

Documentation Toolkit

Written and produced by Museums Worcestershire

Introduction

Museums are full of objects and collections. These collections need to be documented in order to understand what it is that you have, where it came from and where exactly it is located. Other things to think about are the legalities and ethical considerations of your collections and whether they are being met.

The Documentation Toolkit is designed to help you go about putting procedures in place to document your collection.

Guiding principles

1. If you don't have one, draft a Documentation Procedure Manual

A manual will help you and those in your organisation keep the documentation of your collections consistent and on track. Make sure you stick to it!

2. Make sure that everyone is aware of the procedures

If everyone is aware of them, they should follow them. Keep communicating the procedures if they get forgotten – don't fall into the trap of letting them slide.

3. Keep the procedures in line with SPECTRUM

The SPECTRUM procedures from Collections Trust are sector guidance for museum documentation that accreditation recognise. Even if you are not accredited, the procedures are good guidance for maintaining your documentation.

4. Maintain awareness of collection legalities and ethical considerations

Make sure you are up to date and informed on aspects such as GDPR, transfer of title, keeping human remains, firearms etc – have policies in place.

5. Backlog documentation

If you have a collection which hasn't been maintained in its documentation, come up with a plan to tackle it.

Set your goals

Remember to set SMART goals

Specific: Plan and set out tasks for each section of your documentation

Measurable: Keep a track of accessioned objects and inventories by having an annual review.

Achievable: Working in bitesized chunks will help you chip away at a backlog and will help keep you motivated.

Realistic: Define your resources and compare against your timeframe – do you need extra help / funding?

Time: Set timeframes for particular projects such as collection reviews and backlog projects.

Conduct an audit

- What are your current documentation procedures and are they fit for purpose?
- Do you know what you have in your collection? Collate all the documentation that you have and compare it against your collection in an audit.
- Define all of your audit goals – what questions do you want it to answer?
- Is everything documented? At what level is it documented? Do you know where it all is?
- Define who is to take the lead and communicate to your team.

How to guidance and best practise information

Best practise for documenting collections is to follow SPECTRUM procedures – there are 9 primary procedures that you should follow to keep track of your collection on paper. These are:

- Object Entry
- Acquisition and Accessioning
- Location and Movement Control
- Inventory
- Cataloguing
- Objects Exit
- Loans In (borrowing objects)
- Loans Out (lending objects)
- Documentation Planning.

All of these procedures are outlined and can be accessed on the Collections Trust website (see Resources section of this toolkit).

There are other procedures that you can adopt that will help keep your collection documentation on track, such as condition checking, insurance, rights management and audits etc. The 9 primary ones are key. You may find the other procedures are also very useful to your organisation.

Collection Management System (CMS) – what system do you use or want to use ie MODES, ADLIB etc. If you are in the market for a CMS, make sure you pick one that does what you want it to do – but remember, these are long term investments as they need annual maintenance upgrades that you will have to pay for.

Documentation review

If you have a collection that has had very little documentation or have had times where documentation was not being performed, the best thing to do would be to perform a Documentation Review. Find out how much is documented by comparing it to the primary procedures – how much of your collection is documented? Where are the gaps? Do you have enough information?

Its ok to say that you don't have enough information – sometimes that is often the case.

Start documenting your collection by doing a basic inventory, by box, shelf or collection. It helps to first write a plan for your inventory (SPECTRUM guidance on inventories will give you a good idea of what to include, see resources), how are you going to do it, what resources do you have to do it, what key information are you going to include and what numbering system is going to be used:

- accession number if you have it?
- Entry number?
- Or assigned temporary number?

Once the inventory is complete, its time to go over what documentation you have

- accession registers: has the object been accessioned? If no number is on the object, look for descriptions, manufacturers names on the object, colour etc.
- Object History Files: check these files for information that may have been collected at the point of entry into the museum.
- Entry numbers: check your Entry register to see whether it has come through the door but hasn't been accessioned yet.
- Meeting Notes: Did you discuss the object during meetings? Check past meetings to see whether it was discussed and what was decided. Is the object historic and been found on a shelf: suggest that you discuss 'found in museum' objects within your team to see whether you want to accession it
- look at your current Collections Development Policy to see whether it ticks all the boxes and of course, don't forget to check your collection to make sure you don't already have several good examples of it.
- Catalogue Cards: check to see whether a card has been made for the object and what information has been added to it.

Documentation for archaeological archives

Some accredited museums look after archaeology collections. They will have Deposition Guidelines for contractors to use in order to deposit archaeology. The guidelines set out how the archive should be prepared. For instance, the archive needs to include the site code, title of the project and location.

Archaeological archives are in three parts; finds, paper and digital and also needs to include a detailed inventory that can be cross referenced with contents and catalogue lists for all parts of the archive. Digital archives should be uploaded to a Core Trust Seal Repository like the Archaeology Data Service.

Handy hints

There are lots of toolkits online that can be used as guides and templates to help you with documentation such as the Museums Association and Collections Trust. They are all so incredibly useful!

Museums Worcestershire case study – documentation review

In 2016 Museums Worcestershire undertook a rationalisation project, following a store move. Five pianos were found in long term storage in various states of condition.

A Documentation Review was undertaken to ascertain what information was held about the pianos. Two of them had their accession numbers attached and found to have good documentation and would still have been collected under the current Collection Development Policy. These two pianos were retained in store.

A detailed examination of Entry records, Accession Registers, Loans In Register and object history folders was employed to understand if there was any reference to the remaining pianos. None was found. At this stage, it was felt within the team that we had done all we could to find mention of them and so they were considered not accessioned and put forward for disposal. A Collections Team Meeting was held, and the pianos were discussed and put through the museum's Acquisitions and Disposals Procedure which includes a significance matrix - this is designed to rate the object against a series of questions. Did they fit the museum's collection policy, how many do the museum already have, what condition are they in, can the museum display them etc.

A report was written detailing the work completed to ascertain the information held within the museum's documentation systems about the pianos, the outcome of the significance matrixes and the recommendations of the team. This was then put forward to the next meeting of the museum governing committee who had the final decision on the future of the pianos within the collection. The committee agreed with the collections team and it was decided to rationalise the three pianos.

Two of the pianos were repurposed as set dressing for a room at Hartlebury Castle and at The Commandery, Worcester. The fifth piano was in such a poor condition that it was deemed unsuitable for display or for education handling. The Museums Association (MA) Disposals Toolkit was an invaluable piece of advice for Museums Worcestershire when deciding what to do with the piano. An advertisement was placed in the MA journal, and five museums who have musical instrument collections were contacted to see if it would enhance their existing collections. Two conservators were also contacted but unfortunately the piano was in such a bad condition, it was unsuitable. The piano was finally collected by a piano restorer who used it for spare parts. All correspondence, the review, exit form etc were all documented and kept together in the Exit Filing system. A condition check and photographic survey was also included.

Its worth bearing in mind that this kind of smaller documentation review can take a number of months. Don't let that put you off, just plan accordingly.

Action plan

Short term actions

- Check your existing documentation against SPECTRUM procedures by undertaking a Documentation Review. If you do not have a documentation manual, draft one.
- **Do you have a backlog?**
Create a plan to tackle that backlog. Make sure you include timeframes and resources available and resources required – do you need help with it? Do you have the funds to do it?
- **Make sure your team are aware of the policies and procedures.**
It's very often Front of House staff that deal with the public coming in to leave objects – make sure the staff are aware of what to do.
- Make sure your rights management is up to date with government legislation.

TOP TIP: Make sure you keep everyone informed of your procedures.

Medium term actions

- **Undertake a Collections Review**
– make sure you know what objects you have got.
- **Have an Audit** – define what you want the audit to do. For instance, movement control and location – do you and your team know where all your objects are?
- During your audit you might want to check whether the objects are marked or labelled – refer to Collections Trust guide for reuniting numbers with orphaned objects.
- There are really good guidelines about how to mark and label your objects – a link is provided in our reference section.

TOP TIP: Inventories and backlog – don't get overwhelmed if you have a lot to do, just take bites off it.

Long term actions

- **Inventories** – these can take some time. Schedule your work within a timeframe and set review points.
- **Cataloguing** is a never-ending process. Make sure that you collect the information that is outlined in the SPECTRUM primary procedure, whether it is in a CMS or spreadsheet. Ensure the catalogue is updated whenever research is undertaken for exhibition or engagement.
- Your documentation procedural manual and plan will form an important part of your accreditation application and as such will need to be routinely reviewed.

TOP TIP: Keep checking your procedures against what is being done. Make sure that everyone is doing it by the book!

Reviewing progress

Review your progress by drafting annual reviews

- Keep accession lists of all objects accessioned in a financial year (with valuations to help with your insurance).
- Review your backlog every year against what has been achieved but also what has not been achieved within your timeframe including why (pandemics are on top of the list!).
- Think about adapting your goals – review your resources again to see if anything has changed. If it has, react and think about what you can do to combat it. It might mean looking for a different funding stream or stretching out your timeframe a little, perhaps recruiting some more volunteers.

Resources & further reading

Links to documentation templates

<https://collectiontrust.org.uk/resource/tracing-living-people/>

<https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/ethics/code-of-ethics/>

<https://ma-production.ams3.digitaloceanspaces.com/app/uploads/2020/06/18145447/31032014-disposal-toolkit-8.pdf>

Rights Management - <https://collectiontrust.org.uk/resource/rights-management-suggested-procedure/>

Marking and Labelling – <https://collectiontrust.org.uk/resource/labelling-and-marking-museum-objects-booklet/>

Websites for further advice

<https://www.museumsassociation.org/>

<https://collectiontrust.org.uk/spectrum/>

<https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/ethics/disposal/>

Copyright, Data Protection and Licensing Experts – Naomi Korn <https://naomikorn.com/>

Society of Museum Archaeology toolkits - <http://socmusarch.org.uk/training/smart-project/>

Publications

- ***Managing Previously Unmanaged Collections: A Practical Guide for Museums***
Angela Kipp – Rowman and Littlefield, 2016
- ***Basic Condition Reporting: A Handbook***
Southeastern Registrars Association – Rowman and Littlefield, 2015



Funded by
Historic England

Supported by funding from Historic England

www.museumsworcestershire.org.uk

Museums Worcestershire is a partnership between
Worcester City and Worcestershire County Councils

MUSEUMS 
WORCESTERSHIRE
Art • Heritage • Events