

The Institute of Conservation

Ethical Guidance

June 2020



Contents

Introduction	2
Principles of Conservation	6
Commentary	7
Knowing why any action is proposed, and who is involved	7
Understanding the issue	9
Considering resources and constraints	10
Designing the action	12
Documentation	14

Introduction

The Icon Ethical Guidance is designed to guide the actions of all Icon members, regardless of specialism or area of practice. Our members are involved in the care of items, architectural features and decorated surfaces, which are valued for their significance as items of cultural heritage. Issues of sustainability are central to all conservation, whether of items, landscapes, or the natural world around us: all are finite resources with which we have complex relationships, but which we seek to preserve.

The conservation of landscapes, buildings and wildlife are covered by the codes of other Professional Bodies.

The Icon Ethical Guidance is also designed to explain to the wide and diverse audience now involved in conservation – including members of the public, private owners, custodians, and other heritage professionals – the concepts which govern actions, as opposed to other types of repair and/or maintenance, and related craft skills.

Conservation is an approach to items of cultural heritage, which seeks to preserve their intangible and physical manifestations as evidence of the past for present and future generations to study and enjoy.

Conservation seeks to avoid causing further harm, which is understood as being further loss of significance, including that which is historic, cultural, artistic, scientific, or religious.

All physical features of items of cultural heritage, including those, which may sometimes be described as damage, are potentially of significance and, as such, the option of no action should be considered before all others.

However, items of cultural heritage can deteriorate over time or suffer damage. This results in situations in which conservation intervention is necessary to maintain, stabilise, and repair the items so that they can continue to be appreciated and enjoyed.



Conservation does not operate in a vacuum. The Icon Ethical Guidance is informed by

- International charters concerning cultural heritage
[<https://icon.org.uk/icon-resources/conservation-standards>]
- The importance of the context of conservation actions
- The material evidence of items
- The intangible values to their audiences
- Social, economic and ethical concerns.

Successful actions are based on

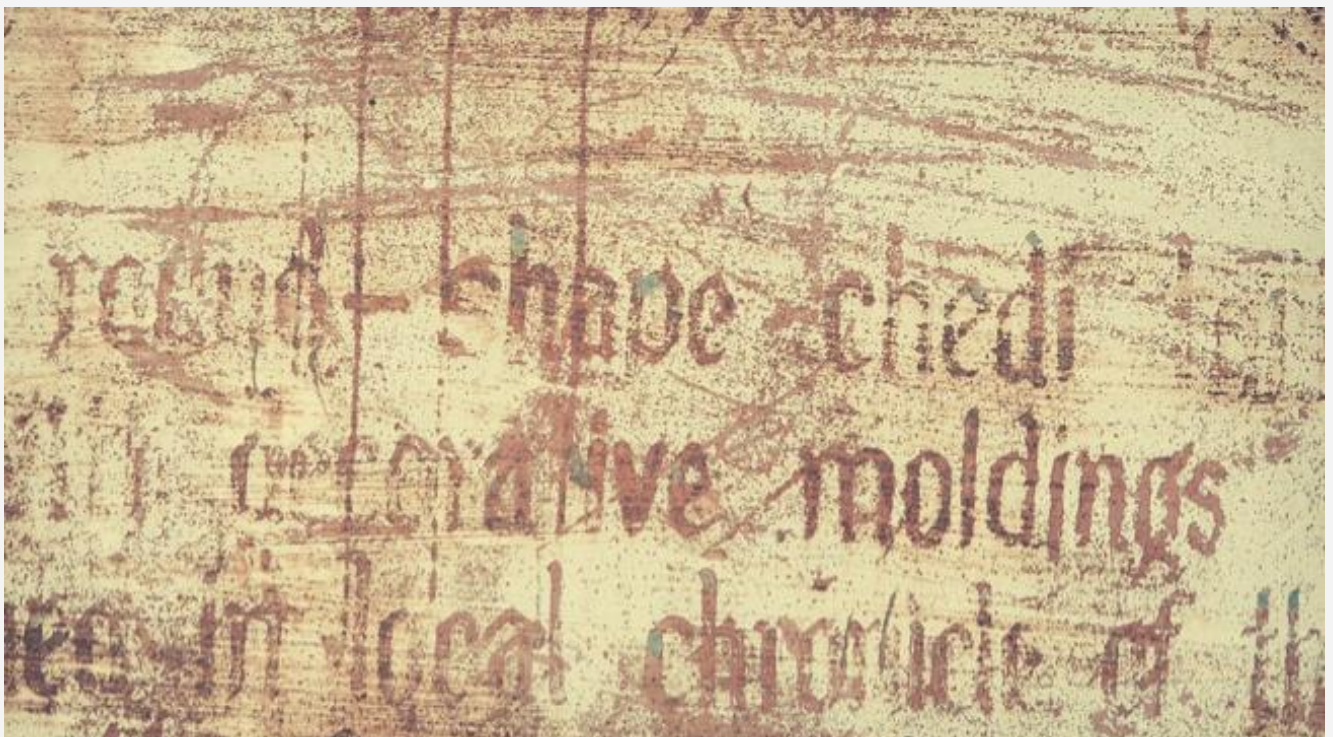
- Discussions and collaborations to achieve as deep an understanding as possible of the cultural heritage concerned
- Ensuring impact and implications of actions are developed before deciding on a course of action.



The Icon Ethical Guidance encapsulates concepts that are common to all actions involved in the care of items, but allow for and encourage different approaches according to individual circumstances. The Icon Ethical Guidance supplements and enlarges upon concepts set out in the Icon Code of Conduct and the Icon Professional Standards, and should be read in conjunction with these documents.

The Icon Ethical Guidance consists of:

1. **Principles of Conservation:** thirteen broad statements defining the ethical approach to items of cultural heritage. P.6
2. **Commentary** on the Principles of Conservation, comprising a short analysis of the fundamental ideas expressed by each Principle, and how to apply them to your practice. Pp. 7-14
3. **Glossary** of terms used. Separate document



Principles of Conservation

Knowing why any action is proposed, and who is involved

1. The aim of the proposed action should be agreed with stakeholders, taking into account the demands which will be placed on the item, the goals of the stakeholders and the material needs of item. The option of no action should be investigated first.
2. The rationale for the proposed action needs to be clearly defined and understood before starting.
3. The action is appropriate, sustainable and effective in achieving the agreed aim with the least means possible.



Understanding the issue

4. Decisions should be governed by thorough understanding of the item and its significance, including its tangible and intangible qualities.
5. Decisions are based on an understanding of the underlying causes of deterioration, which should be addressed where possible.



Considering resources and constraints

6. Decisions are informed by an assessment of consequences, risks, and benefits.
7. Decisions and actions should draw on and provide appropriate skills and experience.
8. Aim for the best quality and most sustainable action achievable with available resources.



Designing the action

9. Future use, planned maintenance, preservation and preventive measures should be considered when designing the action.
10. Actions should remain detectable.
11. Actions should allow future re-treatment and remain as reversible as possible.
12. Actions should only be undertaken where there is evidence to support the intended aims and the methods proposed for achieving them.



Documentation

13. The action, or decision to take no action, is documented to the appropriate level of detail and include recommendations for the future maintenance and preservation of the item.



Commentary



Knowing why any action is proposed, and who is involved

- 1. The aim of the proposed action should be agreed with stakeholders, taking into account the demands which will be placed on the item, the goals of the stakeholders and the material needs of the item. The option of no action should be investigated first**

The action should aim not to be detrimental to any embodied intangible values or tangible material qualities. Therefore, stakeholders should be consulted and their views understood and balanced with meeting the physical needs of the item, taking into account its context use and purpose.

The degree of consultation and weight given to each argument depends on the nature of the item and its ownership. The influence of past stakeholders may also be relevant, as expressed in the terms of bequests, gifts or acquisitions, whether formal or informal. It may be necessary to advocate on behalf of the item to inform stakeholders of the causes and consequences of deterioration to inform decision-making. This may lead to different solutions for similar problems: material needs may be met in more than one way or where material needs may be subordinate to another function. The best outcome will benefit the item and stakeholder.

2. The rationale for the proposed action needs to be clearly defined and understood before starting

The first step is to assess if the action is required or not. All recommendations, including that of taking no further action, should be made clear to the stakeholders and the consequences of decisions taken as to whether to take further action or not should be understood. The recommendation(s) should be written in a simple statement which records the rationale for each.

3. The action is appropriate, sustainable and effective in achieving the agreed aim with the least means possible

Stakeholders should be consulted when formulating the aim of the action. Considerations should include details of future use of the item, and the expected life-span of the action.

The least extensive means that fulfils the agreed aim of the action should be adopted. Interventions may be required to preserve and maintain items for study and use, but actions that disturb as little of the evidential value and significance of those items as possible, are encouraged. The same principle can be applied to actions related to conditions for storage and display.

When considering the sustainability of actions, care should be taken not to over-specify. For example, the optimum conditions in terms of longevity of objects need to be considered in the wider context of energy consumption and long-term sustainability. The rationale behind actions should be recorded so that the completed action can be measured against the stated aim.



Understanding the issue

4. Decisions should be governed by thorough understanding of the item and its significance, including its tangible and intangible qualities

Any intervention has the potential of irreversibly removing evidence of previous uses and environments, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Judgement is needed to determine whether evidence of use or earlier alterations and repairs provide information that should be preserved.

5. Decisions are based on an understanding of the underlying causes of deterioration, which should be addressed where possible

Decisions should be informed by an understanding of the reasons for the item's condition, such as change or deterioration of an item in response to its environment, handling, treatment history or inherent material properties.

Actions should be based on examination of the item with appropriate methods within the cultural and material context. The future use of the item, for instance in terms of storage, handling, display, sampling and where applicable transit should also guide actions taken.

Decisions could involve taking no further action, treatment and/ or preventive measures and recommendations for future care.



Considering resources and constraints

6. Decisions are informed by an assessment of consequences, risks and benefits

The short and long-term consequences of an action should be assessed before any work is undertaken, bearing in mind that the effects might be felt beyond the immediate time and place of the action. Risks include possible unwanted effects such as damage to an item, harm to the people undertaking or in the vicinity of the work and harm to the reputation of an individual or institution. The risks of an action should be compared to the risks of not doing anything at all.

Although change can be associated with deterioration or damage, change arising from actions should be for the better. Possible benefits arising from actions include increased stability and lifetime of items, improved presentation, greater opportunities for use, sustainability of relevant skills and greater potential for education. If benefits outweigh the risks, the proposed action is more likely to be justifiable. There is no point in undertaking an action if there is no predictable benefit.

7. Decisions and actions should draw on and provide appropriate skills and experience

Decisions and actions should draw on and provide appropriate training, development opportunities, skills and experience. Training should foster diversity and inclusivity in the sector.

8. Aim for the best quality and most sustainable action achievable with available resources

Successful actions take into account the larger context in which they take place. Financial resources and the availability of people with the appropriate expertise are usually the most immediate resources considered, but the overarching sustainability of actions must be considered. All those involved in actions should consider not only the best action for items and stakeholders, but the potential environmental, financial, and social impact of actions.

In terms of items and collections, consideration should be given to the relative merits of using resources on single items or wider collections, and the prioritisation of actions to make the best use of the resources available. Resources may limit the extent of actions, but the quality of the actions (including the decision-making, materials and skills used) should not be compromised.

In situations where resources are not available to allow the agreed best course of action to be carried out, recommendations for future improvements should be recorded and communicated. The rationale behind actions should be recorded so that it can be understood by others, present and future.



Designing the action

9. Future use, planned maintenance, preservation and preventive measures should be considered when designing the action

The action should be considered in the context of:

- any organisational mission statement
- how the item will be used in order to fulfil its role
- what the owner wants from the item
- the impact of the proposed use on the item.

As far as is reasonable, the future availability of resources should inform the extent and focus of a work scheme, and part of the future recommendations may include a breakdown of resources required going forward in order to assist with planning or resource development.

Stakeholders and all those responsible for the item(s) should understand the preservation goal and priorities, including appearance, mechanical function, evidence potential, sampling potential, retention of skills and demonstration of function and experience.

10. Actions should remain detectable

Any change that has been made to the item through an action(s) should be able to be identified by others, whether they are designing future actions, investigating significance, or using the item. Detectability is needed to explain what was done where and by whom, to help future conservation professionals and others understand the history of treatment and present condition, and design their own actions.

11. Actions should allow future re-treatment and remain as reversible as possible

The possibility of reversing a conservation action depends on the method and materials of the intervention and the nature of the cultural heritage, ranging from full reversibility to retreatability. The option should be selected which gives the greatest opportunity in the future to undo what has been done.

12. Actions should only be undertaken where there is evidence to support the intended aims and the methods proposed for achieving them.

Methods and materials used for treating objects or their environments should have been tried and tested. Traditional techniques may not have been subjected to rigorous scientific scrutiny but their efficacy and safety in the long term are known through experience. Although there will always be a first time that a method or material is applied to an item, there should be evidence from trials carried out on related non-heritage materials.

Restorations cannot be speculative. The proposed final state must be justified by evidence from the item itself or from appropriate documents. The use of replicas and substitutes, along with retirement, storage, repatriation and letting things go, are increasingly considered in the care of items and collections. Appraisal of these options should also be based on evidence, such as research, analysis, historic records, monitoring or other data.



Documentation

13. The action, or the decision to take no action, is documented to the appropriate level of detail and the documentation includes recommendations for the future maintenance and preservation of the item.

The options for actions and the rationale for the selection of a particular action or decision to take no action, should be recorded to inform future custodians. For example, it is necessary to know what materials have been used so that adverse reactions to future treatment and use can be prevented. This knowledge assists with future planning, expected outcomes and longevity of interventive treatment may be included

Documentation should include recommendations for the future care, maintenance and preservation of the item. These should be considered at the treatment proposal stage and finalised at the end of the project.

The appropriate level of detail for all these records is in accordance with prevailing known and accepted standards where they exist. The level of detail needed is that which enables others to understand why the decision was taken, what was done as a result and what the support needs are going forward.

Documentation should be archived in such a way that it is accessible to those needing it for the reasonably foreseeable future.

Documentation can have a value in itself. For example, it may become the only record of the existence of an item where original items are lost or destroyed.



All images Creative Commons



The Institute of Conservation is a membership organisation and charity that brings together those with a passion for the care of cultural heritage.



www.icon.org.uk

Icon Ethical Guidance © 2020 Icon