

National Records of Scotland (NRS) Collections Information Policy

1. NRS Purpose

The National Records of Scotland's mission statement is to 'Collect, preserve, and produce information about Scotland's people and history, and make it available to inform present and future generations'.

2. Aim of policy

This policy sets out how NRS seeks to provide and maintain intellectual access to its archive holdings for staff and users for purposes of research and management. Although the great majority of our finding aids are already available online, it is a central objective of this policy that eventually all of them will be online, subject to the reservations set out in 9 below.

3. Scope of policy

This policy covers all of the records in whatever format under the authority of the cataloguing and other branches of Records and Archives Services staff (RAS) in the NRS. It encompasses the work of the staff of the NRS as well as any volunteers under their direction. It does not cover records created by the statutory registration of births, marriages and deaths, nor the population censuses.

4. Background

The NRS and its predecessor bodies began taking records into its holdings in the mid-1780s. Inevitably since then various different standards have been employed for listing and indexing the records in order to make them publicly accessible.

A comprehensive, modern catalogue standard was first set out by Cecil Sinclair in 1986. This was paralleled by a separate standard for computer listing, initially for government records on the STAIRS application (from 1985) and then for government and private records on STATUS (from 1991).

All these were superseded when NRS purchased CALM (2002) and introduced a unified cataloguing standard for all analogue records based on ISAD (G). Between 2002 and 2003, a team of staff in the National Archives of Scotland (NAS) eCat Project supervised the retro-conversion of as many as possible of the legacy manuscript and typed catalogues into electronic form. This was done by marking up a paper copy of the catalogue and then having this retyped by a commercial keying company.

This catalogue was then loaded onto the NAS Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC).

Inevitably, a hard core of older catalogues, with little conformity to ISAD(G), proved difficult to convert and so remained paper-based. Their conversion is ongoing.

More generally, in pursuit of the greater good of building an online catalogue, we accepted many of the imperfections of the original paper catalogue, while fully intending to remove defects and mistakes later. Since that time, the most egregious failings of the catalogue have been removed and work continues to remove less obtrusive shortcomings.

5. Accessioning Information

All accessions (analogue and digital) should be documented in the CALM Accessions module within a week of receipt. Any associated correspondence or supplementary information concerning ownership or access conditions is to be retained in the appropriate collections management file.

Temporary Deposits (TDs) are records that do not belong to NRS but are brought here on a short-term basis. This is normally for public inspection, assessment before transfer to an archive, digitisation or exhibition. TDs are administered by the staff of the National Register of Archives for Scotland (NRAS), a branch of the NRS. The NRAS maintains a permanent record of each TD, showing ownership, names of the users consulting it, and the dates of arrival and return. All TDs are separately stored and bear special labelling to distinguish them immediately from the other NRS holdings. TD information is not recorded in CALM.

6. Cataloguing Information

In the work of cataloguing its archive holdings, NRS adheres to its in-house cataloguing standard, which follows ISAD (G) and is implemented through its electronic cataloguing application, CALM. On joining a cataloguing team, staff familiarise themselves with the manual and procedures. Cataloguing is subject to checking by line managers.

The overall CALM database is swept quarterly on behalf of the users to identify double numbering, blank fields and other errors that are not readily identifiable by individual cataloguers. This task is co-ordinated by staff in Court, Legal and Private Records Branch.

NRS aims to catalogue all archive collections to either file or item level. In practice, this means that an individual record entry in our catalogue might be a volume, a bundle of papers, or a single sheet of paper. The

aim of cataloguing is to provide a researcher with the best reasonable means of locating the information they are seeking. It should also, by implication, suggest to researchers where not to look. It also provides a level of security for the records as the catalogue will, more often than not, record the presence of particularly noteworthy documents.

7. Preservation and Conservation

Since 1991, all new accessions have been assessed for conservation issues on receipt or shortly after and collection care programmes are in place to ensure continual monitoring of the condition of NRS holdings. Although the storage environment is known, stable and managed, conservation knowledge about collections that predate this period is not comprehensive. Ongoing cataloguing, surveys and collection audits all identify conservation issues and inform programmes of work. Where records are found to be unsuitable for public inspection because of their physical condition, this will be noted in the catalogue. Normally it will state that the records are 'closed', with a comment that this is due to conservation issues. Every effort is made to keep the catalogues up-to-date but it can happen at the point of production, or when surrogacy is requested, that records will be found to be unfit and so subject to restriction or temporary withdrawal from access. In these situations, staff will maintain dialogue with the reader and will try to facilitate access to such records where possible, whether by supervised access or by seeing whether suitable repairs might be expedited. Conservation resources are costly and finite, however, and the long-term preservation of the records must be paramount. Consequently there will be occasions when access is not possible and has to be refused.

8. Physical Security Issues

Almost all archived records are unique. Some are also of outstanding cultural or financial value. NRS has a programme to digitise the most popular records to provide surrogates and thereby aid their preservation. This extends to records identified as being of unusual value, where there is perceived to be a risk of theft or damage. The catalogue will show when researchers are expected to use surrogates. The underlying assumption is that, where a digital or other surrogate exists, access to the original records will be given only in exceptional circumstances.

9. Freedom of Information, Data Protection, Environmental Information and Public Access

In its cataloguing work, NRS recognises its obligations under the Data Protection Act, 1998 (DPA), the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act, 2003 (FOISA) and the Environmental Information (Scotland) Regulations, 2004 (EIR).

There is a working assumption that archived public records should be opened to public access as soon as possible, within any closure or exemption guidelines set by depositing bodies under the appropriate regulations. Where records contain sensitive personal data, the provisions of the DPA override the presumption of access rights embedded in FOISA. The depositing body normally remains the data controller for any personal information contained in these records, although there are some exceptions, such as the records of Scottish public inquiries. NRS staff participate in Scottish Government training in data protection. This informs their cataloguing work, to ensure that sensitive personal data is not improperly made available by NRS, whether in the catalogue itself or by a failure to identify records containing such information during the listing process. Where a body of uncatalogued records is anticipated to contain quantities of sensitive data, this will be taken into account at the catalogue planning stage.

Records owned by the Keeper, for instance archives gifted by, or purchased from, private bodies, are subject to FOISA and EIR.

Privately owned records deposited in NRS are exempt from FOISA and EIR. They may also be subject to specific access conditions by agreement with the owners. They do fall under DPA, however, and the owner will remain the data controller for any personal information contained in these records. Only where the owner is unknown will the Keeper assume the responsibility of data controller.

Where a public record in NRS is closed or otherwise exempt from public access under the provisions of FOISA or EIR, this will be clearly stated in the catalogue. The catalogue will usually give a reason for this, expressed in general terms without revealing personal or other information.

10. Intellectual Property Rights (IPR)

NRS adheres to copyright legislation. Where necessary and appropriate, the NRS Online Public Access Catalogues will identify any IPR residing in a collection, with an indication of the rights owner.

11. Online Public Access Catalogues (OPAC)

There are two types of OPAC in NRS, the in-house versions for NRS and NRAS which can be viewed in the Historical and Legal Search rooms, and the online versions. The in-house versions include some sensitive personal data about living individuals and may be viewed only after registered researchers have signed an undertaking recognising their obligations under Data Protection legislation. The online versions do not contain sensitive personal data about living individuals. The in-house

version of the NRAS catalogue includes lists of papers that private owners do not wish to go online.

The data for both the OPACs is drawn from the CALM application and is updated monthly.

The overwhelming majority of NRS catalogues are in electronic form but as noted above, a few still remain paper-based. The cataloguing branches maintain a list identifying paper catalogues not currently on OPAC, as well as record series where there is cataloguing work in progress. This is available on demand and it is planned to make it available on our website.

12. Cataloguing Information Plan

NRS has a cataloguing information plan that is revised each year by the heads of the cataloguing branches. This sets out the plans and priorities for listing up to six years ahead, divided into short-, medium- and long-term. The short-term tasks are confined to the immediate year ahead and are normally dominated by incoming business. The medium- and long-term targets reflect more of the ongoing work of upgrading older catalogues and reducing the backlog of uncatalogued records. Decisions on assigning priorities are currently taken by the branch heads in consultation with the NRS Records and Archives Board and the Deputy Keeper, taking into consideration the significance of the material, perceived public or other demand, and availability of suitably qualified cataloguers. This is recognised to be a narrow decision-making forum and it is intended to broaden out this process to get a more rounded view of what the various stakeholders might wish catalogued.

13. Cataloguing Upgrades

The backlog of uncatalogued records and constant pressure on staff resources means that upgrading or improving existing catalogues is only done where necessary. This is where the existing catalogue is misleading; where there is a discovery of significant material not properly identified when first catalogued; where the catalogue has insufficient information to interpret it correctly; or where it would benefit exhibition or other NRS publicity work.

14. Backlogs and Cataloguing Priorities

NRS catalogues the bulk of newly accessioned records within weeks of their arrival and endeavours to list the remainder as soon as possible thereafter.

In common with many archive repositories, however, there are quantities of records within NRS's holdings which are either only partially catalogued or completely uncatalogued (legacy collections). Each cataloguing branch maintains a list of the uncatalogued records for which it is responsible, together with any associated collections management information. NRS is working towards a reorganisation of its storage, whereby new accessions are stored separately from catalogued records and only integrated into the main record series once they have been catalogued.

In some instances these backlogs of legacy collections are of very long standing. NRS is currently considering the benefits of placing outline descriptions of these groups on our archive catalogue. These would be at collection or series level, giving a 'broad brush' sense of its contents. This will enable us to show the extent of the archives we have in our care much more fully, and will provide transparency to both archive users and record creators. Information about the level of interest in these partially or completely uncatalogued collections could then be gathered and analysed to allow NRS to set priorities for new cataloguing work. This identification of uncatalogued material in the catalogue would not presuppose a right of public access. NRS staff would do what they could to allow controlled access in such cases but security and conservation considerations would be paramount.

15. De-accessioning

The NRS is an archive and does not normally de-accession records which have been brought in from depositors. There are currently six exceptions to this.

1) The Summer weeding programme in which a team of law students are recruited and trained to identify and select processes for preservation from the annual intake of records from sheriff courts. This work is done in accordance with a schedule agreed with the Scottish Courts and Tribunal Service (SCTS) and focuses on processes reckoned to be of historical or legal significance. Processes not so selected are securely destroyed. This work is funded annually by SCTS.

2) Where permission has been given by depositors to destroy duplicate or other unimportant material that it was impracticable to sift out before receipt.

3) Where a review of the administrative or historical value of all or part of a record series indicates that there is no longer a case for retaining or collecting it, NRS may de-accession any part of that series. Reviews of this type will involve the depositor of the record series and, where appropriate, experts and users in the field covered by the records. The

review conclusion must be approved by the NRS Records and Archives Board and then by the Keeper of the Records.

4) Where owners of privately deposited collections request their return or transfer to another body, they will first be checked for content and condition. A proper receipt will be obtained on return. It may be appropriate to continue to display the catalogue in the NRS system, with suitable alterations to represent the changed status and location.

5) Where records of primarily local interest are transferred to a local authority or other archive under the Charge and Superintendence of the Keeper of the Records. This process is governed by a formal agreement between the Keeper, any owner of the records, and the receiving archive. The records remain the ultimate responsibility of the Keeper and the NRS catalogue will continue to display the associated catalogue entries with suitable alterations to represent the changed status and location.

6) Where the physical condition of a record makes it more appropriate to make and preserve a surrogate rather than to absorb the resource costs of preserving the original. These are rare occurrences.

16. Temporary retransmissions

NRS has a unit that manages temporary retransmissions of file and item level records to depositing bodies, where the body has an administrative or other bona fide need to inspect the record in-house. For public records this is done under s. 5(3) of the Public Records (Scotland) Act, 1937. The Retransmissions Unit records the order for the record, oversees its outward journey, issues reminders to encourage returns, and records the return. Retransmissions are expected to be short-term, that is a maximum of six months.

17. Collections Management Information

Aside from the information held in the accession and catalogue modules of CALM, there will normally be a body of other information about the different collections in NRS maintained on collections management files. These would normally include any formal agreements with depositors and donors, as well as information about closures, access restrictions or conditions, details and explanations of record content or function, cataloguing work, and any other significant information concerning the records involved. Staff are expected to keep these up to date. Because of the sometimes confidential nature of their content, these records are not normally available for public access. As government documents, they do fall within the remit of FOISA.

18. Collections Audit

The NRS archives staff devote two weeks each year, currently one week in February and in September, to a collections audit (or 'stocktaking'), a programme of examining selected collections or sub-collections. This may be to check their integrity, preservation status or other condition. A report will normally be drawn up recording the results of the exercise and lodged with the other collections management information. Where appropriate, findings will be reported to the NRS Audit and Risk Committee.

19. Catalogues of records held elsewhere

The majority of entries in the NRS catalogues concern records actually held by NRS. A significant proportion of the catalogue, however, constitutes records surveyed by the National Register of Archives for Scotland (NRAS) which are held privately, or private records held by local authority or other archives. This material is very clearly identified as such. As noted above, there are separate NRAS in-house and online catalogues. Sometimes records pass from NRS to other archives, either on Charge and Superintendence terms, or as a transfer at the request of the original depositor or owner. In these cases, particularly where the records had been in NRS for many years, it may be appropriate to continue to keep the original catalogues in the public domain, while clearly showing that the actual locations of the records have changed.

Laura Mitchell
Deputy Keeper
National Records of Scotland
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