

INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION SKILLS STRATEGY 2023

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icon

THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION



OVERVIEW

Ensuring that the skills to effectively care for objects, collections and built heritage exist within the conservation workforce is a key priority for Icon. This relies on a fine balance between the number of individuals undertaking training, the skills they are being taught, and the need to respond to demand from employers, clients and commissioners of conservation services.

Icon's membership includes conservation professionals with knowledge of more than 150 different material specialisms. They work across many areas of practice including: interventive treatments, preventive conservation, research, education, and conservation science as well as those managing conservation projects and teams.

Icon is committed to supporting the continued development of a dynamic and resilient conservation workforce in support of our strategic objective to ensure that conservators' work is valued and recognised. We also want to ensure that conservation professionals have fulfilling and rewarding careers.

PRIORITIES

Our skills strategy builds on Icon's [2022 Labour Market Intelligence](#) research and has been developed alongside consultation with Icon members and key stakeholders across the heritage sector. Underpinning this document are three key strands which cross all priorities identified by this strategy:

- Ensuring that skill supply activities are sustainable and meet the needs of employers, clients and commissioners.
- Recognising the need to stimulate demand for conservation skills, to ensure that clients and commissioners engage fully trained professionals where appropriate.
- Prioritising accessibility in all stages of training and development so that everyone can achieve a rewarding career in conservation.

To ensure that there is a resilient, vibrant and thriving training offer that supports the delivery of our three aims **we have identified six priorities for action:**

1. **Understand** the core skills required by professional conservator restorers and the level of competence expected.
2. **Support** and develop training to support conservation activity wherever it is taking place and whoever is doing the work.
3. **Ensure** that skills training has the breadth and depth to support the range of material knowledge needed in the sector.
4. **Continue** to increase the number of Icon Accreditation across the UK and internationally.
5. **Support** a diverse range of entry routes into the conservation profession.
6. **Support** higher education institutions to deliver sustainable conservation training programmes.

Understand the core skills required by professional conservator-restorers and the level of competence expected

Icon's 'Professional Standards and Judgement & Ethics' are designed to apply to all professional conservator-restorers regardless of their area of practice or the material-specific knowledge that is required to perform their job roles. The Professional Standards focus on the underpinning thought processes that guide decision-making; they do not identify the specific range of core conservation skills that are required in the workforce.

This is challenging for training providers and early career professionals entering the job market for the first time. Debate in recent years has focused on identifying the practical conservation skills that graduates need in order to successfully enter the workplace. There is also a focus on their ability to work independently as well as broader work-related skills such as project management, communication and digital skills.

These factors combine to put increasing pressure on training providers and students alike to add more to the curriculum without allowing for the additional time and resources to develop these practical skills.

In order to better support training providers and professional conservators at all career stages, we will:

- Have a clear understanding of the core skills and the level of competence that all those completing conservation training need in order to be considered 'fit to practice'.
- Work with education institutions to ensure that the core skills identified are clearly embedded in their programmes.
- Provide early career professionals with clear guidance for how they can continue to develop their knowledge and understanding of conservation practice.
- Highlight to employers, clients and commissioners the skills that they can expect from early career professionals and provide support to enable employers to deliver effective inhouse training to allow staff to develop their technical and broader work-related skills.

2 Support and develop training to support conservation wherever it is taking place and whoever is doing the work

Many small museums and galleries do not have the resources to employ conservator-restorers for day-to-day care. Often they rely on the curators, front of house staff and volunteers to undertake basic care of collections activities. More could be done to support them to look after their collections effectively while knowing when to turn to a professional for specialist advice.

There is also a large number of individuals working in the built heritage sector who undertake conservation and restoration. The majority of these individuals have a high level of technical skill but lack the underpinning knowledge of conservation theory and practice to inform their decision-making.

A third group includes private owners who, like those working in small institutions, care for their personal heirlooms and family collections.

In these three examples, it would be unrealistic and inappropriate for Icon to advocate that conservation should only be carried out by professional conservators. Icon should instead focus on ensuring that whoever is undertaking conservation has sufficient skill to undertake basic tasks while recognising the limits of their own understanding. They should value the specialist skills of fully trained (and accredited) conservator-restorers and know when and how to access their support.

We will:

- Provide support and training to the full range of people undertaking conservation-related work to ensure everyone has the skill and knowledge to effectively care for buildings, objects and collections.
- Increase awareness of the underpinning principles and practice of conservation. Highlight the value of expertise and the positive impact this has on project outcomes.
- Ensure individuals understand when to bring in professional conservators-restorers and know how to find and commission their work.

3 Ensure that differing methods of skills training exists to support the breadth of material knowledge needed in the sector

Icon's [2022 Labour Market Intelligence](#) research highlighted that the greatest need for skills training exists in archives, books, paper, textiles and paintings conservation. The research also highlighted a number of areas where employers and commissioners struggle to identify suitably qualified individuals.

Some of these areas where recruitment struggles exist, relate to specific elements of broader material specialisms, such as structural treatments of easel and panel paintings, but others relate to whole areas of specialist practice such as industrial heritage skills and time-based media where the number of practitioners is very low.

It could also be argued that all material specialisms with low numbers of practitioners – for example musical instruments conservation – are 'at risk' because losing even one or two practitioners might have a significant impact on the ability to care for such collections.

Complicating the issue is the fact that the UK education sector is economically driven, meaning that training organisations are unlikely to be persuaded to deliver expensive courses for small numbers of students. This is particularly relevant to niche areas of practice where the numbers of students are always going to be relatively small, or where the potential students embark on training later in their careers, when they are unable to undertake long periods of formal training without access to pay.

We will:

- Map the full range of formal and informal training that is delivered across all areas of conservation practice.
- Develop our understanding of the types and scale of museum collections to enable programmes to be tailored to anticipated workforce requirements.
- Work with sector partners to identify different methods of developing training which fills the different skills development needs.
- Compile a conservation skills 'at risk' list to provide a focus for advocacy and skills development activities.

4 Continue to increase the number of Accredited members of Icon across the UK and internationally

Icon Accreditation offers reassurance to clients, commissioners and employers that a professional conservator-restorer has independently proven that they consistently work to high professional standards. Since it was first introduced in 1999, more than 1,200 people have become accredited members of Icon.

There is significant potential to increase the number of Accredited members of Icon – this is not only important to help safeguard the system of accreditation itself, but also to continue raising standards of conservation-restoration practice and ensure that clients and commissioners have access to specialists when and where they need their skills.

Icon has already stated its commitment to embrace all conservation-restoration professionals, more effectively regardless of their material specialism or area of practice. In particular, we want to nurture and support those practicing in built heritage and craft-based areas of the conservation profession. We know that many of these individuals operate to a high technical standard but may lack the underpinning knowledge of conservation practice that would allow them to successfully complete the assessment process.

Over the last 18 months Icon has undertaken a comprehensive review of the process by which Icon Accreditation is delivered. This has focused on the accessibility of the system and its adaptability to individual needs, the use of volunteers, and the support that it is provided to candidates navigating their way through the process. Our aim is to continue to promote high standards of practice while reducing the barriers that prevent people from applying for accreditation.

Icon Accreditation is one of only three systems of professional accreditation for conservator-restorers globally – this is a unique position for Icon. There is established interest in Icon Accreditation from professionals outside of the UK and we are well placed to support those members in their professional development.

We will:

- Continue to actively advocate for and promote the positive impact of accreditation to employers, funders, clients and commissioners of conservation-restoration services.
- Fully implement the review of Icon Accreditation to ensure that candidates are effectively supported through the process and volunteer assessors find their role rewarding.
- Work to develop training for those working as conservators, but who lack the detailed understanding of the principles which underpin conservation practice.

5 Support a diverse range of entry routes into the conservation profession

Professional conservators-restorers require a high level of technical skill, material knowledge and an in-depth understanding of the principles and ethical frameworks that underpin conservation practice.

Degree-level education has become the normal entry route into the conservation-restoration profession (Icon's [Conservation Salary Survey 2022](#) identified that 82% of job roles required at least a Bachelor's level degree). We recognise that the conservation higher education sector provides excellent training, and its impact should in no way be diminished.

However, if we are to continue to encourage the best talent into the sector, we must also recognise that an academic route is not the *only* way to become a conservator. We will therefore continue to encourage the development of high-quality vocational entry routes that are recognised as being on a par with the existing academic training offer. This is essential, not only from the perspective of offering different ways to meet individual learning needs, but also to support social mobility and diversity in all its forms.

Icon has actively supported the development of apprenticeships in England since 2016. This work led to the development of two new apprenticeship standards for conservator-restorers. We have also cemented our support for apprenticeships by registering as the End Point Assessment Organisation for various conservation programmes. This will ensure that vocational entry routes into the sector are recognised as delivering the high standards expected of the conservation profession.

We will:

- Actively engage with future developments in apprenticeships and technical education across all parts of the UK.
- Work with training providers and employers to support the creation of sustainable, high quality apprenticeship programmes.
- Develop our own internal systems and processes so that we can effectively deliver high quality apprenticeship end point assessment services.

6 Support higher education institutions to deliver sustainable conservation training programmes

The education sector provides excellent high-quality training producing graduates who are knowledgeable and adaptable to the challenges of working in the conservation sector.

However, most of the training programmes exist on a knife edge – the increased commodification of the higher education sector means that conservation courses which by their nature have high space and resource requirements can find themselves competing with more profitable programmes in their own institutions.

Over the last ten years, such pressures have led to the closure of two significant programmes, the book and paper programme at the University of the Arts London in Camberwell and the furniture and decorative arts course at Bucks New University. The way in which the sector has responded is inspiring. For example, a dedicated group of practitioners supported the development of a new book and paper programme at City & Guilds London Art School. More recently UCL launched a new programme in the conservation of contemporary art and media. This represents a significant step forward for training in the sector.

However, the underlying threats to the sector remain, and we must not lose sight of its fragility or else risk a significant gap in training leading to a reduction in the overall number of qualified object conservation professionals entering the workforce.

Icon has little ability to influence decisions that are made based on economic viability. However, what we can do is work with the Conservation Higher Education Group, sector partners and key stakeholders to identify areas for collaboration and work to effectively advocate for the sector.

We will:

- Investigate opportunities for the validation and recognition of training programmes which can offer credence to the programmes and support them in their own internal discussions.
- Continue to work with stakeholder groups across the heritage sector to identify areas for collaboration, and opportunities to collectively advocate for the value of conservation education.



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