The National Archives

Technical guidance for Inquiries and Inquests

The National Archives
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1.   Introduction

The records of inquiries and inquests are of enduring historical interest. They may be selected for permanent preservation at The National Archives for use by future researchers and policy makers.

These records are increasingly created, received, used and published by the inquiry in digital form. Managing large volumes of digital information can be complex and costly unless it is planned from the outset. The inquiry will need to develop policies and procedures that ensure its digital records can be found, used and trusted as required, and to enable appropriate control over access to sensitive records.

At the conclusion of the inquiry, the records will be appraised and selected for permanent preservation, reviewed for sensitivity and transferred to The National Archives or, for highly sensitive records, to another appropriate custodian. The cost and complexity of this process can be greatly reduced if the right policies are implemented from the outset.

1.1   What is the purpose of this guidance?

This guidance describes the technical factors that should be considered when establishing policies and procedures for managing the digital records of an inquiry, to reduce the cost and impact of the operational management of the records in support of the inquiry, and to safeguard the Public Record for the future.

Although the guidance specifically refers to inquiry records, it is equally applicable to inquests and other public record bodies.

This guidance forms part of a wider suite of advice and guidance on information management for inquiries which can be found at:

http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/information-management/projects-and-work/public-inquiry-guidance.htm

1.2   Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is primarily aimed at the Inquiry Secretary, but will also be useful to staff responsible for Records Management and Information Technology (IT). These staff may be located in the inquiry team or the sponsoring department.

2.   Recommendations

2.1   Creating digital records

Selecting the right technology for the digital records you create will both enable you to consult and work with these records over the course of the inquiry and facilitate long-term preservation following the conclusion of the inquiry. When creating digital records you should:

- **Choose standard file formats**
  Choose standard file formats for written documents (such as transcripts, reports or presentations) and any other digital media you create (such as recordings, film or photographs). This will make it easier for you to work with them, publish them and share them with others when needed. The National Archives maintains a list of digital file formats[1] that can be economically and technically sustained. You should consult this list before selecting formats for use by the inquiry.

- **File emails with your other records**
  You will almost certainly correspond by email. This activity is likely to be carried out by several members of the inquiry team, raising the risk that the record of your correspondence becomes fragmented across multiple email boxes. You should treat your email correspondence like any other form of evidence and save it with the other inquiry records.

- **Create accessible copies of specialised digital formats**
  You may need to develop or commission work in a specialised digital format. For example, the records of previous inquiries include animations and virtual-reality simulations. When commissioning work of this nature, ask your developer to provide an alternative version (or export) that can be viewed without the need for specialised software. This will enable you to share or publish the records as you require, and will allow The National Archives to provide access to them in the future.

2.2 Receiving digital records

You will receive digital information or evidence from other organisations and individuals. This forms part of the inquiry record. Managing this information from the point at which you receive it will enhance your ability to find, understand and work with it as required over the course of the inquiry. It will also ease the eventual transfer of the material to The National Archives for permanent preservation.

- **File email attachments with your other records**
  If documents or other files arrive as attachments to email messages, treat these like any other form of evidence and save them (and the covering email) with the other inquiry records.

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[1] www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/information-management/file-formats-for-transfer.pdf

- **Record the copyright status of information you receive**
  Maintain a record of the copyright holder of any evidence that is submitted – preferably in the metadata associated with each digital file or folder[2]. Establishing copyright as soon as the records are received is considerably easier than doing so retrospectively. Failure to manage copyright may limit your ability to share or publish the records of the inquiry (for example, on the inquiry website) and may limit the ability of The National Archives to provide access to them in the future.

- **Consult The National Archives if you receive non-standard digital files**
  If you receive information or evidence in a non-standard digital format, please consult The National Archives at the earliest opportunity so that we can offer you tailored advice. There is a risk that the use of specialised formats will limit your ability to work with these records over the course of the inquiry, and The National Archives may be unable to accept and preserve these files as part of the historical record.

2.3   Storing digital records

You will need to define how you wish to store and manage your digital records. The National Archives offers guidance[3] on how to design an effective filing structure (file plan). In addition, when choosing an IT system for storing your digital records, you should consider the following:

- **Business requirements**
  The system should support your business requirements for records management. These will include the ability to file, find, retrieve, understand and trust your records.

- **Access control**
  The system should support your requirements for controlling access to the records. This is particularly important where sensitive records are held.

- **Metadata**
  The system should enable you to record any metadata you need to manage and work with the records. As a minimum, you should consider: a meaningful title or document reference, covering dates, sensitivity or protective marking, rights, whether the record has been selected for permanent preservation. You may require additional fields to support your own particular operational requirements, for example, subject or classification, the author or contributor, other names, internal references, whether the record has been published on your website.

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[2] http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/information-management/projects-and-work/copyright-and-ownership.htm
[3] www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/information-management/projects-and-work/filing-structures.htm

- **Legislative or compliance requirements**
  The system should support you in complying with your statutory obligations. These include the Inquiry Rules 2006, the Public Records Act, the Freedom of Information Act and the Data Protection Act.

- **Export and transfer**
  The system must allow the records and their metadata to be exported. This will enable you to publish documents on the inquiry website when required, and will allow the records to be transferred to The National Archives for permanent preservation at the conclusion of the inquiry.

There is a wide range of IT systems for storing and managing digital records. For example, your sponsoring department may provide you with a dedicated Electronic Document and Records Management System (EDRMS); you may choose a collaborative working environment such as Microsoft SharePoint; or you might decide to rely on traditional shared drives and folders[4]. Each of the available options has associated benefits, costs and risks. You should ensure that the system you choose meets your requirements and supports you in delivering the required outcomes.

2.4   Working with digital records

Your choice of technology will affect your ability to work with your digital records. We recommend the following steps to maintain the usability of your records, both during the course of the inquiry and following transfer to The National Archives:

- Organise and structure your records in a way that enables you to find, understand and protect them.

- Give the folders in your filing structure meaningful names which indicate what information they contain. This is key to maintaining an understanding of the records – both for inquiry staff and for future researchers. Aim to be clear rather than concise when naming folders.

- Use descriptive file names which convey meaningful information about the content of each document. Ideally, these would remain understandable if removed from the context of the folder structure in which the file is held. Aim to be clear, rather than concise when naming files – most IT systems in common use will accommodate long file names.

- Establish clear procedures for version control to ensure staff can identify the relevant version of each document, and to enable changes to be tracked and managed.

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[4] www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/information-management/managing-electronic-records-without-an-erms-publication-edition.pdf

Following these recommendations will greatly reduce the amount of work you will need to undertake to prepare and describe your records prior to transferring them to The National Archives. It will also make it easier for future users of the records to find and understand them when the records are eventually released.

2.4   Publishing digital records

You should publish open evidence (and other non-sensitive documents) to the inquiry website in an accessible format. Choosing appropriate formats from the outset will reduce the effort involved in this.

- **UK Government Web Archive**
  The National Archives will work with you to capture your website into the UK Government Web Archive. This can be done at agreed intervals to record regular snapshots of the website, followed by a final, comprehensive, capture before the website is closed at the end of the inquiry[5].

- **Redacted records**
  You should maintain a record of which documents (and versions) have been published, preferably within the metadata of the relevant file or folder. If you publish redacted versions of documents, you should continue to hold the closed originals as part of the inquiry record for eventual transfer to The National Archives (or retention at another secure repository). These records will then be securely maintained until such time as it becomes appropriate to release them.

2.5   Selection

The inquiry staff will appraise the records to make a selection for permanent preservation at The National Archives. This process can be greatly facilitated if records are appraised as they are created or received, to indicate their potential long-term value. The following technical features can support the selection process:

- **Metadata**
  Your records management system should be capable of recording information about selection decisions, preferably in the metadata of each digital file or folder.

- **Search**
  An effective search facility can assist you in your final appraisal of your digital records.

- **Export**
  Your records management system must allow you to export selected records, with their associated metadata.

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[5] www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/information-management/projects-and-work/creating-an-official-inquiry-website.htm

2.6   Sensitivity review

Prior to transfer to The National Archives, selected records must be reviewed for sensitivity[6]. This includes identifying the following:

- **Personal data**
  Data held by the inquiry, the release of which would breach the Data Protection Act.

- **FOIA exemptions**
  Specific exemptions from disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act. For example:

  - Information provided in confidence, the disclosure of which would constitute an actionable breach of confidentiality (Section 41)

  - Information which would endanger the physical or mental health of individuals (Section 38)

- **Protective marking**
  Classification under the Government Protective Marking Scheme.

It is difficult, costly and time-consuming to review for sensitivity retrospectively, more so if this has to be carried out by the sponsoring department after the inquiry has closed and the team has dispersed. The process can be greatly facilitated if records are reviewed for sensitivity as they are created or received. The following technical features can support the sensitivity review process.

- **Metadata**
  Your records management system should be capable of recording the decisions you make about sensitivity, preferably in the metadata of each digital record or folder.

- **Search**
  An effective search facility can assist you in your final sensitivity review.

- **Export**
  Your records management system should allow you to export records and metadata according to their sensitivity, for example, to send records to different repositories depending on their protective marking. The National Archives does not hold records classified above Restricted so these will be securely retained by the sponsoring department until such time as it is appropriate to release them. If the majority of your records are retained in this way, it may be preferable to keep the inquiry record together and transfer only a copy of the metadata to The National Archives. Please contact us if you think this may apply.

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[6] www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/information-management/projects-and-work/sensitivities-and-review.htm

2.7   Transfer

The system you use to store digital records must enable you to export them, along with their metadata, for transfer to The National Archives (see section 2.3 above on choosing a system for storing digital records). We require the following metadata for transferred digital records[7]:

- A meaningful file name or title

- Covering dates (or date created)

- For closed records, a description of their sensitivity or details of the relevant FOI exemption.

- Their position within your filing structure, folder structure or business classification scheme (file plan).

2.8   Access

Sections 2.1 and 2.2 above offer guidance on suitable file formats for digital records. Choosing widely-used, stable, interoperable formats will support your need to work with, share and publish digital records over the course of the inquiry. The same technical considerations will enable The National Archives to provide long-term access to these records:

- The choice of document formats can greatly affect the cost and complexity of providing access to records over the medium and long term.

- Choosing an unsustainable document format may mean that records cannot be preserved at The National Archives, or made available to future researchers.

- The National Archives publishes a list of 'preservable' digital file formats[8]. These are the formats we are currently able to accept, maintain and make available, while operating within our technical and budgetary constraints. You should consult this list when selecting digital record formats for use by the inquiry.

3.   Next steps

The National Archives supports inquiries and inquests by providing tailored, specialist guidance on records and information management. We can offer further advice on selecting technology that will both support your requirements for working with your records whilst the inquiry is in progress, and ease the subsequent selection, review and transfer of records to The National Archives. Please contact us to discuss your requirements: information.management@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk

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[7] www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/information-management/digital-transfer-guidance.pdf
[8] www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/information-management/file-formats-for-transfer.pdf