

Official access

What is official access?

Official access means agreement from an agency to allow a particular person to see records of that agency held by the National Archives, for an approved purpose, as set out in section 30 of the *Archives Act 1983*. It is different from public access because it allows access to records which may not be generally available to the public, such as records not yet in the open access period and records that have not been assessed for public access or have been assessed and found to contain exempt information.

When is official access needed?

Official access is normally granted by agencies to enable their officers to use records held by the National Archives in one of our research centres. There are a number of reasons why an agency might need to authorise official access to records in this way. Apart from the need for staff to consult archival records to meet the ongoing needs of day-to-day administration, access may also be needed to:

- facilitate internal investigations into past events
- facilitate research projects leading to the preparation of official histories or other publications
- assist major government inquiries, including committees of inquiry or royal commissions
- facilitate 'discovery' exercises in relation to litigation.

As well as the staff of an agency, consultants or contractors engaged or commissioned by the agency to undertake specific tasks may be granted official access. So too, where an Australian Government agency has been privatised and records of that agency remain under Commonwealth control, the agency accepting responsibility for the control of those records may grant official access to the company that has bought the business of the privatised agency.

Sometimes it may be necessary for officers of one agency to have official access to the records of another agency.

Who can authorise official access?

Official access must be approved by a manager in the agency controlling the records. Approval of an officer of the Senior Executive Service or equivalent level is generally required.

Official access authorisation form

An official access authorisation form must be submitted to the National Archives before official access to records can be granted.

Completing the authorisation form requires clear identification of:

- the officer who is authorised to have official access
- the officer who has provided the authorisation
- the records to which official access is approved (including any limitations on access)
- the period during which access is authorised
- whether the officer is authorised to access security classified material and to what level, and
- certification by the Agency Security Advisor (in the agency authorising access) that the officer has a current security clearance to the required level (when access to security classified material has been requested).

By completing the authorisation form you are providing the National Archives with the information required to ensure that those authorised are given access only to the records they require for the task being undertaken. It also assists the National Archives in identifying the records that are being sought.

You can access the form from the link at the end of this webpage. Official access forms are also available from all National Archives research centres.

Expiry of authorisations

The official access authorisation form asks the authorising officer to nominate the date on which the authorisation should cease. Annual authorisation may be granted to officials undertaking longer-term projects, but these authorisations need to be renewed by 31 January each year.

Identifying the records

Officers seeking official access must be able to identify the records they wish to use. In order to retrieve records, the National Archives requires *series numbers* and *control symbols*. Where this information is provided, access to records can generally be given in accordance with the service standards and rules of the research centre.

Obtaining copies of records

The National Archives will only provide copies of records if this is approved on the official access authorisation form. Normal copying charges will apply.

Viewing security classified records in a research centre

Before visiting a research centre to view security classified records, please study our research centre rules, and the terms of agreement for researchers authorised to view security classified records. A signed copy of the Terms must be returned prior to viewing records. You will also need to let us know the preferred day and time you would like to visit.

On arrival to a research centre, please:

- leave all bags, pens, cameras, laptops and mobile phones in the lockers provided. Any materials taken into the research centre must be presented for inspection upon leaving
- present your researcher card to the officer on duty when entering the research centre, and sign the attendance register
- view records only in the designated room and do not leave records unattended at any time. You have a responsibility to protect the records from access by other researchers
- do not unfasten or remove folios from a file, or mark or annotate original records in any way
- return all records to research centre staff when leaving, and sign out on the attendance register.

If you have any questions, please ask the officer on duty in the research centre.

More information

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