



National Preservation Office

The application and use
of standards in the care and management
of libraries and archives

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Introduction

In recent years, a great deal has been written on standards, codes of practice and general guidelines for the management of libraries and archives, and this has come about for a number of reasons:

Value for Money

The political shift towards restrictions on public spending gave rise to a need for organisations of all kinds to demonstrate efficiency, value for money and user satisfaction; this stimulated the development of service charters, codes of conduct and performance indicators within the sector.

Media

Collections held by libraries and archives continued to grow, both in volume and range, as traditional holdings of books, documents and photographs were supplemented by audio and visual recordings, microforms and digital records of all kinds. This created a need for more effective collection management, whilst the relative fragility and impermanence of some modern media stimulated study of their deterioration mechanisms and methods of enhancing their stability.

Buildings

Advances in the study of energy efficiency and preventive conservation led to more holistic approaches to the design of buildings, control of the environment within, and improved techniques for the handling, storage and conservation of a range of archival materials.

Disasters

Various well-publicised library and archive disasters prompted increased awareness of the necessity for disaster prevention, emergency planning, and appropriate methods for the retrieval and conservation of damaged items.

Information Technology

The rapid development of information technology changed the expectations of both providers and users of libraries and archives, and necessitated fresh guidance on the management of, and access to, digital information.

This leaflet is aimed at personnel in libraries and archives wishing to be sure that their institution is performing according to currently accepted best practice; those considering an expansion, refurbishment or relocation of their service; or those wishing to build upon past achievements to improve their performance. It summarises the main standards and codes of practice relating to libraries and archives, and includes a bibliography of additional reference material.

What Is A Standard?

Chambers 20th Century Dictionary defines a standard as 'a thing, quality or specification by which something may be tested or measured; an established or accepted model; a definite level of excellence or adequacy required, aimed at, or possible'. In practical terms, standards represent a consensus of core principles, or statement of best practice, arrived at by appropriately qualified individuals or groups.

In this country, the British Standards Institution (BSI), in conjunction with expert advisory panels, is responsible for formulating nationally agreed standards; and its Training Services section provides a wide range of courses aimed at promoting the understanding and use of standards. Standards and codes of practice are also developed by professional bodies and other organisations, such as the Society of Archivists, the Library Association, and the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts. The international lead body on standards is the International Standards Organisation (ISO), of which BSI is a member. The ISO is a global federation of national standards organisations from

more than 90 countries, dedicated to developing and maintaining international standards, with a view to facilitating the international exchange of goods and services.

Standards may be mandatory or voluntary. Mandatory standards include those pertaining to building regulations, Health and Safety, and fire precautions; failure to adhere to these can result in fines or prosecution. In the case of voluntary standards, the onus is placed on the organisation, practitioner or consumer to be aware of the standard and insist on conformance with it.

Why Are Standards Important?

Mandatory standards are essential to ensure the safety and wellbeing of staff and members of the public in libraries and archives, and the long-term preservation of their collections. Voluntary standards demonstrate the best practice which can be aspired to across a wide range of activities (preservation, conservation, security, access, training and so on).

The application of standards enables libraries and archives to carry out their functions consistently, and to an agreed level of quality. Having a benchmark against which performance can be measured helps to demonstrate professionalism, accountability and efficiency to staff, user groups and funding bodies. Adherence to standards builds confidence in the professions, helps to ensure customer satisfaction, and facilitates co-operative working with other organisations both in the United Kingdom and abroad.

Furthermore, the holdings of libraries and archives are, by their nature, fragile and susceptible to damage from a variety of sources. These include human intervention, environmental factors, disasters and other external events. Standards and codes of practice specify the action which libraries and archives can take to safeguard their (often valuable and sometimes irreplaceable) holdings against risks such as these. Thus adherence to standards is of great benefit in terms of preserving the nation's documentary heritage, and also in terms of continuity of service to the public.

Library and Archive Buildings

The building is the first line of defence between a library or archive collection and potentially damaging environmental and human factors. Its design and

construction have profound implications for access and security, energy-efficiency and running costs, environmental stability and disaster prevention. New buildings can be designed to very high specifications to take these factors into account; however, it is possible to make modifications to existing structures to improve their performance.

The main standard relating to archive buildings, environment, security and storage is BS 5454 (BSI, 1989; currently under revision); many of the recommendations made in this document are equally applicable to libraries. A substantial amount of additional information, case studies of new and converted buildings, and an extensive bibliography, can be found in a Royal Commission on Historic Manuscripts survey of archive buildings (Kitching, 1993). The Museums and Galleries Commission (MGC) have produced a useful publication on the selection and conversion of industrial buildings (Bordass, 1996); and whilst this is aimed primarily at the museum sector, it contains many recommendations relevant to libraries and archives using, or considering using, buildings of this nature.

Investing in improvements to a building's energy-efficiency can lead to significant long-term revenue savings in addition to improved environmental stability. The Energy Efficiency Office (EEO) produces guidelines on all aspects of energy management in public buildings, including one aimed specifically at libraries (EEO, 1994). The Management Charter Initiative is responsible for developing business management standards; and, in conjunction with the EEO, has produced National Vocational Qualifications in energy management which would be of value to staff in both libraries and archives.

Preservation and Conservation

■ training

It is essential that practitioners engaged in the repair and conservation of books and documents should be appropriately trained. Archival conservators are expected to have completed a recognised course of training offered by one of several conservation training schools, or a Society of Archivists apprenticeship scheme. Continuing Professional Development should be maintained through membership of organisations such as the Society of Archivists, the Institute of Paper Conservation or the Library Association.

■ standards and guidelines

The British standard pertaining to repair and conservation is BS 4971 (BSI, Part 1 1988, Part 2 1980; currently under revision). Best practice guidelines for archives and record offices have been published by the Society of Archivists (Pickford, Rhys-Lewis & Weber, 1997), and the British Library Research and Innovation Centre (Feather & Eden, 1997). The first of these documents covers the role of conservators, their training and employment, funding for archival conservation and many practical issues, and includes a valuable bibliography; the British Library publication summarises recent research in the field, and makes recommendations for further research and national cooperative strategies.

Emergency planning and disaster mitigation is an essential component of any preservation strategy. In recognition of this, the British Library Research and Innovation Centre produced a project report and guidelines on disaster management (Matthews & Eden, 1996). These guidelines are to assist library and archive staff in preventing disasters, and producing effective plans to minimise their effects should they occur. Again, the document contains an excellent bibliography, including reference to the RAMP study on disaster planning for UNESCO (Buchanan, 1988).

Photographs and Other Media

Libraries and archives may hold extensive collections of photographic material, ranging from early glass plate negatives to modern colour prints. BSI have produced a range of standards relating to the care of photographic materials, including BS ISO 10214:1991, on filing enclosures for the storage of processed photographic materials. The MGC standard on the care of photographs also contains much relevant information.

Wear and tear on many other types of original archival material (newspapers, drawings, documents and so on) can be minimised by preservation microfilming. BSI has also issued a range of standards giving recommendations and specifications for microcopying various materials; details of these, and other British Standards, can be found on their web site (see Bibliography). Additional information can be obtained from the National Preservation Office (NPO), which took part in the Mellon Microfilming Project, and supplies both a procedural manual and proceedings of the 1992 NPO conference on microforms in libraries.

Electronic Records and Digital Information

In response to the massive increase in digital information, a large number of organisations are working to develop standards which facilitate access to, and preservation of, this data. Organisations who have developed data policies to manage electronically created data include BODC (British Oceanographic Data Centre), NERC (Natural Environment Research Council) and the Data Archive. A key resource is the Arts and Humanities Data Service (AHDS), which is collating information on standards bodies, information resources and best practice guidelines, and making it available via the Internet.

Further information

Further information on all the issues outlined in this leaflet can be found in a recent extensive bibliography on standards related to preservation. It covers access, paper, film, optical and magnetic records, environmental control, exhibition, Health and Safety, security and emergency planning, and has been compiled by the National Library of Canada (Dodson & Wellheiser, 1996).

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