

Museum Essentials: Ethical Practice – Internal Ethics Committee Case Study

National Museums Liverpool (NML) has an international reputation for its ethical approach. NML's values state that - as an organisation it is welcoming, honest and educational, and as a team they are trustworthy, respectful and inclusive. This means that NML must be confident in making ethically sound decisions, demonstrating institutional integrity and always acting in the public interest. Its commitment to ethical practices is reflected through partnerships, programmes and activities.

To implement the organisation's values effectively, structures are in place to enable staff to actively apply them. The Ethics Group at NML, set up in 2015, is essential to support the ongoing commitment to ethical working practices.

“National Museums Liverpool takes its ethical responsibility very seriously. Museums are facing ever greater scrutiny over the ethical implications of collections management, funding, story telling and public integrity. Our Ethics Group acts as the conscience of NML and helps provide an environment where staff can confidently recognise and address challenging situations in a safe place of work.” Laura Pye, Director, National Museums Liverpool

The NML Ethics Group is an internal advisory group that provides guidance and makes recommendations on ethical issues arising out of NML's work. The group promotes good ethical working practices for all staff and Trustees and has dedicated support from the top of the organisation.

Aims

- Embed ethical thinking across NML and provide a framework and guidance for staff to manage ethical processes.
- Ensure NML keeps abreast of external influences that may risk or damage NML's reputation and brief staff accordingly.
- Encourage staff to raise concerns about any matter they believe is not in line with NML's Values and Policies and they may feel uncomfortable about.
- Make recommendation and provide advice and ensure that all cases follow the UK Museums Association's Code of Ethics and subject specialist guidance as required. Responsibility for decision making lies with the Leadership Team and the Board of Trustees.

Outputs

- Using an agreed process, the Ethics Group considers ethical issues in key working areas including, collections management, interpretation, sponsorship and fundraising, commercial operations, media and reputation, visitor engagement, partnerships, governance and workplace.
- The Ethics Group logs all cases to build institutional knowledge on the ethical behaviour of NML and keep a record of rationale and subsequent decision making.
- The Ethics Group coordinates relevant training for the whole organisation and regularly shares guidance, information and updates through internal briefings, staff pages and blogs.
- So as to ensure ongoing dialogue, the Ethics Group has regular updates with the Leadership Team and a representative member of the Board of Trustees.

Membership and meetings

- Membership of the Ethics Group represents staff from across NML. Membership is by expression of interest and reviewed every two years to ensure representation from key work areas.
- Members are granted a reasonable amount of time to attend meetings and carry out tasks as part of the expected outputs agreed in minutes of the meeting.
- There are 10 meetings a year and they are scheduled far enough in advance to enable as many members as possible to attend.
- Open and honest discussion is encouraged during meetings. All opinions are valued. Due to the potentially sensitive and subjective nature of discussions, group members are asked to respect The Chatham House Rule during meetings.

“Co-ordinating the Ethics Group for NML is a fascinating challenge. The issues brought to us are, by their very nature, difficult and can be divisive, but we feel immensely encouraged by an organisation which wholeheartedly and proactively supports ethical working practices in all our work” Francoise McClafferty and Liz Stewart, Co-chairs of the National Museums Liverpool Ethics Group

Would this work in your organisation?