

Documentation planning pack part 1: Planning to improve your collections documentation

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1. Introduction

This planning pack explores how documentation planning could work in your museum, and specifically, how it can be implemented to meet the requirements of the UK Museum Accreditation Scheme.

It is in two parts:

- Part 1: [Planning to improve collections documentation](#)
- Part 2: [Greendale Museum Documentation Plan](#)

This planning pack expands on the Spectrum 5 *Documentation planning* procedure:

Definition: Making your documentation systems better and enhancing the information they contain as an ongoing process of continual improvement

Your own procedure should meet the following minimum requirements:

Minimum requirement	Why this is important
Review the collections information you already have and agree areas for improvement in the light of your collection management priorities.	You do not spend time and resources working on things that interest you but do not contribute to the wider priorities of your organisation.
You have a written documentation plan setting out specific objectives that can be achieved within a realistic timeframe given the available resources.	You break down 'the backlog' into manageable projects that meet your wider objectives. In the UK this is a requirement of Museum Accreditation.
You review progress towards achieving your plan's objectives regularly.	You can celebrate 'quick wins'. You are able to address any problems that might cause the plan to fail.

2. Why do you need a documentation plan?

Documentation planning is an integral part of a museum's collections management activity. Successful documentation planning enables a museum to:

- Develop collections
- Manage collections more effectively and efficiently so that they can be used by audiences
- Manage information about the collections so that museums are accountable and able to improve information about the objects in their care
- Demonstrate to governing bodies, funders and users of collections that the management of collections information is integral to the delivery of services to the public
- Manage and mitigate risks to the collections

Documentation planning is an ongoing activity in the museum; collections information is continuously being collected and improved. It is recognised as such in collections management standards such as Spectrum and is a requirement of the Arts Council England Museum Accreditation Scheme.



If your organisation does not yet meet the Spectrum standard for the Inventory procedure, this should be the first priority addressed in your plan. This main focus of this guidance is Inventory and eliminating backlogs, but the principles described can be applied to the improvement of more detailed collections information. For example, Cataloguing is an ongoing, open-ended process that is less daunting if treated as discrete research projects.

3. Before you start

Museum Accreditation places the documentation plan in the context of the museum's development policy and the museums documentation policy. All documentation planning should be in the context of appropriate policies and the museum's organisational purpose.

Before you begin to create your documentation plan you need to:

- Understand where your museum is in the context of your Accreditation application or return. Although documentation planning is an ongoing activity in every museum, you will need to understand your documentation planning practice in the context of the Accreditation cycle.
- Work within the context of your museum's wider Accreditation related activity and consult with the people leading on your application. Your documentation plan cannot be created by a single individual in isolation from the other plans and goals of the museum; it will impact on many of your museum's resources and help to deliver your museum's goals. It is important that documentation planning is understood and owned by as many staff as possible within the museum.
- Gather relevant resources, standards and guidance (eg the Accreditation standard and guidance, Collections Trust resources)
- Think about how you are going to manage the delivery of your documentation plan - think about aims, roles and responsibilities, resources available, challenges, risks, opportunities and constraints.
- Understand the Accreditation requirements regarding documentation - see the Spectrum 5 *Inventory* procedure for a definition of documentation backlogs and a suggested procedure.
- If your backlogs are large and/or spread across many departments or collections, consider how you are going to prioritise them. Resist the temptation to try to work through the entire backlog in a single project. It may be more effective to work with colleagues to identify a collection which is underused or of relevance to a particular audience, or in need of rationalisation.

4. What should be in a documentation plan?

Ideally a documentation plan should be structured like any project plan, with reference to aims, roles, actions, resources and risks. All circumstances are different; however, here is a possible format for a documentation plan that describes how a museum plans to meet the Accreditation Standard for its documentation, with an emphasis on clearing a backlog:

Section 1: Introduction	
1.1 Context and background for the plan.	<p>Refer to the museum's organisational purpose, forward plan, and other museum policies, specifically its collections development policy and collections documentation policy.</p> <p>Refer to the standards and methodologies to be used when the plan is carried out.</p> <p>Introduce the Accreditation requirement for documentation planning.</p>
1.2 Your museum's target position regarding the documentation system and the backlogs	<p>Describe the aim of your plan clearly. Be SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timed). It may be easier to describe your aim after you have been through the planning process and assessed your position.</p>
Section 2: The documentation system and the Spectrum primary procedures	
2.1 The Spectrum minimum standards for a basic museum documentation system	<p>List the Spectrum primary procedures and make a reference to the concept of a basic accountable documentation system. List any other Spectrum procedures your organisation uses. Alternatively, if you have these listed in your procedural manual, you can just refer to them.</p> <p>Note: if your museum's collections management policies state that you do not accept or make loans, you do not need to implement the Spectrum Loans in and Loans out procedures.</p>
2.2 Analysis of current shortfalls in the museum's documentation procedures and identification of what needs to be done	<p>Consider each of the Spectrum primary procedures, referring to your documentation procedural manual. Analyse these against the Spectrum standard to identify any shortfalls and/or improvements to be made.</p> <p>You can now describe the actions you need to take in your Action Plan in Section 4.</p> <p>You may also wish to analyse other Spectrum procedures your museum is using.</p>

Section 3: Improving your collections information	
3.1 A review of the museum's collections information and improvements needed, including a description of the museum's backlogs	<p>Aim to describe the parameters of your collections; your collections development policy will be useful here. What do you have in your collection? Can it be split into categories or collections?</p> <p>Describe your backlogs. Broadly speaking, how well documented are your collections? How many records do you have for certain parts of the collections? What kinds of information do you hold? A spot check audit might be useful to help answer these questions (see <i>Audit</i>). It might be useful to summarise this information in a table.</p> <p>Beyond the requirements for <i>Inventory</i>, what other collections information does your museum need to improve?</p>
3.2 Rationale for prioritisation	<p>It is still important to prioritise your backlog activity, particularly if your backlogs are large. Remember your plan has to be SMART, so you will need to identify areas of your collection which can be brought up to standard within the resources available. Do you have backlogs which need to be prioritised over other areas, and why? What resources do you have available and how much can you realistically achieve?</p> <p>If you do not have a backlog or if your plan also covers other documentation improvements, as identified in Section 3.1, how will you prioritise this work as a process of continual improvement?</p>
Section 4: Action Plan	
4.1 A plan for rectifying current shortfalls identified in Section 2 and Section 3 .	<p>The easiest way to work through backlogs is to use the <i>Inventory</i> procedure; this is the method recommended in Accreditation guidance. Describe your actions and the methods which will be used; this may be best described in a table.</p> <p>When creating your action plan, try to anticipate the resources you are going to need. Some questions you may want to ask are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who will be involved, and do you need extra staff or volunteers? Will they need training? • Will extra equipment or space be needed? • Are there alternative sources of funding for some aspects of the plan? <p>Suggest a realistic timetable for the work and estimate costs, including measurable results and milestones to review progress. Scale down projects, identify achievable 'chunks' and don't be overambitious. When working on backlogs, it might be appropriate to use bulk accessioning techniques.</p> <p>There is more guidance on timescales at the end of this resource.</p>

Section 5: Risk analysis	
5.1 Identify risks to your plan and how they might be mitigated	It is good practice to identify risks to your documentation plans – what might cause your plan to derail, and how might you decrease the risk of this? You will find that considering risks and mitigation might cause you to revisit parts of your plan and adjust them.
Section 6: Date and sign off of plan at management level, including a date for review	Your plan needs to be part of your museum's wider Accreditation related activity. Sign off at a high level within your organisation is an important recognition of the museum's commitment to your plan. Your plan should also include a review date.

See [Documentation Planning Pack - Part 2: Greendale Museum Documentation Plan](#)² for an example of a documentation plan from a fictional museum.

5. Target positions and timescales

A documentation plan must be based on realistic targets. Target positions need to balance the quality/quantity you are aiming for with the resources that you have available. For example, it is no good aiming to create excessively detailed catalogue records in a limited time, with the result that you are unable to complete the project. In this situation it might be better to focus on the minimum Inventory information required, so you have at least achieved a basic level of accountability.

It is difficult to estimate how long it is going to take to clear a backlog; every situation is unique and timescales will vary according to location and collection type. There are however some project management top tips, which will help you to plan successful projects that deliver to budget and time:

- Work within your organisational purpose and collections management policies**
Is your plan delivering on your organisational purpose? If it is, you may be able to work with other people/teams in your museum to achieve your goals. For example, as part of your collections access work, you may be able to create a project which uses volunteers with specialist knowledge.
- Run a trial project**
A trial project can be a very useful tool when estimating timescales. When you've decided what your project is to achieve, carry out a trial over a couple of hours, half day, or longer and work out what can be achieved in that timescale. Ensure you also include some contingency time.
- Consult with those who will be delivering the plan**
Test your draft plan, and trial project, with the staff and volunteers who will be responsible for delivering the actions plan, so that you can build an accurate picture. Have you missed out any key steps or underestimated how long something takes?
- Estimate object numbers**
Although estimating object numbers can be hit and miss, it is worth making an approximation of the numbers of objects you are going to deal with in your project. For example, check several boxes to get an average of the number of items per box and then multiply by how many boxes you have in your store.
- Estimate how long your documentation activity will take based on your estimate of object numbers**
Again, this is probably not going to be accurate; however it will give you some ball park figures. You can base your estimates on your trial run, or you can look at the experience of other projects.

- **Be prepared to adjust your plan during the project**

All project management methodologies accept that projects change and adjust as they progress. Be prepared to incorporate change into your project; build change management practices for agreeing and recording changes into your project methodology.

- **Presentation**

As well as your action plan table, it can be useful to plot your actions into a simple GANTT chart or calendar. This will allow you to see any bottlenecks and conflicts, and busy periods such as exhibition changeovers, and adjust your plan as needed.

- **Continuity**

Documentation projects can be complex, and some may suffer from changing circumstances, such as staff changes, within the museum. Always plan for continuity in your project so that there are records of what your project set out to achieve and what it has achieved. It is good practice to record information about all documentation projects in your documentation procedural manual.



Collections Trust's mission is to help museums capture and share the information that gives their objects meaning. Our standards and advice are used around the world to make museum collections accessible.

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