

UK Heads of Conservation Group
Guidance: conservation and care of collections during Covid-19 (Corona virus)
26 March 2020

Many heritage organisations are implementing special measures to ensure their collections are safe during this unprecedented period. The details of what is appropriate and feasible will vary between organisations: this guidance outlines those areas to consider in order to maintain the condition of collections from a conservation perspective.

Access

Currently the UK is in a period of lockdown. Heritage organisations are secure with onsite security systems and personal in place, however site access for collections staff is necessarily restricted in line with the Covid-19 lockdown and quarantine measures.

Risk assess your collections

With restricted access, it is important to identify the highest areas of risk across your collections to enable you to focus the time and resources you can deploy. The Collections Trust provides a useful guide to undertaking collection risk assessments available online here: <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/resource/assess-and-manage-risk-in-collections-care/>

The primary risks to collections are the agents of deterioration as summarised in this wiki: https://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/Ten_Agents_of_Deterioration. In the current lockdown scenario, key risks include:

- Pest infestation: collections with known pest issues or particularly vulnerable to pest
- Poor environment: collections susceptible to fluctuations and extremes of humidity located in areas with poor or limited environmental control
- Dust: organic material on open display or open in storage
- Light: collections exposed to UV or extreme light levels at risk of fading or degrading from light exposure
- Building fabric/features: known building issues including areas prone to water ingress, leaky radiators or historic fireplaces that may introduce water, dust and debris to collection areas

You should also consider any equipment onsite linked to the care of collections that requires ongoing maintenance. For example, standalone dehumidifiers/humidifiers and freezers holding collections. These may be a risk if equipment maintenance is not maintainable during this period.

Focus your resources

When you have identified your high and medium risk collections, focus on identifying methods to monitor and, ideally, reduce risk. These could include:

- Turning off all lights except for security lighting
- Ensuring food is either removed from site or held in air-tight containers
- Where possible, monitoring collection environments remotely via Building Maintenance Systems (BMS) or other environmental monitoring systems and making changes to air handling unit set points/functions via remote controls if temperature and humidity move outside preferred parameters
- Turning off environmental control systems, either because they are prone to malfunctioning, cannot be maintained, or because with no visitors in the building, adequate conditions can be maintained without using the plant

Scheduled collections care checks

Where possible, a regular check of collections assessed as high and medium risk is desirable. These checks are ideally undertaken by colleagues trained in collections care with site

knowledge who can readily identify issues such as pest activity, mould growth or other changes to the condition of collections. For some organisations, it may be onsite security or other colleagues not trained in collections care who undertake checks. In these instances, an overview of the high and medium risk collections should be provided with details of where to focus checks, what to look for and contact details of trained colleagues offsite to report concerns to or discuss potential issues with.

In all instances, it is important establish a means to record and share the results of collection checks across relevant colleagues. This will enable you to identify changes in collections and reassess risk areas throughout this period to ensure your resources are always effectively deployed.

Emergency plans

The person in the organisation who leads on collection emergency planning should consider whether response plans need updating for this unique period. For example:

- Will the plan work if some colleagues are unable to attend site due to the Covid-19 quarantine orders and, if not, can other colleagues be identified as reserves?
- If the plan relies on the use of an external contractor or assistance from a partner organisation, is that service or support still available?
- If the plan assumes that equipment, materials and PPE will be purchased or hired at the point of need, is that still achievable, or do alternative arrangements need to be put in place?

The Museum of London has developed an excellent pocket-salvage guide available at the following link which may be useful to support this review:

<https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/application/files/9414/5615/4887/pocket-salvage-guide.pdf>

Other useful guidance

We are now preparing guidance on how to plan to 'wake up your collections' when the Covid-19 outbreak is resolved, and heritage organisations prepare for reopening. The following links also signpost you to a range of very useful sector guidance about collections care during the Covid-19 outbreak:

Museum of London has an excellent page providing current sector advice and latest news relevant to the Covid-19 outbreak:

https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/application/files/3515/8495/4952/Covid-19_Resources_and_Information.pdf

AIM has published a detailed page with a lot of useful information and resources on their website: <https://www.aim-museums.co.uk/coronavirus-covid-19/>

The Museums Association has created an overview article, looking at how Covid-19 will impact museums and what can be done to mitigate it:

<https://www.museumsassociation.org/news/25032020-covid-19-resources-for-organisations-and-individuals>

Arts Council England (ACE) have released guidance for NPOs and their other funded programmes regarding the current Covid-19 outbreak:

<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/blog/responding-covid19-emergency>

NCVO guidance the NCVO has a helpful guide to dealing with Covid-19 within your organisation: <https://www.ncvo.org.uk/practical-support/information/coronavirus>