Collections management framework

This guidance explains what is meant by a collections management framework¹ and provides basic information about what a collections management framework contains. Using this guidance will help you to assess whether you wish to work towards adopting a full collections management framework.

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1. What is a collections management framework?

A collections management framework is a term used to describe a structured method for improving your collections management processes over time. It is a set of components that provide the foundations and organisational arrangements for designing, implementing, monitoring, reviewing and improving collections management processes throughout the organisation.

¹ This collections management framework is based on PAS 197: Code of practice for cultural collections management.
Figure 1. A collections management framework

2. Collections management framework and the museums Accreditation scheme

The Accreditation Standard (2018) requires museums to develop policies to guide their collections management work. Using a collections management framework approach is one possible way of managing collections.

3. Collections management policies

Collections management policies set the tone and provide long term guiding principles for the management of the collection. It can be helpful to think of a policy as a statement of the ‘what’ and the ‘why’. It should not include information about the ‘how’ (procedures), or detail of the ‘when’, ‘who’ and ‘where’ (plans).

What is a policy?

Policies set out the principles and rules for guiding decisions and achieving desired outcomes or delivering the mission and strategic aims of an organisation. They are the overall intentions and direction of an organisation as formally expressed by top management or the governing body.

A policy should be written in broad enough terms to last for several years, whereas a plan will be reviewed and updated more frequently. Procedures are developed as working

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documents at an operational level. Although they may be referred to, they should not be included within a policy.

When policies are written they may be linked together in, either in one master document with an overarching collections management policy statement that covers information common to all, or simply by cross-referencing the policies to each other. This introductory policy should refer to the mission statement, or statement of purpose, of the organisation, and the legislation, statutory requirements and ethical codes that are common to all areas of collections management work. It should include any broad policy statements that are common to all areas of collections management activity, so these do not need to be repeated in each of the subject-specific policies that follow.

What is a mission?

The mission of any organisation is intended to guide strategic decisions. Top management should prepare, document and be guided by a mission statement setting out the collecting organisation’s purpose in relation to the collection.

An effective mission is usually one that is simple and that has been devised with input from as many staff, volunteers and stakeholders as possible. As a result, it is an area where small organisations may find it easier to achieve a strong focused mission than large ones.

For collecting organisations, the mission needs to reflect this core purpose in order to ensure that collections priorities are not lost amongst all the other strands of policy. This is particularly true in larger organisations within which holding collections may not be the primary purpose. In these situations, it is sometimes necessary to develop a collections specific mission statement at an appropriate level within the organisation to feed up into the overall strategic vision for the organisation and also to guide the work within the collecting department or section.

Collections management policies

The four policy areas are:

- Collections development (also known as acquisition and disposal).
- Collections information (also known as documentation).
- Collections access.
- Collections care and conservation.

These four policies mirror the required policies for museum Accreditation (4.2, 5.1, 7.1, and 6.1)

![Collections Management Policy Diagram](image)

Figure 2. The collections management policies

To achieve maximum public benefit, whilst also ensuring long term care of the collections, these four areas of policy need to be developed with close reference to each other, and in
line with the overall mission of the organisation. Altogether, this constitutes an integrated collections management policy.

You are not tied to these policy headings. The exact terminology and structures you use are not important so long as the subject areas are covered adequately, and the policies complement rather than conflict with each other.

3.1 Collections development policy

A collections development policy is an important document that helps your museum to shape its collections. The policy is used to outline the strengths and weaknesses of your collection and to describe how you would like to develop the collection in the future through acquisition and rationalisation.

Due to the high number of important legal and ethical considerations involved in acquisition and disposal, the Accreditation Standard refers applicants to a template policy to ensure that museums include key elements in their policies.

The 2018 Accreditation Standard (4.2) states that a collections development policy must include:

- The museum’s statement of purpose.
- An overview of current collections.
- Themes and priorities for future collecting.
- Themes and priorities for rationalisation and disposal.
- Information about the legal and ethical framework for acquiring and disposing of items.
- The date you’ll next review the policy.

3.2 Collections documentation policy

Collections documentation and the management of information about your collections underpins all the other collections work in the museum. It is important to have a clear policy statement defining your commitment to gathering storing and making available information about the collections.

Many museums have systems for collating and storing information about collections in place. However, in some cases, systems are not up to date, or the information about the collections is of a variable quality. A documentation policy statement can be used to make a commitment to improving the systems (both manual and electronic) and to set out the standards that you are aiming to achieve. A documentation policy statement can be short and concise and should reflect the size and nature of your museum.

At a minimum, it is recommended that the documentation (information) policy should contain:

- A description of how collections information is documented kept up to date and made available. Or, a statement of what the museum aims to achieve, eg it is likely that you will reference Spectrum 5.0.
- Reference to the legal requirements and ethical codes that govern collections documentation within the museum.

Each procedure in Spectrum 5.0 has information and guidance about policy.

Note: Some museums may have a wider information policy setting out their approach to the management of all information within the museum including management records and other
data held by the museum. In this case, the documentation policy required for Accreditation may be integrated within the wider information policy.

### 3.3 Collections care and conservation policy

Collections care and conservation is a major part of collections management activity in a museum and it is important to have a clear policy statement setting out the museum’s approach. The following definitions may help to distinguish the distinct areas of activity:

- **Collections care** – a range of activities intended to safeguard a collection. These activities can include organisational policies, security, storage, cleaning, maintenance, handling, scientific investigation, environmental monitoring and control, exhibitions and loans, conservation, provision of surrogates and emergency planning.
- **Conservation** includes:
  - **Remedial conservation** – interventive techniques applied to an item to achieve chemical and physical stabilisation for the purpose of extending the useful life of the item to ensure its continued availability.
  - **Preventive conservation** - choosing and managing museum buildings, site and environment to achieve optimum conditions, including environmental monitoring and control, pest management, storage and display provision.

In times of limited resources museums are encouraged to take a strategic approach to protecting and conserving the collections. For example, by using risk assessments, and prioritising collections care work in line with the overall strategic goals of the organisation, it is possible to target remedial conservation at areas of the collection that are most often requested for loan, display, or research. Your collection care and conservation policy can be used to outline these strategic priorities for remedial conservation.

At a minimum, it is recommended that the collections care and conservation policy statement should contain:

- A commitment to a risk management approach to collections care. This would entail carrying out regular risk assessments and using the outcomes to inform decisions about collections care and conservation.
- Reference to the legal requirements and ethical codes that govern collections care and conservation within the museum.
- A description of how collections care and conservation issues are communicated. ie – state how you intend to keep staff, volunteers and stakeholders informed.

Additionally recommendations for collections care and conservation planning, the policy statement can include commitments to:

- Environmental monitoring.
- Environmental control – you may specify the range of environmental conditions you aim to maintain.
- Building maintenance.
- Housekeeping.
- A policy of consulting accredited professionals for advice and for remedial conservation treatment.

### 3.4 Collections access policy
Within the Accreditation Standard (2018) the requirement for an access policy statement is included in Section 7 Be accessible to the public. Widening access and improving the user experience is high on most museum agendas.

Approaching the development of all four policies in an integrated way and ensuring that access policy priorities are in tune with the wider work of collections management, will bring tangible benefits to both the museum users and the collections.

At a minimum, it is recommended that the access policy statement should contain:

- A description of how the organisation aims to provide access to its collection and information about the collection in a way that is in line with organisation’s mission statement, including how the organisation:
  - Facilitates physical, sensory and intellectual access to items in the collection and collections information on site and, where applicable, virtually.
  - Lends and borrows items to/from individuals or other organisations.
  - Displays items to the public.
  - Utilises surrogates.
  - Where applicable, manages collections and items that are handled and operated.
  - Identifies users and their needs and barriers to access.
- The legal requirements that govern the organisation and other requirements the organisation aims to comply with in providing access to its collection.
- A commitment to manage the collection within a specific ethical code.
- The type and extent of commercial access that will be granted to items taking account of intellectual property constraints.
- An assertion that the competing demands of access and long-term care will be managed in accordance with the outcome of the collection care risk assessment.

Additionally, your access policy may contain specific statements about access to the collection by:

- School groups.
- Community groups.
- Researchers.
- Other specific groups relevant to your museum.

Some museums will have separate loan policies, or these may be included within the overall collections access statement. The policy needs to be proportionate and should reflect the size and priorities of your organisation.

The 2018 Accreditation Standard (7.1) states that a collections access policy should cover ‘… how people can see, use, and reference your collection, gain access to your museum buildings and sites, and how you share information about the collection with people.’

This should include:

- Using a variety of interpretative methods to exhibit the collections.
- Enabling public access to the collections, buildings and sites, and associated information.
- The date you’ll next review the policy.
4. The benefits of integrated policies

Although not specifically required for Accreditation, most museums will find it beneficial to set the policies up in an integrated using a general collections management policy statement as an introduction to a suite of interlinked policies, as described earlier in this guidance sheet.

Your museum may already develop policy in an integrated way. But, in many museums there is a tendency for policy to be developed by individuals, or by individual departments working in isolation. If this is the case in your museum, committing to developing integrated policies is likely to be very beneficial to your organisation. For best results you will need bring together staff, volunteers or trustees to discuss the policies and to the areas of overlap and in doing so you are likely to achieve a greater understanding of common goals and a clear sense of overall purpose.

Listed below are some examples of policy cross-over to help get you started, but you are likely to discover many more:

- **Collections access – collections documentation**
  You may make a commitment to collate user generated information about your collections and to store it in a retrievable format in the collections management system. See Spectrum 5.0 *Use of collections* procedure.

- **Collections development – collections documentation**
  You may link your documentation and collections development policies by committing to reducing an accessioning backlog. And vice versa, acquisition may be restricted until accessioning is up to date.

- **Collections development – collections care and conservation**
  Collecting new material impacts on your storage, remedial, and preventive conservation programmes. Committing to carrying out an impact assessment before deciding to acquire new items may help to ensure that these two policies work together to ensure the best care of the collection.

- **Collections access policy – collections development**
  You may adapt collections development priorities and collecting themes in response to usage, or public consultation.

5. Internal audit

Internal audit is conducted at defined intervals to determine if elements of the collections management framework has been properly implemented and is maintained.

Internal audit forms an important part of the internal review of a collections management framework. For example, a schedule of internal audits might carry out spot checks to test whether documentation procedures have been implemented correctly. How often audits are carried out, or what elements of the framework are checked are up to each individual organisation and should be in proportion to their capacity to run such audits. The results of audits would be fed into the regular management review of the framework and used to improve the framework.
6. Management review

Top management should ensure that it reviews the organisation’s collections management policy and processes to ensure continued effectiveness. Reviews should take place at defined intervals. They should review the organisation’s collections management framework at defined intervals to ensure its continuing suitability, adequacy and effectiveness.

Management review is nothing neither new, nor unique to a collections management framework. It simply means that an organisation should have scheduled reviews of its operation on a regular basis to: check the effectiveness of its procedures, assess how well planning objectives are being met, review feedback from staff and clients, and to consider updates in legislation etc.

Management review can be as in-depth or wide-ranging as needed and will vary from organisation to organisation.

What is important is that the findings of a review are acted upon and result in changes to policy, plans, or procedures where needed. By carrying out regular and meaningful reviews and acting on the outcome of the reviews, an organisation will improve over time.

7. Continual improvement

Having a framework of mission, integrated policy, planning and processes, internal audit and management review helps museums, libraries and archives to achieve ongoing improvements to their collections management practice and overall management of their organisations.

Collections Trust

Collections Trust’s mission is to help museums capture and share the information that gives their objects meaning. Our standards and advice are used around the world to make museum collections accessible.

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