



## Email Guidance

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Version	Notes	Author	Date
0	Initial ideas		6-13/3/09
0.1	Filled out, included notes from email guidance folder; set up section number structure		16-20/3/09
0.2	+ AL's comments		1/7/10
0.3	+ CG's amendments		8/7/10
0.4	+ minor changes by AL		9/7/10
0.5	+ comments from ISO		23/7/10
1.0	+ minor changes by AL and CG, rearranged section numbering		6/8/10
1.1	+ clarification on EDRMS and on use of shared files		16/8/10
1.1a	+ clarification of "archiving" in Outlook		24/8/10
1.2	Amended ref. to ERMS		20/9/10
1.2a	Included ref. to protective marking	RM	3/14
1.3	Reviewed and minor updates.	RMPO	22/1/15
1.4	Amended file type guidance & minor typos throughout	RM	20/2/15
1.5	Para removed. Para added on email silo	RMPO	26/2/15
1.6	Minor revisions throughout; changed ref back to EDRMS and removed ref. to corporate policy at Section 4	RM	9/9/15
1.7	Refreshed text throughout	RM	21/3/17
1.8	Updated DPA and security classification references	RM	27/8/18

Name of Record	Email Guidance
Author	Records Manager
Owner	Chief Officer - Legal & Procurement
Status	Live
Approved by	Chief Officer - Legal & Procurement
Date of Publication	27/8/18
Review Date	27/8/20

## 1 Introduction

Managing email presents a range of challenges.

The IT section has produced guidance on email best practice and the Council has an acceptable use policy for electronic communications.

This guidance note lays out some key principles, looks at retention and storage of emails, and considers some other important issues in email management.

## 2 Key principles

- *All information and all communication, whatever media it is in, requires to be managed.*
- *Some emails have little or no long-term value; others are core records of the Council.*
- *Emails belong to the Council, and not to the individual employees who send or receive them.*
- *Every employee has a responsibility to actively manage their emails.*
- *The email system is a tool for communication, not for the long-term storage of information.*

## 3 Retention

There are a number of drivers for actively deciding what we should keep and what can be deleted.

Firstly, storage is an issue. Storage is expensive: it is simply not possible to store all the emails ever sent or received.

Secondly, the Council has to deal with requests for information under the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002. This provides a public right of access to all the information that we hold - including emails. There have been several instances where time consuming and difficult searches have had to be carried out simply because officers kept emails long after they were needed. There are similar access rights available to an individual under the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA)

Thirdly, one of the key principles of the DPA is that the Council must not retain personal data any longer than is necessary. Each officer is to give consideration to whether they really need to retain an email (and indeed anything else relating to identifiable, living individuals) any longer than it takes to deal with the particular matter in hand.

A cluttered, unstructured inbox in which everything is held onto “just in case” soon deteriorates into an electronic soup of inaccessible data.

Emails, like all other information held by the Council, need to be retained for as long as they are required and no longer. The Council has developed a records retention schedule, and this schedule applies as much to emails as it does to other electronic records or conventional media.

It is important to stress that retention considerations relate to the process or function of a record, not to the record type. Therefore there is no single answer to “how long do I keep my emails?” as it is the context and content of that email which is significant.

Different types of emails, then, should be kept for different periods of time.

**Unimportant, or personal** emails should be actioned as required, and then disposed of. For example:

- “I’ve moved today’s meeting from 11:30 to 12:00”;
- An “all users” email advertising a function or event;
- “Thanks for doing that”;
- “...fancy a bite of lunch?”;
- Posts from a “Listserve” or other mailing lists;
- Notices of online publications, adverts for conferences, etc.

Email is the perfect medium for such messages and these account for a significant percentage of all emails. They should not be considered as records at all, but simply deleted after you have dealt with them.

**Significant or Business Critical.** A significant number of emails are of some continuing business relevance. They evidence the Council’s rights or responsibilities, show why a decision was taken, or give authority for a particular course of action. They can be vital in understanding why processes or cases developed as they did. They are likely to be referred to again and may require to be retained for a significant period of time.

Depending on the content and context of the email many will require to be retained - although not in the email system; see below.

The retention period is defined by the process of which the email forms a part: the Council’s Retention Schedule will help inform the decision on how long the email should be kept.

#### 4. Methods of Storage.

For the most significant emails, the ideal place to store such information would be at the appropriate area of an electronic documents and records management system (EDRMS). This preserves the accuracy, authenticity and provenance of an email, allows it to be stored with other records relating to the same subject, and ensures proper security, access and final disposal outcome. Some departments of the Council have systems which perform some of these tasks, but there is as yet no corporate-wide system.

In absence of such a system, officers must consider where to store emails. Ideally, they should be stored with the other records that support that particular function. As with all other Council information, officers should avoid storing such information on their own personal drives, and departments should ensure that shared drives are available, eliminating duplication, giving due regard to security, and allowing information to be properly structured.

In circumstances where an email relates to a process which is still essentially paper-based, and where the authority record of that process is a conventional paper file, it may be appropriate to print the email off and store it in that file. The email will then acquire the same retention criteria as the other elements of that file. The electronic copy of the email can then be deleted.

Increasingly, of course, Council business processes are carried out electronically. Where the main point of storage of information is electronic, the email should be saved there. Guidance on which type of file should be used to save emails is given in section 5 below.

Many emails are of some short-term value but will not require a more formal designation as a record and storage elsewhere. One suggestion is to set up a “3 month retention” folder. Such emails, including those of business significance which have also been saved outwith the system as described above (both sent and received), can be moved from the “inbox” or “sent mail” after they have been dealt with. On a regular basis, perhaps monthly, this folder is date-ordered and all the emails beyond the 3 month retention cut-off are deleted.

In summary

- Immediately delete, after actioning where required, trivial or transient emails.
- Save important emails outwith the email system and retain in accordance with relevant retention schedule.
- Delete all emails from Outlook after 3 months.

Another option is to “archive” your old emails. This is NOT recommended here. While “archiving” does clear out your email system, it deals with none of the other issues raised above. It stores a potentially huge quantity of data most of which is unlikely to be again required, while leaving the Council open to accusations of failing to meet our obligations under the Data Protection Act or the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act.

When confronted with an 'inbox full' message some users will simply 'archive' a vast chunk of their messages and store them on their desktop or elsewhere using the “Archive” function of Outlook. In this scenario not only do the emails still remain – but they are now contained within an unmanaged and inaccessible local silo. “Out of sight, out of mind” is rarely a good information management maxim, and “archiving” is the electronic equivalent of simply sweeping dirt under the carpet.

## 5 Email management

As noted above, the Council already offers guidance on various aspects of email use and management. This section deals with a number of related points not covered there.

**Dissemination of emails.** It is very easy to send emails to a variety of recipients. Take care, though, not to overuse functions like “forward” and “cc”, and do not automatically “reply to all”.

Remember that you cannot guarantee that the recipient of your emails will delete them as appropriate and they can therefore become a permanent record which may be accessed through Freedom of Information or the DPA. Always consider this before emailing on a sensitive topic and if it is not something which you would commit to a formal letter or memo, then consider whether to send the email at all.

**Responsibility for email management.** Every employee has a responsibility to manage their emails. One point relating to this, and to the retention of emails, is who is responsible for managing an email: the sender or the recipient? The National Archives has made a few common-sense suggestions on the responsibility for saving the authority copy of an email:

- For internal email messages, the *sender* of the email, or initiator of an email dialogue that forms a string of email messages;
- For messages sent externally, the *sender* of the email;
- For external messages received by one person, the *recipient*;
- For external messages received by more than one person, the person responsible for the area of work relating to the message.

Again, it should be stressed that each employee of the Council is responsible for enforcing these rules for their own account.

**Naming conventions.** Use the “subject heading” of your email sensibly. Put in enough information to allow the easy identification of the email, but don’t make it so unwieldy that you duplicate the entire message. Strike a balance between brevity and accuracy. Email titles like: “Hi there”; or “a few points” will *not* aid the future identification of a record.

If emails are being stored electronically outwith the email system, consider at that stage whether the subject title is the appropriate title to assign there, or whether the title needs reformatted or further information included.

Avoid using confidential or personal information in the subject headings wherever possible: for example, use a file reference rather than a name.

**File types.** When emails are being saved electronically outwith the email system, consider the format in which they are to be stored. HTML files are small in size and versatile, but Outlook Message files are best in terms of retaining all the associated metadata.

**Attachments.** Where a document is available on a website, or on the intranet, or in a shared area, send the URL (the “link”), rather than including a copy of the document. Large image-based files will quickly slow down the system and fill up the personal space

allocations of everyone you send them to: much better to allow “point and click”. This is very straight-forward:

- open the webpage or intranet page where the document is mounted
- double click on the address line
- Select “Edit” and “Copy”
- In the body of your email select “Paste”

In this way everyone to whom you send the email can access the document – without you having created multiple copies and unnecessarily using storage space.

**Deleted items.** Remember that putting emails into the “deleted items” folder in Outlook does NOT actually delete them. You still have either manually empty the “deleted items” folder (under “Tools”), or, easier still, set your Outlook options to automatically empty your “deleted items” folder on exiting the program.

**Old accounts.** Once an officer has left the Council, their email account must not be left unmanaged. It is recommended that such accounts are closed six months after the officer has left the Council, and all its contents deleted. Prior to this happening, indeed ideally prior to their departure, it is the responsibility of the line manager to ensure that any emails of longer term value are stored at the appropriate alternative location.

## See also

- The Council has produced an [email good practice guide](#) (intranet) covering related issues.