Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service

Care and Conservation Policy

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Revised edition 2016

Colchester+Ipswich Museums

1.0 Introduction

1.1 This Collections Care and Conservation Policy will guide the work that Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service does in the field of collections care and conservation. The accompanying Collections Care and Conservation Plan will help to deliver the statements made in this policy.

1.2 Caring for the collections is a fundamental duty for all museums. This policy includes a combination of preventative and remedial conservation measures, designed to ensure long-term preservation.

1.3 In addition conservation science can be used to investigate the nature of objects – what they are made of and how they have been constructed.

1.4 The policy takes account of The Museum Association's 'Code of Ethics for Museums' which advocates the principle that museums should maintain and develop collections for current and future generations, and states (in section 2.1) that, 'All those who work in and with museums should preserve collections as a tangible link between the past, present and future' ('Code of Ethics for Museums', Museums Association, 6th Edition 2015).

1.5 The 'Code' also refers (in section 2.1) to the need to 'Balance the museum's role in safeguarding items for the benefit of future audiences with its obligation to optimise access for present audiences'.

1.6 This policy takes account of the Society of Museum Archaeologists' 'Towards an Accessible Archaeological Archive', especially chapter 8 'Conservation Requirements of the Archive' which states that, 'The archive should be conserved to an appropriate level before deposition with the archive repository' ('Towards an Accessible Archaeological Archive', SMA, 1st Edition 1995).

1.7 This policy is also guided by and takes account of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and the COSHH Regulations 2002.

1.8 Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service is committed to using 'Benchmarks in Collections Care' as a performance management tool to review and measure current standards of collections care and work towards improvement ('Benchmarks in Collections Care 2', MLA, 2011).

1.9 Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service currently has two full-time qualified and experienced museum conservators amongst its staff. Additional conservation expertise is available from other staff members who have wider roles within the Museum Service.

2.0 **Conservation Principles**

2.1 There are two main means by which the survival of the collections is effected: remedial conservation and preventative conservation.

2.2 Remedial conservation involves the treatment of individual objects in order to stabilise and preserve them. It is the responsibility of the conservator to maintain the physical, historic and aesthetic integrity of the object. Conservation work is performed by adhering to the following standards of recognised practice:

a) All treatments should be consistent with respect for the integrity of the individual object.

b) The conservator should only use techniques and materials which, to the best of current knowledge, will not endanger the true nature of the object, and which will not impede future treatment, or the retrieval of information through scientific examination.

c) The techniques and materials which affect the object least should always be selected.

d) Nothing should be removed from an object unless there is sufficient evidence that it is not part of the original condition of the object.

e) Before treatment, adequate examination should take place and all stages of treatment should be recorded.

f) It is unethical to conceal the true nature of the object through restoration.

g) Treatment should be undertaken only within the limits of the conservator's professional competence and facilities.

h) It is the responsibility of the conservator to keep up with current conservation knowledge and practice so as to give the best available treatment.

i) If the conservator delegates work on objects, he or she remains directly responsible for the work.

2.3 In recent years, there has been a change in emphasis away from remedial conservation and towards preventative conservation. Preventative conservation involves protecting the collections by:

a) Monitoring and adjusting where possible the environment in which objects are housed.

b) Providing appropriate packaging to ensure the physical safety of objects.

2.4 This ensures that the number of objects in the collections requiring time-consuming and expensive remedial treatment will be minimised. This is both better for the objects and more cost effective given the limited resources available for active conservation.

2.5 Priority areas have been identified, and some preventative measures have already been instigated, but an ongoing programme over several years will be necessary in order to ensure the optimum conditions for the survival of the collections.

2.6 The principal areas of the collections are:

2.6.1 Archaeology: Sensitive materials (metals) are stored in appropriate desiccated environments achieved either through dehumidified rooms or localised silica gel environments. Organic materials are stored alongside similar social history items in broader controlled environments.

2.6.2 Social history: A variety of storage conditions exist. Close control is maintained for costume, clock and archive collections. Outsize and/or less sensitive items are stored in warehousing.

2.6.3 Costume: This is all located in off-site storage and environments of 50% humidity maintained through localised heating. When acquired, new costume is repacked and integrated into these storage areas.

2.6.4 Photography collection: Glass plate negatives are stored in archival supports. Film negatives in appropriate archival packaging.

2.6.5 Natural history: Consists of entomology, geology, taxidermy and fluid specimens. The material is divided up and stored according to its nature and localised environments provided where practicable.

2.6.6 Art: Humidity controlled store and art racking is provided for hung works. Works of art on paper are stored in Solander boxes in the same environment.

3.0 **Categories of Material**

3.1 The following categories of material are treated in house:

- Archaeology
- Social History

- Natural History invertebrate, geological, botanical and vertebrate material (where practicable) and treated in consultation with appropriate Collections and Learning staff.
- Paper (basic cleaning treatments only)

3.2 The following categories are contracted out to specialist conservators:

- Clocks
- Costume and Textiles
- Paintings
- Prints, Drawings and Watercolours
- Photographs
- Paper

4.0 Conservation Priorities

4.1 Categories: archaeology

4.1.1 Remedial conservation is undertaken on existing collections, newly excavated archaeological material, and nearly all newly acquired natural history material. Inevitably, with collections of this size and variety, demand for active conservation far exceeds the manpower or financial resources available. Therefore it is necessary to prioritise categories of objects requiring care.

4.1.2 At present objects are prioritised as follows:

- Objects requiring urgent treatment
- Objects required for display
- Objects required for publication

4.1.3 Additionally, an amount of work is undertaken for outside organisations (for example, the Colchester Archaeological Trust and Suffolk Archaeology CIC) for which commercial rates are charged.

4.2 Levels of Remedial Conservation

4.2.1 Because of pressure of work, not all objects receive the same level of conservation. ICON Archaeology Section has determined four levels of active conservation as a means of prioritising work:

1) Minimal conservation. (X-radiography photography, minimal investigative cleaning, packing for stable storage).

2) Partial conservation (as category 1, but with a higher degree of cleaning, and possibly stabilisation).
3) Full conservation (photography, X-radiography, examination and investigation, cleaning, stabilisation, some reconstruction).
4) Display conservation (as category 3, but with full restoration, cosmetic treatment etc.).

4.2.2 Decisions on treatment priorities and to which level a given object is to be treated are taken in conjunction with the museum's Collections and Learning staff, and the excavators.

4.2.3 Where material is non-sensitive/non-urgent, it will be considered for treatment if and when provision can be made for it.

4.2.4 Material of non-sensitive nature may be worked upon by conservation students/interns under supervision of the Conservation Officer.

5.0 Conservation of Newly Excavated Material

5.1 CIMS is the recipient of substantial quantities of newly-excavated material. This material has to be treated and properly stored as an urgent priority. Conservation costs are considered to be part of the excavation budget so that as far as possible, they are included in the developer funding for the excavation.

5.2. The conservation needs for excavation archives are applied in accordance with the Society of Museum Archaeologists' Guidelines *'Towards an Accessible Archaeological Archive'* (1995) and as stipulated in '*Archaeological Archives in Essex – Guidelines for preparation and deposition*' adopted by Museums Essex in October 2015.

6.0 Future Priorities

6.1 Conservation priorities reflect changes in funding and provision within the wider museum service and are subject to alteration during the life of this document.

6.2 This policy will be reviewed in 2019 alongside the next development plan.