# Documentation Planning Pack

## Introduction

The aim of the Collections Trust Documentation Planning Pack is to assist museums to produce their own documentation plans. The guidelines contained in the pack can be used for all types of documentation planning. They are not intended as the only way to produce a documentation plan but are specifically to help documentation planning as required by MLA's accreditation scheme.

The pack was created from the Collections Trust Documentation Planning training module, and the Collections Trust publication Documentation: a practical guide by Margaret Harrison and Gordon McKenna. It is also informed by the discussions we have with our members through our enquiries service. All Collections Trust resources and advice are based on *SPECTRUM*, the UK and international standard for Collections Management.

This pack has three parts:

- Part 1: How to write a documentation plan
- Part 2: Greendale Museum's documentation plan
- Greendale Museum's accreditation application form Section 4.3 to 4.4C

## What is a documentation plan?

A documentation plan is a carefully thought out document or report which reviews the documentation at a museum, identifies problem areas and puts forward a plan to solve those problems. It will generally include details of the timescale, methods, equipment and materials, responsibilities, and how much it will cost.

## Why is a documentation plan needed?

A documentation plan is necessary for MLA's museum accreditation scheme. The Accreditation Standard Section 4.4 requires the:

'Creation of a written documentation plan, setting out actions, including the timescale, for dealing with any backlog'

A carefully prepared documentation plan will not only assist internal planning but it will demonstrate to governing bodies and funding agencies that the museum is serious about meeting professional standards in order to improve access to the collections.

In order to bring your documentation into line with current standards, major changes will often be needed. It may be necessary to introduce new or improved procedures to properly document new additions to the collections, or you may need to reconstruct missing records. All of this may involve a substantial commitment of staff time, materials and probably computers. In these circumstances you cannot afford to make mistakes or run out of time, money or enthusiasm.

## What should be in a documentation plan?

Section 4.4.2 of the Accreditation Standard says:

'The documentation plan will set out the scale of the backlogs to be tackled and will describe

1. how the Primary Procedures will be implemented,
2. how *SPECTRUM* minimum standards will be met for items to be retained for the permanent collection or retained on loan
3. the timescales for this work.'

A documentation plan should:

- Describe the current state of affairs;
- Describe the target position which the museum is aiming at;
- Summarise current shortcomings;
- Describe changes which will eliminate these shortcomings;
- Describe the methods which will be employed;
- List the equipment and materials which will be needed;
- Identify the personnel who will be involved, their responsibilities and any training they will need;
- Suggest a realistic timetable for the work;
- Estimate costs

### 1. Before you start

- Brief, in general terms, trustees, councillors and all staff on the importance of the Accreditation Scheme to your museum and your users;
- Determine who will write your museum's documentation plan;
- Consult as widely as possible with all staff about their involvement with the documentation of the museum's collections. Do this in order to identify who has the information needed to complete the documentation plan.

### 2. Reviewing the primary procedures

The first part of a documentation plan should look at the minimum standards for the *SPECTRUM* primary procedures and how they are implemented in your museum. Sorting out your current procedures is the essential first step in documentation planning so that the problem of documentation backlogs does not get any bigger.

The accreditation standard requirement (see Section 4.3.2) is to meet the *SPECTRUM* minimum standard for the primary procedures:

- Object entry;
- Acquisition (including the maintenance of an accession register and its security copy, and marking and/or labelling procedures);
- Location and movement control;
- Cataloguing (with provision of appropriate indexing);
- Object exit;
- Loans in;
- Loans out;
- Retrospective documentation.

## Describing the current state of documentation

Look at each of the *SPECTRUM* primary procedures separately and describe the existing situation in your museum. Describe how the procedure works, who does it, what sort of documentation is created e.g. forms, cards, registers.

You can see examples of how these descriptions of the entry and acquisition procedures could be incorporated in the Greendale Museum documentation plan sections 2.1 and 2.2. The example documentation plan also shows how Greendale Museum has described its current procedures for entry and acquisition.

## *SPECTRUM* Procedures

The following paragraphs are provided as optional introductions to each primary procedure which you could use in your documentation plan. They are based on the *SPECTRUM* standard for each procedure.

### Entry Procedure
### *SPECTRUM* Procedure: Object entry

Museums are expected to take the same care of objects not belonging to their collections as they would of their own objects. They might be held liable for loss of, or damage to, objects whether

solicited or not. Entry records log every item which is left in the care of the museum at the time of its arrival. Entry documentation should be applied to all potential gifts or purchases, and items to be identified, even if they will only remain in the museum for a short time.

[Here describe your own entry procedure.]

**Exit Procedure**
*SPECTRUM* **Procedure: Object exit**

Exit records should log any item from the permanent collection which leaves the museum premises. The procedure should be applied to all outward loans, temporary transfer of material for conservation, copying etc, permanent transfer to another institution, or the destruction of an object due to damage. The return of an object to its owner (e.g. an unwanted offer of a gift) does not normally require the creation of an exit record. Its removal will be logged on the appropriate entry form.

[Here describe your own exit procedure.]

**Acquisition Procedure**
*SPECTRUM* **Procedure: Acquisition**

Accessioning is the formal acceptance of all permanent acquisitions (whether by gift, purchase or bequest) into the museum collection. It is achieved through the following steps:

- **Transfer of Title:** A legal term to describe the formal process of a change of ownership of an object from one person or organisation to another.
- **Accessioning:** The formal inclusion of an object into the institution's collections. It follows transfer of title and includes assigning a number to an object and recording details in an accessions register. An accessions register is the permanent record of all objects which are, or have been, part of the institution's permanent collections. An entry should record details concerning the source, identification and history of each item.
- The accession register is the most important document in a museum. It acts as a formal list of the institution's collections for which staff are accountable. It should last as long as possible and be made from the best quality, high rag content, archival paper. If using a manual system, the volume should have sewn pages and a stout binding. The best quality permanent ink should be used when making entries and unnecessary handling avoided. If a computer system is used for cataloguing accession records could be generated from the computer record in the form of a print-out. These print-outs should be made on archival quality paper and then bound.
- **Security Copy of Accession Register:** A back-up copy of the accession register should be made and held at an outside location. Ideally copies should be made on microfilm of fiche. Photocopying is an acceptable alternative. The Accreditation Standard states that: 'A second, back-up copy of the museum's accession records must be created and maintained. Both registers must be held securely, with one available to authorised staff for reference and the other stored off-site. Where accession information is wholly computerised, it must be supported by a copy of key accession information produced in an alternative medium which meets proven archival standards. Updates must be made to the stored copy at regular intervals so that the two copies remain consistent.'

[Here describe your own acquisition procedure, including how you provide security copies of accession information.]

**Marking and Labelling Procedure**
*SPECTRUM* **Procedure: Acquisition**

Labelling and marking should accompany the accessioning procedure. Each item in a museum collection must carry its identity number at all times. Every item can then be identified and its history traced. If this bond between the object and its documentation is broken, the consequences

may be serious. At best, time will be wasted because of the need to track down documentation and re-establish the link. At worst, the object will lose its provenance for all time.

[Here describe your own marking and labelling procedure.]

**Cataloguing and indexing Procedures**
*SPECTRUM* **Procedure: Cataloguing**

The requirement of the Accreditation Standard is that there should be at least three indexes giving access to catalogue information.

Cataloguing is the assembling together of all primary information about each item in the collection. This information is held in a file of records. These could be cards, loose-leaf sheets or computer records. This file is the collection catalogue.

Information in the record is sorted into a set of pigeonholes known as 'fields'. Each discrete piece of information such as the date the item was made or the name of donor is held in a separate field. This may be a box on a catalogue card or an entry on a computer screen. The record should be consistently structured in this way, as it is easier to index than unstructured information. When information is placed in these fields certain rules must be followed to aid indexing. These rules govern the words used, the order in which they are entered and any punctuation which may be required. This regulation of data entry is known as 'terminology control'.

[Here describe your own cataloguing and indexing procedures.]

**Location and movement Procedure**
*SPECTRUM* **Procedure: Location and movement control**

Museums need to log current and past locations of all objects in their care to ensure that they can locate any object at any time. This information should be recorded in the catalogue record. This system should include: location coding, location recording and a means of recording a change of location.

[Here describe your own location and movement control procedures.]

**Loans Procedures**
*SPECTRUM* **Procedure: Loans in**
*SPECTRUM* **Procedure: Loans out**

Museums need to manage and document the process of borrowing objects, for which they are responsible for a specific period of time and for a specified purpose, normally display, but including research, education or photography. They also need to manage and document the process of loaning objects to other institutions for a specific period of time.

All loans into museums should be for a fixed period of time with agreed terms and conditions. Museums should not accept items on 'permanent loan'.

[Here describe your own loans procedures.]

You can see examples of how these descriptions of the entry and acquisition procedures have been incorporated into in the [Greendale Museum Documentation Plan sections 2.1 and 2.2]. The example documentation plan also shows how Greendale Museum has described its current procedures for entry and acquisition.

# Analysing Your Situation

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The next stage is to analyse your existing primary procedures against the accreditation standard and *SPECTRUM*. The Collections Trust Accreditation Support Pack can help with this:

- To help you assess whether your museum's documentation system meets the accreditation standard, the Collections Trust has compiled the accreditation checklist. Go through it and

assess each of the procedures as they work in your museum.

- Check your current procedure against the accreditation checklist. This will show you if you do not meet the standard and will allow you to plan what action to take.
- Use relevant Collections Trust factsheets to examine individual procedures in more detail. The factsheets explain the *SPECTRUM* standard and give detailed guidance on its implementation.
- Go to *SPECTRUM*'s recommended standard, used as a checklist for Greendale Museum's object entry and acquisition procedures as described in their plan.

Having carried out the analysis of primary procedures using the checklist, you can then identify the actions you need to take. Look at the Greendale Museum documentation plan to see what actions they identified.

When you have got to this stage you can fill in section 4.3 of the accreditation application form. To see how Greendale Museum filled in this section look at their accreditation application form.

## Retrospective documentation and backlogs

The second aspect of documentation planning is to look at retrospective documentation or backlogs. How can the documentation for objects already in your collection be brought up to current standards? C:\manage_information\write_doc_plan\docplan1\doc_plan\what_is_backlog

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### What is a documentation backlog?

A museum can have many different types of backlog depending on the standards it is aiming for in its documentation. If, for example, a museum's target position is to have photographed every item in it's collection, then it could be said to have a backlog if it still has unphotographed objects. However, for the purposes of accreditation a backlog is defined much more closely.

'A documentation backlog exists when the setting up of the primary procedures listed in 4.3 has not taken place and their maintenance is not up to date for all items in the permanent collection and those on loan.'

The accreditation guidelines also describe how backlogs should be tackled

- '4.4.3 When addressing backlogs, a museum should have an accession record and a location record for all items, or group of items, in its collection. If it does not, then it must start by making an inventory of all items in its care. The inventory will enable an overview of the museum's position relating to documentation backlogs to be established and should be completed within a short time span. Each inventory entry must contain an accession number (if this has already been allocated) or a temporary number, a simple object name or brief description, and the object's location. Every unnumbered item, or group of items, listed in the inventory must be labelled with a temporary number …
- '4.4.4 Having create an inventory, the museum must then compare the inventory with existing documentation records to identify and resolve any anomalies and see if any unnumbered items match existing documentation'

So, a documentation plan with a target of meeting the accreditation standard will ensure that the information you hold about all existing objects in your collection meets the minimum standard for the *SPECTRUM* primary procedures. The Collections Trust factsheet on retrospective documentation outlines the basic principles of carrying out an inventory as required by accreditation.

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## Describing the Backlog

A documentation plan should describe the current situation regarding any accreditation backlog you have in your museum. In the first part of your plan you will probably have found problems with your procedures for accepting new objects into the collection. It is now time to consider how to apply the

minimum standard for the primary procedures to objects that are already in your collections. However, note that not all primary procedures can be carried out retrospectively. For example if we have objects in our collection without entry records then we cannot rebuild those records retrospectively.

At this point in your documentation plan you should aim to describe the parameters of your collections. What do you have in your collection? Can it be split into categories or chunks? Broadly speaking, how well documented is it? How many records do you have for certain parts of the collections? What kinds of information do you hold? See how Greendale Museum described their collections in their Documentation Plan, Section 3.1.

Not all the primary procedures can be carried out retrospectively. However, the following procedures can be addressed retrospectively and an inventory is often the best way to do this.

- **Accessioning**
  An inventory will establish whether you have unnumbered items in your collection. It will help you work out whether these are undocumented or have become detached from their accession numbers;
- **Location and movement control**
  An inventory is the only way establish an up-to-date location for every item in your collection.
- **Cataloguing**
  By carrying out an inventory you will create a basic catalogue record for every item. If you only have a cataloguing backlog this can be dealt with without carrying out an inventory;
- **Loans in**
  An inventory will help you establish what loaned objects are in your collection. This will enable you to take appropriate action. For more information on dealing with loans retrospectively see the Collections Trust factsheets on Disposing of objects you may not own and Loan records (Incoming loans);
- **Loans out**
  An inventory is an ideal opportunity to take stock of items that are on loan to other institutions. However, this can be loans out can be dealt with without carrying out an inventory. See the Collections Trust factsheet on Loan records (Outgoing loans).

Greendale Museum does not meet the minimum standard for the following points on the retrospective documentation checklist:

- Ensure that a unique number is assigned to, and physically associated with, all objects
- Ensure that an accessions register is maintained, describing all acquisitions and listing them by number
- Ensure that a unique number is assigned to, and physically associated with, all objects
- Provide a record of the location of an object when it is not at its normal location
- Enable you to search for location information by object number and by location name

They also do not have a catalogue or indexes for the social history collection.

Although there are a range of issues to deal with at Greendale Museum, the best starting point is for the museum to carry out an inventory. See the section Actions for Greendale Museum social history collection in the Greendale Museum documentation plan.

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## Priorities, timescales and resources

A documentation plan must be based on realistic targets. It is no good trying to create excessively detailed catalogue records, for example, if there is a risk that this will prevent the project being completed in the foreseeable future. The plan must include an assessment of resources required (staff, skills, time, materials, equipment etc).

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**Documentation Priorities, Timescales and Resources**

Your museum will have to work out its own priorities, timescales and resources but here are some suggestions as to what you will need to consider:

**Documentation priorities:**

- Accreditation standards
- Which parts of a collection can most easily be brought up to the accreditation standard
- Which parts of the collection are most used
- Which parts of a collection are already well documented.

**Timescales**

The greatest cost of documentation is staff time so it is important that it is planned properly. You may want to define how much time each member of staff spends on documentation activities per week, or may want to have a complete 'blitz' on documentation for example, if the museum closes for the winter. You should consider whether other activities will suffer and whether this is acceptable. It is a good idea to set short term goals as well as overall targets. Each phase should, if possible, produce a useful result and it should increase staff morale. There is no standard way of estimating timescales for retrospective documentation. Each museum has its own problems which need to be addressed in different ways. It is a good idea to carry out test runs of what you want to do to estimate how much time it might take.

There is more information on documentation timescales and examples from real museums in the Collections Trust factsheet Documentation Timescales.

**Resources**

- What is the minimum total initial outlay?
- What will be the minimum on-going costs?
- Will extra staff be needed?
- Will existing staff need training?
- Will extra equipment (stationery to computers) be needed?
- Will extra space be needed for particular activities?
- Which aspects of the plan could be grant-aided?
- Which costs could be spread over a longer timescale?

When you have worked out your priorities, timescales and resources you can produce an action plan. For an example see the Greendale Museum Documentation Plan Section 4, Action Plan.

You can now fill in section 4.4 of the Accreditation Application form.

# Conclusion

The final section of your documentation plan should include the date, signature of the person responsible for the plan, the date it has been ratified by your governing body and a review date.