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National Preservation Office

Building Blocks for a Preservation Policy



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Building Blocks for a Preservation Policy

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What is a preservation policy?

Preservation, as it applies to library and archive material, can be defined as: “all managerial and financial considerations including storage and accommodation provision, staffing levels, policies, techniques and methods involved in preserving library and archive materials and the information contained therein”.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it more concisely and defines “preservation” as the art of “keeping safe”, “keeping alive”, “maintaining” and “retaining”, while defining a policy simply as: “a course or general plan of action”. Therefore, a preservation policy at its most basic, is **a plan of action for safe keeping**.

In some of the literature on preservation, the words *policy* and *strategy* are often used interchangeably. According to the *OED* a strategy is “the art of war”; in our case, war against decay and destruction; it is also “the management of an army in a campaign”, in other words: the management of all the tools and skills at our disposal to fight against decay. The difference is that a *policy*, a plan of action, should address the questions of **what** needs to be preserved, **why**, for what purpose and **for how long**, while a *strategy* addresses the questions of **how** this should be done and **in what order**.

Why is a preservation policy needed?

Accountability

The need for a preservation policy is not new, but it has become more acute in recent years. With ever-dwindling resources and many more claims on those that are available, the need for accountability and the need to justify expenditure have become more pressing. Organisations and institutions, particularly their governors and funders, but also their users, expect a policy as a

sign of accountability and as a tangible expression of intent, as well as something that can be monitored. A policy can explain to users why certain actions are or are not taken. It sets out the responsibilities of all concerned, staff and users alike.

Funding

A policy is often required when bidding for funds and to demonstrate that such funds can and will be used responsibly and to good long term effect. It is needed to set and validate priorities, and to review long-standing practice. It is useful to raise awareness of issues among funders, top management, staff and users.

Strategy

A policy is required to develop a preservation strategy and to plan coherent preservation programmes.

What needs to be taken into account when formulating a preservation policy?

Purpose of institution

What needs to be preserved and why are directly linked to the purpose and function of the collections and of the institutions in which they are kept.

There are many different kinds of libraries and archives, ranging from national institutions and large research collections, to specialist libraries and archives, local record offices and public lending libraries. They cater for a wide variety of users, from academics, businesses and private researchers, to children and all others who want to be educated and entertained.

Cooperation

Cooperative acquisition, collection management or preservation programmes may be planned, or already in place. A preservation policy must incorporate such commitments.

Nature of the collection

What needs to be preserved, why and for how long, will be influenced by the nature of the material.

A broadly based international collection will comprise original sources and secondary material, basic research material and ephemera, in a variety of materials, media and formats. These will impose their own conditions, but they also serve many different purposes. The purpose of the collection, even more than its physical format and the different media in which the information is presented, determines its preservation needs. Different formats and different media may need different strategies and demand different technical solutions, but the aims and the purpose of the library or archive and its functions determine its preservation policy, which must cover all formats and all media.

Digital material

When we consider digital material the need for sustainable access introduces an extra dimension. For conventional material the human body provides its own access mechanism and one that is renewed with each generation. For digital material this is not the case; machine-readable texts require the appropriate hardware and software to make them intelligible to the users. Unless these are available, we will not be able to access and use the data.

Library and archive functions

The purpose of a collection is a determining factor in its preservation needs, but other library and archive functions that are closely linked to preservation need to be considered, such as acquisition, retention and access.

The strength of these links and the relative importance of these functions, again depend on the purpose of the institution in question, as well as on the nature of the material. Although the purposes of the various kinds of libraries and archives vary, they will all have some basic objectives in common. All acquire material, mostly with the aim of making it available, and all want to retain some of it for a longer or shorter period, some in perpetuity. They will therefore have to ensure that those collections are in a fit state to be used.

Acquisition, Retention, Storage, Access, Use, and Security

Acquisition

Preservation decisions will be determined by the format and the purpose of the acquisition.

Acquisition decisions can themselves be preservation decisions, e.g. when it is decided to acquire a text in a particular format, be it in hard copy, paperback, microfilm, or digital format, or when it is decided to acquire a rare edition relatively cheaply, but in bad condition, rather than wait for a better copy at greater expense. The purpose of an acquisition also determines its preservation needs. An item may be acquired for short term use, to be replaced by a new edition as soon as, or even before, it has worn out; it may be acquired for the primary purpose of lending or for use on the premises; it may be acquired for medium term heavy use only, or for long term retention, to become the national archival copy. In each case the preservation decision will have to follow the purpose of the acquisition.

Retention

Retention is directly linked to preservation.

In most libraries, as opposed to archives, material is not always acquired with a retention decision clearly in mind. Frequently, the decision to retain an item for medium term, long term or indefinite use, can only be made once its short term usefulness has been proven. Before any preservation decision is made, a retention decision is vital. Without a clear retention policy, preservation rapidly becomes a haphazard and potentially wasteful exercise. The decision on the format in which an item is to be retained is almost equally important.

■ **Levels of retention:** Retention can be considered on three levels: transient material; material of which the intellectual content only is to be retained; and material for which it is important to retain both the content and the original format. Once the level of retention has been decided, the preservation policy can follow.

■ **Transient material:** Transient material, or material that will be superseded or replaced, although it may need conservation treatment, is rarely part of a preservation policy in terms of long term preservation planning. It is not the

kind of material that would normally be accepted by an archive.

■ **Retention of the intellectual content:** Collections of which the intellectual content only is to be retained are obvious candidates for surrogating. For some purposes of access, surrogates can be preferable to originals. Provided they have been made to required standards, their use can help to prolong the life of an original by protecting it from over handling and repeated copying. From a preservation viewpoint the preferred method of surrogacy for paper-based text documents is still microfilming. Digital surrogates offer numerous access benefits, but the preservation of the digital data will itself involve considerable preservation effort and cost.

■ **Original format:** Surrogating is not always a solution. In many cases, the format is as important as, or sometimes even more important than, the information it contains. Physical format can provide information over and above its content and there are a number of library and archive users who have a real need to consult material in its original format.

Whether or not the original format should be retained once a surrogate has been made requires careful consideration. Difficult decisions are necessary, and must be based on the nature of the material in question, on the likely use it will get and on the likely purpose of such use.

For electronic material it is no longer possible to distinguish between retention and preservation. Preservation of the intellectual content must begin at the time of acquisition or before, in order to ensure sustainable access. The main reason for this is the lack of longevity of the storage media for electronic information, together with the inevitable obsolescence of their retrieval hardware and software. Simply 'leaving things as they are' is not an option for digital collections. The choice whether to retain the document as an artefact, or to retain the information it contains, or both, is no longer a real choice with electronic material. If we try and keep electronic publications as artefacts, i.e. exactly as received from the publisher or producer, they will eventually become inaccessible and their content will be lost.

■ **Storage:** Long term retention demands suitable storage conditions and good quality equipment to protect against the physical and chemical deterioration

of collections. The age, rarity and value of the collections, as well as the materials of which they are made, their format, structure, size and shape will all determine the conditions under which they should be stored. Some types of material will need greater security, others a different and/or better controlled environment or extra protection. Ideally, storage conditions should be adapted to the materials of which the collections are made, but for most institutions this is not practical. Moreover, many library and archive items consist of a mixture of materials, each of which may have different optimum conditions.

Compromises have to be made and a balance found.

Standards for the storage of conventional material have been well established (e.g. BS 5454:2000). Standards for the storage of electronic material are still being developed. Such standards and guidelines are useful, but they must not become divorced from the purpose and the use of the material for which the storage and environmental conditions are prescribed.

Access

The kind of access required will influence the preservation needs of the collection and will need to be considered when formulating a preservation policy.

Access can take many forms. Access to information about holdings, through good and accessible catalogues, and wider library and archive networks, will increase use and thereby the need for conservation treatment, for better protection and for good storage facilities. Catalogues also help by defining what is in a collection, thereby preventing readers from asking for the wrong material and thus preventing over-handling. Catalogues can also refer readers to surrogates, thereby safeguarding the originals, while registers of surrogates can direct users to existing surrogates available for use and copying.

Use

The kind and amount of use that are made of a collection will also strongly influence its preservation needs.

Use can take the form of direct or remote consultation or of semi-direct enjoyment (e.g. exhibitions). The needs of the users will determine whether the original document, provided it is in a fit state to be used, or a surrogate is issued, while the kind of use will determine the security measures needed. The concept of use is an important one for most libraries and archives, and many

institutions take the amount of use as an indication of their preservation needs. This poses no problems with heavily used material which will need protection and/or treatment to keep it in a usable state. However, low use alone is no justification for neglect. The gradual shift in many libraries from ownership and collecting to the provision of access reduces the chances of our long term ability to fulfil the research needs of future generations.

■ **A conflict?:** Providing access to collections and preserving them for future use can, at least for conventional material, be seen as two conflicting aims. There are some kinds of access that defeat or prevent future use, and there are preservation methods that inhibit instant access. Such conflicts can be resolved if the need for and the purpose of access are considered carefully. For digital materials access and preservation are inseparable.

Security

A preservation policy needs either to include a security policy or to be linked to one.

A security policy should address the physical security, such as building and perimeter security; security of access (e.g. access by staff, contractors and users to storage areas, and decisions on closed versus open access); security during lending and transport; exhibition security; and security of computer systems, including authorised access to and authorised manipulation of data. The need to safeguard a collection will influence the way in which it is housed. High security areas are often needed, but security that is too strict can defeat itself in the case of a sudden emergency. A sensible policy of controlled access should be in place whenever any secure storage is planned.

A security policy must include the users, and state, for example, limitations of access to original material in favour of surrogates. It should also state clearly the responsibilities for security of the collections, both those of the staff and of the users. Procedures to be followed in case of a breach of security should be clearly set out, as should procedures for preventing, and coping with, disasters.

Other library functions

Loans

Other library functions that must be taken into account when formulating a preservation policy include lending (to other institutions, individuals or exhibitions), exhibitions and reprographic services.

The reasons for lending material and restrictions on lending certain types of material must be clear. It must be decided whether loans will be restricted to duplicates and surrogates, or whether original and rare material can be lent. Conditions for loan should include specifications for environmental control, security and handling, security provision during transport and responsibility for insurance.

Exhibitions

Similar considerations apply to exhibitions, whether these are held in the home institution or elsewhere. A clear statement is needed on any restrictions on the type of material that can be exhibited; on the duration of the exhibition; on conditions for security; control of the environment and illumination; on the design of exhibition cases, furniture and stands. Guidelines for support materials and the handling of objects are also needed. Decisions are needed whether material that is lent for exhibition should always be photographed or microfilmed first. Procedures must be in place for conservation reports and for monitoring the condition of the material before, during and after the exhibition.

Reprography

A policy on copying or reprography for users must take account of preservation considerations.

Such a policy needs to encompass issues such as copyright and the status of the material; frequency of use and frequency of demand for copying; limitations inherent in particular formats (e.g. very large documents, fold-out maps or illustrations), and particular media (e.g. illuminated manuscripts or vellum documents). It must state clearly any restrictions imposed by the condition of the material (e.g. fragile or brittle documents, tight, weak, or important original bindings), and give guidelines for handling and support. Rules are needed as to what material may and may not be copied by the users themselves. Criteria for

retaining or discarding originals, once a copy has been made, need to be specified. If preservation surrogates have been made, a policy on their use should be developed, e.g. whether the users are always offered a surrogate in preference to the original, whether copies should be made from the surrogate only and whether there is a register or catalogue entry for surrogates.

Resources

Funding

No preservation policy or strategy, however well conceived, can be implemented without sufficient funding.

We can make no assumptions about the provision of resources. Preservation is only one of many library and archive functions that require funding. For a proper balance between the funding of preservation activities and those of other library and archive functions, we must consider how they are related.

Historically, libraries and archives have looked at the balance of funding between acquisition and preservation; between access (catalogues, reader services) and preservation; and sometimes between public services (exhibitions and publication programmes) and preservation. More recently the balance of funding between computing and telecommunication services and preservation has also been considered. Lack of resources has always stood in the way of the successful implementation of a preservation policy or strategy and will equally affect the ability to preserve electronic material. Long term access to such material requires an ongoing commitment to reformat or to migrate data, and planning is made more difficult because of the rapid changes in technology, the unpredictability of its nature and of future alternatives.

Education and training

Limited resources mean that we must make the best use of the resources we have, including human resources. A constant emphasis on preservation awareness raising throughout an institution and throughout the community is vital. More investment is needed in training and educating conservators, preservation managers and all those who handle and use books. Knowledge of historical book structures, the history of book production and book materials, past and

present conservation techniques and new technology, are all vital if selection for preservation is to be informed and if decisions on treatment and solutions are to be intelligent.

Formulating a Preservation Policy

The following elements should be considered:

- The rationale for the policy must be stated and its scope defined.
- The policy should be based on the purpose and function of the institution and its collections.
- The policy should contain a statement of preservation philosophy, balancing preventive preservation with active conservation. It should be supported by accepted and proven standards and by a high level of professional performance.
- It should be supported by financial and human resource policies which ensure that the preservation policy is realistic and can be implemented.
- It should be based on an assessment of the preservation needs of the collection, taking into account the value and rarity of the material, the amount and kind of use it gets, the way in which it is stored, and its physical condition.
- It should be linked to the acquisition, retention and access policies of the institution.
- It should either encompass, or be linked to, policies on collection security, storage and environmental control.
- It should give guidelines for the proper handling of the collections.
- It should include policies for reprographic and surrogating processes.
- It should include policies for exhibitions and loans.
- It should give guidelines for the management of the risks the material may be exposed to, both in its ordinary life-cycle of selection, acquisition, storage, use, travel, exposure, moves, chemical and mechanical deterioration, and under extreme conditions, such as fire, floods, terrorist or enemy attack, building collapse or biological infestation.
- Most important of all, it must be a **living** document, known by all concerned, frequently referred to, regularly updated and constantly monitored.

Checklist for a preservation policy

The following checklist may be used when assembling documentation for the formulation of a preservation policy.

A General or institutional policies and statements:

- 1 **Definitions of terms**, e.g. preservation, conservation, surrogating.
- 2 **Mission Statement or Strategic Objectives of the Institution.**
- 3 **Policy principles**, including a statement on cooperation (where appropriate) and a statement of preservation philosophy.
- 4 **Retention Statement** or link to separate retention policy, and possible link to collection development policy.
- 5 **Security Statement** or link to separate security policy.
- 6 **Storage Statement** or link to separate storage policy, to include a statement of environmental conditions to be attained, or a reference to relevant national/international standards.
- 7 **Access Statement** or link to access policy, to include statements on access to the institution and its collections, on access for loans, reprography and exhibitions; guidelines for handling of material.
- 8 **Surrogating or substitution policy.**
- 9 **Financial policy for preservation.**
- 10 **Statement of responsibility for the preservation policy**, including reviews, implementation and monitoring.

B Policies and statements relating to the management of preservation programmes:

- a **Selection for preservation, including surrogacy**, based on assessment of needs according to:
 - the objectives of the library

- retention policy
 - the significance/value/rarity of the material
 - the amount and kind of usage
 - the physical condition of the material.
- b **Education and Training programmes** for:
- all library staff
 - conservation and preservation staff
 - users.
- c **Risk assessment and risk management strategy.**
- d **Disaster prevention, control and recovery plans.**
- e **Policy for, or statement on, research and development in preservation and conservation.**
- f **Policy on treatments**, with reference to standards and benchmarks for all types of material, including non-print material.

Further reading

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