

Emergency Planning

Introduction

Emergency planning is about minimising the risk of disasters and limiting the damage that is caused when they occur. Disasters can be caused by natural forces, such as fires, floods or subsidence, by unpredictable happenings such as explosions, or by criminal acts ranging from vandalism to terrorism.

Many museums have established procedures to deal with staff and visitors in the event of an emergency, but fewer have equally well-developed plans to rescue their collections. Under the Accreditation Standard, museums must have an emergency plan (also called a disaster plan – see 1.7 and Appendix 4 of the Accreditation Standard) that covers arrangements for staff and visitors, for collections and buildings, a risk assessment of threats such as fire, water, theft and vandalism, and procedures that staff should follow in the event of an emergency.

This factsheet has been prepared to help you to deal with emergencies effectively. It takes you through the stages of disaster planning, starting with making an assessment of the risks of disasters occurring, then suggests ways in which you can help prevent disasters, and finally shows how you can deal effectively with them once they have happened. Having put all these procedures in place, it then shows you how to tie them together into a coherent emergency plan. At the end of the factsheet you will find further sources of information.

Before You Start

Planning for emergencies can seem daunting, and for this reason it is suggested that you should consider giving staff (or volunteers if you are a volunteer-run or supported museum) the following roles:

- One person to act as an emergency co-ordinator. In smaller or volunteer-run museums two people could share this role.
- A small emergency planning team to help the emergency co-ordinator, made up of people familiar with the museum's key areas of operations who can help the emergency co-ordinator carry out a risk assessment and then develop an emergency plan.
- A salvage team, which can be the same people as the emergency planning team and which will be responsible for rescuing objects in the event of a disaster and removing them for treatment or temporary storage. If possible the team should include people who have some knowledge of the collections and their conservation needs and who have been trained in object-handling. They should also be briefed on priority objects for salvage.

Remember that disasters may not happen to the museum alone – if the surrounding area is suffering, for example from a flood, rescue services may not be able to help the museum, or may even wish to use it in their rescue plan. You may wish to consult them to find if they are planning to use the museum building. Smaller museums may find it helpful to work with other similar institutions to develop their plans, and you will find suggestions on ways of doing this in the section on **Writing the Emergency Plan**.

Once you have decided who is going to be responsible for developing your emergency plan and procedures, you can begin by assessing the risks to which your museum is most vulnerable.

Risk Assessment

Identifying risks can help you manage them more effectively, and is the essential first step in developing an emergency plan. A risk assessment should cover the building and site, visitor services, the collections, collections care and conservation, security and health and safety.

The stages of risk assessment are:

- Identify hazards; that is, anything with the potential to cause harm such as electricity or chemicals. Hazards also include things such as highly uneven floors, trailing cables and inadequately lit stairways. "Risk" is the probability that such a hazard will cause harm.

- Decide who or what might be harmed and how
- Think about how often the risk might occur and how severe the outcome would be, then take steps to remove the hazard or reduce the risk to an acceptable level. For instance, improve the lighting on a stairway, and attach high visibility tape along its treads.
- Record your findings. This is a legal obligation for museums with five or more paid employees, and good practice for smaller institutions.
- Review the assessment after changes to work practices, and at least every five years.

Using the Risk Assessment to Prevent Disasters

You can now begin to use your risk assessment to focus on the types of emergency which are most likely to occur in your museum, and develop measures and procedures to reduce the risk. At this stage you should: -

- Take advice from the fire, police and ambulance services.
- Think about the particular risks your museum faces; for example it may be vulnerable to flooding because of its location.
- Ensure that you inspect the fabric of your buildings and services regularly, and that resulting maintenance is carried out, for example unblocking gutters. If you do not own your building, make sure that your landlord is aware of any maintenance that is needed.
- Inspect weak spots and vulnerable areas; for example basements which are vulnerable to flooding either externally or from leaking pipes. If you use these areas for storage of collections, can you relocate the objects to a safer area?
- Check that your detection and alarm systems for fire and water are functioning properly.
- Ensure that you have enough fire extinguishers and that they, and the sprinkler system if you have one, are working properly.
- Back-up your computer files and documentation frequently, and store copies in a separate building.
- Ensure that your insurance for public liability and loss of, or damage to, the museum building and collections is adequate and up to date. You may wish to include the cost of getting the museum up and running again, or temporary facilities in the meantime (e.g. renting a room).

Practical Preparation for Disasters

For staff, volunteers and visitors

Developing procedures to ensure the safety of staff, volunteers and visitors is one of the most important components of an emergency plan. You need to:

- Develop evacuation procedures for staff and visitors.
- Ensure that visitors know what to do in an emergency by clearly marking escape routes, providing written instructions and using the public address system if you have one. Do your procedures take account of the needs of people with physical disabilities or learning difficulties?
- Check that all staff are aware of how alarms sound, the locations of fire alarms and fire-fighting equipment, how to use extinguishers, fire and evacuation drills, bomb scare procedure, key control procedures and first aid procedures.
- Devise a call-out system to be used in the event of an emergency, using for example a telephone “tree”, where each person in turn calls one or more numbers from a list.
- Train staff and volunteers in the emergency response team to handle objects safely.

Many of your staff and volunteers will need training in order to carry out these procedures. Training can be varied, and could include inviting speakers from the police or fire service, to talk about day-to-day risks and how to minimise them. Some museums also carry out mock disasters, though these take time and resources to organise. Make sure that all staff regularly refresh their knowledge of the Emergency Plan.

For collections

Ensuring the safety of your collections is also a vital part of your emergency plan. You should:

- Make a list of those objects to be given priority in the salvage operation. You may decide to give priority to objects of national or international importance, or those of special significance to the museum. These priorities may change over time and the list should be regularly reviewed.
- Assemble a salvage kit of materials and equipment to be kept in a safe place near the museum; if you are a small museum, consider sharing a kit with a nearby institution, and keep it in a mutually convenient location. You might include spare equipment such as first-aid kits, protective clothing, torches and spare batteries, basic tools, paper towels, sponges, buckets and polythene sheeting, disposable cameras and documentation equipment, collapsible crates, simple tools (hammer, pliers, screwdrivers, Stanley knife), waterproof tape and any materials required for the salvage of your priority objects.
- Identify the best routes for removing objects from the building. Try them out to make sure they work. Identify where the objects may be kept after they are removed from the building.
- Write guidelines on how to treat damaged objects in the 48 hours following a disaster, after you have taken advice from a conservator or collection care specialist. Objects which have been salvaged must be logged and tagged, then removed to a secure area for immediate treatment or temporary storage. At this stage they should be examined if possible by a conservator who can decide on immediate treatment.
- Assemble the contact details of other services you may need – insurance company (with policy number), electricians, plumbers, equipment and crate hire, temporary storage facilities, freezers, conservators, and other voluntary organisations which can help.

Writing the Emergency Plan

By now you should have most of the information you need to write your emergency plan. The plan's purpose is to set down the information and procedures that have come out of the planning and risk assessment process. It should be concise and clearly written, and you should test it on colleagues to make sure that it is easy to understand. Your plan will only be effective if the format is clear and the contents are concise and easily understood. It helps if all staff are familiar with it and feel that they were involved in its production.

It may help to think about the following questions:

- What is the plan for?
- Who will use it?
- How will they get access to it?
- Where can it be kept securely? (It may contain sensitive information, such as staff telephone numbers and the location of objects)
- How will they use it?

Format

- A loose-leaf format, for example in a ring binder, makes distribution and updating easy.
- Include a clear list of contents and prominent numbering of pages and sections.
- It should be easily identifiable, with a highly visible cover and title.
- Make it waterproof, either laminated or enclosed in plastic sleeves
- Print it in minimum type size of 12pt. Do not use dark coloured paper as it can be difficult to read or copy.
- It should be dated and include the date for review and the version number (e.g. version 3) on the front.

Contents

- Details of staff on call and keyholders, and arrangements for call-out.
- Contact details of essential services, conservators, consultants, security, insurers and loss adjusters, and building surveyor.
- Floorplans which identify key features of the building and its contents, to help with salvage and loss control.
- Location and contents of salvage kit.
- Details of suppliers of specialist equipment and services.
- List and locations of objects for priority salvage.
- First aid conservation notes for types of material in the collections.
- Record sheets for logging the salvage of objects, their condition, location to which they are moved and any emergency treatment carried out.

You can contact the Accreditation Officer at SWMLAC for a copy of Wiltshire Museums' template for an emergency plan, which contains useful information.

Sources of further information

Emergency Planning

Museum Practice, Spring 2005

Risk management for museums

Association of Independent Museums

Focus paper 12, 2000

Available from AIM Publications, Lindford Cottage, Church Lane, Cocking, Midhurst, West Sussex GU29 0HW.

Tel/fax: 01730 812419. Email: heavyhorse@mistral.co.uk

Emergency manual for historic buildings and collections: EMMS guidance on drawing up emergency plans.

Interactive CD ROM

2001

£29.50

Available from www.emms.org.uk/public.htm (Accessed 13.9.05) or from East Midlands Museums Service, PO Box 7221, Colston Bassett, Nottingham NG12 3WH. Tel: 01949 81734, Fax: 01949 81859, Email emms@emms.org.uk

1.7 and Appendix 4 of the Accreditation Standard