

# Collections care and conservation

## Definition

Managing and documenting any conservation work on particular objects, such as treatments to slow decay, repair damage or improve appearance.

## Scope

This procedure is closely linked to ***Condition checking and technical assessment***. Conservation interventions are usually the result of condition checks, and are often prompted by other procedures, such as managing a loan request. Conservation treatments will often be informed by scientific analysis of materials and other technical assessments. Conservators might also be involved in making bespoke supports or packaging for objects.

Conservation records are important and should form a seamless part of your collections documentation, even if the work itself is carried out by external specialists away from your museum.

## The Spectrum standard

You should have a **policy** on the care of your collections and the conservation of objects. This could either be a standalone document or part of a wider collections management policy. Either way, in deciding your policy you will most likely need to consider these questions:

- Who is responsible for setting and ensuring the standards of collections care you will maintain (involving external specialists if needed)?
- What are those standards for the different categories of objects in your collection?
- How you will monitor that these standards are being maintained?
- When might you consider conservation treatment for objects?
- Who will be involved in agreeing the scope of any proposed conservation work (especially on objects that do not belong to your museum)?
- Who can authorise conservation work?
- Who can carry out conservation work, and what are your criteria for selecting external specialists where needed?

- How should conservation work be documented, and what records should external contractors provide?

You should also have a written **procedure** that explains the steps to follow when managing and carrying out conservation of objects. Spectrum's suggested procedure is a useful starting point, but however you do it, your own procedure should meet the following minimum requirements:

Minimum requirement	Why this is important
Appropriate authorisation is given for any decision to change an object's standard of care or carry out any conservation treatment.	No conservation work happens without the knowledge of those responsible for the objects.
You record the details of all collections care measures and conservation treatment (including dates and who performed the work) - and can access these via relevant object numbers.	You have a full conservation history of your objects, and can find this information easily when you need it.  If a problem later arises, you can check other objects that might also be affected.
You update objects' catalogue records with any new information gained as a result of conservation.	New insights about how objects were made are not just kept in conservation files that might not be generally accessible.
You schedule, where necessary, any further conservation treatment, call-back condition checks or periodic care activities.	You can plan your conservation activity and ensure that objects are available when needed.

## Suggested procedure

### Agreeing conservation work

#### Scope the work to be carried out.

Conservators are often involved during the course of several other Spectrum procedures. If a conservator has previously carried out assessments and made recommendations for treatment, this can form the basis of reaching agreement on work to be done. If this is not the case, a condition check and recommendations for treatment will be carried out by the conservator on first receiving objects.

## Reach agreement on the work to be carried out.

The conservator's proposed work should be agreed in writing. This may be fairly straightforward if the objects belong to you and the conservator is an in-house employee. If the objects do not belong to you (eg if you are proposing conservation work on a loan for an exhibition) you should get the written agreement of the relevant owners.

If you are contracting an external conservator, you will need a formal agreement, including:

- The assessment and recommendations following a condition check.
- A timetable of work.
- The conservator's name and business details.
- The authority to carry out the work and the person responsible.
- Terms and conditions (eg payment schedule).
- Any transport, handling, security, insurance and access arrangements, both in transit and while the objects are with the conservator.

File this and note the **Document location** in the relevant object records so you and others can find it in future.

## Provide the conservator with information about each object.

If available (and not confidential) give the conservator the following information for each object they will be working on, and ideally images too:

- Object number (or an entry number or loan number for items that do not belong to you).
- Brief description.
- Materials.
- Location (if the conservator will have to get the object from here).
- Technical descriptions and condition assessments.
- Previous conservation history.
- Recommended treatment or conservation requirements resulting from condition assessments and intended use.
- Reason for conservation.
- Person making the request.
- Date of the request.
- Date for completion.
- Any health and safety hazards and risk assessments.

File this and note the **Document location** in the relevant object records.

Record information about the conservation work before it is carried out.

This should include:

### Object identification information or Object entry information

- The **Object number** or **Entry number** of the objects, or groups of object, being worked on.

### Conservation and treatment information

- A reference number for the work - **Conservation reference number** (use a standard format).
- The name of the conservator (and contact details if not in-house):
  - **Conservator** (use a standard form of name).
  - **Address**.
- Your authoriser - **Conservation authoriser** (use a standard form of name).
  - **Conservation authorisation date** (use a standard format).
- **Conservation method** (use a standard term source) being used in the work.

## Carrying out conservation work

Move the objects.

If the object is to be moved within your buildings (including from a remote store to an in-house conservation facility). Go to **Location and movement control**.

If the object is going from your buildings to an external conservator for the work go to **Object exit** and from there to **Location and movement control**.

Carry out the agreed conservation work.

## Recording conservation work

At the time, or as soon as possible, record details of the job and the work on each object.

While the work is being carried out, or very soon afterwards, the conservator should record:

### Object conservation and treatment information

- When the work was carried out:
  - **Treatment begin date** (use a standard format).
  - **Treatment end date** (use a standard format).
- The **Treatment report** containing:

- The type of work (eg conservation treatment, preventive measures, condition report, loan condition report).
- The action carried out (location, procedure, method, materials used, duration, and result).
- The reference numbers of reports, photographs, drawings, X-radiographs or other types of image.
- The new or revised handling, packing, storage and display recommendations.
- The packing/support instructions if part of the work.
- The updates to the care and maintenance plan (if appropriate).
- The call back date for any follow-up work or evaluation (if appropriate) (**Recall date**).
- Details of any new or reproduction parts fitted to an object.

### Add relevant information from the conservation record to your documentation system.

If you are using an external contractor, you should receive a copy of all the information recorded during the work. File this and note the **Document location** in the relevant object records so you and others can find it in future.

You may need to transfer key information (such as hazard notes or handling recommendations) to the relevant object records so it is immediately available to anyone looking at those records. If the work has been carried out by an in-house conservator, such information can be entered directly onto your collection management system.

### Check the objects on the agreed recall dates.

To check the longer-term success of conservation treatment, objects should be examined on agreed recall dates and their condition recorded.

## Guidance notes

### Note 1: Levels of recording

The extent and form of the conservation documentation will depend on the type of conservation event or treatment and its effect on the object concerned. Special circumstances may determine the level of detail possible. These include disaster recovery, emergency minor conservation treatment, mass or bulk treatment, preventive conservation measures, housekeeping activities (eg dusting objects on open display). Emergency records should be completed in full when conditions allow.

## **Note 2: Recording evidence that might be lost during conservation**

Where conservation treatments known to invalidate analytical techniques or remove potential information are undertaken, the effect of these should be noted as part of the result. Any procedures for preserving information (eg sampling prior to treatment), should be recorded. Such treatments include heat treatment of metals and removal of all soil from archaeological objects. All treatments should be recorded in full for future reference for health and safety reasons and in case materials used begin to degrade and require removal.

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## Agreeing conservation work



