

EXETER CITY COUNCIL
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY
2 JUNE 2009

EXECUTIVE
16 JUNE 2009

POLICY FOR THE ETHICAL CARE OF HUMAN REMAINS AT RAMM

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To propose a policy for the ethical care of human remains in the museum collection, in the form of an annexe to the Acquisitions and Disposals Policy 2005-2010.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The government's response to the Royal Liverpool Children's Hospital (Alder Hey) scandal in 1999 was the construction of a legal framework that became the Human Tissue Act 2004 (HTA). The provisions of this Act cover consent, storage, research and public display of human remains and it came into force in September 2006.
- 2.2 The intention is to regulate organisations through licensing. Museums do not need a licence for displaying material that is over 100 years old and for holdings in possession at the time the Act came into force. However, one is needed for human tissue that post-dates 1906. The Act's Codes of Practice are split into six main parts, which primarily focus on the medical profession. However, museums are included because human tissue is common to some historical collections.
- 2.3 In 2005, DCMS published the Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums. This was designed to help the museum sector by further clarifying the roles and responsibilities of those institutions holding human remains in their collections and making knowledge of such collections publicly accessible. The document states

Museums should put in place, make public (for example through their website) and as necessary review, a policy on human remains in their care. (2005:16)

3. POLICY FOR THE ETHICAL CARE OF HUMAN REMAINS

- 3.1 A copy of the draft policy is available in the Members' Room or on the Council's website. The key element is the first general statement:

Exeter City Council acknowledges that human remains within its collections once belonged to living individuals and will care for them in a respectful and culturally sensitive manner, while also making relevant parts of the collection available for repatriation, research and learning.

- 3.2 The policy uses a definition derived from that used by the Department for Culture Media and Sport:

RAMM uses the term human remains to mean the body, or its parts, of once living people, specifically in reference to modern humans (Homo sapiens sapiens). This

definition includes osteological material (bone and teeth), soft tissue (including organs and skin), blood and slide preparations of human tissue. It does not include human nails or human hair; the latter is relatively commonly found in Victorian jewellery for example, we do not believe this material should be classified as human remains, but should be treated as being culturally sensitive.

- 3.3 The amount of human remains held in the collections is not great. There are about 20 items in the Ethnography collection, while the Antiquities collection contains material deriving from the many archaeological digs in and around Exeter together with a small collection of Egyptian human remains, including the mummy of Shep En-Mut. The Natural History collection contains slides of Victorian origin.

It is part of the guidance on the act that the museum should make this information available and accessible, which it will proceed to do once the policy has been adopted.

4. RECOMMENDED

- 1) that Scrutiny Committee Community support and Executive Committee adopt the Policy for the Ethical Care of Human Remains as an annexe to the overall Acquisition and Disposal Policy.

HEAD OF LEISURE & MUSEUMS

S:PA/LP/ Committee/609SCC1
20.5.09

COMMUNITY & ENVIRONMENT DIRECTORATE

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)
Background papers used in compiling this report: