

# **Preserving Communities:**

## **A Guide to Archiving for Community Organizations**

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## Table of Contents

I. Introduction.....	4
II. What are archives? .....	5
1. The Purpose of Archives .....	5
2. Types of Archives.....	5
a. Government.....	5
b. Academic.....	5
c. Issue-Specific Archives .....	6
d. Institutional.....	6
3. Which Records Are Archival?.....	6
III. Why should we archive our records?.....	7
1. Historic Legacy.....	7
2. Research.....	7
3. Documentation of Society.....	7
4. Documentation of Your Group's Work.....	7
IV. The Importance of Records Management.....	8
1. Appoint a records manager .....	8
2. Use Naming Conventions for File Titles .....	8
3. Centralize Your Records .....	8
4. Cut Down on Redundancy .....	9
5. Migrate Formats .....	9
6. Remember Email.....	9
7. Create a Retention Schedule .....	9
8. Create a Records Management Manual .....	9
V. Challenges faced by community organizations with recommendations .....	10
1. Turnover.....	10
a. Exit Survey.....	10
b. Transition Documents.....	10
c. Collect Records from Out-Going Members.....	10
2. Inability to Devote Staff Time to Records Management and/or Archival Issues.....	10
a. Enlist Volunteers.....	10
b. Enlist Students.....	11
c. Grant Opportunities.....	12
3. Lack of Space/Unsuitable Space for Long-Term Storage of Records .....	144
VI. Donating Records to an Archive .....	14

1. Choosing a Suitable Archive.....	14
2. Negotiation the Transfer of Records .....	14
a. Privacy Concerns.....	14
b. Tax Receipts.....	155
c. Intellectual Rights .....	15
d. Responsibilities of the Archives.....	15
e. Arrange the Physical Transfer .....	15
3. Preparing Records for Transfer .....	15
a. Identify Archival Records .....	15
b. Provide Contextual Information.....	15
c. Box the Records .....	16
VII. Creating an In-House Archive.....	16
1. Create a Suitable Space.....	16
2. Designate an Archivist.....	16
3. Formulate an Arrangement System.....	17
4. Access.....	17

## **I Introduction**

This guide is intended to assist grassroots community organizations with archiving their records. Many community organizations are not properly represented in archival holdings across Canada and this absence creates a gap in the historical record as well as creates difficulties for the groups themselves as organizational memory is lost with high turnover rates. This leads to a lot of redundant effort due to the fact that projects cannot be built upon if there is no record of the project ever being undertaken to begin with.

It is my intention that this guide be consulted for advice on how to begin the archival process, as well as instilling a sense of importance in the long-term preservation of the extensive and vital work being done by community organizations across Canada.

This project was undertaken as part of my studies for a Master of Library and Information Studies degree at Dalhousie University, Halifax. The project was developed over the course of one academic year, from September 2008 to April 2009, and could not have succeeded without the help of my academic supervisors, Kathryn Harvey of the University of Guelph Archives and Special Collections and Susan McClure of the Halifax Regional Municipal Archives.

Furthermore, the research for this guide was undertaken with the co-operation and support of three Halifax-based community organizations: the Ecology Action Centre, the Halifax Cycling Coalition, and the Roberts Street Social Centre. Thank you to these organizations and to the individuals within them who took the time to assist with this project.

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## **II. What are archives?**

### **1. The Purpose of Archives**

Archives are responsible for collecting unique records (a record can be any media, from paper to audiovisual material and photographs), arranging them in a manner that reflects their original use, describing them so that they can be searched and retrieved for research purposes, making them accessible for research, and ensuring long-term preservation. Archives are different from libraries in this regard, as any record found in an archive will be the only copy in existence and these records are not loaned out to the public the way books are from libraries.

In addition to the above, archivists are also responsible for ensuring that archival holdings present a holistic documentation of society and not just social elites, government sectors, and private business. In recent decades, more effort has been given to collecting the records of labour unions, minorities, and community organizations. These efforts will be most successful with the full participation of those whose papers are to be archived, and this guide will hopefully make headway in that regard.

### **2. Types of Archives**

There are several different kinds of archives and it is important to understand the difference between them if your group is considering donating records (see Section VI for more information on archival donations).

In general, archives fall under one of the following categories:

#### **a. Government**

Government archives exist on the municipal, provincial, and federal level. Their primary purpose is to retain government records for use by the government and public research. However, many government archives also collect non-governmental archives if they are mandated to do so. In this case, government archives will only collect those non-government records that exist within their geographic scope. For instance, a municipal archive might collect the records of an NGO that has contributed significantly to the life of the city. A provincial archive, on the other hand, would focus more on NGOs that have been active across the province, while the federal-level archive (Library and Archives Canada) would only collect the records of NGOs that are national in scope.

#### **b. Academic**

Many universities have their own archives. Like government archives, academic archives usually collect the records generated by their university and its faculty. However, many academic archives collect extensively outside the scope of the university and may develop key collections based on the research being done at the university or as a specialization.

### **c. Issue-Specific Archives**

There are several archives that only collect records within a specific set of criteria and subject matter. Such archives include the Ukrainian Canadian Archives (Edmonton), the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (Toronto), and the Ontario Jewish Archives (Toronto).

### **d. Institutional**

Many institutions, businesses, churches, unions, etc., have their own archives which are usually restricted to only collecting the records created in-house.

## **3. Which Records Are Archival?**

When thinking about archiving records, it is important to have an idea of which records are generally archival (meaning that they have long-term value for research purposes) and which records are generally not.

The first point to keep in mind is that *your organization's archival records are only those records which your organization creates in the course of its activities.*

As mentioned above, archival records can be in paper form, on disc, on a hard-drive, on video tape, on a digital format, in photograph form, etc. Archival records include (but are not limited to):

- Meeting minutes
- Correspondence (including email)
- Photographs
- Annual reports
- Planning documents
- Reports
- Memoranda
- Financial reports and final statements that summarize the group's finances (such as quarterly or annual financial statements)
- Budgets
- Newsletters
- Posters or other event advertising
- Contracts and other legal documents
- Press releases

Records that are usually not archival include:

- Receipts
- Daily, weekly, or monthly financial statements if that information is summarized in annual or quarterly statements
- Blank forms
- Transitory documents (such as bills of lading, receipts, carbon copies, and transitory correspondence - think about all of the email you may receive that simply asks how you're

- doing or what you're doing for lunch, etc.)
- Printed material that exists elsewhere (books, reference material, etc.)
  - Documents created by other organizations
  - Newspaper clippings, unless created as a media-relations function
  - Catalogues
  - Day books
  - Ledgers
  - Tax records older than 7 years

### **III. Why should we archive our records?**

So, why should you archive your records? Why should you take the time to think about these issues and put the effort into it, especially when there's so much other work to be done? Consider this:

#### **1. Historic Legacy**

At present, the legacy of your organization may not seem that important, especially if you are heavily involved in some on-going projects that you hope to see concrete gains from. However, what your group achieves will have an effect on society as a whole, no matter how small it may seem. What is preserved from your organization will affect how your organization is remembered once it is gone, or once all of the current members have moved on and been replaced.

#### **2. Research**

Research can only be undertaken with what exists. Future researchers will never be able to ascertain the impact of your work or the evolution of not only your organization, but also the issues you work on if there is no documentation to look at.

#### **3. Documentation of Society**

As mentioned in Section II-1, archivists are concerned with documenting society. This essentially means ensuring that archival holdings are representative of the actual make-up of society. For too long, the shelves of archives were full of records from businesses, civic leaders, politicians, and social elites. In more recent decades, however, more effort has been committed to the archival representation of minorities, women, labour, activist groups, community organizations such as yours, and other groups that had previously been overlooked. Think of it as archival social justice and equality.

#### **4. Documentation of Your Group's Work**

Moving from the macro-level of society down to the actual work your group does, there is a very practical reason to ensure that your records are kept and preserved. Proper archiving will help prevent re-inventing the wheel and member burn-out by enabling organizational memory to continue and for

current members to learn from previous members' mistakes and triumphs. With this information, past projects can be improved, old ideas that didn't work won't be dragged out again and started over with the same results, and current members will have a sense of continuity from the group's history. Furthermore, proper documentation of your group's efforts generates accountability and enables group members and the general public to understand what you do and why.

## **IV. The Importance of Records Management**

So hopefully you're realized that it is important for your group to put some thought into archiving your records. The next step is to arrange the records that you already have into some sort of system of records management that will not only prepare them for future archiving, but also make your organization that much more stream-lined and efficient.

Following are some simple steps and procedures that can be used to manage all of those records that your group has accumulated, be they electronic or hard-copy:

### **1. Appoint a records manager**

Enlist one member from the group to be the go-to records manager. This will ensure that the management will be consistent and (hopefully) utilized. This is not a glamorous job, but it also doesn't need to be an overly difficult or frustrating one, either. Major gains can be made in records management with a minimum of time and effort, but the results will soon make themselves apparent.

### **2. Use Naming Conventions for File Titles**

Documents are increasingly created electronically and saved on computers. It is important for clarity that these files are named according to a standard naming convention. What naming convention is used is not as important as the fact that there is one. Your new records manager can devise unique naming conventions, but they must be used by everyone to be effective.

An example of a naming convention would be "Board\_Minutes09-04," "Board\_Minutes09-05," etc. If everyone using the same naming style for the title of similar files, they will be much easier to find, manage, and ultimately archive. However, if some people use "Minutes\_09-05" and others use "April minutes," problems will eventually occur and files might get lost in the shuffle.

### **3. Centralize Your Records**

When possible, it is important to centralize records. This can be done with the use of a server or at least one master computer where copies of every file are saved. For hardcopy files, one file cabinet can be designated as the master copy cabinet. This way, records are always available if needed and complete copies can always be obtained. You will also avoid a situation wherein one person has some records on their personal computer, another person has hardcopy documents at home under their bed, and a third person has some records on their laptop which was recently lost.



However, it should be noted that centralizing your records doesn't mean putting them all in one place without any back-up copies. Safeguards should be put into place to ensure that every existent copy of every record is not in the same place and susceptible to some unforeseen disaster.

#### **4. Cut Down on Redundancy**

Redundancy is a problem for both hardcopy and electronic records. While having copies of important records is important, it is not necessary to have an over-abundance of copies. Having too many copies of files on a computer can be just as confusing and inefficient as not having enough.

#### **5. Migrate Formats**

As new file formats come, it is important to migrate records which have been saved on old formats into the new formats. This will ensure that all of those files you have saved on CD-R's will still be accessible long after those CD-R's have been corrupted. File migration should be done annually, at the very least.

#### **6. Remember Email**

Don't forget about your email! Emails are records and they need to be included in any records management system you devise. At the very least, ensure that significant ones are being saved and can be accessed. Ideally, you should think about how to save them, such as in folders divided by date or by subject matter.

#### **7. Create a Retention Schedule**

A retention schedule dictates how long you will keep certain kinds of records and what you will do with them once they have served their purpose. For instance, a retention schedule might have the following recommendations:

Tax files: keep for seven years, destroy after retention period

Annual reports: keep for five years, transfer to archive after retention period

Monthly financial statement: keep for one year, transfer to storage after retention period, then shred after 7 years

Some documents, such as tax files, have legal periods for retention. Others are at your discretion, but you should put some thought into this and really decide what needs to be kept, what needs to be stored, what needs to be thrown out or destroyed, and what records really have enduring value and should be archived.

#### **8. Create a Records Management Manual**

Now that you have some new records management policies, it's very important to write them down so everyone knows how to use them and future members of your group will continue them.

## **V. Challenges faced by community organizations with recommendations**

During the course of this research project, certain challenges faced by community organizations were identified. Some of these challenges prevent organizations from properly archiving their records (or from even having records that are archival). Below are the key challenges with recommendations:

### **1. Turnover**

Turnover affects just about every organization in existence. However, the turnover rates of grassroots community organizations can be astronomical. These unusually high turnover rates can incapacitate an organization and prevent the creation of any evidence or record of their activities. However, all is not lost. The following recommendations can be put into place to mitigate the effects of turnover:

#### **a. Exit Survey**

Outgoing staff members and/or volunteers can be given a simple written or recorded exit survey in which they provide brief information about what they did with the organization, what their role was, what projects they worked on, and what their thoughts on the organization are. The use of this survey will achieve several results: it will create a record of each person's involvement, it will create evidence of the group's activity, it will create an organizational memory, and it will act as a sort of oral history of the group.

#### **b. Transition Documents**

Simple job descriptions of key positions within the organization should be created to describe what the duties and responsibilities of these positions are. This will ensure that transitions between members will be as smooth as possible.

#### **c. Collect Records from Out-Going Members**

As mentioned in Section IV-3, many organizations have records scattered amongst its members. Sometimes individual members even have records at home or on their personal computers. If this is the case, it is important to retrieve these records before the member leaves the group for good.

## **2. Inability to Devote Staff Time to Records Management and/or Archival Issues**

Members of community organizations are usually stretched pretty thin and there just aren't enough hours in the day to devote to everything that needs to get done. Luckily, there are some options:

### **a. Enlist Volunteers**

If your organization relies on volunteers, you can ask one or more of them to help out with records management and archival issues. A volunteer could even be the group records manager (see Section

IV-1) or archivist (see section VII-2).

## **b. Enlist Students**

Several cities in Canada have a university or college with a program in information, library and/or archives studies. Most of these programs offer their students internships or other work experience. It might be possible to have an information management student assist with your needs, either as part of a school internship or as paid work experience. The following are some information management programs in Canada, sorted by province:

### ***i. Alberta***

Grant MacEwan College (Edmonton) Information Management and Library Technology  
<http://business.macewan.ca/gmcc/imlt/home/index.cfm>

Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (Calgary) Library and Information Technician Program  
<http://www.sait.ca/pages/cometosait/academic/diplomas/alit.shtml>

University of Alberta School of Library and Information Studies  
<http://www.slis.ualberta.ca/>

### ***ii. British Columbia***

Langara College (Vancouver) Library and Information Technology Program  
<http://www.langara.bc.ca/science-technology/library-technology/index.html>

University of British Columbia School of Archival, Library and Information Studies  
<http://www.slais.ubc.ca/>

University College of the Fraser Valley (Abbotsford) Library and Information Technology Program  
<http://www.ufv.ca/libtech.htm>

### ***iii. Manitoba***

Red River College (Winnipeg) Library and Information Technology Program  
<http://me.rrc.mb.ca/Catalogue/ProgramInfo.aspx?RegionCode=WPG&ProgCode=LIBIF-DP>

### ***iv. Newfoundland & Labrador***

Memorial University of Newfoundland Certificate Program in Library Studies  
[http://www.mun.ca/lifelonglearning/programs/univ\\_cert/library\\_studies.php](http://www.mun.ca/lifelonglearning/programs/univ_cert/library_studies.php)

## ***v. Nova Scotia***

Dalhousie University School of Information Management  
<http://sim.management.dal.ca/>

Nova Scotia Community College (Halifax) Library and Information Technology Program  
[http://www.nsc.ca/Learning\\_Programs/Programs/PlanDescr.aspx?prg=LBTN&pln=LIBINFTECH](http://www.nsc.ca/Learning_Programs/Programs/PlanDescr.aspx?prg=LBTN&pln=LIBINFTECH)

## ***vi. Ontario***

Algonquin College (Ottawa) Library and Information Technician Program  
[http://extraweb.algonquincollege.com/fulltime\\_programs/programOverview.aspx?id=0440X01FWO&](http://extraweb.algonquincollege.com/fulltime_programs/programOverview.aspx?id=0440X01FWO&)

Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology (Toronto) Library and Information Technology  
<http://www.senecac.on.ca/fulltime/LITA.html>

University of Toronto Faculty of Information  
<http://www.fis.utoronto.ca/>

University of Western Ontario Faculty of Information and Media Studies  
<http://www.fims.uwo.ca/>

## ***vii. Quebec***

McGill University Faculty of Information Studies  
<http://www.mcgill.ca/sis/>

Université de Montréal École de bibliothéconomie et des sciences de l'information  
<http://www.ebsi.umontreal.ca/>

## ***viii. Saskatchewan***

Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (Saskatoon) Library and Information Technology  
[http://www.siastr.sk.ca/programs\\_courses\\_descriptions/LIT.shtml](http://www.siastr.sk.ca/programs_courses_descriptions/LIT.shtml)

## **c. Funding Opportunities**

There are grants that you can apply for which will enable your group to hire a professional to do the work for you. These programs are usually offered on a provincial or national basis for archival projects. The grants and their requirements vary, so it is advised that you contact a local archival association about these grants and experienced archivists and/or records managers who would be interested in the project. Following are some of the associations:

***i. Archives Association of British Columbia***

<http://www.aabc.bc.ca/aabc>

***ii. Archives Society of Alberta***

<http://www.archivesalberta.org/>

***iii. Saskatchewan Council for Archives and Archivists***

<http://scaa.usask.ca/>

***iv. Association for Manitoba Archives***

<http://www.mbarchives.mb.ca/>

***v. Archives Association of Ontario***

<http://aao.fis.utoronto.ca/>

***vi. Association des archivistes du Québec***

<http://www.raq.qc.ca/>

***vii. Council of Archives New Brunswick***

<http://www.canbarchives.ca/canb/>

***viii. Council of Nova Scotia Archives***

<http://www.canbarchives.ca/canb/>

***ix. Archives Council of Prince Edward Island***

<http://www.archives.pe.ca/>

***x. Association of Newfoundland and Labrador Archives***

<http://www.anla.nf.ca/index.php>

***xi. Yukon Council of Archives***

<http://www.yukoncouncilofarchives.ca/>

***xii. Northwest Territory Archives Council***

<http://www.pwnhc.ca/nwtac/nwtac.html>

***xiii. Archive Council Nunavummi (Nunavut)***

<http://www.cdncouncilarchives.ca/nunavut.html>

### **3. Lack of Space/Unsuitable Space for Long-Term Storage of Records**

The simple answer to this dilemma is to donate your records to an archive (see Section VI). The only other option is to store your records off-site at the home of a member or other suitable location (see Section VII).

## **VI Donating Records to an Archive**

So you've decided that archiving your records is extremely important, you've instituted some basic records management, and you're ready to donate your archival records to an archive and sit back and watch history being made. You have made some wise decisions, not least of all the decision to donate your records to an archive as this will guarantee that they will be preserved, arranged, and described by professional archivists and made accessible to researchers, subject to your restrictions. But how exactly do you donate records to an archive?

### **1. Choosing a Suitable Archive**

As explained above, there are several types of archives (see Section II-2). You need to find one that collects the kind of records that you have. To do this, you can use the Canadian Council of Archives' Directory of Archives (<http://www.cdncouncilarchives.ca/directory.html>) to search for archives in your location or by subject matter. When looking for an archive, you need to consider what their collecting mandate is, how accessible the archive is for you, and whether or not the archive is currently collecting, as sometimes archives will put a temporary moratorium on collecting.

Once you have found a suitable archive, initiate contact. Speak with an archivist, explain who you are and what your organization does, and ask if they would be interested in obtaining your records. If they are, you're ready to negotiate the transfer of records from your possession into the archives.

### **2. Negotiation the Transfer of Records**

There are several issues to consider when donating records to an archive, such as:

#### **a. Privacy Concerns**

You might have some privacy concerns with your records. You may request that certain records remain restricted from public view for a certain period of time. Archives encourage donors to keep as much of their records as possible open for research, but are more than willing to protect any privacy concerns you may have. The details of restrictions will have to be negotiated.

## **b. Tax Receipts**

In some cases, archives will issue a tax-deductible receipt for the fair market value of the records you are donating. Appraising the fair market value of records is a complicated process, so this may not also be available to you. If you are interested in this, it doesn't hurt to ask and see what can be agreed on.

## **c. Intellectual Rights**

Usually, donors transfer intellectual rights (e.g. copyright) over their records to the archives with the physical records. However, like everything else, this can be negotiated. At the very least, you should discuss it with the archivist and come to a mutual understanding.

## **d. Responsibilities of the Archives**

When an archive accepts your records, they are responsible for preserving the records in their current state and making the records available to donors and researchers upon request. Anything beyond that (for instance, having all of your records digitized and made available online) will have to be negotiated.

## **e. Arrange the Physical Transfer**

Once everything has been decided upon, you will have to arrange with the archives to have the records physically sent. Depending on the amount of records, an archivist might arrive and take the records him/herself, you might drop the records off at the archives, or a shipping company might have to be hired to transfer the records. Furthermore, you might have to do some boxing of records to get them ready (see Section VI-3).

# **3. Preparing Records for Transfer**

So the donation has been fully negotiated and everything is ready to go. Now you just have to do a little bit of tidying up to prepare the records for transfer.

## **a. Identify Archival Records**

Using the general guide found in Section II-3 and your conversations with the archivist, try to weed out any records that are obviously not archival. If there is any doubt, just leave it with the records that are going to the archives and the archivists will make the decision. But you can certainly weed out books that were not published by your organization, boxes and boxes of tax records from 15 years ago, and other obvious things like that. Again, if there is any doubt, just leave it alone.

## **b. Provide Contextual Information**

When archivists arrange and describe records, it is important for them to understand some contextual

information about the person or group whose papers they are working on. This gives them a good idea of how the records were originally used and how they should be arranged and described. Furthermore, when all of the records are arranged and described, they are listed in a finding aid which also provides brief information about the creator of the records.

To that end, give the archivist any information that would help with this endeavour. For instance, if you have lists of board members, coordinators, executives, etc., or other documents that succinctly summarize the history of your group, provide a copy to the archivist and s/he will thank you.

### **c. Box the Records**

If your records are scattered all over the place (hopefully not, if you instituted some of the recommendations found in Section IV) or if your records are in file cabinets, you'll need to box them up for the transfer. The archives might provide boxes or you might have to find your own. Either way, ensure that you pack the records properly so that they do not get bent or damaged during the trip. Pack textual records tightly to keep them up-right and ensure that the boxes are full before sending them. Create a list of contents for each box.

## **VII. Creating an In-House Archive**

So you've decided to create an in-house archival system, or you were unable to find a suitable archive to take your records. Fear not, as you have the ability to look after your own archives. Just keep some of these issues in mind and you'll have your archive up and running in no time:

### **1. Create a Suitable Space**

The most important aspect of archival records is the fact that they are deemed to have lasting or enduring value. In order for that value to remain enduring, the records need to be kept in a space with some element of environmental control so that they are not damaged. Here are some key features that you should look for when creating or finding a suitable storage space:

- No direct sunlight
- Away from sources of water (taps, faucets, sinks, drains, pipes, etc.)
- Low humidity (zero humidity or dampness is ideal)
- Cool temperature (especially important for photographs and audiovisual material)
- Free from pests (insects, rodents, etc.)
- Accessible, but secure

### **2. Designate an Archivist**

Like in Section IV-1, designate one person as the group archivist who will look after the records and ensure that the archival system is maintained and continued. Again, this is not a glamorous position but it is important and it need not be as difficult or time-consuming as it might sound.



Whoever is chosen to be the archivist should ideally have some understanding of archival practices, no matter how limited. This guide is a start, but you can also consult with archivists at any of the provincial archival associations listed in Section V-2c. These associations usually have an archives advisor who can help set up an archive or provide opportunities for workshops or other archival education. These associations might also be able to inform you of grant opportunities for money that can be applied to starting an archive.

### **3. Formulate an Arrangement System**

Once you have a group archivist who knows what to do, you need to formulate an arrangement system for your records. Simply put, you need to arrange your records in such a way that you can retrieve a particular document at any given time. Therefore, it is not enough to just toss everything into a box in the corner as you would be unable to successfully retrieve the minutes from the 1997 annual general meeting if that were the case. And if you can't get what you're looking for without pulling your hair out, what's the point of having the archive to begin with?

Explaining how to arrange your records for an in-house archive is beyond the scope of this guide. The important thing is that you have a system and use it, no matter what it is. You may wish to emulate professional practices or create your own, in-house, highly idiosyncratic system. Again, the important thing is that you have a system, that it works, and that the system is maintained and expanded on.

Whatever your system, it should be dynamic and flexible enough to add more records to over time, and simple enough to understand as the first archivist steps down and a new one takes over.

### **4. Access**

When you set up your in-house archive, you need to ensure that it is accessible to your group's members. An unused archive is a sad archive, indeed. You get the most out of your archive the more you are able to use it, consult it, and learn from the records in it.

Furthermore, a decision will need to be made about providing access to non-group members. If you have created an extensive, comprehensive archive that fully documents your group and the issues it has worked on (as I'm sure you will), then researchers might be interested in consulting it. At the very least, you need to decide if you're going to provide access to records in such a case, what records members of the public may or may not see, and how you will provide access to them without risk of damage or loss.