

Archives and Special Collections

Collections Care and Conservation Policy

1. Context and Purpose

Durham University has a suite of policies relating to collection management within libraries, museums, and archives and special collections, underpinning its general strategy. These documents are available at

<https://www.dur.ac.uk/departments/library/about-us/policies/>

The Collections Care and Conservation policy relates to archives and special collections. It is informed by the acquisition and retention policies, and covers material held by Durham University at Palace Green Library by donation, deposit, or purchase; and material held by Durham University on behalf of Durham Cathedral.

Durham University's archives and special collections include over 70,000 books published before 1850, and approximately 4 miles of archival material including medieval manuscripts, maps, prints and photographs. They represent a rich resource for learning, teaching and research, and are available for anyone to consult. They also form part of the cultural heritage of Durham and, in particular, its World Heritage Site.

The Collections Care and Conservation policy outlines Durham University's strategic approach for the long-term preservation of archives and special collections to ensure material remains available for future stakeholders to research and enjoy. The policy sets out principles which are embedded into conservation planning and activity, with relevance to all aspects of accommodating and accessing collections.

2. Definitions

Collections Care: All measures taken to manage risks to collections with the aim of protecting and preserving material from agents of deterioration and damage. It covers all managerial, financial and technical considerations including conservation, storage and accommodation provision, staffing levels, policies, techniques, and methods involved in preserving library and archive materials and the information contained therein.

Conservation: The interventive treatment of an object to inhibit the progress of deterioration

Preservation: Non-interventive measures required to achieve long-term retention of collections.

3. Principles

3.1. Facilities

Durham University aims to store archives and special collections in accordance with *BS 4971:2017 Conservation and care of archive and library collections* and *BS EN 16893:2018 Conservation of Cultural Heritage. Specifications for location, construction and modification of buildings or rooms intended for the storage or use of heritage collections*.

3.1.1. Security

Appropriate security arrangements are maintained for collections to minimise risk of theft and vandalism.

All material, other than modern books, are stored in secure areas with access restricted to designated staff via a digitally audited electronic key safe system. Visitors are supervised at all times while in collection storage areas. An intruder alarm system and CCTV system is maintained with 24-hour external monitoring.

Researchers handling material are supervised in designated spaces where they are prohibited from bringing bags and large items. Lockers are provided for visitor's personal possessions.

3.1.2. Fire detection and prevention

Durham University maintains robust fire safety procedures that consider the risk to collections as well as visitors and staff. A Fire Risk Assessment is maintained alongside a practiced Fire Evacuation Plan that includes measures to safeguard collections. Procedures are shared and collaboratively developed with County Durham and Darlington Fire Rescue Service who carry out regular familiarisation visits.

Fire detection systems are maintained in line with current standards and tested and serviced regularly. The system is externally monitored with an automatic Fire Rescue Service call-out.

3.1.3. Environmental control and monitoring

We aim to provide environmental conditions which conform to *BS 4971:2017 Conservation and care of archive and library collections*.

Archives and special collection strong rooms have air conditioning systems with temperature and relative humidity control set to maintain

suitable conditions for mixed archive and library collections. Light and UV exposure is controlled by windowless strongrooms and lights which are only on when the room is being accessed by staff. Rare book storage in the Medieval Exchequer building and the 17th Century Cosin's Library has limited environmental control via a conservation heating system designed to maintain stable RH levels. External windows are covered by two-part light and UV screening.

All collection storage and exhibition spaces are actively monitored and data retained and reviewed to ensure suitable conditions are maintained.

3.1.4. Housekeeping and building maintenance

The cleanliness of storage areas and condition of our buildings is vital to effective collections care. All staff are encouraged to report building defects promptly which are reported and remedied. Liaison meetings are held with Durham University's Estates and Facilities department to ensure routine and reactive building maintenance tasks are completed.

Collection storage and exhibition areas are regularly cleaned using methods which are not detrimental to archives and special collections material. A programme of integrated pest management is in place using blunder traps. Where pests are discovered, they are identified and contextualised to determine risk to the collection. Action is taken where necessary to address pest issues.

3.2. Collections Care

Collections care considerations are embedded in every aspect of working with archives and special collections and each member of staff has a role to play in striving for best practice as defined by *BS 4971:2017 Conservation and care of archive and library collections* and measured by *Benchmarks in Collection Care for Museums, Archives and Libraries*.

3.2.1. New accessions

The condition, stability, and material composition of potential new collections is investigated before they are acquired and an assessment made of their collection care requirements.

New collections are inspected before entering storage areas to minimise the risk of contamination from mould, pests, or particulate matter. Any material found to be contaminated or damp is treated in a designated decontamination room by trained staff wearing appropriate PPE.

3.2.2. Handling

All staff receive one-to-one training on handling collections at the start of their employment and attend periodic refreshers. Conservators provide specialist support and advice on handling and production issues. Book supports and other handling equipment are available in the search room and other locations where collections are used.

Researchers are required to watch an instructional video before handling collections. They also have access to written guidance and support from the invigilating member of staff who is constantly present.

3.2.3. Transportation

Archives and special collections material is only transferred offsite in exceptional circumstances. They are properly packaged and secured in an appropriate vehicle and never left unattended. Time away from secure storage is minimised and insurance cover is in place for all material being transported.

3.2.4. Exhibition

Collections are condition assessed by a conservator before being approved for exhibition. Condition reports and photographs are produced along with specific display requirements. External institutions requesting to borrow items for exhibition are required to meet the requirements of Durham University and to sign a condition of loan agreement.

3.2.5. Packaging

Appropriate packaging protects collections from deterioration and makes them more accessible. Collections are assessed for their packaging requirements and suitable packaging is provided according to the specific needs of the collection items. Suitable packaging is defined as providing effective protection from physical and chemical damage and may require custom made enclosures.

Packaging is designed and applied according to the principles set out in *BS 4971:2017 Conservation and care of archive and library collections*.

3.3. Conservation

Remedial conservation is undertaken in specific circumstances: when an item has suffered damage or deterioration and is in danger of deteriorating further unless treated, is in such poor physical condition that users are unable to consult it or when the contents can only be read or digitised if the item is conserved.

Interference with the physical structure and appearance of an item is kept to a minimum and all physical features judged to be essential to an item's historical integrity are preserved.

Interventive conservation is guided by recognised standards: *BS 4971:2017 Conservation and Care of Archive and Library Collections*; The Institute of Conservation's *Professional Standards and Judgement & Ethics*; the European Confederation of Conservators-Restorers Organisations (ECCO) *Professional Guidelines and Code of Ethics*.

3.3.1. Staffing

Conservation is undertaken by professionally qualified conservators who are encouraged to be accredited by an external organisation such as the Institute for Conservation. Where appropriate, paraprofessional staff, students on work placements, or volunteers may assist with conservation treatments under the close supervision of a conservator.

Conservation staff are supported to continue professional development and be active participants in the profession, contributing to conferences and publications that enhance their practice and the reputation of Durham University.

Conservation staff are recognised as technical professionals, supported by Durham University as a signatory to the Technician's Commitment which seeks to advance technical career pathways, acknowledge and celebrate technical excellence, and seek out new opportunities for leadership roles for technical staff and to develop the next generation of technical professionals with viable career routes.

3.3.2. Prioritisation

Items are prioritised for remedial treatment based on stability of condition, rarity and intrinsic value; and planned research, teaching, exhibition, or digitisation. Stakeholders are consulted before intervention.

3.4. Reprographics

3.4.1. Surrogates

Digital or physical surrogates may be produced for the purposes of access or preservation. The creation of a surrogate does not remove the need to preserve the original format, where this is possible, but the existence of a high-quality surrogate may inform conservation decision making. A surrogate should be considered where the original is

exceptionally fragile or rare, subject to high levels of use or copying requests or is at risk of being subject to excessive handling or display conditions that do not meet the standards set out in the Collections Care and Conservation Policy.

3.4.2. Processes

Appropriate imaging techniques are applied to ensure no harm comes to collections items and conservators advise on proper arrangements and handling best practice. Preparatory interventive conservation may be carried out to facilitate digitisation where condition or format poses a risk to safe imaging.

3.5. Emergency planning and response

An up-to-date emergency response and salvage plan is maintained to ensure safety of staff, visitors, and collections in the event of a major incident affecting Palace Green Library. The plan compliments and is supported by the University Library and Collections Business Continuity Plan and infrastructure developed by Durham University.

Stores of disaster response and salvage supplies are maintained in the vicinity of collections storage areas and Durham University maintains a priority subscription to Hanwell Document Restoration Service.

4. Sustainability

- 4.1. Environmental sustainability considerations are embedded into procurement and project planning, seeking ways to reduce environmental impact.
- 4.2. Proactive preventive conservation is advocated as a more sustainable approach than reactive conservation while recognising both approaches are necessary for the sustainability of our collections.
- 4.3. Passive or highly energy efficient methods of environmental control are favoured where collection sensitivity and building performance makes them viable.

5. Standards

- 5.1. The Collections Care and Conservation Policy has been developed with reference to the following standards and methodologies:
 - British Standards. *BS 4971:2017, Conservation and care of archive and library collections*. London: BSI, 2017

- British Standards Institution. BS EN 16893:2018 *Conservation of Cultural Heritage. Specifications for location, construction and modification of buildings or rooms intended for the storage or use of heritage collections*. London: BSI, 2018
- The Institute of Conservation. *Professional Standards*. London, 2020
- Collections Trust. *Benchmarks in collection care for museums, archives and libraries*. 2018

6. Roles and responsibilities

- 6.1. University Library and Collections Committee are responsible for approving the Collections Care and Conservation Policy and ensuring implementation through inter-departmental collaboration.
- 6.2. Director of Library and Collections ensures appropriate resources are available to enable compliance with the Collections Care and Conservation Policy.
- 6.3. Head of Collections is responsible for development of guidance and policies across Archives and Special Collections that accord with the Collections Care and Conservation Policy.
- 6.4. Senior Manager: Conservation and Collections Care is responsible for developing the Collections Care and Conservation Policy and ensuring it is implemented.
- 6.5. Conservators are responsible for implementing collections care and interventive conservation treatments and supporting ASC staff in aligning practice with the objectives of this policy.
- 6.6. Archives and Special Collections staff support this policy by identifying and reporting conservation needs and promoting best practice with service users.

7. Communication

- 7.1. The Collections Care and Conservation Policy is published on the Durham University website
- 7.2. University Library and Collections provides Collections care advice and guidance on best practice to other Durham University Departments and externally to heritage organisations, private libraries and archives, and the public.
- 7.3. We maintain active professional relationships with conservation organisations and communities within the UK and internationally, including the Institute of Conservation and the Archives and Records Association.
- 7.4. We communicate the importance of collections care through outreach and engagement activities, publications, and exhibitions.

8. Review

8.1. This policy was approved by University Libraries and Collections Committee (ULCC) 25th June 2025.

8.2. The Collections Care and Conservation Policy is reviewed every three years