

## Working Ethically: Ethical Dilemmas

### Ethical Dilemma

A member of staff working for a historic house charity contacts the Ethics Committee to seek advice in relation to recent behaviour from the incumbent family within their ancestral home.

A new exhibition about a key family figure is in development and the conversations with the family about object choices and oral histories are suggesting that they have a particular view about how this figure's story should be told.

This is a complex relationship and they want to ensure that they are able to have a conversation that reflects the Code of Ethics but doesn't damage the long-term relationship.

### Response

The principle within the Code of Ethics that most resonates with this dilemma is Principle 1 – Public Engagement and Public Benefit.

In the work that we do we need to ensure that we use collections for public benefit – for learning, inspiration and enjoyment. In the situation described the points within this principle that are most pertinent are:

1.2 Ensure editorial integrity in programming and interpretation. Resist attempts to influence interpretation or content by particular interest groups, including lenders, donors and funders.

1.4 Ensure that information and research presented or generated by the museum is accurate. Take steps to minimise or balance bias in research undertaken by the museum.

These should be seen as priorities in sharing collections and their interpretation, whether the collections are permanent or loaned.

How these ethical behaviours are presented to a living descendent is critical and should be highlighted at the very beginning of the relationship, explicitly stated and agreed as part of any loan or partnership agreement. The Code of Ethics could be referenced explicitly or as an appendix.

If it hasn't been then the organisation may have to tread more carefully in relation to explaining the issues and impact. This might come as part of a loan or partnership agreement review or in this case in advance of the exhibition topic being identified, for example their focus on a 'positive story' may have influenced whether this exhibition was chosen as opposed to having to influence once the exhibition is given the green light, programmes have been confirmed and resources used.

Any early engagement can be built on further by gaining their interest and enthusiasm at the start of the exhibition planning stage, this will create a sense of ownership and buy-in which will contribute to the exhibition's success.

If this hasn't been the case, having an open and honest conversation with the family as soon as possible is essential. You may need to reflect on what 'argument' will most influence them, you may think about who else will influence them on your behalf; are there any stronger relationships within or outside of the family that could encourage a change in thinking?

As an organisation you need to think about the longer-term relationship and the associated public benefit and as such it is important to agree what is negotiable within the context of the Code of Ethics. Is there anyway there can be panels with different stories? Does the associated programming afford any opportunities to have multiple views?

As with many ethical dilemmas there are clear good foundations of ethical practice that if included at first would mean that there would be no future dilemma.