

AHONOURING THE ANCIENT DEAD

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CHARITY REF. EW02473

Michael Ellis MP,
Under Secretary of State for Arts, Heritage and Tourism,
Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport,
100 Parliament Street,
London,
SW1A 2BQ

22.9.18

Dear Mr Ellis,

Guidance for the care of Human Remains in Museums (DCMS 2005)

I am a Trustee of a UK organisation called Honouring the Ancient Dead, which was set up when the DCMS guidelines were originally being developed. We advocate respect for what are commonly called 'human remains' and their related funereal artefacts. In particular we focus on the physical evidence of ancestors who don't fall within either the scope of the Human Tissue Act (2004), i.e. those less than 100 years old, or the Guidance for Best Practice for Treatment of Human Remains Excavated from Christian Burial Grounds in England (2005). Please find further information on our website: <http://www.honour.org.uk>

These guidelines are a very important document, but they are now 13 years old, and they do need to be revisited and updated. We therefore request that the DCMS carries out this work, or commissions an organisation, such as Arts Council England or the Museums Association, to produce a new edition on its behalf. The guidance was originally developed through a consultation process, which HAD contributed to, and valued greatly. If they are going to be reviewed, then a similar process would be very helpful. HAD believes the 2005 Guidance needs to be reviewed for the following reasons:

- Much has happened since 2005 both in the UK and further afield. The publication of the Guidance stimulated much debate and numerous scholarly articles. Many museums published their own human remains policies, and this subject has much greater awareness than it did pre-2005. This is especially the case since the dead of the First World War will shortly have died over 100 years ago. All this new thinking now needs to be reflected in a new edition of the Guidance.
- The emphasis in the 2005 Guidance was very much on the return of skeletons, cremations and associated material to other countries. This was an important issue at the time for National Museum collections, and again a body of experience and good practice has built up around this which needs to be reflected in a new edition of the Guidance.
- However, the main issue for most non-national museums relates to skeletons, cremations and associated material in their care which originated in the British Isles. In our view the 2005 Guidance did not give this sufficient consideration and a new edition could remedy this.
- The 2005 Guidance refers only to skeletons, cremations and associated material in museum collections. However, most of these are maintained by museums as a Statutory function, in designated local archaeological archives. These comprise of

finds deposited as a result of local archaeological excavations, which nowadays tend to arise as a result of developer activity. In our view the Guidance does not refer sufficiently to the practices, duties and responsibilities of archaeology teams before, during and after discovery and exhumation. Nor does it consider the key role of the Ministry of Justice in issuing Exhumation Licences to archaeological fieldwork teams which make this process possible. This issue is increasing in importance as the pace of redevelopment speeds up, and more and more of the people who lived and died here before we did are excavated. In our view a new edition could remedy this.

We do hope that you will give this request serious consideration. We know that you appreciate that all aspects of a community's or a nation's heritage are important to its citizens, but interest in and respect for the people who lived and died here before our modern age is especially so.