

Best practice guide to appraising and selecting records for The National Archives

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Introduction

Our joint responsibility is to work together to select records of archival value for permanent preservation, and ensure their transfer and ongoing accessibility.

This document provides information on how to appraise and select records for preservation at The National Archives. It applies to public record bodies who transfer records of historical value to The National Archives and third-party contractors acting on their behalf. It is intended as a quick reference guide for those who are involved in the process of appraising public records.

More detailed guidance is available on our website at nationalarchives.gov.uk/information-management/our-services/selection-and-transfer. This interactive document can be printed but will be more useful electronically – **words and phrases in pink** provide links to detailed guidance and further information that may be of use.

Responsibilities for appraisal and selection

Under the **Public Records Act 1958**:

- Public records bodies are responsible for the selection of records of archival value and for the safekeeping of these records
- The National Archives is responsible for coordinating and supervising this process by providing guidance and support

What this means in practice is that:

- Departments (specifically the departmental records officer or equivalent and their team) plan, manage, carry out appraisal and selection of their records and document the process in line with The National Archives' Records Collection Policy and supporting guidance
- The National Archives (specifically through the information management consultants) monitors this process, provides advice, guidance and training to support departments and signs off selected records

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Background

For over 50 years public records bodies have followed the system of appraisal established by the Grigg Report in 1954. This involves appraisal of records at five years (for ongoing business value and potential archival value) and 25 years (for archival value), followed by the transfer of selected records at 30 years. Using this system records of archival value are identified using file-by-file review. Fifty years on this system is, in most circumstances, no longer viable for a number of reasons:

- Digital information is vulnerable, and may become inaccessible due to format obsolescence or deletion. Departments need to capture decisions about the value of information early in the information lifecycle. This is vital to ensure essential context is maintained and to allow for efficient and effective appraisal of the information
- The increasing volume, proliferation and complexity of digital information means that a file-by-file approach is prohibitive and resource-intensive
- Paper file-by-file review is time consuming, and may not be an efficient use of departmental resources
- From 2013 the 30 year rule will be gradually reduced to 20 years over a 10-year transition timetable. More records will need to be reviewed in a short space of time to comply with the change in legislation
- Machinery of government changes (where functions are abolished or transferred) mean that large amounts of information often have to be appraised at short notice

Departments should appraise their records and make selections at the highest level possible, for example, at a business function or series level. Appraisal at a file level (file-by-file review) or individual document level should be reserved for only those cases where appropriate. In addition digital records should be appraised as close to creation as possible.

This will help to:

- Make the process of appraisal and selection more efficient and less labour-intensive
- Ensure that the business value of records is understood and embedded within departmental business processes, such as in retention and disposal schedules, or 'What to Keep' policies
- Enable departments to comply with legislation surrounding the transition to a 20 year rule
- Make it easier to apply appraisal and selection to large volumes of records, including those which are 'born digital'

Records collection policy and selection criteria

The **records collection policy** sets out which records The National Archives will and will not collect from public records bodies, when we will collect them and where they will be held. Record selection continues to be based on two broad criteria – the documentation of what government did, why and how, and the value of the records for future historical research.

The National Archives seeks to collect and preserve public records which document the following:

- The principal policies and actions of the UK central government and English and Welsh Governments
- The structures and decision-making processes in government
- The state's interaction with the lives of its citizens
- The state's interaction with the physical environment

To implement the Records Collection Policy, The National Archives has produced a set of generic records selection criteria ([see Annex A](#)). These criteria provide more detailed guidance on the types of records that should be permanently preserved, and should be used by departments to develop their justifications for selection.

In addition to this the [operational selection policies](#) provide more detailed guidance on what to select for either specific government functions (for example, central government expenditure and diplomatic relations) or generic types of records found across government (for example, publications and grey literature, internal administration policy records, committee records). These can be found on The National Archives' website.

When carrying out methods of appraisal and selection below, departments should ensure that they use the records collection policy, generic records selection criteria and any relevant operational selection policies to guide selection decisions. This will ensure an efficient, consistent, auditable and transparent approach to understanding why records are selected for transfer to The National Archives.

Top tips

- Departments should use the guidance above along with results of other appraisal work to produce selection criteria specific to their own needs. This is particularly important if the generic criteria either do not apply, are not sufficiently detailed, or if no operational selection policies apply
- Departments who wish to develop specific selection criteria for their organisations should discuss this with their information management consultant

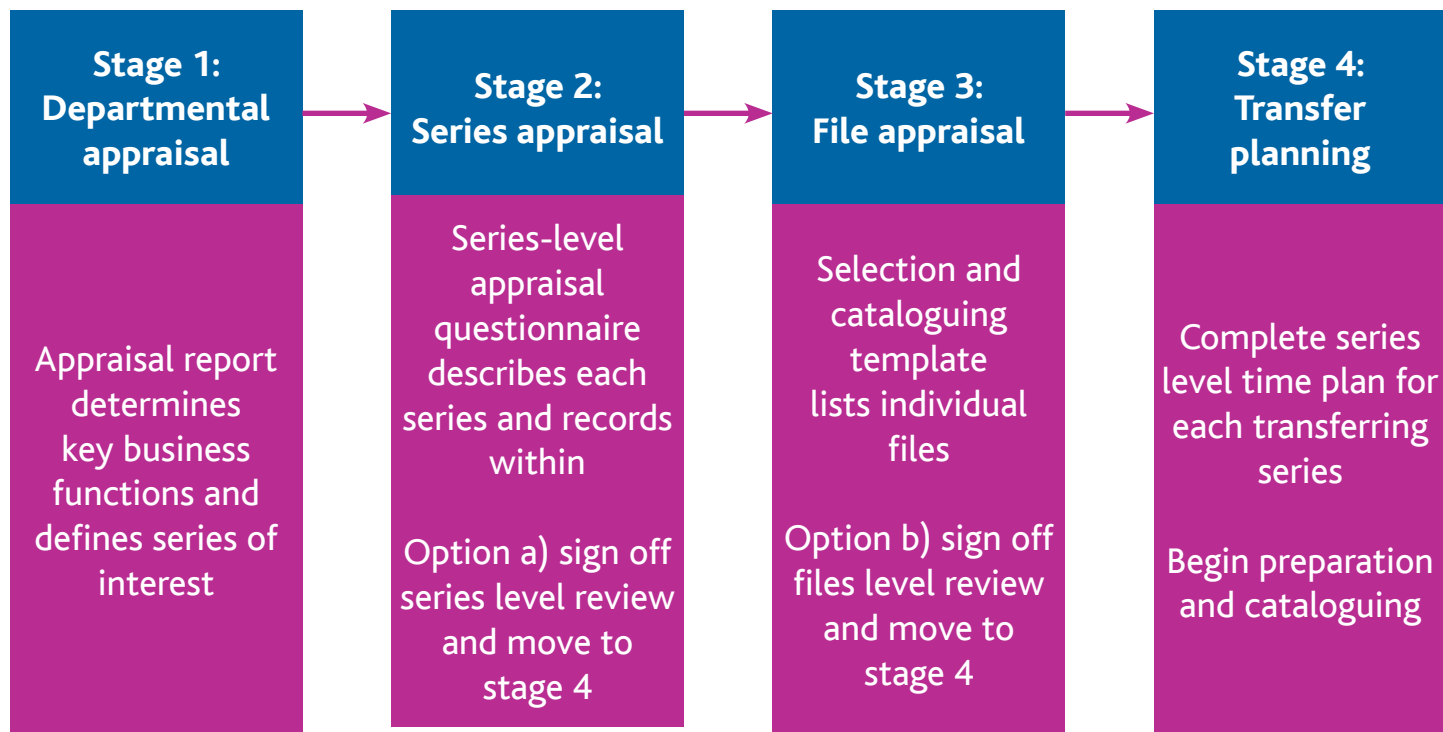
Documentation

Departments should indicate on their appraisal documentation (appraisal report, series-level appraisal questionnaire, or single transfer form) the records selection criteria, the operational selection policy number, and any other relevant appraisal guidance that apply to the selected records.

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How to carry out appraisal and selection

Appraisal and selection process



Departmental appraisal

Appraisal at a departmental level (often referred to as 'macro appraisal') involves understanding the organisation as a whole (its purpose, functions, business processes and the information created) in order to make high-level decisions on which groups of records or categories of information to select for preservation. Departments may already have this information documented through the process of retention or What to Keep scheduling.

Top tips

- Give particular consideration to the following areas, as this is where information/records of the highest archival value are likely to be found:
 - Core functions – the main role of a department (as opposed to facilitative or common functions such as finance or human resources)
 - Statutory functions – those functions which legislation requires the department to perform (for example one of The National Archives' statutory functions is to supervise and coordinate the process of appraisal and selection)
- Larger or more complex departments may appraise functions/business areas individually rather than tackling the whole organisation at once
- Talk to business areas as they will have knowledge of the functions they carry out and the information/records they create

This guidance document focuses on the process of appraisal and selection of records of archival value for permanent preservation.

However departments should note that it is their responsibility to manage their information appropriately. As part of this, departments should know what information they create and hold, understand the value of their information from a business and legal perspective, know what to keep and how long for. Undertaking an appraisal approach at the departmental level will help you understand these issues and also support you in finding the answers.

Further information on this and on information management generally can be found on [The National Archives website](#).

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Documentation

- The National Archives has produced a template **appraisal report** to enable departments to gather together the information described above and document high level decisions on what records should be selected for permanent preservation
- Appraisal reports are considered and signed off by The National Archives **records decision panel**. This helps to ensure a consistent approach to appraisal and selection across government
- Once selection has been agreed, relevant information is entered by the department onto the cataloguing template in order to begin the transfer process

Series appraisal

The outputs of a departmental appraisal should include an understanding of series that may contain records of archival value, or those that can be immediately identified as not. Departments then need to appraise these series in more detail so that selection decisions can be made and documented. In order to do this departments will need to answer a series of questions about a file series in order to decide what the most appropriate method of appraisal should be, for example:

- The function/s that the series reflects
- The type of records contained, for example, policy records, case files
- Whether the business area or department was the lead for this function

Having gathered this information, departments should first consider whether a selection decision can be made at series level. For example, when a function and all or most of the records in the series are considered to be of high value a decision could be made to select the whole series. Alternatively, a decision could be made not to select a series when the records are felt to be of little or no value. A decision could also be made to select part of a series for example where some of the records are considered to be of high value but the rest are of no value. Series that can be immediately identified as not having records of archival value can be disposed of after decision to dispose is documented and approved by The National Archives.

If a selection cannot be made at series level, then a further appraisal needs to take place at file level. There are several methods that can be used at file level and these are described on **page 11**.

Top tips

- Use previous selection statistics as a guide. For example, if 80% or more of a series has been selected previously then a decision could be made to select
- File series where there are a mixture of file types (for example, policy, case files, committee papers) are likely to require further examination
- Check that a series is still what it purports to be – often file series change over time and may become more or less valuable as a result
- Sources of information that may be of use when researching a series include establishment files, official histories, departmental website, civil service yearbooks, annual reports

Documentation

- The National Archives has produced a template, the **series-level appraisal questionnaire**, which enables departments to gather together information on a file series and to document the selection decision. Departments may already have similar forms that they use for this process or wish to adapt the Series-Level Appraisal Questionnaire to their own specific needs. This is acceptable if the form includes space for sign off and for the appraisal decision and justification
- Where a selection decision is being made, all the appropriate records selection criteria still need to be listed and a brief indication of the scope of each need to be applied
- Completed series-level appraisal questionnaires are signed off by The National Archives information management consultant
- Once it has been agreed that all or part of a series has been selected, relevant information is entered by the department onto the series level time plan and cataloguing template in order to begin the transfer process

File appraisal

As mentioned, departments should avoid file or document level appraisal wherever possible. However there are occasions when it will be required:

- Where there is a mixture of file types within a series
- Where little or nothing is known about a file series
- Where file titling is limited (for example, 'Miscellaneous ' or 'General')

Four different methods can be used:

1. Mixed series

A series that contains a mixture of policy and case files. Case files should be separated out and reviewed in line with **Operational Selection Policy 48** . Policy files should be appraised as a whole using the series-level approach above (for example, if they cover the development of primary legislation a decision could be made to select them all) or using one of the appraisal methods below.

2. Selection criteria and file title

An appraisal of the files takes place using selection criteria (records collection policy, generic selection criteria, operational selection policies, departmental selection criteria) and comparing them against the file titles in order to select files for preservation. This method is much less effective when file titling is poor or where the content of files does not match the file title.

3. Sift and file review

An appraisal takes place initially on file title, sifting out any files that are obviously worthy of selection (for example, records of a key committee or management board) or should not be selected (for example, a publication). The remaining files are then subjected to file by file review. Again this method is only really effective where file titling is accurate.

4. File by file review

Each individual file is appraised on its content using relevant selection criteria (records collection policy, generic selection criteria, operational selection policies, departmental selection criteria).

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Top tips

- 'Mixed series', 'selection criteria and file title' and 'sift and file review' should be considered before resorting to file by file review. This will save time and resource by ensuring that file content is only appraised when absolutely necessary

Documentation

- The review and cataloguing template should be used to list files and the selection decision
- It is essential that relevant selection criteria and additional comments are added to the appropriate columns on the review and cataloguing template as this will aid the process of sign off at The National Archives

How to carry out appraisal and selection

The Information Management Consultant team can provide further advice and guidance on all of the areas covered in this document. Either contact your information management consultant directly or send your enquiry to information.management@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

The National Archives holds appraisal and selection training twice a year at Kew. It is also possible, where time and resource allow, for The National Archives to provide a tailored course for one or more departments where there is sufficient demand.

All staff engaged in the process of appraisal and selection should attend The National Archives' training in appraisal and selection and/or tailored appraisal training session given by The National Archives within their own or another government department.

Further arrangements for transferring records to The National Archives can be found in our [transfer aide memoire](#). If you have any questions regarding record disposition or the transfer of public records to other Places of Deposit, visit our [website](#) or contact asd@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

All guidance and templates referred to in this document can be found on [The National Archives' website](#).

Annex A - Generic records selection criteria

1	The principal policies and actions of UK government
1.1	Records of policy decisions that had a significant impact on UK or international events and conditions where department was the lead (for example, foreign policy, policing, asylum and other legal cases, deployment of troops, setting the budget, intervention on foreign exchanges)
1.2	Records that show the development of primary legislation where department is the lead (for example, work on White or Green papers, Bills, Acts, notes on clauses, policy working groups or committees)
1.3	Records that show the development of secondary legislation where department was the lead (for example, work on statutory instruments)
1.4	Key records that illustrate how legislation was implemented where department was the lead
1.5	Records of decisions that affect the way an organisation conducts its core functions (for example, decisions that set a precedent or had an impact on wider political developments)
1.6	Records of projects that were particularly innovative, or were significant from the perspective of cost, risk or impact (for example, Millennium Dome project and project to build the new British Library)

2	The structures and decision-making process in government
2.1	High-level governance records (for example, agendas, minutes and papers of Cabinet Committees, management boards, key committees, ministerial committees) – see OSP 35 – Board and Committee records
2.2	Records that show dissolution, creation, merger of departments, agencies (for example recent machinery of government changes under the programme to reform public bodies in 2010/11) – see OSP 24 – Machinery of Government Changes and the management of the Civil Service 1974 to 2000
2.3	Records that illustrate how a body or function was privatised/nationalised (for example, privatisation of British Rail)
2.4	Records (for example, evidence, transcripts, reports) of tribunals, commissions, inquiries or inquests that were of particular public interest or had a significant impact on policy or process
2.5	Constitutional relationships (for example, government relationship with devolved administrations)
2.6	Records of discussions/actions where there was involvement of secretary of state/minister (unless they are non-public records such as party political and constituency records - see OSP 12 on the central direction and oversight of government policy)
2.7	Records reflecting the creation/development of key departmental function/structure

3	The state's interaction with the lives of its citizens
3.1	Aggregated data which provides extensive information on individuals or groups (see OSP 30 on interaction between the state and the citizen), places or organisations (case files or datasets, for example, Census records)
3.2	Records that illustrate a significant event/person/group which lead to a change in policy, set a precedent or caused controversy and add to what is already known - see OSP 48 on case files (for example, a legal case that set a precedent in how a particular law was applied in practice)
3.3	Websites of UK Government departments and agencies in accordance with OSP 27

4	The state's interaction with the physical environment
4.1	Records which document the impact of policies/proposals on the natural environment (for example, impact of decision to build a nuclear power station on the surrounding area)
4.2	Records of significant events (natural/man-made) which lead to a change in policy, or set a precedent (for example, foot and mouth crisis)
4.3	Key records that establish or re-affirm UK Crown responsibilities (property and major assets) (for example, OS maps, Thames Barrier, Channel Tunnel, Olympic venues)

5	Records that should always be selected
5.1	Any record created earlier than 1660 (a requirement of the Public Records Act 1958)
5.2	Papers cited in, or noted as consulted in the preparation of Cabinet Office official histories

6	Records that should not selected
6.1	Copy papers (for example, copies of policy or discussion papers circulated between departments)
6.2	Information of reference/short-term value
6.3	Operational or administrative records (for example Finance records such as invoices, receipts and HR records such as grievance papers)
6.4	Department or branch is not the lead (for example, inquiry records where the department was not the secretariat, policy papers where another government department was the lead)
6.5	Newspaper cuttings/copies of publications
6.6	Routine or stand-alone case files that do not fall within criteria 3.1 or 3.2
6.7	Records/information captured elsewhere or already preserved at The National Archives (for example Hansard, published advice and guidance, annual reports, Parliamentary papers)
6.8	Non public-records
6.9	Records that need to be retained by law but aren't considered to be of historical value (for example, finance records, health and safety, nuclear waste disposal records)
6.10	Minimal content (for example very few papers on a file) or where the content doesn't add substantially to what is already known
6.11	Public correspondence unless it forms a part of records selected under criteria 1, 2, 3, and 4
6.12	Records published on a departmental website providing they are captured fully into the UK government web archive

Annex B - Definitions

Appraisal - process of distinguishing records of continuing value from those of no further value so that the latter may be eliminated.

Selection - identification of information and records that are of archival value and should be permanently preserved.

Archival value – records that are of historical value and should be selected for permanent preservation in line with The National Archives selection criteria.

Review - term often used to describe appraisal in UK government

Series – a grouping of records that relate to a particular function/area of government work

Records decision panel – a panel consisting of members of staff from across The National Archives which considers matters relating to selection and disposition of records, including the selection of records for permanent preservation.