

Summary

This factsheet outlines the importance of having a defined filing structure within which to organise your records, both paper and electronic. It will also provide practical tips for designing a filing structure. You will discover:

- Why a filing structure is important
- What elements make a good filing structure
- The steps you could take in designing a filing structure
- What a good filing structure might look like

Introduction

Institutional records should not be managed as a personal resource, but should be stored in appropriate locations in a manner which facilitates and encourages sharing. Appropriate locations include shared filing cabinets, and a shared electronic area, rather than keeping electronic records in a personal storage area (e.g. Microsoft's 'my documents' folder).

However, within shared storage areas (both paper and electronic) filing can quickly become unwieldy, disorganised and difficult to work with. The best way to deal with these issues is to take time to create and document a **filing structure**. The structure will define the creation, labelling and physical organisation of **filing containers** (e.g. document wallets, hanging files, lever arch files and electronic folders) in which to place records. A systematic filing structure will allow people to find what they need quickly and easily, and to know where to store new records they create.

Why is a filing structure important?

If records are organised in a logical and consistent manner the following benefits can be realised:

- Encouragement of **sharing** of information within a team or the wider organisation
- A **shared and consistent** approach to the storage of records, avoiding individual practices developing which the majority do not understand
- Easy identification of information created previously will **avoid unnecessary duplication** of information
- A **consistent** approach to the destruction of records by storing together record types of a similar nature
- **Saving time** which can be wasted searching for records held in disorganised structures
- Timely detection of all required information for a subject access request, to **comply** with the Data Protection Act
- Protection against **information loss**, especially of concern when people are away or leave an organisation

What makes a good filing structure?

When designing a filing structure you should ensure it is:

- **Usable** – it must follow a logical form so that people can easily identify the correct record required or location to store something. Otherwise people will not use it or misfile records frequently. Think if a newcomer could use the structure.
- **Simple** – titles should be clear and concise to avoid ambiguity. If a record could feasibly be stored in two locations in a structure then use electronic shortcuts or paper cross references to avoid duplication. Consider using subfolders or file dividers to ease navigation (e.g. separate into year or alphabetical folders).
- **Functional and hierarchical** – it should reflect the functions and activities of work carried out, therefore grouping together records of a similar type. These should be arranged in a hierarchy, ranging from broad functions to more specific activities for achieving that function.
- **Controlled** – there should be rules in place to support the management of the structure and the records within it, and to stop separate practices occurring. Rules can include: instructions on titles to use, version control, preferred locations and when to close paper files and create multiple parts. Routine maintenance should be carried out at regular intervals to monitor that the rules are adhered to. Maintenance should also include a general review of the filing structure to ascertain if the functions are still relevant and that it meets the needs of the users, along with the application of retention policies.
- **Extensible** – the structure should allow space to add in new paper files or electronic folders when required. If arrangement is alphabetical this is not usually a problem. However, if the structure uses a file numbering system you may consider leaving suitable gaps at the point of initial design (e.g. number your folders 5.05, 5.10, 5.15, etc rather than 5.1, 5.2, 5.3).
- **Documented** – a structure should be documented to allow people to see an overview of the system. This would include each folder holding paper records and at least the first two to three levels of an electronic filing structure. Any rules for use of the structure should be documented also and scope notes explaining the type of records to be contained in particular folders would be useful.

How should a new filing structure be designed?

When designing a filing structure in essence you are creating a framework which can be used to define the physical organisation of records. The framework can be applied to records held in both paper and electronic formats. The following steps build up an approach to take when designing a filing structure:

- **Identify any filing structures already in use.** For example there may be an existing structure for paper records which could be further developed for wider use. This has the advantage of consistency and will also likely already hold meaning for staff. The structure used to present a retention schedule can also provide a useful starting point for a filing structure. See the relevant retention guidance document for further advice.
- **Investigate the functions and activities.** Records management best practice advises that a filing structure should reflect the functions and activities of an organisation and not be based on individual team and department names and definitely not a mere reflection of personal interests. An exception to the functions and activities structure is that some folders will be better defined by a general subject term. The filing structure should take a hierarchical form, with best practice suggesting three to four levels as an appropriate hierarchy. The first level should reflect the broad functions, with

the next level focusing on activities. It is then the specific categories of records created and used to fulfil those functions and activities which form the lower levels of the filing structure. A simplified example to demonstrate this range could be **Human Resource Management – Recruitment – Job applications**. One method to employ when defining the functions and activities is to hold a meeting with key representatives to discuss what should be included.

- **Make a decision on the order of the filing structure and a referencing system.** Some structures may be arranged in alphabetical order, but a drawback with this is that you cannot dictate the order of arrangement, especially if creating the structure in an electronic environment. Therefore, you may consider using a coded referencing system alongside elements of the structure. Codes can be a useful shorthand for identifying a specific file. The file code also helps you navigate a filing structure which is not arranged alphabetically. Numerical or alpha-numeric are two common types of referencing:

Numerical, e.g.

1 Office Management
 1.1 Health and Safety
 1.1.1 Procedures
 1.1.2 Risk Assessments
 1.2 Financial Management
 1.2.1 Budget
 1.2.2 Invoices

Alpha-numerical, e.g.

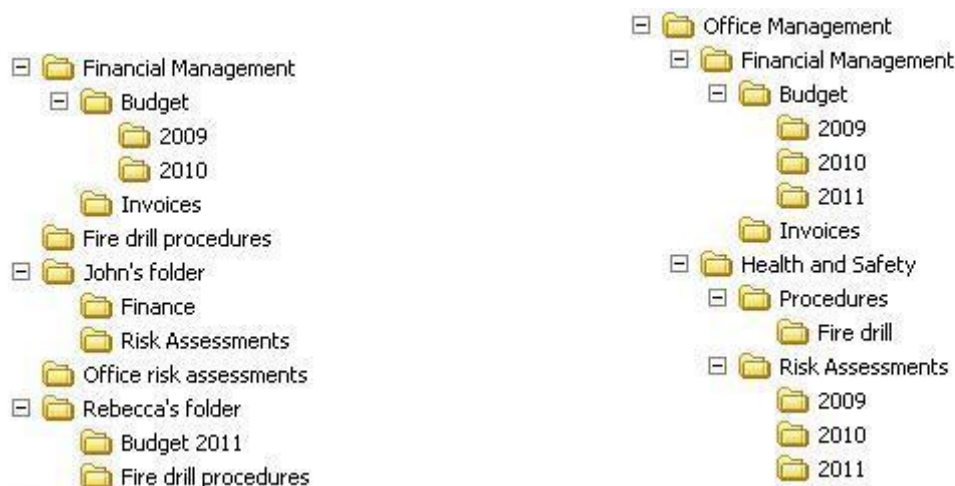
G Office Management
 FM Financial Management
 05 Budget
 10 Invoices
 HS Health and Safety
 05 Procedures
 10 Risk Assessments

- **Consult colleagues to assess usability.** It is advisable to involve representative members of an organisation or department when designing a filing structure. This might include involving them in the initial stages of investigation, for example interviewing individuals or holding focus groups. At the very least you should ensure that a draft structure is circulated for comment and allow time to make required amendments.
- **Implement the filing structure.** Once agreed by all necessary you will need to create the filing structure in a physical or electronic form, creating all necessary filing containers. A decision should be made on whether you are to move all the records you currently hold into the new filing structure. One option is to close any existing structures, not allowing any additional records to be added, while moving across those records still needed for current business use into the new structure. It is not usually cost effective to move all legacy material into a new system.
- **Regularly maintain the filing structure.** Whilst the records held within a filing structure should be assessed on a regular basis, at the very least once a year, time should also be set aside at regular intervals to review the actual filing structure. A suitable time lapse might be every five years. You need to ensure that it is still fit for purpose, checking such elements as if functions

have changed or new ones taken on and if the information generated has changed. Ultimately it must still meet the needs of those individuals using it.

What does a good filing structure look like?

To take an example, the images below show how part of a filing structure for a shared electronic file store could look. Whilst these are simplified structures, the image on the left shows a structure which is likely to develop problems and the image on the right shows how this could be reorganised.



The main concern with the structure on the left is the inclusion of personal named folders within a shared area. As you can see, 'Rebecca's folder' contains the 2011 budget, which should be alongside the previous years in the 'Budget' folder. Personal folders should be avoided as people could leave and it also makes it difficult for others to understand a filing system or locate important information. The top level of the structure also has health and safety related documents stored in two places (fire drill procedures and office risk assessments). The structure on the right shows these folders reorganised into clearly defined areas in which people using the structure would expect to find all relevant financial management and health and safety records.

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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