

Filing Practices

1. Scope

- 1.1. This standard is a best practice benchmark for all organisations creating or holding public records. It provides advice and guidance on the control of paper-based files. It does not cover electronic files.

2. Responsibilities

- 2.1. Departmental Record Officers (DROs)/Information Managers (IMs) or their public authority equivalents are responsible for ensuring the existence and operation of an effective and efficient registered file system, for ensuring that it is used by all operational areas of their organisation, and that the relevant documentation is accurate and available to staff of the organisation when required.
- 2.2. PRONI staff in the Records Management, Cataloguing and Access Team are responsible for giving advice and guidance to government departments and agencies on the management of their records, including filing and record-keeping systems.

3. Purpose

- 3.1. The purpose of registration is to provide evidence that a record has been created or captured in a record-keeping system. It involves recording brief descriptive information about the record in a register and assigning the record a unique identifier.
- 3.2. Determining which records require registration is a risk-bound decision, dependent on analysis of the organisation's requirements to maintain accountable records of particular business activities and its information needs.

4. File Registering Standards

- 4.1. Papers and correspondence should, as far as possible, be kept in files which are allocated a distinct reference number. As all the papers held within a Public Body constitute the collective memory of that Body, it is important that all the papers should be kept in such registered files rather than being held on 'personal' files of staff.
- 4.2. Even files with a security classification, and held outside the main Registry, must be registered.

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- 4.3. In manual control systems, a register is normally a separate record. In computerized systems a register can comprise a combination of data elements. Whatever form it takes, the register should be unalterable and auditable.
- 4.4. The title of every file should be accurate, fully reflecting the contents of the file. (See section 6 below.)
- 4.5. The span of a file is limited to a maximum of five years (with some exceptions, e.g., Personnel files).
- 4.6. The cover of every file should state (1) the year in which it was opened and (2) the date at which it was closed. These will often coincide with the dates of the first and last paper. The latter governs the dates of First and Second Review and, if it is later selected for permanent preservation, the date of possible public access.
- 4.7. Once a file has been closed no further papers may be placed on it. These should be placed on a new file, with adequate cross-reference.
- 4.8. Old files must under no circumstances be re-registered under a later date or, even worse, with a different reference number.
- 4.9. To ensure uniformity in practice it is best if there is one officer through whom all requests for the opening of new files are channelled. Even where file registering is decentralized, one individual, in each business area, should have this role. The role of this officer is to ensure that a new file which is requested is allocated to the correct category within the filing system, and that the file accurately describes the likely contents.
- 4.10. There should be a manual of registered file practice which should include instructions and guidance on file creation.

5. Arrangement of Files and papers

- 5.1. The most efficient and economical way of arranging files and papers is the one that works best for the particular Public Body, is easily understood by its users and assists in ready identification and retrieval of individual files. It is also important that each series of records is readily identifiable in order to facilitate checking against the Disposal Schedule and thereby the correct destruction/preservation action. This is usually done by means of a prefix (preferably a letter) for each series, reflecting the functions/business area and organisation of a particular Public Body. A number is then added to indicate the subject area of the file, followed by the number and year of opening of the file.

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For example, P1/1/2001 – where 'P' is Personnel Section/Division, '1' is the subject area of 'Recruitment of Staff' and 1/2001 indicates the first file for that section opened in 2001.

The least helpful method of arranging files is to number them simply in the order in which they have been opened in any one year. For example, the tenth file opened in 2001 would be registered as 10/2001. This system does not permit a ready indication of the origin of the file and makes it impossible to identify various series of records and, therefore, the distinct business areas of a Public Body. As a result it causes difficulties in identifying records of short term value, in drawing up Disposal Schedules and in the efficient operation of the First and Second Review. [For more see separate guidance on Filing Systems.]

6. File Titling

- 6.1. The title of every file should accurately reflect its content. It must be brief yet sufficiently comprehensive to describe the contents clearly. This is essential for an efficient and effective filing system. If file titles are inaccurate, ambiguous or imprecise, the locating and retrieval of information will be difficult, staff time will be wasted and may lead to a loss of confidence in the system and thereby an increase in the number of duplicate files created. Avoid jargon or vague terms like 'Miscellaneous' or 'General'.
- 6.2. A structured approach to file titling, based on two or three elements, is recommended. The first element should describe the main subject area to which the papers refer or indicate the branch to which they belong (eg. Finance or Personnel) and the second element should identify the particular subject matter; for example

Finance – Public Expenditure Survey
Personnel – Recruitment

For reasons of efficiency, a further element may be added to make the title even more precise

Finance – Public Expenditure Survey – Policy
Finance – Public Expenditure Survey – Estimates
Personnel – Recruitment – Policy

- 6.3. Precision saves everyone's time. File titles should not use the word 'The', 'A' etc or a number, as this makes the use of file lists or indexes, by subject matter, impracticable. Abbreviations/ acronyms also lead to confusion, for example, 'NICS', could mean either the 'Northern Ireland Civil Service' or the 'Northern Ireland Court Service'. If abbreviations

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have to be used keep an index of them and the name of the originating Branch/Division. Be consistent with abbreviations or punctuation, for example, 'The Industrial Development Board' has been entered on file titles under the full title, as well as 'IDB' and 'I.D.B.' and all three have to be searched on the computer to locate specific subjects. Preferably avoid acronyms as what they stand for is forgotten after a number of years.

7. Other Practical Points

- 7.1. Paper clips and pins should be removed from papers before filing, as these will damage the paper and when rusted can be a health hazard. Particular attention to this must be given to those records, which, according to the Disposal Schedule, are to be preserved permanently.
- 7.2. Electronic media must not be stored on paper files because these are unstable and easily corrupted. Moreover, the supporting software could be obsolete by the time the file and contents are subject to review.
- 7.3. Flags, either adhesive tabs or strips of paper attached to a page with cellotape, should be avoided – instead use card dividers.
- 7.4. File covers should provide adequate protection for the papers and preferably have a flap which should be used to prevent papers becoming dog-eared. If they become tatty or torn, new covers should be prepared and the front of the old covers retained inside the new ones. Old covers form part of the original record.
- 7.5. Files should not be filled too full – they should not be more than 25mm (one inch) thick. Bulky files should be closed and a continuation file opened and cross-referenced with the old part.
- 7.6. Files must not contain any loose papers.
- 7.7. Do not use metal tags – instead use the readily available plastic-ended ones.
- 7.8. Avoid the duplication of papers – only one copy of any piece of information should normally be filed on any one file.
- 7.9. Papers to be filed should be punched 2.5 cm/one inch in and 2.5 cm/one inch down from the edge to minimize the danger of detachment.
- 7.10. All papers received for filing should bear a file reference number.

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- 7.11. Papers should be filed in date order with the most recent papers on top. This is very important as the review and access dates are calculated from the date of the last paper on the file and, if the latest document is not on the top, it is likely that the wrong terminal date will be assumed.
- 7.12. All papers should be filed on the right hand side of the file. Bulky or outsize items can be stored in a pocket or envelope inside the cover on the left hand side.