Standardisation in Sussex?
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Sussex Museums Group is a coalition of 47 museums from East and West Sussex that aims to provide mutual support, training and to share best practice among its membership. In 2013 its specially formed Archaeology Working Party (consisting of representatives from museums, commercial archaeological units, local voluntary groups, artefact specialists and planning archaeologists) started the process of creating a set of guidelines for the selective retention, deselection and rationalisation of archaeological archives. The intention is that these could be incorporated into the deposition procedures for archaeology collecting museums in the region.

Core to the process was to the aim to create archives that had *maximum potential for public engagement*. There is after all little point in curating collections that cannot directly or indirectly benefit the public.

The obstacles to achieving this are:

- *A lack of storage space*. The data for this have been well rehearsed elsewhere. A large number of museums have been forced to cease collecting archaeological archives due to lack of available space. Without significant additional funding, new space is unlikely to be created. Such funding is extremely unlikely to be obtained and so alternative solutions are needed.
- *A significant backlog*. Where archaeological units have been unable to deposit excavated material with museums for several years, backlogs of un-deposited archives are being stored at the units' expense, awaiting deposition. Any space created by a museum (and likely at the museum's expense) will immediately be filled by these backlogs. This could be a disincentive for museums to create new space.
- *A lack of archaeological expertise in museums*. Most museum curators are not archaeological specialists. Even those with an archaeological background are unlikely to have an expertise broad enough to determine what elements of a full archive can be safely deselected or disposed.

The Sussex Museums Group's "Selection, Retention and Disposal Guidelines" (soon to be renamed following CIfA feedback) was launched in November 2015, and are an attempt to partially overcome these obstacles by reducing the volume of archives entering museums without the need for museum archaeological expertise. The principle is that material of "low research potential" is recorded by the excavators and not deposited with a museum. Essentially, while retention of material used to be

assumed, it now has to be justified. The guidelines describe artefact types that should be retained for deposition on a material by material basis. It also describes the minimum standards for recording material that is not deposited.

Drawing on input from commercial archaeological units and planning archaeologists, as well as artefact specialists, the guidelines are compatible with existing working processes and communication structures. It suggests a variety of pathways from excavation to deposition depending on the extent of the excavation and the expertise of the specialists involved. This means that potentially expensive procedures are not imposed on relatively small evaluations and that "trusted" local specialists have more autonomy to dispose of material, which adds efficiency.

It is important that museums embrace these guidelines voluntarily and incorporate them into their existing procedures. Guidelines imposed from elsewhere are unlikely to be adopted by curators, especially considering the lack of archaeological expertise in museums mentioned above. For this reason, the guidelines were developed to be clear and not intimidating to the non-archaeologist, but useable to the artefacts specialist.

Wholesale adoption in full of the guidelines by museums is an unreasonable expectation. Museums have different collections development policies, deposition procedures, resources, administrative structures etc. It is highly unlikely that a single document can be compatible with the full range of procedures that already exist within museums. For this reason they were presented to curators as a "suggested best practice" that could be edited to meet local needs and limitations. While this implies that a national standard will not be possible (unless it is a considerably simplified one), it does mean that the Sussex guidelines could act as a template that could be rolled out over a wider area.

Crucially, while they are a significant step in the right direction, the Sussex guidelines do not entirely overcome the obstacles described above, and so do not in themselves meet the aim of producing archives with maximum potential for public engagement. Implementing them will not create storage space, but only slow the rate at which it is being eroded. This means that the backlog of archaeological archives held by contractors will not reduce. It also does not in itself address the lack of archaeological expertise in museums.

Potentially the guidelines could be applied retrospectively to existing collections, which would ease the current problems more effectively, especially if done in parallel with construction of additional storage. The logistics, funding and ethics of this are matters for future discussion.

A matter for ongoing consideration is how the guidelines are enforced. Museums lack the resources and expertise to check incoming archives. This would also be an unmanageable burden on planning archaeologists. While units almost always operate to the highest professional and ethical standards, the concern that a minority might ignore the guidelines, thus creating an unbalanced business environment, is a very real one. Ongoing monitoring is needed to establish the extent and severity of this problem and any possible solutions.

The guidelines themselves can be viewed **here.** This version is being trialled in Sussex and will be updated in November 2016 following feedback from stakeholders. Any suggestions on how they could be improved would be welcome. Suggestions, comments and queries should be directed to Dr Rob Symmons at coafish@sussexpast.co.uk.