

Ethics

Covid-19: the ethics of contemporary collecting

Sharon Heal, 03.04.2020

A statement from the Museums Association

People who work in and with museums are already thinking about how we might collect objects, ephemera and stories relating to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Whilst it's important that museums record this challenging period which is having an impact on the whole of society on an international scale, we clearly need to be approaching contemporary collecting with sensitivity and respect.

Museums have responded incredibly well to the crisis, supporting staff and volunteers, closing institutions and ensuring their collections and spaces are safe and secure, as well as donating food and equipment to points of need. It's important that we put the needs of our communities and the public first in this crisis.

In regard to contemporary collecting we should think about being respectful, sensitive and ethical. In the current crisis all three principles of the Code of Ethics apply to the work of museums and we should bear them in mind in all that we do.

Public benefit and engagement: we should be thinking about how we keep our public engaged when our institutions are closed; there has already been a huge amount of digital innovation, from putting collections online to repurposing existing tours and content.

In addition we should consider how we engage the public in any contemporary collecting of Covid-19 material in a supportive and considered way. We should also consider how we support our communities and community partners and seek to add value where we can to wider efforts.

Stewardship of collections: the Code states that we should acquire collections "with transparency and competency in order to generate knowledge and engage the public." We should be open about what we are collecting and why, and should consider the interpretation and care of digital items including social media posts and other material.

Individual and institutional integrity: the Code states that museums should uphold the highest levels of integrity; this especially applies when collecting contemporary items in this crisis. We should be open about what we are doing, clear about our motivations and respectful of people's emotions and feelings. This also applies to our support for staff and volunteers.