



**Public Record Office
of Northern Ireland**

PRESERVATION OF RECORDS

PRESERVATION POLICY

Revised: September 2006

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1. Introduction

1.1 What is 'Preservation'?

'Preservation' is the means by which archives are protected for the use of present and future generations. It is a word commonly used by record offices, libraries and museums to describe the ways in which their collections are safeguarded and kept in good physical condition. This can be done through a variety of measures aimed both at minimising the risk of loss of records and slowing down, as much as possible, the processes of physical deterioration which affect most archive materials.

1.2 Why Have a PRONI 'Preservation Policy'?

Preservation is a core function of any record office. It is central to a record office's role as guardians of archival heritage. Preservation helps to ensure that all of us have an equal opportunity to see and enjoy unique and important records. Indeed, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) was established to support this objective. Under the Public Records Act (Northern Ireland) 1923, PRONI was given specific responsibility for the "preservation of certain public records appertaining to Northern Ireland" and for the preservation of "any [privately-owned] deeds or documents ... deposited in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland". In fulfilment of the Act, it is PRONI's duty to "preserve all records selected for permanent preservation to the standard and in the format which gives full weight to both good archival practice and economic costs".

The formulation of a preservation policy for PRONI is, therefore, an essential step in fulfilling all these responsibilities and gives PRONI the direction it requires to initiate measures which are necessary for the protection of its archives. The policy also enables staff to meet, or extend, nationally and internationally agreed standards for the preservation of archival materials. Furthermore, it reminds us of the constraints that we, staff and public, must accept if important records are to be saved for present and future generations.

If you have any queries concerning the preservation or conservation of records, contact our Preservation Officer, brendan.campbell@dcalni.gov.uk

1.3 Development of PRONI's Preservation Policy

PRONI's Preservation Policy developed as its preservation needs evolved and expanded. Formerly, the chief components of preservation



at PRONI – storage, copying and conservation – functioned independently and often at variance. The creation of the Preservation Section in 1993, and the appointment of a Preservation Officer at the same time, brought together these previously separate strands and facilitated the formulation of an integrated preservation strategy.

The Preservation Policy lays down the criteria for PRONI to achieve optimum preservation standards, which largely follow British Standard recommendations, where they exist. The Policy has also been guided by the experience, expertise, and research of PRONI's Preservation Section. Furthermore, full account has been taken of the advice and information received from preservation managers, conservators, bookbinders and archivists at relevant institutions outside PRONI. Details of institutions, publications, etc., which have been consulted are listed in the Appendix, pp.13-14.

The Policy will always be subject to change to take account of future preservation demands and developments.

2. Common Standards for the Preservation of Records

- 2.1 To preserve archives effectively, everyone involved with record management/preservation must share a common responsibility for their physical security and protection. Furthermore, these common preservation standards need to be understood and applied by the public who use the archives. To achieve this, documents must always be:
 - 2.1.1 Placed, handled, consulted and/or displayed in a way which minimises the risk of damage and takes due account of their size, shape and physical condition.
 - 2.1.2 Placed, handled, consulted and/or displayed in a safe and secure location.
 - 2.1.3 Moved with due care between locations.
 - 2.1.4 Placed, handled, consulted and/or displayed under appropriate preservation conditions (e.g. avoid areas of unsuitable temperature and humidity, or areas directly affected by ultra violet light).
- 2.2 Proper account must be kept, at all times, of the precise location of all records, including those temporarily withdrawn or undergoing administration – referencing, cataloguing etc.



- 2.2.1 Withdrawn or issued records must be returned to their permanent place of storage immediately after any examination, treatment or consultation is completed.
- 2.3 Appropriate staff must be alerted, and action taken, where serious damage or loss has occurred, or is likely to occur. This includes physical misuse, maltreatment, or theft of records
- 2.4 The Public Records Act (N.I.) 1923 imposes a statutory obligation upon all those who have 'charge' of Northern Ireland public records – in effect, all who handle or use such records to ensure their proper 'removal' and 'delivery' to PRONI. The Act also places an onus of care upon such persons for the records in their charge. If these obligations are to be met satisfactorily, then the general preservation standards cited in paragraphs 2.1–2.3 must apply with equal force to all custodians, holders, depositors and creators of Northern Ireland public records.

3. Acquisition and Selection of Records

- 3.1 To meet its preservation obligations under the Public Records Act (NI) 1923, and save important records for future generations, PRONI must gain access to, or acquire/control, all records of significance to Northern Ireland. This can be achieved in two ways:
- 3.1.1 Private owners of records important to Northern Ireland should be encouraged to take measures to preserve their collections, or preferably, persuaded to deposit them with PRONI, either on a loan basis or as permanent donations.
- 3.1.2 In the case of official Northern Ireland and Imperial records, PRONI must "attend [to] all courts, government departments or offices in Northern Ireland" to ensure that such bodies meet their statutory obligations under the 1923 Public Records Act for the accession of important records to PRONI.
- 3.2 The 1923 Public Records Act requires PRONI to retain only those records of sufficient public value to justify their preservation. This directive obliges PRONI to be selective when choosing records for preservation. However, while doing so, PRONI must guard against the danger of rejecting important records and/or accepting records of little or no significance. The Office must, therefore, be satisfied that the following requirements are met:



- 3.2.1 All decisions regarding the selection, acquisition and permanent retention of records brought to PRONI's attention must be taken by staff qualified to assess the public value of archival material.
 - 3.2.2 The public value of all records brought to PRONI's attention for possible acquisition must be properly assessed.
 - 3.2.3 Those with responsibility for assessing the public value of records will be accountable for their selection decisions. Therefore, they must be able to justify their reasons for accepting/rejecting any record(s).
- 3.3 All acquisition and selection decisions have a direct effect on important preservation resources such as storage, copying and conservation. Therefore, when assessing the public value of record(s), PRONI must:
- 3.3.1 Appreciate the limitations on preservation resources and take account of these in selection decisions e.g. avoid duplication of records; where duplication arises, give preference to records which are in better physical condition and are of a size/shape/format which allows for easier storage, safer handling etc.
 - 3.3.2 Avoid, whenever possible, introducing physically 'unhealthy' records to PRONI, especially those which may be likely to 'infect' other archives e.g. records which may be affected by moisture, fungal growth, or insect infestation.
 - 3.3.3 Where it is necessary to acquire such records, the appropriate staff should be notified immediately so that this material can be isolated and treated prior to contact with other archives.
- 3.4 Records selected by PRONI for preservation should be clearly and coherently referenced as soon as possible after their acceptance. All accessions, lists, consignments, reference numbers, box numbers etc must be accurate and precise. In this way, all records can be identified and subsequently located with ease.
- 3.5 Staff responsible for the selection of accessions will have a continuing involvement in the physical welfare of the archives through:
- 3.5.1 Reappraisals of the public value of these records.



- 3.5.2 Making final decisions, based on Conservation appraisal of the deterioration of records, as to whether:
- (a) No further action should be taken to preserve the record(s).
 - (b) The record(s) should be copied and then discarded.
 - (c) The record(s) should be copied and retained.
 - (d) The record(s) should be conserved.
 - (e) The record(s) should be copied and conserved.

4. Record Storage

- 4.1 Maintaining an optimum archive storage facility is a core function of preservation. This practice, in particular, should be recognised as the primary means of guaranteeing the physical security and long-term survival of records. At the outset, therefore, PRONI must comply with the following basic directives in regard to the storage and retention of records:
- 4.1.1 Sufficient space must be made available for the permanent and safe storage of PRONI's archives.
 - 4.1.2 All permanent and temporary storage areas must be safe and secure to minimise the risk of theft or malicious damage e.g. access to stores should be carefully controlled; access points should be fitted with strong doors/barriers and adequate locking systems; stores should be patrolled at regular intervals; stores should be equipped with sensitive security alarm systems.
 - 4.1.3 All permanent and temporary storage areas must be structurally sound and sufficiently strong to withstand adverse weather conditions and small scale vandalism or malicious attack.
 - 4.1.4 All permanent and temporary storage areas should be fireproof and moisture-proof in order to reduce the possibility of serious accidental or malicious damage.



- 4.1.5 Environmental conditions in permanent storage areas must be carefully controlled and regulated to reduce the threat of atmospheric contamination.
- 4.2 Staff involved directly with the storage of records and with acquisition duties will usually be among the first to observe potential or actual threats to the physical welfare of the documents. It is therefore vital that they actively engage in the following preservation measures:
- 4.2.1 New accessions should be properly prepared for long-term storage e.g. the physical condition checked, ironmongery and excessive dust/dirt removed.
- 4.2.2 Records should be stored with consideration to their physical protection and ease of retrieval e.g. large maps and plans should be kept flat in plan cases or loosely rolled in Cyclopacks; volumes should be placed correctly on shelves and never packed tightly between narrow gaps; manuscript material should be kept in secure, acid-free boxes, appropriately filled and with properly fitted lids.
- 4.2.3 Staff working on new accessions, storage maintenance, or document retrieval must report all seriously damaged records to the Conservation Section. In some instances, Conservation staff may withdraw these records from public access until they have been repaired etc. Withdrawn documents are then labelled 'Closed Until Conserved'. Missing documents should be reported to Head of Preservation.
- 4.3 One of PRONI's main responsibilities, in the day-to-day care and storage of records, is to be aware of their location at all times. The Office should, therefore, have an efficient and effective system for locating records and maintaining up-to-date information on any changes that may arise through:
- (a) Movement of records between stores, shelves, boxes etc.
 - (b) Issuing/lending of records to the public, individual staff members, depositors, trustees, professional institutions etc.
- 4.3.1 In carrying out these responsibilities, PRONI must take the following precautions:



- 4.3.1.1 A full and accurate account of the precise location of all records must be maintained.
- 4.3.1.2 Paperwork/checks on the location of all records issued from or returned to storage must be made.
- 4.3.1.3 Loss or theft of records must be noted/reported/investigated as necessary.
- 4.3.1.4 The physical condition of records issued from, or returned to the stores should be assessed and any physical change/damage should be noted/reported/investigated/treated as necessary.

5. Copying of Records – Reformatting

- 5.1 When considering various methods of 'preventive' preservation or acquisition, PRONI should be prepared, where feasible, to copy information from original documents to alternative and more physically manageable media. This will reduce the need for direct reference to originals, thereby prolonging their lifespan by minimising exposure to the physical dangers of actual loss or damage through excessive handling.
- 5.2 As it may not be possible to produce preservation surrogates of all important archives, records for reformatting should be prioritised according to the following factors:
 - 5.2.1 The public value of the records.
 - 5.2.2 The condition of the records e.g. irreversible decay, liability to unavoidable damage, attractiveness to thieves.
 - 5.2.3 Suitability of the records for copying – this includes assessing possible physical impediments to copying and carrying out a prognosis of the quality of any image transfer.
- 5.3 When reformatting records on preservation or acquisition/access grounds, PRONI must ensure that all permanent images are produced to a high standard and to a sufficiently durable and accessible medium. To achieve this, PRONI has three primary obligations:
 - 5.3.1 Archival quality copying equipment and materials must be used.



- 5.3.2 Copying equipment and materials must be operated and managed by staff competent in their use and application.
- 5.3.3 PRONI must remain up-to-date with technological advances in the field of image conversion (e.g. improvements in microfilming technology and developments in digital technology) and be capable of putting this knowledge into operation.
- 5.4 Copies must never be confused with the originals – thereby putting the security of both at risk. To avoid this possibility, staff should take the following precautions:
 - 5.4.1 All preservation and acquisition copies must have a distinctive referencing/cataloguing system to distinguish them from their original counterparts.
 - 5.4.2 Where significant physical similarities exist between any copy and an original (e.g. a photocopy of an original document or a photographic copy of a photograph), a visible and indelible mark should be made on the copy to clearly distinguish one from the other.
- 5.5 PRONI should take all necessary precautions to ensure the security of all copies produced on preservation and acquisition grounds. This would include producing back-up/security copies of the main user copy, and the storage of these in a different location.
- 5.6 Where appropriate, PRONI should insist on surrogates being consulted in preference to the originals. These copies should be of the highest quality possible and convenient for the public to use and examine. This will reduce the need for direct reference to originals. (See paragraph 5.1)
- 5.7 For preservation reasons, there must be tight controls on the copying/reformatting of records. PRONI therefore, needs to apply the following criteria:
 - 5.7.1 Original documents should not be copied if the reformatting process would be detrimental to the record.
 - 5.7.2 Where it is possible to reformat original records, it is preferable to make one quality copy from which all subsequent copies are produced. This would avoid over-exposing the original to the



various reformatting processes which, in the long-term, would be damaging.

6. Public Displays and Exhibitions

- 6.1 Exhibitions are part of PRONI's service to the public and a source of information for visitors. Moreover, through exhibitions, public awareness of preservation can be increased, thereby generating essential support for Preservation objectives.
- 6.2 To raise this public interest and awareness, PRONI must demonstrate and encourage proper understanding of the preservation needs of all records used in exhibitions e.g. through the use of explanatory notices, reference to relevant preservation issues in talks to visitors, displays of conservation/preservation materials, tools, and equipment. The approach to this should be interesting and imaginative, as well as informative.
- 6.3 While we seek to encourage public awareness of preservation through exhibitions there is always a risk to the physical safety of records placed on display. Therefore, where feasible, PRONI should avoid using original documents, preference being given to the use of quality copies instead. However, where original records are exhibited, the following Preservation measures should be taken:
 - 6.3.1 Spaces designated for exhibitions should be structurally sound and, as far as possible, free from the risk of flood and fire. Precautions to counteract such hazards may be necessary e.g. installation of moisture detection systems, smoke alarms, 'archivally-friendly' fire extinguishing equipment.
 - 6.3.2 Precautions must be taken to avoid theft and malicious damage e.g. invigilation, CCTV, security alarm systems, barriers.
 - 6.3.3 Records should be displayed in a manner which prevents unnecessary touching or handling, e.g. locking documents inside secure display cases.
 - 6.3.4 The display environment must be carefully controlled, free from potentially damaging atmospheric conditions and agents.
 - 6.3.5 To avoid damage to records or physical harm to staff, due account must be taken of the physical size, weight, shape and construction of documents being considered for display.



- 6.4 Requirements cited in paragraphs 6.3.1-6.3.5 also apply to records on loan from PRONI for exhibition by other institutions.

7. Conservation and Repair of Records

- 7.1 Conservation treatments in PRONI are carried out in accordance with nationally recognised codes of ethics and principles which protect the integrity of the archives.
- 7.2 Records at risk from chemical and physical deterioration should be submitted for conservation treatment as soon as possible. Decisions about which records to conserve, the extent of related treatments and their priority, must be based on the following factors:
- 7.2.1 The public value of the records.
 - 7.2.2 The nature and degree of damage/deterioration.
 - 7.2.3 The chemical/physical consequences for the records of any remedial action.
- 7.3 Conservation treatments must be carried out to the highest standard possible and be of clear chemical/physical benefit. To achieve this, PRONI must maintain the following safeguards:
- 7.3.1 Conservation staff must possess sufficient knowledge, skill and ability to make accurate appraisals of the condition of records referred to them, and to carry out the treatments required.
 - 7.3.2 Records designated for conservation must be treated using the appropriate materials, tools, and equipment.
 - 7.3.3 All repair materials must meet archival standards. All tools, equipment, and machinery must be fully serviced and maintained.
 - 7.3.4 Conservation staff must keep up-to-date with innovations in conservation methods and be capable of adapting to and initiating such improvements.
- 7.4 Conservation expertise should inform all preservation aspects of the various Section activities within PRONI e.g. acquisition, cleaning and sorting, storage and handling, copying, disaster planning, exhibitions, and access.



8. Disaster Planning

- 8.1. A disaster plan is required to be in place to safeguard the archives against unexpected or sudden events which would have destructive consequences (e.g. floods, fire, bomb attacks, theft) To be effective, the formulation and procedures outlined in the plan must:
- 8.1.1 Cover all areas where records are stored, handled, examined, consulted or exhibited.
 - 8.1.2 Operate in a way which reflects existing needs, regulations and limitations.
 - 8.1.3 Take the necessary steps to minimise the risk of a disaster by identifying significant hazards and devising practical and effective means to avoid them. These preventive measures should be implemented in accordance with the overall disaster plan.
 - 8.1.4 Contain realistic procedures to enable a swift and effective reaction against any disaster which threatens the archives. In particular, these procedures should include:
 - (a) Involvement in devising and revising the disaster plan, at appropriate levels, by those staff with responsibility for the implementation of emergency measures.
 - (b) Channels through which external emergency support services can be contacted (e.g. police, fire services, architects, engineers, cold store and transport services).
- 8.2 Procedures inbuilt into the plan to review, update and amend policy and information at regular intervals.

9. Appendix

- 9.1 PRONI's Preservation Policy is derived, to some extent, from the expertise and experience of Preservation/Conservation staff. It also draws on the following sources:

Public Record Office of Northern Ireland Disaster Plan Manual – 2006.

British Standards Institution publications:



BS 5454:2000 Recommendations for Storage and Exhibition of Archival Documents.

BS 4971:2002 Repair and Allied Processes for the Conservation of Documents – Recommendations

BS 1153:1992 Recommendations for Processing and Storage of Silver – Gelatin Type Microfilm

National Preservation Office, Knowing the Need (2005).

The Museum Environment (1999).

Jerry Weber, *Photocopiers – Friend or Foe? A Survey by the Preservation and Conservation Group of the Society of Archivists*, *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1993, pp. 65-68.

Ian Dunn and Jeanette Strickland, *Security in the Management of Business Archives and Records*, *Business Archives: Principles and Practice*, no. 65 May 1993, pp. 43-50.

J.E. McIntyre, *Microfilm as One Preservation Option – Costings & Choices*, paper delivered at National Preservation Office Conference entitled "Microforms in Libraries: The Untapped Resource?" Birmingham, 1992.

Mary Lynn Ritzenhaler, *Preservation of Archival Records: Holdings Maintenance at the National Archives*, National Archives Technical Information Paper No.6, Washington D.C., 1990.

Libraries and Archival Institutions, etc, Consulted

Ulster Museum, Belfast.

National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.

The National Archives, London.

Tyne & Wear Archives Services, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne.