

Developing a collection-wide, object-focused risk assessment: From COVID-19 response to comprehensive management tool

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Abstract

Risk management is vital to appropriate and sustainable collection care. At the British Library (BL) it became increasingly recognised that existing risk management approaches were either collection-wide or object-focused, but not both: the strategic assessment addressed institution-level concerns, but not specific, practical requirements; and object-oriented assessments did not extend across the institution or the wider remit of collection care. The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown necessitated dramatic changes in collection care procedures across the heritage sector. At the BL, many day-to-day operations became impossible and others required significant adjustments. To support this, a comprehensive risk assessment focusing on specific collection needs was carried out. Subsequently, it became apparent that this provided an effective foundation for an ongoing risk management tool for the physical collection, centred on practical, object-level requirements as a complement to the existing strategic risk assessment; this was then used to support ongoing and planned operational and development activities.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents recent work at the British Library (BL) to develop a collection-wide, object-focused risk assessment for the physical collection. The BL has two principal locations (St Pancras, London, and Boston Spa, Yorkshire) and a physical collection that numbers an estimated 170 million items; although the bulk of the physical collection is paper-based, with a significant proportion of film-based media, over all a very wide range of formats and material types are represented. The BL's remit is to preserve the collection in perpetuity as well as make it available through direct access, exhibitions and loans; the work is supported through operational, curatorial and management activities.

Previously, the BL's approach to risk management tended to be either institution-wide or object-focused, but not both:

- The existing strategic risk assessment provided an overview of the high-level challenges faced by the institution overall (institutional relevance, physical and digital security, staff and technology capabilities, etc.) but did not focus on the specific, practical, day-to-day requirements of the collection and its interactions with locations and activities in the BL.
- Object-oriented assessments, to support access, treatment or projects, were based around specific items or groups of items, so they did not address the collection as a whole in their range or application.

Given the vital role of risk management for appropriate and sustainable collection care (Baer 1991, Waller 1994, Ashley-Smith 1999, Michalski 2004, Waller and Michalski 2005, Brokerhof and Bülow 2016), the need for such a risk management tool had been formerly identified as a long-term aim to support operational activities and to ensure that the collection remained at the heart of wider BL decision-making, policy development and investment programmes. Despite the recognition of this need, increasing demands on time for collection care staff meant that it proved difficult to schedule such a large piece of work, especially when faced with tasks which required more urgent and immediate resolution. However, the necessity of managing the risks arising from the unprecedented effects of the COVID-19 outbreak provided a framework on which this work could subsequently be based.

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COVID-19 RESPONSE

The complex, changing situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic required a comprehensive revision and development of collection care procedures at the BL, as in many other heritage institutions. However, this also provided an opportunity to review existing activities extensively, develop new approaches and scrutinise underlying assumptions, and to then adapt and modify activities accordingly; under normal operational conditions, such a wide-reaching revision of processes and procedures would be difficult, if not impossible.

The BL sites were closed to access for both staff and public after the announcement of the first lockdown in March 2020, but no staff were furloughed, instead working from home where possible and appropriate (later during the pandemic, limited site access for a small number of staff became possible). This meant that many routine collection care tasks became impossible and a range of novel risks emerged, the most significant of which were particularly related to: known ongoing issues whose resolution was interrupted by the lockdown, and were thus exacerbated; the ability to sustain maintenance, environmental control and monitoring of the buildings; and the operation of salvage (disaster response) protocols not fully compatible with lockdown limitations.

To help deal with the situation, the BL's collection care response was underpinned by a risk assessment developed to address the immediate needs of the physical collection and the challenges to its safety (Garside et al. 2021). This was carried out in the first few weeks of the initial lockdown period to allow the highest priority activities and responses to be appropriately targeted with the limited available resources. This represented a steep learning curve, addressing many unknowns, so the first iteration had to be based on a significant number of assumptions and extrapolations. Identified risks were addressed by a range of suitable collection-focused mitigations particularly related to careful prioritisation of workflows, optimisation of limited on-site activity in combination with remote access and home working, and assurance of the stability and security of storage areas, all supported by close liaison with other departments and external partners. Certain specific issues, such as concerns about the efficacy and implementation of the salvage response, were addressed by completely revising existing policies and developing new working practices and procedures, supplemented by team-wide training.

As the situation developed, the assessment was reviewed and revised taking into account lessons learned and experiences gained, and it became apparent that although the BL was operating under unprecedented conditions, operational processes and environmental integrity were surprisingly robust, supported by the adaptability and commitment of the staff, and many of the anticipated problems did not arise.

DEVELOPMENT

During the periodic reviews of this assessment in 2020 and 2021, it became apparent that it provided an ideal framework on which to establish a wider-reaching and ongoing risk management tool for the collection as

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a whole, based around its practical, day-to-day requirements, and taking into account the various locations across the BL in which items are stored, accessed or used and the range of activities in which they may be involved.

Taking the COVID-19 risk assessment as a starting point, its scope was broadened to consider the requirements of the collection under normal operation, whilst retaining the focus on practical considerations. Adjustments were obviously necessary to adapt it from the needs of a specific situation to one which would address the issues encountered in the general operation of the institution. Many of the types of risk remained the same (for example, those associated with rain ingress, pests, environment or security) but were aggregated or broadened in their context. Lockdown-specific issues were removed – particular examples included material out of normal storage for unplanned extended periods (whether on-site or off-site), interrupted and incomplete work, perishable materials (such as food) remaining on-site without disposal and newly acquired material which could not be processed in the normal manner. Finally, a variety of new risks were added dealing with collection care issues in the broadest sense, particularly those addressing legacy problems and the longer-term development of collections policy and provision. In particular, the current document now makes explicit mention of risks to cataloguing and conservation resources, lack of clear policies covering issues such as deaccession, collection moves and the loan of BL items to other institutions, which had previously been undertaken without clear overarching guidance.

Over all, then, the ongoing risk management tool addresses collection-focused issues relating to:

- Building defects, maintenance problems and plant failure
- Environmental problems (temperature, relative humidity, light, pollutants and dust)
- Pests
- Quality of storage provision
- Unauthorised and unsupervised access
- Routine use of items (staff and public access, exhibitions, loans)
- Internal and inter-site transport of items
- Off-site third-party storage
- Uncatalogued material
- Policy issues (deaccession, content strategy and legal requirements)
- Collection moves
- Resource management

Figure 1 demonstrates the scope and size of the assessment, which deals with 42 individual risks and their mitigations; the details of specific risks have not been included in the figure to improve clarity and to comply with confidentiality and collection security requirements. Risks were rated in terms of ‘impact’ and ‘likelihood’ on scales of 1 to 5, and these were then

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Risk	Site	Initial Risk	Mitigated Risk
Rain ingress	St Pancras	Green	Green
Rain ingress	Boston Spa	Red	Yellow
Rodents	St Pancras	Orange	Green
Rodents	Boston Spa	Yellow	Green
Birds and bats	Boston Spa	Yellow	Green
Insects	St Pancras	Green	Green
Insects	Boston Spa	Yellow	Green
Mould	Boston Spa	Orange	Yellow
Fire	St Pancras	Green	Green
Fire	Boston Spa	Green	Green
OxyReduct failure (B31 & B32)	Boston Spa	Green	Green
Plumbing leaks	St Pancras	Yellow	Green
Plumbing leaks	Boston Spa	Yellow	Yellow
Unauthorised access	St Pancras	Green	Green
Unauthorised access	Boston Spa	Green	Green
Unsupervised access	St Pancras	Yellow	Green
Unsupervised access	Boston Spa	Green	Green
Use of collections	Staff	Yellow	Green
Use of collections	Readers	Yellow	Green
Delivery of material	St Pancras, Boston Spa	Green	Green
Intersite transfers	St Pancras, Boston Spa	Green	Green
Environmental problems – B31 & B32	Boston Spa	Green	Green
Environmental problems – general storage areas	St Pancras	Green	Green
Environmental problems – general storage areas	Boston Spa	Yellow	Yellow
Third party storage	On-site (Non- BL collections)	Yellow	Yellow
Third party storage	Off-site (BL collections)	Yellow	Yellow
Contaminants	Boston Spa	Yellow	Yellow
Contaminants	St Pancras	Yellow	Yellow
Radiation/Light	Boston Spa	Yellow	Yellow
Building work and maintenance	Boston Spa	Yellow	Green
Building work and maintenance	St Pancras	Yellow	Green
Collection moves	Boston Spa	Yellow	Green
Collection moves	St Pancras	Yellow	Green
Collection Storage, quality of shelving	Boston Spa	Orange	Yellow
Uncatalogued material backlog (legal deposit and recently purchased acquisitions)	Boston Spa	Red	Red
Uncatalogued material backlog (historic and recently purchased acquisitions)	St Pancras	Red	Red
Uncatalogued material delivered to reading rooms	St Pancras	Orange	Green
Use of de-accession policy	St Pancras, Boston Spa	Orange	Yellow
Content strategy	St Pancras, Boston Spa	Yellow	Yellow
Legal deposit - new formats, smaller presses	St Pancras, Boston Spa	Yellow	Yellow
Conservation resources	St Pancras, Boston Spa	Yellow	Yellow
Loans of BL material to other institutions	Off site	Yellow	Yellow

Figure 1. An overview of the risk assessment document for the British Library's physical collections

used to generate an overall risk category, presented using a system of four colour-coded levels from green (low), through yellow (moderate) and orange (high) to red (very high). The levels of initial risks are presented, along with residual risks after mitigation; mitigations were selected to be pragmatic, practical, capable of implementation across the collection and achievable with the available resources.

A fundamental difficulty with compiling an assessment of this type lies in understanding how object-level risks are represented and have an impact at the scale of whole collections or collection areas, and in the way in which potential mitigations may be chosen which are both effective and implementable at that scale. Previously, many of these aspects would have been assessed on the basis of assumptions and inferences, or as theoretical exercises, but now it was possible to determine likely responses on the basis of practical evidence: the nature and extent of the COVID-19 situation meant the potential impact of subsequent institution-wide collection risks could now be considered in a much more fully informed manner. In particular, the evaluation of mitigations was supported by a greater confidence in the BL's collection care provisions, especially the efficacy and robustness of operational processes, the strength of working relationships with other departments and the role of remote access and home working when dealing

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with on-site issues, all of which had been significantly tested and proven over the lockdown period.

IMPLEMENTATION AND USE

This risk assessment is a dynamic document, intended as a practical tool to support operational and development activities within the BL that involve use of the collections; therefore, it will be regularly reviewed, revised and developed to reflect changing practice, new uses for the collection and evolving priorities. As well as its direct application to help highlight collection risks and allow resources to be appropriately targeted to provide mitigations, it has demonstrated its value in a number of other ways, particularly when ensuring that collection care concerns are represented at the necessary management levels and are able to influence such issues as development projects, policy making, cross-departmental collaborations and the use of budgets.

In general, it acts as a tool to help management and operational and curatorial staff to take a consensus view of the needs of the collection and thus to ensure collaboratively its ongoing safety. Additionally, it acts as a reference point when developing more specific or narrowly focused risk assessments, to assess or support specific activities, thus helping to enable consistency of application and comparability of such work (Rogerson and Garside 2017). It is also used to understand better the impact of high-level decisions that lead to changes in institutional policies and priorities, the use and availability of resources, and the development of uses of the collection.

Specific examples of the application of the assessment to support activities of this kind include ensuring that site-wide redevelopment programmes have appropriate collection care input, reviewing de-accession processes and justifying the need for greater resources for the upkeep or storage areas. It has been employed to inform current and forthcoming development projects at the BL (such as Boston Spa Renewed) to ensure that these retain collection care priorities at their core and that all team members, both internal and external, appreciate the potential range of threats that collections face (British Library 2022a, British Library 2022b). Past experience has demonstrated that collection needs are often under-appreciated or sidelined during such projects, with emphasis given instead to architectural, engineering and management aspects. Presenting threats to the collection in a clear, systematic form, such as a risk assessment, allows these issues to be incorporated into the work process from the start – importantly, it enables these issues to be understood by all participants, without requiring specialist conservation knowledge, and makes clear the likely short- and long-term threats to the collection if inappropriate choices are made. It allows project aims to be bench-marked against outcomes and helps avoid over-emphasis of particular issues at the expense of others – in the case of the Boston Spa Renewed project, an example of this was an initial design focus on improving the environment, when from a collection care perspective it was known that a more significant issue for collection safety was inappropriate shelving, as could be demonstrated with the risk assessment. It also helps make clear that concerns lay not simply with a limited number of highly vulnerable items but rather with potential detrimental impacts on collection areas as

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a whole, and that such effects can be subtle and cumulative. This has been vital in ensuring a consensus of opinion that even apparently innocuous changes to design criteria or material usage can have a significant impact on collection safety.

Another outcome is the development of a cross-departmental team who are currently reviewing and updating deaccession policy. Two specific results have been the understanding that space planning (whether large-scale redevelopment or as a result of office moves) is a driver for deaccessioning and disposal, and that in a large institution there will be a mixture of experienced and casual users and that policies need to address and support both. Looking holistically at the activity and various users has revealed that while in theory there is a supporting policy, it is not currently embedded, fully understood or actively managed. Historically, these issues have been difficult to both recognise and then act on, falling as they do across a variety of different areas of responsibility. The risk document clearly demonstrates the extent and interconnectedness of the problem, helping both to identify underlying contributory causes and to enable their solution to be sensibly distributed between stakeholders. It also provides a way of tracking improvements in the situation, to which all parties can contribute.

A further benefit has been to help highlight shortfalls in established collection care activities. This includes issues such as the lack of resources for cataloguing, conservation and cleaning, the lack of clear processes in established areas exacerbated by outdated or incomplete formal guidance and gaps in knowledge where policies exist, and increased risks to loaning BL collection items, especially with constantly growing demand and the changing nature of loans, tours and exhibitions. A particular example is the lack of resources to support the necessary routine in-situ cleaning in storage areas, which, as a result of being able to demonstrate the impact of this problem through the use of the risk assessment, is an issue that is now being escalated to strategic level; without such a supporting document, demonstrating the 'cascade' effect of an apparently low-level issue of this kind, ultimately impacting on the safety and accessibility of the collection as a whole, it would have been difficult to achieve high-level recognition of the problem. A practical outcome here has been the development of cross-team cleaning initiatives. A pilot project has been established in which BL Assistants are trained to carry out some book and shelf cleaning, and to do this outside their normal role. This has an added benefit of improving the environment in which the teams work, as well as making them more aware of and likely to report collection care issues.

An especially important outcome has been to bring to light the interconnectedness of some activities and the dependencies that exist between teams, which previously (before lockdown) had not been so obvious. Related to this, it has also brought about a greater understanding of some of the less obvious risks, including those related to the vital role of underpinning activities (such as cataloguing, storage etc.) and prompted recognition of the need to have robust contingencies in place (including space, resources, monitoring capability, etc.). This has enabled a better appreciation of collection care priorities in emergency situations and the way in which these can be dealt with through appropriate response and

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mitigation; having experienced the unprecedented situation created by the pandemic, it is now possible to plan much more accurately for different levels of emergency and required response.

Looking to the future, it will be used as a benchmarking tool to assess the appropriateness and implementation of planned forthcoming activities, and it will help to inform the development of ongoing policy and project planning. As such, it will be revised annually to ensure that it remains relevant and genuinely reflects the needs of the institution. It will also find application as a training and educational resource to provide greater awareness of current and potential risks to the collection.

The assessment is currently being extended to incorporate similar considerations for the digital collections to provide a genuinely comprehensive overview of the BL's collections as a whole.

CONCLUSION

The requirement to create a collection-wide, object-focused risk assessment in response to the immediate problems created by the COVID-19 pandemic provided the impetus to develop an ongoing risk management tool with the scope to encompass the whole of the physical collections and an emphasis on practical, operational needs; it also imparted greater confidence in assessing the impact of collection-wide issues and in the efficacy of necessary mitigations. To ensure the continuing relevance and usefulness of an assessment of this kind, it must be regularly reviewed and updated. Doing so has created a robust and accessible resource which underlines the importance of day-to-day collection care activities, ensures that they can be placed at the centre of decision-making at higher levels within the BL and helps to provide a common point of reference to enable discussion and collaboration between different departments and specialisms, with the ultimate aim of ensuring the continuing safeguarding of the collection.

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