SUBMISSION FROM SCOTTISH COUNCIL ON ARCHIVES

Useful definitions

- **Continuous improvement**: The assessment of current performance in recordkeeping in a public authority in order to improve that performance and thereby support the business of the authority. It usually involves identifying areas for improvement and putting in place relevant action plans. It is not a one-off action but rather a repeated process so as to ensure that recordkeeping meets the changing needs of the authority.

- **Document**: A collection of information - in hard copy or electronic format – that is treated as a discrete entity. The importance (or otherwise) of the information content determines whether it becomes part of a record.

- **Electronic records**: Records created, maintained and accessed in an electronic format.

- **Hybrid system**: A records management system that embraces both paper-based records and electronic records, and which will usually seek to maintain links between the records.

- **Life cycle of records**: The period of time during which records are in the possession of a public authority. It consists of three stages: creation or receipt; use and maintenance; and final disposition (to an archive or for destruction).

- **Paper-based records**: Those records created and maintained using the traditional medium of paper. Individual documents are held in files with identifiers such as the name of the creating public authority, a file title reflecting the content or common theme of the accumulated documents and the dates of first and last papers.

- **Record**: A collection of information – in hard copy or electronic format – created or received by a public authority during the discharge of its functions and retained in order to document and support its activities, including the meeting of audit and compliance requirements.

- **Recordkeeping architecture**: The relation to one another of different recordkeeping systems within a public authority (e.g., data shared across systems or records created and maintained in different formats).
• **Records management**: The systematic, economical and efficient control or management of the creation, filing, retrieval and final disposition of records in order to support the business activities of a public authority, including proper documentation of its policies and actions. Records management includes planning, organising, training and promotion.

• **Self-evaluation**: The monitoring, evaluation and revision of its own recordkeeping systems, procedures and practices by a public authority in order to ensure that they continue to support business needs, including legal and accountability requirements.

**Records management challenges**

1. The information age is a reality, and it is as omnipresent in Scotland as in any other modern country. The creation and exchange of hitherto unimaginable quantities of information - literally millions upon millions of individual pieces of information - has become the stuff of the everyday transaction within government (in the broadest sense), within the commercial world and even in the communications between ordinary individuals. Over the last two decades and more there has been an information revolution resulting in major economic and societal changes. We communicate differently from earlier generations and we do so at a speed previously literally unimaginable.

2. However, the information age is not wholly dominated by the electronic records phenomenon. While the overwhelming majority of information is indeed created and maintained within an electronic environment, there is another and much more long-standing aspect of recordkeeping that requires both to be recognised and to be fully allowed for, namely the traditional paper-based record.

3. The recordkeeping architecture of almost all public bodies is significantly challenging. They have to maintain traditional paper-based records management systems; create new systems to manage the mass of electronic records; and, more often than not, put in place hybrid systems that allow the linking of records created and maintained within the two recordkeeping media.

**Securing the investment**

4. Information – whether in electronic or traditional paper form – is in all instances the outcome of an input or investment. Every document has to be created, a process that can take the emerging text or data through several iterations. If time is money, then information clearly costs: from its creation, through its communication, to the maintenance of recordkeeping
systems that allow it to be accessed over time and disposed of when no longer of value to the business.

5. The investment in creating and maintaining records is recognition that these collections of words and of figures – whatever the differences in format – are vital assets. They are essential in a society that seeks to protect the legal and other rights of both government and citizens.

6. Without records the everyday operations of society would grind to an unpleasant halt. It is therefore vital that the records are created and maintained using procedures and practices – records management – that ensure they are accessible, accurate, auditable, authentic and secure. Given their importance, records management procedures and practices should be frequently monitored, evaluated and, as appropriate, amended so as to ensure that they meet ever-changing needs.

7. The information contained in records effectively managed can increase efficiency, reduce costs and underpin accountability. Records are the essential evidence of how a public authority discharges its functions, how it makes decisions and how it acts internally and externally.

8. If those assets are not handled efficiently, then there is a negative impact on business whether through time wasted finding the information and/or through the making of decisions on the basis of the inadequate information available. The consequences can be extremely serious.

9. Securing the investment in the creation and maintenance of records does not simply involve finding the ideal solution that will allow ease of access. During a time of rapidly changing technology and of challenge to the concept of how government can best deliver services for the citizen, there is an inescapable need to harness continuous improvement in relation to records management. Such an approach ensures that records management processes remain up to date and equipped to deliver the information needs of government and of the citizen against the backdrop of political, social and economic change.

Accessibility

10. Records management ensures that the records remain accessible over time. It is access not merely within the public authority responsible for the records but access for a much wider audience best summed up in the single word ‘society’. The citizen has the expectation that most information in the records will be available to him and that government (in the broadest sense) will fully recognise that expectation. Government has clearly done so by establishing defined access rights in freedom of information, data protection and environmental information legislation.
11. In particular circumstances, access to information for an individual is not about a business-related transaction or family or local history (both popular reasons for access) but about something uniquely and intensely personal to the point where it is endowed with emotional significance. Such circumstances have a unique importance that transcends administrative need or the exercise of a legal right but which, nonetheless, are usually dependent on both those elements.

Dealing with the issues

12. The key factors governing any approach to records and their management are clear:

- the volumes of records in electronic and paper-based formats and the continued growth in those volumes
- the all-pervasive nature of information creation in a modern society
- the investment committed to the creation of the information, and the need to recognise records and the information they contain as vital assets
- the importance of access, whether driven by business need, legal right or personal reasons.

13. These factors, taken individually and together, point to the economic, social and legal importance of records and the information they contain. To meet the pressures arising from these different factors records management systems have to be robust, offer guaranteed consistency and respond to changing business needs. To have it otherwise opens the way to inefficiency, waste of valuable resources and fragmentation of effort in meeting the challenges facing records management in an environment moulded by rapid technological change and increased public rights and expectations.

14. The need for the development of common standards in records management is recognised internationally and the application of common practices cannot be a matter for dispute in Scotland or any other modern country. However, there can be differences as to how best to create and maintain the common practices needed to ensure long-term efficient records management and access.

A new paradigm for records management in Scotland

15. In the opinion of the Scottish Council on Archives (SCA), ensuring consistency in on-going records management requires a legal framework that reflects the importance of records in government and the fact that they are as a publicly-funded asset. That legal framework – a Public Records
(Scotland) Act – would provide clear authority for action and a core reference point applicable across the range of public authorities that constitute government in Scotland.

16. However, a legal framework does not of itself guarantee consistency of improvement in recordkeeping and the handling of information assets. Achieving such a goal and maintaining it require that the framework should be populated by the on-the-ground records management needs of individual public authorities with very different functions and resources. And the same applies to voluntary or third sector bodies discharging functions on behalf of government.

17. The SCA is a body born of the desire to find strength and renewed purpose in a co-operative approach that recognises the strengths and needs of different participants. That approach is fully applicable – indeed, indispensable – in meeting the many challenges faced by modern records management, including straddling different media.

18. Within the National Archives of Scotland resides records management expertise of the highest quality. Within each public authority resides knowledge of its own functions and services and how those are reflected within existing records management systems. The bringing together in partnership of the two sources of expertise would open the way to a mutually beneficial partnership that could make best practice records management a reality in Scotland.

19. If records and the information they contain are vital, then it is sensible to have in place a mechanism that identifies those who repeatedly decline to recognise the importance of records. At the same time, it is necessary to see any sanction as extraordinary and to be used sparingly and solely for the purpose of achieving a necessary remedy for a serious deficiency in records management. Proportionality is essential.

A way forward

20. The SCA is of the view that the improvement of records management in Scottish public authorities is best secured by a balanced approach:

- On the one hand, there is clearly a need for the creation, maintenance and promotion of robust and flexible records management standards.
- On the other hand, the on-the-ground reality is that public authorities are best equipped to understand their business needs and the associated internal processes.
- Bringing together those two strengths will secure success.
21. This balanced approach is driving the SCA’s current work in developing a self-evaluation tool called Archives and Records Management Services (ARMS): a Quality Framework for Archives and Records Management Services in Scotland.

22. The ARMS framework is based on the widely-recognised European Foundation for Quality Management excellence model, which advocates an eight-step self-evaluation process applicable to the full range of archival and records management activities, including the specific records management function:

- Gain and retain management commitment
- Communicate what you are doing and what you are trying to archive
- Plan the self-evaluation process
- Brief and develop those directly involved in the process
- Conduct self-evaluation
- Consider outcomes and priorities
- Establish and implement action plans
- Monitor progress, review and maintain momentum.

23. The ARMS framework identifies core outcomes:

- Help people trust organisations (accountability)
- Select and make our individual and community stories accessible (access)
- Support efficient delivery of services
- Management and governance.

24. Assessment of the levels of effectiveness in delivering the outcomes - ranging from excellent to unsatisfactory – is tied to seven quality indicators (QIs):

QI 1: Create and manage trustworthy records
QI 2: Protect rights and interests
QI 3: Make sure our records and archives survive as long as they are required
QI 4: Help people find and use our records and archives
QI 5: Work with our community
QI 6: Leadership and management
QI 7: Ethos and values.

25. Each QI is linked to the desired relevant outcomes, to associated themes, to a description of what the QI means in practical terms and to a list of questions that should be asked. The answers focus on evidence to support any assessment and on identified strengths and areas for improvement. The intention is to assess impact and to encourage improvements that extend impact.
26. In line with continuous improvement thinking ARMS is not merely a detailed snapshot of the present situation. It leads directly to two important outcomes: recognition of success, and the development of an action plan to meet the issues in areas requiring improvement.

27. ARMS is flexible in that any QI can be tackled on a standalone basis. It thereby addresses the issues of limited resources, of what is important at a given time to an organisation (which can change rapidly) and of maintaining a momentum for improvement.

28. The SCA is of the view that ARMS could provide significant practical support for the application of guidance issued by the Keeper of the Records under the envisaged Public Records (Scotland) Act.

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Chair
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