



Western Cape
Government



Cultural Affairs and Sport

How to organise, manage and care for your archive:
A guide for community organisations in South Africa

This guide to archiving for community organisations has been compiled by the Western Cape Archives and Records Service (WCARS) Cape Town, South Africa. This guide has been made available free of charge as part of WCARS public programming activities. It is made freely available for non-commercial use, display, broadcast, performance and distribution. Attribution in the event of copying, display, broadcast, modification or reuse is requested.

June 2024

How to organise, manage and care for your archive:

A guide for community organisations in South Africa.

Compiled by:

Mary Minicka

Head of Preservation Section
mary.minicka@westerncape.gov.za

Helen Joannides

Outreach and public programming
helen.joannides@westerncape.gov.za

June 2024

Part Three

Providing access to the archive's information and materials:

Managing external researcher and staff access to the archive's materials, how to prevent any unauthorised removal of materials, and managing the handling and usage of archival materials.

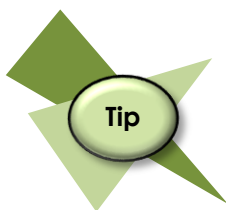
Why develop procedures for access and use of archival materials?

Providing access to records and information is widely considered to be one of the core activities of an archive. There are three components to providing access: (1) providing intellectual access (finding aids that help researchers find what they are looking for in an organised archive); (2) legal access (for example, copyright and other legal permissions, use rights) to make and use copies; and, (3) physical access to records themselves or surrogate information in the form of copies or scanned images of records.

Providing access to records and information requires some organisation so that things run smoothly for both the archive and the researcher, and access is provided in a way that safeguards the records. Protecting the records from unauthorised access by providing researchers, volunteers or staff with sound guidelines as to how they can access and/or use information.

Archives need to have policies and procedures regarding retrieval, use, and access to records. These not only provide guidance for how to implement certain functions and tasks, but also provides a measure of transparency in how archives arrive at certain decisions and how procedures have been set up to address certain issues.

Each archive will need to tailor their policies and procedures to the needs of their records and how the archive operates. Procedures and policies should be reviewed on a regular basis, and updated as circumstances change, or new issues arise that need managing to ensure an archive and its records are not unduly impacted by unreasonable expectations and demands for the consultation and use of their records. Procedures also need to specify the ground on which people may be denied access to records: donor restrictions on certain records may play a role, which needs to be explained, certain records may remain restricted for a period of time, which again can be explained.



Policy documents are usually broad statements of intent (“to provide access to X documents, but not Y documents”). Procedures will fill in the broad detail of policy statements and provide the practical steps to achieve a stated policy goal.

For example, the policy requirement “All researchers must register with the archive” needs to have procedures for how that registration must happen. An archive may require that a researcher must provide proof of identity, state the reason for their research and sign an undertaking to abide by the rules of the archive with respect to how documents are to be used and handled during the consultation process, etc.

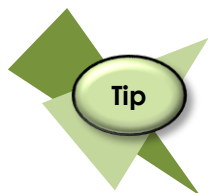
Combined, policy and procedures for access are the “rules” of what you will allow people to look at – or not; what you will allow people to take photographs of, scan and film– or not; what you will allow to be published and broadcast – or not. These rules will also outline how people must handle documents to ensure that no damage or harm occurs to them.

What to put into your access policy

Providing access to archival records has two main aspects that need to be considered when drawing up a policy and the procedures that will specifically address how records are to be accessed: physical access and legal access.

Of the two aspects, physical access is possibly the most recognisable as the work of an archive. Physical access is the opportunity granted to persons to examine documents in-person, or online. The process of physical consultation poses risks to the record from mishandling as well as misappropriation. An access policy needs to address how researchers will be accommodated and supervised to ensure no harm or loss to the collection occurs through the mishandling or theft of archival materials. An access policy will also need to address the use of archival materials for exhibition. It also needs to deal with other, less common situations such as film and use in publications: with the potential copyright and fair use issues outlined, as well as a distinction between reproduction for non-profit and for-profit use by external parties.

The legal aspect of providing access is possibly a little less familiar, but it is no less important to think about and include in your policy and procedures. These issues can have serious consequences for the use of records and the information they contain, as well as the public reputation of an archive. Legal access has roots in the archive's legal relationship with the records in its possession. This includes permission to use them for research or consultation, issues of confidentiality versus open records, ethics of use regarding violent and potentially offensive content, copyright, and the reproduction and distribution of information and images.



Personal information and data are increasingly coming under legal safeguarding requirements. Trends indicate that these legal requirements will only get stricter. Archives need to think about how they are going to manage the various legal requirements for the protection of personal information and data. This includes not only information in records, but also the information that archives gather, for example during the registration of researchers. Policy and procedures need to address this issue.

Donated materials may also need special consideration in how personal and confidential information is to be managed, especially for researcher access and any copying or publishing of that information.

Other areas of managing access to think about for including in your policy and procedures

Archives, their staff and volunteers generally strive to provide the broadest possible access to the records held in an archive. However, there are times when certain records and / or information is restricted. In these cases, policy and procedures should provide information about any restrictions on the access and use of records or information in a way that is clear. Any restrictions should be fairly applied to all users of the archive, to both staff and external researchers. Though organisation staff may also have differing levels of access granted to them, compared to external researchers, they are still expected to exercise care and discretion when dealing with records of a sensitive nature.

Sensitive information of a personal or medical nature or relating to social care of vulnerable persons may need additional restrictions or safeguards on access and usage. Archives have a duty of care with regards to this kind of information, and placing additional safeguards on the access, use and reproduction of information like this is part of their work. The push-back from researchers against any perceived restrictions on their unfettered access to archival materials can be quite strong, with staff and volunteers often being at the receiving end of abusive behaviour. It is better to develop policies and procedures in advance, rather than waiting for an incident to occur.

Policies and procedures on the careful handling of records and of researcher conduct while using archival materials should also be developed. These often take the form of “reading room rules”. Most archives, libraries and other heritage institutions post the reading room rules on their internet and social media platforms, so it is easy to find examples and adapt them to your archive’s needs.

Policies on the handling of archival materials should also extend to how staff can handle, transport, and care for archival materials. Also consider including policies on the use, transport and handling of archival materials that are to be exhibited, whether exhibition is in-house or on loan to another institution for a determined period. Safeguards on the careful handling and usage of archival materials extends to staff, who are most likely to do most of the handling that archival materials experience.

Archives are now often used for filming and photography. With a resulting increase in the use of historical materials in documentaries and other forms of media. This can be a great way of getting people to know about your archive. However, any commercial filming and photographic activity will need to be carefully managed to ensure that no harm is caused to the archival materials and that the work of the archive is not unduly disrupted. Filming and production crews will need to be informed in advance of how they can and cannot work in the archive and with its records, and their work needs to be adequately supervised by a staff member with enough seniority to call a halt to any activity that will pose a danger to the wellbeing of the records or unduly impact on the functioning of the archive. Consider charging daily fees for the work that will have to be done to accommodate the work of a film or photography.

Some of these issues may need their own policy or procedures to manage, if they become a big enough problem. There is no reason that a particularly difficult issue cannot have its own policy and set of procedures to better manage it. Some really complex issues often benefit from having additional policy and procedure guardrails in place.

Managing access to archival records on a day-to-day basis

Access policies and procedures will need to cover all the ways in which information and research queries will be directed to the archive: in-person, by email, and telephonic requests. Any limitations to access (e.g., charging for answering queries, or requiring the making of appointments) will need to be made clear. Develop policies and procedures for how researchers will be accommodated, how requests for reproductions of archival materials will be handled.

Policy and procedures can also stipulate when the archive will be open to outside researchers, and when it will be available to staff of the organisation. For archives with very small numbers of staff or volunteers available to assist researchers, access hours may need to be limited to certain mornings, days or hours of the week to make sure someone is on hand to assist researchers and to monitor their use of the records during consultation. Some small archives require appointments to be made in advance. Conducting a quick telephone or email interview with a prospective researcher can also help staff and volunteers to establish in advance what the researcher is looking for, and can help streamline the providing of access for both parties.

There is additional information on how to manage researcher access to archival records in this section. Please see the following pages in this section for information on: how to safeguard collection materials; and, on providing access to archival materials.

Providing access: accommodating researchers and responding to requests

Providing access to information is one of the core activities of an archive. It begins before the first researcher knocks on the door, sends an email or makes a phone call. It begins with the process of compiling finding aids. The process of arranging and describing collection materials is the start making archival materials accessible. Through the indexes and finding aids that are compiled from the arrangement and description process, researchers and archivists can search for information to answer queries.

Providing access is also about how to accommodate researchers and their queries. Research visits can be either virtual or in person. Archives need an access policy that will address both sides to the provision of access, how the archives indexes its materials, compiles its finding aids, and how the archives will accommodate research visits / queries.

Archives have access guidelines designed both to help preserve materials and protect them from theft or damage, ensuring they will remain available for future researchers. Guidelines will differ between repositories. Typical guidelines include:

1. Registration and personal identification

Many archives ask researchers to fill out an application form, either on paper or online, or to acquire a researcher card before they begin using materials.

These forms typically include name, address, institutional affiliation, materials to be used, and a description of the research project. Photo identification may also be requested. Registration practices familiarize staff with the researchers to better assist them; and may also be used to aid a criminal investigation if theft or vandalism occurs. Some archives also require a note of recommendation or special permissions before admitting researchers.

2. Removal of coats and bags

Another method used to discourage theft is requiring that researchers remove bulky outer clothing and store purses, bags, binders, and laptop cases outside of the consulting area. Many archives have lockers or other monitored areas that researchers can use to store personal possessions. If the only storage option is a nonsecure environment, such as a public coat rack, be sure to remove valuable items like keys and wallets from bags and pockets.

3. No food, drink, sweets, or gum

This guideline is designed to help preserve the collections. Spills can irreparably damage documents or require costly repairs by a conservator. The presence of food may also attract insects or rodents that infest archival materials. Crumbs and dropped bits of food can stain and mark documents.

4. Use of pencil only

This is a preservation practice in case accidental marks are made on archival materials; pencil can be erased while pen marks cannot be removed without recourse to chemical treatments.

Beyond the concern with accidental pen marks, there can be other considerations limiting the use of writing tools and notepads in consulting rooms. Some archives restrict researchers to only bringing in a few pencils and an eraser (with sharpeners available inside the consulting room). Pencil cases can hold sharp objects that can be used to cut pages from books and are sometimes not permitted in consulting rooms. Pads of paper can be used to slip paper records into, to snuggle them out of the archive. Paper is either provided or paper pads are inspected on entry and on leaving the consulting room. Unfortunately, there are those who enter archives as researchers with sinister intent.

5. Request forms

Forms are used in a variety of situations, from "call slips" that specify the boxes or books a researcher would like to see, to forms requesting reproductions (such as photocopies).

Some forms have very practical uses, like verifying that the correct materials are retrieved, calculating fees, or keeping track of usage for statistical and preservation purposes. By recording exactly which materials were used and by whom, they can track the movement and usage of archival materials and provide verifiable data on the use of the archive's materials. Forms can also serve as a theft deterrent, with traceable information about who consulted what.

Care needs to be taken with the gathering of personal information and data. Legislation on the collection, use and storage of personal information requires the careful management of this information. Any archive collecting researcher's personal information need to be aware of the current provisions for its safeguarding.

Forms can be useful in notifying the researcher of any legal requirements to take into consideration for how materials are used. For example, photocopies of unpublished materials may require additional permissions before they may be published. The researcher's signature on the request form indicates that they have read and understood these stipulations, and that the archival repository has done its duty informing researchers that those conditions exist.

6. Gloves

In most cases clean hands, free of lotions or perfumes, are sufficient for handling materials. Gloves may be necessary for handling metal objects or photographic materials (photographic prints and negatives) to protect the materials from the oils and other residues left by hands. An archive should provide gloves if they are required. White cotton gloves are not recommended, non-latex powderless gloves are preferred.

7. Laptops, cell phones, cameras, recorders, and personal scanners

Many archives allow the use of cameras, laptops, and other personal digital devices, but restrictions may exist. Certain archival records may require permissions to be granted before they are reproduced, and the lights used by cameras and scanners can cause text and images on documents to fade if they are overexposed.

Guidelines in these areas are for security and preservation purposes, as well as for ensuring that all researchers can work in a relatively quiet, distraction-free environment. Archival staff may also ask to inspect any devices researchers bring with them before entering or leaving the research area.

8. Careful handling and maintaining order in boxes /files

To ensure that materials are maintained for future use, all archives ask researchers to handle materials carefully. While older materials are generally thought to be more fragile, even new materials need to be handled with care, so they remain available to the next generation of researchers.

Researchers may not write on records, lean or press on them, place them on the floor or allow them to overhang tables. If researchers are unsure how to open a box or handle a record, they need to ask for assistance.

It is important that materials remain in the order in which the researcher received them so they can be located later and observed in their proper contexts. Misfiling or changes in order can lead the archival staff to assume that items are missing and inconvenience future researchers. Repositories generally provide place markers to help a researcher keep materials in order and to mark items requested for photocopying. An archive may have additional guidelines like removing one folder from a box at a time, leaving reshelving to archival staff, etc.

9. Limiting the number of items issued to researchers at a time

Researchers will be provided with a limited number of records for consultation at any one time. Depending on the archive and the staffing available to them, this can range from providing only one box at a time, to extracting the requested record from a box and presenting it to the researcher while retaining the rest of the box.

There are a number of reasons for providing a limited number of records for researchers to work with at any one time. These include security concerns. Researcher's activities are more easily monitored if there are only a small number of records on their desk at any one time. Also, records from different boxes are less likely to get mixed up (or go missing) if the researcher only gets to consult a small number at any one time.

Different kinds of records may have differing levels of restrictions when they are consulted. Some records may be of such importance that the researcher is individually supervised by a staff member.

Archives set their limits on how much can be requested and consulted at any one time, based on their staff resourcing and concerns for the safety and security of their records. For smaller archives, setting limits on the days or hours during which the archive is open to external researchers can help in ensuring enough staff are on hand to properly supervise researchers.

Providing access and more: Digitisation

Increasingly, digitising archival records is seen as a way to provide access. However, it should be noted that it also has a role to play in preservation. First, it is a way to ensure old and fragile records as not handled as often as digital copies can be consulted instead. Second, should disaster strike, you have copies of significant records.

Digitisation and archives is a field on its own and an in-depth look is beyond the scope of this guide. Moreover, should you wish to embark on a digitisation project for your archive, here are some tips to consider.

- What is your archive's goal in embarking on a digitising programme?
 - Do you want to safeguard a few key records, by providing digital surrogates?
 - Do you want to make your finding aids and inventories, and a few selected records available online?
 - Do you want to eventually put your whole archive online?
- Plan for the digitisation goal you want to achieve, even if you are doing it step by step.
- What resources do you have for digitising? Digitising can be costly and time-consuming to do properly. Archival standards for digitisation are high and require enormous digital storage capacity.
- Make sure you have the know-how you will need:
 - Equipment, which includes staff trained to use it, and people who know how to handle to prevent damage to the records while scanning.
 - Database or system to capture information about your scanned records (called metadata) in and people trained to capture it so your records are searchable.
 - Enough digital storage for high resolution images,
- Software and equipment change quickly. Factor in how you will respond if the technology changes.
- Digitising does not mean your archive can dispose of the original records in paper format. Your archive has been entrusted with their care in perpetuity. Now that you have scanned images of the original records, these scanned images also become your responsibility to safeguard in perpetuity.
- The principles for managing a paper-based collection, do not always translate to a digital archive. New ways to manage records will need to be implemented to manage the digitised versions.
- Managing your digital records will require ongoing maintenance. Scanned images and the accompanying metadata will need to be migrated across new generations of software to preserve them from digital obsolescence in the long-term.



Archival access

- Access is a core activity of an archive.
- Archives normally have policies and procedures regarding retrieval, use, and access to records.
- Access can be defined as: intellectual access (finding aids), legal access (permissions, use rights) and physical access (virtually or in-person).
- Particularly sensitive information of a personal or medical nature or relating to social care of vulnerable persons may need additional restrictions or safeguards on access and usage.
- Access can include providing copies of archival records for researchers, as well as allowing filming activity in the archive or of the record.

Considerations for accommodating researchers

- Registration and personal identification of researchers.
- Coats and bags are not permitted in the consulting room / space.
- Food and beverages are not permitted in the consulting room.
- Use of pencils only when consulting records, other restrictions on writing tools and notepads may also apply.
- Request forms
- Use of gloves when consulting records.
- Use of laptops and other electronic / digital devices
- Careful handling of records during consultation, and maintenance of the order of records in boxes and folders.
- A limited number of records will be issued to researchers at a time

Digitisation for access

- Digitisation for access needs to be planned for. It is almost like setting up a completely new archive.
- It will require a budget of its own, that will not only include the software and equipment, but ongoing training of staff.
- The processing of the scanned images and adding of metadata need to be planned for.
- The migration of scanned images is currently the only way to preserve digital records.

Western Cape Archives and Records Service
Department of Cultural Affairs and Sport
72 Roeland Street, Cape Town, 8000
tel: +27 21 483 0400
www.westerncape.gov.za/cas



**Western Cape
Government**