



Security in museums and galleries: key security

A locked building, room, storage area or exhibition case is only as secure as its key: if that key is lost, illicitly duplicated or handed out inappropriately then the security of that particular area is reduced. More locks are compromised through careless key control than as a result of picking or being forced. Throughout this Practical Guide reference to 'keys', also includes reference to key pads, swipe cards and key codes.

Basic principles of key security

- all museums should have a written security policy which has been signed off by senior management. This policy, which addresses organisation wide security issues, should include the control, issue, possession and storage of for all keys, including those for collections areas. Key security policies will identify responsibilities for key control, circumstances under which keys are issued, and systems for key control.
- staff should be aware of specific circumstances which pose an increased risk to key security. For example, projects such as exhibition/gallery installations, decants or building projects create a period of higher levels of key distribution, different staffing patterns and greater levels of access to collections for movement, installation or collections care purposes. These are periods of greater risk and it is important that project-specific security issues are considered and reviewed, to maintain accountability levels.
- only the keys needed to secure the building at close, and to open the building, each day should be taken from the building. Local police and security/fire alarm companies (as appropriate) must always have full and current details of key holders to the premises.
- all keys other than those needed to close and open the museum must be retained in a secure area within the building.
- keys should be issued to staff or volunteers, from the secure area, only for work-related activities.
- the deciding factor for key possession by staff and volunteers should be need and accountability, rather than status or convenience. Extreme care needs to be taken when issuing keys to contractors and outside agencies, and the issue should not permit unsupervised access to collections. It is sometimes preferable for future accountability for senior staff to be excluded from routine access to collections areas, unless in an emergency, if that is practical.

- staff and volunteers should be supported through formal induction and training to understand the role played by key control in the security of the collections. Responsibility for key control and possession of keys should be reflected in staff job descriptions and volunteer agreements.
- the level of key control needs to be proportionate to the level of security required; however, this needs to be balanced with the considerable inconvenience and impact of lost keys for areas which require a lower level of security.

Practical key security control measures

There are a number of practical measures and procedures, which support a key control policy. They are:

- keeping all keys in a secure area
- labelling keys with a number only
- maintaining a key tracking system
- keeping a key register
- maintaining a programme of key auditing
- supporting staff to look after keys which are their responsibility
- having a written procedure for lost keys
- regular reviews of access permissions for secure areas to ensure requirements remain relevant and up to date

Keeping all keys in a secure area

All keys, other than external door keys, must remain inside the building in a secure area which is preferably under direct supervision. Keys should be stored and issued from a secure cabinet or safe.

Spare keys and master keys must be secured in a separate safe with very limited access for identified senior key holders only.

Labelling keys with a number only

All keys should be identified by a coding system. Do not label keys with a tab indicating their purpose, such as 'silver store'.

Maintaining a key tracking system

The issue of keys should be supported by the museum's key security policy, which should identify who has access to keys, and for which purpose, and who is able to issue keys.

A key tracking system provides an instant visual record of which keys are currently on issue, and enables a visual inspection at the end of the day to confirm that all keys have been returned. Someone must be responsible to ensure all keys are returned safely at the close of each day. A simple system can be created by using numbered key tabs which are held in a cabinet on corresponding coloured and numbered pegs. Individuals are then given a plastic tab which they can trade for the key.

More sophisticated systems are also available which will not release the key unless the tab, or 'access peg' is in position. Other systems are computer controlled and maintain a record of all transactions, only releasing keys to personnel with a pin number or electronic tab. They may be further enhanced if the access peg is linked to a personal ID card, or vehicle keys, thus ensuring the individual returns the keys at the end of the working day, and that keys do not leave the building. An audit trail of access to secure areas, whether manual or electronic is desirable.

Keeping a key register

A key register ensures that you know who has keys and when keys are issued and returned.

Keys should be issued either permanently, where the holder requires frequent, long-term access or temporarily, where the holder requires short-term, infrequent access. Generally speaking permanently issued keys should only be those which are needed to close and open the museum: all other keys should remain inside the building.

A register of permanently issued keys should be maintained, while temporary keys should be logged out on a separate register and ideally returned on the same day. Key registers should be kept in the secure area where keys are issued.

Maintaining a programme of key auditing

Regular key audits should be conducted to confirm the whereabouts of each key, and to ensure that the key registers tally with the key tracking system.

Supporting staff to look after keys

Key security is part of the staff and volunteer induction process. At induction, all staff and volunteers should be familiarised with key control policies and procedures, and be informed of their own responsibilities for key security, which should be described in their job description or volunteer agreement. If a new member of staff or volunteer is to be responsible for a key it must be emphasised that it should not be duplicated, or passed to a third party without permission.

It is helpful to provide staff with ways to look after the keys for which they are temporarily or permanently responsible. Retractable chains that are unobtrusive and clip to a belt are now available from high street stores, and will help to avoid keys being mislaid.

Opening and closing times can be vulnerable times for the lone key holder, especially if called to the premises at unusual times and therefore procedures should take this into account. For their own safety, allowing a single member of staff to be the first to arrive and the last to leave should be avoided.

When staff or volunteers finish working for a museum, all keys must be returned, and the key registers updated.

Having a written procedure for lost keys

Any lost keys must be reported straightaway, and an assessment made to establish:

- the circumstances surrounding the loss
- the likelihood of the recovery of the keys
- the threat posed to the museum by the loss
- the action that needs to be taken

If as a result of the loss, locks need to be changed, an interim security procedure may have to be adopted or additional personal security presence introduced to cover the period of compromise.

Key suiting

A common problem in larger venues is the large number of keys in circulation, particularly if there is a multiplicity of different locks in a building. One way round this is to introduce a master key suited system. This is usually arranged in hierarchical 'family tree' fashion with a grand master key, below which are developed a number of master suites, below which may be a number of sub-master suites, below which are a number of single keys which give access either to specific doors or to a number of common doors. The master suites might relate to specific functional areas of a building, thus there might be one master suite for office and ordinary storage areas, a second for collection storage areas, a third for engineering plant areas.

Keys can be 'cross-suited' so that someone with authority to enter areas covered by two or more master suites can still carry one key instead of a bunch. The key suiting plan would normally be worked out by the lock supplier following a specification of requirements by the institution. The advantages of a master-suited system are that it:

- enables all doors to be linked together in a common system leading to improved key control
- means that individuals carry fewer keys around with them which normally helps to reduce losses
- provides easier access for security staff when responding to emergencies

The main disadvantage of a key suited system is that the security of the system will be seriously compromised if a master or a sub-master key is lost. All the cylinders operable by that key might then have to be replaced. There is also the expense to be considered of installing new lock barrels in doors when the system is first installed. However, once the system is in place, the cost of replacement barrels can be reduced by using suited 'inserts'.

See <http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/security> for more museum security resources.