



the national archives

General guidelines for the selection of records

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1. Introduction

1.1 These guidelines, which are being re-issued for the use of Departmental Record Officers (DRO) have been extracted from Section 3.6 (Criteria for Selection) of Chapter 3 of the Manual of Records Administration (1993) and revised to take into account changes since that date. The guidelines were developed specifically for the review of paper records but many of the principles may still be applied to records created in digital formats. Guidance on the method of selection of digital records is provided through the Appraisal Report.

2. General

2.1 The destruction of records is an irreversible act, while the preservation of records which are unworthy of preservation involves high and continuing costs. The guidance which follows is intended to assist the DRO to identify records of permanent value with relative ease, and to avoid both ill-considered destruction and also uncritical selection.

2.2 The criteria are necessarily general. It is for DROs, with the assistance of Client Managers (CM), to adapt them to the circumstances of particular departments, and to ensure that everyone involved in the processes of selection at any stage is aware of the criteria that bear on the review decisions in which they may be participating. In preparing departmental guidance, DROs should bear in mind that selected records are:

- (a) infrequently used in isolation, but frequently used with others selected by their departments and by other departments; and
- (b) regularly used for research unconnected with the purpose for which they were created

2.3 The criteria are intended to be useful at every stage of the selection process, although the full range will not apply at each, and what follows sets down the differing considerations that bear on selection decisions at differing stages. DROs should consider whether they should issue separate guidance for each selection process, for example, for the preparation of Disposal Lists or for the conduct of First Review.

3. The Acquisition Policy and the collection themes

3.1 The Acquisition Policy (2000) sets out The National Archives objectives in acquiring records. These are:-

- To record the principal policies and actions of UK central government
- To document the state's interactions with its citizens and with the physical environment

They are to be met by collecting records which relate to eight themes:-

- 2.2.1 Policy and administrative processes of the state:-
 - 2.2.1.1 Formulation of policy and management of public resources by the core executive
 - 2.2.1.2 Management of the economy
 - 2.2.1.3 External relations and defence policy

- 2.2.1.4 Administration of justice and maintenance of security
- 2.2.1.5 Formulation and delivery of social policies
- 2.2.1.6 Cultural policy
- 2.2.2 Interaction of the state with its citizens and its impact on the physical environment:-
- 2.2.2.1 The economic, social and demographic condition of the UK, as documented by the state's dealings with individuals, communities and organisations outside its own formal boundaries

3.2 In the preparation of guidance and the conduct of review DROs and reviewers should ensure that the records to be selected fall within one or more of the collection themes.

4. Departmental criteria

4.1 Departmental criteria for selection bear on the processes of selection, in particular in the drawing up of Disposal Lists and in the conduct of First Review. DROs must ensure that records required for the day to day conduct of public business survive for as long as the need to consult them continues. This administrative need will, at a minimum, subsist in a proportion of the administrative and financial records of the department, and in those containing the funding of departmental experience, information of value for departmental research, significant contributions to the history of the department or those required for the conduct of legal proceedings.

4.2 The DRO must equally ensure that records of legal value to the Crown, and to cognate public bodies, for example, evidence of title, survive for as long as they are required. They must also ensure that any record is preserved for as long as required, which establishes the right of any person, when there is an understanding that evidence of that right will be preserved by the state. Once the administrative or legal purpose for the preservation of any such record has disappeared, the research criteria will be applied to it.

4.3 The DRO must establish which, if any, of the records of the department must be preserved under any statutory provision, and whether there is a limit to the period for which they must be preserved. When there is a limit, research criteria will thereafter be applied.

5. Records to be selected for preservation without review

5.1 The following categories of record must be preserved, either in the context of the drawing up of Retention and Destruction Lists, or in the context of review:

- (a) Any record created earlier than 1660 (a requirement of section 3(3) of the 1958 Act);
- (b) Annual reports. These are to be preserved at the British Library in accordance with operational selection policy 36 at <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/recordsmanagement/selection/pdf/osp36.pdf>;
- (c) record sets of the minutes and circulated papers of major departmental bodies, for example departmental committees and advisory bodies,

together with those of major interdepartmental committees and other bodies for which the department provided the secretary or holds the main set of papers (additional guidance has been issued as OSP 35 at <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/recordsmanagement/selection/pdf/osp35.pdf>;

- (d) papers relating to the preparation of departmental legislation, or that in which the department took the lead;
- (e) papers cited in, or noted as consulted in the preparation of, Cabinet Office official histories; and
- (f) records which must be permanently preserved by statute although not necessarily at The National Archives. It should be noted, that a statutory requirement to 'Keep' a particular form of record is usually a requirement to create it and maintain it while it is in active use, and not an obligation to preserve it permanently.

6. Research criteria

6.1 Research criteria are applied to records at Second Review and also in the consideration of case files. The aim of the application of research criteria to records is to provide to researchers those original records (or in the case of case files a representation of them) which:

- (a) were of significance while they were in active use;
- (b) show the significance, in the perspective given by the lapse of time, of the functions and activities of which they formed a part; and
- (c) have contents of an informational character.

6.2 In applying such criteria, DROs and CMs, may need to draw on informed opinion both inside and outside the department.

6.3 In assessing the quantity and quality of that information, and the significance of the records, they will be concerned to provide for research into:

- (a) aspects of the history of the department, its organisation and procedures as laid out in the operational selection policy on records of internal administration (OSP38) <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/recordsmanagement/selection/pdf/osp38.pdf>
- (b) the formulation and interpretation of policy and legislation and, more selectively, its implementation;
- (c) notable events or persons, when the records add significantly to what is already known;
- (d) major events, developments or trends in political, social, legal or economic history;
- (e) scientific, technological, environmental or medical research and development;
- (f) regional or local conditions, when it is unreasonable to expect information to be available locally, when it is convenient to hold it centrally, or when it is known that significant local information does not survive locally; and
- (g) demographic, medical, social, cultural and economic history and historical geography, by means of statistical and quantitative research.

7. Examples of records likely to be selected at review

7.1 The following are examples of records likely to be selected at review.

- (a) records relating to the origins of the department as provided for in the operational selection policies on board and committee papers (OSP35), publications and grey literature (OSP36) and records of internal administration (OSP38)
www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/recordsmanagement/selection/pdf/osp35.pdf;
<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/recordsmanagement/selection/pdf/osp36.pdf>;
<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/recordsmanagement/selection/pdf/osp38.pdf>
- (b) copies of reports and other papers from bodies which are subordinate to, or closely linked to the department but which are not subject to the Public Records Acts;
- (c) principal policy papers, for example those leading to primary or subordinate legislation in which the department took the lead, submissions to ministers, and papers created in the course of preparing material for the Cabinet or a Cabinet Committee, including all drafts;
- (d) papers created during the formulation, implementation or interpretation of major policies, for example, those which reflect significant changes in policy, throw light on the main functions and programmes of the department, the interaction between the department and other areas of public or private life, or contain information, in particular statistics, returns or digests, not readily found or brought together elsewhere;
- (e) records relating to obsolete activities or to abortive projects of a department;
- (f) papers relating to notable events and *causes celebres*, or other events which gave rise to significant contemporary interest or controversy;
- (g) records of the more important aspects of scientific, technological, environmental or medical research and development;
- (h) records containing information of significant regional or local interest which is not available locally, or when the records constitute an important or convenient overview of information covering the whole country or a wide area of it.

7.2 The records created in different departments vary widely: comprehensive, detailed instructions on the application of the criteria to the papers of every department cannot be provided centrally. The DRO and CM must therefore always bear in mind that the preceding paragraphs are intended only as an illustration of the application of the departmental and research criteria, and they together share the responsibility for applying them to the records of particular departments.

7.3 The following paragraphs give guidance on some problems likely to arise in the day to day work of reviewing.

8. Weeding

8.1 Many files selected for permanent preservation contain duplicate or otherwise ephemeral material. Unless such material can easily be removed during the cleaning process, it should be left in place. In nearly all cases the weeding process is not cost effective.

9. Information preserved elsewhere

9.1 The DRO and CM should consider whether the information in the records under review is wholly or substantially available in:

- (a) more compact or accessible form, for example, in published works; or
- (b) other records which have or will be selected for permanent preservation, held in the department, its regional and local offices and research institutions, other departments, the TNA or other archives; or
- (c) the records of other departments, held in the TNA or other archives.

9.2 If it is not clear, but appears relatively easy to check, that the information has been published, for example, included in the annual report or in an answer to a parliamentary question, or is otherwise held in a more compact form, this check should be made. No excessive amount of time should be spent on searches for alternative sources.

9.3 When a record contains only papers circulated by other parts of the department or by other departments solely for information, it must be rejected as soon as its administrative usefulness has come to an end. When such papers are interleaved with original correspondence or memoranda, the decision to keep or destroy rests on the administrative or research value of this additional material.

9.4 Files containing minutes and circulated papers of interdepartmental committees will normally be preserved in the lead department, and destroyed when their administrative use has ended wherever else they occur, unless there are significant departmental papers in them. The DRO should, nevertheless, check whether the records have survived in the lead department.

9.5 When duplicate or similar series of records occur within a department, for example circulated reports, only one set will normally be considered for preservation. The others will be destroyed, unless they can be used to complete the first, or are arranged in a different sequence which has an informational value of its own.

9.6 TNA will normally be able to advise whether information is duplicated in records already transferred, or held in another repository. No excessive amount of time should be spent on searches for alternative sources.

10. Part-files and sub-files

10.1 All parts of a file selected for permanent preservation should normally be kept. However, if this would involve preserving a disproportionate amount of duplicate or otherwise ephemeral material, those parts which consist of such material must be discarded.

10.2 When a file selected for preservation has associated sub-files, these do not necessarily have to be preserved. Each must be treated on its merits.

11. Information management records

11.1 Guidance on the retention and disposal of records management information, including a model disposal schedule, is provided in Advice on Disposal Schedules – Information Management Records Standard No.9 http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/recordsmanagement/advice/pdf/sched_info_management.pdf

12. Responsibilities of the DRO

12.1 To prepare departmental guidance on selection criteria and to ensure that everyone involved in the selection processes is aware of them

13. Responsibilities of the CM

13.1 They are as follows:

- (a) To assist the DRO in the preparation and revision of departmental guidance on selection criteria; and
- (b) To monitor the application of that guidance.

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