



Record retention schedules: a guide

Introduction

An essential part of good records management is ensuring that you retain records for as long as they have value. This is determined by a number of factors, which include business needs, legal and regulatory requirements, risk management, best practice and historical value. The retention schedules provide guidance for departments on how long records should be kept based on these factors. You should refer to your [departmental record retention schedules](#) when making decisions about retaining and disposing of your records.

What are record retention schedules?

Record retention schedules outline the different types of records that a department generates, receives and manages in the course of carrying out business functions and activities of the United Reformed Church. It sets out how long records should be kept for in order to meet its operational business needs, statutory and fiscal requirements, and to ensure that records of historical value are identified and preserved. Retention schedules also establish what should happen to records once they are no longer required. The record retention schedules cover all Church House records, regardless of formats (e.g. paper and electronic).

Why should you use a record retention schedule?

The benefits of using record retention schedules include:

- You are meeting current and future business needs of URC.
- It gives you the knowledge and confidence as to when and how to dispose of your records safely.
- It retains evidence that you have complied with legal and accountability requirements.
- It helps you to avoid inadvertent or ad hoc destruction.
- It makes it easier for you to manage and retrieve records that are needed by systematically removing records that are redundant.
- It eliminates the cost of storing and maintaining unwanted records.
- It preserves information on past and present decisions as part of corporate memory.
- It preserves records which serve interests of society at large.
- It retains contexts to enable future users to judge authenticity and reliability of records.

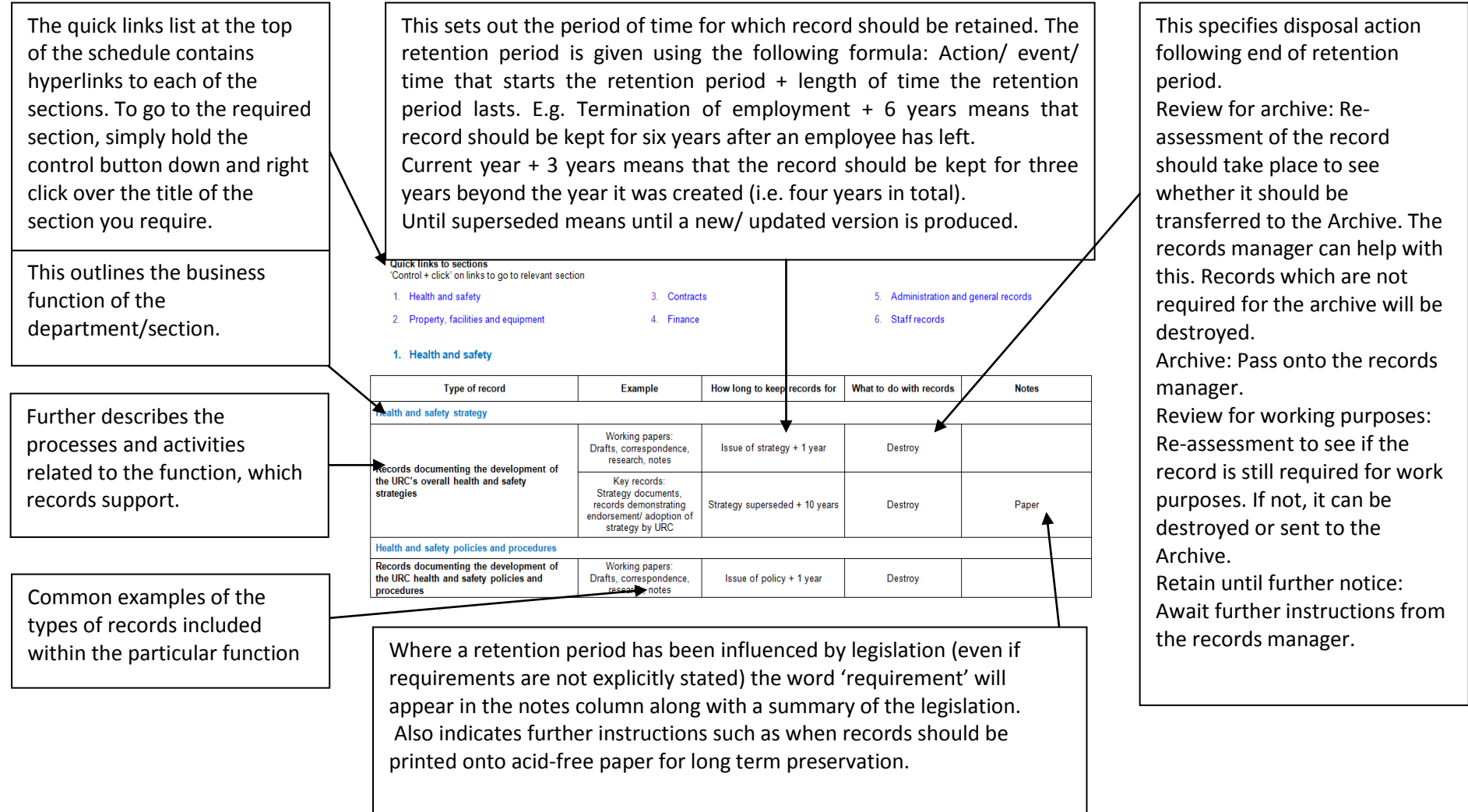
How are record retention schedule developed?

The retention schedules were developed between 2010 and 2014 in consultations with staff at URC, information gathered from departmental surveys of electronic and paper records in Church House and considerations of legal and regulatory factors. As part of the current records management programme additional information surveys and researches will be conducted to update the current record retention schedules and this will reflect departmental restructures and new legislative and statutory requirements.

When you are defining retention periods for records, it is important that you consider the various factors before you make a final decision:

- Operational and business requirements: Is information needed to support the work of your department for a defined period of time?
- Legal and regulatory requirements: Are there rules for the retention of some information documented in law? Are there any external requirements to maintain the information, either from governmental or granting agencies? Many laws include specific requirements to create and maintain records and sometimes they will stipulate the length of time for which records must be held. Some are applicable more generally across URC, and some impact on specific business functions and activities. It may state a statutory minimum or maximum retention period, or just provide guidance. Although not all are necessarily explicit in their direction on retention periods, many refer directly to record-keeping. Therefore it is very important when you are defining retention policies that legal research is carried out. This would be alongside reviewing sector-specific advice – standards and codes of practice – issued by national and international professional bodies.
- Accountability and transparency: Is information required to demonstrate the work of the URC (for example, to wider society or regulatory authorities) and to show accountability for its actions? Does the record help to prevent a legal liability? Or does it perhaps pose a liability, even after the administrative value has disappeared?
- Long-term reference or evidential value: Similar to above, administrative value has passed, but do you need to keep the information so that it is available to support future work (for example, if it sets a precedent that must be followed again)?
- Historical value: Is the information likely to be of interest for future researchers and therefore needs to be transferred to URC archive at an appropriate point? Does the record document an important part of URC's history? Will it be a valuable resource to researchers many years from now? Do the records document important decisions or opinions? Some archival records are very easily identified (e.g. papers of official boards and committees), but others less so. The records manager will be able to help you with identifying archival material.
- Relationship with other records: Is one distinct set of information needed in order to understand another set? If so, both are likely to be needed to be held for the same period of time.
- Level of use: It can be useful to ask how often you have consulted these records over a period of time, certainly in order to assess their operational value. Some people take this a step further and put in place processes to monitor use over a period of time (for example, putting a sticker on the front of a file each time it is accessed). Other considerations include at what point would not having the material available cease to be a serious hardship?
- Cost: Storage costs, whether you are holding paper or electronic records, can be a factor in deciding how long to keep something for.
- Risk: Perhaps an over-riding factor to consider is URC's approach to risk. Asking questions around the consequences of either destroying or keeping information can focus the decision. This will inevitably include you looking at legal and financial implications, as well as business requirements.
- Best practice: The records management profession shares a lot of resources and so it is usually possible to look to other retention policies to benchmark practice against.

Understanding record retention schedules



How should you use a record retention schedule?

- Retention is usually carried out on files rather than individual records. Most records are found in files and it is quicker for you to carry out retention in this way.
- Ideally you should identify a record's retention period at the point you either create or receive the record. However, the retention period of a record or file can be identified at any given time. It is useful to add retention information, such as the retention period, to the cover of paper folders (e.g. destroy on 31/12/2015) so that you can easily identify candidates for destruction. You could also make a note of retention information in the title of an electronic folder for digital records.
- A retention schedule can be used as a basis for a filing structure or at least compliment the arrangement. Arranging records logically, for example grouping similar series of records together will enable you to locate records easily. This will help you to reduce the time you spend searching. It will also allow you to match groups of records to their associated retention period. Advice on how you can effectively create filing structures for your records is available on the guide ['Organising paper and electronic records'](#).
- Where a file contains records with different retention periods, it is normal practice to identify the record with the longest retention period and apply this to the whole file.
- The [retention schedule](#) can be used when clearing out old electronic and paper records and files. Therefore, you can dispose of your records in accordance with the retention schedule on a continuous basis throughout the year.
- It is recommended that you try to schedule regular housekeeping times to review both paper and electronic records. This should be at least once a year and may include you closing folders, destroying paper, deleting electronic files, marking records with future retention actions and monitoring use of filing systems. Be consistent when applying a retention period. If you are aware that groups of records of the same business activity are held in multiple locations and formats, then look at all of these wherever possible and ensure the same actions are applied throughout.
- You may choose to store files which have not yet reached the end of their retention period in the record stores rather than in your office where the records manager will implement retention at the appropriate time. More information on how you can transfer records is available in ['Church House record stores'](#) guide.
- If you wish to keep a file beyond its disposal date, a request should be made to the records manager to extend the retention period. The records manager and department will then agree on a suitable extension period. Moreover, if you are not happy with aspects of your department's retention schedule, then changes can be suggested and made. However, please note some retention periods take into account legal and regulatory requirements and these cannot be changed.
- Using the retention schedules, you should dispose records in a manner appropriate to their security requirements. For more information on this please see guidance on ['Record disposal'](#). If you have any doubt concerning the destruction of a record (e.g. because of a current Data Protection subject access request or perhaps legal proceedings) then it must be postponed and reviewed again at a suitable date. This date should be agreed and recorded somewhere.

Should you keep records electronically or in the paper files?

The Church House does not currently have the facilities to manage its electronic records for long term preservation. For this reason:

- Records listed in your [departmental retention schedule](#) as having a lifespan of 6 years or less can be kept purely electronically.
- Records with a retention period of longer than 6 years or those required for audit, legal or evidential use or those which are deemed worthy of permanent preservation as archives should be printed out and kept in your paper filing systems.
- Databases and complex spreadsheets can only be kept electronically, although reports may be printed out where necessary.
- You can keep an electronic version of a printed document for reference, but it should always be destroyed when the paper record is destroyed. Your electronic filing systems should match your paper systems to make this easier.
- Where an electronic and paper version of the same document exists, the paper version should be considered the master copy.

Further advice

To discuss anything in this guide or for more advice to help with managing your records, please contact the records manager on: shahera.begum@urc.org.uk

Plus keep an eye out on the public records management folder for further guidance sheets. These will cover a range of topics including how to use the records store, managing electronic and paper records, how to successfully manage your emails and tips for creating effective filing structures.