

RECORDKEEPING IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA: Who is responsible?

**A Guide for State & Local Government
Employees and Contractors**

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WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR GOVERNMENT RECORDKEEPING?

Every State and local government employee and contractor has some responsibility for his or her organization's records management. Specific recordkeeping responsibilities will differ depending on the particular role in the organization. Whenever there is any doubt about responsibility, advice should be sought from either a person with specific responsibility for the agency's recordkeeping (eg records manager) or a supervisor/manager. The over-riding principle, however, is that it is everyone's responsibility to make their contribution to ensuring all substantive business records are collected and managed within their organization's records management system.

In overview, everyone's recordkeeping responsibilities are to:

- find out how and where records are kept in your agency;
- make records to support what you do;
- put records in your agency's recordkeeping systems;
- find out how the records that you create relate to other records created as part of the same business process, and
- keep records unless properly authorised to destroy them.

You must not:

- destroy, delete or alter records without proper authority;
- remove corporate records from your agency without permission, or
- lose records that are in your care.

WHAT IS A GOVERNMENT RECORD?

The Act defines a government record as a record created or received by:

- a government organization; or
- a government organization employee or contractor in the course of work for the organization.

The Act covers records in all forms, including:

- any thing on which there is writing or Braille;
- a map, plan, diagram or graph;
- a drawing, pictorial or graphic work, or photograph;
- any thing on which there are figures, marks, perforations, or symbols, having a meaning for persons qualified to interpret them;
- anything from which images, sounds or writings can be reproduced with or without the aid of anything else; and

- any thing on which information has been stored or recorded, either mechanically, magnetically, or electronically.

When should you make a record?

Records do not just happen. You must make a conscious decision to create them.

Make a record if you need to show:

- what happened;
- what was decided or recommended;
- what advice or instruction was given;
- when it happened;
- who was involved;
- the order of events and/or decisions.

If you are not sure whether to make a record ask yourself:

- does this relate to my work?
- did I write or send this in the course of my work?
- am I required to act on this?
- is this something I have used to do my work or to reach a decision?

If your answer is 'yes' to any of these questions, make a record and put it in the recordkeeping system.

You should not put:

- very short -term or unimportant material (such as phone messages or room bookings); or
- personal material (such as email from friends)

into corporate recordkeeping systems.

Remember to make a record of:

- significant meetings where business decisions are made;
- work-related significant discussions (phone calls, face-to-face conversations) where business decisions are made or directions are given; and
- significant internal or external correspondence (including emails) you send or receive that relate to your work, or is referred to you for action.

LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

The *State Records Act 2000*

In the past, there was relatively little regulation of government recordkeeping practices in Western Australia. Practices have evolved largely based on business needs and circumstances. That changed significantly in 2001 with the proclamation of the *State Records Act 2000* which now governs how government records are created, maintained, destroyed or permanently preserved as State archives.

The Act was promulgated to improve recordkeeping practices across government organizations. Key to this objective is that government records be kept for as long as they are required, for business needs, and then either retained in the State archive for future research needs or legitimately destroyed.

Good recordkeeping makes good business sense as it:

- enables informed and consistent decision-making;
- saves time in locating relevant documents;
- assists with business continuity when staff change;
- enables explanation and justification of actions;
- provides evidence of responsibility for decisions;
- shows order of events and respective roles;
- provides protection and support in event of litigation;
- protects the interests of the government and the agency, and the rights of employees, contractors, clients and citizens;
- reduces space required for storage;
- provides historical evidence of significant decisions and events.

Recordkeeping Plans

The Act requires all government organizations to prepare a recordkeeping plan to:

- outline how records are to be created;
- how these records are to be kept;
- identify those government records that will be State archives;
- identify whether access to the archives will be restricted, and when these restrictions will cease;
- specify the retention period for those government records that are not State archives; and
- describe the systems to ensure the security of government records and compliance with the recordkeeping plan.

All employees and contractors providing services to, or on behalf of government organizations, are required to comply with their respective organization's recordkeeping plans.

Under section 78 of the Act it is an offence for an employee or contractor:

- not to keep a record in accordance with the organization's recordkeeping plan;
- to unlawfully transfer a government record to a person who is not entitled to the possession of the record;
- to destroy a government record unless authorized by the recordkeeping plan, and
- to have unauthorized possession of a government record.

DIGITAL RECORDS

The *State Records Act 2000* applies equally to digital records, whether created electronically or converted into digital form from another format.

Good recordkeeping for digital records is particularly important as their significance as corporate records is not always appreciated. In consequence they can be more vulnerable to loss or unauthorized modifications.

STATE ARCHIVES

State archives are those government records that are to be retained permanently.

State archives are very important because they document significant decisions and events in the development of the State and local Government. People expect to be able to rely on State archives as a source of accurate information about past events and piece together the history of the State, its society and people.

Government records which may need to be permanently preserved as State archives include:

- records documenting the establishment of the agency;
- agendas, minutes and reports of governing bodies and committees;
- files relating to internal policy;
- reports on major projects;
- reports on projects of importance to the community;
- records in regard to the drafting of legislation;
- legal opinions which influence the agency's policy;
- some personnel files;

- some financial records, particularly financial records up to the early part of the twentieth century, but also others of archival value; and
- major organization and function charts.

In general, State archives can be kept by the agency that has created them for up to 25 years. After that time, they should be transferred to the State archives collection.

Because State archives are permanent records, they need to be handled with special care and stored in appropriate conditions to ensure their long-term preservation. Advice on handling and storing of archives is provided in *SRC Guideline 2, Storage of State Archives retained by Government Agencies*, available at the State Records Office website <http://www.sro.wa.gov.au/src/policies.html> - [guidelines](#).

*Note: Old volumes of files or less frequently used records are often housed by agencies separately from the records in daily use to make more space available for the current records. Although this separation of inactive from active records is often called 'archiving', such records **are not necessarily** State archives*

BETTER PRACTICE

It is not possible to design a "one size fits all" best practice guide that could apply across the whole of government and to each government employee or contractor.

Each agency should provide guidance to its employees and contractors as to their respective recordkeeping responsibilities. Training should also be provided to assist staff and contractors in meeting these responsibilities.

In general, all employees and contractors should:

- understand their recordkeeping responsibilities;
- have knowledge of their organization's records management systems;
- be familiar with, and follow, their organization's recordkeeping policies and procedures;
- be aware of, and follow, their organization's digital records management policies/processes;
- understand that records:
 - may only be disposed of in accordance with the agency's retention and disposal schedule or general disposal authorities, as appropriate;
 - should not be removed from the recordkeeping systems without authority;
 - should not be altered without authority.

Recordkeeping in Western Australia

In conclusion:

- recordkeeping is the responsibility of all;
- we should document any significant work-related activities and enter these records into our organization's records management system;
- we must not dispose of, alter or delete records unless we are authorised to do so.

For further information regarding government recordkeeping contact
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