

Archives access policy

1. Policy statement

Explore is committed to providing the widest possible access to the archives in our care. We recognise that access to and engagement with archives can take many forms and can include online as well as physical interaction with our collections. Our service acknowledges that archives gain relevance and value when they are used and seen by current audiences, but we are also dedicated to ensuring the collections remain accessible to future generations.

In accordance with Explore's Strategic Priorities, we seek to engage with all our communities, devising a range of services in collaboration with and appropriate to each community's needs. Explore's key organisational activities, outlined in the Strategic Action Plan include:

- Engaging people with the culture and heritage of our City
- Inspiring people of all ages to learn, imagine, create and share ideas
- Supporting individual and community wellbeing

The archive supports Explore's organisational priorities and activities by maintaining a permanent publicly accessible record of the heritage and culture of the City of York and its people. The archive provides an historical, educational, inspirational and community resource, and acts as a focus for promoting local identity, active citizenship, creativity, wellbeing and belonging.

2. Policy context

Below is a list of the principal legislation that governs access to our collections:

- Local Government (Records) Act 1962
- Local Government Act 1972 (s.224)
- Public Records Acts 1958 & 1967
- General Data Protection Regulation 2016 (hereafter GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018 (hereafter DPA). UK GDPR 2021 and the DPA together form data protection law in the UK
- Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act 1992
- Children's Act 2004
- Freedom of Information Act 2000 (hereafter FOIA)
- Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010
- Representation of the People Act 2002
- Environmental Information Regulations (2004)
- Prison Services Instructions (PSIs) 04/2018
- Equality Act, 2010
- Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988 and subsequent legislation

Explore York Libraries and Archives is a Mutual Society and therefore not directly subject to FOIA. However, the archives in our care remain the legal property of the City of York Council (CYC) and are therefore subject to relevant information legislation.

This policy should be read in conjunction with the following policies:

- Explore Archives Restricted Records Policy
- Explore Archives Collections Care and Preservation Policy
- Explore Archives Collections Development and Information Policy
- Explore Libraries and Archives Data Protection Policy
- Explore Libraries and Archives Volunteer Policy
- Explore Libraries and Archives Customer Charter
- CYC Records Retention Schedule

This policy supports the key organisational priorities outlined in the Explore York Libraries and Archives Strategic Action Plan 2024-2027:

- Getting the Basics Right
- Engaging our Communities
- Building the Future

3. Key terms

Born-digital records: those records that have been created, in the first instance, in a digital format (e.g. a Word document)

Digitised records/digital surrogates: digital copies of physical records.

Access: this is a wide-ranging term that encompasses:

- the physical facilities for anyone visiting the service
- facilities for people using the service remotely
- promotion of the collections and the archives service
- engagement with physical or digital archives either in-person or remotely
- legislative and professional frameworks affecting how items are described and used
- the processes of describing archives through cataloguing and indexing to internationally agreed professional standards

4. Scope and purpose

This access policy applies to all the archive collections we hold, including both physical and digital archives. It covers both in-person and online access, whether onsite or remote.

The purpose of this policy is to outline the legislative and professional framework that governs access to archival collections held at Explore. It provides a transparent set of guidelines for staff and for our users, ensuring that access is provided in a fair and consistent manner, in accordance with regulations and professional best practice.

Please note that this policy excludes CYC records that remain in the possession of council departments and its arms-length bodies.

5. Introduction

Explore York Archives serves a range of communities and stakeholders, including but not limited to:

- communities within York as defined generally by the boundaries of CYC, although some communities extend beyond those boundaries
- depositors
- researchers
- creatives
- education providers and students
- CYC Officers and Councillors
- any person or corporate body with an interest in the present and future of the service
- future users

The information below outlines the guiding principles for access to our archive collections.

6. Catalogues and documentation

The archive service at York Explore is committed to enhancing access to and discoverability of our collections by ensuring they are catalogued and searchable online. Since 2024, a systematic re-cataloguing effort has been underway to ensure all our catalogues meet international standards. We prioritise the following to aid access to our collections:

- Processing new acquisitions promptly, within one month of receipt
- Reducing our cataloguing backlogs with current staffing as well as externally funded projects
- Delivery of our annually reviewed cataloguing plan, which outlines our cataloguing priorities for the year

Our annual cataloguing priorities are assessed based on the following criteria:

- User demand
- Explore's strategic priorities
- Condition of the collection
- Significance of collection
- Size of collection
- The quality of information currently available on the collection

The service also publishes collection information on Explore's website and contributes information on its holdings to Archives Hub and Archives Portal Europe, as well as The National Archives' Discovery site.

7. Onsite access

Our Reading Room is the main frontline delivery point for our archive services. Anyone visiting our Reading Room can expect:

- staff and volunteers to be identifiable
- staff available, including a Duty Archivist, to advise on suitable sources of information held either by us or elsewhere
- catalogues, finding aids, and reference materials supporting access to the collections
- study space which is pleasant and clean, with additional equipment such as magnifiers available

- premises to comply with the Disability Equality Duty in the Equality Act, 2010
- to be made aware of Reading Room guidelines, including advice on handling material and protective equipment
- free internet access and computing facilities in line with Explore York Libraries and Archives' internet and Wi-Fi offer
- a range of reprographics services that meet the needs of the user without placing materials at risk of damage and which are provided in line with the requirements of the Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988 and subsequent legislation
- retrievals from secure areas to be completed promptly at advertised times
- items that are not yet catalogued may be made available to customers if an archivist considers that the retrieval of such items can be made in a reasonable time, in accordance with legislation, and without risk of loss or damage to the item/s
- the ability to make an appointment to view material at advertised times outside of working hours

8. Remote access

Customers who are unable to visit in person can make an enquiry by email, telephone or by visiting us in person at our Archives and Local History desk. We aim to respond to enquiries within 15 working days. All responses will be in line with Explore York Libraries and Archives' Customer Charter. In addition, those contacting us directly can expect:

- to be told the name of the staff member dealing with their enquiry
- to be able to order images (where legislation permits), and to access other remote services such as our research services
- to be advised in advance of fees and charges payable
- to have access to our free 15-minute lookup service

We will make access information available on our website, this will include physical access information such as opening hours, contact details, and directions to our service, as well as fees and charges, and means of accessing our range of services remotely.

We recognise the value of providing remote access through digital surrogates and make some of our records available through a commercial partner, Find My Past. We will look to extend this offer in future years. Our York Images site provides access to over 9000 images with users able to purchase high-resolution copies for research or publication.

9. Outreach and engagement

We seek to engage, enthuse and inform those who are not already engaging with the archives by undertaking and supporting a range of engagement opportunities, including talks, workshops, family activities, creative activities, and exhibitions. We are always looking at ways we can innovate and extend our reach through collaboration with library colleagues and external partners.

The archive service is committed to working with a range of education providers and students from diverse disciplines, providing access to the collections as part of their education experience in York.

In recognition of the contribution that volunteers bring to our service, and the positive impact on the volunteers themselves, the archive service provides regular volunteering opportunities as part of our annual cycle of engagement activities.

10. Continual improvement

Explore York Archives seeks to improve access and respond to the changing needs of our audiences. We are currently working to address the following gaps in our current access offer:

- Remote volunteering opportunities for those who are unable to travel to our Reading Room.
- Easier access to born-digital material and digital surrogates, both online and in our Reading Room.

11. Restricted records policy

We operate on a presumption of openness and any restrictions conform to the legislative framework that governs access to archive collections. Restrictions on access are explained fully in our Restricted Records Policy.

12. Feedback and monitoring

We recognise our users as active participants in our service, having responsibilities as well as rights. We will clearly communicate those responsibilities to our users, particularly in relation to:

- handling material
- respect of copyright and data protection laws
- customer behaviour

We maintain customer feedback mechanisms and complaints procedures as part of Explore's Customer Charter. We communicate to key stakeholders our objectives, our plans, our performance, and feedback from our users.

Our Community Members receive information about our activities and are able to provide direct feedback at the Explore Annual General Meeting.

The archive service also participates in the Archives and Records Association's National Visitors' Survey.

Volunteers and participants at our events can contribute feedback via our evaluation surveys.

13. Roles and responsibilities

The Head of Archives has overall responsibility and oversight of this policy. The archives team have responsibility for direct implementation, and the wider Explore team support these activities.

If you would like to provide feedback on this policy, please contact archives@explore.org.uk

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Version control		
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1.0	20/06/2025	Replaces Archives and Local History Access Policy, 2020
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