



The National Archives

# OPERATIONAL SELECTION POLICY OSP48

## CASE FILES

April 2009

## **Contents**

1. Authority

2. Scope

3. Background and definitions

4. Principles for the selection of case files

5. Questions/points to consider when appraising case files

Annex 1 Table of operational selection policies that cover case files

Figure 1 Decision chart for the selection of case files

## 1 Authority

1.1 The National Archives' Acquisition and Disposition policy statements published in 2000 (updated in 2007 as the Acquisition and Disposition Strategy) announced the intention of developing, in consultation with departments, operational selection policies across government. These policies would apply the collection themes described in the policy to the records of individual departments and agencies.

1.2 Operational selection policies are intended to be working tools for those involved in the selection of public records. This policy may, therefore, be reviewed and revised in the light of comments received from the users of the records or from archive professionals, the department's experience of using the policy, or as a result of newly discovered information. There is no formal cycle of review but we would welcome comments at any time. The extent of any review and revision exercise will be determined according to the nature of the comments received.

1.3 If you have any comments upon this policy, please email

[Information.management@nationalarchives.gov.uk](mailto:Information.management@nationalarchives.gov.uk)

Or write to:

Appraisal Policy Manager  
Information Management and Practice Department  
The National Archives  
Kew  
Richmond  
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## 2 Scope

2.1 The policy provides guidance on the selection of case files for permanent preservation. It replaces and expands on operational selection policy 0 on sampling techniques for case files.

2.2 It does not cover case files where selection criteria have already been laid out in another operational selection policy or appraisal report.

2.3 It does not cover scientific case files. The National Archives intends to prepare separate guidance to cover this type of case file. It also does not cover medical case files.

2.4 This operational selection policy provides guidance on the selection of case files for permanent preservation. It does not provide guidance on the application of freedom of information legislation to selected case files.

### **3 Background and definitions**

3.1 Case files, sometimes referred to as ‘Particular Instance Papers’, are described in the Grigg Report as “often very large groups of papers, the subject matter of which is the same, though each relating to a different person, body or place...while each individual document may be of little importance by itself; taken together or by way of sample these papers enable broad conclusions as to historical, economic or social trends to be drawn”<sup>1</sup>. Case files probably account for over 70% of the total government holdings, and for some agencies and Non Departmental Public Bodies this figure will be much larger.

3.2 Case files are records series whose component files contain similar information, generated in response to the same piece of legislation or regulation, about a specific group of persons, organisations, places or transactions. That specific group could be very large, e.g. the whole population of England and Wales, or relatively small and discrete, e.g. applications to exceed foreign restrictions.

### **4 Principles for the selection of case files**

4.1 The National Archives principles for selection are set out in the Acquisition and Disposition Strategy published in 2007. Case files present a particular challenge for appraisal because they create significant storage pressures and yet may be a major source for records that document the economic, social and demographic condition of the UK or the impact of the state on the physical environment.<sup>2</sup> They may play an important role in creating an archive that supports government policies to overcome social exclusion and which implements The National Archives’ Diversity Strategy.

4.2 In line with the Acquisition and Disposition Strategy The National Archives will make the cost of selection and storage of such case files explicit in its decisions.<sup>3</sup> It may also take into account issues such as sensitivity review and redaction.

4.3 Selection should be based upon the determination of “what papers, if retained, would give the greatest amount of information in the smallest amount of space”<sup>4</sup>

4.4 Before any appraisal is undertaken case files should be identified and considered separately from the normal review process. Case files should not be subjected to file-by-file selection (the process of examining each individual file in order to make a decision about whether to select for permanent preservation).

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<sup>1</sup> Grigg Report, para 62

<sup>2</sup> Acquisition and Disposition Strategy, The National Archives (2007), p5

<sup>3</sup> Acquisition and Disposition Strategy, The National Archives (2007), p2, section 5

<sup>4</sup> Grigg Report, para 109

- 4.5 Large collections of paper case files that are likely to cause significant issues (appraisal, storage, preservation etc) should be taken by the relevant Information Management Consultant to The National Archives Records Decision Panel for consideration.
- 4.6 The Acquisition and Disposition Strategy states that statistical sampling should be avoided for paper case files but other types of samples to aid research use may be useful to illustrate development of the application of policy, or to demonstrate how datasets were compiled.<sup>5</sup> The strategy states that specimens of case files will not be selected simply to preserve examples of departmental work.<sup>6</sup>
- 4.7 Selection of case files, whether in digital or paper form, will use procedures which ensure as far as possible that decisions are fully informed as to the uniqueness of the information in the set of records and are rigorous and consensual. Such procedures may include the establishment of temporary advisory panels of researchers, operational selection policies and the use of selection criteria developed for specific areas of research interest.<sup>7</sup>
- 4.8 Electronic case files and datasets do not present the same kind of storage problems as paper case files. The electronic world makes it possible for electronic case files to be transferred to The National Archives in their entirety. Digital datasets and Geographical Information Systems may also be selected in their entirety. **However** the storage and preservation of electronic case files still has substantial cost/resource implications and this should be taken into account when making selection decisions as set out in section 4.2.
- 4.9 Although The National Archives would normally wish to take paper records in their original format, in some cases it might be preferable (from a storage and cost point of view) to take an electronic copy instead. However, scanned images would have to meet The National Archives standards for preservation and access.

## **5 Questions/points to consider when appraising case files**

### **5.1 Existing operational selection policies**

- 5.1.1 There are a number of operational selection policies that already set out guidance for selection of case files. If the case files in question are covered by an existing policy then that guidance should be followed when conducting appraisal.
- 5.1.2 The table at Annex 1 provides a list of operational selection policies that contain advice on the selection of case files.

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<sup>5</sup> Acquisition and Disposition Strategy, The National Archives (2007), p6, section 4.2.2

<sup>6</sup> Acquisition and Disposition Strategy, The National Archives (2007), p6, section 4.2.3

<sup>7</sup> Acquisition and Disposition Strategy, The National Archives (2007), p6, section 4.2.4

## **5.2 Do the case files relate to a core function or internal administration?**

- 5.2.1 Case files generated to implement a department's core, unique functions may have historical value and are therefore more likely to warrant selection than case files relating to internal administration.
- 5.2.2 Case files that relate to the internal administration of the department (for example, human resources or finance) are not generally selected for preservation at The National Archives. However, existing retention schedules and selection guidance should be checked and all such records may be accorded periods for future destruction.

## **5.3 Are they simple or complex case files?**

- 5.3.1 Simple case files are generally returns on a printed form or to a standard questionnaire. Here inputs and outputs are standard and the case files essentially record processing operations such as applications for driving licences. It is the type of information now commonly entered into a dataset.
- 5.3.2 For simple case files the value of the record series or digital dataset resides in the aggregated use of the individual entries or returns: more or less sophisticated statistical analysis may reveal social, economic or environmental trends. The information in just one return may have value to a specific individual or organisation. However, selection must primarily be conducted on the basis of the statistical use that may be made of the aggregated data. Some very significant simple case files are selected for permanent preservation, such as the decennial census and personnel files of the armed services.
- 5.3.3 For complex case files, although they are all generated by the same piece of legislation or by the same procedure, they are characterised by a low degree of document similarity and a high degree of variation between files. In complex case files civil servants are applying a high level of consideration to the information for each case, as occurs, for example, with legal files. Such case files, although relating solely to one entity, start to take on the characteristics of a policy file: the outcome may involve re-interpretations of policy and/or prompt re-consideration of policy.
- 5.3.4 Complex case files yield data of a qualitative nature: the whole set of entries will not be susceptible to standard statistical tests, except by first reducing the information to a standard format. In these cases specific case files, although relating to one person, organisation or event, may yield information of broader historical value, such as standard investigations where data on significant disasters or test cases may be found, such as air accident investigations. They require special consideration where they have a strong link with policy development.

## **5.4 Are they interpreting law/setting precedents?**

- 5.4.1 Some cases may have led to a change in legislation or set precedents for how a particular piece of legislation is interpreted or implemented. They could also have led to the development of a new piece of legislation. This type of case might have higher future research value though it may be difficult to identify these cases.
- 5.4.2 There is no suggestion that departmental review staff should read through every file to find cases of this kind. However, it may be possible to identify key cases using departmental knowledge or publications, for example, key cases are also sometimes highlighted in Annual Reports and some departments highlight cases of high potential impact as part of their day to day work. Relevant case files could then be selected by title.
- 5.4.3 If it is not possible to select key cases of the kind described above then it will be necessary to consider selecting either all or none of the case files. In weighing up whether to select all or none of the case files, issues such as historical value, storage, preservation and access should be taken into account. The National Archives does occasionally take in whole runs of case files for preservation, for example, the decennial census.

## **5.5 Other significant cases**

- 5.5.1 Some case files may be of value if they relate to persons, notable events/causes célèbres, or other events that gave rise to significant contemporary interest or controversy or attracted considerable national press interest AND the records add significantly to what is already known.
- 5.5.2 However as in 5.4.2 above these should only be selected if they can be identified without creating significant extra work for review staff. If it is not possible to select key cases then the all or nothing option described in 5.4.3 above should be considered.

## **5.6 Are they summarised in policy files or publications**

- 5.6.1 Where cases of the kinds described above are covered by policy files or publications it may be better to ensure that the policy files are selected for preservation and that the publications are preserved at the British Library, unless the case files provide detail that it is essential to capture.

## **6 Other relevant guidance**

Acquisition and disposition strategy

[http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/acquisition\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/acquisition_strategy.pdf)

Appraisal policy and background paper

[http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/appraisal\\_policy.pdf](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/appraisal_policy.pdf)

[http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/background\\_appraisal.pdf](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/background_appraisal.pdf)

Preparation for undertaking review of paper records (particularly Annex 4)

[http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/preparation\\_paper\\_review.pdf](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/preparation_paper_review.pdf)

Model retention and disposal schedules

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/recordsmanagement/advice/schedules.htm>

See also list of operational selection policies in Annex 1



## Annex 1

Operational selection policies that contain advice on the selection of case files

Number	Subject
OSP1	Department of the Environment 1970-1979
OSP2	The Crown Estate 1975-1985
OSP4	Use and conservation of the countryside for recreational purposes
OSP5	The administration of social security 1979-1991
OSP6	Records created by and relating to coroners 1970-2000
OSP7	The Welsh Office 1979-1997
OSP8	The Security Service
OSP10	Nature conservation in Great Britain 1973-1991
OSP12	Records of the central direction and oversight of government policy and programmes 1970-2000
OSP13	Britain's diplomatic relations 1973-1996
OSP15	Control of central government expenditure 1969-1997
OSP16	Records relating to probation and other forms of non-custodial treatment of offenders 1965-2001
OSP17	Preservation of the built environment 1970-1999
OSP18	Records of the registration of births, deaths and marriages of United Kingdom citizens occurring overseas
OSP19	School age education (3-16 year olds) 1974-1988
OSP20	Records of the Central Office of Information/COI communications (COI)
OSP21	Records of the Criminal Cases Review Commission (CCRC)
OSP22	The records of the Royal Mint 1975-2002
OSP23	Records of Britain's overseas representation 1973-
OSP25	The regulation of companies
OSP26	The regulation of civil aviation 1972-2002
OSP29	Metropolitan Police Service
OSP30	Government and the people: the interaction of the state with the citizen
OSP31	Post 16 education 1974-1988
OSP32	Records relating to court actions for individual insolvency (case files and datasets) 1973-2003
OSP33	Records relating to court actions for corporate insolvency (case files and datasets) 1973-2003
OSP34	Restrictive trade practices 1956-2000
OSP37	Freedom of Information Act records
OSP40	Records relating to the indictable criminal proceedings 1972-1992 (indictments and case files) excluding military law
OSP42	Records of departmental legal branches
OSP43	Competition case files
OSP44	Records of the UK government involvement in the development of European Community secondary legislation
OSP45	English Partnerships 1999-2006
OSP46	Records relating to military law and courts-martial
OSP47	Water Services Regulation Authority (OFWAT)

**Figure 1: Decision chart for case files**

