



**Public Record Office  
of Northern Ireland**

# **PRESERVATION OF RECORDS**

**GUIDANCE ON PUBLIC CONSULATION  
OF PRONI RECORDS**

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# PRESERVATION OF RECORDS

## 1. WHY BOTHER WITH PRESERVATION?

The Public Records Act (NI) 1923 makes PRONI legally responsible for the records entrusted to its care, thus protecting the information for present and future generations. Preservation is therefore any action which contributes to keeping the records held by PRONI for posterity; how they are stored; how they are handled; their repair; the production of substitutes (microfilm, photocopies or digital images); and special security arrangements.

Conservation repairs and treatments are time-consuming and expensive. Therefore, the emphasis has to be on preventive measures which halt or, at least, slow down deterioration. This is why there is limited self-service in PRONI and why visitors are encouraged to use the 'finding aids' (catalogues, guides, etc.) rather than order out original documents in the hope that they may be of use in research.

## 2. WHY IS PRESERVATION IMPORTANT?

Records are the archival heritage of a nation, an irreplaceable part of its history. Obviously, they must be handled with the utmost care to guard against damage or loss. Preventive measures ensure that, as far as practicable, public records can be accessed by present and future generations. At the same time, these measures protect the interests of Depositors, many of them public-spirited individuals, who have entrusted their archives to PRONI so that others can use and enjoy them.

PRONI's code of practice on records preservation can be found in our Preservation Policy Document which is available for consultation in the Public Search Room.

## 3. WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR PRESERVATION?

All PRONI staff, and all their activities, are directed towards preserving the records. As a user, you also have a responsibility because even the mishandling of records is a major cause of their deterioration. The effects may not appear



immediately but may become evident suddenly, and even dramatically, after many years have passed. That is why it is so important that you observe the rules for using the Record Office, even when they appear to be inconvenient.

#### **4. HOW CAN YOU HELP IN PRESERVATION?**

***(i) By observing the following rules designed to protect records against serious damage and loss:***

- Please make sure your hands are thoroughly clean and dry
- Smoking is strictly forbidden
- Eating (including sweets and chewing gum) is strictly forbidden in the Reading Rooms and Public Search Room because of the damage that can be caused by grease spots. Food particles also attract insects and other pests
- Drinking is strictly forbidden in the Reading Rooms and Public Search Room
- Pens, ink and typing correcting fluid are strictly forbidden in the Main Reading Room as they can mark documents or leak/spill onto them. Pencils only may be used, and their sharpening must be done in the Public Search Room. A sharpener is provided at the staff desk
- Erasers must not be brought into the Reading Rooms as particles from them can cause damage to documents
- Do not use any sharp instrument near documents - pencil sharpeners (including those which collect the shavings), scissors, staplers, hole-punchers, etc, cannot be used or taken into the Reading Rooms
- Documents or microfilms must not be removed from the Reading Rooms or taken out of the building. They must be returned to the Issue Desk in the Main Reading Room or to the staff desk in the Microfilm Reading Room
- No cameras, scanners (including scanning pens) or any kind of copying device may be used in the Reading Rooms



- Mobile phones, personal radios, and stereos are prohibited in the Public Search Room and Reading Rooms

**(ii) *By handling the records carefully so that no information is lost through tearing, folding or crushing:***

- Never mark a document or volume in any way
- Do not put the paper on which you are writing onto a document as this will mark and possibly tear the document.
- Avoid touching the text of documents. If you need to follow the lines of the text, ask for an acid free slip of paper from the Issue Desk
- Do not fold, crease or bend any document since it will damage the paper and could result in loss of information
- Do not lean on a document or volume as this may crumple the paper or break the spine of a volume
- Heavy volumes must not be placed on top of a document or map
- Do not try to force a volume to lie flat (in other words avoid placing strain on the spine) or leave it lying open face downwards; instead, use the support bags and volume restraints (leather weights are provided to keep the pages open). The leather weights should also be used to support rolled documents – both sides of the rolled ends should be supported. You will find support bags placed on the reading tables and leather weights are available at the Issue Desk
- To avoid tearing records, be careful when turning pages or unfolding documents, and please do not wet your fingers to turn or separate pages.
- Never use force or an instrument to separate pages that are stuck together as you may tear them. Never attempt to open a sealed item yourself. Bring any problems to the attention of the Public Search Room staff who will seek assistance from Conservation staff



- Always place the document or volume on the desk in a way that gives it maximum support, and do not let documents overhang the edges of the table
- Documents in clear protective sleeves must not be removed from their enclosures. Attempts to remove the document may cause damage
- When removing or replacing documents in envelopes great care must be taken to avoid tearing the edges of the documents
- Re-assemble or re-tie document bundles with care. Furthermore, make sure the document tape is not tied too tightly as this can damage the edges of the documents
- To avoid tearing microfilms, take care when loading and removing them from the microfilm reading equipment.
- Photographic negatives and prints are easily damaged. Do not flex them. Moreover, do not touch them except at the extreme edges. Lint free cotton gloves (obtainable from the Issue Desk) should be worn when handling original photographic prints or negatives. Glass plate negatives are not issued to readers on Health and Safety grounds
- Do not try to remove rusted paper clips or pins as you could easily tear the paper. Bring the problem to the attention of the Public Search Room Staff who will seek assistance from Conservation staff

***(iii) By observing the security regulations in place for protecting the records:***

- Show your reader's ticket to gain admission to the Record Office
- On each visit register your name and reader ticket number in the visitors' book, and sign out when leaving the premises
- Leave all overcoats at reception or place them in the lockers; jackets and cardigans should not be left draped over a chair in the Reading Rooms or Public Search Room but should also be placed in the lockers (these also constitute a Health and Safety risk)



- When leaving the office, you may be asked to produce, for inspection, your papers and other personal belongings
- All briefcases, bags, handbags, lap-top computer bags, newspapers, magazines and any other bulky objects must not be brought into the Public Search Room or Reading Rooms - these must be placed in the lockers provided
- Files, folders, envelopes, ring-binders and pencil-cases may be brought into the Public Search Room but not into the Reading Rooms. When brought into the Public Search Room, they must not be left unattended. You may bring the contents of *one* folder or file or envelope into the Reading Rooms - leave any other folders etc in the lockers
- To order out a document, complete a requisition form – this can also be done on screen
- 5 documents is the maximum that can be ordered out at any one time
- Requests for documents which present security problems will be considered by the officer-in-charge of the Public Search Room. In such cases, do not expect a ruling on the same day. However, you may speed up a response by completing a reader's query form
- Unlisted records will only be produced at the discretion of the Deputy Keeper
- PRONI security staff invigilate the Reading Rooms at all times to ensure there is no breach of the rules. Furthermore, closed-circuit TV cameras operate in the Main Reading Room and in the Self-Service Microfilm Room and all documents are inspected on return to the Issue Desk
- You are responsible for all records issued to you, therefore, do not leave them unattended. If you need to leave the Reading Room, even for a short time, leave the documents with staff at the Issue Desk
- Documents requested will not be issued to unattended tables
- Informal swapping or passing of documents is not allowed
- Loose papers must not be re-arranged



- You will be required to sign an undertaking that you have returned all documents issued to you in the Reading Rooms

***(iv) By reporting any documents missing or any documents in a fragile condition***

***(v) By acknowledging that there are instances when documents cannot be issued because of their fragile condition or because handling would cause further damage***

***(vi) By acknowledging that it will be necessary to prohibit the photocopying of certain records if they are fragile or if there is a chance of damage from handling. The following copying rules generally apply:***

- Documents in guard-books (which make more than 5 documents available to you at the same time) cannot be photocopied as they are easily damaged during the copying process
- Outsize documents or volumes (i.e. larger than A3), or even sections of them, cannot be photocopied as they are too large for the photocopying machine. However, we can arrange to have some outsize documents copied by an external body, provided they are no larger than AO size, are single sheets, flat, do not have applied seals, and are in good condition
- Volumes which are fragile, or where there is risk of the spine breaking (e.g. tight bindings), cannot be photocopied
- Volumes with folding enclosures will not be photocopied as there is the risk of the documents tearing when placed on the copier
- Press cuttings in scrapbooks will not be photocopied where these are folded and difficult to handle without damage
- Original photographic prints will not be photocopied because the heat and light from the photocopiers may damage the image
- Parchments will not be photocopied as the heat from the photocopier can shrivel them and the static electricity can remove the text



- Records with applied seals will not be photocopied as the seal can easily break from the weight of the copier lid. However, these records can be scanned or microfilmed
- Where original archives have been microfilmed, the microfilm copy rather than the original documents will be produced (unless the microfilm copy is illegible). The positive advantage of using microfilm is that more documents can be made available to you at any one time. Where there is a microfilm copy available, only microfilm print-outs will be supplied as photocopying the original document would cause unnecessary wear and tear
- If a record cannot be photocopied, it may be possible to obtain a copy through the less damaging process of scanning or microfilming
- Where there is doubt, Conservation staff will decide whether or not a document is in a fit condition to be issued or copied

**Thank you for taking the time to read this leaflet and for helping us to preserve our archival heritage. *Remember our staff are here to help you make the most of your visit.***