



# **The National Archives Records Management Guides**

## **4. Active Records Management: Records Creation**

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### Introduction

This Records Management Guide has been produced by The National Archives as part of a series of brief explanatory guides which have been developed to help public authorities achieve compliance with the Code of Practice, issued by the Lord Chancellor, under Section 46 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. This Code provides guidance on good practice in records management to all authorities subject to either the Freedom of Information Act, or the Public Records Act 1958 or the Public Records Act (Northern Ireland) 1923. For the convenience of the reader this Code is hereafter referred to as the Records Management Code.

Record creation is one of the most important processes in records management and organisations should aim to create good records in an effective system. This guide:

- gives direction on what records should be created in the first place
- sets out how to create and/or capture records
- identifies what makes a record an adequate record
- describes how to set up and document a filing system or corporate record plan or classification system for paper or digital records and for hybrid systems
- explains how to ensure shared filing systems are effectively implemented by a team of people.
- addresses the issue of documenting active recordkeeping systems as well as procedures and standards for creating adequate records

### What records should be created

Records should be created when there is a need to remember the details of an event, decision or action such that anyone needing recourse to the facts, whether or not they were party to the original matter, can rely on and acknowledge that the representation is accurate. Records should be created to:

- Provide evidence of policy
- Provide evidence of decisions

- Provide evidence of actions/activity
- Provide evidence of compliance with rules, regulations and legislation appropriate to the organisational context
- Comply with relevant rules, regulations and legislation
- Inform colleagues of what has been done or decided (and serve as a reminder later)
- Act as a reminder of how something has been done
- Track progress of a project or process

Essentially the body of records should support the organisation's business needs so staff can do their work consistently in full knowledge of the processes, decisions and actions that inform, lead to and initiate that business. The body of records should also provide credible and authoritative evidence to protect the rights of the organisation, its staff and anyone else affected by its activity – including but not limited to a court of law. The body of records should also provide an institutional memory so that time and distance do not affect access to and availability of the corporate knowledge resource. Finally, the records should provide the evidence and information required for any possible internal or external audit.

Records are sometimes created unnecessarily. This happens when:

- There is no need for evidence that something has been done
- A record duplicates evidence or information in one or more other records
- A redundant duplicate of a record is created (for example via a multi-part form such as a receipt)

Record audits, workflow analyses and functional appraisals can all assist in identifying unnecessary and redundant records. Forms and other routine documentation should also be checked to make sure that all the information is needed for a complete and accurate record and it is not duplicated anywhere.

Each organisation or authority must decide for itself what records need to be created and maintained depending on the legal and regulatory environment and the precise nature of its business.

## How to create/capture records

The physical act of writing, or of printing out a paper record, creates and fixes the information. With most electronic records you normally have to save your documents in order to capture them - e-mails, though, have to be transmitted to the intended recipient to create a record as otherwise they remain in draft form.

However, creating a record is not enough unless the record is then captured or filed into a filing or business classification system created and managed by the organisation. It is important that records are kept in their context and the best way to achieve this is to file or classify them. If this is not done records cannot be tracked or used efficiently as they are effectively orphaned. . Record creators file records because they need to see and use them in context together with other records relating to the same matter. They are also filed because they need to be kept somewhere, particularly if records are to be shared with colleagues. Once record quantities pass a critical mass, they cannot be found efficiently if they are kept in a big heap of paper or if digital records are saved electronically into a single folder with meaningless titles.

With paper records the act of filing physically associates records of a related activity or transactions within a container (usually a manila folder or binder), which is then stored and managed subsequently as a physical aggregation. In the digital domain electronic records are captured by classifying them into a corporate file-plan or business classification scheme. This normally associates the electronic record with an electronic folder, which provides the key metadata, needed to locate and control the records placed within it. (Metadata is explained later in this Guide.)

Records captured or filed in a corporate filing system will possess some of the necessary characteristics to be regarded as authentic and reliable. Whatever the format of the records, they should be saved into a proper records management system.

This includes emails. Where emails document significant transactions they should be treated and managed as corporate records. However, most email applications are not good recordkeeping systems as the emails are normally held in personal mailboxes and hence are not accessible to anyone else. The adoption of Electronic Document and Record Management (EDRM) systems can provide an effective solution here. Where that option is not available consideration should be given to establishing either corporately controlled and managed email folders in which email records can be stored within the email client (e.g. the software program that is used to read and send e-mail such as MS Outlook or Lotus Mail) or, alternatively, a corporate folder system on a shared

drive in which all electronic records, including emails, can be stored. If none of these options are practicable it may be necessary to insist on a print to paper policy where the printout is placed on a paper file but this solution represents a high risk to the organisation as it is difficult both to monitor and enforce. For that reason it should be adopted only as a last resort.

Note that whilst a record can consist of a single document, it may also be an aggregation of records, for example a file or even a register, which is built up over time.

For all records, regardless of format, creation consists of both compiling the necessary facts or details and assigning its place in the system by means of a reference, file title or tagging (which can be automated for electronic records). Some of the facts and details will be in the content of the record, others can be captured in the system. These other details are called metadata. Metadata is additional information about the record that is needed to validate and understand the it and its context.

It is important to remember to create and/or capture metadata associated with the record format. Traditionally, to manage active paper records it has not been necessary to capture information about their physical attributes, although it becomes more important as they grow less active. For electronic records you need to know the format of the record in order to be able to read it – in fact you need the programme itself as the record cannot otherwise be accessed.

It is not possible to prescribe exactly what the content of records should be – that will depend on the nature of the business to be recorded. However, there are a few constituents that should almost always be present:

- The identity of person or equipment (pc, server etc.) creating the record
- The date of creation (and time if necessary)
- Open and closure dates for record aggregates such as a file
- The function of the creator and/or their organisational context
- Format

In some instances organisations may require the use of authenticating mechanisms such as signatures, stamps, seals or initials. With physical records these are directly visible on examining the record as they form part of the physical record. However, use of digital signatures or watermarks can be problematic because if an electronic record is to be held for some time it may not be possible

to maintain access to the digital signature for the required period and the record may then become unreadable and consequently unusable. Where digital signatures etc are used, organisations need to have a clear policy and procedure to support continued access to such items until the record is no longer required

## Adequate records

The National Archives Records Management Guide, *What is Records Management?* defines a record as: "recorded information, regardless of media or format, created or received in the course of individual or organisational activity which provides reliable evidence of policy, actions and decisions." An adequate record is one that:

- Can be trusted as an accurate and complete account of the policy, actions or decisions it documents
- Has been created by an individual or individuals with first hand knowledge or experience of the matter that is being recorded or by equipment or systems routinely used to record such transactions or activities
- Has been created at the time of the matter being recorded or soon after as part of, or as a by-product of, the activity it documents
- Is authoritative in that it comes from a recognisable and dependable source and is the primary source for evidence of the action, policy or decision it documents
- Is credible and its validity can be depended upon
- Is authentic and can be proven to be what it alleges to be and that it has been created, sent or received by the alleged person or organisation at the time or date alleged
- Has integrity and can be proven to have been protected from unauthorised alterations
- Can be located, retrieved, accessed and understood both alone and together with other related records

This list of record characteristics seems rather daunting but remember that organisations, and public bodies and government in particular, have been creating and maintaining records successfully for centuries. Using this guide and the other useful guidance produced by The National Archives will ensure that your records are adequate to document your organisation's work and decision-making, to provide accountability and to protect the organisation and its stakeholders.

## Filing systems and corporate record plans

The filing system or record plan has a major role to play in active records management. The main reasons for this are:

1. The authenticity of the record depends on the record keeping system in which it was created and/or captured
2. The fact that your records are created as part of your business processes and filed or captured into the filing system will contribute to the records' reliability
3. As with any system, a filing system helps ensure that repetitive tasks are carried out accurately and consistently

The benefits of an effective classification or filing system are:

- faster assignment of records to files
- faster retrieval of information and records
- greater security and protection of records

Such systems must be in place prior to or at the very latest in parallel with record creation or capture.

### **Terminology**

There are a number of related terms which are applied to active record keeping systems. The term 'corporate record plan' refers to a written schema which classifies records in some way (usually according to business function) across the whole organisation. This does not necessarily reflect the physical or electronic storage of the records. The term 'classification scheme' is similar to record plan in that it is also a written schema which classifies records – but the basis of the classification will vary more, and might be subject, person or project based. 'Filing system' is a term which encompasses both the classification scheme and the records. Thus a filing system is a framework which:

- Physically holds records (for example filing cabinets with file folders or a computer with software and document folders)
- Provides a classification scheme to group or link related records
- Reflects or maps the work of the creating business unit
- Has rules and conventions for accepting records into the system, as well as for removal of records
- Contains records

## **Selecting an appropriate classification scheme**

Given that there is a requirement to file records, you need a scheme that ensures you can store and access your records as comprehensive related bundles. The records which support some functions are fairly homogenous and uncomplicated, therefore the classification scheme for the filing system will be simple and obvious, for example patient records filed alphabetically by surname. Usually business functions and the records that support them are more complex so you need a system that includes not just the classification scheme but also rules for selecting classifications and possibly guidance on cross-referencing.

The classification scheme must reflect business functions and business needs. It must also accommodate records in any format, particularly paper and electronic records. Your scheme may already be in place and work well, but if it doesn't, or there is no system, you will need to survey prior to developing a new system or improving the old one. The National Archives Records Management Guide No 5, *Active Records Management: Record Keeping and Record Maintenance* gives more advice on how to survey the organisation's functions and records.

## **What the filing system should include**

An effective filing system, regardless of the media of the records it contains, will include:

- Records
- Related metadata (there are a wide range of possibilities for this, according to organisational and team needs. They include: dates of creation, opening, closing; format; creator; whether closed, inactive or superseded, and security marking where applicable)
- Secure storage facilities (servers or physical space)
- More secure storage for sensitive, personal or classified records (by means of locked rooms/cabinets, user ids and access permissions, password protection, clear procedures)
- Protection from alteration (by means of user ids and access permissions, password protection, clear procedures)
- Safeguard from unauthorised removal or destruction (by means of user ids and access permissions, password protection, clear procedures)
- A process to retrieve records and, if paper records are involved, track them while removed from the system

- Classification scheme
- Location scheme or register, if paper records are involved
- Cross reference rules and procedures
- Mechanisms for linking related records (physical file covers, electronic folders or metadata)

In the paper environment a lot of these elements were physically and conceptually separate: with computers, and particularly with electronic record keeping systems, all the procedures, rules and mechanisms, the metadata and even the records can be kept together in one system.

## Hybrid systems

It is likely that for a long while to come most organisations will be operating in a hybrid paper and digital environment. This being so, the filing system and procedures for its operation should be a hybrid one to ensure that both paper and digital records are covered.

Establishing and operating a hybrid system depends upon knowing what kinds of records are kept in paper and which in electronic format. Your survey (See No 5 in this series of Guides) will provide the information you need to assess which records are or should be kept in which media and where there is duplication across media. You will need to develop rules and guidance for all record types to indicate the media in which they should be created. Where the master is electronic it is a good idea to allow convenience copies for reading or meetings but to stipulate that they should not be filed in the paper system.

It is best to have the same, or at least a very similar, classification scheme for paper and electronic records but in any case the scheme should reflect your business functions and needs. A hybrid system also needs to be capable of cross-referencing related records in different media.

Some record formats can be very difficult to integrate into a hybrid system, for example a picture library with digital images or photographic prints. There is no reason why a picture library cannot continue to be maintained in its existing location according to its own classification scheme but it needs to be recognised and counted as a set of records to be managed. Databases and other management systems such as those for the finance or human resources function similarly often sit outside the electronic record keeping system and are separate from other records in the system

folders. They also need to be identified and encompassed in a records management programme, for example there should be data entry and editing rules which result in an audit trail to ensure the record can be relied upon to be accurate and authentic.

## Shared systems

An important aspect of record creation and setting up good filing systems is how the system will be used and shared. Record creators and users should be involved in developing new filing systems and/or improving old ones. You can use the survey process to canvass opinions and advice. Another good way to involve people is to have a meeting to discuss a draft proposal. It must be understood that where there are different approaches to file classification and filing procedures, individual preference will have to defer to the need for clarity and consistency. One way of doing it may be no more valid than another but a decision must be made and the resulting rules and procedures followed.

Even in a small team, it is good practice to designate someone with responsibility for managing the filing. This does not mean they have to do it all, but they should monitor the records themselves to ensure the system is working. They should also review the procedures and other aspects of the system to ensure it is working and suggest and implement changes where necessary.

## Documenting systems

Even if you have a very simple filing system for which there appears to be no need for written clarification, you need to have documentation. This should cover the whole system and include:

- Guidelines on what records must be created and procedures to create them
- A clear statement on the ownership of the records and the intellectual property they contain
- Guidelines on what metadata to capture and procedures for doing so
- Guidelines on where to store records and how to document and track locations
- Security classification scheme and guidance on how to implement it
- Guidelines on access and access restriction

- File classification scheme and guidance on how to use it
- Details of, and guidance on, any finding aids such as card indexes and databases
- Filing procedures including how to open and close files
- Retrieval procedures
- Cross-referencing rules
- Rules regarding which media to use to create and maintain records
- Rules on paper convenience copies
- Guidelines on linking records across media
- Technical specifications for any automated or computer system
- Details of system manager or administrator

It is good practice to have documentation for your filing system so that new staff can learn how it works and existing staff who seldom use the system can remind themselves of how it works. Very importantly, the documentation reinforces the evidence that there is a reliable and adequate system in place to create/capture and maintain records. This can be a useful defence in the event that a complaint to the Information Commissioner's Office leads to scrutiny of your records management practices.

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## Further Guidance and Information

The National Archives Guide, *Active Records Management: Record Keeping and Record Maintenance*, provides information on both surveying records and on maintaining recordkeeping systems. It includes reference to further guidance and information on specifying and setting up record keeping systems, which is therefore not included below.

### Standards

- *ISO 15489-1:2001 Information and documentation – Records Management (Part 1 General)*
- *PD ISO/TR 15489-2:2001 Information and documentation – Records Management (Part 2: Guidelines)*

### Codes of Practice

- *BIP 0025-1:2002 Effective records management. A management guide to the value of BS ISO 15489-1*
- *BIP 0001-2:2003 Freedom of information. A practical guide. Using records management techniques to simplify compliance*

### Guidance

- The National Archives Records Management Standard: *File Creation*  
[http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/recordsmanagement/advice/pdf/stan\\_file\\_creation.pdf](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/recordsmanagement/advice/pdf/stan_file_creation.pdf)
- Guidelines for management, appraisal and preservation of electronic records  
<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/electronicrecords/advice/guidelines.htm>
- Business classification scheme design  
<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/electronicrecords/advice/guidelines.htm>
- Good practice on managing electronic records on a local area network  
[http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/electronicrecords/advice/pdf/managing\\_elect\\_docs.pdf](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/electronicrecords/advice/pdf/managing_elect_docs.pdf)

- *Complying with the Records Management Code: Evaluation Workbook and Methodology*

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/electronicrecords/code.htm>