

CONSERVATION PLANNING

Museums and galleries have a responsibility to care for their collections, and part of the effective care of your collection is - knowing what the risks to your collection are and having a plan that outlines how you are going to minimise these risks. This is referred to as a conservation plan.

Conservation covers the management of the environment surrounding collections (preventive conservation) and the treatment of individual objects (remedial conservation).

A **conservation plan** is the 'preparation of a strategy for the long-term care of collections. It involves identifying the conservation needs of collections, prioritising them and allocating resources to deal with them'.¹

WHY DEVELOP A CONSERVATION PLAN?

Collections are the most important resource of a museum: they are what make museums unique and, without them, the museum would not exist. Caring for collections makes them safely available to the public now, while helping to preserve them for future generations. A conservation plan helps you do this in a number of ways. As well as helping you understand more about how to care for your collection it can be used to show that you are caring for your collection in a systematic manner which will help you when applying for future grants or obtaining sponsorship.

The key benefits to developing a conservation plan are:

- Expert assistance in determining conservation needs
- Increased knowledge in collections care
- Ensuring that limited resources are used in the most efficient way
- Assistance in securing grants and support
- A well cared for collection

CHOOSING AND WORKING WITH A CONSERVATOR

You will need assistance from a conservator to develop a conservation plan. A conservator is someone who has been trained and is qualified to carry out conservation. In Australia conservators are not accredited. This means that anyone can call

¹ ReCollections: Glossary p 10

themselves a conservator. So it is important to check that anyone you are planning to use is qualified to undertake the work.

Conservators can be specialised in the preventative care and conservation treatment of a particular collection type (specialist conservator) or they can be specialised in the preventative conservation of all collection types (preventive conservator).

Both specialist and preventive conservators can undertake conservation plans, but it is important to check that the conservator you are planning to use is able to provide conservation recommendations for the range of collection types you have in your museum/gallery.

Remember that you are the one with the overall responsibility for the care of your collection. The conservator is there to give you the benefit of their expertise, but you must make it clear what you want from them, what each of your roles and responsibilities will be and how you will communicate during the conservation planning process. Just because they are the expert do not think that you can not make it clear what you want or that you can not be a part of the process. This can be a good opportunity to learn more about caring for your collection.

KEY AREAS IN A CONSERVATION PLAN

Collections do not look after themselves: you need to identify what the collection needs and plan how you are going to meet these needs. There is no one way to undertake a conservation plan, and all conservators will take a slightly different approach. However, they should all incorporate finding the answers to the following questions:

- What does your museum/gallery have?
- What risks is the collection exposed to?
- What collections care practices are in place?
- What are the priorities?

This information should then be collated together to determine a three – five year plan that identifies what actions need to be done, in what order, by who and at what cost.

What does your museum/gallery have?

There are two aspects to identifying what your museum/gallery has: the collection and the resources at your disposal.

It is important at the start to collate all of the information you have on your collection before you can start assessing any risks or identifying any priorities for action. The aspects of the collection that need to be identified include:

- Different collection type
- Materials they are made from
- Size of each collection
- Significance of each collection
- Collection condition

It is then necessary to identify all of the resources that your museum/gallery has that

could be used for to benefit the care of this collection. This will highlight what additional resources are needed and whether existing resources are being used effectively.

Resources that need to be identified include:

- Buildings and space available
- Paid staff and their positions
- Volunteers and their responsibilities and areas of expertise
- Existing budget and sources of income or grants

What risks is the collection exposed to?

Once the information on the collection and the resources available has been collected, it is necessary to work out what risks the collection is currently exposed to. This is the key assessment part of the conservation plan and where the expertise of a conservator is crucial.

A staged approach is often taken which starts by looking at the risks outside the museum/gallery building, then looking at the risks from the building, within each room, within each storage/exhibition system in use, and finally looking at the collection items themselves. So do not be surprised if a conservator starts looking around the building or the surrounding environment. It all contributes to a picture of the risks to the collection that might exist.

There would be a need to examine the buildings and surrounds to see:

- What the external conditions commonly are
- What the general condition of the building(s) is
- Whether the buildings provide an effective buffer against external conditions
- Who is responsible for building maintenance and how often is it undertaken

The next stage would commonly include an examination of the environmental conditions to see:

- What internal conditions are being aimed for and do they meet the needs of this museums collections
- What the existing conditions are
- What the existing environmental control measures are
- Whether environmental monitoring is being undertaken and what actions are taken if the monitoring shows that there are problems

The environmental conditions examined should always include: temperature, relative humidity, light and pollution.

The next stage would commonly include an examination of the exhibition and storage areas to see:

- Whether you have permanent or temporary exhibitions and whether exhibitions travel
- Whether items are on open or covered display
- What materials are used to create the display cases and mounts
- How often items are rotated between storage and exhibition
- Whether you have dedicated or dual use storage areas
- Whether there is an isolation area for items entering the collection
- What materials are used to wrap items, for enclosures and to construct

storage systems

The last area examined would commonly be related to the handling of the collection to see:

- What the movement of collection items is within the building(s)
- How items are transported
- What equipment is used
- What the skills of existing staff and volunteers are

What collections care practices are in place?

Once the risks to the collection have been determined, an assessment needs to be made of your current collection care practices. This will highlight what risks are currently being minimised, whether all existing practices are correct and what additional practices are needed. Practices that are commonly examined include:

- Condition reporting and treatment
- Housekeeping
- Pest management
- Disaster preparedness planning
- Security

What are the priorities for your museum/gallery?

Remember that the conservation priorities are likely to be different for each museum and gallery. You and the conservator need to decide how you are going to allocate the priorities for your museum and gallery. This can be done by asking the following questions:

- What risks would cause the most damage?
- What damage is most likely to occur?
- What actions would reduce the greatest number of risks?
- What can be done immediately by existing staff or volunteers?

To manage the risks effectively you and the conservator need to ask each of these questions and then see which risks are on the top of the lists most often. These will be your top priorities. Then work down through all of the risks identifying their relative priority in this way.

Using the information to complete the conservation plan

Once this information has been collected you and the conservator need to use it to complete the conservation plan. You and the conservator need to:

- Create a three to five year plan outlining what action you are going to take in each priority area each year
- Identify who will undertake each of the actions and the time that it needs to be completed by
- Identify what each action will cost
- Identify what funding or grant support you will need

When you have done this make sure that the plan does not just sit on your shelf to be referred to from time to time. It needs to be a working document. You should review

what has and has not been achieved each year, refining the responsibilities different people have and the funding requirements for actions that still need to be completed.

FURTHER INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

Key support agencies for conservation planning include: Museums Australia (Vic), the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material (AICCM), State and Regional Museums/Galleries, and Local Councils.

Museums Australia (Vic) can provide assistance with conservation planning for small museums and galleries in the form of information and advice, professional development and training, museums accreditation and Roving Curator program. Contact: 03 8341 7344 or mavic@mavic.asn.au

Further conservation information can be found on the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials (AICCM) website www.aiccm.org.au. This includes lists and contact details for conservators, conservation information and the Code of Ethics and Code of Practice for conservators.

State and Regional museums and galleries often provide information and advice for small and community museums and galleries. Some of the specific programs available in Victoria include the:

- State Library of Victoria Conservation Enquiry Line. Contact: 03 8664 7359 or toll-free on 1800 999 735 www.slv.vic.gov.au/help/conservation-guides
- Museums Victoria Discovery Centre. Contact: discoverycentre@museum.vic.gov.au
- Heritage Victoria (information and advice about archaeological artefacts and shipwreck relics). Contact: 9938 6894 or heritage.victoria@delwp.vic.gov.au

Heritage Victoria also provides resources for developing a Conservation Management Plan <https://www.heritage.vic.gov.au/research-and-publications/conservation-management-plans>

Local Councils and Heritage Victoria may provide advice on local history, heritage and planning issues, grants and access to the Internet via local libraries.

Further information on conservation planning can be found in *Museum Methods* (Museums Australia (NSW) Inc) and in *ReCollections* (Heritage Collections Council). *ReCollections* is available on-line <http://aiccm.org.au/resources/collection-care/australian-resources/recollections>

This factsheet is one of a series developed for use in Australia by Museums Australia (Vic) 2004 and updated in 2019.