

COVID-19 Impact on Record keeping in Scotland UPDATE Autumn 2020

January 2021

In Spring 2020, as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was being felt across workplaces and communities, NRS conducted a survey into the impact this disruption was having on the public sector recordkeeping community in Scotland. This survey provided valuable insight and metrics about the initial impact of the pandemic and the implications for the sector. In October and November 2020, NRS revisited the survey to gauge the impact six months on.

We received 55 responses to the survey: this represents one third of the PRSA stakeholder community. This is a little less than the Spring 2020 survey, but constitutes a representative sample. As with the previous survey, the largest group of respondents came from the local authorities and the health and social care sectors: however, we saw responses from across the stakeholder community.

The high level summary of the key themes to emerge from the update survey are:

- **Significant reduction in RM resource and substantial changes to roles and responsibilities.** 17% of respondents were reporting continued adjustment to their roles and responsibilities as a result of the pandemic. Redeployment, furlough and recruitment freezes had caused impact, but in addition to direct role changes, this was further qualified by one third of all respondents reporting significant alterations and additions to their existing roles and job descriptions, as a direct result of the pandemic. Although nearly half of such changes involved additional “Information Governance” activities e.g. around the move to O365, IG policy development for working from home, increased DPIAs; over half these changes were to include non “IG” responsibilities, e.g. staff welfare; resilience; health and safety; logistics and distribution; COVID secure workplace. It is clear from both surveys that the pandemic has put a squeeze on the limited RM resource across the public sector and has seen a diversification of job responsibilities, leading to a dilution of focus on records management activities.
- **Continued widespread cessation of records and information management development work.** This was first reported in the Spring 2020 survey, but was reasserted in the Autumn update survey, as the continued impact of reprioritisation across the Scottish public sector has reduced the resource available to push forward on planned records management development activities. 81% of respondents noted moderate to significant derailment of planned development projects as result of reprioritisation demands.
- **“The right records, in the right place, at the right time”** Agile, robust recordkeeping has been demonstrably critical to the success of remote working arrangements and supports the swift public sector response to the pandemic. Respondents reported the increased importance of records management to the efficient public sector response: reported as 58% importance in the Spring, and up to 67% importance by October 2020. Although there is a recognition that the priority is dealing with the health emergency, there is a reported sense of the increased visibility of the essential asset of reliable information. Access to reliable, accessible digital information has been fundamental to business agility.
- **A swift move to digital recordkeeping.** The Spring 2020 survey reported the importance of access to digital records to support agile working. Six months on the Autumn update survey indicates that 50% of respondents have changed their records management arrangements as a result of the pandemic. Most notably, the complete move away from hybrid systems and paper records, to the embrace of fully digital solutions. 41% of respondents noted that the method of public record creation has also been changed by the impact of working changes, most significantly with the roll out of O365, SharePoint, Teams and OneDrives. Whilst this is welcomed, there were a significant number of concerns raised by respondents as to the lack of

control, infrastructure, planning and management, which was sacrificed for rollout speed to deal with the sudden impact and changes necessitated by the pandemic. 35% of respondents reported they were not always certain they could locate information. These issues will be further explored in a secondary presentation and planned workshops with stakeholders throughout 2021.

- **The pandemic has created new functions and new public records which require management.** 38% of respondents noted their organisation was undertaking new activities as a result of COVID-19, and as a by-product, creating new records. Also of note, 25% reported the use of 'new' technology and media for the creation and management of records. These two scenarios will pose challenges for the records management community in Scotland, and the PRSA team are keen to work with colleagues to explore and understand this further.
- **A need to identify and secure records of enduring value.** We are living through emerging history and 61% of respondents are currently reviewing, or planning to review, existing retention policies, to capture and secure records of enduring historical value. Additionally, 57% of respondents have been actively collecting material relating to their COVID-19 response. The NHS bodies are actively working together on this, to harness their response to a global health crisis, and ensure records relating to COVID-19 are identified and preserved. Respondents noted their wish for further guidance and support from NRS and this will inform our activities over 2021 and beyond.

Next steps

January 2021 has seen the re-imposition of significant national lockdown, and the health crisis has continued to deepen. More work needs to be done to monitor the short, medium and long term impact of this crisis on the public sector record keeping. However, there are some tangible actions that can be derived from the data thus far collected, which NRS will consider in the immediate future:

- The impact and challenge of O365, and new functions, new records and new technology.
- Guidance on the identification and preservation of record of enduring historic value.
- Advocacy for the importance of records management to support business agility.