

COLLECTIONS CARE PRINCIPLES OF ACCESS TO COLLECTION ITEMS

Introduction

This document outlines the principles for access to collection items held by the National Library of Wales (NLW). It is written from the perspective of maintaining access for everyone and forever. NLW has a vast range of collections in a variety of physical formats, which includes over 5 million books and periodicals, 40,000 volumes of manuscripts, 4 million archival documents, 1 million photographs, over a million maps, 60,000 pictures and 4,000 framed works of art. By today, a substantial range of sound and moving image media is also included, together with rapidly increasing quantities of information in digital formats.

Since the Library's foundation in 1907, the need to preserve and conserve its collections has been acknowledged as a fundamental responsibility or 'core function'. The Conservation Unit was established in 1912 and has, since then, worked to enable continuing access to collections. It has done this through conservation treatments, which include the repair of damaged items and strengthening of fragile items, as well as 'preventative conservation' programmes. Preventative conservation, also described as 'preservation', ensures that items do not deteriorate, however long they are kept, by storing them in protective boxes or packaging in secure environmental conditions which are appropriate to their format, and handling them correctly.

The NLW holds its collections in trust for the nation and is responsible for both protecting the items in its care and providing, promoting and enhancing access to this material, whether physical and analogue, or digital. The Library regards good surrogate copies as a valuable way to increase access to collection items, whether for remote users online or to preserve fragile items or material frequently requested by researchers. However, surrogates are not always a substitute for the original. Effective surrogates, where available, reduce potential risks to physical items, especially for the most fragile, unstable or heavily-used items, in accordance with UNESCO's statement that "digitisation can protect documents from deterioration by reducing handling". For all these reasons, onsite users at NLW who request items which have been identified as being highly significant, fragile, or at particular risk of deterioration through atmospheric changes when moved from storage, are asked to provide additional information to assist staff in considering the request. In addition to enabling the Library to make an informed decision on the specific request, this information contributes to better understanding of user requirements and future planning.

Recent experience at the Library has demonstrated the significant value of using traditional conservation techniques alongside digitisation expertise to create digital resources to support new research and learning purposes, including business needs (such as boundary evidence), community research on sources such as the Tithe Maps, and the creation of facsimiles of medieval manuscript books for outreach and learning activities. The first step is to repair and prepare fragile manuscript material for digitisation, the second creates high quality surrogate copies, while the whole process is overseen by conservation expertise and the original material receives skilled treatment to ensure that it survives as long as possible.

1. Definitions

For the purposes of this document, access to collection items is defined in the following ways:

- Direct access to original material in NLW reading rooms
- Access to surrogates through electronic systems, microforms and facsimiles
- Reprographic orders and on-demand digitisation

2. Principles

- 2.1 Users should expect free and unrestricted access to Library collections in the reading rooms and online. Specific reading room areas are designated for using particular types of items.
- 2.2. Every effort will be made to provide direct access to collection material, but where high quality surrogate copies are available, they will be actively promoted as an alternative to the original items
- 2.3 Requests to view some items may require additional consideration by the Library's staff, as noted in 3.1 below.
- 2.4 Although the reading rooms are supervised, users consulting those items which require additional consideration will be supervised more closely
- 2.5 When direct access by users is not possible to collection items, the NLW will strive to provide access through another means, such as placing the item in a glass case, or through an intermediary (such as conservation staff turning pages)
- 2.6 The additional considerations which may affect access to items which users wish to request are not, at present, indicated in the online catalogue, but the Library is working to address this need as soon as possible. A list of items which may be affected is in the process of being compiled, based on the criteria in 3.1 and on ongoing conservation assessments.
- 2.7 Where staff or users observe poor physical condition or damage to an item which has been requested, this should be reported so that Library staff can take remedial action. This may mean that the item falls under the considerations listed in 3.1

3. Additional considerations

Whilst the vast majority of collection items are freely available for consultation in the reading rooms or for reprographic orders without restriction, additional consideration is sometimes necessary prior to providing access to particular collection items. The reasons may include, but are not limited to:

- the item is particularly valuable (old, unique, rare) and of high cultural significance, and/or the physical condition is poor and the risk of damage by handling or exposure to environmental change is significant

- specific restrictions on access apply, such as Data Protection legislation or Freedom of Information exemptions
- the item is unusually difficult to retrieve: e.g. because of temporary relocation or barriers to storage areas, or other factors including external loan, exhibition, or being in the process of cataloguing

3.1 Requests for items that require additional consideration

Readers should complete an ‘Access to Collection Items: further considerations’ form as part of their request for items which require additional consideration. Information provided in this form will inform the decisions made on the particular request and will assist the Library to understand its user needs and guide future surrogate creation and conservation treatment programmes. For reprographic orders, a member of the enquiries team should complete this form on behalf of users.

Reasons for access to original items may include:

- **A surrogate copy is not available or is not appropriate for the user’s needs:** Whilst great care is taken in creating high quality surrogates for research and reprographic purposes, it may not be possible to recreate the functionality or physical experience of the original item in its entirety. Users may therefore require access to original items for their research needs. Where a request relates to a fragile or high-risk item for which no surrogate exists, the Library will consider the creation of a surrogate as part of its operational plan

3.2 Categories of assessment

Assessment Category	Example Material	Action Required
Category A	Items of particular value (old, unique, rare) and of high cultural significance and/or physical condition is poor and risk of damage through handling is significant	Complete an ‘Access to Collection Items: further considerations’ form, with signature from authorized member of staff. Circulation may take more than standard time to allow for evaluation of restricted items and/or acclimatization. It may be necessary to allow 24 hours between request and delivery to the reading room.
Category B	All other items where good surrogates exist.	No signature required, but staff should recommend the use of surrogates.
Category C	Restrictions for other reasons, such as those listed in 3.3	Contact the relevant member of staff.

4. Self service copying and photography

4.1 Self Service copying

Access to self-service photocopiers to allow readers to make copies of post-1910 print collections is available in the north reading room only. For pre-1910 print material, and items from the south reading, the photocopying service must be used.

4.2 Photography in the reading room

Readers are permitted to use their own cameras to make copies of items in the reading room.

Reading room staff should ensure that items are handled correctly and that appropriate supports and copy stands are utilised.

Readers are only permitted to use available light for photography. Additional lighting, including flash, is not permitted.

If a reader wishes to photograph an item in a restricted category, this must be noted on an 'Access to Collection Items: further considerations' form before being signed off.