SUBMISSION FROM HIGHLAND COUNCIL

1. The Highland Council fully supports the general principles of the Public Records (Scotland) Bill. It is recognised that the Public Records (Scotland) Act 1937 is out of date, and that an updated framework for the improved management of public sector records, building on existing guidance and best practice, will greatly improve public service provision.

2. The Council welcomes the proposal incorporated in the Bill to place an obligation on Scottish public authorities to produce and implement a Records Management Plan, and would support the powers proposed whereby the Keeper of the Records of Scotland may monitor and review the plans.

3. The proposal incorporated in the Bill whereby the Keeper may prepare a model Records Management Plan setting out and outlining the minimum key elements and standards for efficient records management would provide a welcome benchmark against which local authorities could measure their performance. Whilst incorporating existing standards and guidance, such a plan would need to be sufficiently flexible to allow local authorities to take account of their own unique geographical and cultural characteristics and to develop their plans accordingly.

4. The Highland Council has recently taken a number of important steps towards formalising its own provision for Records Management. The recently constructed Highland Archive Centre was designed to incorporate a dedicated Records Centre for the storage of the Council’s records, and this is managed by a team of Records Management staff headed by a Records Manager. On 10 June 2009 the Council formally approved its Records Management Strategy and Policy, and subsequently, on 18 August 2010, the Council’s Records Retention Policy and Disposal Authority were also approved and are being rolled out within Council services.

5. In the context of its role as the custodian of historic, archival records, the Council notes the proposal in the Bill to repeal Section 53 (clauses 1-3) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1994, which relates to ‘proper arrangements for the management of records’. In this respect, the Council would wish to point out that, while the Bill addresses proper arrangements for the records of the current local authorities, and also those of their predecessors, it appears not to address the need for proper arrangements for records described in Section 53 (clause 1c) as being ‘otherwise placed in their custody.’ This clause embraces the very substantial holdings of archives of private individuals and other organisations which have been placed in the care of many Scottish local authority archive services during the period since 1975.

6. In general, the Council is mindful that the Bill represents an important step forward for record keeping practice within Scotland’s public bodies, and respectfully
submits this written evidence trusting that its comments will be of assistance to the Education, Life-Long Learning and Culture Committee.

Hugh Fraser
Director of Education, Culture and Sport
23 November 2010