

Caring for your collections: Preservation planning for large collections

Preservation planning is the method by which the general and specific needs of a collection are determined, priorities established, and resources for implementation are identified.

The main goal of a preservation plan is to determine how to care for the collection now and into the future. Planning also highlights actions that can be realistically achieved and those that cannot.

Before commencing preservation planning it is essential to have a mission statement and collection policy. Policies will allow you to look critically at collections that have accumulated over the years and identify those that do not serve the mission of the organisation. These should be weeded, de-accessioned, or donated to other repositories. This in turn allows you to concentrate your preservation resources on those materials that are truly important. Organisation and description of your collections will also make it much easier to set preservation priorities.

Setting Priorities

- Most institutions have many preservation requirements but limited resources. Therefore, it is essential to establish which actions are vital for consideration first. This requires the judicious setting of priorities.
- Prioritising is the process of deciding which actions will have the most significant impact, which are the most important, and which are the most feasible.
- The simplest way to prioritise preservation actions is to consider the collection against a set of specific criteria. This will ensure that informed value judgments are made before reaching any formal decision. The criteria below will help:

1. Impact

- This is the extent to which an action will improve the preservation of the institution's collections.
- Actions that will result in dramatic improvement in the present condition of materials, substantial decrease in the rate of deterioration, substantial increase in efficiency of current preservation activities, or considerable savings of time, energy or money.
- To evaluate impact, consider the following questions:
 - To what extent will the implementation of a specific action improve preservation of the collections?
 - How great is the immediate impact and what is the potential impact of implementing this action?
- The greater the impact of an action, the higher its priority.

2. Feasibility

- Feasibility or practicality of implementing an action must be considered.
- Actions vary in the amount of time and resources required to implement them. Some are easy to implement, while others are impossible.
- Factors to look at include:
 - Staffing levels and expertise (availability of technical and management capability),
 - Financial implications (capital outlays, expenditures for materials and services, ongoing operating costs, fundraising potential)
 - Policy and procedural changes (if these are required and who can make them).
 - The political feasibility of various actions must also be realistically evaluated.
- If it is not likely that you can implement an action, it may be given a low priority even if its impact is high.

3. Urgency

- Another criterion to consider is urgency of an action.
- An action should be considered urgent if waiting to implement it would cause further problems or would mean bypassing an opportunity.
- All other factors being equal, those actions requiring immediate implementation should be given highest priority.
- The use, storage, condition, and value of the materials in the collections are influential in prioritising actions and are important to consider.
- The amount and type of use items receive is significant. Items on permanent exhibition have different needs from those in storage. Items that are used frequently for research purposes have different needs from those that are looked at infrequently. Items that are used heavily or in a damaging way are at higher risk and in more urgent need of attention.
- Housing of collections is important. Materials that are stored under poor environmental conditions or in harmful containers, or are susceptible to theft, vandalism, fire, or other disasters, also are at higher risk.
- Yet another factor to consider is the value of the materials. The nature of the value of items (monetary, intrinsic, associational, and bibliographic), their uniqueness, their provenance, and their significance to the institution need to be considered.
- For how long materials need to be preserved and in what form they need to be preserved are additional important considerations.
- It might also be useful to get a Significance Assessment (SA) completed on all or parts of your collection. An SA helps explain the meaning and value of a collection and provides further information for its management and interpretation. Submissions for grants to undertake a Significance Assessment can be made through the National Library of Australia – [Community Heritage Grants](#)

Surveying

- Surveys are the most effective way to determine preservation needs and should be used as the basis of the preservation plan.
- PNA - Preservation Needs Assessment
 - Is a report and assessment that is often carried out by a conservator (in private practice). These can be done as general building and environment survey and/or collection specific surveys. Many granting agencies require such surveys before funding storage improvements or treatment. In many ways it is the most important

survey and should always be carried out before more specific surveys are commenced.

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General Survey

- Initially, a general qualitative survey should be carried out. This should focus on the building and environment to identify hazards to collections overall and to help preserve materials using preventive maintenance strategies. For example, this type of survey examines building conditions, storage and handling procedures, disaster preparedness, and policies that impact preservation. Each building is inspected outside and inside, room by room, from a preservation perspective. A formal report is then prepared, which:
 - Identifies potential hazards to the collection (from the environment or from storage and handling procedures).
 - Identifies actions required to insure the long-term preservation of collections (e.g. improving housekeeping, storage enclosures, fire protection, environmental management, etc.).
 - Prioritise the needs of the collections and identifies steps necessary to achieve required preservation actions.
- The general survey is often the first step in an institution's long-term preservation initiative. Many grant agencies require such surveys before funding storage improvements or treatment. In many ways it is the most important survey and should always be carried out before more specific surveys are commenced.

Collection Specific Surveys

- These surveys focus on a specific collection within an institution. Examples are photographic materials, rare books, maps, or architectural drawings. A conservator can visit the institution to assess the collection, making recommendations for its care, including overall preventive maintenance actions as well as conservation treatment options. A collections level survey may also identify groups of objects and individual objects in need of treatment and provide treatment proposals along with cost estimates for treatment using a private conservation company. Priorities for a treatment program for the collection under consideration are included in the written report.

Item-by-Item Condition Surveys

- Item-by-item condition surveys focus on a pre-selected group of artefacts. These surveys are more detailed in their object level assessment of materials than collection surveys and generally consist of in-depth examination of a relatively small group of objects. Treatment priorities are developed and cost estimates are prepared. Item-by-item surveys are often an appropriate next step after a more general collections level survey has been completed. Condition surveys are performed by conservators and can be undertaken for a group of books, works of art, photographs, or archival materials with little or no attention given to collection care issues.

Implementation

- Keep the plan short. A good preservation plan is clear, concise, comprehensive, and realistic. It should clearly state your mission and lay out goals, objectives and actions for the permanent care of the collection.
- Implementing the plan can be difficult. Easy to accomplish, inexpensive changes that benefit the greatest number of items are the best place to start. Weigh your needs and resources. A number of small steps will gradually improve the overall care of your collection.
- Remember that your preservation plan does not stand alone. A good plan is a subset of the overall long-range plan for the institution, helps set collections care priorities, and is an important document for fund-raising.
- Never forget that planning is an ongoing process.

Useful Websites

- Community Heritage Grants - National Library of Australia [Community Heritage Grants](#)
- AICCM Australian Institute for Conservation of Cultural Material www.aiccm.org.au
- AIC American Institute for Conservation <https://www.culturalheritage.org/>
- Find a conservator in private practice through the Australian Institute for Conservation of Cultural Material (AICCM) <https://www.aiccm.org.au/need-a-conservator>

The procedures described here have been used by State Library of Queensland in the care of its collections and are considered suitable by State Library as described; however, State Library will not be responsible for damage to your collections should damage result from the use of these procedures.

Need further information?

(07) 3840 7810 | www.slq.qld.gov.au/preservation



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