

Closed by COVID-19?

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

Who should use this 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, libraries and museums and at heritage sites. Whether working as volunteers or as 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.

Collecting organisations range in size from the small (often managed entirely by volunteers) to the large (with hundreds of paid staff). This Guide aims to provide advice that can be adapted for any size of organisation.

What is the scope of this Guide?

During an epidemic or pandemic, many adjustments will need to be made to the way a collecting organisation operates. This Guide is **ONLY** about the adjustments that need to be considered in relation to **the collection of heritage items**.

Each organisation should **ALSO**, of course, anticipate that changes will be required in many other operational areas, including the management of visitor access, cashflow, communications, online services, etc. Maintaining a healthy and safe workforce is the top priority for every organisation, and may require new policies and procedures.

Why is guidance needed for a closed collection?

When storerooms and exhibition galleries are shut for an extended period, there are additional risks to consider for the collection because personnel aren't present at their normal frequency. During any period of closure, there is increased risk of vandalism, security breaches and pest invasions.¹

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)
- Security (e.g. intruders and vandals may become a problem)
- The health and wellbeing of personnel (including volunteers, staff and contractors).

This Guide therefore suggests some tasks that should be undertaken to ensure that a collection is not neglected but preserved in a stable environment, despite the less-frequent attention that it may receive while an epidemic/pandemic emergency exists.

A vital and overarching responsibility

- Maintain your own health, and support each member of your team in doing likewise.

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

Preliminary tasks

- Be alert to the emergence of a disease that might become classified as an epidemic or pandemic.
- Convene a meeting of the Collection Team, to plan ahead for the 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
 - Roles and responsibilities of individuals
 - Chain/s of command and succession-planning
 - Communication methods and back-up plans
 - Procedures for authorisation of changes to plans
- Confirm existing relationships with contractors who provide specialised services e.g. security, cleaning, information and communications technology, repairs and maintenance (e.g. for the premises, and for HVAC services²), monitoring of pests and environmental conditions, insurance, etc.
- Ensure that protocols for contractors accessing any collection areas are up-to-date.
- Consider upgrading existing monitoring services e.g. CCTV images; environmental data loggers for temperature and RH, 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.
- Confirm the status of any collection items that are temporarily located at different premises e.g. on 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, request the off-site manager/s to place the item/s in local storage when their organisation reaches Stage 1.
- Ensure that contact details for relevant personnel (including volunteers, staff and contractors) are current.
- Plan to remove items from display and to place them in secure storage during Stage 1. Which items are at high risk if they remain in the display environment?
- Assess the material resources for collection management that may be required during a period of closure of the premises; order or re-stock as appropriate.
- Consider whether the organisation’s existing Disaster Plan could be implemented during a Stage 3 closure; revise the Plan if required.

2 HVAC means Heating, Ventilation and Air-Conditioning

- Review ways in which the public can access the collection online and remotely. 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 e.g. in Australia, Trove, and web-based services?
- 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 all relevant Preliminary tasks have been completed as well as possible.
- Remove high-risk items from display and place them in secure storage.
- 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.
- Document any known weak points in the premises where insects or other fauna might gain entry, by taking photographs – especially in collection storage areas.
- 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 might be rostered to attend the premises on different days to ensure 'social distancing'. In smaller organisations, one individual might make occasional visits to inspect the premises.

For premises where there is no contracted security and no cleaners have been booked to attend, the last person leaving each day 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, or closed against dust).
- Check that window coverings are left in their correct usual positions e.g. blinds down/closed.

For all collecting organisations:

- 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?
- At the normal frequency, check and/or take readings from any environmental monitoring system/s.
- 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.
- Check ceilings, toilets, showers, basins, taps etc. for leaks or mould growth.

- Clean out fridge/s and defrost freezer/s. 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 fauna making a new home e.g. insects, birds, rodents, possums.
- Make random checks of filing cabinets, cupboards, lockers, etc. for signs of pest infestation.
- Check status of any rooms behind locked or closed doors for anything unexpected. Some areas may require an open door to allow ventilation. Don't forget exterior buildings such as sheds, garages and shipping containers that are part of the organisation.
- 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 are secure, there is no damage from falling branches or trees, no windows are broken, no vandalism is occurring, etc.
- Set up and implement a 'buddy' system so that the last person leaving on a particular day makes contact (by phone or email) with another employee/volunteer to let them know they have safely left the building and are not trapped inside.
- Prepare for transition to Stage 3.

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 are secure, there is no damage from falling branches or trees, no windows are broken, no vandalism is occurring, etc.
- Monitor any data received remotely from systems inside the premises

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.
- Consider staging the return of personnel to collection and storage areas, so that any damage can be carefully observed.
- Review the status of collection and storage areas inside the premises. Document any changes via photographs and written reports.

- Arrange for cleaning of the storage areas, with special focus on flat surfaces and the corners of floors.
- Review the status of collection items being held away from the premises e.g. on loan to another organisation, or with a conservator.
- 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.
- Re-connect with your local counter-disaster agencies and first responders for fire, flood and other emergencies, as identified in the organisation's Disaster Plan.
- Return collection items from the store to display as appropriate.
- When the time is right and public access resumes, resume normal collection management activities.

About this document

This Practice Guide draws on planning done by and 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 mid-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 completed by Margaret Birtley (HHS) on 27 March 2020, based on discussions with Mary Reid, Sarah Brown (BAG) and Veronica Bullock (Significance International Pty Ltd).

The document is endorsed by:



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