

Summary

This factsheet intends to explain when you need paper records and how to look after them. You will discover:

- When you need to print records
- How to title and date paper records, and mark them with file codes and titles
- How to store paper records and what to do if they get damaged
- How to destroy and archive records

The guidance which follows is not prescriptive and should be adapted wherever necessary to meet local circumstances.

Introduction

The advice below should be read in conjunction with the factsheet “Organising your records”, which gives advice on setting up a filing structure for your records. Having a well thought out filing structure is the basis of managing your records well, whether you are dealing with paper or electronic records. This factsheet gives some specific tips about how to manage paper records across their life cycle.

Creation of paper records

Nowadays most paper records start life as electronic documents created on a computer. It was once thought computers would lead to a paperless office, but the fact that it is all too easy to create paper records by pressing the “print” button has meant there is probably more paper in offices than ever before! In addition, documents created on computers in other offices will still often be printed out and sent to you in the post and these documents still need to be looked after.

Before deciding to print out a document, thought should be given as to whether it is enough simply to store it on computer. Considerations will include:

- Does the document need to be **signed**? If a letter is being signed and sent out in the post, it is worth considering taking a photocopy of the signed original for the file, as this provides evidence that the letter on file was sent out in the form shown. This is particularly valuable if the correspondence is being retained permanently for the archives.
- Is there any **legislation**, best practice or internal guidance which requires the document to be held in paper form?
- Does most other information on the same subject exist in a **paper file**? It may be sensible to print the document to make sure the file is complete.
- Is the document an important part of the **archives**, for example showing something significant about the Church of England’s history? If so, there is a case for printing a copy to preserve it in the archives. It is not certain whether electronic documents will be accessible in the very long term, as the same technology might not be around to read them.

In cases where none of these reasons apply, it is sensible to keep the document just in electronic form. This saves paper and is environmentally friendly.

If a record is being printed, the length of time the record is being retained for will give a guide as to the level of care that should be taken. Some records need to be kept

permanently, for example because they are of historical or legal value, while other records may be destroyed after a given period of time. For a record being retained permanently, it may be appropriate to take the following steps:

- To use good quality paper - coloured or recycled paper is not ideal (recycled paper consists of very short cellulose fibres, making it weak and easily torn). Ideally, acid-free archive paper should be used, as it is less likely to deteriorate.
- To use good quality permanent ink for annotations and signatures.
- To use brass paper clips or brass staples for securing papers – most metals in clips, pins, staples, and tags can corrode and cause damage to documents.
- To avoid putting post-it notes on the document or using of correction fluids.
- To avoid the use of self-adhesive tape to “mend” papers.
- To avoid using rubber bands to tie up papers – bundles should be wrapped in strong white paper (ideally archival paper) and then tied with white cotton or linen tape.

However, it would be an expensive over-reaction to apply these guidelines to records which are being retained for a much shorter period of time – for example, routine financial records. Other factsheets give specific advice on the retention of records in parishes, dioceses, bishops’ offices and cathedrals.

Titling, dating and marking up records

All printed documents should have a **clear title** on the front page, which should be consistent for documents of the same type. For example, the minutes of the Diocesan Advisory Committee should carry the same title at the top of the document – not “Diocesan Advisory Committee Minutes” for one meeting and “DAC Minutes” for the next. In general it is better to use full names rather than abbreviations.

Documents of the same type should also have a **consistent layout**. As described in the factsheet on “Looking after your electronic records”, this can be achieved by using templates and styles. It is also helpful to add page numbers.

It is essential that all documents are **clearly dated** and the date should be visible on the front page of the document. This makes it easier to file documents in date order within a file. For similar reasons, letters and other records arriving by post should be stamped with the date on which they are received.

Before filing a document it should be **marked up** with the name or code of the file it is going to be placed in. This makes it easy to file the document and to put it back in the right place should it be taken out of the file later. The file name or code should be the same as that listed in your Filing Structure (see the factsheet on “Organising your records”). It is sensible to write the file name or code in pencil on the top right hand corner of the document, so that it can be easily seen and amended if necessary. If you have codes for your files, simply write the code without the file name.

Storage and security of paper records

Office and on site storage of paper records

Most recently created or recently received records will need to be stored in the office area, usually in filing cabinets. Suspension files within the filing cabinets should be

clearly labelled with file codes and titles in accordance with those listed in your filing structure (see the factsheet on “Organising your records”). Within each suspension file, separate cardboard folders (known as square cut folders) can be used to store records on particular topics or pieces of business.

Filing cabinets containing records should be located in areas which are secure, cool and dry. They should not be stored in the same place as stationery and general office supplies, but in clearly designated areas where the records can be easily retrieved and are safe from fire, flood, theft or unauthorised access.

It is worth considering storing highly valuable or confidential records in a safe or in lockable fire resistant filing cabinets. This particularly applies to records relating to safeguarding. Safes and filing cabinets should be regularly checked and opened to ensure the contents are not subject to damp, mould or pest infestation.

Older records which are not in day to day use but need to be retained on site should be stored in high quality cardboard boxes. Records being retained as archives should be stored flat in acid-free archive boxes. This prevents them becoming folded or misshaped (this is particularly a danger if the box is not full). Do not pack records in plastic bags, as they prevent air circulation and can also give off gases that are harmful to paper.

Further general rules that apply to the on site storage of records include:

- Make sure that records are protected from immediate contact with metal in cupboard walls, shelves, trays and the like.
- Where possible, avoid basements and attics as storage areas as such places are likely to suffer from dampness or high temperatures (experts recommend storing records at around 13°C to 19°C with a relative humidity of 45-60% - most importantly, both temperature and relative humidity should be stable).
- Do not place records at floor level or where leaking water pipes could cause damage. If the area is prone to floods, store well above the known highest flood level.
- Check all electrical circuits have been tested during the last two years. Keep a carbon dioxide fire extinguisher nearby. Use a liquid fire extinguisher only as a last resort.
- Do not unnecessarily expose records to light – switch off lights when storage areas are unoccupied.

In some cases the physical constraints of the building you work in may force you to store records in conditions that are not ideal. If this is the case, the key point is to ensure the most valuable records are kept in the best possible conditions.

What to do if records get damaged

It is essential to request specialist advice and assistance when records have become damaged:

- A document salvage company can assist with the recovery of records in the aftermath of a major incident such as a flood or fire. As part of the business continuity planning, it may be worth considering having a contract with such a company.
- The Diocesan Record Office (DRO) you use to deposit your archives (see below) should be able to offer advice.

- The websites of the National Archives (<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk>) and British Library (<http://www.bl.uk>) provide some general advice on preservation and conservation.

The following general guidelines may be helpful in dealing with the immediate aftermath of an incident in which records are damaged:

- Protect damaged documents first with white blotting paper and then place them within folders.
- Avoid bringing abrasive materials such as metal bulldog clips into immediate contact with a fragile document.
- Do not attempt to dry sodden documents. Store them in a plastic bag in a domestic freezer until professional advice or assistance is available.
- Do not attempt any type of repair, as conservation needs to be carried out under the direction of those with professional expertise. Mass-produced gum or glue and transparent self-adhesive strips must not be used on any documents, for they themselves in time cause damage.
- If a document is damp and smells of mould, isolate it and place it in a natural current of cold dry air. Seek advice as soon as possible, as the mould may still be active.

Prevention is always better than cure, so it is worth taking time to ensure that the storage conditions of your records protect against dangers such as fire and flood.

Outsourced storage of paper records

There should be an agreement with your Diocesan Record Office (DRO) that covers the long term storage of records being retained as archives (see the factsheet on “Agreements with record offices”). However, the DRO should not be used as a place to send other unwanted records. Instead, various commercial companies offer contracts for the storage of business records. If space is at a premium, this option is worth considering for the storage of records which are not in frequent use but that need to be retained for a period of time, for example to comply with relevant legislation.

Before sending off records for storage, it is important to know exactly how long they need to be kept for. Your retention schedule (see below) should give guidance on this. If records are sent off to storage without you knowing when they can be destroyed, they are likely to remain there forever, costing you money needlessly.

Destruction and archiving of records

Most records should be **destroyed** after a given period of time, in accordance with the retention advice given in separate factsheets for parishes, dioceses, bishops’ offices and cathedrals. As explained in those factsheets, you should have a retention schedule based on the retention guidelines given (but likely to be adapted to local circumstances). This retention schedule should indicate the manner in which different types of records should be destroyed. For paper records, there are two options:

- A lot of records can be recycled, provided they do not contain confidential details such as names and addresses. Many local authorities will collect paper and cardboard for recycling, and commercial companies also provide this service for a fee.

- Confidential records, including those containing names and addresses, need to be shredded. This can be done using a shredder on site or by a commercial company. Such companies should provide a Certificate of Secure Destruction to show that the records have been shredded.

Records which need to be retained permanently as **archives** should be deposited with the Diocesan Record Office (the “DRO”), usually run by the local authority. A separate factsheet covers “Agreements with record offices”. The Church of England yearbook gives details of the Diocesan Record Office for each diocese (in some dioceses there is more than one DRO).

Factsheets available in the records management toolkit

- What is records management
- Organising your records
- Looking after your paper records
- Looking after your electronic records
- Looking after your emails
- Looking after your multimedia records
- Agreements with record offices
- Access to records
- Data protection
- Copying and copyright
- Glossary

Further guidance

For further guidance please contact the Church of England Record Centre:

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Last updated January 2013