



## What we keep: Principles for selecting the Australian Government's national archives – Policy Statement

July 2021

### Purpose and scope

The purpose of this policy statement is to detail the selection principles and associated considerations that provide the basis for the decisions of the National Archives of Australia when selecting Australian Government records for permanent preservation and provision of public access. This statement does not cover how government records should be managed or provide details on the overall appraisal methodology used by the National Archives.

The National Archives of Australia is responsible for selecting the most valuable Australian Government records and ensuring they are kept permanently and preserved for future generations. In the digital age this process faces significant additional challenges. Digital technologies and business processes central to the conduct of Australian Government business, produce a myriad of highly complex digital records formats - such as smartphone apps, machine learning algorithms, and various social media content. These records (including data) must be assessed to select those that are to be retained permanently as national archives. This statement applies to all Australian Government digital and non-digital records, information and data which are created, collected, received and kept as part of government business. It is intended for information and use by all interested stakeholders including Australian Government agency staff, archives and information management professionals, National Archives' staff, researchers and members of the general public.

The selection principles in this policy statement are applied objectively and impartially by National Archives staff in accordance with our appraisal methodology. The principles aim to reflect the expectations, interests and needs of all communities and cultures within Australian society, including meeting the expectations and research requirements of future generations.

The statement is informed by the International Council on Archives' [Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration](#) (2019). Any actions by the National Archives of Australia in selecting archival records for preservation will incorporate, where relevant, the Declaration's commitments to recognising and preserving Indigenous peoples' culture and knowledge methods. This is also supported by the National Archives' *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols* (2021).

### Key Terminology

For the purposes of this statement the term **records** is used to refer to records, information and data collectively and **information management** to refer to their management processes.

Archival appraisal is the recurrent process of evaluating Australian Government agencies' business functions and activities to determine records that need to be created or captured, as well as how and how long records need to be kept. This includes selection of those records that must be kept permanently as national archives.

Where the term **community** is applied in the following statement and the selection principles it is intended to reference and reflect all of the diverse communities and cultures comprising Australian society. The selection principles apply equally to Australian Government records relating to all communities and cultures.

This policy statement applies to non-corporate and corporate Commonwealth entities, and wholly owned companies including government business enterprises. These are collectively referred to as **agencies**.

### Our role

The National Archives is responsible for:

- selecting and preserving the most valuable records of the Australian Government and facilitating their use by the public, regardless of format or technological dependency; and
- promoting good information management by Australian Government agencies.

The *Archives Act 1983* provides the authority for the National Archives to select and preserve Australian Government records of permanent value. The National Archives also authorises the destruction of records that are not required to be kept permanently.

### What we keep

The National Archives only preserves Australian Government records that are identified as being of permanent value. That is, records of national significance or public interest that will continue to have value to the Australian Government and the community for generations to come. The material we select for permanent retention is known as 'national archives'.

We use selection principles to help determine which records to retain as national archives. Our selection principles are considered in conjunction with a number of additional factors which may impact on our ability to preserve or make records accessible.

Our selection principles are:

1. Government authority, action and accountability
2. Identity, interaction and rights and entitlements
3. Knowledge and community memory
4. Australians and their environment

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## Why we keep Australian Government records

Australian Government records provide a unique source of evidence about the decisions and activities of government. The creation, maintenance, preservation and accessibility of records is essential for the performance of Australian Government business.

It also:

- enables the community to access and understand the decisions and actions of government;
- supports public accountability and openness in the decisions and activities of Australian Government agencies;
- protects the rights, entitlements and interests of Australians and others who interact with the Australian Government;
- provides information essential for protection and future well-being of Australian communities and their environment;
- contributes to the historical record of Australia and provides source material for individual and academic research; and
- enables records to be re-used to benefit the community, including as assets to support the digital economy.

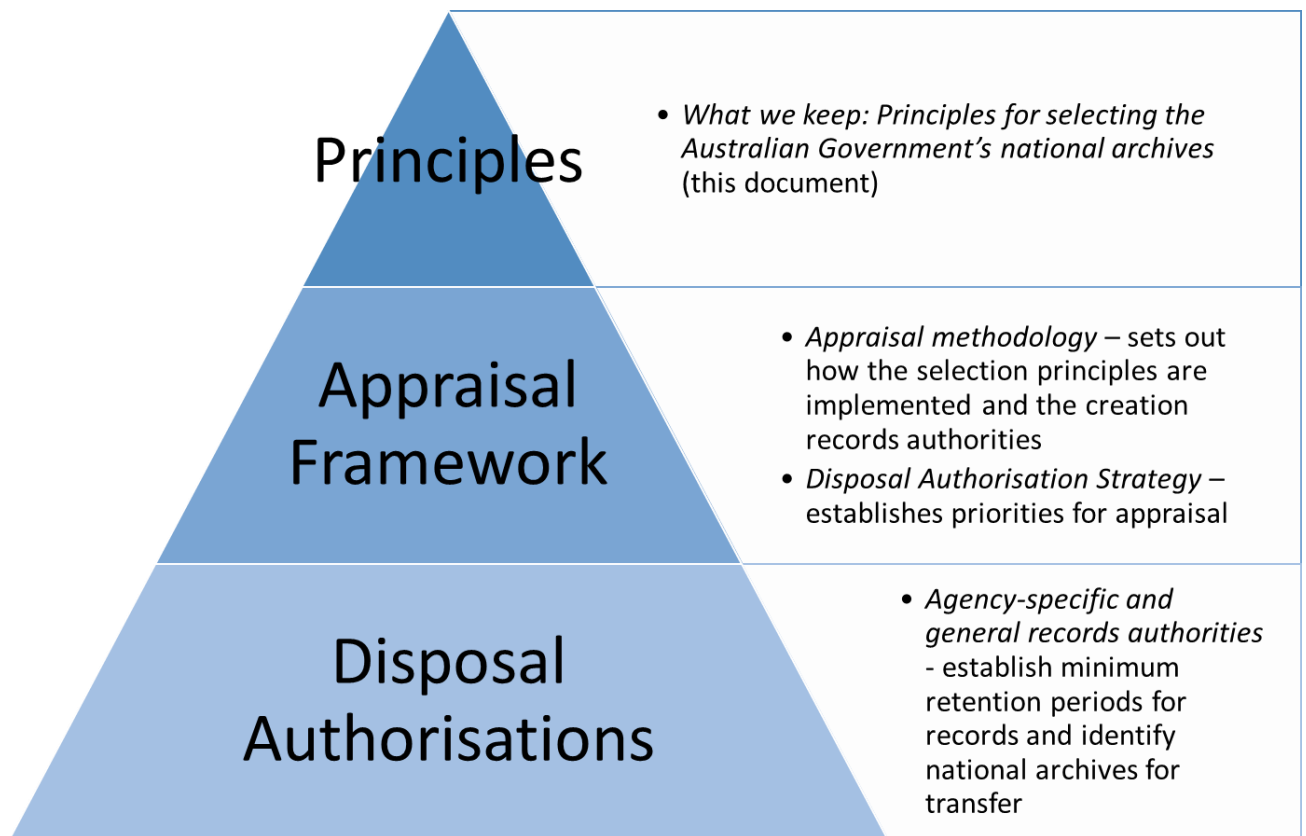
The National Archives holds records for use by the Australian Government and for research and re-use by the public. We facilitate access to these records to enable Australians, and others, to understand our heritage and to support government transparency and a strong democracy.

## Who decides what we keep?

The National Archives decides which Australian Government records will be kept permanently and authorises how long other records need to be kept. These decisions are made with the input and agreement of agencies that create or control the records. The National Archives undertakes detailed analysis of government functions and reviews the types of records (including data) each Australian Government agency creates and receives to decide what will be kept permanently. As part of this process the responsible agency is required to liaise with all relevant stakeholders and identify any special requirements for retaining specific records. We then consider other contexts which give the records additional value to make them eligible for permanent archival preservation.

The following diagram illustrates how the selection principles operate in conjunction with the appraisal framework to support the creation of disposal authorisations, such as records authorities, which are the legal instruments identifying archival material that should be transferred to the National Archives.

Figure 1 – Selection Principles, Appraisal Framework and Disposal Authorisations



## Selection principles

The National Archives endorsed four principles that guide us in determining which records should be selected as national archives. To be selected, a record will need to meet one or more of these principles. The principles apply to records in any format.

### Defining 'significance'

Significance refers to the value or importance of the records and the information they contain. We assess the significance of functions, programs, issues and associated decisions and actions as to how critical, important or memorable they are, or were, in relation to the administration of the Australian Government. We also consider their actual or potential impact on Australian society and world affairs, including their social, economic, political, environmental, national security, historical, cultural, scientific and legal impact. We select records to preserve necessary evidence of Australian Government activity and for other purposes including meeting research and community needs and expectations.

### 1. Government authority, action and accountability

*To keep records that provide evidence of the authority for the establishment and structure of the Australian Government and its agencies, and evidence of the deliberations, decisions and actions taken by the Australian Government and its agencies relating to key policies, functions and programs and significant issues faced in governing Australia.*

This includes records that:

- underpin the establishment of the Australian Government jurisdiction and its agencies and define the nature and extent of their functions, operations, obligations and powers;
- provide a source of authority for the government's ability to take action;
- demonstrate how the government was structured and operated at a high level to implement policies, functions and programs;
- document significant judgements or rulings made in relation to jurisdiction and powers;
- provide evidence of the development and implementation of major policies, functions and programs of the Australian Government and its agencies, including those which are controversial, innovative or of considerable public interest;
- provide evidence of major decisions and activities in relation to a function, particularly those made on behalf of the nation or with national or international implications, that signal a new or changed policy position, or involve substantial expenditure;
- document responses to major threats, issues or challenges facing Australia; and
- comprise unique, irreplaceable information that is needed by governments now and in the future for effective planning, decision making and transfer of knowledge.

Examples of the types of records selected include:

- proposed bills and explanatory memoranda;
- datasets collected to inform policy making, such as population and economic datasets;
- establishment and findings of major review bodies, such as Royal Commissions or Boards of Inquiry;
- Cabinet and National Cabinet deliberations and decisions;
- decisions of the High Court of Australia, such as Wik and Mabo decisions on native title, and associated judicial papers;
- authorisations to establish, merge or dissolve the functions and operations of Australian Government institutions or major offices;
- native title determinations;
- ministerial determinations and delegations;
- official communications to the general public from Australian Government ministers and agencies, including speeches, press releases and through social media channels;
- evidence of the development and performance of significant policies and programs and their potential or actual impact, such as the government response to the COVID-19 pandemic or the Northern Territory National Emergency Response intervention; and
- intergovernmental and international agreements, such as free trade agreements.

## **2. Identity, interaction and rights and entitlements**

*To keep records that for individuals and communities: reflect identity and the condition and status of Australia and its people; provide evidence of ongoing rights and entitlements; or show the impact of Australian Government activities on individuals and communities as well as their interaction with government. We select records with the greatest capacity to illustrate the impact of major government actions and decisions on individuals, organisations and communities.*

This includes records that:

- provide evidence that an individual and their descendants have an ongoing right to a benefit or an entitlement;
- demonstrate the effect of major government functions, programs and policies on individuals or groups;
- show the nature and extent of people's interaction with the Australian Government particularly where it is evident that government functions and programs were, or are, of great significance in the government or development of Australia, or the community;
- document the connections of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to the land, sea and community;
- confirm individual rights to participate in public affairs, or contributes to an understanding of their sense of identity; and
- identify persons, groups or organisations affected by the implementation of policy decisions and the outcomes of those decisions.

Examples of the type of records selected include:

- citizenship applications;
- records that provide evidence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and genealogical links;
- workers compensation claims case records relating to death or serious injury;
- individual family law case judgements made by the Family Court of Australia;
- migrant selection documents, including child migration selection documents, such as those of post-war British and European migrants;
- settlement records relating to migrants and refugees, such as arrival and departure registers for reception facilities; census information collected from individuals who have consented to their data being transferred to the National Archives;
- petitions documenting significant community opposition to government actions and policies;
- individual case management records with far-reaching impact or influence on the lives of individuals, such as detention centre detainee case records;
- active military service and repatriation of service personnel case records; and
- approvals for recipients of notable honours and awards, such as Australian of the Year Awards.

### **3. Knowledge and community memory**

*To keep records that have substantial capacity to enrich knowledge and understanding of Australia's history, society, culture, economy and people. We select records with the highest significance and value to communities and society.*

This includes records that:

- enable connections across generations or communities, including records that provide a rich source of genealogical or cultural information;
- have aesthetic qualities that resonate, move, inspire or educate, such as sources that provide a pictorial representation or narrative of the way Australians have lived and thought, or have had a major influence on Australian thinking, behaviour and attitudes;
- have research, scientific or technical value, such as sources that demonstrate Australian innovation and involvement in notable scientific and technical areas;
- contribute to an understanding of Australia's history and the development of its society such as records that provide information about the impact of important events, issues, persons, organisations, places and themes on local communities, Australia and the world, or that reflect the impact of major international, social, political, economic, legal, cultural, or scientific developments or discoveries; and
- can be re-used and re-purposed by the community including for research value in additional contexts, such as Australian Government datasets which may have uses for the community beyond the Government activity they originally documented.

Examples of the type of records selected include:

- passenger arrival documentation;
- representations to the government for recognition and government reform by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, such as the Larrakia petition;
- outcomes of major research projects undertaken or commissioned by government agencies, including supporting research datasets;
- patents for Australian inventions;
- records of early Antarctic expeditions, including photographs and video footage;
- evidence of innovations in the delivery of online government services to the community, such as design documentation for major apps (eg Bureau of Meteorology Weather app) and for machine learning algorithms underpinning significant decision making processes;
- reports documenting the conduct of Australian military operations;
- documentation of the planning, management and staging of significant cultural events, ceremonies and celebrations;
- images that depict Australian society and major events impacting Australians, as well as those that reflect Australian characteristics, thoughts and beliefs that the government seeks to present to the world, such as significant trade and tourist promotional material; and
- television programs, radio programs and other content, such as podcasts, created by Australian Government broadcasters.

#### **4. Australians and their environment**

*To keep records that have a substantial capacity to contribute to the understanding, protection and future well-being of Australia's strategic geopolitical, built and natural environment. We select records that provide evidence of the impact of Australian Government activities and that illustrate the interaction and relationship of the Australian people with their environment.*

This includes records that:

- provide evidence of the Australian Government's significant policies, programs and actions in relation to environmental management and change, including the impact of and adaption to climate change, and records that may contribute to an understanding of climatic change, weather patterns and natural disasters;
- comprise unique, irreplaceable information (including collection and analysis of data) that is needed by national governments for effective planning, decision-making and transfer of knowledge in relation to issues affecting the economy, environment, resource management, urban planning, and natural disaster prevention;
- document Australia's interactions in the international environment, including Australia's place in the global political economy and geopolitical relations;
- provide evidence of the protection, management and use of Australia's natural resources;
- document the history of land and water resource use which has, or may, impact the health and well-being of the community, the economy and the environment;



- contribute to an understanding of the development, maintenance and preservation of Australia's built environment; and
- document identification, development and management of sites of conservation, cultural or heritage significance.

Examples of the type of records selected include:

- plans for the management of water resources, such as the Murray-Darling Basin Plan;
- evidence of government policies and programs relating to climate change mitigation and adaptation;
- records documenting joint management of national parks with traditional owners;
- datasets such as meteorological observations and geospatial information;
- records documenting national critical infrastructure projects;
- records of Australian Government-owned heritage listed properties, including architectural and engineering plans;
- records documenting negotiations and agreements with other nations and international bodies that further Australia's strategic interests and enhance regional stability and security;
- records documenting conservation, natural environment and resources, including environmental approvals for exploration and development of mineral resources;
- records of government response to critical weather events, such as bushfires, floods and draughts;
- evidence of government policies and programs to enhance Australia's international status and influence and improve regional prosperity, such as regional aid programs and supplying COVID-19 vaccines to Pacific nations;
- records identifying and monitoring toxic sites; and
- environmental observation data, including data on biodiversity, individual species and stocks, and the spread and control of pests, diseases and biological agents impacting the environment.

See [what's in the collection](#) and our [fact sheets](#) for more examples of types of records selected as national archives.

## Other considerations

In addition to the selection principles, there are several factors that we consider when selecting records as national archives. These considerations do not determine the value of the records; rather they enable informed decisions about what we keep. They relate to the quality and accessibility of the records, as well as the resources needed to preserve them and make them accessible.

***Integrity, reliability and completeness*** – where possible only the most complete, accurate and reliable versions of records should be kept as archives. That is, records which have been securely maintained to prevent unauthorised access and deliberate or accidental alteration or removal of information. The content, context and structure of the records should be intact.

***Relationships and dependencies*** – the meaning of some records depends on the existence of metadata which describes, contextualises and provides a history of the record. It may also depend on other records or materials to provide context or make it accessible. For example, where a dataset is to be preserved by the National Archives the supporting documentation about the dataset (eg data dictionaries), will also be kept.

***Best available source*** – where several sources of the same information are available we will keep the best available source. That is, the record with the content of the highest value in the most concise form. For example, the best available source may be a register or dataset that summarises the significant information or it may be a complete run of case files, whichever most effectively provides the best value information. In some instances we may choose to keep more than one source of information – such as in the case of records that can be used to reconnect members of the Stolen Generations to country.

***Accessibility and useability*** – records should be in formats that can be accessed and readily used, or be capable of conversion to accessible formats. Examples of records that may not be accessible or useable include: password protected or encrypted files where the passkey is not known; obsolete digital file formats; digital records that require highly specialised/expensive proprietary software; corrupt or damaged digital media. In such cases the National Archives may investigate solutions for retrieving the information contained in the records, if it is deemed to be of uniquely significant value.

The four selection principles, combined with these considerations, guide decisions on what is to be kept as national archives.

## Review

The National Archives will periodically review the selection principles to ensure that they remain appropriate and reflect contemporary expectations about the sort of records that are considered significant and need to be retained permanently for future access.

This statement will be reviewed five years after the date of authorisation.