

Promoting Records Management in Government

Two major UK government initiatives over the past seven years have been significant in changing the perception of records management in government, and recent Freedom of Information legislation has pushed it further to the front of business managers' minds. Kelvin Smith describes the outcome of these initiatives.

Following publication of the *Report on a Scoping Study of Records Storage and Management* in February 1997, the Public Record Office¹ made radical changes to the arrangements in central government for the management and appraisal of public records - from the review of its own internal organisation through to the introduction of new standards and guidance, and fresh training opportunities, for government records managers.

In order to implement the report's recommendations the Office needed to provide a modern, well-equipped (particularly in skills and knowledge) and efficient service to government departments and agencies. A review of its Government Services Department was undertaken, examining all aspects of its work from top to bottom. The resulting re-organisation focused on four key strategic priorities:

- to raise standards in records management across government
- to secure future access to electronic records
- to improve the quality of selection through a new acquisition policy for UK public records
- to take the lead on the public record aspects of changes to information policy

In order to address these issues effectively, the department was restructured into three units, which have evolved now into:

- inspection and client managers unit
- cataloguing and accessions unit
- electronic records management development unit

and re-named the Records Management Department. Further changes are currently being implemented as the office focuses more on electronic delivery of its services to government and the public.

The second major initiative to affect the work of the Records Management Department was the White Paper *Modernising Government* (Cm 4310, 1999). One specific paragraph was of special significance:

"...by the year 2004 all newly created public records will be electronically stored and retrieved."

The Public Record Office [sic] was charged with providing help and guidance for government

departments to ensure that this ambitious target was met. A first step was to produce a set of functional requirements for electronic records management systems. This was completed by the end of 1999 and the office embarked upon a programme of testing ERM systems against the requirements. Over the next three years sixteen systems were judged to have met the required specifications and a list of these approved systems was posted to the office's website. The functional requirements, developed after wide consultation with the computer industry and government, fell into three categories:

- core requirements - those which all systems have to have
- additional requirements - those which all systems ought to have but which customers may only wish to have in part
- supporting requirements - those which some organisation might have no use for

In October 2002 the requirements were revised and a new programme of testing was begun. This is ongoing.

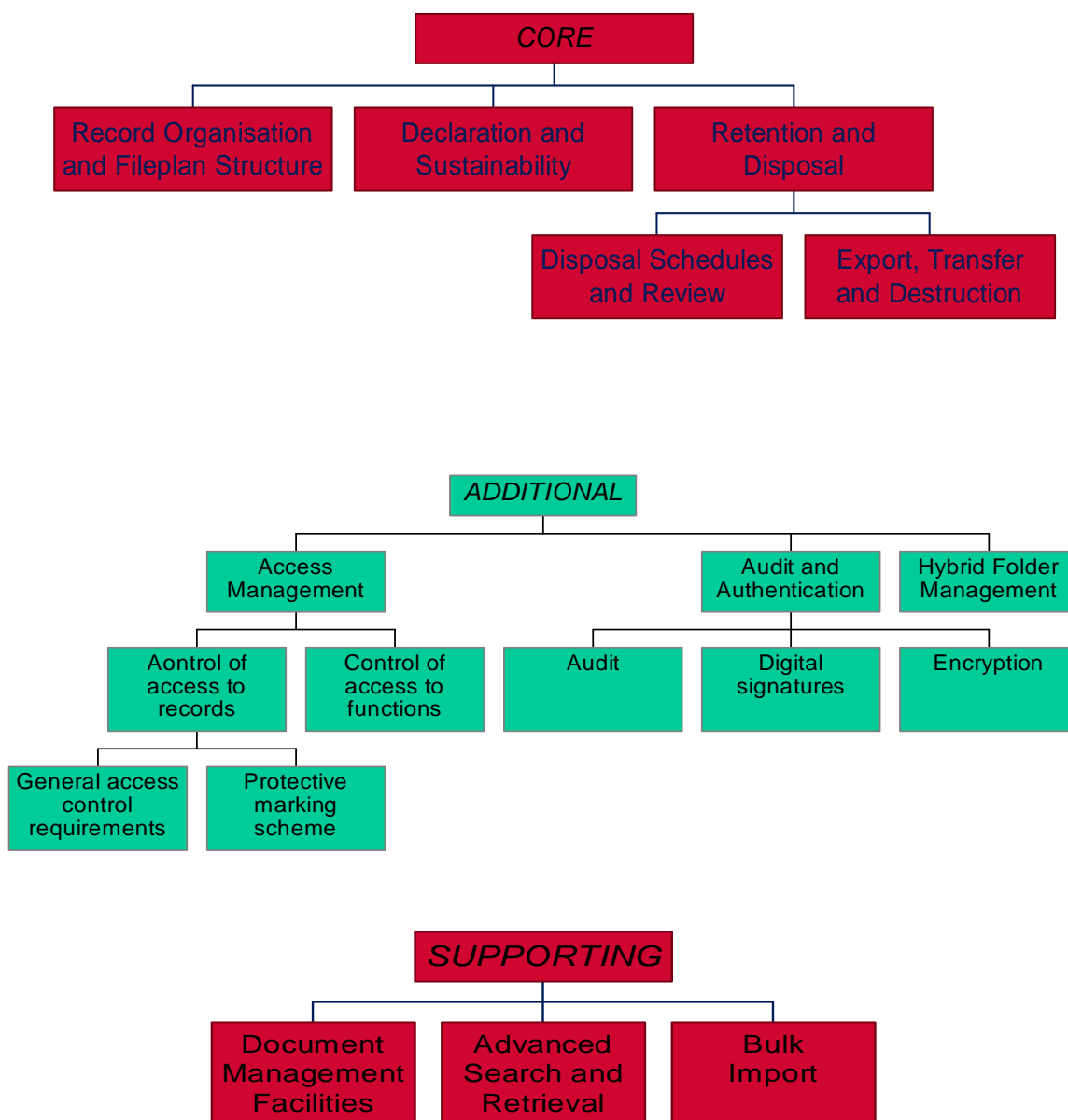
For further information on this aspect of the promotion of records management in government see the National Archives website www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/recordsmanagement/electronicrecords

These two initiatives have led to a great increase in the formal guidance on records management that The National Archives makes available. This is principally aimed at central government departments and agencies but can be adapted and used by anyone. The guidance comprises a set of standards, currently undergoing revision, on major aspects of the management of paper records (such as file creation, tracking records and disposal scheduling), retention scheduling guidelines for those records that most, if not all, organisations create and manage - records relating to buildings, accounting, personnel, health and safety, internal audit, etc. - and publications on particular records management issues, such

as human resources (which includes a competency framework for records management staffing), information surveys, access to public records, and a guide to the Data Protection Act 1998).

¹ the PRO, on merging with the Historical Manuscripts Commission, became The National Archives in April 2003

Functional Requirements:



The most important category of guidance now published, however, is probably that relating to the management, appraisal and preservation of electronic records. This covers all aspects of the electronic records life cycle and also particular types of electronic information (most notably e-mails). The portfolio currently comprises:-

- Framework for strategic planning and implementation
- Corporate policy on electronic records
- Guidance for an inventory of electronic record collections
- Business classification scheme design
- Good practice in managing electronic documents using Office 97 on a local area network
- Evaluating information assets: appraising the inventory of electronic records
- Management of electronic records on websites and intranets
- Generic requirements for sustaining electronic information over time:
 1. Defining the characteristics for authentic records
 2. Sustaining authentic and reliable records: management requirements
 3. Sustaining authentic and reliable records: technical requirements

4. Guidance for categorising records to identify sustainable requirements
- Guidelines on the realisation of benefits from electronic records management
 - Guidelines on developing a policy for managing e-mail

The last of these publications has received widespread comment and commendation. It attempts to help organisations in one aspect of electronic records management that many have ignored in the past. E-mail, however, is an increasingly integral part of information management and crucial to the effective operation of a business's activities. The purpose of introducing a specific policy for this type of record is to present the organisation's perception about what constitutes appropriate use and management of e-mail in relation to the business being conducted. The way in which e-mail messages are used and managed can either help staff organise their work effectively or cause problems in terms of missing deadlines. In addition to the immediate benefits and disadvantages staff encounter with using e-mail there are more serious consequences if e-mail is not used appropriately, including litigation and undesirable media attention.

Mention should be made here of the National Archives' work on digital preservation. In April 2003 the office installed a specially developed digital archive system. The purpose of this system is to store 'born digital' records - records of government that have been produced electronically. These are distinct from scanned copies of paper records and other products of analogue-to-digital conversion. Early accessions into the archive have included a number of high-profile public enquiries, departmental websites, and the records of parliamentary committees and royal commissions. The digital archive stores these records securely together with detailed information about their structure, content, integrity and provenance (metadata). The staff of the digital archive are also carrying out trials and pilots of different preservation approaches; for more information contact digital-archive@nationalarchives.gov.uk

Finally, I mentioned at the beginning of this piece freedom of information legislation. This quote from the Code of Practice on the Management of Records, developed in accordance with section 46 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000, says it all:

"Any freedom of information legislation is only as good as the quality of the records to which it provides access.....

.....Consequently, all public authorities are encouraged to pay heed to the guidance in the Code."

Our records and information management procedures need to be of a very high standard in the modern world of increased accountability, expectations of the public and greater business efficiency. In the same White Paper mentioned above, the UK government highlights the aim that all its services will be available electronically by 2005. Records and information managers are crucial to ensuring that this target is met.

Kelvin Smith ■

