

Policy for Review of Commonwealth Records in the National Archives of Australia's Custody

May 2010



Contents

1. Executive summary	3
2. Definition of records review	4
3. Policy statement	4
3.1 Commonwealth records	4
3.2 Personal records	4
3.3 Recordkeeping	5
4. Who does this policy apply to?	5
5. What does this policy apply to?	5
6. Legislative context for review	5
7. Approaches to review	5
7.1 Sentencing using records authorities	6
7.2 Review appraisal procedure	6
7.3 Valuable records procedure	6
7.4 Agency resentencing	6
7.5 Preventive review	6

1. Executive summary

This policy sets out the rationale for reviewing records in the custody of – and, to a lesser extent, records proposed for transfer to – the National Archives of Australia to determine their archival value. It applies to Commonwealth records and other material in the Archives' custody or proposed for transfer by Australian Government agencies.

The objective of records review is to ensure that the Archives directs its resources to the management of Commonwealth records and other material of archival value. It does this by:

- confirming the archival value of records in custody before resources are allocated to preserving and describing them
- destroying or returning to agency custody records that do not warrant retention as national archives
- confirming that records proposed for transfer have been accurately sentenced for retention as national archives.

Priority is given to the review of:

- records that have previously been accepted into custody without any evaluation
- records sentenced as 'permanent' prior to 2000¹ that may not warrant retention
- records proposed for transfer to ensure that only records of archival value are brought into custody
- records previously sentenced for temporary retention that have reached the date when they are due for destruction, and can be returned to their controlling agency or retained in custody or destroyed with agency concurrence.

Processes available for review activity include:

- sentencing
- producing new records authorities under Section 24 of the *Archives Act 1983* to enable decisions to retain and destroy groups of records
- confirming the archival value of records
- sample sentencing and checking of records prior to transfer
- encouraging controlling agencies to undertake re-sentencing projects.

This policy seeks to ensure that review activity is undertaken in a cost-effective manner to deliver the maximum reduction in holdings for the smallest input of resources.

¹ Since July 2000 records authorities have been developed using the principles of functional appraisal. What were then known as records disposal authorities had been developed from appraisal of the value of groups of records themselves (rather than the functions or business they documented).

2. Definition of records review

'Records review' is an umbrella term for identifying, making, changing or confirming decisions about the disposal status² of records in the Archives' custody or scheduled for transfer into custody.

Records review involves:

- investigating the nature of records in the custody of the Archives, targeting broad groups of records for review and planning review activity
- investigating the disposal status of specific groups of records in custody, including the basis and soundness of previous disposal decisions
- appraising records in custody and preparing disposal authorisation to cover them
- sentencing records against new or existing records authorities³
- in some instances, confirming the archival value of records without a records authority.

3. Policy statement

The purpose of records review is to confirm the status of archival records as 'retain as national archives' (RNA) and to identify non-archival records for destruction or withdrawal from custody. This is to ensure that the Archives directs its resources to the storage and management of records of permanent value.

3.1 Commonwealth records

In order to meet the policy the Archives:

- assesses and confirms records for disposal so that those records which should not be retained as national archives are removed from custody and do not require ongoing expenditure of resources for management
- to ensure resources are used in an efficient and effective manner, assesses and confirms records for retention as national archives before other work, including transfer, preservation, storage and description, is carried out on them.

3.2 Personal records

The Archives has separate policies and procedures in place to review the personal records of people closely associated with the Australian Government in an official capacity and who have deposited their records with the Archives. These include governors-general, prime ministers, ministers, parliamentary secretaries, and Federal and High Court judges.

² A record's disposal status determines whether it is to be destroyed or retained, or is not subject to the Commonwealth disposal regime.

³ 'Sentencing' is a process of using a records authority or other instrument to decide whether to retain, destroy or transfer a record. Records authorities are issued by the Archives under Section 24 of the Archives Act to individual agencies, and cover records documenting agency-specific core business.

Personal records are not sentenced according to records authorities and are given the disposal status 'not applicable' (NA).

3.3 Recordkeeping

To meet public expectations of accountability and transparency, reasons for review decisions are thoroughly documented and captured in an accessible recordkeeping system. Such documentation also enables the Archives to accurately gauge the need for further review activity in the future.

4. Who does this policy apply to?

This policy applies to:

- operational staff responsible for review, transfer, preservation, storage and description activities relating to Commonwealth records and other material
- managers responsible for planning review, transfer, preservation, storage and description activities relating to Commonwealth records and other material.

5. What does this policy apply to?

This policy applies to Commonwealth records and other material created or kept by Australian Government agencies in the Archives' custody, except:

- records already sentenced 'retain as national archives'
- records controlled by Commonwealth persons.

6. Legislative context for review

Section 5(2)(d) of the Archives Act gives the Archives responsibility for determining the 'material that constitutes the archival resources of the Commonwealth'.

Section 5(2)(e) of the Act gives the Archives responsibility for the care and management of Commonwealth records – other than those in current use by agencies – that 'ought to be examined to determine whether they are part of [the] archival resources of the Commonwealth'.

7. Approaches to review

The approach selected will depend on the nature of the records under consideration. In general, records should be dealt with at the broadest level practicable to increase efficiencies in the review process. Sample sentencing may be conducted to establish likely retention and destruction rates and to inform the most appropriate level for review. Homogeneous records (such as series with common formats and some case

records) are more likely to be dealt with at a broader level than complex correspondence records.

Various approaches to review are outlined below.

7.1 Sentencing using records authorities

This approach may be undertaken at item, consignment (that is, transfer job) or series level.⁴ Sentencing at item level is very resource intensive but may be the only viable option for some records, such as complex correspondence records containing significant quantities of temporary records. Sample sentencing may be conducted to establish the nature of the records, the resource costs of sentencing, and likely retention and destruction rates.

7.2 Review appraisal procedure

Review appraisal procedures, under Section 24 of the Archives Act, produce a records authority covering specific groups of records. The records authority can be used where no current records authority exists. It is particularly appropriate to use where records relate to defunct functions.

7.3 Valuable records procedure

The valuable records procedure may be used to confirm the archival value of a group of records. It can be used where no current records authority exists and there is a good prospect that the group contains only a small proportion or no temporary-value records.

7.4 Agency re-sentencing

Re-sentencing of records in custody by agencies using new records authorities represents a significant resource saving for the Archives. This may occur on the Archives' premises or in agency custody. Generally, series and consignments known or expected to contain records of highly significant archival value should remain on the Archives' premises for review work. Agency re-sentencing may be particularly useful for records containing highly technical content, requiring knowledge of particular disposal trigger dates, or presenting other complex sentencing issues.

7.5 Preventive review

Sample sentencing and checking of records prior to transfer ensure that only records of archival value are taken into custody, thereby avoiding the need for future review.

⁴ A series is a group of records that has resulted from the same accumulation or filing process (with the same numerical, alphabetical, chronological or other identifiable sequence), or which have a similar format or information content. A series comprises one or more consignments (or transfer jobs).

Version	Date	Comments
1.1	May 2010	Policy created
1.2	July 2011	Policy endorsed for web publication