



DIRECTIVE R2

APPLICATION AND MAINTENANCE OF THE FILING SYSTEM

**National Archives and Records Service of South Africa
June 2003**

LIST OF TERMS

Act:

The National Archives and Records Service of South Africa Act (Act No. 43 of 1996, as amended.)

Archival value:

Those values, administrative, fiscal, legal, evidential and/or informational, which justify the indefinite or permanent retention of records.

Archives:

Records in the custody of an archives repository.

Correspondence system

A set of paper-based and electronic communications and associated documents, sent, received, generated, processed and stored during the conduct of business.

Current records:

Records that form part of a records classification system still in use.

Custody:

The control of records based upon their physical possession.

Disposal:

The action of either destroying/deleting a record or transferring it into archival custody.

Disposal authority:

A written authority issued by the National Archivist specifying which records should be transferred into archival custody or specifying which records should be destroyed/deleted or otherwise disposed of.

Disposal authority number:

A unique number identifying each disposal authority issued to a specific office.

Disposal instruction:

The specific instruction regarding disposal allocated to each record e.g. *D* for delete/destroy and *A* for transferring into archival custody.

File:

- 1) An organised arrangement of records on the same subject accumulated in chronological order within the same cover/folder/container.
- 2) The physical action of allocating file reference numbers to records and placing them inside the cover/folder/container.

File plan:

A pre-determined logical and systematic structure into which records are arranged and intellectually stored according to subject groups and subjects to facilitate efficient retrieval and disposal of records. The *file plan* is used for both current paper-based and current electronic correspondence systems. It usually contains the reference number, title, description and disposal authority of files/folders held in an office.

Filing system:

The collective noun for a storage system (like files, boxes, shelves or electronic applications and storage systems) in which records are stored in a systematic manner according to a *file plan*.

File reference:

A unique identifier for a file. This can be a numerical, alphanumerical or alphabetical identifier. It is used to link a record to its specific subject file and subject grouping.

Governmental body:

Any legislative, executive, judicial or administrative organ of state (including a statutory body) at the national level of government and until provincial archival legislation takes effect also all provincial administrations and local authorities.

Head of a governmental body:

The chief executive officer of a governmental body or the person who is acting as such.

Records other than correspondence systems:

Records that do not form part of a correspondence file, or a case file e.g. registers, maps, plans, electronic records, audio-visual records, etc.

Public record:

A record created or received by a governmental body in pursuance of its activities, regardless of form or medium. (See Annexure 1)

Record:

- 1) Recorded information regardless of form or medium.
- 2) Evidence of a transaction, preserved for the evidential information it contains.

Recording:

Anything on which sounds or images or both are fixed or from which sounds or images or both are capable of being reproduced, regardless of form.

Recordkeeping:

Making and maintaining complete, accurate and reliable evidence of official business in the form of recorded information.

Record classification system:

A plan for the systematic identification and arrangement of business activities and/or records into categories according to logically structured conventions, methods and procedural rules represented in the classification system. The records classification systems prescribed by the National Archives and Records Service are *filing system* for correspondence systems and the *schedule for records other than correspondence systems*.

Record system:

A collection of policies procedures and systems, which capture information according to a records classification system, manage, store and provide access to records and their context over time. A.k.a. *recordkeeping system*.

Regulations:

The National Archives and Records Service of South Africa Regulations, 2002, Regulation R158 published in the *Government Gazette* No. 24085 of 20 Nov. 2002.

Retention period:

- 1) The length of time that records should be retained in offices before they are either transferred into archival custody or destroyed/deleted. As far as non-archival records are concerned the head of the office decides on the retention periods in accordance with the administrative use of the records and the legal obligations the records need to fulfill. In the case of archival records the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa Act, 1996 as amended, determines that such records must normally be kept for twenty years after the end of the year in which they were created, before they are transferred into archival custody.
- 2) In an electronic document management system, the length of time a record is kept online before it is moved to near-line or off-line storage in a hierarchical storage management system.

Schedule for records other than correspondence systems:

A control mechanism for records other than correspondence files (other records), which contains a description and the disposal instructions and retention periods of all other records. It consists of the following parts:

- Schedule for paper-based records other than correspondence files;
- Schedule for electronic records systems other than the electronic correspondence system;

- Schedule for microfilm records;
- Schedule for audio-visual records.

Scheduled:

Records in respect of which a written disposal authority has been issued and which are due for disposal on a specific date.

Terminated records:

Records which were created or received by a governmental body and which were managed by a records classification system no longer in use.

Unscheduled:

Records in respect of which a written disposal authority has not yet been issued and which can thus not be disposed of.

Vital/essential records:

- 1) Records that protect the enduring civil, legal, financial, property and other rights of the citizens of a country;
- 2) Records that are needed to continue operational responsibilities under disaster conditions;
- 3) Records that protect the legal and financial rights of the Government.

1. MAINTENANCE OF THE FILING SYSTEM

If an efficient file plan is not properly maintained, it will deteriorate rapidly and become uncontrolled with the result that the efficient service which the registry should provide will collapse. It also means that valuable time devoted to revising the system and establishing it on an efficient basis has in reality been wasted.

Supervision over the effective maintenance of the filing system should therefore be entrusted to a senior official who understands the file plan and its workings. This task must appear on his duty sheet. (See Performance criteria for records managers of governmental bodies.)

By effective maintenance is meant that the creation of new files should be rigidly controlled so that they fit into the correct place in the general pattern of the file plan and that duplication of existing files is prevented. New files have to be created when necessary and care should be taken lest new documents be forced into the existing file plan and thus land up on files in which they do not belong.

The National Archivist must be notified of all additions and amendments. This can be done by submitting a copy of the circular informing sections or offices of the additions and/or amendments. In the case of more extensive amendments it is advisable to obtain the approval of the National Archivist before opening file covers or notifying branch offices.

Then too, the practical application of the file plan must be studied continually to note whether any improvements are possible. No current file plan will ever remain static and the necessary adjustments will have to be made from time to time. Apart from new files for new subjects, existing files may have to be re-divided or subdivided. It may transpire that documents accumulate too rapidly on a particular file and that subdivision is necessary, or that other files are subdivided too minutely which could be grouped together.

The correct placing of documents on files should be controlled continuously. This will be necessary particularly in the beginning when the new file plan is still unknown. Gradually things will run smoothly as the working of the file plan becomes known and the staff become accustomed to placing a particular type of correspondence on a particular file. An easy method of control to see whether documents are being dealt with on the correct files is to scrutinize the daily file.

A continual watch must be kept to ensure that ephemeral and important documents do not accumulate on the same file. Hence routine handling of cases should not be dealt with on the same file as those containing correspondence on broad policy matters.

In allocating file reference numbers, particular care should be exercised especially in the beginning, to ensure that documents are placed on the correct files. Gradually more and more documents received will already bear the correct file number since they are answers to letters despatched. There will however, always be

a portion of incoming correspondence which will have to be numbered. The documents should be numbered by using the file plan and not by the use of the alphabetical index. The use of the file plan will ensure that the official concerned gets to know it well. Continual decisions will have to be taken whether a document should be placed on an existing file or whether a new file should be opened. New files should be carefully evaluated as it usually seems uncertain at the start what the subject encompasses or how it will develop. Descriptions should not be chosen in such a way that they are too limiting or too broadly defined. The field the file will have to cover, will therefore have to be chosen very carefully and the description will have to be unambiguous. It is usually necessary to consult the official or section concerned to establish precisely what is required.

Experience has shown that the use of the policy files should be watched closely, not merely to ensure that they are not abused as general files, but also to ensure that copies of documents containing decisions of policy are placed in their entirety on the file.

Cases also occur where the nature of the correspondence on a file changes to such an extent that further correspondence should be conducted on another file, or a new file. Note the following example: correspondence concerning the placing of a service on the budget will be conducted on the budget file until the stage is reached where funds are voted. Correspondence on the actual execution of the service should however, be conducted on the relevant subject file.

2. OBTAINING OF DISPOSAL AUTHORITY

Disposal authority i.e. whether a file may eventually be destroyed or whether it will have to be transferred to an archives repository, will have to be requested for every file in the file plan. Once the file plan has been in use for about two years, is functioning satisfactorily and has had most of the problems ironed out, an application should be submitted to the National Archivist for the issuing of a standing disposal authority.

Once the disposal authority has been obtained, the instructions should be entered on every file cover. The following symbols are used:

A20 : in respect of records to be transferred to a archives repository if a period of 20 years has elapsed since the end of the year in which the records came into existence.

D : in respect of records which may be destroyed after closure.

The periods after which the records are to be destroyed or transferred should be attached to the particular symbol and entered on the file covers and against the file titles in the file plan, eg. D3 (indicates: destroy three years after closure). The period after which documents may be destroyed is calculated from the date of the closure of the file.

2.1 Destruction Register

A register (loose leaf), divided up according to years, should be kept and as soon as a file, or a part thereof, is closed, the number of the file and the volume number should be entered under the year in which it should be destroyed. Thus, a system is built whereby outdated files are discarded regularly, at least once a year.

There is a tendency to remain on the safe side by deciding on lengthy retention periods when the period of retention is chosen for the first time. As a result, it is essential to review the period in the light of experience every now and then, and to shorten it where possible.

The prescribed system of disposing of files can be applied to files which accrue rapidly, or to cases where a file is finally closed. There are, however, also those files which become disused and usually remain among the current files. In order to clear these files as well, all current files should be reviewed periodically.

3. UNIFORM FILE PLAN FOR VARIOUS OFFICES

In cases where a body has two or more branch offices fulfilling more or less identical functions it is highly desirable for a uniform file plan to be compiled and maintained for use in those offices. The advantage is that, where possible, disposal authority for correspondence files can be applied to all the offices - otherwise the records of each office have to be dealt with separately. It also ensures that an effective file plan is in use and that officials when transferred, are already acquainted with the file plan of the new office. No time is lost therefore, owing to lack of knowledge of the file plan.

Should a uniform file plan be used for the head office and branch offices, its value will further be enhanced since most of the correspondence exchanged between the offices will already bear the correct reference number, thereby saving much time in the numbering of documents.

A uniform file plan for head and branch offices, should, however, be implemented only in cases where the functions exercised are so close to one another that a file plan like this is practicable. Occasionally it is better to compile a file plan for branch offices based on the head office file plan, in which, as a rule less provision is made for the subdivision of files - or sometimes greater, as the case may be.

An absolutely important and fundamental requirement of an uniform file plan is that it should be kept uniform. This means leaving as little as possible to the discretion of individual offices as far as opening files for which no provision is made in the file plan is concerned. Generally this boils down to allowing only case files to be opened without prior authorisation.

Thus, for all cases demanding new files, approval must be obtained from the records manager before such files may be opened. The procedure usually followed is to request authority from a central authority (usually head office) beforehand to open a new file. Information is given about the nature of the correspondence for which it is required, with proposals for a possible title and placing of the file in the file plan. As soon as a new file is authorised, all offices using the file plan are informed of it in a circular minute and all make the necessary alterations and/or amendments. A copy of the minute has to be sent to the National Archivist as well. Should a case occur where an office must carry on correspondence for which no file exists in the file plan and the necessary authorisation could not be obtained beforehand, the correspondence is provisionally conducted on a file for unclassified correspondence for which provision should be made in the system. Authorisation is then requested immediately for the creation of the new file required and as soon as it has been obtained the correspondence is transferred to the new file. A note can, if deemed necessary, be placed on the file for unclassified correspondence mentioning whether the documents have been transferred, but no correspondence should be placed on the file permanently.

Such an uniform file plan naturally means that all offices will not open all the files, but only those actually required. It is therefore important for every office to keep a loose-leaf register to indicate which files are actually in use, as explained already under Maintenance of the filing system.

Although there may be gaps in the numbers of the files of an office, these do not usually give rise to any problems.