

PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE OF NORTHERN IRELAND

NORTHERN IRELAND RECORDS MANAGEMENT STANDARD

Issued by The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland
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Filing Systems

1. Scope

- 1.1. This standard is a best practice benchmark for all organisations creating or holding public records.

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,
 - ensuring that it is used by **all** operational areas of their organisation, and
 - 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 all Public Bodies on the proper management of their records, including filing and recordkeeping systems.

3. Purpose

- 3.1. The establishment of a coherent filing system provides for faster and systematic filing, faster retrieval of information, greater protection of information, and increased administrative stability, continuity, efficiency and public accountability.

4. Types of Systems

- 4.1. There are five basic systems:
- Numeric system
 - Alphabetical system
 - System based on subject and arranged topically and hierarchically
 - Systems based on organisational structure
 - Systems based on functions or business processes

Filing Systems

4.1.1. *Numeric System*

This system takes the form of the continuous numbering of files irrespective of their subject matter. As each file is opened it is given the next number in the sequence (usually beginning at the start of each calendar year) with the year of opening included, such as, 1/2001, 2/2001, 3/2001, etc. No attempt is made under this system to distinguish between different business areas, identify vital records or bring related areas of work together.

This system has the advantage of great simplicity, but:

- retrieval depends entirely on meticulous and exhaustive and therefore expensive indexing;
- difficulties arise when a request for a file is phrased in terms which do not match the keywords in the file title;
- it makes it very cumbersome if an overview or audit of the activities of the organisation or the monitoring of specific areas is required;
- it is difficult under this system to segregate files of short term value from those of long term value, and to draw up disposal schedules.

This system is not recommended by PRONI except where Case Files are being used. By Case File is meant those files which deal with the same subject but relating to hundreds of individual persons or business. Examples of these particular instance papers are farming, industrial and housing grant files.

4.1.2. *Alphabetical Systems*

This is another system that appears to offer a simple approach to records management. Essentially, information is organized by main subject headings and arranged in alphabetical order, and their sub-files are also in alphabetical order. So the filing system looks like:

Accounts
 Petty Cash
 Receivable orders

Audit
 Internal
 External

Filing Systems

Staff
Industrial
Non-Industrial

This type of system may suit a small organisation but it is not suitable for any sizeable body. It increases the possibility of files being opened for the same subject but using a different title. This system does not lend itself to consistency in the selection of headings. For example, a file may be opened under the heading 'Staff'; a few years later when filing papers the heading 'Personnel' may be used, and today the heading could be 'Human Resources'.

4.1.3. *Systems based on Subject and arranged Topically and Hierarchically*

This system aims to bring together related files which would be scattered under a numeric or alphabetical system. Here the files are grouped together in common topic areas allowing associated files to be consulted easily if necessary.

The system requires an agreed set of main topic areas (or broad subject areas) which cover the work of the organisation, for example:

Staffing
Finance
Accommodation
Equipment and Supplies
Publicity
Transport
Health and Safety
Information Technology
Customer Services
Board Meetings

There are then two methods of registering under this system. The first method is to allocate a code which consists of a prefix of the topic or subject areas. For example, 'ST' for Staffing files and 'F' for Finance files. The broad subject areas can then be broke down into more specific areas.

Filing Systems

For example, ST/1 = Industrial Staff
ST/2 = Non-industrial Staff

These can be further refined as;
ST/1/1 – Industrial Staff – Recruitment of
ST/1/2 – Industrial Staff – Annual Reports.

Alternatively, each topic can have a block of numbers assigned to each business area, for example:

1-999	=	Staffing
1000-1999	=	Health and Safety
2000-2999	=	Accommodation
3000-3999	=	Finance

As in the earlier case, this arrangement can also be subdivided to cater for specific aspects of a subject area:

1/1	=	Staffing – Industrial Staff - Recruitment of
1/2	=	Staffing – Industrial Staff - Annual Reports.

However, whichever of these options is chosen, it is important that the year of opening is included as part of the file reference number to assist staff determine when files should be closed and when they are due for review. So in the case of the last example, the full file reference should read, 1/2/2001 Staffing – Annual Reports

4.1.4. *Systems based on organisational structure*

In this system the filing arrangement reflects the organisation's structure.

Taking the organisation chart as a starting point, codes are then allocated to each Division or Branch. Therefore Corporate Services Branch is assigned a 'CSB' files series, Accounts Branch, 'A' series; Energy Branch 'E' series, etc. These are of course very broad divisions and can, indeed should, be refined further to differentiate between various business areas within a particular branch. So, in Corporate Services Branch the file series may be broken down as follows;

CSB/1	–	Corporate & Business Plan
CSB/2	–	Finance
CSB/3	–	Staffing
CSB/5	–	Premises management
CSB/7	–	Circulars
CSB/10	–	Departmental Whitley

Filing Systems

Within any one of these sub-groups, further refinement is possible to distinguish further the different aspects of say, staffing issues, by assigning another numeric level, for example,

CSB/3/1 – Policy
CSB/3/2 – Executive Officers – Grade I & II
CSB/3/9 – Typists
CSB/3/14 – Weekly Absence Returns
CSB/3/23 – Pay and Grading

Again, it is also important that the year of opening is included as part of the file reference number to assist staff determine when files should be closed and when they are due for review. So in the case of the last example, the full file reference should read, CSB/3/23/2001 – Pay and Grading.

The advantage of this system is that it keeps together related business issues in a specific file series as well as providing a quick understanding of the work and structure of the Public Body concerned.

A major disadvantage of this system is that organisation structures are not static but are subject to change due to internal and/or external factors.

4.1.5. *Systems based on functions or business processes*

This system is based on an analysis of the functions and activities of an organisation, not merely its structure. Functions and activities are more stable than organisation structures and can be distributed amongst structural components of an organisation.

This system allows for additions and deletions without undermining the overall system. So, if a function moves from one part of the organisation to another then little or no modification is required to the file plan. Similarly, if the name of a particular branch/division changes (a not uncommon occurrence), but the function remains as is, the file structure is unaffected.

It is important in this system that all functions are included and that file titling is derived from the functions of the organisation and not from the organisational units.

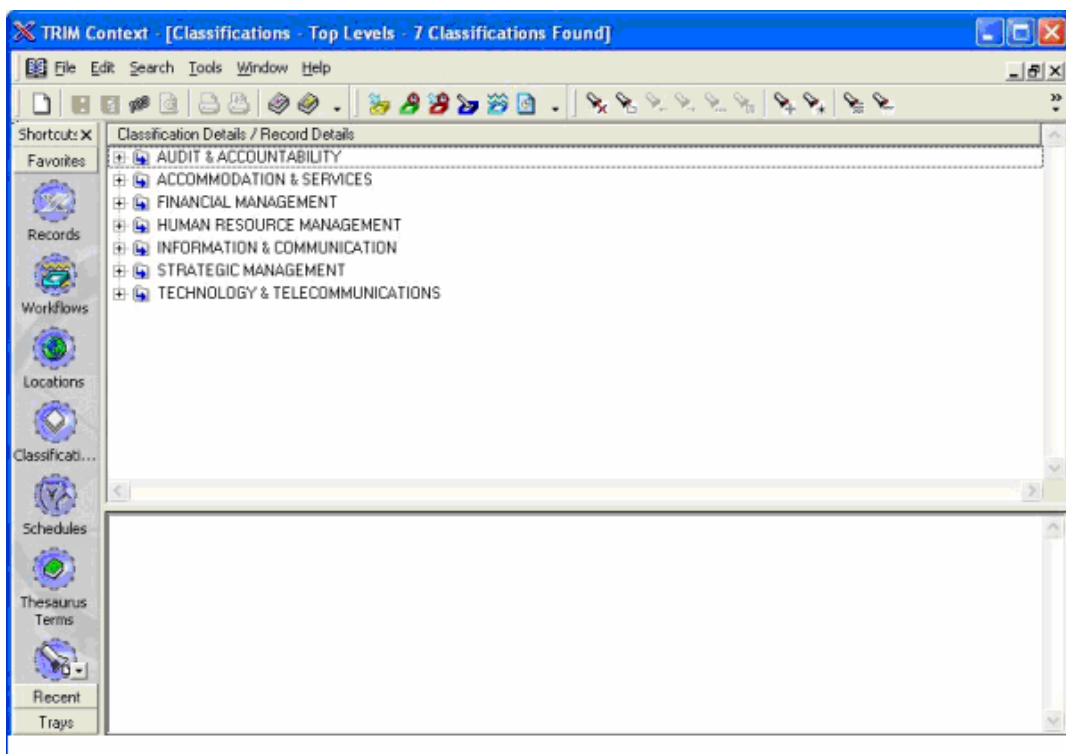
This will involve identifying and documenting each business function, activity and transaction and establishing their hierarchy. That is, the Public Body is at the top of the hierarchy, the

Filing Systems

functions which have been identified as a result of a survey are at the next level, the activities within those functions are placed at the next tier down and then the transactions resulting from the activities are at the next tier, eg, Finance – Audit – Internal – Pay – Income tax.

The degree of refinement of a classification scheme is at the discretion of the business (in consultation with the DRO/IM) and reflects the complexity of the function undertaken within the organisation.

Classification is the process of devising and applying schemes based on the business activities generating records, whereby they are categorised in systematic and consistent ways to facilitate their capture, retrieval, maintenance and disposal.



Terminology used to identify the business functions and activities can also be used for titling and classifying records and form the basis of a thesaurus. The thesaurus then, in its turn, can lead you to the right classification as well as ensuring the correct terminology is applied for titling purposes. This will provide the all-important element of consistency when new files are being opened.

Filing Systems

This system needs to be kept up to date to ensure that it reflects the changing business needs of the organisation as well as reflecting current usage.

The advantage of this system is that it can be used for paper based records or electronic records.