

## Essential Elements of Records Management

For the past few years public authorities in the United Kingdom have been exhorted to take action to develop their record keeping in accordance with a new code of practice on records management (authorised as part of the new Freedom of Information legislation). The code highlights major steps to achieve this:

### 1 The Records Management Function

Records management should be a function that is recognised as a specific corporate programme. It should have clearly defined responsibilities and objectives, and have the organisational support to ensure effectiveness. It ought to be on the same level as other generic functions – such as finance, human resources, health and safety, etc. A champion at Board level should oversee the function, ensuring top-level support and encouragement.

### 2 Roles and Responsibilities of Records Managers

The public authority should appoint a member of staff of appropriate seniority to have lead responsibility for records management – for all records of the authority (in whatever format) from the moment that they are created to their ultimate disposal (whether by destruction or permanent transfer to an archive). The person must have enough authority to be able to ensure implementation of accepted records management policies and procedures.

### 3 Records Management Policy Statement

Public authorities should have in place a records management policy statement that is endorsed by top management and made known to all staff. It is the manifestation of the authority's commitment to records management and a mandate for all related actions. It should be a clear and concise statement, able to be read and easily understood by everyone in the organisation.

Policy statements are best kept short. About two sides of an A4 sheet of paper – certainly no more than three sides – are best. Many people will not have time to read more than this so it is vital to get important points across quickly and clearly.

Characteristics of a policy statement:

- mandate for all RM functions
- commitment to create, keep and manage records
- role of records management
- relationship to overall strategy
- roles and responsibilities

- framework for supporting standards etc
- monitor compliance
- reviewed at regular intervals

### 4 Training and Awareness

Staff directly engaged in the records management function should receive the appropriate training.

All other staff should be aware of their record keeping responsibilities. The immediacy of freedom of information legislation means that staff at the records creation stage have to be careful with their filing and be more aware of file plans, retrieval and disposal, and all those other records management functions that are likely to affect the handling of requests for information.

### 5 Records Creation and Management

Each public authority should have in place an adequate system for documenting its activities – otherwise known as a records classification scheme or file referencing system or file plan or (especially in electronic-speak) business classification scheme. Its records should be part of a standard, authority-wide system so that everyone in the organisation can find what information they need, when they need it, and if there are regular staff movements, individuals do not have to learn a different system. Organisations where units or departments work independently (the “silo arrangement”) will find it more difficult to discharge their records and information responsibilities.

### 6 Record Maintenance

Storage accommodation for the records – active and closed – should be clean and tidy and there should be in place handling procedures that will minimise damage to the records. Basements and attics have been the traditional storage areas for closed records (which have usually been retained for legal reasons or because they may need to be referred to in the future). Those records which authorities have consigned to these storage areas may well be the subject of information requests; they should therefore be accessible and kept in such a way that the required information can be quickly and easily retrieved.

### 7 Record Disposal

When information is no longer required, its destruction should be documented. This will enable public authorities to meet any requests regarding information that has been so dealt with – to assure the public that official information is being destroyed

in accordance with proper procedure and practice. The most effective method of documentation is by the use of disposal schedules.

Where it may not be possible to draw up disposal schedules, some reference to other policies on the retention of information should be made. For example, there may be a policy on the selection of records for permanent preservation in an archive.

## 8 Performance Measurement

The last step is to ensure that, when a records management system is in place, it is operating effectively. The system's performance should be monitored, or measured. A series of performance indicators ought to be agreed between the records manager and business managers to enable this to be done (for example, the time taken to retrieve information; the instances of duplication; records and information kept in more than one format).

A full copy of the *Code of Practice on the Management of Records under section 46 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000* is available on the UK National Archives website:

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk> ■