



Building the Archives: Policy on Records Appraisal and the Identification of State Archives

Issued June 2001

Table of Contents

[Foreword](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Policy Statement](#)

[Appraisal Objectives for the Identification of State archives](#)

[Responsibilities](#)

[Definitions](#)

Foreword

Archival appraisal is perhaps the most important — and certainly the most final — decision-making function that an archives institution undertakes. A decision not to keep records as archives is forever: once the records are gone, they cannot be brought back. A decision to keep records as archives is also forever: it involves an explicit commitment to apply the resources needed to preserve them — and to keep applying resources — for as long as the archives survive.

Archival appraisal also determines the shape of an archives collection, again with effects that will last forever, by determining the nature and extent of the documentary evidence — on which historians and other researchers must rely when examining the actions of government and its interaction with society — that will be available for the use of society in the future.

How much of the documentary output of modern government should we keep as archives? Obviously keeping too little means an inadequate archival legacy for the future. Yet we cannot afford to keep too much. Every facet of the long-term management of archives — cataloguing and listing, storage, security and, especially, preservation — costs money. With necessarily limited resources available for the job, trying to keep too much simply jeopardises our ability to care for the whole collection: both the essential and the ‘nice to have’.

In New South Wales we are fortunate in having an immensely rich collection of official archives. While some parts of the State archives collection indeed owe their survival to good fortune, much of the credit lies in having had, for more than forty years, strong archival legislation (first the *Archives Act 1960*, despite the shortcomings noted in the Introduction, and now the *State Records Act 1998*), designed to ensure that State archives are systematically identified and preserved among the mass of State records before it is too late to save them.

While we provide extensive guidance to help NSW public sector bodies decide how long to keep their records to meet their needs and those of their stakeholders, we have not, until now, had an overall policy to guide State Records’ staff and Board members in making the ultimate decision affecting every State record. We have not articulated a direction in which to guide the growth of the State archives collection.

Yet the collection must grow. History did not stop in 1901 or 1945 or 2001 and it is not going to stop. Nor can the State archives remain static, however glorious the existing collection may be. The State archives of tomorrow are being made in the everyday activity of government today. They will continue to be made for as long as there is government in this State.

This policy, developed in consultation with the NSW public sector and the broader community, will provide a rational and consistent framework in which to make the records appraisal decisions that are at the core of the statutory responsibilities of State Records and its Board. It will give us a better basis for building the State archives.

David Roberts DIRECTOR

Dr Shirley Fitzgerald CHAIRPERSON OF THE BOARD

1 Introduction

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to establish a policy framework for the conduct of records appraisal in the NSW public sector and to state fundamental objectives to guide the identification of State archives.

Background

A feature of government in the twentieth century has been the phenomenal growth in the quantity of records generated. The advent of the information age and electronic records has only accelerated this process. Deciding what records should be made, kept and for how long is an important task for public sector bodies and for government records and archives authorities.

Statutory framework

The *State Records Act 1998* creates a statutory framework for authorising the disposal of State records and for deciding which records will be retained as State archives. Generally, public offices may not dispose of State records, transfer their ownership, take or send them out of NSW, or alter them, without the permission or approval of State Records. This, in turn, requires the prior approval of State Records' Board, who represent a range of stakeholder interests from the Government and the community.

'Public offices' include the Houses of Parliament, courts and tribunals, NSW Government agencies, State owned corporations, local government bodies, the universities and the public health system.

State Records' Board includes a member or officer of either House of Parliament, a judge of a court of NSW and persons appointed to represent State law enforcement agencies, State government departments, declared State authorities, State owned corporations, local government, the private sector and the history profession.

A key aim of these provisions of the Act is to encourage a planned, systematic and strategic approach to the retention and disposal of State records. This helps public offices to determine appropriate retention periods and disposal actions for records to:

- minimise the risks of unplanned and unauthorised destruction of records
- reduce the costs of continuing to keep records unnecessarily, and
- identify earlier and more systematically those records that need to be retained as State archives.

What is appraisal?

Appraisal is the process of evaluating public offices' business activities to determine which records need to be created and captured into recordkeeping systems and how long the records need to be kept, to meet business needs, the requirements of organisational accountability and community expectations. This includes determining which records should be kept as part of our community's collective memory and cultural heritage, that is, as State archives.

State Records works with public offices in the appraisal process to help ensure that the needs of people and government for records — as evidence of the business of the NSW public sector — are met now and in the future.

Why not keep all records?

It is not in the interest of the Government or the community to retain records for longer than they are reasonably required to support identified needs. To attempt

to preserve and maintain accessibility to all State records indefinitely would be prohibitively expensive and impractical to manage. Even in the electronic environment, where data storage costs continue to fall, the full cost of cataloguing, maintenance, migration and accessibility makes it impossible to keep all State records forever. Moreover, there are certain types of records, such as those containing sensitive personal information, which the community expects will be disposed of when they are no longer required for the purpose for which they were created or for related administrative purposes and where there are no other overriding factors requiring their retention.

All records are created for an identifiable business or administrative purpose and the majority of these records can be disposed of by destruction once that purpose has been fulfilled and all legal and accountability requirements for their retention have been met. There are some types of records however, because of the purpose for which they were created, the activity they document and the information they contain, that have enduring value to the Government, to the community at large or to individuals or groups within it. These records are identified and kept as State archives.

The process of appraisal is important to ensure that the records that should be kept are kept for as long as they are required — either for finite, identified periods or as State archives — and that retention and disposal decisions are properly justified and documented.

Building the State archives collection

The appraisal of State records and the identification of State archives are critical to ensuring that the needs of people and the Government for records are met now and in the future.

Deciding what records should be retained as State archives is a complex decision-making process. State Records' approach is primarily shaped by our statutory role in maintaining a record of the authority, functions and activities of government within the State of NSW. The significance of government functions and activities, the interests of stakeholders and resource implications must all be evaluated as part of the appraisal process to identify the best possible records to retain as State archives.

The functions, activities and records of public offices must be appraised within the whole of government context to identify the records:

- which must be retained as evidence of the authority of government and rights of individuals
- which provide an adequate record of the significant decisions and actions of government and the impact of their implementation, and
- which add the maximum possible value to the State archives as a cultural resource documenting the development of the State and its communities.

A variety of current and potential stakeholder interests need to be considered as part of the decision-making process. The ability to predict, foresee and meet all possible future interests cannot be guaranteed and the feasibility and long-term costs of storage, preservation and accessibility must also be considered and assessed as part of the appraisal process. Resource costs involved in the provision of archival quality storage, preservation and access can be considerable. All records retained as State archives must be carefully considered and justified.

Applying best practice in records appraisal

Both public offices and State Records should apply recognised best practice in the conduct of records appraisal. State Records has developed or endorsed a range of materials to help public offices to apply best practice in records appraisal, notably:

- Australian Standard AS ISO 15489-2002, *Records Management* and Australian Standard AS 4390—1996, *Records Management* (adopted as codes of best practice for records management under s. 13 of the State Records Act), and
- [Strategies for Documenting Government Business: The DIRKS Manual](#) (issued 2003).

Further guidance and training will be developed and provided to assist the implementation of this policy. These documents will be incorporated into the *Government Recordkeeping Manual*. The *Government Recordkeeping Manual* brings together the policies, standards and practical guidance that public offices need for the creation, management, protection and ultimate retention and disposal of the records that they generate in the course of their everyday business. The content of the manual is concerned as much with recordkeeping in the electronic environment as in the world of paper.

Development of this policy

The disposal provisions of the *Archives Act 1960* did not facilitate a planned, systematic and strategic approach to the retention and disposal of the records of public offices. This resulted in at times ad hoc decision-making with regard to the destruction of records and the identification of State archives. The introduction of the State Records Act provided a new statutory framework for the creation, management, protection and use of the records of the NSW public sector. Part of the thrust of the Act was a deliberate and necessary move towards a more proactive model for the creation, management, control and disposal of State records. Development of a records appraisal policy was seen as crucial to this reform process to provide a consistent and systematic framework for the conduct of records appraisal activities and the identification of State archives within the NSW public sector.

The content of this policy was initially formulated at a workshop involving members of State Records' Board and staff from a range of operational programs. Workshop participants considered the aims and objectives of State Records appraisal activities and the criteria and values guiding the identification of State archives within the context of current national and international best practice and approaches to appraisal in other government archives. The outcomes of the workshop provided the basis for the development of a draft policy and objectives to guide the identification of State archives.

Once a draft policy had been formulated it was distributed for comment and made available to a range of individuals, groups, professional organisations and public sector bodies with an interest in records appraisal and the State archives collection. Copies of the draft were also placed in the Reading Rooms of the Sydney and Western Sydney Records Centres and on State Records' Web site. A number of organisations and individuals submitted comments on the draft and their interest and participation in the development of the policy is gratefully acknowledged. The responses received generally endorsed the content and objectives of the policy. A number of issues raised in the responses will be addressed through the development of additional guidance to assist the implementation of the policy.

The appraisal objectives outlined in section 3 of this document draw on those adopted recently by the National Archives of Australia, resulting in a desirable

degree of consistency in the two jurisdictions, and this debt is gratefully acknowledged. In keeping with national and international best practice this policy and any guidelines developed to assist its implementation will be subject to review to assess the continuing appropriateness of the appraisal methodology used and the objectives and any additional criteria developed to assist the identification of State archives.

2 Policy Statement

State Records is committed to ensuring that the needs of people and government for records — as evidence of the business of the NSW public sector — are met now and in the future. The appraisal of State records and the identification of State archives are critical to the achievement of this purpose.

Within the statutory framework of Part 3 of the State Records Act:

1. public offices should undertake records appraisal — to meet their business needs, the requirements of organisational accountability and community expectations — in accordance with best practice as described in Australian Standard AS 4390 and using guidance and tools endorsed by State Records, and
2. records that are to be kept as State archives should be identified using the appraisal objectives outlined in the next section of this document.

State Records and its Board are committed to ensuring that the records appraisal process is transparent and accountable.

3 Appraisal objectives for the identification of state archives

To assist the appraisal decision-making process the following objectives have been developed to guide the identification of State archives. The objectives are applicable to records in any format and their arrangement does not reflect any order of priority.

In meeting these objectives State Records seeks to identify and preserve as State archives an adequate record to document the authority and functions of Government, its decision-making processes and the implementation and outcomes of those decisions, including the nature of their influence and effect on communities and individual lives.

Public offices will use these objectives to assist them to identify and appropriately manage records in their custody that are, or could be, State archives. In consultation with State Records they should determine appropriate arrangements for their management as State archives when the records are no longer required for official purposes.

Each objective includes a description of the activities and related records considered likely to meet the objective and will provide the basis for developing further detailed guidance for the staff of State Records and public offices or appraisal consultants employed by them.

Objective 1

To identify and preserve records providing evidence of the source of authority, foundation and machinery of the NSW Government and public sector bodies.

To meet this objective we will identify those State records that document the establishment, structure and functions of the Government and public sector bodies and that establish the nature and extent of their jurisdictions, obligations, responsibilities and powers.

The types of activities and associated records likely to meet this objective include those relating to:

- the passing and promulgation of legislation
- formal instruments or authorities establishing the functions, jurisdictions, boundaries and operations of all levels of government within the State, its offices and any changes thereto
- legal delegations to perform duties and functions of State
- judgements or rulings determining the extent of jurisdictions and powers, and
- agreements between governments

Objective 2

To identify and preserve records providing evidence of the deliberations, decisions and actions of the NSW Government and public sector bodies relating to key functions and programs and significant issues faced in governing the State of NSW.

To meet this objective we will seek to ensure the identification of State records that provide evidence of key decisions and activities influencing the administration of government and governance of the people of NSW. This will include records documenting the background to, basis for, and outcomes of those decisions and activities.

The significance of functions, programs, issues and associated decisions and actions will be assessed in relation to how critical they are, or were, in the administration of the Government and their influence or impact on the people of NSW.

The types of activities and associated records likely to meet this objective include those relating to:

- the formulation and determination of policy across the whole of government
- the formulation, determination and implementation of high level policy and strategic management decisions across sectors and within public sector bodies
- the monitoring, analysis and review of policy affecting key government functions
- major reforms of the State's political and administrative structures and institutions, and
- the development, implementation and review of legislation.

Objective 3

To identify and preserve records providing evidence of the legal status and fundamental rights and entitlements of individuals and groups essential for ongoing functions of the State.

To meet this objective we will identify those State records that are essential for the establishment and protection of fundamental rights and entitlements of

individuals and groups within the community and the ongoing administration of the State. This will include records establishing the existence of individuals and groups, their right to participate in the affairs of the State and make claim to entitlements and protection provided by the State.

The types of activities and associated records likely to meet this objective include those relating to:

- the registration of births, deaths and marriages
- the administration of land title and real property, and
- the administration of probate.

Objective 4

To identify and preserve records substantially contributing to the knowledge and understanding of the society and communities of NSW.

To meet this objective we will identify State records which will substantially contribute to the existing body of knowledge or understanding of aspects of the history, society, culture or people of NSW. This will include records relating to events, persons, places and social, environmental or cultural phenomena of significance to the broader community and the State of NSW.

The types of activities and associated records likely to meet this objective include those relating to:

- the planning and management of major infrastructure or development projects and the State's economic resources
- the planning, management and staging of significant cultural events and celebrations
- the identification, development and management of sites of conservation, cultural or heritage significance, and
- the works and activities of individuals or organisations who have significantly contributed to society.

Objective 5

To identify and preserve records that contribute to the protection and well being of the community or provide substantial evidence of the condition of the State, its people and the environment and the impact of government activities on them.

To meet this objective we will identify those State records containing information essential for or contributing to the protection, physical well being or social benefit of both current and future generations. This will include records documenting the impact of government activities on the environment, the community and individuals within the community or the nature of people's interaction with government or their environment.

The types of activities and records likely to meet this objective include those relating to:

- significant collections and analyses of data to assist effective planning and decision-making in relation to issues affecting the community, resource management, the environment or the provision of essential services
- representations and appeals against the decisions and actions of government or the legislature, and
- individual case management where it is evident that the government functions and programs had far-reaching impact or influence on the lives

of individuals within the community, the environment or the development of the State and its resources.

4 Responsibilities

There are three key participants involved in the appraisal of State records and, within the statutory framework provided by the State Records Act, each has its own roles and responsibilities.

Public offices

Public offices are responsible for:

- identifying their recordkeeping requirements
- evaluating their business activities to determine which records need to be created and captured into recordkeeping systems and how long they need to be kept to meet their business needs, the requirements of organisational accountability and community expectations, and
- recommending which of those records should be kept as State archives.

State Records

State Records is responsible for:

- ensuring that public offices apply best practice in appraising their business activities and the records for which they are responsible
- appraising types of functions and records common across the NSW public sector or across a distinct sector to determine how long the records should be kept to meet business needs, the requirements of organisational accountability and community expectations
- determining which State records should be kept as State archives, and
- authorising the disposal of State records, subject to approval by the Board under s.21(3) of the State Records Act.

The Board

The Board of the State Records Authority is responsible for:

- reviewing recommendations for the retention and disposal of State records, and either
 - endorsing the retention of State records as State archives, or
 - granting approvals for their disposal.
-

5 Definitions

For the purposes of this policy the following definitions apply.

References taken from the Australian Standard, AS 4390—1996, *Records Management*, Part 1: *General*, are marked by an asterix (*). Terms that have not

been referenced are taken from State Records' sources. All other sources are provided in brackets after the definition.

Appraisal

The process of evaluating business activities to determine which records need to be captured and how long the records need to be kept, to meet business needs, the requirements of organisational accountability and community expectations.* Effective appraisal of the recordkeeping requirements of an organisation ensure that:

- appropriate records are created and maintained; and
- records are retained for as long as they are required to meet business needs, as well as broader organisational and cultural needs.

Archives

Those records that are appraised as having continuing value.*

Business activity

Umbrella term covering all the functions, processes, activities and transactions of an organisation and its employees. Includes public administration as well as commercial business.*

Disposal

A range of processes associated with implementing appraisal decisions. These include the retention, deletion or destruction of records in or from recordkeeping systems. They may also include the migration or transmission of records between recordkeeping systems, and the transfer of custody or ownership of records.* State Records approves the disposal of NSW public offices' records, generally either by destruction or retention as State archives, under the terms of the State Records Act. It remains incumbent upon a public office not to dispose of records in contravention of the organisation's legal responsibilities or other interests or requirements.

Electronic records

Records communicated and maintained by means of electronic equipment.*

Records

Record means any document or other source of information compiled, recorded or stored in written form or on film, or by electronic process, or in any other manner or by any other means (*State Records Act 1998* s.3(1)).
See also *State record*.

Retention period

The period of time that records need to be retained before their disposal, generally either by destruction or retention as State archives. Retention periods authorised by State Records are *minimum* periods only and a public office may keep records for a longer period if necessary. Reasons for longer retention can include legal requirements, administrative need, and government

directives. A public office *should not* dispose of any records where they are aware of possible legal action for which the records may be required as evidence.

State archive

A State record that the Authority has control of under the *State Records Act 1998* (*State Records Act 1998*, s.3(1)).

State record

Any record, made and kept, or received and kept, by any person in the course of the exercise of official functions in a public office, or for any purpose of a public office, or for the use of a public office (*State Records Act 1998*, s.3(1)).

State Records Authority of New South Wales
Sydney, Australia

Building the Archives: Policy on Records Appraisal and the Identification of State Archives, June 2001

© Copyright reserved by the Government of NSW, 2001. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced by any method without the prior written consent of the State Records Authority of NSW.

Terms and conditions of use of on-line versions of our publications.

ISBN 0-7313-8899-2