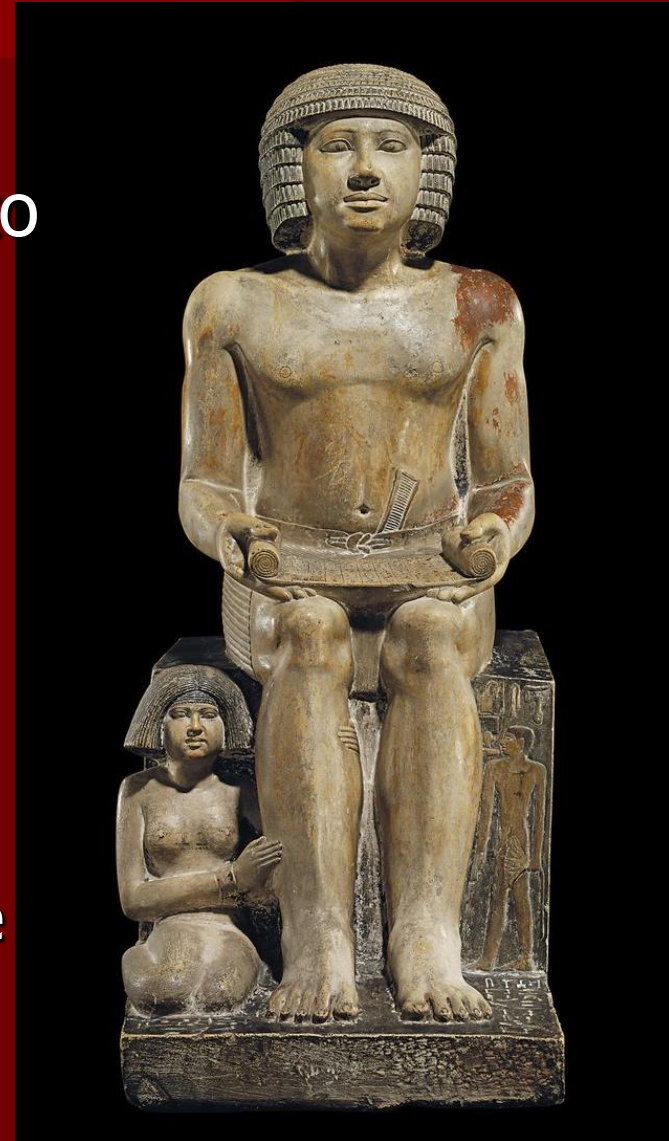
- ❑ It is important that all aspects of the disposal process are documented; this should be done to SPECTRUM standards.
- ❑ Any records should include:
 - reasons for disposal
 - desired outcome
 - opinions and advice considered
 - method of disposal
 - conclusion of process: retention, transfer, sale etc.
 - any conditions attached
 - information relating to the item and photographs
 - documentation relating to transfer of title
 - note of any new location.

Further thoughts:

**TO RATIONALISE OR NOT TO
RATIONALISE?**

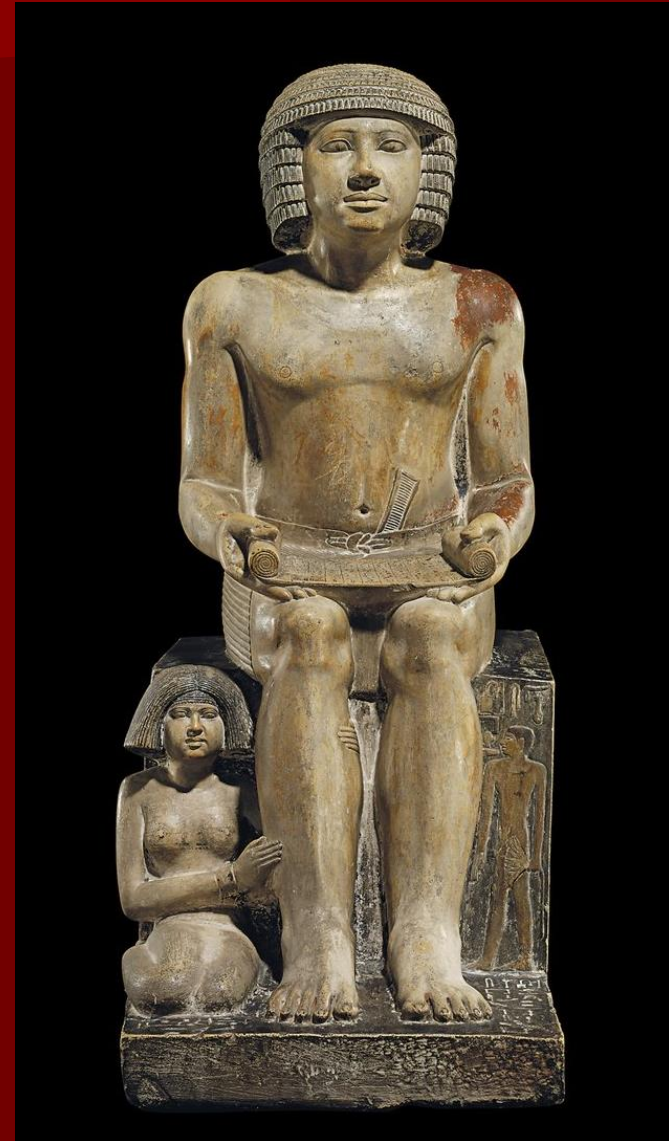
Case Study: Sale of Statue of Sekhemka, Northampton Museum & Art Gallery (MANAG) 2014

- banned from the Museums Association (MA) for 5 years due to
 - considered unethical (financially motivated + insufficient consultation)
 - jeopardized museum's accreditation status + ability to receive grant funding
 - encouraged illegal excavation / plundering Egyptian antiquities
 - The sale could have made the statue inaccessible to the public, students, and scholars.



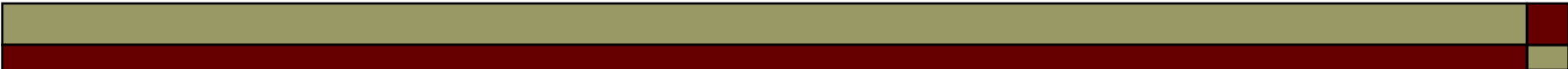
Case Study: Sale of Statue of Sekhemka, Northampton Museum & Art Gallery (MANAG) 2014

- outcome of the sale
 - stripped museum of its official accreditation
 - barred the museum from public funding
 - destroyed public trust in the borough council
 - tarnished the international reputation of UK and its museums



Controversial sale by Christie's in London – achieved £15.8m

- ❑ Initiated by Northampton borough council in order to fund a major extension
- ❑ statue given to the town in 1880
- ❑ Controversy increased price by almost £10m
- ❑ Egypt criticised sale: council should have consulted with his government first: "Sekhemka belongs to Egypt and if Northampton borough council does not want it then it must be given back. It's not ethical that it will be sold for profit and also not acceptable."
- ❑ identity of buyer not revealed by Christie's

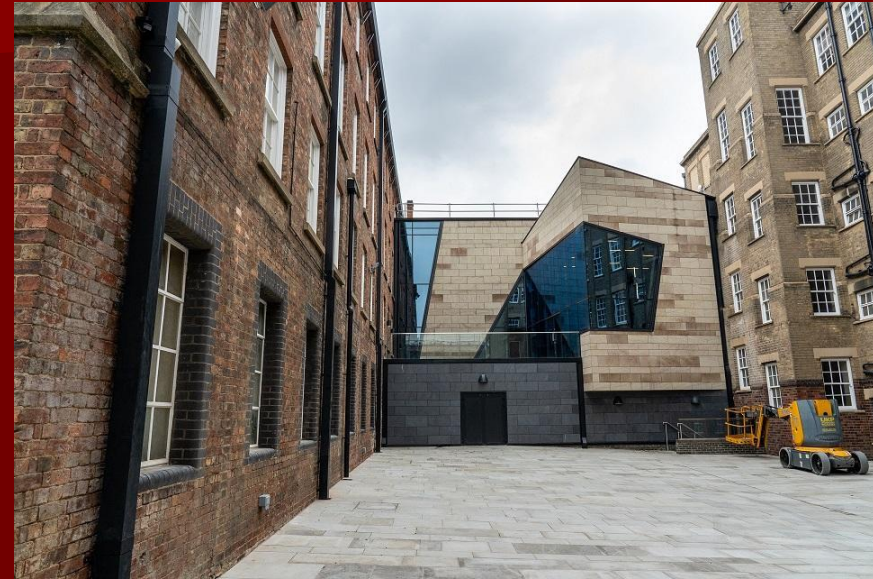


What was going on?

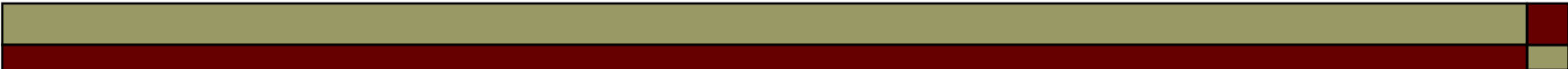
- ❑ Council “assured” that "every penny" raised would be ring-fenced for the museum service / redevelopment
- ❑ opposed by Northampton residents – *Save Sekhemka Action Group* – "the blackest day in Northampton's cultural history", town "shamed across the world"
- ❑ Arts Council England stripped accreditation status → cannot win future government grants and funding as against guidelines for museums (commitment to managing collections for the enjoyment / benefit of users)
- ❑ Museum appealed: not on display for 4 years prior, nobody asked to see it during that period

2022 – Re-accreditation

- Council leader Johnathan Nunn told the BBC in 2021 that he was “not sure” if a similar sale would happen again.
- “If it did it would be done in a very open, consultative way, with people genuinely being able to understand what the implications were, and to have their say,” he said.

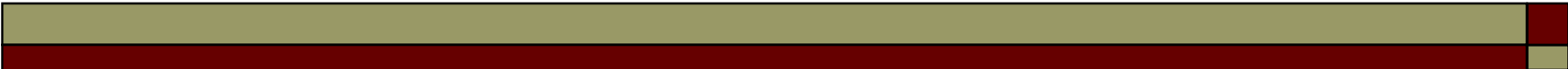


- <https://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/news/people/northampton-museum-gets-accreditation-back-from-arts-council-eight-years-on-from-ps158m-sale-of-sekhemka-statue-3945311>



National Trust US

“To deaccession an object is to formally and permanently remove it from the collections. To dispose of an object is to relinquish title and remove the object from the premises.”



Arguments for R&D

- ❑ Too much material
- ❑ Changes in collecting
- ❑ Not enough storage
- ❑ Sustainability
- ❑ Expose and understanding of collections
- ❑ Education and Outreach



Arguments against R&D

- ❑ Expensive
- ❑ Time consuming
- ❑ "Should keep everything"
- ❑ Risk management

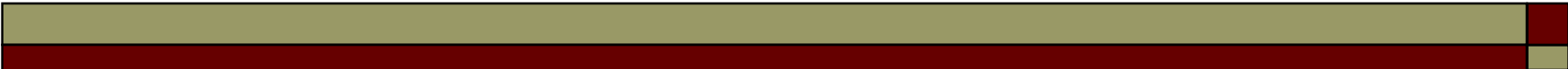


More often than not museums do not carry out R&D because:

- ❑ Lack of understand of significance
- ❑ Difficult to identify stakeholders
- ❑ Lack of information about the collections
- ❑ Costs
- ❑ Working out who to work with
- ❑ Staff
- ❑ Too much risk

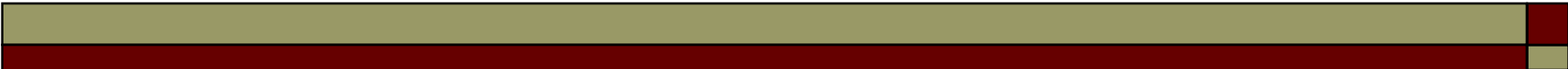
Other routes that do not lead to a waste bin...

- ❑ Re-packing and re-boxing
- ❑ Storage
- ❑ Transfer
- ❑ Future policies and procedures
- ❑ Update of professional standards



Archival Material

- ❑ Digitisation
- ❑ Cost
- ❑ Time
- ❑ Space released
- ❑ Accessibility



Archaeological Archives

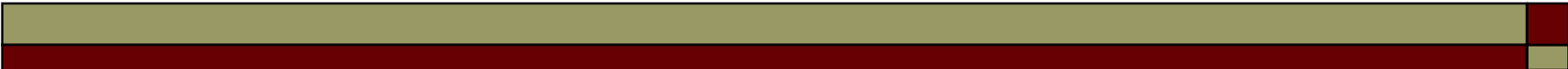
- None of the policies really relate to dealing with archaeological material, and yet the as a collection theme, most museums (not including theme specific or natural history/science museums) have a larger quantity of archaeological material in comparison to other typologies, costume etc..



Case study

- Southampton City Council
 - Selling Sir Alfred Munnings *After the Race*
 - Selling 1 of 2 Rodin bronzes, *Crouching Woman* or *Eve*





Finances over ethics

- ❑ The desired price or expected price is not always the price that is paid
- ❑ Objects being sold into private hands always raises ethical issues