

Re-engaging the public with spontaneous memorial collections

Key ethical & practical considerations for archivists

Every spontaneous memorial collection is unique, shaped by its specific context, community, and moment in time. It is important to recognise that the role of archivists goes beyond simple preservation but towards ethical remembrance. All actions that lead towards engaging people with sensitive collections requires empathy, transparency in decision-making, and a commitment to building and maintaining trust with the affected communities.

Community Ownership & Representation

Q: Who does this memorial represent and who should be involved in decisions about it?

- Engage directly with those most affected (families, community members, local leaders).
- Ensure representation of diverse voices, avoiding dominant or institutional narratives.
- Prioritise community-led interpretation and input.

Consent & Ethical Use

Q: Were items left with the expectation of long-term preservation or public display?

- Items may have been left in grief or protest, not for archival use.
- Seek retrospective consent where appropriate (especially for personal or identifiable items).
- Avoid reuse that could cause harm, distress, or misrepresentation.

Context & Interpretation

Q: How do we explain the collection meaningfully, without altering its original intent?

- Avoid removing items from their emotional or social context.
- Offer clear, neutral interpretation with room for reflection.
- Use community-informed narratives to frame the story.

Preservation vs. Ephemerality

Q: What's worth preserving—and what should remain temporary?

- Many items (flowers, paper notes) were meant to degrade naturally.
- Use digitisation and selective conservation to respect original materials and meanings.
- Be transparent about preservation choices and criteria.

Public Access & Continued Engagement

Q: How can we reengage the public in a way that's respectful and inclusive?

- Choose appropriate formats: exhibitions, digital collections, workshops, or reflective spaces.
- Apply trauma-informed practices in design and delivery.
- Create opportunities for ongoing dialogue and healing.