

# Retrospective documentation

## **Definition**

The improvement of the standard of information about objects and collections to meet *SPECTRUM Minimum Standards* by the documentation of new information for existing objects and collections.

## **Minimum Standard**

The organisation must have a policy on retrospective documentation. Refer to [Before you start - Policy requirements](#) for details.

The procedure for retrospective documentation must:

- Define the purposes of the organisation's documentation system. The primary purpose should be to establish accountability and access;
- Define the organisation's understanding of the backlogs it has;
- Work towards reducing its backlog;
- Review progress on reducing the backlog on a regular basis;
- Work towards an overall improvement in the quality of information held about objects and collections;
- Review progress on the overall improvement in the quality of information on a regular basis.

## Before you start

Retrospective documentation is a *Primary Procedure*. This means that in order to meet the documentation requirements for the *Museum Accreditation Scheme* an organisation must reach the *SPECTRUM Minimum Standard* for this procedure.

### Types of backlog

There is no simple answer to the question "What is a backlog?" Here is a non-exhaustive list of types of backlog that an organisation might have:

#### **SPECTRUM Procedural**

An organisation should have in place all the procedures in SPECTRUM that it uses. In particular:

- The organisation's *policy requirements* for the procedure;
- The awareness of the *legal environment* under which the procedure operates;
- The implementation of the procedure set out in a procedural manual;
- A system of review for each procedure, making changes when needed.

#### **Core information**

The basic standard of documentation for objects in an organisation's collection is that ensuring accountability for any object, at any time. All objects (or groups of objects) must have the core inventory information detailed in [Cataloguing - Procedure - Step 4](#).

#### **Accessioning**

An organisation often has a backlog in the formal *accessioning* of objects into its *permanent collections*, including the writing up information into its *accession register(s)*.

#### **Cataloguing**

A cataloguing backlog is more difficult to define. It depends on the purposes an organisation has for its documentation system (see [Step 1](#) below.). The *Museum Accreditation Scheme* defines its cataloguing requirement (see below), but many organisations will want to have a more comprehensive catalogue.

#### **Museum Accreditation**

The *Museum Accreditation Scheme* has a number of requirements for documentation. It states that a documentation system must:

- Have a documentation plan, which the organisation works to, especially in clearing backlogs;
- Implement *Object entry* - there must be a record of all objects that enter the organisation;
- Implement *Acquisition* - organisations must:
  - Maintain an accession register;
  - Have security copies of the accession register;
  - Label and/or mark all objects (or groups of object);
- Implement *Location and movement control* - all object movements must be recorded;
- Implement *Cataloguing* - there must be two indexes to give access to information. These are the object's identity number and one other (location, donor and subject classification are suggested);
- Implement *Object exit* - there must be unique records of all objects in the permanent collections that leave the organisation;
- Implement *Loans in* - records must be maintained;
- Implement *Loans out* - records must be maintained.

## ***Retrospective documentation***

### ***Cultural diversity***

Collections information relevant for new and culturally diverse audiences is often not fully documented or not documented at all. This information can often be found in existing paper-based material associated with the object(s). In addition, contributions from past owners and viewers of objects can be explicitly sought. A toolkit and methodology for this can be found in MLA London's *Revisiting Collections* work which is supported by MDA. See [Sources of help and advice](#).

### ***Legal environment***

#### ***Rights***

Objects and other material may have rights associated with them (e.g. copyright). Also information that the organisation records about the persons will be governed by rights legislation (e.g. *Data Protection*). The procedure for retrospective documentation needs to take into account these rights. See the [Rights management](#) procedure for full details on how to do this.

### ***Policy requirements***

The organisation must have a policy for retrospective documentation. It is good practice for it to address:

- Timescale for reducing backlogs;
- Levels of resources allocated to *Retrospective documentation*;
- Number of objects/records to be addressed;
- The standard of documentation required;
- Associated roles for the activity (e.g. a condition audit, or the need to revise storage arrangements).

## Procedure

### Define organisation's purposes

- 1 Define the purposes of the organisation's documentation system. The primary purpose is to establish accountability - what the organisation has and where it is. Any backlog in doing this must be addressed first. Then the organisation can go on to explore its other backlogs.

Explore the other purposes of the organisation's documentation system by looking at:

- Who the 'clients' of the system are, e.g. staff, volunteers, auditors, researchers, school students, and adult members of the public;
- Who is involved in the operation of the documentation system, e.g. professional staff and/or volunteers;
- What the organisation is trying to do, e.g.:
  - Inform the general public about the history of its locality;
  - Help teachers and school students meet requirements of a curriculum;
  - Tell the story of a particular individual, industry, type of object;
  - Help in the teaching of university students.
- The organisation's mission statement;
- Who the owners of the organisation are - what their requirements (e.g. do they require audit);
- What the environment in which the organisation is operating in, e.g. legal restraints, requirements of the *Museum Accreditation Scheme*, and requirements for funding.

All these factors will inform the definition of the organisation's backlogs.

Create a **written** definition of purposes of the organisation's documentation system. Record a reference to the document.

#### Information requirements:

- [Reference information](#).

### Define organisation's backlogs

- 2 Use the document purposes document produced in [Step 1](#), together with the [Before you start](#) section above to define the organisation's backlogs. This could be done by listing the different types of backlog and giving a statement about the organisation's situation with regard to that type.

Create a **written** definition of the organisation's documentation backlogs. Record a reference to the document.

#### Information requirements:

- [Reference information](#).

### **Planning to clear backlogs**

**3** Create a **written** retrospective documentation plan. See [Sources of help and advice](#) for practical information on clearing backlogs. The plan should detail:

- The actions the organisation will be taking to address the backlogs (e.g. carrying out an audit or a project to label and/or mark objects in a store);
- Detail resources (e.g. people and time.) that will be used;
- Set measurable outcomes (e.g. all objects on display have inventory records);
- Give date-defined milestones that can be used to review progress (e.g. Phase 1 will be completed on the 31st of December 2005).

Record a reference to the document.

**Information requirements:**

- [Reference information.](#)

### **Reviewing progress**

**4** Regularly review the organisation's progress on tackling its backlogs. This should be based on the milestones defined in the plan.

Adjust the plan, if necessary, based on the results of the review.

Create a **written** review report and a revised plan. Record a reference to the document.

**Information requirements:**

- [Reference information.](#)

## Sources of help and advice

### Publications

- Holm, Stuart.** *Facts and Artefacts: How to document a museum collection. (Second edition).* (Part 3, 'How to tackle backlog' pp 34-37). Cambridge, MDA 1998.
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- MDA.** *Terminology control.* [fact sheet] Cambridge: MDA, 2006.  
<[http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/manage\\_information/about\\_terminology](http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/manage_information/about_terminology)>
- Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA).** *The Accreditation Standard.* London: MLA, 2004.  
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