

SECTION 6: ACCESS AND OUTREACH

There is no legal obligation for a private charity, as most religious orders or communities are, to make its archives available for general public access. It may be that your archive is intended principally for use within the community, particularly if it is a closed order. The level of access you allow is up to you.

Once the community has decided that it wishes to enable access to its archive by external researchers, you then must consider what the policy and procedures will be for such researchers. Forward planning is a good way to ensure that the experience is fulfilling for all involved and reduce any risk of harm to the archive material, the user, or to you and your community.

Basic considerations for allowing access

The first, and fundamental, decision to make is how you want archive users to interact with you. Think about the time and resources that you have available. If you are only in the archive one day a week and do not have reading room space, you probably want to limit reader visits to a small number each year. Also think about the state of the community's collections: are they uncatalogued? Have fragile or valuable items been identified? Is there material that has to be closed? Closure periods should be decided upon for general categories of records and these closures approved by the governing body (and documented) so that access is not provided on an ad hoc basis. Some categories of records that are very particular to religious congregations (such as Chapter books) will need to have closures decided upon by the Archivist in consultation with the governing body. For some other more general categories of records you can look elsewhere for examples e.g. school records in local record offices. Is there material that could be embarrassing or distressing? Remember that where personal information relating living individuals is concerned, you will need to meet the legal requirements of the General Data Protection Regulations 2018 which commonly involve closures of up to 100 years. Advice may be obtained on such issues from local record offices or The National Archives. It may be that after considering such factors you decide to deal only with enquiries by correspondence for now.

This is entirely your choice but, in making it, you need to consider the level of service you can support and make it clear to potential users. If your service is very limited compared to other archives, explain why this is the case. Generally, archive users are sympathetic to restrictions imposed by a lack of time and resources if this is communicated clearly.

If you decide that you could support external reader visits, an amount of forward planning and organisation will be required to make sure that these are smooth and low risk. This is common sense and can be done at minimal expense. If you already host visits from members of the public, some of these precautions should be familiar. As with all security, much of it is about psychology. Here are some points to consider:

General premises security

- Visitors should not be able to enter non-public areas or archive storage areas. Make sure that there are working locks on doors and windows.
- If a visitor needs to enter a non-public area (e.g. a contractor), they should always be accompanied.
- Have clear rules about which members of your community or staff members can enter archive storage areas and why.
- Permit visits by prior appointment only, except in very well resourced institutions. This also allows some level of identity checking before providing access to researchers e.g. asking a student to provide a reference from their supervisor.
- If you usually work on your own, install a doorbell or entry phone for the archives area, as well as a panic button or mobile phone in case of emergency.
- Think about what you would do if you felt threatened by a visitor. You may want to record this as a formal procedure and share it with those you would call for help.

Setting up a reading area

- The ideal is a regular-shaped enclosed area, such as a square or rectangular room. If there are alcoves or areas which cannot be seen from the rest of the room, try to block them off with furniture.
- The reader should be clearly visible to you wherever they are in the room
- Have a clean, tidy, dedicated area for the reader to work in, and a separate area with a clear sightline for the invigilator. A refectory style table can be a useful readers' desk if you have oversized archive material.
- Require all readers to remove anything that could be used to hide and carry away documents such as bags, coats, scarves and unnecessary folders. Set up a secure cloakroom area, if you can, or some lockers to hold all these items. Regular archive users will be prepared for this.
- Ask readers to let you know if they need to leave the room. If you have several at once or a large site, you could ask them to sign in and out. There should be one point of entry or exit only (but bear fire regulations in mind)
- Consider what you would do if you need to leave the room -you could ask the reader to step outside and lock the room, take the archive material with you or lock it away, or have someone else 'on call' if needed. Some archives film users on a webcam or CCTV but make sure that you tell them first, and delete the footage once it is no longer needed.
- A lockable drawer or small safe could be useful to secure archive material quickly.

Regulating readers

- Confirm someone's identity and the subject of their research on their first visit. Most archives ask to see photo ID and proof of address. You may find it

appropriate to ask for a letter of introduction in some circumstances.

Whatever you decide on, ensure that your policy is clear and applied fairly.

- Provide written guidelines on what constitutes acceptable ID. If you are unsure, many larger archives publish their policy on their websites or be able to provide a copy.
- Check identity and log each subsequent visit, usually by asking them to sign in. Exactly how you do this is up to you.
- Create reading room rules to set out appropriate behaviour and practice for all users, display them clearly, and ensure that readers are fully cognisant with them on their first visit.
- Be clear that access to archives is conditional on obeying these rules. You could ask readers to sign them on first arrival.
- Ask your superior, leadership team or trustees to endorse the rules. This makes clear that they are organisational policy, not just restrictions that you have personally imposed.
- Try to ensure this information is available to readers before their visit so that they can make sure their research is compliant, and any questions can be dealt with beforehand.

Producing documents

- Clear and efficient procedures are the best way to reduce damage to documents by researchers.
- Try to find out what they will need to look at before they visit so that you are able to get the documents ready, check that they are present, undamaged, and have no restrictions on use.
- Consider how many documents or folders you are prepared to produce at once. These should be small batches to reduce the risk of anything being lost or misplaced, but not so small that you need to keep fetching more.
- Have a way of checking documents in and out of the storage area, such as a database, logbook, or triplicate paper slips.
- Have a way of checking that nothing has been removed from a file, such as a unique reference for each document, page numbering, or counting pages before handing it over.
- Do not produce material that is fragile or damaged: the easiest way to produce a surrogate is to take a good quality digital photograph.
- Have a policy on copying documents whether by readers taking their own photos, or staff copying only.

As far as possible these guidelines and rules should be consistently applied to all users, not only external researchers.

If you feel that you are not able to offer reader visits, be explicit about the services that you are able to provide, the timescale and whether there is a charge. Set a clear limit on how much research you are prepared to do. Charges should be realistic but proportionate, with a view to covering costs rather than making a profit.

Next step: publicising the archive

Now let your potential users know that the archive exists. Consider who those people might be. Use the content of the archives as a guide. If you think the primary interest would be from those in your community or with an existing link to it, then use your usual channels of communication to reach them. Make sure that you are listed in any order, parish or diocesan or denominational directories. A regular article in a newsletter, parish or school magazine is an effective way to raise interest, as well as encouraging the use of archive material in any groups you might be associated with or responsible for leading, such as parish discussion groups or history groups, 'friends' organisations or tertiaries, retreats, contact with schools, catechesis, or even in pastoral visiting.

If your archives record the interaction of your community with external bodies such as records relating to schools, medical care, work in parishes or local charities, local history groups and family historians may find them of interest. Local libraries or history centres will often be able to put you in touch with such groups. Search the internet for local websites or forums which have a history section. Other organisations e.g. schools, hospitals, churches, that you had a link with in the past, or perhaps still have, may run their own heritage groups who would welcome an opportunity to work in partnership.

There are many existing networks for archivists and academics in the field of religious archives and religious orders within the Anglican or Roman Catholic churches. These take many forms, from subscription organisations, regular conferences to informal mailing lists. There are also several groups and mailing lists aimed at those working in archives, libraries and records management many of which are free or low cost and open to any interested party. These are all places in which you might want to raise awareness of your collections as an academic resource or to ask for help with specific issues you encounter. A list is provided in the appendix. You should also think about whether your archives could be interesting to academics outside the field of religious history and try to create links with the relevant departments. Some examples might be architectural history, history of art, music, sociology, history of education or social work, history of medicine, migration, missionary studies and many more.

Outreach tools

Outreach may sometimes seem a frightening term. All it means is encouraging people to use your archives, which is not so different perhaps to encouraging people to visit your church or community, to use a drop-in centre or to learn more about faith. If you have done any of that before, then you have the skills to create an outreach programme for your archive, even on a very small scale. Why not replace the word "outreach" with the word "mission" and consider how your archives might be able to form a part of your community's mission?

Heritage rooms

Essentially, these are small museums to showcase parts of heritage collections to visitors. Usually they contain fixed collections, so the content does not change, but

some include cabinets for temporary exhibitions. Several religious orders have brought in external companies to design heritage rooms, including audio visual exhibits, touch screens to view documents and professionally produced displays of plate, textiles and archival material. In one case, a whole Pugin convent has been given over to this use. However, the cost of these can reach five figure sums and there is an ongoing cost of maintenance, particularly for audio visual equipment. These investments can pay off but need serious consideration as to cost versus benefit. It is perfectly possible to produce a heritage room 'in house' at a much lower cost, even just a few hundred pounds. Display cases and exhibition equipment can often be purchased second hand from other archives and museums and local museums services can sometimes offer advice. The key is to make sure that nothing on display is being damaged, and where possible to use copies or facsimiles of archival material, or artefacts of which you have many examples.

Temporary exhibitions

If the idea of a heritage room still seems ambitious, or perhaps you simply do not have the space, consider a temporary or portable exhibition. With a good quality digital camera or a scanner, most archive material can be safely copied for display and then all that is needed is a display board or table top. Portable table top cases are also available. Portability could come from digital images printed on boards or banners or displayed in a PowerPoint presentation. This could be a convenient way to use any films or audio recording you may have among your collections. The travelling exhibition approach is useful where you have groups of interested people who are prevented from visiting you for any reason, including cost, distance or health. If you have ministries involving elderly or disabled people, it could provide a way to introduce them to heritage activities or involve them with archive work.

Websites and social media

If you want to encourage readers and visitors, a web presence for the archive is crucial. Nowadays, if it cannot be found on Google, there is a tendency to assume that the thing does not exist. The first step is to be listed on Find an Archive which is the most comprehensive directory of the archival repositories in the UK and is maintained by The National Archives. If your community has a website, make sure that there is a page or section for the archive which provides clear information about location, opening hours, access and contact details. This is the best place to provide access to the information and policies mentioned above, and any lists or catalogues of archive material you have. Some smaller and remote archives have decided to provide access to archive material entirely through their website by digitising most of their collections. If you do not have a website you can use at the moment, then creating one is simple and low cost, and can be done by anyone who is able to browse the Internet.

Social media can be a good way to promote an archive, using sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. These are particularly useful to keep in touch with people who are already regular users, or already linked to your organisation about new ideas and projects, however small, and to feel part of a community. This can be helpful if you work on your own. However, once you post text or images on these

sites, you do lose control of it to some extent. It can be shared or copied anywhere in the world, by anyone. It is crucial to make sure that you have the correct copyright permission to post an image, and to be comfortable with the possibility of others taking that image and using it for purposes that you might not agree with. If this is a concern then consider uploading a low resolution copy or inserting a 'watermark'.

Usually postings on heritage subjects do remain very good natured. If you are considering using these sites to promote your archive, a first step would be to join as a private individual first and then to follow and interact with organisations that you are interested in to learn how things work.

In all these areas, be realistic in your aspirations and goals, talk to others who have undertaken similar initiatives and do not be afraid to enlist the help of trusted and knowledgeable volunteers, under appropriate supervision, where they can supply time, effort and know-how which may not otherwise be available to you.