

Records Management: Retention Scheduling

7. Complaints Records

1 Introduction

1.1 This guidance is aimed at Departmental Record Officers and staff in departments and agencies who deal with customer care and handle complaints about their organisation and its work. It reflects the current (2001) state of the law and best practice but does not represent legal advice. The Public Record Office (PRO) will endeavour to update the guidance in the light of changes in the law but responsibility for checking on more recent enactments rests with the reader.

1.2 The Government believes that the proper handling of complaints is central to its programme to modernise and improve public services. Complaints handling has to be built into an organisation's corporate and strategic plans, and covered in annual reports. The Freedom of Information Act 2000 includes a duty on all public authorities to publish their complaints procedures.

1.3 A complaint may be defined as "any expression of dissatisfaction that needs a response". It may be about service delivery or policy or maladministration. Detailed guidance on dealing with complaints is part of the Government's Service First programme and can be found at www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/servicefirst/1998/complaint

2 Scope and Nature of the Records

2.1 The scope of complaints records may embrace three areas:

- internal complaints procedures
- independent complaints reviews
- complaints handled by the Parliamentary Ombudsman

The last of these are not public records but may be copied to departments for information. The Parliamentary Ombudsman recognises that exchanges of correspondence between his Office and public record bodies investigated (including final results reports) become public records and may be available under the Public Records Acts. Some departmental papers may also have been prepared to answer enquiries or investigations from the Ombudsman.

2.2 Complaints fall into three broad categories:

- against standards of service
- against government or office policy
- on maladministration

Many government departments and agencies now have client charters, setting out the level of service provided. These derive from the Government's Service First programme and earlier Charter Mark programmes, and form the basis of a complaints procedure.

Maladministration is a failure to deal with matters properly or fairly and may involve:

- failure to follow proper procedures
- discourtesy
- discrimination or injustice
- excessive delay
- not answering a complaint fully and promptly
- failure to apologise properly for mistakes

2.3 Complaints are generally dealt with in one of two ways:

- locally, through sections and individual members of staff
- centrally, through a special section or through a named Complaints Officer

or sometimes with a blend of these two – local ownership and replies with clear central monitoring systems that allow the identification of areas for improvement.

2.4 Records of complaints may be arranged in one or more of several classifications:

- Policy and Procedure – including the complaints system, checklists, publicity, helpdesk, Departmental Complaints Officer role, monitoring the system
- Precedents
- Published complaints and statistics
- Reports
- Independent reviews
- Case files – usually divided between enquiries and investigations
- Surveys

2.5 Information in case records would normally comprise

- the name and address of the person complaining
- the date of receipt of the complaint (which governs target times for reply)
- details of the complaint, including its category (for analysis purposes)
- remedy being sought by the person
- action to be taken on the complaint

The handling of some of this information is subject to the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998. See Data Protection Act 1998: A Guide for Records Managers and Archivists (PRO, 2000).

2.6 Increasingly records of complaints are created and maintained electronically, for example recording and monitoring, producing management reports, and measuring satisfaction by questioning users and analysing questionnaires. The retention guidelines in this booklet apply to records in all formats.

3 Retention of Complaints Records

3.1 The retention of records relating to complaints should be considered in the light of business requirements, taking account of the cost of retention and the use of the records in the future. Very few of these records are likely to be selected for permanent preservation; only those relating to very significant or historical cases are likely candidates.

3.2 The schedule below shows recommended periods for the retention of the various types of complaints records:

Type	Item	Description	Disposal(maximum period)
	1	Policy statements	When superseded
	2	System handbook/guide	When superseded
	3	Minutes of meetings of Complaints Committee, Service Standards Team, etc	10 years
	4	Surveys	3 years
Case records	5	Enquiries	3 years
	6	Investigations	10 years
	7	Statistical reports	5 years
	8	Reports on particular complaints or on categories of complaints	3 years
	9	Precedents	Review after 10 years
	10	Register of Complaints	10 years
Reviews	11	Correspondence and papers	10 years
	12	Reports	3 years

4 Other Publications and Further Information

4.1 The Public Record Office is currently working on four main collections of records management standards and guidance which aim to promote good practice in the management of public records throughout all stages of their life cycle:

4.2 Record Keeping

This series includes standards on particular aspects of records management and also publications covering general records management principles. Current material forming part of this series is:

- o RMS 1.1 File Creation [1998]

- RMS 2.1 Tracking Records [1999]
- RMS 3.1 Storage of Semi-Current Records [1999]
- RMS 3.2 Business Recovery Plans [2001]
- Human Resources [1999]
- Information Surveys [1999]
- Management, Appraisal and Preservation of Electronic Records (in two volumes - Principles and Procedures) [1999]
- Developing a corporate policy on electronic records [2000]
- Good practice in managing electronic records using Office 97 on a local area network [2001]

4.3 Acquisition and Appraisal

This series contains publications relating to acquisition and disposition, retention scheduling and operational selection policies. Current material in this series is:

- Acquisition and Disposition Policies
- RMS 5.1 Disposal Scheduling
- Retention Scheduling: 1. Buildings Records [1998]
- Retention Scheduling: 2. Personnel Records [2000]
- Retention Scheduling: 3. Accounting Records [1998]
- Retention Scheduling: 4. Health and Safety Records [1999]
- Retention Scheduling: 5. Contractual Records [2000]
- Retention Scheduling: 6. Project Records [2001]
- Retention Scheduling: 7. Complaints Records [2001]
- Selection of Case Files: Sampling Techniques [2001]
- Operational Selection Policies [2000-01]:

OSP 1 Department of the Environment 1970-1979

OSP 2 The Crown Estate 1975-1985

OSP 3 Industrial Policy 1974-1979

OSP 4 Use and Conservation of the Countryside for Recreational Purposes 1974-1983

OSP 5 The Administration of Social Security 1979-1991

OSP 6 Records created by and relating to Coroners 1970-2000

OSP 7 The Welsh Office 1979-1997

OSP 8 The Security Service 1909 –

OSP 9 Fiscal Policy 1971-1979

OSP 10 Nature Conservation in Great Britain 1973-1990

OSP 11 Nuclear Weapons Policy 1967-1998

Developing an inventory of electronic records [2000]

Evaluating information assets: appraising the inventory of electronic records [2001]

4.4 Access

This series provides guidance on access, freedom of information, data protection and similar issues. Publications currently forming part of this series are:

- Access to Public Records [1999]
- Data Protection Act 1998: A Guide for Records Managers and Archivists [2000]

4.5 Preservation

This series covers guidance on the preservation of records and the preparation of records for transfer to the Public Record Office, including their cataloguing, packing and labelling [series under development].

4.6 Further information on these and other aspects of the management of public records can be obtained from:

Records Management Department
Public Record Office
Kew
Richmond
Surrey
TW9 4DU

tel: 020 8876 3444

fax: 020 8392 5283

email: records-management@nationalarchives.gov.uk