



Guide No. 6 Electronic records

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Electronic records, like paper records of an Area or Local Meeting or committee, need to be managed. This handout provides guidance on creating, filing, keeping, disposing and preserving electronic records.

Summary of guidance

- Electronic records need to be managed.
- The same principles of records retention apply to electronic records as they do to paper records.
- Electronic records should be arranged in an orderly way and kept secure.
- Folder and file names should be short, but meaningful.
- Electronic records should be backed up.
- Meetings should develop a strategy for preserving electronic records over time.
- Electronic records can be deleted once they have passed their use to a meeting and have no historical importance.

1. Creating and filing electronic records

Just as all paper records of a meeting or committee need to be arranged in an orderly way and kept secure (see *Guide No. 4 Creation to curation of records*), so the same applies to electronic records. The following advice is intended to help meetings name and organise their electronic folders and files.

1a. Filing electronic records

- Files should be structured into folders and sub-folders with other files that form part of the same activity or subject. Isolated files are of minimal value.
- The structure of folders should be simple and logical, and should proceed from the general to the specific by dividing a broader theme into sub-themes.
- Ephemeral files of no enduring value, e.g. those of purely personal relevance, should *not* be filed with a meeting's electronic records. They should be either moved into a personal folder or deleted.
- If a Meeting is running a paper filing system alongside an electronic filing system, the electronic folder should use the same titles as the paper files.

1b. Naming folders and files

One of the most important functions of any recordkeeping system is to ensure that the records it contains can be located at a later time. To ensure that the right records can be retrieved efficiently, it is vital to use good folder and file names.

- Folder and file names should be short, but meaningful, e.g. 20090811CommitteeMinutes.doc. Long names mean long file paths which increase the likelihood of error, are more difficult to remember and recognise and are more difficult to transmit in emails as they often 'break'.
- Use capital letters to delimit words, not spaces and underscores which increase the length of the folder or file name.
- Avoid using initials, abbreviations and codes that are not commonly understood.
- When including a number in a file name always give it as a two-digit number, unless it is a year or another number with more than two digits. This ensures files are listed in number order within a folder, e.g. OfficeProceduresV01.doc
- If using a date in the file name always use the format YYYYMMDD. This ensures files are listed in date order within a folder, e.g. 20090811CommitteeMinutes.doc
- When including a personal name in a folder or file name, give the surname first, followed by the initials, e.g. SmithM20090811.doc (for versioning see 1c below)
- Avoid using common words such as 'draft' or 'letter' at the start of file names, or all of those files will appear together in the file directory, making it more difficult to retrieve the files you are looking for.
- Order the elements in a file name in the most appropriate way to

retrieve the record, e.g. 20090811 CommitteeMinutes.doc or SmithM20090811.doc

- File names of records relating to recurring events (e.g. meeting minutes and papers, weekly, monthly or annual reports, event management and budget planning documents) should include both the date and the event name or event description so that the record can be identified and retrieved.
- The file names of correspondence should include the name of the correspondent, an indication of the subject and the date of the correspondence, e.g. SmithMMeeting20090811.doc

1c. Version control

The version number of a record should be indicated in its file name by the inclusion of 'V' followed by the version number and, where applicable, 'Draft' or 'Final'.

Some records go through a number of versions, for example they start out as working drafts, become consultation drafts and finish with a final draft, which may then be reviewed and updated at a later date. It is important to be able to differentiate between these various drafts. E.g. ReportV01Draft.doc

2. Backups, security and confidential records

Electronic records, like paper records, should be kept secure and access to them should be restricted to those who need access. It is good practice for individuals to have their own computer logins and passwords. This allows meetings to restrict access to areas where sensitive or confidential records are stored.

Before disposing of a computer, all files should be deleted from the hard drive. If the files were particularly sensitive or confidential, you may wish to wipe the hard drive of the computer to prevent the files from being recreated.

It is good practice to regularly back up files onto tape, CD DVD, or memory stick. The backup should be kept in a secure place and in a separate location from the computer.

3. Retention of electronic records

The same principles of records retention apply to electronic records as they do to paper records. See *Guide No. 2 Meetings' records and their retention and disposal*.

4. Preservation of electronic records

Electronic records are vulnerable to corruption and loss, and can be rendered inaccessible by hardware and software changes. This section aims to help meetings decide upon the best means of providing access to and preserving electronic records for as long as they are needed.

Meetings will not need to preserve *all* electronic records. Only those that need to be kept for longer than 5 years (see *Guide 2 Meetings' records and their*

retention and disposal). It is advisable to develop a strategy for ensuring access to these records otherwise it will be difficult and costly to access them in the future.

4a. Practical steps towards preserving electronic records

- Survey and draw up a list of electronic records a meeting holds.
- Think about how long the electronic records need to be kept and draw up a retention schedule (see *Guide 2 Meetings' records and their retention and disposal*).
- Meetings should undertake a risk assessment of the electronic records that need to be preserved for more than 5 years. Meetings should consider the impact of losing the records for the meeting, how likely it is that this would happen and the cost of preservation measures. A matrix can be used:

	High	Medium	Low	Very Low
How serious would the consequence be if we did not have the records?				
How high are the risks to the records in their current format?				
Would it be expensive to preserve the records?				

A medium to high response to the first two questions strongly indicates that measures need to be taken to preserve the electronic record.

4b. Preservation strategy

There are two issues to consider when preparing a preservation strategy: storage and format.

Storage

There are three main storage options for preserving electronic records:

- **Print to paper**
For: easy to preserve.
Against: record is no longer in its original format; leads to a build up of paper records which may become unmanageable over time.
- **Save to DVD-R (holds 4.7Gb) or CD (holds 700Mb)**
For: frees space on a computer.
Against: retrieval of files is slow; DVDs and CDs may corrupt or be lost; DVDs, CDs and associated hardware may become obsolete; the format electronic records are in, for example Word 97, Word 2000, Word 2007, Excel 97, Excel 2000, Excel 2007, etc., and their associated software to open them may become obsolete in the future so regular checking and opening of records is required which can be time-consuming.
- **Store on computer**
For: provides quick access; meeting does not have to worry about physical degradation or obsolescence of CDs and DVDs; allows for control and security measures to be imposed.

Against: the format electronic records are in, for example Word 97, Word 2000, Word 2007, Excel 97, Excel 2000, etc., and their associated software to open them may become obsolete in the future so you must ensure records can be opened after every upgrade of software which may require you to consult an IT professional if you are unable to open them.

For many meetings the first option 'Print to paper' is the most likely one to be used and should certainly be used for archives, i.e. permanent records such as minutes and supporting papers (See *Guide No. 5 Minutes and supporting papers* and *Guide No. 2 Meetings' records and their retention and disposal*). For all other electronic records, the last point 'Store on computer' should be considered. It offers secure storage, back up and ease of access.

Formats

In addition to considering storage options, it is also necessary to consider file formats. When considering which file format to choose, meetings should consider how long the electronic record will need to be kept and how it will be used. By saving an electronic record in the correct file format, the risk of software obsolescence is reduced.

- For short-term preservation, the format in which the record was created can be used, e.g. Word, Excel, Access, etc.
- For long-term preservation, proprietary formats such as the above should be avoided, and non-proprietary formats used instead, e.g. plain text or PDF; PDF-A.
- It is not possible to preserve a database long-term in its original format. A compromise between the original use of the record and preserving the data must be sought. E.g. an Excel spreadsheet cannot be preserved long-term in Excel format. At some point the data will have to be exported from Excel into a format suitable for long-term preservation such as CSV (comma separated value) format. It is advisable to consult an IT professional if a meeting wishes to preserve a database long-term.

5. Disposing of electronic records

Once electronic records have surpassed business, administrative and legal use to a meeting, and have no historical or research value, they can be deleted.

A separate guide in this series deals with deposit of archives to appropriate repositories. See *Guide No. 9 Depositing archives with appropriate repositories*.

6. Managing emails

This section provides practical advice on managing emails.

Basic rules for emails are:

- The sender files a message sent within the organisation

- The recipient files a message sent from outside the organisation
- Recipients marked as c.c. do not need to file messages.

There are two broad forms of email:

- Email is purely a wrapper for an attached document - only the document needs to be saved
- Email itself is a text document - the email needs to be saved

Email messaging is an unstructured medium which can become disorderly and tangled. They can produce confused and repetitious records. The following provides some guidance on how to manage emails effectively:

- Use clear and descriptive subject lines.
- Indicate if no reply is needed.
- Do not resend attachments with reply unless necessary.
- Do not bundle topics together in one email if possible. It is better to create separate messages in the same way as a text document has a single central focus.
- Include previous text in replies, and identify a significant point at which the whole dialogue is saved as a record in one physical message.

There are three recommended ways of storing emails:

- By printing to paper.
- By saving into a relevant folder within the email system.
- By saving emails to a folder on the computer. (attachments should be saved in the same folder as the email)

The last way is recommended as best practice, i.e. saving messages into the relevant folder on the computer. This system has the advantage of bringing together all documents and messages relevant to a theme, activity or function in the same folder.

7. Further advice

For further advice on managing records and archives you can either write to Friends House Library, Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ, telephone 020 7663 1135 or send an email to library@quaker.org.uk

Guides in this series

Guide No. 1 The job of the Custodian of Records
 Guide No. 2 Meetings' records and their retention and disposal
 Guide No. 3 Legislation affecting records and record-keeping
 Guide No. 4 Creation to curation of records
 Guide No. 5 Minutes and supporting papers
 Guide No. 6 Electronic records

Guide No. 7 Preservation and storage of records and archives
Guide No. 8 Use and access to records and archives
Guide No. 9 Depositing archives with appropriate repositories
Guide No. 10 Disaster preparedness
Guide No. 11 Creating exhibitions and displays
Guide No. 12 Records equipment and suppliers
Guide No. 13 Glossary
Guide No. 14 Frequently Asked Questions

All guides can be downloaded from the Britain Yearly Meeting website www.quaker.org.uk/Library on the Support for Meetings page or requested from the Library.

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