**Department of Local Government,
Sport and Cultural Industries
State Records Office** of Western Australia
GOVERNMENT OF
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

# Records Management Advice

## Recordkeeping Basics

**Introduction**

This guide provides basic information for creating and managing records for Western Australian State and local government organisations. Non-government organisations may also find this guide useful for developing records management programs.

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***Special note: Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017)***

Some recommendations from this Royal Commission relate to creating and keeping records of child sexual abuse cases or allegations, and records that may become relevant to future cases or allegations. Organisations should consider what information needs to be retained, based on the level of their activities or services involving children.

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**1.     What is a record?**

Information that is created or received by an organisation in the course of its business is a record. Records may be in any format that can be read and understood, such as: paper files and documents, emails, spreadsheets, PDFs, databases, photographs, maps, tape recordings, text Information that is created or received by an organisation in messages from mobiles, and social media posts.

**2.     Why should my organisation keep records?**

A well-run organisation relies on well-managed information. Records are the basis of good information. They provide evidence of what an organisation has done, and why.  Keeping full and accurate business records means an organisation can account for its actions, report on its activities and defend itself to external parties, if necessary, while making informed and consistent decisions.  Over time business records become the corporate memory, or history, of an organisation.

State and local government organisations in WA must comply with recordkeeping requirements in the *State Records Act 2000*, as detailed in an approved Records Management Plan. This Act does **not** apply to non-government organisations.

**3.     Who should create and keep records?**

All employees, including temporary staff, contract staff, volunteers, local government councillors and Board members, must ensure records of business activities, transactions, communications and decisions are captured as an official record. Dedicated information management staff may be responsible for duties such as collecting mail, registering correspondence, maintaining relevant information systems, and arranging for disposal of records that are no longer required.

**4.     Why have recordkeeping policies and procedures?**

Well-run organisations have good information management based on clear recordkeeping policies and procedures. Policies should set out an organisation's expectations for making full and accurate records of its business. These should indicate which staff positions are responsible for creating and managing business records. Standard operating procedures provide clear instructions regarding recordkeeping tasks and staff responsibilities.

## 5. What should be recorded?

An organisation should record actions, decisions, and commitments arising from communications or meetings, whether internal or external, formal or informal.

Ask yourself the following questions – if you have one or more "yes" answers, a record should be created.

- Does the matter relate to my work?
- Did I write, receive or send this in the course of my work?
- Do I need to take any action, such as reply to someone?
- Is this something I have used to do my work or to reach a decision?
- Will I, or my organisation, need this information in the future?

Examples of records might include:

- Meeting agenda and minutes
- A file note of a meeting to discuss a specific issue
- An email from a manager, authorising purchase of an item
- A letter sent to a client in response to a query
- An email raising a workplace safety issue
- A social media post about changes to the organisation's services

> *Special note: Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*
>
> Organisations must carefully consider what sorts of records may be relevant to an actual or alleged incident of child sexual abuse and retain them accordingly.

## 6. How do I make a record?

Records can be kept in the format in which they are created (such as letters, spreadsheets, forms or emails). In some cases, you may need to create a record manually, particularly for important conversations or telephone calls. Make a file note as soon as possible after an important conversation or meeting so all relevant information can be captured, including:

- **Details of meeting or conversation** – date, time, type of communication, names of people involved and organisations represented
- **Content of meeting or conversation** – topics discussed, any decisions or commitments made, actions required
- **Other details** – author, file number, date written

## 7. Do I need to keep a hard copy or electronic record?

The *State Records Act* does **not** require records to be kept in any particular form. Records can be kept digitally, or in paper, or as a combination of the two. There is no need to print digital records unless the organisation has a specific business requirement to do so. Organisations can digitise, or scan, paper records to improve access to them, or to save physical storage space. Digitisation can be an expensive and/or time-consuming process, so consider costs against potential benefits before starting a scanning project.

**For Western Australian State and local government organisations:** If you intend to destroy the original record after scanning, the SRO's *General Disposal Authority for Source Records* must be followed.

## 8.    How do I manage records?

To establish a recordkeeping program in your organisation, these basic activities should be considered:

- **Correspondence capture:** Organisations should keep a record of any correspondence that they send or receive, whether hard copy or digital. This provides evidence of this correspondence and enables it to be retrieved as needed. Correspondence can be recorded in a register or spreadsheet, or another business information system. The register should contain details such as: sender, recipient, date received, subject matter and file reference.

- **Naming and Filing**: When creating documents, it is important to name them consistently so your organisation can easily identify and retrieve them in future. When filing records, similar matters or issues should be grouped together.

- **Digital records:** Most organisations create digital records. These may be created and kept in a business information system such as an Electronic Document and Records Management System, a Customer Relationship System, or other software. Whichever is used, it is important to have processes in place to ensure that digital information remains complete, secure, accessible and reliable.

  Be aware that digital storage may be cheap but digital records will need to be consciously managed and migrated over time to ensure they can still be read and used. There will also be ongoing costs for backups and maintenance, and these may increase substantially over time as the volume of data increases.

- **Storage and Access:** Consider who needs to access which records and where they can best be securely kept. Access to some records, such as confidential or sensitive matters, may need to be restricted to certain people or positions. Any specific access provisions should be formally documented.

  Records should be kept in suitable storage, which should offer protection from potentially harmful environmental conditions. You might need to consider issues such as appropriate shelving or cabinets, fire protection, and security.  If needed, onsite or commercial providers may be used for physical and digital storage.

- **Disaster Management:** Records can be damaged or lost to fire, floods, mould, insects, computer viruses or vandalism. What would happen if you lost your business records? Your organisation should have a disaster management plan to ensure your organisation's records are protected.

- **Training**: Consider how to make staff and volunteers aware of recordkeeping responsibilities and processes. This may form part of the induction when new people join the organisation, or as part of a regular training program, or both.

  Training methods should suit your organisation's size and resources, and might include face-to-face sessions (group or individual), updates at staff meetings, email circulars, and/or external training courses.

## 9.    How long do records need to be kept?

The purpose of a record will determine how long you need to keep it. Most records do not have permanent value, but disposal of records can only be done using an approved disposal authority. Depending on the information in the record, you should use the appropriate General Disposal Authority published by the SRO, or a Retention and Disposal Authority specific to your organisation.

**For non-government organisations:** Disposal of records should be done in line with an agreed, documented policy or set of rules. The SRO's General Disposal Authorities cover common administration disposal rules which can be used as a guide.

## 10.    How do I destroy records?

The organisation's principal/chief officer, or delegate, must sign off on lists of records to be destroyed. Destruction must be done in accordance with agreed business rules.  Records must be destroyed to the extent that no information can be recovered. This is particularly important if computers or other equipment are being sold or re-used.  Hard copy records can be shredded or pulped. Digital records can be destroyed by deliberately altering the data or by physically destroying the storage medium.

**Further information or advice**

Please contact the State Records Office:

• Email at sro@sro.wa.gov.au