



Guide No. 10 Disaster preparedness

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1. Introduction

Records, archives and books are vulnerable to many forces, ranging from unthinking neglect to natural disasters such as fire, storm or flood, to deliberate acts such as vandalism, arson, and burglary. Bearing in mind that in most instances records, archives and books are likely to be kept either in the meeting house or, in the case of records and archives, in a Friend's home, it is advisable to give some serious thought to disaster preparedness. There is much that can be done in advance to prevent and prepare against disasters, and action that can be taken afterwards to limit further damage.

Meetings are advised to:

- Have a written disaster plan.
- Carry out a risk assessment and assess the possible risks to records.
- Take steps to minimise the risks - don't wait for a disaster to strike.
- Carrying out regular monitoring of environmental and storage conditions is a good way of being alerted to any changes that may lead to disasters.
- Know the appropriate action to take should disaster strike - whatever the disaster, prompt action is vital to reduce the damage caused.
- Have a stock of disaster equipment.

If records have been created electronically, ensure that there are back-up copies (see *Guide No. 6 Electronic Records*). In the case of older records, archives and manuscripts, consider having security copies made, for example on preservation quality microfilm, and stored at a different site.

The most common threats to records, archives and books are damage from water and fire. Most likely the damage will be caused by water, because even in the case of fire the greatest damage is often inflicted by the water hoses used to extinguish the flames. The following is advice on what you can do to prepare for and deal with disasters. It is by no means exhaustive and cannot hope to cover all eventualities. It is advisable to seek expert guidance; local archives, the National Preservation Office and sometimes local fire services can offer advice and guidance.

2. Water

a. Risk assessment

- Ask where and in what circumstances could water get into the premises?
- Think in particular of the risks of storm, burst pipes, blocked drains or gutters.
- Look at the location of drains and drainpipes, water tanks and pipes, sewerage services, and kitchens.

b. Taking steps to minimise risks

- Avoid basement storage if possible.
- Check that there is an outlet for any water that may get in.
- Make sure the bottom shelf of any storage is at least 150mm off the floor.
- Leave a small gap between any shelving and outer walls so that boxes, books or files do not touch the walls.
- Do not leave documents piled on floors or beside windows.
- Storing documents in acid-free archival storage boxes offers considerable protection.

c. What to do in the event of a flood or burst

- Quick action is necessary to prevent the growth of mould; this can start occurring within 2 to 3 days of water damage.
- Undamaged materials should be protected temporarily with polythene sheeting, while attention is turned to damaged materials.
- Rescue affected items and remove them to a dry, preferably cool, room.
- Air blowers can be used to assist the drying out process provided they are kept on a cool setting, as heat may promote mould growth.
- With care, first aid can be attempted on damp but not saturated papers, by placing clean blotting paper between each page.
- Saturated materials are very susceptible to damage and should be handled with care. Don't attempt to separate pages, but contact the local record office for advice. Usually water-soaked documents will need to be placed in a freezer, and then later slowly thawed and dried out. Some record offices have a freezer, or have arrangements with specialist disaster recovery services.

- If the flooding is extensive and large quantities of documents are involved then contact the local record office immediately for advice.
- Clean up the disaster area and ventilate it well before re-using it for storing records. If necessary hire a portable dehumidifier until the environmental conditions are stabilised.

3. Fire

a. Risk assessment

- Ask how and in what circumstances could a fire begin in the area where books and documents are stored?
- Consider in particular the proximity of sources of flame or heat, such as open fires, kitchens, electrical circuits, or other potential sources of risk such as flammable materials.

b. Taking steps to minimise risks

- Where possible choose storage areas with good fire resistance and ensure that doors and windows are tightly shut when the premises are unattended.
- Carbon dioxide fire extinguishers should be used for paper fires, so have a hand-held carbon dioxide fire extinguisher for use in the event of a small fire.
- Keep papers in boxes or files and keep loose papers to a minimum. Acid-free boxes can provide some protection.

c. What to do in the event of a fire

- More often than not the cause of the damage will be the water-hoses and extinguishers used to put the fire out rather than the fire itself. In which case follow the advice on what to do in the event of a flood or burst, as given above.
- Damage by fire is most likely to be from smoke and heat, soot or charring, and will need treating with the advice of a professional conservator.
- Fire and smoke damaged books and documents should be temporarily kept in plastic bags until an expert can examine them. Handle damaged documents gently, and seal and label each bag.

4. Disaster plan

Have written down what action is to be taken in the event of a disaster.

- This should include a list of addresses and telephone numbers of people who will need to be contacted in an emergency. In addition to the emergency services it should include plumbers, locksmiths, glaziers, and the nearest record office.
- Draw up an order of priorities in which documents should be rescued and treated. Disaster can strike at any time and there is no guarantee the clerk, meeting librarian or custodian of records will be there. So, make sure others know what to do and have copies of the disaster plan.
- A disaster plan is designed to be a working manual ready to use at the time of the disaster, so it is essential that it is short with clear and easy to understand instructions and easy to carry around. One suggestion

- would be to either keep it in a plastic folder or have it laminated.
- It is good practice to review the disaster plan at regular intervals, even if no disaster has occurred.
- After dealing with a disaster, carry out a post mortem. Ask yourself questions such as: Could the disaster have been prevented? What needs to happen to ensure it doesn't happen again? Did the plan work? Are there things in it that need changing?

5. Disaster equipment

To be able to act promptly, keep some essential equipment to hand. Have available:

Stout polythene sheeting	Bin bags
Torches	Dust masks
Protective gloves	Cloths, sponges, and towels
Plastic bags of different sizes	Blotting paper/absorbent paper
Scissors	Bubble wrap
Labels	String

6. Conservation advice

Books, records and archives in a particularly damaged or fragile state should be looked at and repaired by a professional conservator. Choosing the right conservator is important as the wrong choice can result in permanent damage. The local record office may be able to suggest a conservator or to advise on what to look for and what to expect when hiring a conservator. Bodies such as the Preservation Advisory Centre, the United Kingdom Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (UKIC), or the Institute of Paper Conservators will also be able to give advice.

The UKIC has a Conservation Register and also produces a leaflet 'Choosing and Working with a Conservator' which is available from their website at www.conservationregister.com or in hardcopy from Conservation Register, c/o Institute of Conservation, 3rd Floor, Downstream Building, 1 London Bridge, London SE1 9BG, telephone 020 7785 3805, email info@conservationregister.com.

7. Further advice

Further advice about disaster planning is available from meeting librarian guides 4 and 6 and guides for clerks and custodians of records numbers 7 and 10.

Advice can also be obtained from Friends House Library, Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ, telephone 020 7663 1135, email to library@quaker.org.uk, or from your local records office.

Guides in this series

Guides for clerks and custodians of records

- Guide No. 1 The job of the Custodian of Records
- Guide No. 2 Meetings' records and their retention and disposal
- Guide No. 3 Legislation affecting records and record-keeping
- Guide No. 4 Creation to curation of records
- Guide No. 5 Minutes and supporting papers
- Guide No. 6 Electronic records
- Guide No. 7 Preservation and storage of records and archives
- Guide No. 8 Use and access to records and archives
- Guide No. 9 Depositing archives with appropriate repositories
- Guide No. 10 Disaster preparedness
- Guide No. 11 Creating exhibitions and displays
- Guide No. 12 Records equipment and suppliers
- Guide No. 13 Glossary
- Guide No. 14 Frequently Asked Questions

All guides can be downloaded from the Britain Yearly Meeting website www.quaker.org.uk/Library on the Support for Meetings page or requested from the Library.

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