

# Developing a Collections Information Policy

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## 1. Purpose of the Guidance

Archivists routinely gather and record information about their collections from the point of accessioning onwards, both to manage and provide access to collections effectively. As yet, archivists have not routinely evidenced their adopted approach towards recording information about collections nor evidenced the thinking and decisions which have influenced this approach – all important for advocacy, transparency and accountability. Developing a written information policy can be an opportunity to create this evidence for future use.

The aim of this guidance therefore is to help archivists write a Collections Information Policy which reflects their own archive service's approach to collections information and which they can use practically by developing a policy which will:

- Evidence why collections information activities are important and demonstrate the value of what the archive service does in this area
- Help the archive service meet the Archive Service Accreditation Standard under requirement 2.3.1 Collections Information Policy

The guidance is aimed at staff who work in any type of archive service and tasked with writing a Collections Information Policy. It is not a template, but should allow archivists to develop a Collections Information Policy which reflects the purpose of their archive service and the environment in which they operate.

## 2. Why have a Collections Information Policy?

Writing an effective policy requires the investment of staff time and it can be useful to identify some benefits and value of a Collections Information Policy to justify this investment.

**A tool for advocacy:** A written statement which explains the importance of collections information and describes professional activities associated with this is valuable for both internal and external stakeholders, such as senior managers or funders. It communicates the value of core but 'hidden' work undertaken by the archive service. Gaining approval for your collections information policy by parties within your reporting structure can be a useful method of gaining internal support for work in this area.

**Improves transparency and ensures accountability:** A clear and written statement that is available for consultation and which both describes and explains an archive service's approach and the reasons for what an archive service has promised to deliver can improve understanding and manage expectations among depositors, researchers and other key stakeholders. Documenting, explaining and justifying your approach can lead to improved confidence amongst these stakeholders.

**Improving Collections Management within the archive service:** Documenting your approach to Collections Information can be an opportunity to review how well this integrates with other collections management activities such as accessioning, appraisal, collections care, and providing access to collections. It re-enforces the interrelationship between collections development, collections information and collections care. A policy should provide a framework to guide any decision making within the archive service and thereby encourages consistent planning across collections management. A policy also provides guidance to all staff and others involved in collections information activities.

**Guide Collections Information planning:** A written document outlining your approach to managing and developing collections information can provide a practical tool to guide planning in line with identified priorities and ensure a consistent approach through successive planning cycles.

**Succession Planning:** Documenting the archive service's current approach to managing collections information can preserve knowledge of staff and help with succession planning within the archive service.

**Increasing acceptance of national and international standards:** With the increasing acceptance of national and internal standards within the archives community, particularly in with regard to cataloguing, it can be useful for an archive service to communicate their approach to recording this information. This can help with sharing collections information more widely through networks.

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### 3. Understanding Collections Information

#### 3.1 What is Collections Information?

Collections information is the information used for the management of the collections held by an archive service. It provides intellectual control over collections in order to enable access to collections. It is therefore any information collected from depositors or information generated during accessioning, appraisal of collections, cataloguing and the creation finding aids, and which records the location and movement of collections.

PAS 197:2009 defines collections information as *'information an organisation collects, holds and maintains about its collections and/or collected items'*.

*'Points where archive services gathers information- deposit and accessioning, cataloguing, physical condition, preservation and conservation activities.'*

Those working in archive services are therefore very likely to be familiar with the concept of collections information if not the concept of a written collections information policy.

#### 3.2 Collections Information and Archive Service Accreditation

Archive Service Accreditation is the UK Standard for Archive Services and looks at how well an archive service performs in three areas: in organisational health, collections management, and providing access to collections for a range of stakeholders.

The standard was designed to fit closely with other frameworks and standards already in use in the archive, museum and library sectors such as the PSQG Standard for Access to Archives PD 5454 and PAS 197:2009.

In terms of collections management, Archive Service Accreditation adopted as primary reference the recommended structure for an integrated Collections Management Framework laid out in PAS 197:2009 i.e. a framework of policy, plans and procedures.

The standard also borrows much of the terminology relating to the management of collections i.e. collections development, collections care, collections access and most importantly in this context collections information.

**Requirement 2.3.1 of the Archive Service Accreditation Standard** states that:

‘The archive service has a policy on collections information which specifies how collections information is recorded and enhanced and the standards and procedures which must apply’

The Standard also requires that the archives service has collections information plan and collections information procedures to deliver the policy in practice.

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## 4. Policy, Plan or Procedure?

Understanding the scope and content of a policy, plan or procedure and the relationship between these can also help clarify the scope and content of the policy itself.

With reference to the [Archive Service Accreditation Guidance](#) :

Policy: Describes the overall intentions and directions of an organisation. Provide a framework for organisational planning and action. Can be written in the form of a statement, require the endorsement of the organisation's governing body. It should address the whys.

Plan: Sets out the objectives of an organisation and identify the actions needed to achieve those objectives, in line with the organisation's policies and in order to deliver its mission statement. Planning documents should link with and be consistent with the policy to which it relates. Examples are strategies (3-5 years), business plans annual, departmental/individual action plans (often related to projects or reporting cycles)

Procedures: Describe a specified way to carry out an activity or a process in order to deliver a particular output or outcome. Procedures may be documented in the form of operational guides, manuals, handbooks, instructions etc. Procedures should be consistent with and policy to which they relate.

For small archive services or for those archive services who are integrated within a wider collections organisation, the Collections Information Policy may be part of an overall Collections Management Policy for the archive or be integrated within the policies of the wider organisation.

## 5. Developing a policy

This section will take you through the key steps of writing and developing a policy. It is recognised that many organisations have their own in house procedures and guidelines for developing and writing policies.

*Remember that your policy should cover both analogue and born digital collections.*

Step	Activity	Notes
1	Define the aim and scope of your policy	<p>Be clear as to why you are writing the policy and what you want to include.</p> <p>Questions to consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why are you writing the policy, what do you want your policy to achieve?</li> <li>• Who are your audiences? who you are writing the policy for, for example archive service staff, researchers, depositors, funders? What do they need to know?</li> <li>• How will your policy provide effective guidance for collections information management planning and link with procedures?</li> <li>• How will it link with collections development, collections care, and access to collections?</li> </ul>
2	Research the content and consult with other staff where necessary	<p>Questions to consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the current approach of the archive service? How can this be reflected in the policy?</li> <li>• How does it relate to other policies such as access policies, collections care policies, collections development</li> </ul>

		<p>policies? Do these policies successfully integrate with each other and support rather than work in conflict?</p>
3	Develop the structure and content of the policy	<p>Questions to consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How will the archive service's approach be reflected in the policy?</li> <li>• How is this best communicated? What format or style is best suited to your content?</li> </ul>
4	Write the policy	<p>Questions to consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will your policy be easily understood by non archivists if these are part of the intended readership of the policy?</li> </ul>
5	Policy sign off	<p>This will depend on the management structure within your organisation and how powers of approval are delegated within the management structure. Obtaining approval for the policy by a more senior manager within the management structure can mean generating interest and creating visibility for what you are doing, achieving advocacy for your archive service.</p>
6	Publicise and communicate your new policy	<p>Questions to consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who needs to know about your new policy? Who needs to know the detail of your policy? Who needs to be aware of your new policy? Consider this with reference to different audiences such</li> </ul>

		<p>as: archive service staff, senior management, depositors, funders, researchers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the best method to communicate this for each audience - via a website, intranet, newsletter, email, face to face or team meeting, a training session?</li> </ul>
7	Policy Review	<p>Reviewing your policy on a regular basis ensures it remains current and reflects the aims and needs of your archive service.</p>

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## 6) Policy Scope and Content

This section will help you decide what to include in your collections information policy, remembering that every archive service is different and not every suggestion may be relevant to your service and situation. There is no model template or model structure for a Collections Information Policy, but some of the following are likely to be relevant.

- **Providing context to your overall approach**
- **Legislative context**
- **Systems used for recording collections information**
- **Point of deposit and accessioning**
- **Disposals and withdrawals**
- **Location and movement control**
- **Cataloguing**
- **Staffing and funding**
- **Protecting your collections information**

*The policy should cover collections information concerning both analogue and born digital collections.*

Content	Notes
<p><b>Providing context to your approach – the importance of Collections Information</b></p> <p><i>The archive service ‘recognises that good documentation of its collections, through accessioning cataloguing and other activities, is fundamental to collections management and to good public access; [the] archives is committed to improving the quality of collections information in terms of its structures and completeness.’</i></p>	<p>Stating why collections information is important will help to engage your audience or readership and make it clear how collections information helps the archive service to achieve its aims.</p> <p>Linking collections information to the overall mission, purpose and aims of the archive service and how it relates to other areas of collections management and access to collections can strengthen this further and provides evidence of how well functions work together within the</p>

<p><i>(Lancashire Archives)</i></p> <p><i>'...explains how we aim to maintain and provide accurate documentation of our collections for the purpose of their improved control and access. It supports our Mission Statement as set out and should be seen in conjunction with [the] forward plan.'</i> <i>(Flintshire Record Office)</i></p>	<p>archive service.</p> <p>This might be expressed through a statement reflecting the archive service's overall commitment to collections information.</p>
<p><b>Providing context to your approach – importance of your Collections Information Policy</b></p> <p><i>'It will assist in decision making and prioritising work in a range of circumstances; providing access to the holdings which is balanced with their long-term preservation and legislative requirements; cataloguing work by staff and volunteers; submission of funding bids with a cataloguing and information enhancement aspect.'</i> <i>University of Huddersfield Archives</i></p> <p><i>'The policy is supported by a Collections Information Plan, which outlines the objectives through which we will achieve the aims of this policy'</i> <i>(Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service)</i></p>	<p>Stating why a collections information policy is important and how the archive service will use the policy during the course of its work is also crucial.</p> <p>Explaining how your policy influences your collections information planning can demonstrate the link between policy and plan: the difference the policy will make in practice.</p> <p>Examples might include guiding the archive service's approach to recording and making accessible catalogue information; guiding cataloguing planning; providing evidence of your approach to stakeholders and potential funders.</p>
<p><b>Providing context to your approach – historical background</b></p>	<p>Explaining the background to your current situation with regards to</p>

<p><i>'The approach to creating collections information depends on the size of the cataloguing background, legacy of cataloguing systems and professional standards used in the past' University of Huddersfield Archives</i></p>	<p>collections information can provide essential additional context for your approach. You may wish to clarify any legacy issues in terms of cataloguing backlogs, periods of missing depositor details or gaps in accessions information, as prioritising these.</p>
<p><b>Legislative context</b></p>	<p>You may wish to describe the legislative framework in which your archive service operates and any other organisational policies or codes of practice that might influence access to collections and the level of information made available, internally and to the wider public.</p>
<p><b>Systems for recording collections information</b></p>	<p>The policy should note where the archive services records or holds collections information or any software used for recording and making available collections information. Examples include accession registers, depositor records, filing systems, and any software used.</p>
<p><b>Point of Deposit/Accessioning</b>  <i>'Accessioning is the process of capturing information about acquisitions as they are transferred into our care. For archives, this is the foundation on which all subsequent management processes rest.'</i> (Derbyshire Record Office)</p> <p><i>'We will accurately record key</i></p>	<p>The policy should include the archive service's approach to recording information about accessions, depositor records, intellectual property rights, access restrictions/ownership and legal status of collections, what information is recorded and any timescales for achieving this.</p>

<p><i>information about the archives we acquire, their nature and contents, the identity of the person or body transferring the archives into our custody, and the terms on which we are to hold the records.’ (Derbyshire Record Office)</i></p> <p><i>‘Recording the provenance of collections is crucial to ensuring the integrity of our archive collections. (Institute of Education Archives)</i></p> <p><i>‘Shropshire Archives participates in The National Archives’ annual Accessions to Repositories Survey to enable up-to-date information to appear on the National Register of Archives. Summaries of significant new accessions also regularly appear in the Salopian Recorder, the Newsletter of the Friends of Shropshire Archives, and in the Transactions of the Shropshire Historical and Archaeological Society.’ (Shropshire Archives)</i></p>	<p>Where some of all of your collections arrive through internal transfer, a policy on levels of information expected on transfer helps to set expectations from transferring bodies.</p> <p>Publicising newly accessioned material to your stakeholder groups both internal or external groups is an element of the accessioning process and your approach to this should be included in the Collections Information Policy, for example publishing information in an annual report, on the website or internal intranet, via a newsletter or in the reading rooms.</p> <p>If you participate in The National Archives’ annual accessions to repositories survey then this could also be included here as a way of making information available to a wider audience.</p>
<p><b>Disposals and withdrawals</b></p> <p><i>‘All disposals are recorded in the Content and Structure field of the Adlib database.’ (Royal College of Gynaecologist and Obstetricians)</i></p>	<p>Explaining your approach to recording any decision about collection disposal or withdrawals in your policy is important not only for staff awareness but also for stakeholder confidence in collections management.</p>
<p><b>Location and movement control</b></p>	<p>Including a short statement about why the archive service services records</p>

<p><i>‘To help fulfil its obligations of care to the archive material it holds and to the depositors of such material, FRO always aims to maintain up-to date information on the locations of all items in its care.’</i> (Flintshire Record Office)</p>	<p>location and movement of collections reinforces the link between collections information, including collections information procedures and collections care, including security of collections, at policy level.</p>
<p><b>Finding Aids</b></p>	<p>Any finding aids which facilitate access to collections should be mentioned, including how these are improved and where published if relevant. Any older finding aids, such as published guides, which are not updated as a matter of policy may also be mentioned to clarify the approach.</p>
<p><b>Cataloguing</b></p> <p><i>‘Cataloguing the material within Cumbria Archive Service’s custody is essential to enable staff to effectively manage the information retained for permanent preservation within the Archive Centres, and to enable public access as appropriate.’</i> (Cumbria Archive Service)</p> <p><i>‘Cataloguing since 2009 has been undertaken using CALM software supported by an in-house General Manual for Cataloguing. FRO uses the following standards:</i> <i>The mandatory elements of International Council on Archives,</i></p>	<p>Explaining the approach to cataloguing in the context of what your archive service offers and in terms of providing access to collections is valuable in making the link between collections management and providing access to collections. Stating why cataloguing is important and linking this to access to collections can endorse the commitment to these. This can be particularly helpful in securing resource for further description.</p> <p>This section should reference both analogue and born digital material as appropriate.</p> <p>Archive Service Accreditation uses the</p>

*General International Standard of Archival Description [ISAD(G)], International Council on Archives, International Standard Archival Authority for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families [ISAAR(CPF)], National Council on Archives, Rules for the Construction of Personal, Place and Corporate Names [NCA Rules]’ (Flintshire Record Office)*

following categories to describe the cataloguing state, which may be helpful for reference:

- Fully catalogued (the expectation is that this will be in accordance with at the mandatory elements of ISAD (g))
- Fully catalogued (but to a lower standard than ISAD (g))
- Box-listed or roughly-listed material, or collections for which only collection-level descriptions exist
- Completely unlisted collections
- Full catalogue available online

Your policy can make reference to which cataloguing standards you use for analogue and digital collections. If relevant you may also think about including your approach to retrospective conversion and your approach to prioritising cataloguing backlogs and revisiting collections. Any timescales or targets for cataloguing of collections could also be included, or may instead be included in planning.

For services with particularly extensive backlog levels of collections without standards-based information, any policy on making accessible incomplete or lower-quality information to facilitate

	<p>access may be explored and explained.</p> <p>Stating where your catalogues are available internally or externally for example on your website, through shared networks such as AIM25 or Archives Hub, or through TNA's Discovery, makes clearer the link between cataloguing and providing better access to collections.</p>
<p><b>Staffing and Funding</b></p>	<p>Describing how collections information activities are resourced, particularly for archive services with cataloguing backlogs, establishes a link between collections information activities, staffing, funding and forward planning.</p> <p>Resourcing might include seeking external grant funding eg Heritage Lottery Fund, National Cataloguing Grants Scheme; working in partnership with other organisations; allocating staff time to cataloguing work; using volunteers or dedicated project staff, and the basis on which professional/paraprofessional staff are needed for cataloguing.</p> <p>If your service works extensively with volunteers to improve collections information, issues such as intellectual property in volunteer-created information and how this can be reused (e.g. if</p>

	<p>indexes may be licensed commercially)          can add transparency to your relationship          with volunteer contributors.</p>
<p><b>Protecting your Collections          Information</b></p>	<p>Here you might describe how the archive          service ensures the security of its          collections information to avoid loss or          compromise, for example if any          information held in online systems is          regularly backed up, whether any paper          files are held in a lockable filing cabinet.          This underlines investment needed in          protecting resource already expended on          improving collection information and          where relevant provides assurance to          depositors and donors.</p>

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## 7) Further resources

[Archive Service Accreditation Guidance](#)

[Revisiting Archive Collections](#)

### Websites:

[UK Archives Discovery Network \(UKAD\)](#)

The National Archives:

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives-sector/documenting-collections.htm>

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives-sector/loan-agreements-and-accessions-registers.htm>

[Archives and Records Association \*Guide to Archival Standards\*](#)

### Standards

PAS 197:2009 *Code of Practice for Cultural Collections Management*

BS 6879/ISO 3166-2: 1998, *Codes for the representation of names of countries and their subdivisions, Part 2*

[International Council on Archives, \*General International Standard Archival Description \[ISAD \(G\)\]\*](#), 2nd edition, 1999

[International Council on Archives, \*International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families\*](#) (ISAAR (CPF), 2004)

<http://www.ica.org/en/isaar-cpf-international-standard-archival-authority-record-corporate-bodies-persons-and-families-2nd>

[National Council on Archives, \*Rules for the Construction of Personal, Place and Corporate Names\*](#)

### Links to Collection Information Policies:

[Cumbria Archive Service Collection Information Policy](#)

[Richard Burton Archive, Swansea University Collection Information Policy](#)

[Flintshire Record Office Collection Information Policy](#)

[University of Huddersfield Special Collections draft Collections Information Policy:](#)

[Shropshire Archives Collections Information Policy](#)

[Kings College London Archives Collections Information Policy](#)

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