

Carrying Out a Benchmarks Assessment: Benchmarks 2.0

How does Benchmarks in Collection Care work?

Benchmarks in Collection Care is a checklist which is used to carry out a collection care assessment. The checklist defines three levels of collections care.

The three levels are:

- BASIC - a minimum level of practice which all museums, archives and libraries should be able to achieve.
- GOOD - a standard that is achievable by the majority of organisations
- BEST - the highest standard to which a museum, archive or library can aspire.

These three levels are used to evaluate the quality of collection care in ten areas of collection care activity, or **sections**, which are:

- Policy
- Buildings
- Storage
- Housekeeping
- Handling and Use of Collections
- Environmental Monitoring
- Environmental Control
- Conservation
- Surrogate Copies and New Media
- Emergency Preparedness

Some of the sections are further broken down into sub-sections. Sections and sub-sections contain the *benchmarks* against which you measure your level of collection care.

As you work through the Benchmarks checklist it is important to refer to the *Benchmarks 2.0 Glossary* which you will find in *Benchmarks Advice*.

Remember your goal is not to reach best in every benchmark - where you want to get to in any collections care activity is decided by your organisation's aims and policies, and by the use of your collection.

Putting a Benchmarks Assessment into the Context of your Organisation

A collection care assessment is never made without reference to other collections management activities in your organisation, and it is always carried out in the context of your organisational purpose or mission statement, and the policies or statements that flow from it.

So, before you start your Benchmarks Assessment it is worth considering:

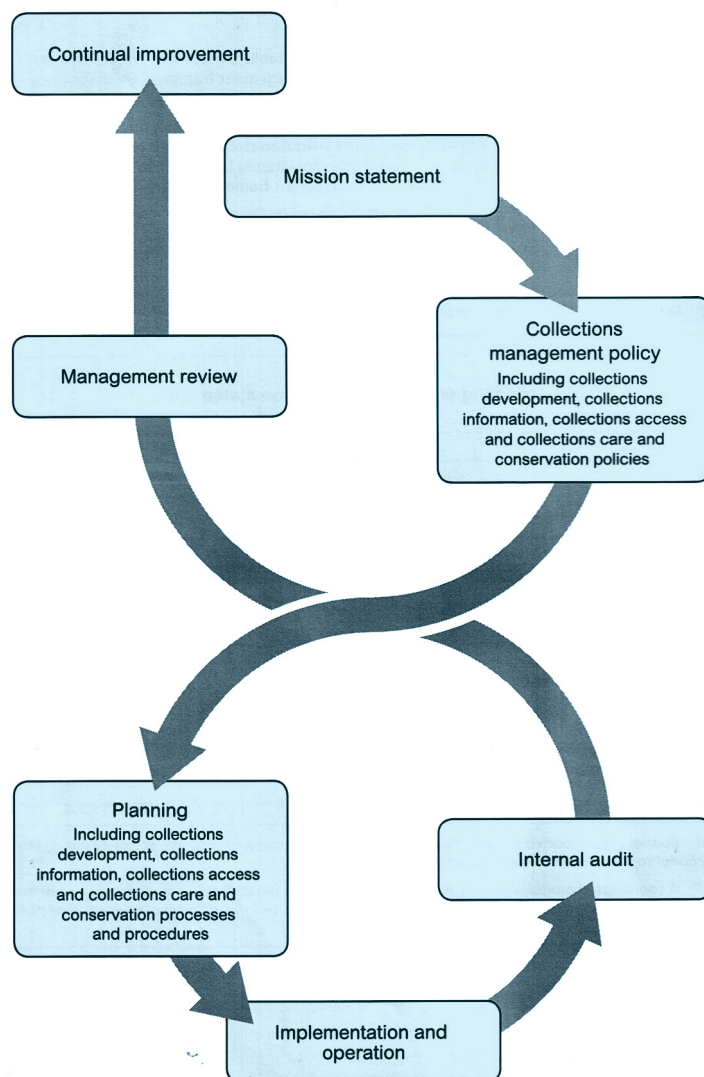
- how the assessment will relate to your organisation's collections care policy or statement.
- how the assessment will help you to plan and target your collections care resources so that you can fulfill your mission statement effectively.

For example: you may have agreed at policy level that some parts of your collection can be more heavily used. These parts of your collection are likely to be at more risk and you might use a targeted Benchmarks Assessment to identify:

- the current level of collection care for these parts of your collection
- areas where care/budget should be targeted in order to minimise the risk to the collection

This approach is very much in line with the *PAS 197:2009 Code of practice for cultural collections management*, which advocates an approach to collections care and conservation based on risk management. Regular assessment of the collections using Benchmarks provides a framework for assessing the risks to your collections and offers a structure for improvement to reduce those risks over time.

PAS 197 illustrates a continuous cycle of improvement which flows from organisational mission, to policies, procedures, processes and planning, through to review and improvement. The PAS 197 cycle looks like this:



In the diagram above a Benchmarks Assessment is one of the processes that would fit into the planning section.

Carrying out a Benchmarks Assessment

There are 3 steps in a Benchmarks Assessment:

Prepare

- Understand your organisational context and how the assessment fits into your goals and policies.

- Establish what it is that you are going to assess - you may want to make an assessment of a single collection or building, or your whole organisation. Remember that Benchmarks is applicable to collections both on display and in storage.
- Decide which checklist format you are going to use. The checklist is available in two formats:
as a pdf document
as an Excel spreadsheet

Which format you use will depend on your circumstances. The Excel spreadsheet gives you the ability to merge and manipulate the data you collect, whereas the pdf will require data to be transcribed before it is re-used. There is advice about using the Excel spreadsheet on the first Tab of the spreadsheet.

- Customise the checklist and decide which parts of it are relevant to the collection you are assessing, by deleting or crossing through individual benchmarks which do not apply to your collection. If for example, you do not hold a particular type of material, say books, then you will be able to ignore those benchmarks for the care of books. Some benchmarks already carry an M (museum), A (archive), or L (library), which indicate that a benchmark relates specifically to either certain types of material, or to practice which is only relevant to a museum, library or archive.

Do not delete any benchmarks in the Policy section: they are applicable to all organisations and provide the building blocks of a well managed collection.

You can customise the pdf by simply crossing through irrelevant benchmarks. There are instructions for deleting benchmarks on the first Tab of the Excel spreadsheet.

- Decide who is going to carry out the assessment and make sure that they understand your organisational context, and have access to all relevant documents. You may decide that the assessment is to be carried out by a private sector consultant, rather than a member of staff. However, it is important to remember that you will need to consult at many different levels within the institution - for example you will need to include staff responsible for conservation, buildings, finance, personnel and collections use.
- Plan how and when you are going to carry out the assessment, thinking about time, people, resources and access to display and storage areas.

Assess

Work through each of the Benchmarks sections, deciding if you meet each level of practice.

The policy section of Benchmarks is a high level assessment of the strategic management of your organisation. If you are carrying out a multi-site assessment, you will almost certainly find that you only need to fill in the Policy section once, as it will apply to all sites within your organisation. It is advisable to complete the Policy section first, before moving onto the other sections. As far as possible we have tried not to repeat policy related benchmarks in other sections.

Indicate if you have:

- **Met** the benchmark
- **Partly Met** the benchmark (ie it is in progress)
- **Not Met** the benchmark

At some point in the process, either at the time of the assessment, or later during planning, you may find that you want to record a comment, and there is space provided for this beside each benchmark. For example under:

3.27 - There is a plan near the storage entrance showing the layout of the store and instructions for the use of any storage equipment such as mobile shelving are clearly displayed

you may have decided this is **Partly Met** and want to add “*New guidelines for use of storage equipment to be approved [Date], as part of review of Health and Safety*”.

The length of time needed to carry out an initial evaluation varies according to your circumstances and the size of the

collection, but most people find that assessment of a single site will take between half a day and two days.

Review and Improve

Once you have completed your assessment you will have a clear picture of your current levels of collections care. You will have a summary of your collections care achievements at Basic, Good and Best.

You now need to:

- Look at the *Not Met* benchmarks and decide, in the context of your organisation's policies, and the risks posed to your collection by use, which benchmarks you want to attain. This is an stage which requires care: you need to achieve basic levels of care, but at the same time you need to balance what you want to achieve against the background of your policies and plans.
- By comparing the outcome with the priorities identified in your Collections Care and Conservation Policy, you will be able to plan for the benchmarks you still need to achieve within the context of your organisation's goals and resources.



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