

Public Access Policy

Introduction

This policy describes how National Records of Scotland (NRS) makes archives publicly available using a variety of channels including onsite services, digital services, outreach and learning and in partnership with other organisations.

The policy supports the National Records of Scotland's purpose: "We collect, preserve and produce information about Scotland's people and history and make it available to inform current and future generations."

The impact of Covid-19

The policy set out here reflects NRS's normal practices and intentions in serving its different audiences. We shall try to keep to these as closely as we can. Covid-19 has had a profound effect on all public services in Scotland, however, and NRS is no exception. Inevitably there will be short-term, unforeseen changes to our different services in the months ahead as the pandemic evolves. These will be most obvious in the services that we can offer to onsite visitors, particularly with regard to the current location, visitor capacity and opening hours of our search rooms. Any variations to other services, are described on the NRS website, which will be updated as circumstances change.

The Principle of Access

As a major holder of information of potential use for personal, historical, legal and commercial purposes, NRS is committed to making as much of it as possible available to the public. This commitment reinforces our legal obligations arising from Acts of the Scottish and UK parliaments, most particularly the Scottish and UK Freedom of Information Acts of 2002 and 2000 respectively, from the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and from the various statutes governing the registration of vital statistics and the recording of Scottish title deeds, other legal instruments and court records.

NRS holds the primary records for understanding all aspects of the history of Scotland, its peoples and their lives, its government, economy and society and the way in which the nation shaped the development and history of many other countries across the globe. These records are made available on our premises for the benefit of everyone.

Access to Principal NRS Public Services

NRS offers a wide variety of services for customers and stakeholders.

ScotlandsPeople

ScotlandsPeople is the name of NRS's service to provide official extracts of statutory registers of births, marriages and deaths and access to digital copies of statutory registers, legal records and historical records for all types of research. Records available include the post-1855 statutory registers of births, marriages and deaths; the records of Scottish open censuses, 1841 to 1911; Old Parish

Registers (OPRs) of baptisms, marriages and burials, pre-1856; Roman Catholic registers from 1703 (by agreement with the Scottish Catholic Archives); other church registers of baptisms, marriages and burials, 1733-1855; wills and testaments from 1513 to 1925; soldiers' and airmen's wills, 1857-1965; military service appeal tribunal records from 1916 to 1918; valuation rolls for various years from 1855 onwards; Coats of Arms from 1672 (by agreement with the Court of the Lord Lyon King of Arms); maps and plans; Highlands and Islands emigration records, 1852 to 1857; photographs and illustrations, and a variety of other indexed record series known to be of use to genealogists and historians.

Online access is through www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk. A principle of this site is that it is free to search the indexes used to locate relevant records; a charge is only made to view and download copies of records. In a number of cases, however, records are free-to-view. The site offers access to our 'Virtual Volumes' system. This displays digital copies of unindexed historical records in the care of NRS. Currently the system contains volumes from the courts of the Church of Scotland, mainly the kirk sessions, presbyteries and synods between 1560 and 1870. The images are free to view, and a charge is made only to download copies. Virtual Volumes will expand in the coming years to include other court, legal and private records. Also free-to-view are the transcriptions of the 1881 Scottish census, the Registers of Corrected Entries (RCEs) that are associated with specific statutory records, maps and plans, and Highland emigration records. Customers can also order official certificate copies from the statutory registers and our open census records. The image library on the site allows free access to several thousand images of photographs, important historic documents, illustrations from records and other highlights from our archives. High quality images for publication, broadcast and exhibition can be purchased online and downloaded immediately.

On-site access to the service is available at the ScotlandsPeople Centre in Edinburgh for a daily charge of £15. Evening visits can also be booked by groups for a charge dependant on the size of the group. All charges are taken from a statutory table of fees. Customers access the same digital system and records that are available through the internet but additionally can view the modern-day images of statutory records. Access to customers is provided in the Centre's search rooms where trained staff are on hand to provide guidance and advice. Applications for free access for the purposes of historical or literary research or education are considered on a case by case basis. Our search rooms also offer access to a small reference library and some digital, microfiche, microfilm copies of genealogy related material.

As part of its support both for local authority archives and for the Scottish ancestral tourism industry, NRS has since 2007 encouraged the development of local family history centres. Local authorities that can demonstrate to NRS both that they have suitable facilities and that they have co-located their archive and statutory registration functions may receive access to the same records offered through the ScotlandsPeople centre in Edinburgh. Currently Glasgow, East Ayrshire (Kilmarnock), Scottish Borders (Hawick), Highlands (Inverness) and Clackmannan (Alloa) have local family history centres with these facilities and also charge £15 per day for access.

Historical Search Room

The Historical Search Room based in General Register House, Edinburgh offers on-site access to the principal records for researching Scottish history. These include the archived records of central government departments and agencies, the records of the Scottish central and many local civil and criminal courts, archives of former nationalised industries (rail, coal, steel) and a large number of collections belonging to private families and major companies. Access is free of charge, provided that

the visitor can produce photographic proof of identity and address, and is not engaged in research for a legal purpose. Trained staff are present to provide guidance and advice.

The Legal Search Room

The Legal Search Room, based in General Register House, Edinburgh is for researchers who are examining the public records (primarily public registers of land ownership, land sales, mortgages and other legal obligations) for legal or commercial purposes. They may be members of the public, the legal profession, the business community, or professional searchers working by proxy for law companies outside Edinburgh. Access to the records is chargeable, according to a statutory table of fees. Trained staff are present to provide guidance and advice.

The Extracts Services Team

The Extracts Services Team, based in New Register House, Edinburgh provides customers (who register and order through www.scotlandsppeople.gov.uk) with formal copies ('extracts') of certificates of Scottish births, marriages or deaths, taken from the post-1855 statutory registers and open Scottish census records. These are required by individuals for family history and a wide variety of other purposes (e.g. for getting a passport; for job applications; for confirming a death). The team charges according to a statutory table of fees and also charges for postage.

Adoptions Unit

The Adoptions Unit, a small, specialist team based in General Register House, Edinburgh assists individuals (or their appointed representatives) aged 16 or over who have been adopted in Scotland to access their original birth details and other information about their adoption by using statutory registers and closed court records. The sensitive and confidential nature of these records means that access is confined to the adopted persons (or their appointed representatives) in person. Access is free and is usually by appointment.

The NRS Maps and Plans Unit

The NRS Maps and Plans Unit is based at Thomas Thomson House (TTH), Sighthill, Edinburgh and oversees access to the large collection of printed and manuscript maps held by NRS. Access is free for visitors undertaking historical research but is chargeable, according to a set table of fees, for those conducting commercial or legal research. Plans access is given to readers either by providing images of plans on viewing screens in the Historical Search Room or, where a plan cannot be copied, by appointment at TTH. Trained staff are present to give advice and guidance. Images of some plans are also accessible on the ScotlandsPeople site.

The NRS Library

The NRS Library is a reference service which supports the research needs of staff and visitors in our search rooms. It is not a lending library and its holdings must be consulted on the premises. Access to the Statistics Library at Ladywell House is by appointment only. The Library catalogue is currently only accessible to personal visitors. We actively collect publications based on our records.

The National Register of Archives for Scotland (NRAS)

The NRAS, based in West Register House, Edinburgh maintains a register of catalogues of archives of historical interest held privately in Scotland. Readers are allowed to inspect electronic copies of almost all of these catalogues in the Historical Search Room and many can also be viewed in full on the NRS website. Since the NRAS does not hold any of these archives, access to them is entirely at the discretion of the owners. The staff of the NRAS can give advice on how to obtain such access and will answer enquiries remotely.

The Scottish Register of Tartans

The Scottish Register of Tartans, established by an Act of the Scottish Parliament in 2008, offers a registration service for and information about tartans for anyone interested in tartan, private user or industry member, whether in Scotland or anywhere around the world. The Register is virtual and was set up to promote and preserve information about registered tartans. Certificates are sent to anyone who registers a tartan and charges are taken from a statutory table of fees. Details of registered tartans are available online at www.tartanregister.gov.uk. Woven samples of registered tartans and physical documents supporting the Register may be inspected in the Historical Search Room. The staff of the Register can give advice on registration and answer enquiries thereon. Whilst the Register staff welcome personal callers, this must be by appointment.

NRS Outreach and Learning Services

Outreach and Learning's strategy is to engage everyone with our unique historical records. We help learners to develop their knowledge and understanding of NRS archives and records, and provide them with the skills and confidence to access, read and interpret their content in order to connect with Scottish history, heritage and culture. Further information about Outreach and Learning's services and online resources can be accessed via the [Learning](#) section of the NRS website.

Outreach and Learning's [services for schools](#) are designed to support the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence and National Qualifications in the form of school workshops and online resources for primary and secondary school pupils. From September to March within the school year, we usually deliver free workshops for Primary 4 to Senior 6 pupils at NRS. The workshops explore a diverse range of topics including: the Scottish Wars of Independence; the Victorians; the First World War; the Second World War: the Scottish Home Front; and Scottish Identity. The development of topics and themes across the Scottish curriculum is ongoing. NRS can also deliver career-long professional learning for teachers.

The Outreach and Learning Team also provides specialised talks and workshops for groups of undergraduate and postgraduate students visiting with their tutors to investigate particular topics. Similarly, we can accommodate a small number of visits each year from local history or other special interest groups. Such visits are by appointment only.

Practical tuition in palaeography is provided at www.scottishhandwriting.com which has an emphasis on supporting the ability to read Scottish historical manuscripts from the 16th to 18th centuries. NRS staff also deliver an annual in-house course on Scottish handwriting, delivered in conjunction with [The University of Edinburgh's Centre for Open Learning](#).

Outreach and Learning provides access to a wide range of historical records through [in-house exhibitions](#), [events, talks and visits](#) and through external partnerships. A notable recent example is

the highly successful exhibition 'Prisoners or Patients? Criminal Insanity in Victorian Scotland', created in partnership with the University of St. Andrews and held at NRS in 2019.

NRS exhibitions are created to mark historic anniversaries or explore important topics, and may highlight developments in NRS' own resources or services. Exhibition research and content are further used to create learning resources, including [features on the NRS](#) and [ScotlandsPeople](#) websites as well as educational workshops.

Recently we have created mini-websites from exhibitions: '[Prisoners or Patients?](#)' and '[Malicious Mischief? Women's Suffrage in Scotland](#)' that include images from our archives, transcriptions, audio excerpts and downloadable versions of the exhibition content which enable our users to access and enjoy the content remotely.

NRS also extends access by lending records to other bodies. The most recent example is for an exhibition at the V&A Dundee in 2019. Temporary loans are governed by strict conditions and begin with a formal application using the standard facilities report form available on our website: see <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/record-keeping/conservation/exhibition-and-loans>.

NRS run a public talks programme during the year, featuring staff and external experts on subjects relating to NRS' records and activities. We welcome visitors to our buildings during the annual [Edinburgh and East Lothian Doors Open Days](#) weekend and take part in other seasonal activities. In addition, we can provide tours of our historic buildings for interested groups. Such visits are by appointment only.

NRS assists the media to access our historical records. Initial approaches are channelled through the NRS Communications team, who work with colleagues to facilitate filming or recording of historical documentaries for TV and radio.

Each year, NRS arranges a preview event for the media ahead of the annual release on 1 January of 'closed' files. Journalists are given access to a selection of what are thought to be the most interesting files to fall open under the 15 year rule. An embargo on publication is in place until 1 January.

NRS Digital Services

In addition to the digital services referred to above, many of NRS's users now access its resources and learn about its services online, through its website www.nrscotland.gov.uk. This takes them in turn to a number of other sites.

NRS in partnership with several other Scottish national institutions gives access to a wealth of historical information about Scottish places, buildings and topography. This includes many maps, plans and historical taxation and other records from NRS holdings. This service can be accessed at www.scotlandsplaces.gov.uk.

NRS Services to Record Depositors

Our Depositor Liaison and Engagement teams provide advice, assistance and access to the Scottish and UK government departments, agencies, courts and other bodies that deposit records with us. They also engage with a wide variety of private and commercial record creators.

Commitment to Customer Engagement

NRS has a national and international audience and the overwhelming majority of our customers have a positive experience, whether as visitors to our Edinburgh offices or as users of our online services. We strive to maintain this standard of service by engaging with user groups to assess their satisfaction. We welcome and consider seriously all user suggestions about service improvements.

ScotlandsPeople users have in the past been surveyed for views on any proposed changes to the website. The Historical Search Room participates in the two-yearly users' survey administered by the Archives & Records Association's National Surveys Group. NRS holds quarterly meetings of a search room user group, which includes representatives of the Scottish Association of Family History Societies (SAFHS) and the Association of Scottish Genealogists and Researchers in Archives (ASGRA). Minutes of this are published online. It is intended to extend our user groups to include representatives from other sectors of our audience.

In 2021, NRS commissioned an [audience research project](#) to explore how our customers engage with us both online and face-to-face to find out more about the different types of customer we support and their needs, in order to develop a framework of customer personas.

Each persona is a fictional but realistic example of a typical NRS customer, grouped by age, location, level of interaction and what challenges and motivates their behaviour. These personas are grouped into type of user, from novice to expert, and cover customers of both online and face-to-face services.

The [customer personas framework](#) will be used to help us understand our audiences better and ultimately help inform future service improvements.

Forms of Access

General

Records available through ScotlandsPeople are found using specialist software with advanced, easy to use search facilities and are viewed using an image browser compatible with computers and mobile devices. This is not always the case with original records to be examined in the Historical Search Room, where many are stored off-site. The online catalogue identifies documents in this category.

On-site

Personal visitors form a significant part of our audience. ScotlandsPeople, the Historical and Legal Search Rooms and Extracts Services are all open to callers Monday to Friday, from 0900 to 1630. With the exception of the Maps and Plans Unit which is open 0930 to 1600 on Tuesdays and Wednesdays and by appointment, the other NRS services described in this policy observe these same hours but require that personal access be by appointment only. In addition, evening group visits can be booked to the ScotlandsPeople Centre. Information about closures for public holidays is posted on www.nrscotland.gov.uk.

Remote

The majority of NRS customers use our remote and online services. The primary access to these is, as noted above, through our websites at www.nrscotland.gov.uk, www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk, www.tartanregister.gov.uk, and also at www.scotlandsplaces.gov.uk.

All the public service teams in NRS answer correspondence. The bulk of this work involves provision of straightforward services (e.g. arranging to produce copies of records; answering simple enquiries). Many correspondents, however, make quite elaborate requests for information and where possible, staff will use their professional knowledge to suggest how a particular investigation might be carried out. Otherwise readers are expected to do their own investigations, either personally, perhaps through a friend, or by employing a professional searcher. NRS provides a list of such searchers on our website but this does not constitute a recommendation and NRS has no responsibility for the quality or quantity of work provided by searchers.

Distributed Access

Charge and Superintendence Agreements

NRS has been committed for many years to fostering the development of local archive provision in Scotland. Since the late 1970s, we have entered into a number of agreements by which records considered to be of primarily local significance are, on certain conditions, transferred from NRS to Scottish local authority and university archives on long-term loan under the 'Charge and Superintendence' of the Keeper. This programme will continue, as staff and conservation resources permit. New receiving archives will now be expected to have accredited status under the UK Archives Accreditation scheme. Existing holders of such records are expected to work to become accredited.

Records that have been transferred to other archives are identified as such in the NRS online catalogue.

Restrictions on Access

In common with many other archives, there are restrictions on public access to some of the records in our holdings.

NRS staff will provide advice and explanations to the public about any access restrictions. They will also advise enquirers about any rights of appeal or other mechanisms open to them to obtain access to otherwise closed or restricted material.

We do not permit researchers to remove records from our premises and we have no public lending facility.

The records of Scottish Censuses are closed for 100 years under a confidentiality guarantee by the Registrar General for Scotland, which is supported by the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act, 2002.

Records of adoptions are closed by Statutory Instrument 1971, No. 1162 (S.144) for 100 years from the date of creation, except to adopted persons over the age of 16, or their appointed representatives.

Criminal records and family actions (including divorces) from the Scottish central and some local courts, are closed for 100 years to protect the privacy of living individuals and comply with data protection law. The Rehabilitation of Offenders' Act, 1974 also places restrictions on the use of some court records.

The departmental files of the Scottish and UK governments and their agencies were formerly closed under the 30-year rule, with longer closure periods attached to files containing information relating to

national security or likely to cause serious distress to identifiable individuals. All these closures are now subject to review and many have been reduced or even removed entirely. Following the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act, 2002, there is now a presumption across the Scottish Government that departmental files are open unless data protection, freedom of information or other considerations come into operation. NRS holds many files that originated in UK departments and these will retain closures applied under UK legislation.

Three further types of non-statutory restrictions exist in NRS. The first is common to most public and private archives; a small proportion of our records are fragile or damaged and so we cannot allow readers access to them. In some cases we have already made electronic images, microfilms or other surrogates, so that readers can at least view the information contained in such records. We also have an active conservation programme to identify and conserve damaged records. Secondly, all records are unique but some are of exceptional value, whether cultural, financial or both. In these cases readers will only be permitted to inspect surrogates, save in exceptional circumstances. The third category of restrictions relates to some of the many collections of private papers of national or regional historical significance held by us on deposit (loan) and which do not belong to us. Some owners have placed restrictions on access to their archives. Most commonly they require readers to give an undertaking to obtain their permission before publishing anything that uses their papers. Some restrict the making of copies. Nor is it permitted for readers to make use of private deposited collections for legal or commercial purposes without first obtaining the owner's permission.

The general statutory restrictions on access to our collections are set out at appropriate places on our website. The detailed online catalogue of our holdings, accessible through our website, states clearly which records are 'Open' and which are 'Closed', 'Exempt' from access under Freedom of Information legislation, or otherwise restricted. In many cases the full catalogue entry will state the reason for the closure.

How are our Policies and Services Communicated?

Our principal policies relating to access and to the collections can be seen on our website.

NRS maintains a Twitter account [@NatRecordsScot](https://twitter.com/NatRecordsScot)

Readers who are registered on www.scotlandsppeople.gov.uk can subscribe to receive our newsletters. The service also maintains Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Users of the Scottish Register of Tartans can subscribe to receive updates when new tartans are registered and the Register staff also maintain Facebook and Twitter accounts.

NRS also produces a variety of leaflets outlining its services, which are available on our premises or on application.

NRS's Commitment to Comply with Legislation

Many pieces of legislation regulate or impinge on the work of the NRS and we work to comply with all of them. Our main functions are governed by:

- The Census Act, 1920
- The Adoption of Children (S) Act, 1930

- The Public Records (S) acts, 1937 and 2011
- The Adoption Act, 1958
- The Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages (S) Act, 1965
- The Local Government (S) Acts, 1973 and 1994
- The Health and Safety at Work Act, 1974
- The Marriage (S) Act, 1977
- The National Heritage (S) Act, 1985
- The Copyright Act, 1988
- The Freedom of Information Act, 2000
- The Freedom of Information (S) Act, 2002
- The Civil Partnership Act, 2004
- The Environmental Information Regulations, 2004
- The Public Sector Information Re-use Regulations, 2005
- The Local Electoral Administration and Registration Services (S) Act, 2006
- The Adoption and Children (S) Act, 2007
- The Scottish Register of Tartans Act, 2008
- The Equality Act, 2010
- The Marriage and Civil Partnership (S) Act, 2014
- General Data Protection Regulation, Regulation (EU) 2016/679
- The Data Protection Act, 2018
- The Civil Partnership (S) Act, 2020

Where necessary, the legal obligations concerning particular aspects of our functions are set out at appropriate places on our website and in our online catalogues.

Copying

The majority of records in NRS are openly accessible. Readers may purchase copies of most records in our care. Copying is done by NRS staff, using digital imaging equipment. Depending on the circumstances, paper copies can be provided as certified or as formal extracts. NRS will decline to make copies if the records would be damaged by the process, or if there are copyright or ownership issues. In such cases, staff will provide an explanation.

Readers in the Historical Search Room are permitted to use their own digital cameras to make copies of original material for their private use except where: 1) NRS has already made digital copies available; 2) the records have conservation needs that require especially sensitive handling (e.g. glass plate negatives); 3) the records are from private archives held in NRS but owned by third parties. Before using their cameras, readers must sign an undertaking to comply with copyright legislation.

Library books are provided for reference as an aid to research in the records. We ask that visitors take notes but do not copy or photograph pages.

Charging Policy

NRS charges fees for readers wishing to use certain services on ScotlandsPeople, ScotlandsPlaces, Extracts Services, the Scottish Register of Tartans and for access to the public legal registers where the purpose of inspection is legal or commercial, and for provision of extract, certified or other copies of original records.

These charges are levied in accordance with Statutory Instruments of the Scottish Parliament: SSI 2005, No. 77 (fees for searching legal records and for obtaining copies of legal and historical records); SSI 2009, No. 6 (fees associated with the Scottish Register of Tartans); SSIs 2009, Nos. 64 and 65 (fees associated with the registration of births, deaths and marriages, etc.); SSI 2010, No. 427 and SSI 2016, No. 64 (fees associated with searching ScotlandsPeople resources).

Access to the public records for historical or literary purposes is free (Public Records Scotland Act, 1937, s.10).

Equality and Diversity

In the services that we provide and the employment of our staff, NRS works with the public sector equality duty in mind. All our buildings have lift and ramp access for staff and public use, as well as disabled toilet facilities and meet the requirements of health and safety and equality legislation.

Our search rooms have adjustable desks and staff will make provision for visitors with additional access requirements. The ScotlandsPeople Centre supports visitors who require a carer and access for carers is available free of charge. The ScotlandsPeople website and network is written to be accessible and comply with W3C's 'Priority 1' guidelines on accessibility. There are limited parking facilities for disabled visitors at all our public buildings. Visitors wishing to use these should contact us in advance.

The National Archives' Directory and SCAN

NRS has an up-to-date entry on [The National Archives' directory of UK archives](#). We do not submit copies of our lists to the National Register of Archives at Kew, since these can already be seen on our online catalogue. Summaries of the contents of our principal series of historical records may also be seen on the Scottish Archive Network (SCAN) site www.scan.org.uk.

Policy Review

This policy will be reviewed annually.

Anne Slater
Head of NRS Operations and Customer Services

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