

# Closed by COVID-19?

## A Practice Guide for managers of heritage collections that are closed at short notice because of an epidemic or pandemic

Version 1.2, published 29 April 2020.

### Who should use this Practice Guide?

This Guide is for people who are responsible for collections of movable cultural heritage in collecting organisations such as archives, galleries, herbaria, historical societies, keeping places, libraries and museums and at heritage sites. Whether working as volunteers or paid staff, their aim is to preserve the collection for the long term by achieving high standards in management of the collection and its environment. This Guide is likely to be **most useful for organisations that do not have ready access to professional conservators**.

Collecting organisations range in size from the small (often managed entirely by volunteers) to the large (with hundreds of paid staff). Some organisations are located in a single building. Others manage multiple buildings, sometimes at different sites. This Guide aims to provide advice that can be adapted to **any size of organisation** and uses the word 'premises' to refer to the physical structure/s where any part of an organisation's collection is located.

### What is the scope of this Practice Guide?

During an epidemic or pandemic, many adjustments will need to be made to the way a collecting organisation operates. This Guide focuses on the adjustments that need to be considered in relation to **risks to collections of heritage items**.

### What is outside the scope of this Practice Guide?

Although this Guide focuses on collection issues, personnel and operational matters are also critical during an epidemic / pandemic. Keep in mind the following points.

#### Regarding personnel:

- Maintain a healthy and safe workforce. Without healthy people, there might be no-one to care for the collection. The health of people must always be prioritised ahead of the preservation of heritage items.
- Follow local guidance for hygiene and physical distancing.
- Support personnel who can work from home.
- Keep up to date with, and share as appropriate:
  - recent advice from government regarding changes to health, safety and work practices affecting personnel, and

- changes to employment conditions (for organisations that have paid employees).

#### Regarding operations:

- Manage any new issues by introducing new procedures and/or policies.
- Anticipate that changes will be required in areas such as: visitor access, outreach and online services, finances and cashflow, reputational risk, insurance cover, security, internal communications (with personnel) and external communications (with patrons and audiences).

### Why is guidance needed for a closed collection?

When storage and display areas are shut for an extended period, **additional or increased risks to the collection** may need to be considered **because personnel are not present at their normal frequency**.

Risks to collection items during an epidemic or pandemic arise from potential changes to:

- Environmental conditions e.g. ventilation may be more limited; pest traps may be full and not able to be replaced. <sup>1</sup>
- Security e.g. intruders and vandals may become a problem.
- The availability of personnel, including volunteers, staff and contractors.

This Guide has been created to suggest some tasks that should be undertaken to ensure that a collection is preserved in a stable environment when it is closing or closed.

### Regimes for enhanced cleaning and disinfection

If a person with a confirmed or suspected case of COVID-19 has been identified in the organisation, **do not use disinfectants in close proximity to collection items**. Treat affected areas as follows:

- For non-collection areas and non-heritage surfaces, refer to public health guidelines.
- For heritage items and for collection storage and display areas, **isolation and quarantine** are preferred methods of control. Seek advice on appropriate isolation and quarantine periods from local public health organisations. In instances where isolation and quarantine are not possible, seek professional conservation advice from organisations such as the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material prior to undertaking any cleaning. <sup>2</sup>

---

1 See: '[Ten agents of deterioration](#)' and '[Potential for increased pest activity during museum closures](#)'.

2 <https://aiccm.org.au/news/covid-19-collection-and-conservation-resources>

## Stage 0 - Preliminary tasks

**Situation:** An epidemic or pandemic may have been declared, but restrictions have not yet been imposed on collecting organisations in your locality. The premises are open to the public and all personnel are working normally on site, if fit to do so.

- Be alert to the emergence of a disease that may be classified as an epidemic or pandemic.
- Convene a meeting of the collection team, to plan ahead for an epidemic / pandemic emergency. Consider how to prepare for the next three stages of response that might be required during the emergency:
  - **Stage 1 – ‘All hands on deck’**
  - **Stage 2 – ‘Skeleton staff’**
  - **Stage 3 – ‘Evacuation or Lockdown’**
- Ensure that the collection’s needs are represented at planning meetings for the whole organisation.
- Seek confirmation from the organisation as a whole regarding:
  - Duties that should continue to be performed
  - New duties that may be required
  - Regimes for enhanced cleaning and disinfection (as outlined in the previous section). Note that many cleaning solutions can cause permanent damage to collection items and heritage surfaces.
  - Roles and responsibilities of individuals
  - Chain/s of command and reserve personnel
  - Communication methods and back-up plans
  - Work-from-home arrangements, including tools to facilitate virtual meetings and methods for accessing files and databases
  - Procedures for authorisation of changes to plans and activities
- Ensure that contact details are current for relevant personnel (including volunteers, staff and contractors).
- Confirm existing relationships with contractors who provide specialised services relating to the collection e.g. security, cleaning, information and communications technology, insurance, conservation, HVAC <sup>3</sup> services, monitoring of pests and environmental conditions etc. Review the flexibility of contracts – can scheduled activities be reduced or increased if required?
- Ensure that protocols for contractors accessing any collection areas are up-to-date.

---

3 HVAC means Heating, Ventilation and Air-Conditioning.

- Ensure alarms, CCTV <sup>4</sup> surveillance, environmental data loggers and other monitoring systems are working and consider upgrading them so that they can be accessed remotely by authorised personnel.
- Confirm that back-up processes for computerised collection data and documentation (including the collection catalogue) are functioning well.
- Confirm the status of any collection items that are temporarily located at different premises e.g. on outward loan to another organisation, or at a conservator's laboratory or studio. Consider retrieving the item/s if feasible and appropriate. If retrieval is not possible, ask the off-site manager/s to confirm their security arrangements for when their organisation reaches **Stage 1**.
- Consider whether additional precautions need to be taken for heritage items not owned by the organisation e.g. inward loans and items that are under consideration for donation and acquisition.
- Assess which items are at risk if they remain in the display environment. Plan to remove such items from display and place them in secure storage during **Stage 1**.
- Consider whether the organisation's existing Disaster Plan could be implemented during a **Stage 3** closure. Revise the Plan if required. Refresh links, if possible, with local counter-disaster agencies and first responders for fire, flood and other emergencies. Organise training exercises for responding to accidents or disasters in the premises during **Stages 2 and 3**.
- Assess the material resources for training and collection management that may be required during a period of closure of the premises; order or re-stock as appropriate.
- Review ways in which the public can access the collection virtually. Can greater levels of access be provided by adding images, extra information and/or video? Can the organisation contribute collection information to existing online portals and web-based services? <sup>5</sup>
- Be prepared to adjust plans at short notice in response to a rapidly changing situation.

## Stage 1 – All hands on deck

**Situation: The premises are closed to the public but all personnel are working normally on site, if they are fit to do so.**

- Check that relevant **Stage 0** Preliminary tasks have been completed as well as possible.
- Remove high-risk items from display and place them in secure storage. This may include inward loan items.

---

<sup>4</sup> CCTV means Closed Circuit Television.

<sup>5</sup> For example, in Australia, the National Library of Australia's [Trove](#) platform.

- Review the status of collection items remaining on display. Should they be covered against dust or light? Should they be moved to a more secure environment such as a storeroom?
- Remove perishables from café and kitchens; ensure that pantry supplies and light refreshments for staff are stored only in kitchen/s, and in well-sealed tins/jars. Consider removing all foodstuffs from the premises, even if well-stored.
- If possible, check the current condition of items in the collection, perhaps using a sampling method for large collections. Review the risks that apply and the damage that may occur. Consider implementing preventive measures.
- Document any known weak points in the premises where insects or other lifeforms might gain entry, by taking video or photographs – especially in collection storage areas.
- Observing the organisation’s communications procedures, prepare to use social media and online applications to contact colleagues and share information about the collection during **Stages 2 and 3**. Consider creating a shared website or social media group for collection managers and security personnel so they can stay in touch via messages, voice and filmed walk-throughs of the collection and storage areas. Ensure that the selected technology is accessible to all devices used by relevant personnel.
- Arrange for the director / governing body to issue relevant personnel and contractors with letters authorising them to access the premises for specified purposes.
- Prepare for transition to **Stage 2**.

## Stage 2 – Skeleton staff

**Situation: The premises are closed to the public and only essential personnel are working on site. Some personnel may be working from home or another site. Personnel may be rostered to attend the premises on different days to ensure physical distancing. In smaller organisations, one individual might make occasional visits to inspect the premises.**

For premises where there is no contracted security service and no cleaners have been booked to attend, the last person/s leaving each day should assume that **Stage 3** might be imposed overnight. Therefore, they should, on departure:

- Ensure that all rubbish bins inside the premises have been emptied.
- Ensure that lights are switched off, as appropriate.
- Check that internal and external doors are left in the correct status e.g. locked, closed against dust, or unlocked, ajar or open.
- Check that window coverings are left in their correct usual positions e.g. blinds down/closed or up/open.

For all collecting organisations:

- Ensure that, when travelling to and from the premises and on-site, authorised personnel carry with them the letter of authorisation.
- Review the tasks listed in the previous sections of this Guide. Have they been completed as well as possible? Are they still applicable to the current situation?
- Check and/or take readings from any environmental monitoring system/s at normal intervals.
- Check that any installed HVAC systems are working as required, and consider reducing energy bills by switching off systems to non-collection areas that do not require heating or cooling, like a public café or unoccupied offices.
- If planning to switch off HVAC systems in **Stage 3**, prepare to shut them down gradually in collection areas <sup>6</sup>
- Continue to monitor (in person) equipment that cannot be remotely monitored, such as mobile humidifiers, de-humidifiers and freezers. Assess the feasibility of emptying and switching off such equipment in **Stage 3**. <sup>7</sup>
- Clean out refrigerator/s and defrost freezer/s. Leave off and open. Consider relocating any items that require long-term refrigeration to monitored locations.
- Check ceilings, toilets, showers, basins, taps etc. for leaks and mould growth.
- Run water at sinks and flush toilets, to keep systems working.
- Remove any foodstuffs, even if in sealed containers. Personnel should bring their own requirements on a daily basis, and take left-overs home each day.
- Check that electrical appliances are turned off at power points if not required to be on.
- Check exhibition areas, all storage areas and work areas for signs of plants and animals making new homes e.g. creepers, fungi, insects, birds, rodents, possums.
- Look for signs of pest infestation when making random checks of filing cabinets, cupboards, lockers etc.
- Check status of any rooms behind locked or closed doors for anything unexpected. Some areas may now require an open door to allow ventilation. Don't forget exterior buildings like sheds, garages, demountables and shipping containers that are part of the organisation.

---

6 Follow advice like that provided by the Canadian Conservation Institute '[Closing a museum for the winter](#)'.

7 For humidifiers / de-humidifiers follow advice like that provided by the Collections Trust (at around minute 29 of the videorecording [Collections care in lockdown](#)).

- Use all senses, including sense of smell, to detect areas where mould might be growing and dust might be accumulating, and where extra ventilation or cleaning may be required – especially in collection stores.
- Ensure that external perimeter security patrols are completed on a regular basis, looking for outward signs that the premises remain secure e.g. damage from falling branches or trees, broken windows, signs of vandalism etc.
- Set up and implement a ‘buddy’ system so that the last person leaving on a particular day makes contact (by phone, email or a social media group) with other personnel to let them know they have safely left the building and are not trapped inside.
- Prepare for transition to **Stage 3**, and consider these questions in particular:
  - How will future access for essential maintenance and security services be achieved?
  - Who is authorised to deliver such services?
  - Have all relevant personnel and contractors received a letter of authorisation from the director / governing body, confirming permission to access the premises for specified purposes?

### Stage 3 – Evacuation or Lockdown

**Situation: The premises are closed to the public and a management decision restricts or prevents personnel from remaining in, or entering, the premises. Personnel may be continuing to work from home.**

- Ensure that external perimeter security patrols are completed on a regular basis if safe to do so, looking for outward signs that the premises remain secure e.g. damage from falling branches or trees, broken windows, signs of vandalism etc.
- Monitor any data received remotely from systems inside the premises.
- Ensure authorised personnel who need to enter the premises:
  - Carry their letter of authorisation from the organisation’s director or governing body, and
  - Advise local Police (or relevant authority) before going on-site.
- Implement decisions made during **Stage 2** regarding HVAC and other equipment:
  - Complete the gradual shutdown of HVAC systems (or continue to monitor if the decision was to keep HVAC systems running).
  - Continue to monitor (in person) equipment that cannot be remotely monitored like mobile humidifiers, de-humidifiers and freezers (or empty and switch off such equipment).
- While working remotely, plan for re-entry to the organisation. <sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> See: [COVID-19 Basics: Re-Entry to Cultural Sites](#), presented by Mary F Striegel for the National Centre for Preservation Technology and Training (6 April 2020).

## Getting back to normal (some preliminary suggestions)

**Situation:** The epidemic / pandemic emergency is over. Most personnel are able to return to work in the premises.

- Review the health and wellbeing of colleagues and their families. Allow time for mourning, and for remembering any who are not returning to work.
- Find appropriate ways to communicate with any personnel who are still unwell and have not yet returned to work.
- When permitted to re-enter the premises:
  - Implement the Re-entry Plan
  - Consider limiting the number of personnel who are allowed at first to enter the collection and storage areas. Limiting personnel numbers will allow time to observe and document carefully any traces of damage e.g. insect damage or burglary, before too many people come in and disturb possible evidence.
- Review the status of collection (display and storage) areas at the premises. Document any changes with photographs and written reports.
- Arrange or plan for repairs (e.g. possum holes, tilted shelves) that may be evident and need to be rectified in collection or storage areas.
- Check the condition of items in the collection, if possible and as soon as practicable. If a sampling method was used in Stage 1, revisit the sampled items. Document damage, check how items are adjusting etc. Note that some damage might only manifest after a period of time has elapsed. Arrange or plan for items which now reveal unusual deterioration to be dealt with as soon as possible / in a timely manner.
- Arrange for appropriate cleaning of collection areas, with special focus on flat surfaces, the junctions of walls, ceilings and floors, and corners.
- If heating or HVAC has been turned off, or has been working at a lower level, resume gradually so as to give heritage items time to adjust. Ensure filters are cleaned before turning on again.
- Review the status of collection items being held away from the premises e.g. on loan to another organisation, or with a conservator, noting that not all businesses will resume simultaneously.
- Review the events that have occurred. How well did your planning meet the needs of the emergency period? What lessons have been learned? Write a report about the experience for the whole organisation, to share with colleagues elsewhere and potentially in public communications.
- Re-connect with local counter-disaster agencies and first responders for fire, flood and other emergencies.
- Return collection items from the store to display as appropriate.

- When the time is right and public access is allowed, resume normal collection management activities.

## Resources

[Caring for Heritage Collections during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#), Canadian Conservation Institute (April 2020 - )

[Closing a museum for the winter](#), Canadian Conservation Institute, Notes 1 / 3 (1988)

[Collections care in lockdown – Q&A panel video and transcript](#), Collections Trust (7 April 2020)

[COVID-19 Basics: Re-Entry to Cultural Sites](#), Mary F Striegel for the National Centre for Preservation Technology and Training (6 April 2020)

[COVID-19 Collection and Conservation Resources](#), Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material (April 2020 - )

[COVID-19 Libraries / Protocol Information](#), an evolving digest prepared by Dean Giustini, University of British Columbia (2020)

[Cultural Resources and COVID-19](#), Mary F Striegel for the National Centre for Preservation Technology and Training (April 2020)

[Heritage in Times of COVID](#), ICCROM (2020)

[Potential for increased pest activity during museum closures](#), Alex Roach for Museums & Galleries of NSW (20 March 2020)

[Ten agents of deterioration](#), Canadian Conservation Institute (2017)

[Ten tips for small businesses wanting to work from home](#), Australian Computer Society (25 March 2020)

## Endorsements

*Closed by COVID-19? A Practice Guide for managers of heritage collections that are closed at short notice because of an epidemic or pandemic* is endorsed by:



Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material Inc.  
<https://aiccm.org.au>

Click [HERE](#) for PDF version of this document



Blue Shield Australia  
<http://blueshielddaustralia.org.au>

Click [HERE](#) for Doc and PDF versions of this document

## Adoptions and translations



FARO vzw  
Vlaamssteunpuntvoorcultureelerfgoed  
(Flemish interface centre for cultural heritage)  
<https://faro.be>

Click [HERE](#) for the Dutch translation of Version 1.1



SiLK – SicherheitsLeitfaden Kulturgut  
(Guidelines for the protection of cultural property)  
<http://www.konferenz-kultur.de>

Bundesamt für Bevölkerungsschutz und Katastrophenhilfe  
(Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance)  
<https://www.bbk.bund.de>

Click [HERE](#) for the German translation of Version 1.1

## About this document

This Practice Guide initially drew on planning done for three Australian collecting organisations, all located in the state of Victoria: Australian Army Signals Museum (AASM), Bendigo Art Gallery (BAG) and Heidelberg Historical Society (HHS). In the middle of March 2020, each of these collecting organisations moved to Stage 2 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Guide was initiated on 24 March 2020 by Mary Reid for AASM and HHS.

Version 1.1 was inspired by Margaret Birtley (HHS), based on discussions with Mary Reid, Sarah Brown (BAG) and Dr Veronica Bullock (Significance International Pty Ltd).

Following publication of Version 1.1 on 27 March 2020, the content was expanded and enriched by suggestions from members of AICCM (Australia), FARO (Belgium), Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation (University of Melbourne), Museums Aotearoa (New Zealand), and the National Heritage Board (Singapore).

Version 1.2 was prepared by Margaret Birtley (HHS) and Dr Veronica Bullock (Significance International Pty Ltd) and published on 29 April 2020.

Feedback on this Guide is welcome by email to: [secretariat@aiccm.org.au](mailto:secretariat@aiccm.org.au)



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons [Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](#) International License.