



## Managing your files

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Author	Senior Information and Improvement Officer
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## **1. Introduction**

Proper records are essential for the Council to carry out its functions, to provide information for decision making and to evidence our activities, rights and responsibilities.

This guidance offers recommendations on various aspects of managing records. This guidance relates primarily to the management of paper files, but there is a broader applicability to information in all media. While Council information is increasingly created and held in electronic form, paper continues to be the medium of much of our records – and its proper management must not be overlooked.

Proper provision for the creation, management and preservation of Council records was given a statutory basis by the Public Records (Scotland) Act 2011. Better management of the information which we holds will help to deliver:

- Legislative and regulatory compliance;
- Economy in office space;
- Effectiveness in information retrieval;
- Efficiency in record handling and disposal.

Information is a key corporate resource, and every officer has a responsibility for managing it. The application of the guidance here will allow the Council as a whole to better manage our information and will drive up the standards of record keeping throughout the Council.

## 2. File Management

### Naming a Document

Ensure that titles of documents, files, and of file series are meaningful.

Document titles should not be so large and detailed as to become cumbersome, but they must identify the unique nature of that file as far as possible. While “Miscellaneous” or “General” or “Committee Report” will often be adequate at the time that you are working on a file it is unlikely to be helpful at a later date or to assist colleagues in identifying a record. If you find it difficult to give the file a more accurate name, it may be that you are not clear as to the content of the document or file in the first place, and that first this ought to be clarified.

### Version Control

To maintain the integrity of a record and to provide an audit trail of how it developed, it can be useful to use version control. In electronic records systems version control can be maintained automatically, although some systems simply overwrite previous versions and care should be taken to decide whether previous versions and drafts of a document should be identified and retained.

One good method for maintaining version control is by numbering. The numbers should be written in two parts, separated by a period or an underscore, for example

- 1.2; or
- 3.07

The first part of the number (“1” or “3” in the example above) should indicate a substantial revision of the document, for example the addition or removal of significant sections of the document or a major rearrangement of paragraphs, sections or chapters. It should also be used to indicate a “finalised” version, for example when it is being submitted to Council or when it is being published on the website.

The second number (“.2” or “.07” in the example above) should indicate minor revisions, such as an updated contact, correction of errors in punctuation or spelling, or minor additions of text.

As well as being noted in the box, the numbers should also be used in the file title: for example

- “Publication Scheme 2.0”
- “Report on Fees 1.3”

Leading zeros - that is using “02” rather than “2” - can be used at both major and minor revision points if it is likely that the document will undergo more than 9 versions or sub-

versions. This is not necessary, but can aid automatic sorting, for example in Windows Explorer.

Try to avoid using descriptions to maintain version control such as “final” or “draft”.

For further information on this issue, see the more detailed guidance note “version control”

### Finding Aids

Finding aids are tools that help you keep track of information. It is important to give some thought to this, so that whoever needs to find a file can do so quickly and easily.

Traditional good practice would have been to maintain file lists - a list of the titles, reference numbers and location information, along with details of which officers are responsible - for each series of files. As well as aiding identification and location of records, this helps to clarify the arrangement and allows an overview of information held, and makes the long term management of records easier.

For larger records series, or those with more complex structures, a database with more detailed information about each file can be an important finding aid.

One important information governance tool is the Information Asset Register. This identifies not individual files but records series or functional groups of records. Whatever format information is held in, it should all be recorded within the IAR.

### Arranging Files

Develop a structure or file plan on a functional basis, so as to avoid having to reclassify files after every structural reorganisation or change in staff.

This applies both to traditional hard-copy files but also to the structure of records within shared drives or in SharePoint.

It is recommended that office and departmental files are arranged hierarchically. This simply means that numbers should be used to identify each file series and that each part of that number should help identify the file.

For example “L Fol 4/651” means:

- L - “Legal Services”,
- Fol - the general topic, in this case “Freedom of Information”;
- 4 - the file series, in this case “Information Requests”;
- 651 - the particular file number, a simple consecutive number for each file in the series.

Such identifiers mean that the actual file number actually has a significance, and help to maintain order and structure in how records are managed. Such a numbering system will also help to show how records, and the functions that created them, relate to each other.

Take care not to over-complicate the hierarchical arrangement. After a 2<sup>nd</sup> or third layer it is usually better to add a simple consecutive number rather than to endlessly refine and extend the “tree”. When too detailed and exacting an arrangement is imposed, the usefulness of a hierarchical system will be lost.

### Authority Files

Where data exists in multiple locations and in multiple formats, it is important to establish an “authority file”. This defines which file is the primary record on a subject, process or transaction. The establishment of authority files should normally be done on a file series, rather than on a file-by-file basis, with the responsibility for, and format and location of, that series of records clearly established. This allows duplication to be minimised, as all officers who need to access that record will know where it can be accessed, and will not need to build up a parallel, private file.

### Creating and Weeding

Don't start unnecessary new file series or titles and always consider whether a new file is really necessary, or whether the material can be stored elsewhere - or doesn't really have to be kept at all.

Don't add excessive bulk to a file, or continue to add to the file for an excessive period of time. Instead, start a new division regularly: in the case of general correspondence, for example, close the old file and begin a new one annually or on a more frequent basis. This keeps files to a manageable size, and makes it easier to apply retention schedules.

This applies to electronic as well as paper records - consider if it would be appropriate to break a series or start a new folder for records held in a shared drive if this will later aid the imposition of retentioning.

Don't file documents not worth filing; discard notes and drafts, multiple copies, material more appropriately stored elsewhere, published material, commercial and trade information. Booking memos and forms and invitations for events which have already taken place should not normally be retained. *Don't* keep material “just in case”.

This issue is particularly relevant to emails. Further guidance on this managing this particular record type is given in the “Email guidance” document.

Weed files before closing them: as much as 40% of the material in an average file to be passed to semi-current storage will often not be worthy of retention: dispose of this *before* the file is closed.

Avoid letting paper files grow too large as these tend to be difficult to use, inefficient to store, and soon physically deteriorate. Start a new one if the file is more than 3 or 4 cm thick.

Don't make more copies of documents than are strictly required, or print off documents unless you really need to, or print off a whole document when only an extract from one is required. If the authority file is held electronically, there is little justification in then printing off and storing a hard copy.

### Contents sheets

Consider file contents sheets, a page on the inside cover which lists what was inserted by whom and when. Their maintenance can be quite demanding in terms of time, so for many types of records they are not necessary. However, where greater evidential weight might be required for a file, or where very significant decisions could be based on its contents, consideration should be given to this more detailed management of the record.

### Retention Periods

It is vital to the efficient operation of the Council that we do not retain redundant information which we no longer need to keep.

The Council has in place an agreed retention schedule which outlines the appropriate retention periods for records. The retention schedule was based on the Scottish Council for Archives Model Retention Scheme and has been updated and amended to reflect the needs of the Council.

The aim of the retention schedule is to provide a consistent approach to the length of time that information is retained and it identifies records that may be worth preserving permanently as a part of the Council Archive as well as preventing the premature destruction of records that need to be retained for a specific legal, financial or statutory period.

Whenever possible, arrange a file so that it avoids a "conflict of retention". That is, try to avoid creating files which contain within them elements to which different retention rules apply. If such information is stored in separate but related files, it is much easier to dispose of the appropriate part of the records at the correct time.

### 3. Storage of Paper Files

#### Environment

The amount of paper created in the Council continues to be minimized. There remains, however, a considerable volume of legacy files and these require ongoing care and management.

There are formal Standards detailing the ideal environmental conditions for the storage of paper records. While this is primarily designed for archival records, it should be borne in mind that paper degrades if the temperature is too warm, and if the air is damp or very dry. Even worse is when there are considerable fluctuations in the temperature or humidity. In practice, this means that we should be aiming at a storage space where the temperature is around a steady 15 degrees C., and a fairly constant relative humidity of around 55%.

Avoid storing records near radiator or in front of a window. Storage rooms and spaces should be well away from water pipes or other potential flooding hazards.

#### Security

Security of information is paramount, and it is vital to ensure against unauthorised access to records of all media. This protects personal or sensitive information and ensures the evidential integrity of our records. Extensive guidance on information security is available on the intranet.

#### Shelving

Conventional four-drawer filing cabinets are not an efficient method of storage for a series of records of any significant size. The Senior Information and Improvement Officer can offer advice on the appropriateness of hard-copy storage systems for each area.

The overall height of a bay of shelves should not exceed that which can be readily accessed by all staff, and a gap should always be left between the bottom shelf and the floor.

Shelves and cabinets should be lockable and should be closed when not in use. Consideration can be given to mobile shelving where space is particularly tight, but in this case particular regard must be given to the floor loading capacity to ensure that the structure of the room is sufficiently sound to allow the particular stresses which these systems can exert on a floor.

It is a false economy to overfill a storage area, simply making it more and more difficult to find anything. There are also very real health and safety issues concerned with boxes

cluttering up passageways or corridors, or with having to take down overfilled containers from high shelves.

### Location

Whenever possible, keep hard copy material which will need to be accessed by colleagues at an office filing system, rather than at your own desk. Such a system will encourage logical arrangement and consistency of filing, and will cut down on unnecessary duplication of files and documents.

Ideally, there should be a designated person for each office or section to open, title and close files. If an office filing system is used, it is important to develop a tracking system so that the location of files which have been removed can quickly be identified.

For files which require to be retained, but due to their low level of use are no longer frequently referred to, consideration should be given to moving closed files out of the office and into the Corporate Records Store. This will ensure the security of the records while continuing to provide access as appropriate, as well as freeing up space in the office. Detailed guidance on the use of the store is available.

### Scanning

Scanning is not normally recommended if the main reason for doing so is because of storage issues. If there are other good reasons for digitizing - for example, if it is required for pulling the records into an electronic workflow system, or to make back-up copies of vital records, or because simultaneous multiple access is required - scanning can be considered. If the issue is simply storage, however, the most economic way of storing such material is to properly manage the record in its original media by depositing it in the corporate records store.

Further advice on this issue is available in the Corporate Scanning Guidance.

## **4. Archives**

It is important to recognise that some of the records we deal with every day will at a later date become part of the corporate memory of the Council, long after their administrative utility has ended.

Archival records will be an important source of information on how East Renfrewshire is planned, developed and administered. The Council generates unique information on the area and people of East Renfrewshire.

Although only a small fraction of the Council's current records will become part of our archival record, a broad range of material may be worthy of consideration with a view to permanent preservation including policy documents, board and committee minutes and papers, annual reports and accounts, district and area plans, formal public enquiries, files detailing the relationship between the authority and central government, contracts for major building projects, architectural and engineering drawings and plans, social research papers and surveys, photographs, publications, films and recordings.

The Senior Information and Improvement Officer can offer guidance on this matter, or can appraise records with a view to identifying material which should be identified as appropriate for permanent preservation as part of the archive of the Council, and will store such material in the corporate records store and will make provision for their permanent retention.

## 5. Disposal

### Method of disposal

Disposal of records should always be carried out with regard to the sensitivity of the information it holds and in line with the Council Disposal policy.

Any third party company used for the shredding of paper records should provide certification of proper destruction.

If information is particularly sensitive, consideration should be given to cross-cut shredding.

Any personal computers, printers or other electronic storage devices which are no longer required but which are not being destroyed must have their hard disks properly erased. Obtain appropriate assurances from any third party IT company dealing with obsolete equipment, and ensure that they deliver a destruction certificate which details what was destroyed and when.

If there is confidential or sensitive personal data on any redundant storage devices such as CDs, external drives, and back-up tapes, these should be physically destroyed, rather than just deleted.

Proper records of disposal should be retained.