

**DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND
RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

RECORDS MANAGEMENT

POLICY STATEMENT

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Department of
**Agriculture and
Rural Development**

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RECORDS MANAGEMENT POLICY STATEMENT

Introduction

1. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development holds a vast quantity of information in a variety of formats, including written and electronic formats, which has been created in the conduct of our business over the years. These records represent our corporate memory, providing historical evidence of our decisions and actions. They underpin our business by supporting our daily functions and operations, by contributing to policy formulation and decision-making and by acting as a reference store. They support consistency, continuity, efficiency and productivity, helping staff to execute business and deliver services in an equitable way.
2. Good records management reduces the risk of legal challenge or financial loss through control of content, storage and disposal; it maximises the achievement of best value for money in terms of human and spatial resources through greater coordination of information and storage systems. The Department is, therefore, dependent upon its records in order to operate efficiently and to account for its actions.
3. In publishing this Records Management Policy Statement the Department seeks to:
 - define a structure to ensure adequate records are maintained;
 - promote and develop best practice in Records Management throughout all the Department's business units by encouraging the use of a structured maintenance, retention and disposal system; and
 - assure value for money commensurate with legal, operational and information needs.

4. These things are critical at the present time when the Department is taking steps to ensure that it is in a position to meet legislative requirements relating to:

Data Protection: The Data Protection Act 1998 gives individuals the entitlement to have access to any personal information relating to themselves where this information is being held or processed by others. It must be provided within 40 days of a written request

Freedom of Information: The Freedom of Information Act 2000 gives people the statutory right to information held by public authorities. Information must be provided within 20 days of receipt of a written request. Compliance with this legislation means that the Department will have to restructure its filing systems in order to improve the retrieval of information when it is required. A Records Management Handbook has been developed to facilitate this process.

Environmental Information: The Environmental Information Regulations 2004 will give people the right to information with specific reference to environmental matters. Such requests may be written or oral and must be met within 20 days.

5. While limited exemptions may apply under certain circumstances when dealing with requests for information under these pieces of legislation, these can be overridden if the public interest is served better by disclosure than by retention of the information.
6. As a public body the Department is also bound by The Public Records Act (NI) 1923 and The Disposal of Documents Order 1925 which lay down procedures both for the destruction of records deemed to have no long-term value and for the preservation and transfer to the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) of any records selected for permanent preservation.
7. This Policy Statement is intended to demonstrate the Department's commitment to the use of best practice in the creation, retrieval, storage, preservation and destruction of both paper and electronic records. It should be considered in

conjunction with the Department's Records Management Handbook, ISO 15489 and the Lord Chancellor's Code of Practice on Records Management.

Objectives

8. The objectives of the Records Management Policy are as follows:

- Accountability: adequate records should be maintained to account fully and transparently for all actions and decisions;
- Quality: records should be accurate and complete, containing authentic and reliable information;
- Accessibility: information should be easily retrievable from records to facilitate work and to respond to requests for information from those with a legitimate right to access;
- Security: records should be held in a robust format which remains readable for as long as the information is required. They should be secure from unauthorised or inadvertent alteration or erasure. Audit trails should be able to track changes. Access and disclosure should be controlled and monitored;
- Retention and Disposal: there should be documented retention and disposal procedures to ensure consistency across the Department. These should include provision for permanent preservation of archived records;
- Training: all staff should be made aware of their record keeping responsibilities as a result of generic and/or specific training programmes and the provision of advice; and
- Performance Measurement: the application of records management procedures should be monitored regularly against agreed indicators with any action necessary to improve standards being taken promptly.

As the achievement of these objectives will be an added pressure on Business Units it will be important to consider resource implications when developing business plans.

Policy Statement

9. The Department will take all possible steps to ensure compliance with current and possible future legislation in the area of Records Management. In order to do so it is necessary for all the Department's records to be authentic, reliable and accessible; additionally, they must support business functions and activities and be retained only as long as they are of use. To achieve this the Department will set in place and maintain manual and/or electronic systems which facilitate appropriate management practices in the creation, retrieval, storage, preservation and destruction of its records. This will be done through:

- development of a File Plan organised on a functional basis;
- development of clear policy guidelines in the form of a Records Management Handbook;
- dissemination throughout the Department of these policy guidelines;
- initial review and reorganisation of current filing systems so that they operate on a functional basis;
- regular review of records held;
- training of staff in business areas to promote a clear understanding of records management issues in order to develop the necessary expertise in records management generally and with specific reference to dealing with information requests;
- continual monitoring of responses to information requests; and
- regular review of policies and actions taken.

10. This Policy Statement covers all recorded information, in any form, created or received and maintained by the Department or any member of staff in the transaction of business or conduct of affairs and retained as evidence of these activities. Information therefore includes anything handwritten or typed, e-mails and other electronic records, films, photographs or slides, computer disks, microfilms or microfiches, audio and video tapes, maps, plans, drawings and all documentary material held under any other format by the Department.

11. It is envisaged that implementation of and adherence to this Policy Statement will not only assist the Department in meeting legislative requirements but also enable it to:

- access records more efficiently when they are required for internal work or management purposes;
- comply with best practice and the records management policies of other NICS Departments;
- make better use of staff time;
- make better use of space and storage facilities for both manual and electronic systems;
- have improved control over records; and
- reduce costs.

12. Under this Records Management Policy, which has been endorsed by the Departmental Management Board and the Departmental Information Management Committee, overall responsibility for the management of Departmental systems rests with the Principal Establishment and Finance Officer and Agency Chief Executives. However, in the case of the Department, many of the functions are devolved in the first place to the Departmental Information Manager, and secondly, to Heads of Branches acting with the support of Local Information Managers who are expected to coordinate the day to day implementation of the Records Management Policy in their respective business units. Staff in Information Management Branch have a coordination role and are available to advise on the day to day issues surrounding records management. All staff in business units, including Agencies, who have information management responsibilities should have these clearly inserted into their job descriptions and, where necessary, into their Personal Development Plans and Personal Performance Agreements.

13. The Department will audit its records management procedures regularly to ensure continued compliance with this Policy Statement which, itself, will be reviewed by Information Management Branch at 3 yearly intervals.

Implementation of Records Management Policy

14. This is a brief indication of the work which is required for the Department to comply with this Policy Statement. More detail is available in the Department's Records Management Handbook and staff in Information Management Branch (IMB) are able to provide advice.

15. Implementation is intended:

- to ensure that records are present;
- to establish records control systems;
- to improve information retrieval by good filing systems and the use of information technology; this will assist the Department in responding to requests for information in compliance with the various relevant regulations;
- to establish and maintain a retention control system using a disposal schedule;
- to investigate the scope for conversion of records to alternative media; and
- to ensure there is an audit trail for decisions taken.

16. The following steps will be taken in implementation:

- IMB will arrange information surveys in all business units in order to determine what series of records are held;
- IMB will assist business units in restructuring these under a functional filing system so that they reflect the functions undertaken;
- IMB will advise business units to enable them to set in place mechanisms for documenting their activities and registering their records; this should be done uniformly across the whole Department with a view to quick and easy access by means of systematic registration, indexing and classification of documents; advice will also cover security markings;
- Business Units will allocate reference numbers in accordance with the Department's File Plan;
- IMB will introduce a tracking system across the Department in order to facilitate retrieval;
- IMB will consider the provision of storage which is secure but easily accessible;

- IMB will consider what contingency arrangements need to be put in place;
- IMB will monitor compliance with the disposal schedule agreed with PRONI to provide for the removal of documentation which business areas no longer require;
- Business Units will arrange for the annual review and disposal of records in accordance with the disposal schedule; records selected for permanent preservation will be transferred to PRONI;
- IMB and Business Units will arrange for the temporary retention of documentation for destruction whenever it is the subject of an information request or any complaint or appeal following the non-disclosure of information; such temporary retention will continue until the complaint or appeal has been resolved;
- IMB will coordinate the training of staff on records management and compliance with all relevant legislation; and
- IMB will monitor compliance with legislative deadlines with respect to requests for information under the Data Protection Act 1998, the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004.

17. IMB will also provide advice to Business Units on the management of electronic records. Effective maintenance will involve:

- setting up structured folders logically grouped together in accordance with the File Plan;
- putting in place appropriate security arrangements such as password protection to ensure that the integrity of records can be maintained;
- allowing the transmission of records from one system to another when necessary;
- cross-referencing to corresponding paper records where these exist;
- training of staff on electronic document and records management and compliance with all relevant legislation; and
- monitoring compliance with legislative deadlines with respect to requests for information under the Data Protection Act 1998, the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004.

18. It is recognised that introducing the necessary Records Management regime across the Department will be a labour intensive exercise for business units and that it will be time consuming to maintain this on an ongoing basis. Many Business Units may also find that dealing with information access requests will prove to be a significant feature after 1 January 2005. Taking account of these factors Business Units should allocate sufficient resources to Records Management and, where necessary, reprioritise other work. This should be reflected in Business Plans being signed off by senior management.

19. IMB will take implementation forward in conjunction with Business Units to ensure that the Records Management Policy is fully adhered to throughout the Department prior to January 2005 and on an ongoing basis thereafter.