Documentation
Backlogs:
South East
Cross-Domain Study

Supported by
Museums, Libraries and Archives Council
Documentation Backlogs:
South East Cross-Domain Study

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October 2004
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Executive summary

This study has confirmed the perception that backlogs are an issue for museums, libraries and archives in the South East. It has identified that the term ‘backlog’, while generally understood to refer to material within an organisation which is not fully documented, is very difficult to precisely define in a way that is meaningful in each domain. This is because there are different processes within the domains, because backlogs can occur at various stages in the documentation process, and there are different standards of records.

Despite a number of surveys of ‘backlogs’ in each domain, there has been little attempt to consistently define the meaning of the word ‘backlog’. This has resulted in individuals and individual organisations developing their own working definition of ‘backlog’. The extent of these ‘backlogs’ is also estimated in different ways and reported using a wide range of different measures, meaning that the nature and extent of the backlogs is very difficult to measure or map using surveys. The study has shown that producing a precise definition of a documentation backlog, which can be applied across the three domains, will not be possible.

A number of reasons why backlogs have occurred have been identified and these relate to three broad areas: organisation and resources, staffing and process, and accommodation. An important factor is that the roles of museums, libraries and archives have changed substantially in the last few decades and their staff structures have changed to meet the identified needs, often with a reduction in cataloguing posts. The documentation systems and processes in use in the various domains were examined as part of this work. These are not perceived as one of the major causes of backlogs, nor is the introduction of advanced ICT systems. One issue that emerged strongly from the consultations was that governing bodies do not appreciate that investment in good documentation is essential to meet effectively the needs of the access and learning agenda.

There have been a number of programmes and schemes which have helped tackle backlogs. Some of these, such as Museums Registration and Full Disclosure, have a specific focus on improving documentation, while others provide funding for activities which have included new documentation activities. Some of these provide project funding to digitise material or make it more widely available in an electronic format. While these initiatives have been useful, a number of consultees highlighted that many of these initiatives were not ‘joined up’ and, that in developing a project, often time was spent re-learning the lessons others had already learnt in previous projects.

One of the objectives of the study was to develop a methodology for quantifying backlogs. The methodology set out should enable estimates
of the quantity of backlogs to be made in organisations within the three
domains. It uses the ‘time to process’ measurement to try and give a
comparison between collections across the domains. The methodology
assumes all types of backlogs are possible, although it is more unlikely that
an organisation will have detailed catalogue records without the appropriate
accession records being in place. As the study has shown, quantifying a
backlog may take a considerable amount of time, therefore, for general
collection management purposes, this quantification would probably be
better linked with the production of an inventory if this does not already
exist. While the study has shown a possible way of quantifying backlogs,
it has highlighted that this will be inexact, and that producing such a
quantification will not in itself make the case for funding to tackle them.

Tackling documentation backlogs will always have to compete with an
organisation’s other priorities and, realistically, resources are unlikely
to be available to enable excellent documentation of everything held by
organisations, therefore, prioritising work on the backlog (organisationally,
regionally and nationally) will be important to ensure that the greatest
benefits are achieved for the users and for the management of the collection
itself. It is important that a core level of documentation knowledge and
skills resides in each institution to ensure standards are maintained and
records are produced to meet the growing demand. There is, however, a
major challenge for many organisations which are beginning to deal with
material which only exists in digital form.

The goal for museums, libraries and archives is to make the knowledge
stored in them available, and technological developments offer exciting
opportunities to retrieve and use this knowledge if it is electronically
documented. Effective documentation and the elimination of backlogs are
necessary to ensure that the community can share in the knowledge that
exists in our museums, libraries and archives.
**Recommendations**

**7.11** In consultation with other strategic bodies, MLA should develop guidelines on how disposal can be used as an effective collection management tool.

MLA investigates how a national strategy for co-ordinating collecting within museums, libraries and archives can be developed.

MLA encourages all organisations to publish their collecting policies and collaborate with other organisations to co-ordinate collecting where possible.

**7.12** MLA and partners in the Full Disclosure Consortium review how the initiative is to be developed and consider changing the name to be the ‘brand’ for a national campaign to promote effective documentation as the necessity for access to museum, library and archive collections.

MLA and SEMLAC give priority to a programme to advocate good documentation and educate governing bodies in this. They should also lobby other funders to support only access and learning initiatives which are based on good documentation, or where funding for improving documentation is considered to be an appropriate part of a bid.

MLA lobbies the Audit Commission to have the quality of documentation of the collections included as one of the Best Value performance indicators.

SEMLAC investigates the practicalities of a regional benchmarking scheme.

**7.21** MLA investigates how to address the documentation training needs of the sector, and whether national museum, library and archive bodies can share their skills and expertise through providing training.

SEMLAC and mda consider how basic documentation advice and training can be more effectively provided and signposted at a regional level.

SEMLAC investigates how they can support smaller organisations to access web-based resources and ensure other alternative means of receiving information are available.

**7.22** SEMLAC considers setting up an on-line register of experts from within the region who can provide expertise on particular collections.

SEMLAC consults with the regional museum hub to assist in providing such a service.
7.23 SEMLAC investigates whether it can provide a mechanism for smaller organisations to access ICT support, including computer training for staff and volunteers. For museums, this could be developed through the hubs.

7.24 SEMLAC consider how a regional documentation team or network could be established. This could be seen as a recognised training and entry route to a career in the domains.

7.25 SEMLAC considers how further collaborative documentation schemes could be encouraged.

SEMLAC and MLA consider if museums, libraries and archives need an easily accessible source of advice on how to document and care for material outside the range of their normal expertise. If such advice is required, MLA considers extending mda’s remit to provide advice to smaller libraries and archives.

7.31 Organisations ensure that documentation is considered as an important part of their work and given appropriate resources.

Organisations assess their backlogs and use prioritisation as a means of developing a programme to tackle them. They also consider whether it is most cost-effective to produce an inventory as part of the assessment of the backlog.

Organisations critically assess what level of information or catalogue record is required by different types of material, accepting that providing less information about a larger number of items is likely to be more cost-effective than providing more information about less items.

7.32 MLA investigates how to develop a database of processing times for material that has been catalogued, including the specific factors which affect these times, and sampling methods for backlogs.

SEMLAC investigates how a library of documentation projects could be made widely available.

7.33 SEMLAC considers what regional support it could give organisations recruiting and training volunteers, and consults with the mda and Volunteering England to assist in providing such support.

SEMLAC encourages organisations to involve members of the community as volunteers to help tackle backlogs and improve access to material held in museums, libraries and archives.

SEMLAC considers how it can support smaller organisations to manage documentation programmes involving volunteers.
Part 1

Investigation into documentation backlogs
1. Background and reasons for the study

Documentation\(^1\) backlogs have probably always existed in museums, libraries and archives. In previous decades these may have been less evident due to slower rates of acquisition and, in some areas, less complex systems for recording acquisition and producing catalogues. This is not the case today; the SEMLAC collections care survey of 2003\(^2\) indicated that 59\% of respondents had backlogs, with estimates of the backlogs ranging from 1\% of the collection to backlogs requiring 20 years’ work to document. The survey confirmed that ‘backlogs’ are still prevalent throughout museums, libraries and archives in the South East, and that there is a multitude of ways of quantifying them.

As documentation backlogs were perceived to be an issue for each domain, an outline project concept was included in the Year 1 Work Plan of SEMLAC to audit the problem across the sector and to explore strategic solutions. This study was therefore commissioned to conduct a sampled appraisal of cataloguing backlogs and procedures in the museums, libraries and archives sector in the South East. It relates to Full Disclosure, a national initiative which aims to ‘unlock’ information held in museums, libraries and archives through retrospective catalogue conversion and retrospective cataloguing. The study will show that there are many specific reasons for backlogs having developed and many reasons for organisations making less progress than they would like with their removal. The study highlights some initiatives to tackle backlogs, and provides some possible approaches to quantifying and removing them.

The consultant carried out the study using the following methodology:

- Researching existing national, regional and local strategies, standards and guidelines for addressing documentation backlogs across the three domains.
- Establishing and comparatively analysing the cataloguing and related collection management procedures across the domains.
- Identifying and analysing the key backlog priorities and issues for the domains in the South East: documentation, resources, procedures, management, accountability, and user access.

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\(^1\) The term documentation will be used to encompass all the stages of recording information about acquisition, uniquely identifying discrete items and producing a catalogue record or a record that could be used in an index.

Processing will be used to describe generally the carrying out of the above documentation processes, unless a more specific term is needed in a particular context.

Material will be used to describe all objects, books and other discrete information-carrying media (e.g. films and CDs) and archival material of all types that may be acquired by a museum, library or archive.

\(^2\) Collections Care and Management Provision and Needs in the South East 2003
• Sampling of three institutions in each sector, informed by desk-based research, and identify best practice.

• Developing a comparable methodology for quantifying backlogs across the domains; identifying regional needs, issues and priority areas and activities for support.

• Recommending revisions to approaches and procedures.

This study, which is based on in-depth discussions with practitioners and case studies from the museums, libraries and archives domains (see appendix four), shows that one of the key difficulties with planning a strategic approach to addressing documentation is the lack of conformity of process and terminology across the three domains. Some of the common definitions of the terms are set out in appendix one and footnotes will clarify the way some of the terms will be used in the report. An introduction to the documentation and backlog issues specific to each domain is provided in appendix two. This provides the context within which the practitioner participants have made their contribution. The study takes a cross-domain approach which, while identifying the differences, endeavours to bring together common themes from the different domains.

The willing involvement of practitioners from all three domains has been significant in building an understanding of documentation backlog issues. The author of this report is indebted to them for taking the time to contribute.
2. What is a backlog?

2.1 Defining the term ‘backlog’

Despite a number of surveys of ‘backlogs’ in each domain, there has been little attempt to consistently define the meaning of the word ‘backlog’. This has resulted in individuals and individual organisations developing their own working definition resulting in a situation where comparative assessments of backlogs across organisations and domains are impossible.

Producing a precise definition of a documentation backlog, which can be applied across the three domains, will be difficult because:

- the documentation process is not the same in the three domains,
- there is also some potential confusion in the use of terminology across the domains because of this difference in documentation processes,
- there is the distinction drawn between material which has had little or no documentation processing, and that which has records not meeting current documentation standards,
- there is the distinction drawn between material waiting to be documented which has only recently come into the organisation, and material which has been in the organisation for many years.

MLA had suggested that for Museum Registration, a backlog was a term used specifically to denote those items for which there was no documentation of any kind - it would not refer to incomplete records, to out of date records, nor to work of converting paper records to electronic format.

During the study a number of possible definitions for a documentation backlog were identified and a number of these are listed below:

- Objects without documentation or documentation without objects.
- Material held in archive offices that has basic box lists or poor quality catalogues which were not easily useable by the public and did not include
the mandatory data elements of ISAD(G)\(^1\) as specified in A2A project guidelines.

- Any part of the collection for which you don’t know what you have and where it is.
- Any part of the collection which does not have enough information to be used for research or reference and can’t be retrieved.

It is unlikely that it will be possible to produce a definition of a backlog which will be appropriate in all circumstances, however, the lesson from the study is that it is necessary to be absolutely precise about what is meant in a particular context by the term backlog. The author suggests his own version below, derived from discussions during the study:

- Quantity of material awaiting processing (accessioning or cataloguing), not being dealt with as part of a regular process, and with no programme in place to process this material within a defined time period.

### 2.2 The nature of backlogs

As there is no common agreement about the precise definition of the term backlog, it could be used to refer to:

- material with no record at all,
- records with no material,
- material with only an entry/accession record,
- material with a catalogue record but no entry/accession record,
- material only included in a basic inventory,
- material without a full/detailed catalogue entry,
- material not catalogued to current documentation standards.

It is also possible to describe ‘backlog’ as material recently acquired but waiting to be documented (referred to as ‘frontlog’ by one of the respondents) and ‘needing retrospective documentation’ as being the material which has been around for some time. For this report, the term backlog will be used in the majority of cases but the context will make it clear when items need to have retrospective documentation\(^2\).

\(^1\) ISAD(G) - the international standard archival description (general)

\(^2\) retrospective documentation - improving the standard of information or producing new information for existing material
There is also some potential confusion in the use of terminology across the domains because of the difference in documentation processes.

In the museum domain, the term documentation covers:

- procedures, policies and records and everything which happens to objects in the museum.

In the library domain the processes are:

- acquisition, cataloguing and classification.

In the archive domain the processes are:

- acquisition, appraisal and cataloguing.

The nature of any backlog will be distinguished by:

1. at what stage in the process it occurs,
2. the quality of the record,
3. the level of the record.

These are all related to the acquisition and documentation processes within each domain and will be considered further in the next sections.

### 2.3 When backlogs occur

There are a number of distinct stages in the processing of material where backlogs can occur, and some large backlogs can be caused or develop through a combination of delays in the particular stages.

The study has identified four broad areas where the backlog could occur:

- acquisition (recording ownership change),
- accession (uniquely identifying the individual items),
- cataloguing (detailed analysis, completing record),
- marking the item in the approved manner (for museums).

The table overleaf shows the comparison of systems for acquiring and cataloguing material in museums, libraries and archives.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process Stage</th>
<th>Museums</th>
<th>Libraries</th>
<th>Archives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Purchase, receive loan or donation</td>
<td>Order stock items, purchase or receive donation</td>
<td>Purchase, receive deposit or gift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Item entry/acquisition</strong></td>
<td>Create entry record: complete entry form with copy to depositor/letter of thanks to donor recording ownership change</td>
<td>Receipt item and allocate unique record number</td>
<td>Complete deposit form - identifying whether it is a gift or deposit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Record location</td>
<td>Letter of thanks to donor recording ownership change</td>
<td>Letter of thanks to donor recording ownership change/letter of thanks to depositor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accession/marking or labelling</strong></td>
<td>Enter into accession register, allocate unique accession number and physically mark this on object</td>
<td>Label stock</td>
<td>Enter into accession register and record accession number on deposit form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Record transfer of title to museum</td>
<td></td>
<td>Record location and, if uncatalogued, appraise and sort material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Record location</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cataloguing</strong></td>
<td>Produce catalogue record: manual index or included in searchable computerised database</td>
<td>Produce catalogue record with classification and location</td>
<td>Produce catalogue record: manual index or included in searchable computerised database</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Standard entries can be electronically downloaded from a national supplier - extra information can be added locally</td>
<td>Catalogue reference number is recorded on deposit form and in accession register</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Material available for use</td>
<td>Material available for use</td>
<td>Material available for use</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes**

1. The procedures shown in the table are a generic summary of those in use. In some organisations, some procedures will be carried out at the same time as others.

2. In libraries, brand new published books are usually received from book suppliers already containing a bar code with the organisation's unique number, the class number and the date of acquisition.

3. Some libraries outsource all their cataloguing.

4. Archive deposits are material where ownership is not transferred to the archive but the archive holds the material on behalf of the owner and can usually make it available.

5. During the archives appraisal stage, unwanted material can be disposed of.
2.4 Quality of record

Assuming that all organisations carry out the acquisition and accession processes in a similar way, the differences between organisations within, and across, the domains occurs at the cataloguing stage.

In all domains there are standard procedures for producing cataloguing records which are widely used today, however, many organisations have records produced at an earlier time, which may not provide the standard of information expected today. Records which do not meet these standards are considered by some institutions to be a backlog.

2.5 Level of record

Depending on their role and the needs of users, some organisations will generally produce more detailed cataloguing records than others. Organisations will also produce more comprehensive records for certain specific items or types of material. For example, an archive may produce a detailed transcription of a medieval manuscript to aid its users, while a library may produce more complex records of specific holdings for the same purpose.

An acceptable level of documentation will need to be defined for each domain although this may vary from organisation to organisation and collection to collection. Many consultees expressed the view that there was no such thing as a complete catalogue record, except for standard library records, as new or revised information could be added. One approach, therefore, would be to define the minimum number of fields for the record to be considered completed and no longer part of the backlog.

Producing detailed cataloguing records will take more time than producing simple ones and can contribute to the development of a backlog, however, simple records could be considered incomplete and, therefore, part of a backlog.

2.6 Current approaches to assessing documentation backlogs

There is no agreed way to measure backlogs across the domains - shelf length (linear metres), volume (cubic metres) or ‘staff time to catalogue material’ are all used. As has been stated previously, surveys of backlogs have produced results that are difficult to compare as organisations have estimated these in different ways.

Museums do not use a standard measurement for estimating backlogs, partly because of the wide variety of types and sizes of material, and the difficulty this has caused in the development of any standard means of measurement. Often for general estimates, organisations can count objects or identify that a whole store area, or part of a store, is a backlog.
Archives often use a volume measurement based on a standard archive box with the implied presumption that they are filled to a similar level, and some archives use systems which record half or quarter-full boxes. Other archives use a rough time estimate to deal with each box; i.e. estimating a day to process a box has been suggested, however, this method does not allow for an adjustment to reflect the level to which the material would be catalogued - this could be to box level or a full calendar which may have more words than the original document. In archives the assessment will differ as to whether it is carried out before or after the appraisal stage; at this stage some material will be sorted and discarded, reducing the amount of material which would need to catalogued.

In the Logjam\(^1\) project, the size of the archive collection was measured in linear metres for boxed items, maps and plans. This was then used to input into a formula to provide an estimate of cataloguing time. For bound volumes, which are generally less time-consuming to catalogue, they estimated that two linear metres of volumes could be catalogued each day.

Libraries often use a shelf length, linear metre, estimating scheme. This is quite effective as books and journals can be assumed to have an average size and with a large estimate, larger and smaller volumes will cancel each other out.

All these methods can have some level of accuracy if the person estimating has a good understanding of the material. For instance, a store full of a large number of small individual objects would probably be considered a larger backlog than the same store with a few large objects, however, a more significant factor affecting the accuracy of the estimate is whether the material includes items that will take different times to process. The ‘staff time to process material’ estimate, therefore (as currently estimated from experience), is probably most useful for large backlogs, where the ‘easy to document’ and ‘difficult to document’ cancel each other out, however, it is possible to improve the accuracy of the estimate by using specific sample data collected about the time taken to document material.

In the light of these factors, respondents generally expressed the view that backlogs are very difficult to assess with any accuracy without spending a great deal of time on the assessment. As is indicated above, the methods of measurement in one domain (whether based on experience or sampling) may not be applicable to another domain, making comparison between organisations across the domains not particularly useful.

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\(^1\) Logjam: an audit of uncatalogued collections in the North West, NWMLAC 2004
‘Because of all the variables within what is appropriate documentation for different material, used in different ways, cared for by different institutions, the only meaningful way to measure a backlog is on person hours needed to deal with it’. (Response from consultation)

Some respondents expressed the view that staff (including themselves) are very poor at estimating their own backlogs and the time that they will take to process. This was considered to be a particular problem when applying for funds on the basis that a backlog will take a certain amount of time to process.

For large backlogs, the National Preservation Office\(^1\) sampling method could be used, but this requires a statistically selected sample of over 400 items. If the time taken to catalogue these items were measured, it may give a good estimate of the time to complete the whole collection. To use this, the collection would need to be sorted in some way to make the sample valid, and care would have to be taken to produce a statistically valid sample across a mixture of collection types.

\(^1\) National Preservation Office - Preservation Assessment Survey, July 2001. This uses a sampling method to assess the conservation needs of a collection, with a tested methodology for selecting 400 sample items from the collection.
3. Reasons why backlogs have occurred

3.1 Overview

The study consulted strategic bodies and practitioners and looked at some organisations in more detail. As well as identifying reasons for backlogs, these consultations also highlighted some issues which did not appear to be the cause of backlogs. The documentation systems and processes in use in libraries and archives were not identified as a cause of backlogs. These systems have been developed internationally over many years, and although many organisations have their local variants, this was not seen as a particular problem. The issues for the museum domain are outlined in sections 5.35 and 5.36 below.

The consultations and case studies carried out showed that technology and documentation systems were not seen as a significant cause of documentation backlogs, and were seen by many as assisting to solve the problem. For the organisations involved, the need to use metadata\(^1\) and interoperability\(^2\) standards to make their records more widely available was also not seen as a significant cause of backlogs. Although the introduction of new ICT-based systems required new skills to be learned and data to be transferred, this was perceived as a normal part of an organisation’s service development. This is not to say that the introduction of new systems has always gone smoothly, and a number of consultees identified useful lessons that had been learned during such work.

3.2 Organisation and resource factors

3.21 Lack of appreciation of the importance of documentation

One issue did emerge very strongly from the consultations as a factor which has contributed to the development of backlogs in all domains. This was that governing bodies do not appreciate that investment in good

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1. metadata - information which describes significant aspects of a resource and where it is located; this can be held physically or electronically

2. interoperability - the ability of content or one system to work with other systems through the use of agreed specifications or standards
documentation is essential to meet effectively the needs of the access and learning agenda.

3.22 Cataloguing is important but seldom urgent

All organisations, and particularly the professional staff in organisations, appreciate that good documentation and catalogue records underpin the work of the organisation, however, unless documentation is a dedicated role for specific staff members, this work can often be delayed by more urgent and immediate demands on staff. Schemes to encourage staff to allocate, say, one day a week to documenting duties often founder, since the material will not be noticeably harmed by not being processed on a particular day, whereas the public service on a particular day will be noticeably poorer if the enquiry desk is empty. Over time a substantial amount of documentation time is sacrificed and the backlog builds up.

3.23 Lack of resources

In all three domains, lack of resources of both staff and time have affected the ability of organisations to deal with backlogs. A key resource issue is the lack of time for staff to be trained in documentation. This applies to training staff to use a particular documentation system and for staff, without any documentation training, to be trained in the process and the system.

3.24 Lack of staff devoted to cataloguing/documentation

In all three domains specific posts to deal with cataloguing/acquisition processes have been reduced over the years. Cataloguing is no longer seen as a core activity. There is a divergence of opinion as to whether cataloguing skills have declined, but certainly cataloguing is no longer seen as a vocation. Many organisations have employed staff on short-term contracts for specific documentation and digitisation projects, this enables the documentation to be carried out but does not retain the expertise within the organisation. There are also potential project management issues as, towards the end of the project, these contract staff may seek employment elsewhere before the project is completed.

3.25 Diversion of staff to public service

As the roles of museums, libraries and archives have changed, cataloguing and curatorial posts have been lost and transferred to other duties. Archives and libraries have created posts to provide improved public advice and assistance services, and in many cases outreach, while museums have seen a growth in public service, marketing and interpretation posts.
3.26 Increased usage of material

Collections and material in organisations are used more than they were, requiring more staff time to assist enquiries in person and in response to telephone calls, letters and now e-mails. In local authority record offices particularly, there has been a huge growth in genealogy research requiring more resources to be diverted to this area. One local authority record office reports that the number of visitors is now eight times the level of 20 years ago.

3.27 Local Government re-organisation

Local authorities were re-organised in 1974 and further re-organisation took place in 1998, with the creation of unitary authorities. Apart from the diversion of staff resources to prepare and carry out these re-organisations, the collections and collecting areas were affected by the changes in boundaries. Some organisations in the South East have continuing obligations to areas no longer in their administrative area, and some collections have been transferred between organisations to reflect these boundary changes. In other areas total re-organisation has taken place: for example, Berkshire County Council operated a County Record Office from 1948 to 1999, when Berkshire County Council was abolished. It is now operated as a joint service of the six unitary authorities.

3.3 Staff and process factors

3.31 Lack of expertise

Organisations do find it difficult to catalogue some material where expertise is not available within that institution. Smaller museums with specialist collections outside the experience of the curatorial staff, find problems with dealing with such material, although there have been a number of local initiatives to try and address this, as well as a number of specialist networks. The development of on-line catalogues and search engines is beginning to provide an additional resource of information which can be used to assist with identification and cataloguing.

The training in library schools has changed and cataloguing is not taught in the same way. This causes difficulties with cataloguing rare books where book structure and binding are important parts of the record. Smaller libraries may find it difficult to locate and obtain expertise in rare books. Particular problem areas are reported in rare books and local studies, business records, early modern manuscripts, foreign, classical and community languages.

Smaller and specialised archives usually have the expertise available to deal with acquisitions, catalogue them and make them available, however, local authority record offices are dealing with a wider range of material, including
specialised business archives, e.g. architectural plans, where the technical knowledge may be lacking to assess whether this material is significant and then make it available. There can also be problems with early English manuscripts and medieval manuscripts. A number of interviewees expressed the view that more training was required to deal with these specialised archives. Although outside assistance could be obtained with cataloguing, the organisation will still need a certain level of expertise to assist enquirers and make them available.

3.32 Acquisition of large collections

From time to time all organisations are offered large collections of material. The professional staff consider such acquisitions carefully as they have impact on workloads and long-term stewardship costs, but many of these collections are of national or regional importance. These collections can be daunting to deal with because of their volume and will give the organisation a short or longer term backlog. As an example, Hampshire libraries acquired a major collection of aviation books from the DERA\(^1\) library in Farnborough. These books will complement existing collections within the library, but their technical nature means they will require detailed cataloguing to make them accessible, and this will take a skilled member of staff considerable time.

3.33 Prioritisation of material, where access is demanded, at the expense of other material

The needs of the organisation and its users quite rightly have an effect on priorities for documenting, but this can have affects on the work programme and may mean that some collections of material are always being left to be tackled at a future time. For museums, exhibition programmes are often the impetus for detailed catalogue records to be produced for a selection of objects, and often more objects will be acquired and require cataloguing for such an exhibition. In many cases detailed work on these items is carried out instead of less detailed work on a higher volume of other material. In libraries, the opening of new facilities will divert cataloguing resources to make this material available, as well as for exhibition programmes and outreach. For local authority archives, parish records receive priority as they are in demand by researchers, and there is some lobbying by interest groups to obtain priority for certain other types of material.

By January 2005, there will be full implementation of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and this will have a major impact on cataloguing priorities, particularly in archives. This provides a general right of access to

\(^1\) Defence Evaluation and Research Agency
all types of recorded information held by public bodies. Under the Act, all these bodies will have to adopt and maintain a publication scheme detailing the classes of information that they hold, how this information is to be published and whether there is a charge for this information. Organisations with archives can claim exception from this duty if their material is already ‘reasonably accessible’ when enquirers can then be directed to the catalogue of holdings. Organisations with large quantities of uncatalogued material will be unlikely to obtain an exemption. In these cases the organisation will have to answer the enquiry itself and the Act requires this to be done within 20 working days.

3.34 Inaccurate or lost information

For backlogs which have built up over time, much of the information about the material may have been lost or mislaid. If the collection was associated with a particular person or organisation, neither may now be available to assist in the documenting process, and staff who acquired the material (and may have had some information about it) may have moved on. In previous decades acquisition records were not kept in such a thorough manner, and in local authorities there may only be a list of items reported to the relevant committee to assist with any identification or cataloguing. Understandably material where the information is difficult or impossible to locate is not given priority and contributes to the backlog.

The nature of previous accession records may also mean that information which is now seen to be inaccurate may be associated with the material. For some museum, library and archive collections the items can be re-identified, but this can require a great deal of staff time, and some provenance information can be impossible to verify. With the pressure on cataloguing time, it is likely easier material will be attempted first, unless the material is deemed to be of prime importance.

There is also the case where the organisation has information but cannot easily associate it with specific items, and sometimes there are a number of items that cannot be associated with any records held by the organisation.

3.35 Time taken to number objects

Museums have a particular form of backlog which is associated with the process by which an object is permanently marked with the accession number. The intention is that the number should be permanent although will not damage the item. For marking most objects the process requires painting a barrier layer of clear varnish on the item, then the number is applied and then a topcoat of varnish is applied to protect the number. This process can be time-consuming and is often left to be done in batches. With pressures of other work this final stage often gets left and can build up into a backlog.
3.36 Lack of documentation training or information

For effective documentation and cataloguing it is important that the information is both accurate and provided in a standard form. In all domains there is perceived to be a lack of investment in training generally, and specifically in cataloguing.

To be effective and provide consistent work, staff need to carry out cataloguing regularly and need to be well trained at the start. Lack of time or expertise to train new staff is often a reason not to tackle a backlog. It is also the case that the process can seem difficult and in smaller organisations, particularly museums, finding out about the procedures to be used for documentation is reported as sometimes being difficult.

In the museum domain SPECTRUM, the national documentation standard, was only introduced in 1994. While eight of SPECTRUM’s primary procedures are a requirement of museum registration, some smaller museums are still having difficulties implementing these. For these museums, a perceived lack of advice and assistance may be contributing to backlogs. There is also a degree of confusion between the roles of the mda and MLA in providing information.

3.4 Accommodation factors

3.41 Lack of suitable storage facilities

In one sense lack of suitable storage will help prevent backlogs increasing, as there will be limited space to store new material, however, lack of storage space with suitable work areas can prevent a documentation exercise being tackled. Many organisations have stores which are remote from their main staff base, and these can be difficult to work in, due to lack of effective heating or poor lighting, as well as the additional time required to go there and start work.

3.42 Off-site stores - inhospitable and out of sight

An issue raised during the consultations was that there is an understandable reluctance to catalogue material that will remain in unsuitable storage, and be less available to researchers and for others to use. In many cases such stores have been filled, or overfilled, over the years making any sort of access to the material a problem. These stores are also often used for material not considered of prime importance and so their documentation is also not seen as a priority task.
3.43 Lack of space for sorting/documenting

To carry out any sort of documenting /cataloguing exercise effectively, some decanting space is required. Ideally a shelf, or an area at a time, would be tackled and, after cataloguing, the material would be returned to specific locations which are recorded. If there is not space in the store, or no secure area where items being worked on can be left, it is very difficult to make improvements in location recording during this process. Indeed, it can be very difficult even to clear a shelf of material to clean it before the material returns.
4. National, regional and local initiatives which have helped tackle backlogs

4.1 National initiatives

4.11 Museums Registration

The Museums Registration (now Accreditation) Scheme was launched in 1988 with the aim of setting a minimum standard for museums and galleries in the United Kingdom. It has had a key role in raising standards in collections care and improving documentation, with an underlying aim of encouraging the elimination of documentation backlogs, however, despite progress in phases 1 and 2 of the Registration Scheme, a number of museums still have backlogs which would take many years to clear. The Accreditation standard 2004 has a requirement for the ‘creation of a written Documentation Plan, setting out actions, including the timescale, for dealing with any backlog’.

If a museum does not have an accession record and a location record for all items, or groups of items, in its collection, it must start by making an inventory of items in its care. This is an important stage in tackling a documentation backlog and will encourage museums to prioritise work in this area.

4.12 Renaissance in the Regions

In 2001, the report ‘Renaissance in the Regions’ recommended setting an integrated framework for the museums sector based on a network of regional ‘hubs’ consisting of one museum and gallery service with up to three or four partners. In the South East the hub consists of Hampshire County Museums Service (lead partner) with Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust, Oxford University Museums and the Royal Pavilion, Libraries and Museums, Brighton and Hove.
The hub will promote excellence and be leaders of regional museum practice, working alongside partner organisations such as national and university museums, and strategic bodies like SEMLAC.

The priority areas for the hubs include

- Enhance the care, management and conservation of the collections.
- Improve access to knowledge and information.

One of the key areas of work for the hubs is documentation and digitisation to improve access to the collections. The way that this can be done in collaboration with the Designated Collections is being explored as the ‘Net Gain’ project which aims to explore a common approach to issues related to interoperability of digital resources for museums.

**4.13 Designation**

The Designation Scheme was launched in 1997 with the aim of identifying and supporting the pre-eminent collections of national and international importance held in England’s non-national museums. There are currently designated collections held in 62 museums. Museums recognised by the Scheme are expected to work towards the provision of high quality services, which deliver the fullest possible access to their collections. With support from the Designation Challenge Fund, many of the museums with designated collections have undertaken projects to improve storage, documentation and access to their collections.

**4.14 Full Disclosure**

This began as a national strategy for retrospective conversion of library and archive catalogues. The aim of this project is to provide access to museum, library and archive material through an electronic catalogue and, for this to succeed, the documentation of material in these organisations needs to be carried out to an agreed standard. As part of the work a ‘Full Disclosure Prioritisation Study’ was carried out. It recommended that organisations should prioritise work on collections which remain entirely uncatalogued, and proposed an assessment tool for doing this work. The Full Disclosure initiative is considered in more detail in section 6.

**4.15 Joint Information Systems Committee**

This was established on 1st April 1993 with the aim of exploring ‘a national dimension to [providing networking and specialist information services], exercising vision and leadership in bringing about developments

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for the Higher Education sector as a whole. JISC has a major programme for the digitisation of collections in UK Further and Higher Education Institutions. The aims of this programme include enabling access to previously difficult or impossible to view collections and evaluation of the long-term sustainability of the services and preservation created by the programme. A number of projects are in progress or being evaluated under this programme.

4.16 Access to Archives

This is a national scheme to give on-line access to catalogue information. The A2A portal gives access to the holdings of many archive repositories, and it aims to provide the delivery of consistent and appropriate archival descriptions and shared authority data. It sets standards for minimum conformity, recognising that many repositories catalogue to a range of standards.

4.17 Archives Hub

The Archives Hub provides a single point of access to descriptions of archives held in universities and colleges in the United Kingdom. The descriptions are primarily at collection level, although where possible they are linked to complete catalogue descriptions. The Archives Hub forms one part of the UK’s National Archives Network, alongside other networking projects including Access to Archives.

4.18 New Opportunities Fund

As part of its education stand the New Opportunities Fund has supported a wide range of digitisation programmes. These have made learning materials available on the Internet, and these programmes have included material from museums, libraries, archives, colleges and universities, charities, voluntary organisations and others by converting them into electronic form. All of the projects funded under this initiative can be accessed from the programme’s portal website - www.EnrichUK.net.

4.2 Regional initiatives

4.21 Regional strategies and networks

A regional archives strategy ‘Making SEense for Archives’ was produced in 2001 as part of a series of strategies produced for each English region. This identified that ‘backlogs of cataloguing and conservation work - crucial to access - inhibit the work on many otherwise successful archives.’ It recommended that funding must be found to tackle cataloguing backlogs and improve finding aids.

As part of the shared planning framework, MLA has identified that it and the regional agencies should identify the scale of the cataloguing / documentation backlogs between 2004 and 2007. This study is a part of this work. The North West Museums Libraries and Archives Council have carried out an audit of uncatalogued collections in the North West. This project, named Logjam, was investigated as part of this study.

There are a number of museum, library and archive networks which are active in the region. The sub-regional museum groups are a forum for cooperation, as are regional initiatives as a part of national networks such as the rural museums network. There is no regional library system but a wide range of operating networks including Co-South (a network for Hampshire, Southampton, Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight) which includes some of the organisations featured in the case studies.

4.22 SEMLAC survey of collection care and management provision and needs in the South East

This survey was carried out in autumn 2003 and a more detailed analysis of the responses relating to backlogs is given at appendix three. It highlighted the difficulties in backlog measurement and reporting that this study has confirmed. Although the lack of key areas (accession number, marking/labelling and location record) was suggested as a means of identifying ‘backlog’ material, organisations highlighted other issues which meant, in their view, the material was not documented to the standard that they would wish to achieve.

In terms of the three domains, 57% of museums reported having a backlog. There did not seem to be any correlation between types and size of museum and level of backlog, although the larger museums did often have numerically, if not proportionally, larger backlogs. In archives, 80% of the organisations reported backlogs. Here there was a trend that small archives tended to have little or no backlogs and the larger County Record Offices all reported backlogs. This reflects the large amount of material they acquire and the changes in their role which is covered in appendix two. There were not enough responses from libraries about backlog issues to enable any conclusions to be drawn.
4.3 Local initiatives

Many organisations have made efforts to tackle backlogs, often using specific project funding. Some organisations have tackled the backlog issue by re-organising the way they work. Three examples are given below. The full case studies of the nine organisations studied for this report are given in appendix four.

4.3.1 Rochester Museum

*Clear focus on documentation as the primary role of one staff member is making inroads into the backlog.*

Rochester Museum had a large backlog of items in a collection, which is estimated at between 30,000 and 100,000 objects. The records were poor with some having been identified and numbered during the period from 1897 to 1920. From 1920 until 1970 no specific records were kept and, from 1970 until 2000, substantial amounts of donations were acquired, receipted, but not accessioned, with no numbers, locations or detailed descriptions.

From 2000 a new curatorial team has taken over and their approach has been to strike a balance between what they need to do and what they can do most effectively, and use this for prioritisation to achieve the following:

- Maintain registration status.
- Achieve a record for security.
- Record items requiring a licence, like firearms.
- Record civic regalia which travels off site regularly.
- Identify items which may have health and safety issues.

One assistant curator works on documentation almost full-time and they have developed a collection management plan showing the programme, resources and timescale, for a 10-year period. Using the knowledge and abilities of all the staff, they have tackled the collections in groups and taken advantage of opportunities when they arise.

Progress has been good as it is an institutional priority and one member has concentrated on this work and is not distracted by many competing demands.
4.32 Southampton University Library

*Analysis, better focused jobs and better organisation solves the backlog problems.*

Southampton University has developed over the 20th century, with a major expansion in the 1960s and, more recently, other organisations have joined the university. There has been a change in subjects taught which is reflected in the current cataloguing priorities. The structure of library provision has also changed with former departmental libraries having been centralised. The holdings are about 500,000 to 750,000 books with 22,080 runs of journals, some being purchased in electronic form.

The staff identified that they had a backlog and analysed where it was occurring; in acquisition, bibliographic process or classification. They also looked back over a decade at their cataloguing statistics to identify the productivity of a cataloguer. This revealed that books could be catalogued at a rate of 2.3 books per hour over the decade. To tackle the backlog, they adjusted the amount of cataloguing work being required to match the hours of work available.

The other problem area was that librarians were dividing their time between cataloguing and subject liaison, meaning that cataloguing tended to be left and librarians tried to do a large amount of cataloguing in one day which was less efficient. To tackle this they re-introduced a dedicated cataloguing department, with people on 2-year fixed-term contracts, which gives good productivity. Staff have a quota of 10-15 books per day, and with this continuous programme, an output of 12-15,000 books per year is achieved.

4.33 Canterbury Cathedral Archives

*A published cataloguing strategy, prioritisation and collaborative working are being used to tackle the backlog.*

Now part of Kent Archives Service, the Cathedral Archive at Canterbury has three different authorities responsible for parts of its collections. The archivists also care for some cathedral objects e.g. vestments, but not treasury items.

The Cathedral Archive has a backlog of uncatalogued and undercatalogued items, i.e. box lists which can be used, but only under supervision, as there is no security record. There are accession records still to complete as, until the late 1980s, there was only one archivist. A particular problem is the lack of physical space and with only a few outstores, meaning there is a lack of space for new acquisitions. Removing backlogs is now an organisational priority for Kent Archives Service. They have a published cataloguing strategy which identifies that ‘closer management and the
maximum allocation of time and resources is required’. This identifies the need to allocate priorities, monitor the rate of cataloguing and uncatalogued material, and report this in annual reports to the County Archivist.

For new acquisitions, a prioritisation sheet is completed which produces a score which determines the priority to be given to documenting the collection. Material is catalogued using CALM\(^1\) but there is still a manual accession register. Particular collections are catalogued to a high standard, such as a project to catalogue 6,000 medieval charters using a project worker. They have worked on a number of collaborative projects, most recently working with Canterbury museums, Whitstable and Herne Bay for Access to Archives and on an HLF-funded project ‘Oysters Sources’ which will catalogue an antiquarian’s collection in Whitstable Museum.

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\(^1\) CALM - an electronic collections management system produced by DS Ltd.
Part 2

Recommendations and practical guidance on tackling documentation backlogs
5. Quantifying documentation backlogs

5.1 Overview

One of the objectives of the study was to develop a methodology for quantifying backlogs. As part one has shown, there is not a common understanding of the meaning of backlogs; the nature of backlogs can be different and they occur at different stages in the documentation process. The methodology outlined below should enable estimates of the quantity of backlogs to be made in organisations within the three domains. It uses the ‘time to process’ measurement to try and give a comparison between collections across the domains. The methodology assumes all types of backlogs are possible, although it is more unlikely that an organisation will have detailed catalogue records without the appropriate accession records being in place. As the study has shown, quantifying a backlog may take a considerable amount of time. Organisations will need to assess how effective just doing a quantification exercise like this is; if it is making an assessment to use in a funding application, this would have obvious benefits. For general collection management purposes, this quantification would probably be better linked with the production of an inventory if this does not already exist. This would enable the organisation to achieve the goal of knowing ‘what they have and where it is’ and would be the first stage in documenting a backlog.

The previous part of the study has shown the various ways in which backlogs have been measured across the domains. The following is a four-step process to assessing backlogs, which should be applicable to each domain.

5.2 A four-step process to quantifying backlogs

*Step 1: Identify at which stage in the documentation process the backlog occurs.*

This could be in one of the following stages:

- acquisition (recording ownership change),
- accession (uniquely identifying the individual items),
- cataloguing (detailed analysis, completing record),
- or for museums, in marking the item in the approved manner.
If the backlog is in more than one area, consider each one separately. The *bold italic* sections of the table below highlight the areas in each domain where backlogs could occur.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Museums</th>
<th>Libraries</th>
<th>Archives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purchase, receive loan or donation</td>
<td>Order stock items, purchase or receive donation</td>
<td>Purchase, receive deposit or gift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Create entry record:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Receipt item and allocate unique record number</strong></td>
<td><strong>Complete deposit form - identifying whether it is a gift or deposit</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>complete entry form with copy to depositor/letter of thanks to donor recording ownership change</td>
<td>Letter of thanks to donor recording ownership change</td>
<td>Letter of thanks to donor recording ownership change/or letter of thanks to depositor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Record location</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Enter into accession register, allocate unique accession number and physically mark this on object</strong></td>
<td>Labelling stock</td>
<td><strong>Enter into accession register and record accession number on deposit form</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Record transfer of title to museum</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Record location and, if uncatalogued, appraise and sort material</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Record location</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Produce catalogue record:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Produce catalogue record with classification and location</strong></td>
<td><strong>Produce catalogue record:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>manual index or include in searchable computerised database</td>
<td>Standard entries can be electronically downloaded from a national supplier - extra information can be added locally</td>
<td>manual index or include in searchable computerised database</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Catalogue reference number is recorded on deposit form and in accession register</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material available for use</td>
<td>Material available for use</td>
<td>Material available for use</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Step 2: Identify the nature of the backlog.**

The stage of the documentation process where the backlog occurs is important but it is also necessary to establish the nature of the backlog.

This aspect of the backlog could be one or more of the following:

- material which has no adequate records of any sort,
- material which is missing part of the documentation process,
- records and items which are not associated together,
• material with lost or inaccurate information,

• material whose documentation does not meet current documentation standards.

**Step 3: Make an assessment of the quantity of material in the backlog.**

This assessment will depend on the type of material. Measuring in volume and linear metres, although useful for archives and libraries, is less useful for museums as the material is often more varied.

An essential aspect of this stage is to make the assessment with material categorised into similar types which will take a similar time to process. This will also depend on the nature of the backlog and the quantity of items with similar ‘natures’ should be assessed separately. If the assessment involves items which may be boxed, it will be important to establish how full the box is or how many items are in it. For an assessment of a large amount of material, sampling some boxes to produce an average would be realistic and help to get the most accurate result.

**Step 4: Estimate how long the material will take to process.**

To get the most accurate estimate, all the factors that will affect the ‘time to process’ material will need to be considered. These include:

• the complexity of the process:
  • producing detailed records will take longer than simple ones,
  • producing many similar records will be quicker than producing totally different ones,
  • different types of material will take different times to physically examine.

• the skills and experience of the staff:
  • it will be quicker to process material with which people are familiar,
  • project staff will speed up as a project progresses but will need a lot of time to learn processes and technology.

• the space where the work will be carried out:
  • moving material to and from a store will take additional time,
  • putting the material away for safekeeping at the end of work will take additional time,
  • going to and from a remote store will take time.
The way the factors above affect the ‘time to process’ measurement will be different for each organisation and for the type of material. If accurate information about previous processing times is not available, some sample material should be processed to give accurate times. These samples should be for all the types identified in the initial survey. Even if information is available, it is important to consider whether any factors have changed since the information was available - such as a new database system. For some types of backlog (e.g. missing information or where records and items are not associated together) it may be necessary to set a maximum time for dealing with each item, as a very large amount of time could be spent on one item which could have been better spent processing a number of others.

Information can be gathered from outside the organisation. Organisations with similar collections processed to a similar standard can be asked for their data. There are a number of sources of data on times taken to document material. The Logjam project has collected data for archives, the mda has data for museums and the Willpower¹ website has data for museums and archives, however, the times recorded for processing vary greatly, and may not include all the factors in the times reported; therefore, there is no substitute for data which relates to the organisation making the assessment.

With all the factors taken into account, and some comparative data, it should be possible to make a realistic estimate of the time to process a backlog, however, it is important to ensure that all the relevant factors are taken into account. It will also be important to re-visit the estimate regularly as technological and institutional factors will change and affect the estimate.

As part of this process, it will be useful for organisations to begin to collect their own ‘time to process’ data, as this will provide a better baseline on which to base future estimates.

¹ Time taken to create catalogue records for museum objects and archives - www.willpower.demon.co.uk
6. Prioritising tackling the backlog within organisations

6.1 Overview

Tackling documentation backlogs will always have to compete with an organisation’s other priorities, and realistically resources are unlikely to be available to enable excellent documentation of everything held by organisations.

Prioritising work on the backlog, therefore, will be important to ensure that the greatest benefits are achieved for the users and for the management of the collection itself.

In organisations, staff time spent on documentation should be planned to produce the most effective result. Although for specific projects detailed cataloguing may be undertaken, as MLA has indicated for the Registration Standard within the museum domain, the minimum should be to know ‘what you have and where it is’, therefore, producing an inventory of the material collections and their location should normally be a first priority. This will provide a ‘finding aid’ for the material, enabling it to begin to be made available to users.

6.2 Prioritisation factors to consider

A number of the other factors which could be considered in prioritising work on material held in organisations are reviewed below. As this study is taking a cross-domain approach, these factors will have varying degrees of relevance to individual museums, libraries and archives, and also to particular types of material within these organisations. It is suggested that organisations produce their own list of relevant factors (including others of specific relevance to them) and use this to produce a weighted table of factors to determine documentation priorities. An example is given in the Case Study of Canterbury Cathedral Archives in appendix four.

Does the material meet the strategic priorities of Full Disclosure?

The Full Disclosure Prioritisation Study proposed a Prioritisation Assessment Matrix, which was designed to enable funding bodies to prioritise collections for cataloguing and retrospective conversion projects. This matrix sets out five criteria for the prioritisation assessment:

- The relationship to other collections.
- The institutional context.
- Potential use.
- Collaboration.
- Value for money.

The Prioritisation Study supports the view that prioritisation of collections for documentation is a matter for dialogue with other organisations and that there could be a regional co-ordination of priorities.

**Is the material of international/national/regional/local importance?**

A significant factor in determining the priority to give to processing a collection, is its importance. This can be assessed on a local, regional, national or international level and the result of the assessment will depend on the organisation and its users, however, if the material is totally undocumented, it may be difficult to make an assessment of its importance without doing some initial work on it.

**How much information should you record about each item?**

Most of the time for processing a collection will be in producing the detailed catalogue record of the individual items. Normally, more short records would be produced in a given time than the same number of detailed records. This would imply that a higher priority should be given to recording an ‘adequate’ or short record about each item, instead of a very detailed record, as this would provide access to a greater quantity of material, however, this will also depend on the organisation’s policies and practice and some on the material itself. For certain types of material, it may be that only a short catalogue record will only ever be necessary to manage the collection effectively. The needs of the users will help determine the way a collection is processed but, as one of the consultees pointed out, it may be that ‘the best is the enemy of the good’.

In the museum domain, there is a process called bulk accessioning which can be used as part of a strategy to tackle backlogs for particular collections. As the name implies, the process accessions groups of similar items under one accession number. The benefit is that these collections are formally recorded as part of the organisation’s holdings, and more material can be added to the accession register in a shorter time. The process does need to be handled carefully to ensure only appropriate items are included and that, at a later stage, the items can be given individual accession numbers without re-numbering.

Although retrospective documentation may be necessary for some material, it is important to consider whether users’ needs can be met with a variety of systems as part of an assessment of prioritisation. For example, it may not be a priority to transfer all records to an electronic system if a paper-based
system is adequate: Southampton University only transfer book records from index cards to their electronic catalogue if the book has been requested.

**Are there security issues for valuable material?**

Undocumented material that has a significant financial value is at risk of theft or loss. If material is unrecorded, efforts to assist the recovery of stolen material will be hampered, even if it has been noticed that the material has gone missing in the first place. The lack of documentation also means that providing access is more staff-intensive if enquirers, for example, ask to look in a box of undocumented material. If no list of the material given to the enquirer is available, close staff supervision will be needed to avoid the possibility of items going missing.

**Are there people with knowledge or information about the material available now but may not be available in the future?**

Unless material has been acquired as an unexpected donation, it is likely that staff from the acquiring organisation will have obtained some additional information at the time of its acquisition. Some of this will often be in memory and in notes, and prioritising the processing of this material will ensure this additional information is not lost or forgotten. For museums and archives, donations of material are often received from closing or changing businesses when an employee, who is aware of the nature of the material, is available at the time of donation but may not be available for much longer. Similarly older individual donors will have a natural lifespan, giving a finite limit to the time in which they can provide additional information.

**Is the material in one of the organisation’s important acquisition areas or does it fill an identified gap?**

In some cases, material will be acquired which complements or helps interpret existing material that the organisation already holds. In this case prioritising the processing of the new material would have clear benefits to users. Similarly, material which fills a perceived gap in the organisation’s collections, could be given priority to process as this should again help users.

**Is this type of material likely to be used for research/exhibition in the relatively near future or is there a public demand for it? Is it, or information about it, likely to be stored electronically, digitised or used in different ways?**

The immediate needs of the organisation, and particularly their users, will have an effect on the prioritising of processing of material. An identified user-need should be a major factor in prioritisation; e.g. County Record Offices are likely to prioritise processing parish registers, as these are in demand by genealogy researchers. The need for material to be exhibited
within an organisation or loaned to another organisation, will mean that priority will need to be given to this material. Similarly, material being considered for a digitisation project will need to be documented either in advance, or as part, of the project.

**Do other organisations (in the same region) have similar material already documented?**

This may be a reason for not prioritising work or conversely documenting this material may enhance the use of complementary material in another organisation, especially if there was relatively little work involved. In Surrey the ‘Private Faces in Public Places’ project enabled organisations to jointly prioritise work to document holdings of archives, however, within the archive domain alone, a prioritised thematic approach is considered unlikely to be useful.

**Is it in good enough condition to be useful?**

The condition of the material can be an important factor, as material received in poor physical condition may deteriorate if not processed as quickly as possible. For example, infested or decaying items within a larger collection can cause all the items to suffer rapid deterioration. In certain cases where the material is in too poor a condition to be saved, the information can be transcribed and copied onto another media. In the case of very important items, urgent conservation may be required to ensure the survival of the items.

**Would there be external funding for this work?**

The potential availability of external funding is likely to be a reason for prioritising the processing of material. The only risk is that the search for external funding has altered the organisation’s documenting priorities, and that less important material is being tackled first as this is fundable.

**Would it take a short/medium/long time to document?**

There are benefits in prioritising the processing of complete groups of material. If it is considered that the time to process the material will be short, resources might be used to get one group of related material in the public domain. From the perspective of the staff working on the material, this will give a sense of achievement as all the material in one group has been documented.

**For archives in particular, does the Data Protection Act or Freedom of Information Act apply to the material?**

In these cases there are legal requirements which will give priority to material covered by these acts.
7. Recommendations for tackling and removing backlogs

7.1 National recommendations
7.2 Regional recommendations
7.3 Local recommendations

The study has identified a number of strategies for identifying and prioritising tackling backlogs within organisations themselves. There are also a number of areas where further support and strategic direction are required, and recommendations for all these areas are given below. The recommendations are grouped into three areas: those with a primarily national focus, those with a primarily regional focus and those relating principally to individual organisations.

7.1 National recommendations

7.1.1 Collections and collecting

Organisations now have more detailed collecting policies and are less likely to take material unless they have the resources to store and manage them. There is also increasing pressure on storage space and both these factors are making it less likely that organisations will take marginal material just in case it will be useful, however, there is still sometimes pressure to take material at short notice which could be important and would otherwise be lost.

Libraries and archives do have some capacity for removing material from their collections which is no longer wanted; libraries have a programme for withdrawing old books and archives have a process for appraising new collections and removing material which is not required. In museums there is the presumption that items within a museum’s permanent collection will be kept in perpetuity. It may be that de-accessioning can play a part in managing backlogs within an institution, but it is a process which will need to be handled with great care.

Some consultees from the archive domain have suggested that de-accessioning could remove material which is now seen as of dubious evidential value, although for such a judgement to be made, some part of the documentation process will have had to have been carried out. In the museum domain, many museums collected items before vigorous collecting policies came into force, and these may have lain undocumented for many years. As with the archive domain, such material will have to undergo some documentation processing for the organisation to make a judgement about its value. If not wanted, it could then be disposed of in the manner set out in the Acquisition and Disposal Policy.
De-accessioning and disposal, however, should not be used to deal with undocumented backlogs, as there is a substantial risk that material could be disposed of without its importance being recognised. As the National Museum Directors Conference indicated in its report ‘Too Much Stuff’:-

*Disposal should be regarded as a proper part of collection management, but if it is to be successful it must be properly resourced and carefully considered.*

Although most organisations have detailed collecting policies and are collaborating on a range of issues, a number of consultees identified the need for a national strategy for future collecting. Such a strategy would help organisations prioritise work on their own collections by giving a wider context to their assessment. This would encourage better management of material, prevent duplication and contribute to reducing future backlogs, as organisations would be clearer about wider collecting priorities. The development of such a strategy will be complex and will need to ensure local collecting priorities are not neglected, however, with the integration of methods of public access to collections across the three domains, this is an appropriate time to begin to develop such a strategy.

**Recommendations**

- In consultation with other strategic bodies, MLA should develop guidelines on how disposal can be used as an effective collection management tool.

- MLA investigates how a national strategy for co-ordinating collecting within museums, libraries and archives can be developed.

- MLA encourages all organisations to publish their collecting policies and collaborate with other organisations to co-ordinate collecting where possible.

**7.12 Advocacy**

One of the main responses to this study was the view that having good documentation was not seen as a priority by all governing bodies. In particular, access and learning projects were supported without the need for documentation improvements being considered. It was also harder for museums which relied on funding, from visitors in particular, to prioritise documentation work above new exhibitions, for example. For local authorities, the Audit Commission’s Best Value performance indicators do not refer to documentation and so this is not always perceived as being a high priority. Across the South East, benchmarking would also have a useful role in focusing on tackling backlogs and driving up standards. Some organisations already have formal and informal benchmarking arrangements which could form the basis of a regional scheme.
This study relates to the Full Disclosure initiative which aims ‘to unlock the
nation’s information assets’. It is supported by the major national bodies,
but this initiative is perceived as lacking a clear focus by practitioners and
also having a confusing name which gives no clear identity to the initiative
in the mind of governing bodies or users. It would, however, seem that the
members of the Consortium that began Full Disclosure have an opportunity
to develop this as the major national initiative which links documentation
and access together, and promotes the two as inextricably linked. This
would then be used as the major tool for advocacy and be linked to the
various other domain-specific initiatives. Full Disclosure could also be
an initiative for cross-domain prioritisation to make collections available
according to the needs of users. It could look at projects based around
themes or draw up an action plan to tackle, say, 200 key collections.

Recommendations

- MLA and partners in the Full Disclosure Consortium review how the
initiative is to be developed and consider changing the name to be the
‘brand’ for a national campaign to promote effective documentation as the
necessity for access to museum, library and archive collections.

- MLA and SEMLAC give priority to a programme to advocate good
documentation and educate governing bodies in this. They should also
lobby other funders to support only access and learning initiatives which
are based on good documentation, or where funding for improving
documentation is considered to be an appropriate part of a bid.

- MLA lobbies the Audit Commission to have the quality of documentation
of the collections included as one of the Best Value performance indicators.

- SEMLAC investigates the practicalities of a regional benchmarking scheme.

7.2 Regional recommendations

7.21 Training for staff

As was stated earlier, lack of expertise and training were highlighted by
some consultees. Certain specialised material will always need particular
expertise to interpret and document. A common view expressed during
the study was that contemporary archivist and librarian training does not
provide sufficient grounding in cataloguing skills. As many organisations
find it difficult to provide the time to train new staff, this can be a problem
area. This factor is particularly important when staff, who have not had
professional archive or library training, undertake this work.

For museums, professional training in collections management, which
includes documentation, is not seen as lacking but many staff working in
museums will have not had access to such training. This applies particularly to the smaller and volunteer-run museums of which there are a large number in the SEMLAC region. Most museums would now aim to follow the SPECTRUM standard produced by the mda, but for these smaller institutions it is perceived as complex. Some museum consultees regretted the loss of regional documentation courses, which were particularly useful for small museums, although documentation advice is now provided by Museum Development Officers. Museums were also unsure of the precise roles of MLA and mda in providing collection advice. The trend to providing web-based advice and information is also leaving some of the smaller organisations unable to access this advice. The SEMLAC survey showed that only a third of museums had used mda’s internet site www.casportal.org.uk. The inability to access web-based advice like this can be for a number of reasons, including an unfamiliarity with using web-based information or simple hardware problems, such as, not having the right type of printer for printing a long document.

Recommendations

- MLA investigates how to address the documentation training needs of the sector, and whether national museum, library and archive bodies can share their skills and expertise through providing training.
- SEMLAC and mda consider how basic documentation advice and training can be more effectively provided and signposted at a regional level.
- SEMLAC investigates how they can support smaller organisations to access web-based resources and ensure other alternative means of receiving information are available.

7.22 Expertise

A number of consultees identified that expertise in particular areas was a problem. The study has not been comprehensive enough to identify all the areas but the following were identified:

- Languages - foreign, classical, early English and community languages.
- Technical, all aspects of science, technology and industry, plus assessment and interpretation of business records.

In many cases, organisations have formal and informal networks for sharing expertise which work quite well. Other organisations, particularly museums, make use of volunteers with particular technical expertise to assist in documenting their collections. There are many cases, however, where expertise would assist in an initial consideration of whether to accept a collection, or part of a collection, and prevent collections being acquired because they are perceived by non-experts to have potential value.
Recommendations

- SEMLAC considers setting up an on-line register of experts from within the region who can provide expertise on particular collections.

- SEMLAC consults with the regional museum hub to assist in providing such a service.

7.23 Reliable ICT systems

A number of consultees in the study identified how all the domains were adopting ICT-based documentation systems, but that this made the organisation more dependent on these ICT systems. A number of projects reported that technical problems had caused the main delays in their project, and ICT problems can cause delays which contribute to backlogs. Smaller organisations reported that ICT was a particular concern, as they did not have the expertise in-house, nor were they able to access reliable external support.

Recommendation

- SEMLAC investigates whether it can provide a mechanism for smaller organisations to access ICT support, including computer training for staff and volunteers. For museums, this could be developed through the hubs.

7.24 A regional documentation team

The Full Disclosure Prioritisation Study proposed that a cataloguing hit-squad be set up to tackle cataloguing backlogs, but this is no longer a priority, however, the ‘Private Faces in Public Places’ project in Surrey provided contract staff to work effectively across a range of collections in different organisations. There have been many specific documentation and digitisation projects which have employed staff on short-term contracts which have contributed to better access and community involvement, however, towards the end of the project, contract staff are aware that their contract is coming to an end and may seek employment elsewhere before the project is finished.

A regional documentation team could tackle some of the more substantial backlogs and would reinforce MLA’s position that backlogs need to be eliminated, and support is being provided to do this. There are a number of issues to resolve, such as, whether these teams should be domain-specific and how the collections should be prioritised, but these should not be insurmountable.

Recommendation

- SEMLAC consider how a regional documentation team or network could be established. This could be seen as a recognised training and entry route to a career in the domains.
7.25 Collaborative documentation schemes

Libraries already use a collaborative scheme for cataloguing purchased book stock, in which cataloguing records are acquired from a central source, or books are catalogued before they reach the library by outside contractors. In the ‘Private Faces in Public Places’ project, a number of organisations collaborated to bring in outside expertise that they would not individually have been able to organise and manage. The developing regional cultural agenda will serve to also encourage collaboration on a regional basis, however, collaboration is often constrained by difficulties with incompatible funding regimes and lack of common standards for projects. This problem was highlighted by the Full Disclosure Prioritisation Study but still needs attention if the full benefits of collaborative working are to be gained.

The consultations also highlighted that a number of organisations care for material which could be considered the province of another domain, e.g. museums with libraries and archives with object collections. There may be need for information to be provided to organisations to enable them to document and care for material outside the range of their normal expertise.

**Recommendation**

- SEMLAC considers how further collaborative documentation schemes could be encouraged.
- SEMLAC and MLA consider if museums, libraries and archives need an easily accessible source of advice on how to document and care for material outside the range of their normal expertise. If such advice is required, MLA consider extending mda's remit to provide advice to smaller libraries and archives.

7.3 Local recommendations

7.31 Prioritisation of documentation within organisations

As was stated earlier, documentation is considered important but its importance is rarely as important as the day-to-day operational needs of many organisations.

Prioritising documentation within an institution can produce effective results if there are the resources available. In Rochester Museum there was a very large backlog of undocumented or poorly documented material. To make any impression on this backlog, the newly appointed Assistant Curator was given documentation as his main priority, and it was accepted that this work would have to continue to be given priority, whatever other activities were taking place in the museum. In the case of Kent Archives Service, documenting the backlog has been made a published priority and annual reports on progress are produced.
Recommendations

- Organisations ensure that documentation is considered as an important part of their work and given appropriate resources.

- Organisations assess their backlogs and use prioritisation as a means of developing a programme to tackle them. They also consider whether it is most cost-effective to produce an inventory as part of the assessment of the backlog.

- Organisations critically assess what level of information or catalogue record is required by different types of material, accepting that providing less information about a larger number of items is likely to be more cost-effective than providing more information about less items.

7.32 Managing performance

Tackling a backlog is more effective if it is worked on regularly, a section at a time, rather than trying to meet a documentation target by staff trying to process a large amount of material on a particular day. Southampton University Library identified this as a factor in causing their backlogs, and part of their process management changes was to ensure that a realistic amount of books were catalogued on a regular daily basis.

As part of managing a backlog, the organisation should aim to catalogue all new items within a defined period from when they are accepted, and ensure that some of the backlog is tackled at the same time, or within a specific period. From a staff perspective, tackling a complete collection over a defined period of time and completing it gives a sense of achievement. In this way an increasing amount of the backlog can be processed - the elephant task approach of breaking it down into achievable chunks.

Organisations could, however, have a period where everything but direct public service will cease, and all appropriate staff will tackle the backlog with particular targets and timescales being set. This might be particularly appropriate when moving to a new building, when there would be a public expectation that services may cease for a time, coupled with an expectation that improved services would be provided in the new premises.

During the study a number of different documentation projects were examined to see what lessons could be learned which would have wider application. A point made by a number of respondents was that they were convinced that they could have saved time and expense if they had been able to study similar projects in detail during the development of their project. Although a number of projects are written up in journals or presented at conferences, a central source of project details (with contact details and lessons learned) would be a useful resource. Similarly, the development and promotion of a cross-domain database with documenting times, and
sampling methods for assessing backlogs, would also be seen as helpful. This would enable organisations to have a better means of estimating their backlog and the time required to tackle it. It would also help funders by enabling organisations to put realistic time estimates into retrospective documentation funding bids.

**Recommendations**

- MLA investigates how to develop a database of processing times for material that has been catalogued, including the specific factors which affect these times, and sampling methods for backlogs.

- SEMLAC investigates how a library of documentation projects could be made widely available.

**7.33 Additional resources**

It is unlikely that many organisations will ever be able to afford to employ all the staff that they require to process material, especially if there is a large backlog. A number of organisations have involved students to provide additional resources for documentation projects; University College Library, Special Collections, employed some of their own students to assess the value of the collections for a retro-conversion project and West Sussex County Libraries used students from Chichester College to create catalogue records. There are also a large number of volunteers working successfully in organisations on a wide variety of tasks including documentation.

With computer databases, basic skeleton records are straightforward to complete, and experts can check and add information at a later stage. In most cases the process can be set out, a checking process initiated, and most of the basic documentation skills can be learnt relatively easily, as organisations often recruit and train graduate cataloguers with no previous experience. Older volunteers may have expertise and are often computer literate so can soon pick up skills. If organisations offered to provide some basic computer skills training as part of a volunteer programme this could help recruitment.

**Recommendations**

- SEMLAC considers what regional support it could give organisations recruiting and training volunteers, and consults with the mda and Volunteering England to assist in providing such support.

- SEMLAC encourages organisations to involve members of the community as volunteers to help tackle backlogs and improve access to material held in museums, libraries and archives.

- SEMLAC considers how it can support smaller organisations to manage documentation programmes involving volunteers.
8. Summary and conclusions

This study has confirmed the perception that backlogs are an issue for museums, libraries and archives in the South East. It has identified that the term ‘backlog’, while generally understood to refer to material within an organisation which is not fully documented, is very difficult to precisely define in a way that is meaningful in each domain. This is due to the different processes within the domains and because backlogs can occur at various stages in the documentation process. The extent of backlogs is also estimated in different ways and reported using a wide range of different measures, meaning that the nature and extent of the backlogs is very difficult to measure or map using surveys. This is true both within the domains, where more comparable data would be expected to be obtained, and across the domains where the different nature of museums, libraries and archives makes useful comparison even harder.

This has been a cross-domain study and has looked at documentation issues across the three domains. While many of the issues affecting one domain are similar to those affecting other domains, there are significant differences which need to be appreciated when considering issues which could be tackled in a cross-domain way. The report has tried to highlight these differences, where they are appropriate, while presenting this report on documentation backlogs from a cross-domain perspective. Inevitably, this has led to some generalisations and some areas which will not be directly relevant to a particular domain, but the author hopes that the cross-domain viewpoint will help readers in one domain appreciate the issues in the other domains.

The roles in society of museums, libraries and archives have changed substantially in the last few decades and their staff structures have changed to meet the identified needs, often with a reduction in cataloguing posts. It is vital, however, that a core level of documentation knowledge and skills resides in each institution to ensure standards are maintained and records are produced to meet the growing demand. Public and professional expectations of the quality of documentation have also changed. Records were normally only available within an institution but now there is a growing expectation that they will be available outside the institution in a standard format. As the domains work more closely together, there is an increasing focus on standardising descriptions, and UKOLN\(^1\) is co-ordinating work on collection level descriptions and tools to ensure compatibility across organisations and projects.

MLA has expressed concern that significant cataloguing backlogs are associated with too many important collections. This prevents effective access to information and the material, making them less useful to the

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\(^1\) UK on-line network
public and, in some cases, hindering the development of effective collecting policies. All professionals interviewed for this study have expressed concern about the backlogs, and many are making efforts to reduce the backlogs and provide effective access to the material and information. While the study has shown a possible way of quantifying backlogs, it has highlighted that this will not be exact, and that producing such a quantification will not in itself make the case for funding to tackle a backlog. In most cases the first stage should be to ensure that there is an inventory of all the items held by an organisation. In terms of tackling a backlog, the important issue is prioritisation, organisationally, regionally and nationally. It is also vital to make the case that the information still ‘trapped’ in museums, libraries and archives can provide greater benefits to society.

There are a number of national, regional and local initiatives which have tackled backlogs as part of a wider project. Some of these provide project funding to digitise material or make it more widely available in an electronic format. While these initiatives have been useful, a number of consultees highlighted that many of these initiatives were not ‘joined up’ and, that in developing a project, time was spent re-learning the lessons others had already learnt in previous projects. These initiatives, however, have not addressed the long-term problem of core funding. Although not specifically part of the remit of this study, improving documentation and access has to be provided in tandem with adequate storage and conservation for the material held in museums, libraries and archives.

The documentation systems and processes in use in the various domains were examined as part of this work. These are not perceived as one of the major causes of backlogs, nor is the introduction of advanced ICT systems. There is, however, a major challenge for many organisations which are beginning to deal with material which only exists in digital form. Local Authority Record Offices are preserving digital organisational records and libraries are subscribing to digital journals and books which are not physically present in the library. The documentation issues for such material will be similar to physical items, but the location recording and long-term preservation will need new approaches.

The study looked at the assistance necessary to tackle backlogs and these are identified in the recommendations. The larger organisations (e.g. universities and county council services) can engage with national initiatives and grant funding schemes and will engage with SEMLAC where they believe it is appropriate. The medium-sized organisations will look to SEMLAC for support and guidance, will have the resources to engage and participate, and this level of regional grant funding would be attractive to make them engage.

The smaller organisations are the ones which will need most support as their resources mean that it is more difficult for them to engage in initiatives
outside the organisation. Small museums, specialist libraries and archives need to be able to access a regional infrastructure to provide the necessary support and help them make their collections available. As was stated earlier, even the effective and consistent use of ICT is a challenge for these organisations, and this will prevent tackling the backlog and making the information available.

Museums, libraries and archives share many common values and processes. There are many organisations with types of material which could be considered the remit of another domain; for example archives with responsibility for object collections and many museums with their own library and archive collections. The goal will be to make all the knowledge stored in these collections available and, for society to benefit from this resource, there will need to be effective documentation and a strategy for removing backlogs. Technological developments offer exciting opportunities to retrieve and use this knowledge if it is electronically documented. The future is likely to be able to provide users with seamless access to all catalogues of an institution, even though they are on different systems, and to search museum, library and archive records to provide all the information on one topic or item. Effective documentation and the elimination of backlogs are necessary to ensure that the community can share in the potential for learning, and access the knowledge that exists in our museums, libraries and archives.
Appendices
Appendix 1

Definition of terms

The footnotes indicate if the definitions have been taken from a particular source.

Accessioning

The process by which material is recorded as being in the care of a particular organisation and ownership is formally transferred or loan conditions formally agreed - includes the assigning of an item number and entry into the accessions register.

Acquisition

The documentation and management of the addition of material and associated information into the care of the organisation.

Appraisal

This is the process of distinguishing records of continuing value from those of no further value so that the latter may be eliminated.

‘Born digital’

Digital materials which are not intended to have an analogue equivalent, either as the originating source or as a result of conversion to analogue form.

Box List

A list of the items within an archive box.

Cataloguing

The production of a detailed description of the item (and other information) in a structured form, so that a number of indexes can be produced or the record can be included in a database.

Classification

The identification and placement of an item within a systematic arrangement based on the information held in it, its physical characteristics, origin or function etc.

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1 From Standards in Action, mda 1998
2 From the National Archives Appraisal Policy
4 From Spectrum Essentials, mda 1994
**Collection level description**\(^1\)

This is a description of a collection which is described only at the collection level. This is information about the collection as a whole and not information about individual items within the collection.

**Documentation**

1. This term encompasses all the stages of recording information about acquisition, uniquely identifying discrete items and producing a catalogue record or a record that could be used in an index.

2. The information provided by a creator and the repository which provides enough information to establish provenance, history and context to enable its use by others.\(^2\)

**Dublin core**\(^3\)

A set of 15 metadata elements aimed at resource discovery over a wide range of disciplines and sectors.

**Entry documentation**\(^4\)

Information recorded about material at the time of its initial entry into the organisation, including details of the depositor or owner, a description of the material and some means of unique identification.

**Finding aid** \(^5\)

A catalogue, index or list describing principally archives, intended to help researchers find what they need.

**Fonds** \(^6\)

All the archives created or accumulated by a specific person, family or organisation.

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\(^1\) UKOLN


\(^3\) Spectrum Knowledge, mda 2001

\(^4\) From Spectrum Essentials, mda 1994

\(^5\) a2a.org.uk

\(^6\) a2a.org.uk
Inventory

A simple listing of items (which are not necessarily accessioned) which may include certain defined pieces of information.

Metadata

Information about a resource and where it is located. For example a card index catalogue in a library; the information on the card is metadata about a book.

Production

The term used to describe the retrieval of archives from storage for research use. Archives may not be fit for production if they are damaged or fragile. Individual files, volumes, boxes or documents may be treated as ‘producible units’ by a repository.

Retrospective cataloguing

Producing catalogue records for items which have no catalogue records or inadequate catalogue records, the items having been in the organisation’s care for a considerable time.

Retrospective documentation

The gathering and recording of information about museum objects for which incomplete, inadequate or inaccurate information exists, the objects having been in the organisation’s care for a considerable time.

Retroconversion

The term is an abbreviation for retrospective catalogue conversion - converting a catalogue to a different structure from that in which it was originally produced. This is usually converting paper records to electronic format or electronic records to a more accessible and user-friendly format.

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1 Standards in Action, mda 1998
2 Spectrum Knowledge, mda 2001
3 a2a.org.uk
Appendix 2

An introduction to documentation and backlog issues in the three domains.

Museums

*Museums enable people to explore material for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society.*

*Museums Association*

Museums collect a wide range of objects together with a wide range of supporting information, interpret these objects, and their significance to the wider public, and make the objects and information available for research. Museums in the SEMLAC region range from large county council services to small volunteer-run museums. They have a wide range of governance arrangements and types of collections, ranging from fine art to maritime. The collections cover a very wide range of types of material (e.g. from paper to stone) and the collections cover a very wide range of sizes (e.g. from molluscs to complete buildings). Museums often have reference libraries and also now collect more documentary material to support their collections, and some of this material can be considered as archive material.

When museums acquire objects, on arrival they are recorded as legally accepted, and usually fully documented at a future time. After legal acceptance, there is a presumption that a registered museum will not dispose of an object from the collection. Many museums use systems which are compliant with SPECTRUM\(^1\), although many still have records created on older systems which would not be SPECTRUM compliant.

The first attempt to bring a structure to museum documentation processes began with the Information Retrieval Group of the Museums Association in the 1970s. A particular concern was that information related to a museums collections was not being stored in a structured way, and this would make retrieval using computerised systems difficult. A particular concern was that, apart from certain specific collections such as natural history, there were no taxonomic systems to describe types of objects in museum collections. This work was continued by the Museum Documentation Association which is now the mda and are responsible for SPECTRUM.

Many museums in the SEMLAC region have documentation backlogs. For long-established museums these can be substantial, with collections acquired many years ago having very little documentation. As was stated above, the relatively late adoption of common standards for documentation means that very many collections have records which are not compatible.

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\(^1\) SPECTRUM is the UK Museum Documentation Standard
with contemporary standards. With the adoption of more specific collecting policies and the introduction of the Museums Registration Scheme\(^1\) in 1988, museums now control acquisitions in a more effective way, which better relates to their ability to document and store the material effectively. As stated earlier, there are still many collections with inadequate or missing records and so there is a substantial need for retrospective documentation programmes.

**Factors affecting backlogs in museums**

Museums have had to become more entrepreneurial and are under pressure to increase visitor numbers and income. This move was initially led by the development of independent museums from the 1970s, often industry or site-based, which had little or no public sector funding and relied on visitor admissions, trading and fundraising to survive. With publicly-funded museums having had reductions in core funding, there is an increased emphasis on income generation. So now, the emphasis in almost all museums has changed from resourcing posts which had primarily a curatorial role, to funding those in marketing, interpretation and front-of-house services. Cataloguing skills, and the collection expertise on which effective cataloguing depends, are being lost.

Many large museum services invested in computer-based cataloguing systems, although these often required re-cataloguing of existing collections to meet the new format, and resources were not always available to complete this work. For smaller museums, the number of items in a collection would be smaller but so would be the resources to invest in documentation, however, many of these museums were able to produce records on card systems designed by the Museum Documentation Association, with local training and support. With the development of computerised systems these museums struggled to invest in the technology, and backlogs developed in transferring records to this new format.

With the introduction of SPECTRUM in 1994, some museums perceived this as being too complex and have found it more difficult to meet the new requirements. This is more a perception than reality as, for Museum Registration, there is only a need to carry out the eight SPECTRUM primary documentation procedures\(^2\). Although the mda has a regional network of advisors, this perception that SPECTRUM is complex is compounded by the reduction in basic documentation courses for small museums.

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\(^1\) The Museums Registration Scheme was launched in 1988 with the aim of setting a minimum standard for museums and galleries in the UK

\(^2\) The primary procedures are: object entry, acquisition, location and movement control, cataloguing, exit, loans in, loans out, retrospective documentation
Libraries

Libraries play a key role in underpinning learning and personal development, also in making a central contribution to the cohesion and vitality of local communities. (SEMLAC)

There are an estimated 2,500 library collections in the South East, including public library services, university, college, health, school and workplace libraries. The role of libraries is to hold information and make this information available to the public, with local authority libraries now increasing their role as community resource centres. Libraries initially held mainly books and journals, but now information is held in a wide variety of formats such as CDs and video. Many libraries provide access to journals and increasingly books through licences to access these items on-line instead of them being physically present in a library. Many libraries have a variety of special collections, including rare books and local studies collections.

Libraries do not normally have a backlog for current, contemporary acquisitions. These are purchased in a programme, catalogued using readily available data, and made available to readers within, say, a few weeks. Some local authority libraries used to have six-month backlogs in processing lending material but the situation is much improved. Copyright libraries do have backlogs due to the volume of material being received; these items are recorded in the system but not fully catalogued.

To process acquisitions, dedicated cataloguing staff are employed, or book suppliers or agents carry out the cataloguing and book processing. Books are catalogued according to the Dewey Decimal System although problems occur when Dewey is updated and categories are changed - some books remain in their old ‘sections’ while newer ones use the new system. Catalogue entries for most material follows a well-established cataloguing format based on MARC\(^1\). There is a standard format with generally standard information fields, although more information can be added to a particular catalogue entry if required for that particular collection of library.

The classification system for library collections is particularly important, as this enables users to locate the item within the library with other items on similar topics. The main classification systems are based on the Library of Congress and the Dewey Decimal System and these have been in use for many years. Some libraries have local variants of these for particular collections (e.g. University of Southampton for archaeology) and, from time-to-time, changes in classification systems can mean that some items will need to be re-classified and physically moved to new locations. In libraries, it was the location of the item which was important for physical access, but

\(^1\) MARC - MAchine Readable Catalogue - a structure for describing library materials in an automated catalogue
electronic repositories are now accessed in a different way, and libraries have to integrate systems providing physical and electronic access.

Many libraries have a programme for the disposal of books that are no longer in current demand. This element of library management is different to the collection management in museums and archives, and reflects the fact these books are not unique items.

Rare books have a particular value, often because of their historical significance or method of production, and producing cataloguing records for these will take longer. There are potential backlogs in this area as producing the more detailed records can require more detailed research and more expertise, e.g. some holdings could contain several editions in different languages, however, this does not seem to be a long-term potential backlog area as the number of rare books acquired should be manageable, although there could be a short-term problem if a large collection is acquired.

Local studies collections are a developing area for many public libraries and, in this case, the approach is more towards providing access to information than identifying specific holdings. They contain a wide variety of material relating to a specific local area or topic. Often these sections contain material duplicated elsewhere in the collection, e.g. photocopies, but its importance lies in the grouping together with other relevant material, some of which may be original. This presents a cataloguing dilemma and often local studies collections are recorded on a locally devised system which can identify a folder or box in a geographic system. This is a potential backlog area as the material in such a folder can be difficult to catalogue in a way that can be linked with other items in a library’s collections and be searched by electronic systems.

A 1998 survey of items and collections of heritage significance in public libraries in England\textsuperscript{1} showed:

- 30\% of collections are identified as being totally uncatalogued.
- 50\% are identified as being catalogued to item level.
- 8\% are identified as being catalogued to item level although cataloguing is incomplete.

**Factors affecting backlogs in libraries**

These now provide a much wider range of services and access to a wide range of public information is increasingly seen as the role of a library. Staff have been re-organised to fulfil this new remit and some cataloguing posts have been lost.

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\textsuperscript{1} Needs Assessment Survey of Heritage Material and Collections held by Public Libraries in England, LASER for the Heritage Lottery Fund, November 1988
There is some divergence of opinion as to whether cataloguing skills are still declining, but when MARC and derived cataloguing was introduced, the level of skill required for new books was less and the process was simpler. Students are still taught cataloguing in library schools but cataloguing is no longer considered a vocation.

For public and specialist libraries, producing catalogue records of CDs and videos does take time as the records are usually produced individually in each library. Lack of expertise in dealing with these different media is a growing problem. In some areas, the lack of foreign language expertise is also an issue and producing catalogue entries for books in community languages is a challenge for local authority libraries. The growth in local history collections items, with their mixture of material and the need to integrate their catalogues with other collections, is an area where backlogs could develop.

One area of concern to libraries is the need to transfer catalogue entries from card indexes to an electronic system. Many large libraries have catalogue entries on both systems, requiring users to search both systems. Often libraries take a pragmatic approach to solving this problem. At Southampton University Library the material on card indexes is the older, and less used, stock. When these books are borrowed they are added to the electronic catalogue on return.

There is now more priority on getting the acquisition process right, with libraries having a defined acquisition policy. Major libraries are also trying to co-ordinate the acquisition of material for special collections.

**Archives**

*Archives are records produced by individuals, families or organisations (such as local government organisations, companies or universities) during their activities or business. Archives may be in various formats, including paper files, parchment documents, bound volumes, maps, plans, audio and video recordings and photographs. They may be of any date, from early centuries up to the present day. Archives are retained by their creators or in record offices and other repositories, because of their abiding interest for researchers - interest which their original creators might never have expected.* (Access to Archives)

Archives are gatekeepers to information about individuals and organisations, and the interpretation of this information is often left to users of the material. The information in an archive has a particular association with the individual or organisations that created or kept the records - the medium itself is unimportant.
Archive collections are different from published materials and secondary sources in that they provide evidence from both content and context. There are over 375 archive collections and services in the SEMLAC region, funded by public and private sources.

Archives have a two-stage process for dealing with collections: accession and record production, and many archives hold accession and acquisition information separately. Archives accept collections without knowing at the time what importance they will have, as this information can only be ascertained by a detailed study of the material.

Material is acquired by an archive and recorded as a particular collection. There is then an appraisal process at which sorting, weeding and consolidation take place before cataloguing. There is a general use of ISAD (G)\(^1\) for cataloguing with some local variations. It is well established and use of this system does not appear to cause cataloguing delays. After a slow start, archives are embracing new technology, with CALM being increasingly used, and protocols on data exchange (EAD\(^2\)) and the development of National Name Authority Files are assisting the transfer of information. The development of the National Archives Network, including A2A and the Higher Education hub, are enabling archives’ collections to become more accessible.

Material is often acquired more quickly than it can be catalogued, but this is because archives only get one opportunity to acquire unique items. Most archives try and process small collections as they are received, but delays can build up with larger collections. A survey by the Historical Manuscripts Commission in 2002\(^3\) discovered that many archive depositories have significant cataloguing backlogs and some have huge backlogs. Although this survey excluded the South East region, it is likely that the region would report similar backlogs. The English Archival Mapping Project, (phase two, completed in 2000) indicated that the South East had a lower than national average score for finding aids and reference services, which reflected the extent of cataloguing backlogs. Nationally, one third of record offices reported backlogs in the 1980s and it is likely that the overall situation is about the same.

Archives have expanded to take in different types of material such as oral history recordings and films. SEMLAC’s records show that for non-dedicated audio-visual archives, 90% of repositories had audio-visual material, of which 25% was not catalogued. In the SEMLAC area there are

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\(^1\) ISAD(G) the international standard archival description (general)

\(^2\) EAD - Encoded Archival Description

\(^3\) Survey of archive cataloguing problems (England and Wales) Historical Manuscripts Commission 2002
the South East Film and Video supported by a consortium including local authorities and the Wessex Film and Sound Archive. These specific audio-visual archive issues have not been covered in detail in this report as there are two related reports covering these types of collections.¹

**Factors affecting backlogs in archives**

Archives used to be only for academic and historical researchers but now are more widely used. Local Authority Record Offices began a major period of development after the Second World War. They often had one archivist in the council buildings who could work uninterrupted on collecting and cataloguing, except for the occasional visit. Now, with the growth of interest in family history research, the use of these record offices has increased dramatically. This type of use may continue to grow, as family history research develops into village history research and increases the demand for services.

Archive staff have been transferred to the search room from other duties, such as appraisal and cataloguing, as the increasing amount of use has not been reflected in a corresponding increase in the staff complement. The priorities and collecting areas of local authority record offices are often outside the direct control of archive staff, as they are an administrative function of a local authority which will change with any local Government re-organisation. In many local authorities, the needs of Best Value have altered the balance between front-of-house staff and collection management staff, as there is a need to provide the best service in the search room. As well as the transfer of staff from cataloguing in larger archives, it may be that cataloguing may need a critical mass - smaller repositories may have acute problems as they may not be able to afford enough cataloguing staff.

In the past, there have been widely differing standards applied to cataloguing and documentation, with many archives using their own local systems. Although these catalogues can be used within archives, records not produced to modern standards limits the opportunities for data exchange with other organisations. Some of these catalogues have undergone a programme of retro-conversion but this process does not usually fill in missing information.

There was also a lack of collection management skills in many archives, and very few depositors expect a catalogue; cataloguing has, therefore, tended to be a lower priority when a collection is acquired. Some respondents suggested that there are fewer archivists being trained due to a shortage of postgraduate bursaries, although some distance learning schemes have been introduced. In the longer term, lack of trained archivists will become

¹ SEMLAC South East Audiovisual Archive Mapping and Strategy Project and Hidden Treasures - the UK Adiovisual Archive Strategic Framework, March 2004
a problem, and already it is difficult to fill some archivist posts. Lack of expertise is an issue for some collections such as medieval manuscripts and modern business and technical records. Like museums and libraries, archives have frequently relied on project funding to tackle particular collections which has meant that work has not always been tackled in a strategic way.

There is a growing volume of material available for collection by archives as businesses and public bodies produce more records, which need to be collected and then appraised. A particular problem will be to resolve who will collect ‘orphaned records’ - those with no obvious home such as regional Government records. There is also the major challenge of born digital records - those that were produced and used electronically. The challenge in this case is managing their preservation, as the cataloguing problems are the same as for paper records. The cost will be to host and store these records, check their condition regularly and, every so often, transfer the digital records to a new system as technology changes.

Local authority archives are also extending their collections to include local business records, and large numbers of these records are becoming available as old-established local businesses close, merge or move out of the area. Similarly large numbers of records from old estates continue to be offered. The major problem is to assess the significance of the records, e.g. architectural drawings or chemists recipe books and, in some cases, lack of appropriate expertise is a particular problem. Many archives would also struggle to find the space to appraise a large collection.

In January 2005 with full implementation of the Freedom of Information Act there will be further pressure on archives. There will be material covered by the Act residing in uncatalogued material and the need to respond to particular enquiries may distort cataloguing priorities.

Archives are more selective in acquisition these days and do not take material of dubious evidential value, as they are aware of the long-term costs of acquisition. Theoretically, archives should de-accession material but this activity is low down in the list of priorities for many. The National Archives is developing a new framework of standards and best practice guidance for record repositories during 2004.

This survey was sent to museums, libraries and archives in the SEMLAC region, and 52% of those that responded reported having a backlog.

If they had a backlog the organisations were asked to indicate:

- The total quantity of material - object numbers or cubic metres in collection
- Approximate percentage without key areas: accession number; marking/labelling; location record
- Timescale: approximate person months/years to achieve key areas

**Quantity of backlog material**

The organisations reported this in a number of different ways:

- Number of items
- Number of archives
- Number of accessions
- Linear feet
- Cubic metres
- Unquantified/unestimated/cannot give a meaningful figure
- Number of items not catalogued on computer
- Volume of material not descriptively listed
- Percentage of collection which is inadequately catalogued
- All of particular types of collection
- Majority have record of some sort

**Percentage of material with a backlog**

Organisations were asked to estimate the percentage of their total holdings of material which was a backlog, without the key areas defined above. Some organisations supplied these overall percentages and others highlighted other issues which related to a backlog. These were:

- Previous years’ accession registers not completed
- Percentage of items found, percentage missing and percentage of unexpected items found
- Percentage of accessions, percentage of locations, percentage of marking
Timescale

These were reported in different ways and would have been based on various types of assessment.

- Number of months/years to complete with one person
- Number of months if a post dedicated to this
- Number of years at present rate
- X years - dependent on resources and interpretation of documentation standards

Conclusions

The variable nature of reporting reflects the organisation’s own measurements which may not exactly correspond with the suggested measurements in the survey. It also highlights that it is difficult to define exactly what a backlog is for this survey. Although the lack of key areas was suggested as a means of identifying ‘backlog’ material, organisations highlighted other issues which meant, in their view, the material was not documented to the standard that they would wish to achieve.

In terms of the three domains, 57% of museums reported having a backlog. There did not seem to be any correlation between types and size of museum and level of backlog, although the larger museums did often have numerically, if not proportionally, larger backlogs.

In archives, 80% of the organisations reported backlogs. Here there was a trend that small archives tended to have little or no backlogs and the larger county record offices all reported backlogs. This reflects the large amount of material they acquire and the changes in their role which is covered in Appendix two.

There were not enough responses from libraries about backlog issues to enable any conclusions to be drawn.
Case Studies

Case Study - National Motor Museum
Andrea Bishop, Curator

History and background
The National Motor Museum evolved from the Montagu Motor Museum, founded by Lord Montagu in 1952. It was originally conceived as a tribute to British Motoring achievement and a memorial to his father, John Scott Montagu, one of Britain’s motoring pioneers. The National Motor Museum Trust was created to safeguard the important collection of vehicles and, in July 1972, the doors of the new National Motor Museum opened to the public. In 1989, the National Motor Museum Trust Centre opened to house the education department, reserve collections and libraries: the reference library, the motoring picture library, and the motoring film and video library. In addition, the National Motor Museum Trust houses the Shell Art Collection, a major commercial and advertising art collection.

Backlog
The Museum has over 250 vehicles and about 30,000 objects relating to motoring history in Great Britain from 1895 to the present day. The collection includes car accessories, motoring clothing, printed ephemera and other items which help interpret the development of motoring and the associated social implications. The library collections include 14,000 books, 5,000 bound volumes and 20,000 loose magazines, 50,000 sales and 16,000 handbooks. There is also about 30 linear metres of archive material included as part of the reference library. The picture collection contains about 630,000 black and white images, 79,000 colour transparencies and 260 photographic albums. The film collection has 4,550 historic films and 2,000 videotapes of all formats. Over the years the objects in the collection were recorded in now obsolete systems, with 7,000 items on a manual inventory system, and records relating to some acquisitions are not now available.

The project
The National Motor Museum Trust has received funding from the Designation Challenge Fund for a project to carry out retrospective documentation on the collection and is using the collection management database, CALM 2000. The project will run over three years, with the object collection being tackled in the first year, and the photographic collection being tackled in the second and third year, together with further work on the object collection.
The work on the object collection involves accessioning, cataloguing, marking, cleaning and producing digital photographs. One person works on this project assisted by two volunteers doing manual inventories, and also other Trust staff from time to time. Currently 4,000 objects have been accessioned and catalogued with digital images. As part of the programme, improved terminology control is being introduced across the collections. As with many museums, certain items are transferred to a handling collection and some are acquired as spares for use with the vehicle collection. In the case of major display features, such as the garage exhibit, 800 of the key objects in the garage were catalogued as the exhibit was being developed.

The photographic project employs one person full-time for four days a week and there are also five volunteers assisting with the digitisation programme. At present, the photographic collection has 2,000 digitised images and records on CALM.

The library is continuing a programme of indexing and transferring index card records to a database. This is a major undertaking as the magazines alone have 157,000 index cards in six separate sections.

Case Study - Slough Museum
Joanna Follett, Curator

History and background

Slough Museum was set up by volunteers who began collecting material reflecting the history of Slough in 1982. The museum collection, which began in 1985, reflects the social history of the town and the surrounding area from mammoths to modern times. It consists of approximately 5,500 objects and 6,500 photographs, with 1,000 new items being added each year. The museum’s collection covers the area defined by the modern boundaries of the Borough of Slough, including Colnbrook. Slough moved administration from Buckinghamshire to Berkshire in 1974, and is now a unitary authority. It is now located in a modern building in the High Street in Slough. The museum is an independent, registered museum as well as a charity and company with limited liability. It benefits from a Longer Term Funding Agreement with Slough Borough Council and a number of organisations and local companies provide funding and/or services. The museum currently employs a Curator, a Creative Co-ordinator (who provides the museum’s Education Service), a part-time Administrator and a part-time Volunteer Co-ordinator.
Backlog

The collections all had accession records produced, either in an accession book from 1982 or with an entry form from 1985. In 2001, a conservation project ensured that everything was marked properly, before this 75% of the collection had numbers and labels although items on display were not numbered. Some of the items had been catalogued on mda cards but, in some cases, there were no objects to relate to the cards. For new acquisitions, the curator carries out the accessioning of the objects with volunteers carrying out cataloguing and marking.

The project

The museum is undertaking a project, ‘increasing access to and awareness of the Collections of Slough Museum’ which will digitise its collection of photographic material and objects. The aim of the project is to create digital masters and digital surrogates of the museum’s collection, which will be stored on the Adlib Museum Collection Management System database and Technical Standards will comply with NOF\(^1\) recommendations.

Two full-time Documentation and Digitisation Officers were recruited from September 2003 for two years, and the aim is to fully document the vast majority of the collection by the end of the project. The objects and photographs are digitally photographed and scanned by one staff member, and the data is inputted into an Adlib database by another. The average number of items processed is 40-60 a day. The objects are not being re-numbered as they were re-numbered as part of the conservation project in 2001/2. Since the start of 2004, some volunteers have been trained by the Digitisation Officer to assist with this programme, with two doing documentation and one doing scanning. The project is progressing well with the volunteers, who were not computer trained, becoming very involved in the project, and the project benefits from the specialised local knowledge of the volunteers. The project has developed terminology lists as it has progressed, and also has had to look at numbering issues, as some objects have more than one image and these two images need to be related.

A future aim of the project is also to have a public access terminal with an Adlib read-only system and also to link the database to the museum’s website. At present they are surveying potential users to see how the website should be developed and making an initial selection of material for it.

The project was funded from a mixture of sources: the Heritage Lottery Fund, SEMLAC, Pilgrim Trust, Co-operative Society, Slough Social Fund with a contribution from voluntary labour.

\(^1\) New Opportunities Fund
Case Study - Rochester Guildhall Museum
Stephen Nye, Assistant Curator

History and background
The museum was founded in Jubilee Year, 1897 and had a traditional late-Victorian collection with natural history, geology, local history, curiosities and ethnographic material from the empire. Objects were catalogued, numbered and marked by the curator, George Payne. From 1920, after the death of George Payne, until 1970 no specific records were kept, although ‘generous donations’ were recorded in the council minutes. From 1970 until 2000, there was a full-time curator and assistant, with the museum’s moving to a new site. Substantial amounts of donations were acquired, receipted but not accessioned, and there were no numbers, locations or detailed descriptions. From 2000 a new curatorial team has taken over to manage this large collection.

Backlog
The collection is estimated at between 30,000 and 100,000 ‘objects’, some of which are uniquely identified and none of which is located, apart from those on display, therefore, the whole collection could be considered a backlog. The approach has been to strike a balance between what they need to do and what they can do most effectively, and use this for prioritisation. They are working to a collection management plan showing the programme, resources and timescale for a 10-year period.

The key needs are:

- Maintain Museum Registration status.
- Achieve a record for security.
- Record items requiring a licence, like firearms.
- Record civic regalia which travels off site regularly.
- Identify items which may have health and safety issues.

Using the knowledge and abilities of all the staff, they have tackled the collections in groups and taken advantage of opportunities when they arise. The basis of the programme is to visit the objects to ascertain as much information as possible and then reconcile this with any existing documentation. All items new and retrospectively catalogued, will have a new number pre-fixed ‘A’ and this will replace all previous numbers. The objects are catalogued using SPECTRUM guidelines based on a one-stop visit to the objects. Certain objects are bulk-accessioned such as collections of tools or items from one archaeological site. If items are removed they will receive a part number and the accession number and will be fully catalogued at a later stage.
All the records are entered on a self-designed database based on Microsoft Access, which can have thumbnail images inserted or be linked to pages with larger images. The database is searchable and stores data well but has limited applications outside collections management. The work is proceeding in line with the plan with a temporary database of over 4,000 records and 500 images.

The sheer scale of the uncatalogued material prompted urgent action, as the museum was unable to account properly for a large part of its collection, having implications for security and future collecting policy. Progress on the programme has been good as it is an institutional priority and one member of staff has concentrated on this work and is not distracted by other competing demands.

Case Study - Hampshire County Council Libraries
Andrew Dalziel, Acquisitions Manager

History and background
The service consists of 54 libraries with main libraries, and a number of small and mobile libraries. In 1988 the service reduced in size when the libraries in Portsmouth and Southampton were taken over by their new unitary authorities. A particularly important subject area is army history, as the army is closely associated with Hampshire. The library service has been re-organised with a centralised acquisition process through the library headquarters instead of through four centres. This is enabling backlogs to be tackled more effectively.

Acquisition process
Panels of librarians, meeting fortnightly or monthly, select the types of material for the whole county, specifying titles and quantities for libraries and library groups. Of this new material, 90% will be popular titles including videotapes and DVDs. Specific local publications will automatically be bought, and there are some specialist collections, e.g. for travellers, prisons and in a number of community languages.

Books and other items are usually purchased and to order, they need the author, title, publisher, ISBN or class number. These are ordered on the libraries’ GALAXY library management system. Each week new catalogue records are downloaded, the cataloguers amend them to meet the needs of the library service and classify them in the Dewey Decimal System. It may take two minutes to do a simple record, with a longer time for a more complex non-standard work such as a book in Polish from 1915. The priority for cataloguing is new stock, especially DVDs, videos and games,
fiction, books requested which have been purchased, and books for which there will be a demand, such as Booker prize finalists.

The book suppliers insert the bar code, date stamp, spine label and cover. The books are receipted by scanning the barcode and the system identifies its destination library. The library service also receives a number of donations including popular fiction such as Mills and Boon; these are given basic records and distributed to libraries. Special collections are catalogued in more detail and sent to libraries with specific collections in these areas i.e. railways in Winchester, naval history in Gosport, military history in Aldershot, aviation history in Farnborough and local history collections in a number of libraries.

There are 2.5 cataloguers for the whole service. The library has not used volunteer cataloguers but may get some ex-Royal Navy staff to help with gathering information to catalogue naval books.

The local history collections are not fully catalogued, and each library has its own card catalogue system which is primarily location and event-based. Cataloguing is done locally and information is only available within an institution, not outside it. The intention is to have basic local studies details on the computer system with more detailed records on card. Another project is to merge their catalogue with those of Southampton and Portsmouth libraries and make it available on the internet.

**Backlog**

Backlogs occur at certain times of the year and also when there are specific projects such as re-stocking a refurbished library, however, routine material has little backlog, although can build up at certain times, such as at the end of the financial year when additional books may be bought. Backlogs also occur in local studies and can also build up with donated material, for instance, they have recently received a collection of thousands of books and reports from the library of DERA in Farnborough, of which they have kept most for the service. This includes early books on aviation, the earliest being from 1790, and including reports of military aircraft trials. This collection will require more detailed cataloguing records to be produced than the normal library stock, and will need to be re-classified from the DERA library system into the Hampshire Libraries’ Dewey system. To catalogue this collection will require specialist subject knowledge which is available within the library. Advice was sought from the RAF Museum to use their database of aircraft names to catalogue this material.
Case Study - Portsmouth City Libraries
Colin Brown, Library Service Manager
Ted Ryan, Policy and Bibliographic Service Manager

History and background

The Borough of Portsmouth had a public library service in 1883 and this continued until 1974, with the museums service being part of the library service until the 1960s. From 1974 the libraries were part of the Hampshire County Council service, until returning to Portsmouth as a new unitary authority in 1998. There are nine libraries plus a mobile library and library services for the housebound.

The City Libraries hold important historic collections including the Charles Dickens collection, and Naval and local history collections. The Dickens collection originated at the Dickens Birthplace Museum in Portsmouth, after the house was acquired by the then Borough Council in 1903. The collection now extends to 1,500 volumes and 100 reels of microfilm. The Naval collection is the largest in a public library in Britain, and includes the Lily Lambert collection which is mainly concerned with Nelson and his period.

The City Libraries are a member of the Co-South group which provides interoperability between databases in libraries in Hampshire, Isle of Wight and Portsmouth. The group is looking at ways of bringing museum databases into the system and have a pilot project to link different types of databases. The Portsmouth library and museum databases are not yet linked, as they use different systems, but there is an aspiration to develop a system to search across museum, library and archive collections.

Backlog

The service is up-to-date with cataloguing new stock acquisitions. The main uncatalogued stock is reserve material which predates computerisation. There are about 80,000 items of reserve stock of which about 25% may be uncatalogued, and there is now a project to complete the cataloguing of the remaining material.

Acquisitions process

One supplier is used for the majority of the book stock and provides a weekly disc from which new titles can be selected. If a book is ordered and the ISBN is not recognised, the system identifies that the first copy of the book received should be sent to the cataloguing department. The acquisitions team consists of acquisitions librarians, one senior and two assistants, acquisitions processing staff and one cataloguer. Currently the volume of work is very high for only one cataloguer; last year the library service acquired 38,000 items which required 18,000 separate catalogue records. The service has an archive...
policy in which two copies of books of significant local importance are placed in store. Two stock librarians are responsible for reviewing the stock on the shelves. A growing area of work is the acquisition of books in community languages, of which the main language is Chinese. This needs a different approach and training to transliterate. The library is also a member of CILIA (Co-operative of Indic Language Authorities) and a contractor exists for each of the languages so that records can be acquired in languages such as Bengali. The library has used some Government employment schemes for cataloguing schemes in the past and has some volunteer help.

The local studies collection is catalogued using a Dewey system, although the Naval collection continues to use an older version of the Dewey system. The local studies collection includes photographs, maps, and local newspapers. The library service holds an index of the local newspaper on card in the 1950s, and now they electronically index articles in the local paper each day.

**Case Study - Southampton University Library**
Mike Chisholm, Head of Cataloguing
Janet Springer, Acquisitions Librarian

**History and background**

Southampton has had university-type institutions on its site for most of the 20th century, with a major expansion as part of the national university developments in the 1960s. More recently other organisations have joined the university, contributing to a change in the subjects taught, which is reflected in the current cataloguing priorities. The structure of library provision has also changed with former departmental libraries having been centralised. The holdings are about 500,000 to 750,000 books with 22,080 runs of journals, some now being purchased in electronic form.

**Acquisition process**

The acquisition process is driven by the needs of the academic staff and there are liaison librarians associated with each school in the university. Each school has an allocation to spend on books, with which almost all books are purchased, although the library also receives some donations.

After a book is suggested, the acquisitions department order the book, checking if a MARC record is available from CURL. The order will be the bibliographic record and includes the ISBN. The library uses the Z39.50 protocol which enables the transfer of bibliographic information between organisations. The book suppliers provide jackets for books and

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1 Consortium of University Research Libraries in the British Isles
any strengthening required. The acquisitions department check the order, arrange to pay the bill, and they add bar codes and security tags. The order number is the reference used to identify the item between the acquisitions and cataloguing departments. The books are then transferred to the cataloguing department who also add the date and labels.

In the cataloguing department, the MARC record is improved or modified and checked against local practices for consistency and context. Some catalogue entries are enhanced; e.g. CDs to identify what is on the disc. A new enhancement of catalogue entries is that, for some books, suppliers will provide chapter lists, a précis and an image of the book jacket. Music requires extra work to catalogue and is driven by user demand. The demand for foreign language material has gone down between 25% and 30%, as these courses have reduced.

The university aims to catalogue to a medium standard, using mainly records from CURL and the fullness of the records reflects the fullness of the records on CURL. If there is no MARC record the cataloguing department bring the standard up to AACR2\(^1\). The cataloguing department also classify the books using mainly the Library of Congress system. They look at similar books to see how they are classified, or look on-line to check and, for archaeology, they use their own detailed classification system to reflect the academic needs.

**Backlog**

The library now only gets a backlog in cataloguing when large donations are accepted. They used to have a backlog and looked at the processes and staff responsibilities to see where the backlog was being created.

There are three elements to the process of acquiring new material and making it available for use:

- Acquisition.
- Bibliographic.
- Classification.

They looked back over a decade at their cataloguing statistics to identify the productivity of a cataloguer. This revealed that, on average, a cataloguer could catalogue 3.2 books per hour over the decade, taking into account all the factors including holidays. Then they matched the hours of work available to the amount of work expected and were able to reduce the backlog.

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\(^1\) Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules
The other problem area was in staff responsibilities. Librarians divided their time between liaison with the academic departments and cataloguing, as in many instances, the less urgent, and possibly more mundane, job of cataloguing tended to be left and not carried out effectively. To overcome this they re-established a dedicated cataloguing department, with 2 trainees on 2-year fixed-term contracts, which gives good productivity, supported by two permanent staff to ensure the correct classification. Cataloguing staff have a daily quota of 10-15 books, and the work is planned and effectively organised. Cataloguers are encouraged to take some books in the morning and some in the afternoon and, with this regular structured work, a cataloguer can do 12-15,000 books per year.

**Future issues**

Retrospective conversion is an important issue for members of CURL. At the university library, they have records on card that were created before 1980. Some 200,000 to 300,000 records need to be transferred as full records to the computer system. Currently these items may have a brief record or no record, so enquirers have to look in card indexes as well, if books were acquired before 1980. All active collections are electronic and they add others to the electronic database when they are loaned out. As with other libraries, the issue of what record to produce for an on-line journal or an on-line book, is now being tackled.

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**Case Study - Berkshire Record Office**

Peter Durrant, County Archivist
Mark Stevens, Senior Archivist

**History and background**

In 1939, Berkshire County Council first established a committee to consider how to look after the many official and private records being stored in the council’s strong rooms. Although keen to appoint an archivist, war intervened, and it was not until 1948 that the first archivist was appointed. The first permanent home was the basement of the Assize Courts and, in winter 1980/1981, the record office moved to the new Shire Hall at Shinfield Park, and to a larger space in 1994. In 1998 Berkshire County Council was abolished and the record office is now a joint service of six unitary authorities, with one archive authority and one management authority. They agreed to fund a new building in Reading, which was completed in 2000. The collections include thousands of documents relating to Berkshire old and new, with 4.5 to 5 linear miles of archives.
Backlog

The backlog is considered to be the proportion of the collection which does not have a catalogue available in the search room; the acquisition record only shows the number of boxes from a particular source. A decade ago 50% of the collection did not have a catalogue available in the search room but now the backlog has worsened to 60-65%. The Record Office has always used a classification scheme which is reflected in the modern standard and so, in general, older records conform to ISAD(G). Previously, there were constraints on collecting caused by a lack of storage space, but there has been a huge increase in collecting following the move to the present site. Every year one or more major collections have been acquired including recently, one large country house collection.

Acquisition process

There is a member of staff dedicated to be the acquisition person and they do the preliminary documentation and deal with the enquiries from depositors. There is a reception area for receipting using accession forms and then cataloguing is carried out in a dedicated room in a storage area. After acquisition, and before cataloguing, there is the appraisal stage. There are no staff specifically dedicated to appraisal and cataloguing and, in a good year, the equivalent of one full-time staff member will do appraisal and the equivalent of up to 1.5 full-time staff members will do cataloguing. The cataloguing is prioritised using the following criteria:

- public demand,
- historic importance,
- skills and training needs of staff.

The cataloguing programme is planned in order to give rough equality to each area of the collection over a period. Certain records, such as parish records, get priority due to public demand and there is some lobbying from interest groups to get certain records done first. There are targets to give priority to current acquisitions catalogued first and 80% of these are catalogued, unless the collection is currently closed. Detailed records are kept of monthly acquisitions and cataloguing, and the Record Office is involved in benchmarking at regional level.

The cataloguing is based on ISAD (G) and is often done using Word-based tables with importing into CALM later. The same person does the numbering and cataloguing at the same time. The aim is to try and catalogue in more detail than needed for everyday use but detail will vary according to the type of material, e.g. they would calendar medieval deeds but bundle list modern deeds. Older records, which are more inaccessible
to users because of the language or handwriting, will receive more detailed work. The Record Office staff have the knowledge to catalogue almost all the collections. The aim is to make as much information as possible available outside the Record Office.

Conservation is normally done during cataloguing but all material is made safe at the time of acquisition. Basic wrapping and preparation for storage is done by the cataloguer, using a pre-made wrapper. There is a system of recording conservation needs and these are considered by a conservation review panel. The Record Office also reviews material produced in the search room and repairs if required.

Permanent staff do the documentation work, although there have been temporary staff for specific projects, as well as volunteers for listing and calendaring projects, with collections of papers at bundle or individual level. For special projects on architectural records, project staff were trained and used a formula template. Staff are trained in house style and regular supervision meetings, by senior staff, take place to review priorities and quality.

The Record Office is involved in a New Opportunities Fund project with the Museum of English Rural Life in Reading which has been running for two years. This project, ‘New Landscapes, New Technologies’, relates to farming and involves the digitisation of inclosure maps, and required the Record Office to revise and improve 50-year-old catalogues.

Case Study - Canterbury Cathedral Archives
Heather Forbes, Cathedral Archivist and Cressida Annesley, Senior Research Archivist

History and background

Canterbury Cathedral Archives is now administered under the terms of partnership agreements between the Dean and Chapter, Kent County Council and Canterbury City Council, and forms part of the Kent Archives Service. Collections include records of the Cathedral, Canterbury diocese, parishes in the Canterbury archdeaconry, Canterbury City Council and its predecessors, and other organisations, businesses, administrations and individuals in the Canterbury area. The records are accessible to the public in a search room, run jointly with the Cathedral Library, adjacent to the Cathedral. The responsibilities of the Cathedral Archivists include care for some Cathedral objects, e.g. vestments, but not items in the Cathedral Treasury.
Backlog

The Cathedral Archive has a backlog of uncatalogued and undercatalogued material, i.e. that which only has box lists (not to file level) so that it can be used, but only under supervision. There are accession records still to complete as, until the late 1980s, there was only one archivist. Records are the responsibility of different authorities and have different management arrangements, e.g. those given to the Dean and Chapter of the Cathedral are not subject to the Freedom of Information Act. A particular problem is lack of physical space in the Cathedral Archive and only a few outstores, so there is very little space to take acquisitions, therefore, acquisition levels are fairly stable, although they will need to be more active in collecting electronic records.

Removing backlogs is now an organisational priority for Kent Archives Service, of which the Cathedral Archives is a part. They have a published cataloguing strategy which states that ‘closer management and the maximum allocation of time and resources is required’. This identifies the need to allocate priorities, monitor the rate of cataloguing and uncatalogued material, and report this in annual reports to the County Archivist. They aim to catalogue 80% of new material each year as well as tackling some of the backlog.

Acquisition process

There is a manual accession register and material is catalogued using CALM, which is also used for conservation management. For new acquisitions, a priority grading form is completed. This identifies various criteria which are to be considered when prioritising the cataloguing of this collection. These are:

- Subject to Data Protection.
- Subject to FoI.
- Public Records.
- Parish Records.
- Restricted Access.
- Need to please depositor.
- Major conservation needs.
- External funding.
- Estimated cataloguing time.
- Historical importance.
- Anticipated use/public demand.
Each of these criterion is given a numeric score, those with the highest scores being catalogued first. For instance, items subject to Data Protection and FoI, with likely user demand which would take a short time to catalogue, would be a high priority.

Most records are catalogued to an adequate standard, with the aim of a collection level description for everything. The needs of users also affect the level to which an item is catalogued, e.g. 13th century charters in Latin require a high level of interpretation, and a project for 6,000 charters is being catalogued to a high standard using a project worker. Parish registers are catalogued to a set scheme, with a specified level of entry. Volunteers have been involved for a long time in assisting with indexing and cataloguing; now there is the equivalent of one person per week on cataloguing. Volunteers are trained by staff and produce entries in Word, which are checked and then imported into CALM.

The archive has worked on a number of collaborative projects, most recently working with Canterbury Museums - Whitstable and Herne Bay - for an A2A project and on an HLF project ‘Oysters Sources’ which will catalogue an antiquarian’s collection in Whitstable Museum.

Case Study - Tolkien Society Archive
Pat Reynolds, Honorary Archivist

History and background

The Tolkien Society is an independent, non-profit making educational charity established in 1969 to promote interest in the life and works of the author and philologist Professor J.R.R. Tolkien C.B.E., 1892-1973. This is achieved through the organisation of regular seminars and study workshops, educational outreach and publications. A Committee of elected officers oversees the everyday running of the Society and its various functions, including maintaining the Society’s archive. This collects material relating to, inspired by, or produced as, ‘critical responses’ to Tolkien, his works, and other works of fantasy fiction and philology. This includes books (editions of the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and related works, in their original languages and in translation), artworks inspired by Tolkien (such as paintings, drawings and sculpture), ephemeral items (including posters and general advertising material) and recordings using a variety of media. The archive is currently housed in the Surrey History Centre.

Backlog

The records and society papers were initially kept by the Society officers until late 2000. This meant that the total content of the archive
was unknown, and so the backlog was the entire collection. Work on cataloguing the collection was given a major boost by being included in the ‘Private Faces in Public Places’ A2A project from 2002. This project employed two archivists for a year to work across a range of collections in Surrey including the Tolkien Society, Godalming Museum and the Watts Gallery. The Tolkien material was taken to Godalming Museum to sort and make the initial assessment. With the assistance of the two archivists, the archival material has been catalogued and is listed on the A2A website. The work was prioritised by tackling the material of most interest to researchers first, and then the journals and then books. Conservation assessments were carried out as part of the A2A cataloguing process. The works needing conservation were identified and all works were appropriately repacked. The project has raised the importance of the archive within the Society and the aim is also to make as much detail as possible available outside the organisation.

The collection is now being catalogued by the Honorary Archivist and one volunteer using the Past Perfect software and, for some items, accessioning and cataloguing is carried out at the same time. Current accessions are given an accession number, and a letter of thanks sent, or a transfer of title form used, if the gift is of value. The aim is to catalogue to a medium level, taking an average of 20 minutes per record (less for journals) and sizes of objects are not normally measured. For some records, e.g. newspaper cuttings, more detail is included to aid the user. Some foreign language material is scanned and then remotely catalogued abroad, e.g. Cyrillic language material is catalogued by a Ukrainian in New Zealand. The rate of acquisition has increased over the past three years because Tolkien books have been made into major films; this has led to an increase in material waiting to be catalogued, particularly news cuttings.
## Appendix 5

### Consultations and contributors

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<thead>
<tr>
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*Member of Project Steering Group
Brief and methodology

1. Background and context

Proposals are invited for conducting a sampled appraisal of cataloguing backlogs and procedures in the museums, libraries and archives sector in the South East. Based on this work, broad options and recommendations are required for approaches to monitoring and priorities for addressing these backlogs.

There is a perception that cataloguing backlogs are an issue for each domain. As a result, an outline project concept was included in the Year 1 Work Plan of the South East Museum, Library and Archive Council (SEMLAC) to audit the problem across the sector and explore strategic solutions. Some work on backlogs has already been carried out across the UK, for example the archive domain by the Historical Manuscripts Commission (HMC). This study relied substantially upon self-assessment and furthermore, the South East was one of three regions omitted from this work. A full independent audit of all institutions in the region would require considerable investment of resources and such an audit would not be the most effective way of achieving new and revised approaches to the better management of backlogs.

This study will aim to inform future management of resources and collections both locally and nationally within museums, libraries and archives, as well as clarifying and qualifying the nature of, and issues surrounding backlogs. It will also inform sustainability and compliance with current legislation and the ‘Full Disclosure’ agenda. It is intended that the study will highlight specific issues that will be addressed in future focused studies at a regional and institutional level.

2. Project

The project is a phased programme to firstly research and assess the nature of the problem within a regional context, investigating and establishing through consultation, sampling and analysis, the reasons for the backlogs within each domain. The second phase will analyse the compiled information and use this analysis to develop, in consultation, a robust comparable methodology for quantifying and measuring backlogs.

An experienced consultant is therefore sought to:

- Research existing national, regional and local strategies, standards and guidelines for addressing documentation backlogs across the three domains.

- Establish and comparatively analyse the cataloguing and related collection management procedures across the domains.
• Identify and analyse the key backlog priorities and issues for the domains in the South East, e.g. documentation, resources, procedures, management, accountability, user access.

• Establish a robust comparable methodology for quantifying backlogs across the domains.

• Propose revisions to approaches and procedures based on the above.

3. Outline methodology

Phase I (SEMLAC lead)

1. Project brief.
2. Establish Steering Group.
3. Finalise brief.
4. Advertise tender.
5. Interview and appoint.
6. Refine and finalise methodology, project timetable and budget.

Phase II

1. Identify the use of existing backlog strategies, standards and guidelines within the three domains in the South East and identify gaps in the information.

2. Research current backlogs projects, procedures and management.
   2.1 Literature and web-search.
   2.2 Consultation with national and regional bodies.
   2.3 Use specialist and expert knowledge within and outside of the region.
   2.4 Sampling of three institutions in each sector, informed by desk-based research.

3. Consultation.

Phase III

1. Identify regional needs, issues and priority areas and activities for support.

2. Identify best practice.

3. Provide, in consultation, a methodology for comparable analysis of backlogs across the sectors.
4. Outcomes

The study will be a summary document identifying and quantifying the current documentation backlog issues. It will include a broad overview and analysis of present local, regional and national strategies/projects for addressing backlogs. The study shall also identify best practice, key issues and initiatives.

5. Target audience

The study will be used to set future policy and service direction for the managing of documentation backlogs across the three domains. It will also be used as an information and advocacy tool for individual institutions, local authorities, funders, regional and national agencies. It will be used to set priorities for future individual and collaborative action.
## Appendix 7

### References and sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
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**Web sites**

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