

Records Management

Records and Information Surveys

Standards for the management of Government records

Information Surveys

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Preface

This guidance has been prepared by the Public Record Office (PRO) and is one of a series for use by all organisations creating or holding public records.

An information survey is a prerequisite for the work of the records manager. Records are the reflection of an organisation's activities. The survey provides access to these activities and the records that arise from them. It profiles each record series and system, and helps to identify any problems, establish a records management programme, and quickly to design a filing system or produce a disposal schedule. It also helps to determine what is required to install and maintain the records management programme (space, equipment, personnel, etc) as well as how to evaluate the efficacy and economy of records management systems.

An information survey gives an objective view of an organisation's record collections and their uses. It is the first and most important step to the proper control of records whereby procedures are considered in a systematic and disciplined way. It is also a useful tool in assessing the level of knowledge of records management in an organisation.

The collection and analysis of data from an information survey is time-consuming and labour intensive. Comprehensiveness and the productive use to which the information gathered can be put need to be balanced.

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1 **Scope**

- 1.1 Sometimes referred to as an inventory or records census, an information survey is a comprehensive gathering of information about records created or processed by an organisation. These records may be held on various media such as paper, microform or tape. A survey should cover all records, whatever their form. Unregistered records should not be excluded from the process.
- 1.2 Information surveys are primarily concerned with the examination of active records but occasionally it may be necessary to survey semi-active or inactive material when, for example, retention periods are being re-examined.
- 1.3 This guidance is aimed at all organisations creating or holding public records but might be equally applicable to other record-creating bodies. It provides advice relating to surveys of an organisation's paper-based information resources. It does not cover the surveying of electronic records for which separate guidance is available in booklets entitled *The Management, Appraisal and Preservation of Electronic Records* (PRO, 1999).

2 Definitions

- 2.1 **Access.** The availability of or permission to consult records.
- 2.2 **Accountability.** The principle that organisations and individuals are required to account to others for their actions. Government departments and agencies must be able to account for their actions to the appropriate regulatory authority.
- 2.3 **Alphanumeric.** A classification system in which letters are assigned to main divisions and numbers to subdivisions.
- 2.4 **Aperture card.** An 80-column tabulating-sized card with a hole, or aperture, usually containing one frame of a 35mm microfilm; generally used for engineering drawings, maps and charts.
- 2.5 **Appraisal.** The process of evaluating an organisation's activities to determine which records should be kept, and for how long, to meet the needs of the organisation, the requirements of Government accountability and the expectations of researchers and other users of the records.
- 2.6 **Classification.** The process of determining the sequence or order in which to arrange documents.
- 2.7 **Closed file.** A file containing documents on which action has been completed and to which no more documents will be added.
- 2.8 **Departmental Record Officer (DRO).** The person appointed by a government department or agency as being responsible for the management of the records of that organisation.
- 2.9 **Disposal.** The implementation of appraisal and review decisions. These comprise the destruction of records and transfer of selected records to the Public Record Office. They may also include the movement of records from one system to another (for example paper to electronic) or the transfer of custody of the records.
- 2.10 **Documentation.** Written facts about a recordkeeping system, including its component parts and a manual of instruction detailing rules for use and maintenance of the system.
- 2.11 **Electronic records.** Records where the information is recorded in a form that is suitable for retrieval, processing and communication by a digital computer.
- 2.12 **File.** An accumulation of paper records maintained in a predetermined physical arrangement. Used primarily in reference to current records.

- 2.13 **Filing systems.** A plan for organising records so that they can be found when needed.
- 2.14 **Finding aids.** Indexes or other lists, manual or automated, that are designed to make it easier to locate relevant files or retrieve information.
- 2.15 **Hierarchical.** Arrangement by a graded system of organisation.
- 2.16 **Client Manager (CM).** An officer of the Public Record Office responsible for the supervision and co-ordination of the records work of a group of government departments and agencies to provide for the timely and effective appraisal, documentation and accessioning of departmental records.
- 2.17 **Location card.** Card designed to record the location of a record, showing reference number, title or description, user of the record and the date on which the record was taken.
- 2.18 **Microform.** Records in the form of microfilm and microfiche, including aperture cards.
- 2.19 **Numeric.** A classification system in which numbers are assigned to main divisions and subdivisions and the records are arranged accordingly.
- 2.20 **Operational area/unit.** A unit, division or department within a government department or agency with responsibility for a particular function.
- 2.21 **Paper records.** Records in the form of files, volumes, folders, bundles, maps, plans, charts, etc
- 2.22 **Protective marking.** The process of determining security restrictions on records. Previously called 'classification'.
- 2.23 **Public Records.** Records of, or held in, any department of Her Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom or records of any office, commission or other body or establishment whatsoever under Her Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom, as defined in paragraph 2 of the First Schedule to the Public Records Act 1958. Also records of organisations subsequently included in the table in the above Schedule or of those whose records have since been determined as public records by the Public Record Office.
- 2.24 **Public Records Act 1958.** Legislation 6 & 7 Eliz. 2, Ch 51.
- 2.25 **Record series.** A collection of records having a common subject or theme usually identified by a specific lettercode or number.
- 2.26 **Record audit/census.** Complete and accurate listing of records resulting from a survey.

- 2.27 **Register.** A list of records, usually in simple sequence such as date and reference number, serving as a finding aid to the records.
- 2.28 **Registration.** The process of records creation and its recording in an appropriate finding aid, such as a register, index, computer database, etc.
- 2.29 **Registered file.** A file that is part of a registration system.
- 2.30 **Retention.** The continued storage and maintenance of records for as long as they are required by the creating or holding organisation until their disposal, according to their administrative, legal, financial and historical evaluation.
- 2.31 **Review.** The examination of records to determine whether they should be destroyed, retained for a further period or transferred to the Public Record Office.
- 2.32 **Scheduling.** The production of a schedule or list of public records for which pre-determined periods of retention have been agreed between the operational manager and Departmental Record Officer of the government organisation concerned, and the Public Record Office.
- 2.33 **Sound recordings.** A recording of sound on magnetic tape carried on an open reel or cassette.
- 2.34 **Tracking.** Capturing and maintaining information about the movement, use and transaction of records.
- 2.35 **Videotape.** Magnetic or other tape carrying a series of TV images recorded magnetically, electronically or holographically.
- 2.36 **Vital records.** Records essential to the continued functioning or reconstitution of an organisation during and after an emergency and also those records essential to protecting the rights and interests of the organisation and of the individuals directly affected by its activities.

3 **Content**

3.1 In order to meet records management objectives and users' needs, having regard to the likely availability of resources, the information survey needs to include the following:

- a full understanding of the organisation - the nature of its activities, its mission, objectives, components and operations
- level of staff awareness of records management
- what records are held and the activities to which they relate
- an inventory of record containers (cabinets, shelves, etc)
- records documentation (file lists, indexes, etc)
- amount of records
- copies of records
- date range of records
- frequency of consultation of the records
- tracking systems for the records
- current records management system and competence levels of records management staff

4 **Methodology**

Planning

4.1 Many of the difficulties associated with introducing new records management procedures can be overcome by careful planning of the information survey. This planning should include:

- commitment from top management
- aims and objectives
- communication
- data collection
- completion of forms

Commitment from top management

4.2 Written authority from top management for the survey to be conducted and advanced warning to staff of the organisation will go a long way towards producing an effective information survey. A programme of visits to offices should be agreed and the objectives of the survey communicated to the staff involved.

Aims and objectives

4.3 Aims and objectives must be established before the survey is undertaken. These parallel the objectives of records management in general and are actually part of the strategy in achieving these objectives. They may be short-term or long-term. Short-term objectives are usually the basics of records management improvement programmes:

- development of economical records storage and retrieval
- improvement of active records management systems
- development of disposal schedules

Other objectives may be of less immediate concern, such as forms control or computerisation.

4.4 The objective of the survey should therefore be to gather only the information that addresses the aims and objectives cited above. For example:

- identification of all the organisation's records by series or collection and an understanding of their functional context will provide the basis for the disposal schedule
- categorisation of the types of equipment will assist in systems improvement and in calculating savings

Communication

- 4.5 Prior to carrying out the survey a notice should be sent to all managers and staff concerned, identifying the nature of the survey, its objectives, how it will affect their work, and when it will begin. It is often useful to hold orientation sessions with key staff, and to keep managers informed by the issue of progress reports.

Data collection

- 4.6 Before conducting the survey several items should be collected and studied:
- costs of office space, equipment, supplies and staff. Organisational unit costs are often calculated regularly for accommodation (including maintenance and running costs) and for staff (including support services)
 - maps and plans of buildings, showing furniture and equipment
 - copies of contracts with commercial storage companies, microfilming bureaux, computer services, etc
 - inventory of equipment, including computers and photocopiers
 - organisation charts that will give an understanding of the flow of information
 - procedural manuals and forms
 - copies of file lists or databases
 - copies of previous studies
- 4.7 There are two main ways of collecting data in an information survey - physical observation or questionnaire

Physical Observation

- 4.7.1 A physical survey requires records staff to visit operational areas and look into each item of records storage equipment, ask questions and complete a standard survey form. Individual records need not be examined; it is usually sufficient to sample a series or collection.
- 4.7.2 The physical survey should be carefully planned and executed with a minimum of disruption. An initial investigation to establish the whereabouts, ownership, volume and condition of the records may be required to make the plan more effective. When the plan and timetable have been drawn up the detailed survey can follow, using standard survey forms that are simple and straightforward (examples are shown at Appendix A). The survey becomes more manageable if there are two separate forms - one for records and one for staff, space and equipment.

4.7.3 Four main actions form the key to finding out information from the survey:

- **find** every storage place with records and information, including tops of cabinets, disks, commercial storage, under desks
- **look** at all the records and information in the location and media discovered
- **ask** questions until understanding is complete
- **record** the information acquired for future analysis

Questionnaire

4.7.4 The reliability of data which might be required to develop or support a hypothesis or serve as a prerequisite for introducing new procedures is closely related to the size of the survey through which the data is obtained. Physical surveys can be programmed to cover all parts of an organisation. The use of questionnaires, however, relies on individuals to complete them accurately and timely. Because of the heterogeneous nature of information resources, careful consideration should be given before deciding whether the use of a questionnaire will provide results comprehensive enough to enable crucial decisions to be made. Although a well-constructed questionnaire which produces a high percentage response can be a sound, cost-effective approach to gathering information, greater coverage is likely to be achieved through physical observation.

4.7.5 Questions must be framed so that they elicit relevant and accurate information. They can be open or closed. Open questions will encourage opinions and give freedom to respondents but the analysis of free-ranging responses can be difficult. Closed questions lessen the chance of obtaining information which might be useful but which may not have been thought of. A balance of closed and open questions is ideal. A sample questionnaire is shown on page -x-.

4.7.6 Open questions should direct the respondent to as specific an area as possible. For example, the following question will produce different responses:

A. Having recently attended a records management course, what are your thoughts?

B. You recently attended a records management course. What new skills do you think you acquired?

4.7.7 Closed questions can be asked in a variety of ways:

- seeking a yes or no answer
- providing statement or answer boxes for ticks
- ranking scales, for levels of agreement to statements or order of priority of certain issues

4.7.8 Whatever method or type of questioning is used, only one answer should be sought to one question. For example, the following is actually asking two questions:

“There have been too many leaks of confidential papers and managers should be doing more to prevent leaks occurring.”

Agree.....l.....l.....l.....l.....l.....l.....Disagree

4.7.9 Consideration should be given to the issue of anonymity. If names are not included on completed questionnaires it may cause difficulties in checking the extent of replies received.

4.7.10 Data required from a records information survey are largely factual rather than consisting of opinions. Interpretation of the data is therefore not problematic with questionnaires, although the lack of comprehensiveness (if not all questionnaires are returned) may invalidate some of the data. The degree of invalidation may make it necessary to undertake some physical observation (see paragraph 4.5).

4.7.11 See sample questionnaire on following page.

Completion of forms

4.8 The following lists give elements that should be included on survey forms:

4.8.1 Records Form and Staff/Equipment Form:

- *date prepared*
- *operational unit and location*
- *person conducting the survey*

Sample Questionnaire

Records and Information Survey	
Department:	Contact Name:
Date:	Telephone:
1. Title of record series/collection:	
2. What information do the records contain?	
3. For what purpose are the records created?	
4. Date range:	
5. Format of the records:	
6. Filing system (numeric, alpha-numeric, etc):	
7. Finding aids:	
8. Who refers to the records and how often?	
9. Status:	<input type="checkbox"/> official record <input type="checkbox"/> duplicate <input type="checkbox"/> vital record
10. Is there information in other records which duplicates information contained in these records?	<input type="checkbox"/> yes <input type="checkbox"/> no If yes, describe overleaf.

11. Do the records provide evidence of the origins, structure, policy and functions of the organisation?	<input type="checkbox"/> yes <input type="checkbox"/> no
12. Do the records have historical value?	<input type="checkbox"/> yes <input type="checkbox"/> no
13. What is the volume of records in linear metres?	Active records..... Inactive records.....
14. Annual growth rate:	
15. Location of records:	
16. Storage equipment used:	
17. After what period do the records become inactive?	
18. After what period are the records no longer required for reference purposes?	
19. Is the retention period affected by legislation?	<input type="checkbox"/> yes <input type="checkbox"/> no If yes, describe overleaf.
20. Are the records needed for audit purposes?	<input type="checkbox"/> yes <input type="checkbox"/> no
Signature:	Date:

4.8.2 Records Form:

There should be one form for each series or collection. On occasions, however, it may be necessary to record a group of miscellaneous records on one form.

- *series/collection location*: if the series is located in more than one office, it is only necessary to have one survey form and indicate multiple locations
- *series/collection title*
- *date range*: the earliest and latest dates of the records in each series/collection
- *series/collection description*: a clear description of the records is basic to the success of the survey and any future disposal decisions that may be made
- *medium*: indicate whether the records are paper, microform, audiovisual, etc or a combination of these
- *arrangement*: the filing system used - subject classification, hierarchical, alphabetical, numerical, chronological, geographical or other arrangement. Subordinate patterns of arrangement within the series/collection should also be indicated
- *volume*: in linear metres
- *annual growth*
- *inactive records*: the percentage of the total volume of records which are closed or otherwise inactive
- *usage rate*: number of retrievals from the series/collection per week or month
- *vital records*: specify if the records, or some of them, qualify as vital records
- *duplication*: whether copies of the documents in the series/collection are available in another place or medium
- *documentation*: any finding aids for the series/collection which may be in the form of registers, indexes, file lists, file manuals, computer databases, etc
- *restrictions on access and use*: note of any protective markings or other restrictions on use of the records
- *physical condition*
- *disposal authority*: whether any disposal schedule or other directive exists for the series/collection

4.8.3 Staff/Equipment Form:

- *staff servicing the registry/records management unit*: number and grades of staff providing the records service
- *staff served and location(s)*: the number of staff served by the registry/records management unit and their location

- *equipment*: type and number of equipment used in the registry/records management unit (for example, filing cabinets, cupboards and racking)
- *comments*: observations or comments made by the staff of the registry/records management unit

4.8.4 Information from all forms (particularly those for staff and equipment) can be aggregated on a separate form. This might cover the whole organisation or groups/clusters within the organisation. The precise aggregation will depend on how solutions to the problems identified are to be tackled. For example, an aggregation of the whole organisation might result in an unmanageable project.

5 Costs

- 5.1 An analysis of the costs of the records operations should be an integral part of the information survey. Background information will need to be obtained from a central source and used in conjunction with the results of the survey as part of the overall evaluation and report.
- 5.2 Accommodation costs vary from building to building and location to location. For example, office accommodation (such as active records management units or registries) is usually considerably more expensive than storage accommodation (file stores, intermediate repositories, records centres, etc) simply because of the nature of the services required by each (telecommunications, electricity, lighting, messengerial, etc).
- 5.3 Staff costs are generally standardised for particular levels of work throughout government services. Information should be available from departmental financial services.
- 5.4 Equipment costs are crucial to an evaluation of a survey's results. Some types of equipment are more cost-effective than others (for example lateral filing cupboards compared to four-drawer filing cabinets) and a careful analysis of their relative costs, including any maintenance, is important for reaching cost-effective solutions or improvements in records management procedures.
- 5.5 Comparison of storage costs is most easily achieved by calculating a storage factor for each type of equipment. This is simply the result of dividing the amount of files (in linear metres) by the area occupied (in square metres), including the area necessary to access the records. The higher the storage factor the more efficient is the equipment. For example:
 - A four-drawer filing cabinet holds 2.5 m of records and occupies 2.25 sq m of space; the storage factor is therefore **1.11**
 - A lateral filing cupboard holds 4m of records and occupies 0.77 sq m of space; the storage factor is therefore **5.2**
- 5.6 The accommodation, staff and equipment costs should be aggregated on a monthly and yearly basis. Projections and evaluations can then be made, using different storage equipment, accommodation or staff. For example:

File Series:	2/GEN	Year:	1999/00
Amount of files:	80 metres		
Location:	Britannia House, Brighton		
Equipment:	4-drawer filing cabinets	Lateral filing cupboards	
Space occupied:	75 sq metres	15.4 sq metres	
Accommodation cost (@ £200 / sq m / pa	£15,000 pa	£3,080 pa	
Saving:	-	£11,920 pa	

6 Evaluation

6.1 The task of analysis and evaluation of the data from the survey should be carried out promptly as delay can make the findings obsolete.

6.2 Evaluation should be made with a use for the information in mind. Records management is meant to improve records and information systems for the people who use them. A survey that results in only a statistical report is of no use. Information gathered from the survey should enable consideration of the following:

- records which are valueless and could be destroyed immediately – identified from the survey form by low or nil usage rate, or duplication
- inactive records which could be removed to storage – closed files no longer required for reference which can be removed to cheaper accommodation
- filing equipment which could be emptied, removed or re-used – the survey may identify partially-filled equipment in which records could be consolidated
- computers being used inefficiently – the evaluation should take the opportunity to assess whether computerised filing systems, indexes or databases are being put to good use and are improving the efficiency of the information systems
- records or information which could be consolidated, including the elimination or reduction of duplication – evidence of duplication should be highlighted so that resources are used most efficiently
- protection of the records against loss, damage, etc – the type of equipment used should take into account the value of the records, including those which may be of archival value
- effectiveness of systems (filing, indexing, etc) – staff and user comments may point the way to the need for improvement

Only when issues such as these have been considered can plans for improvement, appraisal or new programmes begin.

7 **Presentation of Results**

7.1 Quantitative data from the survey can be presented in tabular form (eg number of different types of storage equipment), with charts (eg percentage of records covered by disposal schedules) or by graphs (eg comparison of number of staff and amount of records serviced).

7.2 Qualitative data, such as physical condition or staff comments, will need to be presented in narrative form.

7.3 The survey report should frame recommendations that are clear and which are constructive proposals for improvement or development. They should be short and supported by facts in the report. They may be one of several types:

7.3.1 Educational - where the recommendation is long-term or developmental, a timetable should be considered.

7.3.2 Influential - where contact or negotiation and persuasion are needed, consideration should be given to who the important figures might be, whether they have been involved, and who might be able to contribute to implementation of the recommendation.

7.3.3 Challenging - where some areas might be directly challenged by a recommendation, the balancing advantages must be taken into account.

7.3.4 Enforcing - tightening up of procedures may lead to significant changes in culture or attitude.

7.3.5 Redeploying - where existing procedures or systems may have to change, there may also be implications in budgets, timetable, training, etc.

7.3.6 Cost saving - where costs can be measured with reasonable certainty, the report should set out the cost benefits clearly.

7.4 The survey report should be as short as possible. There should be a summary, which should concentrate on major findings and recommendations, a brief narrative to illustrate evidence gathered during the survey, and factual data.

8 Further Information

- 8.1 The Public Record Office is currently working on a series of records management standards which aim to promote good practice in the management of public records throughout all stages of their life cycle. The first three standards, published in January 1998 are:
- RMS 1.1 File Creation
 - RMS 2.1 Tracking Records
 - RMS 5.1 Disposal Scheduling
- Other standards are planned for 1999 and succeeding years
- 8.2 A second series of booklets currently in production gives guidance on the retention of records common to most government departments. Buildings records, personal files, accounting records, and health and safety records have been covered so far and more are planned for 1999.
- 8.3 Guidance on acquisition and appraisal are the subjects of a third series of publications. The first two booklets in this series cover *Planning of Records Appraisal* and the *PRO Acquisition Policy*.
- 8.4 In the area of electronic records a major publication, *The Management, Appraisal and Preservation of Electronic Records*, was issued in March 1999. This is in two volumes covering principles and procedures. More booklets will follow in this series.
- 8.5 A fifth series, covering Information Policy, is planned for 1999.

Appendix A - Survey Forms

RECORDS SURVEY FORM

1. DATE PREPARED	2. OPERATIONAL UNIT AND LOCATION		
3. PERSON CONDUCTING THE SURVEY		4. SERIES/COLLECTION LOCATION	
5. SERIES TITLE			6. DATE RANGE
7. SERIES/COLLECTION DESCRIPTION			
8. MEDIUM		13. USAGE RATE	
9. ARRANGEMENT		14. VITAL RECORDS	
		15. DUPLICATION:	
10. VOLUME (<i>in linear metres</i>)		16. DOCUMENTATION	
11. ANNUAL ACCUMULATION		17. RESTRICTIONS ON ACCESS AND USE	
12. INACTIVE RECORDS		18. PHYSICAL CONDITION	
19. DISPOSAL AUTHORITY			

STAFF/EQUIPMENT SURVEY FORM

1. DATE PREPARED	2. OPERATIONAL UNIT AND LOCATION
3. PERSON CONDUCTING THE SURVEY	
4. STAFF SERVICING REGISTRY/RM UNIT	5. STAFF SERVED AND LOCATION(S)
6. AREA OCCUPIED	
7. EQUIPMENT: 2, 3, 4 or 5 drawer standard filing cabinets: 2, 3, 4 or 5 drawer lateral filing cabinets: 1m wide shelves 1m wide lateral filing Circular cabinets Microfilm cabinets Other	
8. COMMENTS BY STAFF:	