

The National Archives

Archive Collection Policy Statements: Checklist of Suggested Contents

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The checklist below shows the categories of information which archive custodians should consider including in any archive collection policy statement that is issued in order to comply with the Historical Manuscripts Commission Standard for record repositories. Examples quoted are based on actual statements received by The National Archives, which maintains a file of collection policy statements that is available for public inspection on request.

1. INFORMATION WHICH IDENTIFIES THE REPOSITORY AND THE GOVERNING BODY

Name of the repository

Address

Identity of the governing body/authority

2. INFORMATION ABOUT THE LEGAL STATUS OF THE REPOSITORY OR OTHER SOURCE OF ITS AUTHORITY TO COLLECT

Statutory position/obligations

An indication, with any necessary explanations, of legislation which defines or limits the nature or scope of the holdings, or in accordance with which the repository's functions including its collecting policy are determined.

In practice this is frequently merged with the information in the next section, and with a general statement of the categories of records accepted on this basis. The legislation may be institution-specific, as in the case of the Public Record Offices, the National Libraries and the Trustee Museums. Or it may be more general, as in the case of local authorities with responsibility under the Local Government Acts to make proper arrangements for the care of their own administrative records.

Some repositories insert a general statement to the effect that they will seek to abide by all current archive legislation.

Official external recognition of the repository

An opportunity to indicate, for example, whether the repository has been:

- recognised by Historical Manuscripts Commission as a repository meeting the Standard for Record Repositories
- [England and Wales] appointed by the Lord Chancellor as a repository for individually specified classes of Public Records (and if so which classes: eg Quarter Sessions, coroners, hospital records) under the Public Records Act 1958;
- [England and Wales] designated by the bishop of the diocese as a repository for ecclesiastical records;
- [Scotland] approved by the Keeper of the Records of Scotland as a place of deposit for records under his charge and superintendence (and if so which classes).

Other constitutional foundation for the collection policy

Where the authority to collect does not stem from statute or official appointment as above, it may be found helpful to state the source of that authority. Examples might include:

- 'The Ordinances of the University state that...'
- 'In accordance with a resolution of the Senate dated...'
- 'Under the terms of the will of...'

Standards

Some repositories have taken the opportunity to spell out that they have adopted the Standard for Record Repositories as the basis for formulating their collection policy.

3. INFORMATION ABOUT SCOPE OF, OR LIMITATIONS TO, POLICY

Overall policy and priorities/mission statement

Some statements indicate how the collection policy fits in to the governing body's wider strategies and objectives including, where relevant, its corporate or business plan. Some indicate particular priorities. Some define what they mean by 'records', 'archives' and/or 'documents'.

- 'The archives service will particularly seek to acquire material which is of historical interest but is in danger of neglect or destruction.'

Otherwise, scope may be limited in several defined ways depending on the nature of the repository and its holdings. Typically these fall into one or more of the following categories: ***geographical area, subject area, chronological period or genre/media of the records***. It is useful to note any exclusions. Demarcations with other repositories should also be explained, but these may apply under any of these subheadings concerning scope, and are therefore covered at the end of the present section.

Geographical area

Where the collection has a primarily territorial basis, the geographical extent of collecting is normally spelt out, even if it is implicit in the name of the repository. If the repository collects over a wider or narrower geographical area than its name might imply, an explanation may be necessary.

- 'The [county] record office will acquire material only from within, or relating to, the administrative county of... as at 1 April 1974.'
- 'Records of the City of N, and of parishes within the diocese of N (except for ...) are in the custody of the City Record Office [ie not in the county record office].'
- 'Archives hitherto placed in the custody of the County Council and relating to [another specified local authority] will be held pending the establishment of recognised archive services there.'
- 'Subject to the overriding principle that the integrity of archival groups should normally be preserved as far as possible and practicable, the record office will not acquire records relating to places outside [the specified area] unless they have a close connection with [the area].'

- ‘The record office would not actively encourage the deposit of records primarily relating to or arising in areas outside the current boundaries, unless there were exceptional circumstances and the agreement of any other interested archive authority had been sought.’
- ‘Papers concerning the city and county, as distinct from the university, are not generally acquired as these are more appropriately housed in ... [name of repository].’
- ‘The division does not normally expect to acquire documents of foreign provenance unless they are already held in the UK.’

Subject area

A definition may be given of the subject area(s) in which the repository has an active interest in collecting.

- ‘In seeking and acquiring new material, priority will be given to labour and political history/South East Asian studies [etc].’
- ‘It is the policy of the university library to acquire such records as may support present and future research and teaching in the university, and as may contribute to the preservation of the cultural heritage of society.’
- ‘The repository does not normally seek to acquire manuscripts in fields which fall outside the existing strengths of its holdings.’
- ‘The archives service will not seek to represent any particular historical, sectarian or other viewpoint in its acquisition of records, but to reflect as objectively as possible all aspects of [name of area]’s past and present.’

Chronological period

If the repository restricts its accessions by date, it is useful to record this. Alternatively, some repositories indicate that there is no such restriction.

- ‘All records are accepted, regardless of date.’
- ‘The division concentrates on material from the last quarter of the nineteenth century to the present day.’
- ‘Records created within the last 20 years will not normally be accepted unless the individual concerned has died or proposes to leave the area.’

Genre or media of records held

Some repositories specify the types of records held. It may be appropriate to indicate whether the collections include modern records, or to explain (for example in the case of a local authority) that whilst the repository exists initially to care for the records of its parent authority it collects far more widely and welcomes accessions from eg businesses, churches and charities, families and individuals.

It is helpful either to confirm that archives in all media are accepted, or to explain the exceptions. If exceptions are indicated but an alternative course is recommended to the would-be depositor, that should also be indicated.

- ‘The archives service will work in close cooperation with [designated records managers and departments] to ensure the systematic transfer of official records to its custody.’
- ‘The university’s own administrative records are separately maintained by the University Registry.’

- ‘Records are accepted in every format, whether manuscript, printed or machine readable; also photographs, pictures and film.’
- ‘The office seeks to acquire microform copies and facsimiles of documents in other repositories or private hands which relate closely to its own holdings.’
- ‘Modern copies of original photographic prints are not normally acquired.’
- ‘Films will normally be referred to the ... [name] Film Archive.’
- ‘The record office will not normally accept three-dimensional artefacts unless they have a special relationship with the associated archives held.’
- ‘Artefacts will normally be directed to the appropriate museum on the advice of [the County Museums Officer].’

Cooperation/demarcation with other repositories whose collection policy overlaps

Agreements/cooperative collecting ventures (if any) with other repositories could be described. This applies, for example, where a county and a city, borough or metropolitan district exercise concurrent archive powers and have come to an agreement over which collects what.

Where competition with other repositories is inevitable, or has arisen in the past, it may be desirable to spell out how disputes will be resolved. At the minimum a statement of intent is recommended.

- ‘The centre does not seek to compete for papers with other repositories.’
- ‘The office will seek to avoid competition, conflict and duplication of effort.’
- ‘Because of our broad brief to collect [specified categories of papers] the repository is in competition with a number of other repositories. However, we work closely with all interested parties to ensure that papers are placed in the most appropriate home.’
- ‘When advising potential depositors the office will draw attention to the existence of other repositories with similar or overlapping interests, to ensure that material is offered to the most appropriate institution.’
- ‘In any case of dispute between [the authority] and another repository as to the proper custodian of the records, the advice of a neutral arbiter such as the Historical Manuscripts Commission will be taken.’

4. INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROCESS OF COLLECTION

Methods of acquisition

It is usual to indicate whether the repository seeks to acquire records by gift, purchase and/or loan, and to record any exclusions. If the policy includes active survey and/or rescue work, this might be spelt out.

- ‘Loans are not normally accepted.’
- ‘Donations and purchases are preferred to deposits on loan.’
- ‘Purchases will be made only of documents of outstanding importance to the [county].’

Conditions associated with accessions

Conditions or restrictions imposed by the repository could be indicated.

- ‘No documents will be accepted without clear and valid title of ownership.’

- ‘Only documents which in the judgement of the archivist in charge are of sufficient quality for permanent preservation will be accepted.’
- ‘Finding aids may be required with deposits where bulk is likely to render the documents otherwise inaccessible until processed.’
- ‘It is a condition of acceptance that documents will be available for public access either immediately or at the expiry of a specified period.’
- ‘The office will not normally accept archives and records which are of a particularly specialist nature, requiring skills or equipment beyond the office's resources to preserve, exploit or interpret.’
- ‘Acquisitions purchased with the assistance of grant aid will be held subject to the terms and conditions of bodies from whom such aid has been received.’

Selection/deaccessioning policy

If there is no intention to deaccession records once received, this should be made clear. If however selection or deaccessioning is not excluded, the timing and nature of the action that will or may be taken could be indicated with any necessary explanation of the circumstances in which the repository might wish to review, destroy as of no permanent value, or otherwise de-accession records. In such cases it may also be helpful to state whether the policy has been specifically approved by the governing body.

- ‘The archives service accepts the principle that there should be a strong presumption against the disposal by sale of any documents in their ownership.’
- ‘The record office shall have authority to transfer records to a more suitable repository if it is considered that the documents would benefit from relocation.’
- ‘The record office shall, in accordance with the wishes and requirements of depositors, evaluate and select for destruction those documents deemed not to be worthy of permanent preservation, and the intention shall be made clear at the time of transfer.’
- ‘Once selected and accessioned, records will be preserved permanently.’
- ‘The [authority] will not sell any documents it owns, save by reallocating records not relating to [its area/subject] which were originally acquired by purchase.’
- ‘The record office reserves the right to conduct a periodic review of the records held, in the light of research use of the records, and where necessary to recommend their disposal or destruction.’

Such a statement would not be fully in accordance with the Standard for Record Repositories section 3.15, but if it is the repository's policy this should be stated.

Certain grant awarding bodies stipulate that records acquired or conserved with their grant may not be disposed of or transferred to another organisation, or at least not without their express authority.

5. INFORMATION CONCERNING ACCESS

Public availability

Whilst this is not strictly to do with collection policy, it is clearly closely related, and some repositories cover it in the same document.

- 'Notice of every new acquisition and of any restrictions on its access or use will be made public at the earliest opportunity.'
- 'The archives service will systematically supply copies of its finding aids to [depositors/libraries/the National Register of Archives].'

6. DATING THE STATEMENT

Date of this issue of the policy statement and date for its next formal review

The Standard recommends review at not less than 5-yearly intervals.

April 2000