

1. Introduction

a. What this document covers

This document gives guidance and advice on how URC churches should care for their paper and electronic records. It includes information on how long records should be kept for, how records should be managed and stored, what archives are and where they should be deposited.

b. The importance of caring for your church's records

Churches have a duty to care for their records; they are a valuable resource.

Some of the reasons why a church should care for its records include:

- Without proper organisation the sheer volume of records (paper and electronic) can become overwhelming. Well managed records ensure that the right information is available to the right people at the right time.
- Many areas of church activity are subject to external regulation, for example, child protection and finance, which makes it essential to maintain proper records.
- Good record keeping increases the church's accountability to its members, the synod, the URC and the wider community.
- It ensures that records that will have archival or historical value in future, and which help tell the story of the church, are identified and preserved.

2. Records retention - how long to keep records

Records must be kept for as long as they are required for operational, legal, historical etc purposes. However, it is also important that records that are no longer required are destroyed, for example, to prevent a build-up of obsolete records taking up valuable storage space.

The records retention schedule¹ in appendix 1 sets how long different types of church records should be kept for to meet business, fiscal, statutory etc requirements and when they can be disposed of. It also documents which church records should be offered to the local public record office to be kept as the church's archive.

3. Keeping records

a. Paper records

Paper should be stored on church premises rather than in private homes. They should be kept in boxes or cabinets. The storage area should be as fire proof as possible; free from damp and mould; well ventilated; and unlikely to be affected by flooding, insect or rodent activity. Therefore, attics, basements, garages and outhouses are not suitable. All records should be kept where they are safeguarded against unauthorised access. Confidential, sensitive or important records should be stored in locked filing cabinets or safes and must be disposed of in a secure manner e.g. through shredding.

b. Electronic records

Introduction

Whilst information technology has made church administration much easier in many ways, there are certain challenges which are specific to electronic records and which must be considered.

¹ A records retention schedule is a list of how long different sorts of records should be kept, and what to do with them after that time.

Long-term preservation and access

Electronic records present particular challenges in terms of long-term preservation and access. Paper records can go decades before needing preservation work; long-term data preservation must be considered at the birth of each electronic record due to the relative instability of electronic media. For example, software and hardware can quickly become obsolete due to rapid developments in technology; magnetic media is easily corrupted, and data is not always retrievable; and data can be lost when migrating records to a new computer system.

As a result, guaranteeing long-term access to electronic records is difficult and requires more management, expertise and cost than guaranteeing long-term access to paper records. For this reason, it is recommended that any church records that need to be kept for longer than ten years or that have been designated as archives be printed and kept as paper records.

Storage

There should be a regular system of backup for electronic records saved on individual computers as a precaution against loss in the case of a hard drive failing, theft etc. These backups should be stored away from the computer, ideally in another building. Records stored on portable media such as CDs or USB flash drives should be checked regularly to ensure that they are still accessible.

Management

Electronic records should be managed in the same way as paper records. They should be saved into an organised filing system and subject to retention and disposal. It is important that electronic records are given titles that are understandable, describe what the record is and include its creation date. The record's title and date should be recorded within the document (for example, as a header or footer) so that they can still be identified when printed. As electronic records are easily altered it is helpful to identify different versions of a document by including version numbers or 'draft', 'copy' etc in the title and in the document itself.

Email

Emails are also electronic records and need to be managed. Unmanaged emails can be a source of stress for staff due to the large volume that they send and receive. Emails should be subject to the retention schedule. Transitory emails such as out-of-office replies should be deleted immediately; emails with short-term value such as notices of upcoming meetings should be kept in folders under the inbox and deleted when obsolete; records of value to the church should be saved into the folder system alongside other electronic records and the email deleted from the inbox; emails which have archival value or which need to be kept for more than ten years should be printed.

4. Archives

Archives are the small percentage of a church's records that are preserved indefinitely because of their continuing value for legal, historical and research purposes.²

a. Where to deposit archives

The URC advises all churches to deposit their archival records at their local public record office. Records will be looked after by professional staff, safeguarded for the future and catalogued and made available to researchers. If a church has not already deposited records with their local public record office, they should contact them to discuss the possibility of transferring records.

b. Archive deposit agreements

It is helpful, before a deposit is made, to be clear on the terms of the transfer and to have a written contract between the church and record office setting out these terms. Things to be considered include:

² An archive is also the building where archives are kept and the organisation responsible for the selection, care and use of records of continuing value.

- **When to transfer records:** records can be transferred to record offices when they are no longer required for current work purposes. The national URC records are transferred to the archive once they have reached 15 years old unless they are still required for operational purposes. Rather than making deposits of records sporadically it can be a good idea to make periodic transfers e.g. every five or ten years.
- **Loan/ gift:** are the records being given as a gift (transferring ownership) or a loan (retaining ownership)?
- **Access to the records:** Once records are transferred they will be made available to researchers according to the record office's access policy. It is important to ask whether the record office will accept records which the church wishes to keep closed to researchers for a fixed period of time. If the record office is not happy to accept these records, the church should consider keeping them until they are happy for them to be accessed by researchers.
- **Data Protection:** When arranging to deposit records, the church should talk to the record office about their policies on data protection. The record office will be able to offer advice, reassurance and information on how they manage records containing personal data.

c. Preservation

Any records that have been designed as archives must be printed and kept as paper records (although a digital copy may also be kept) as churches and most public record offices do not currently have the facilities for the safe long-term management of electronic records.

For archival records, some simple preservation measures should be taken:

- Brass or plastic paperclips should be used rather than metal paper clips, pins and staples which corrode and cause damage to documents.
- Avoid using staples and do not put papers into plastic pockets as these will have to be removed by an archivist before entering the archive.
- Do not use rubber bands on documents as these perish and cause damage to paper.
- Great care should be taken if storing documents in plastic wallets/ folders as certain types of plastic stick to the ink and lift it off the document.

d. Archiving the church's website

The UK Web Archive (<http://www.webarchive.org.uk/ukwa/>) offers an easy way for churches to archive their website. The Web Archive takes six monthly 'snapshots' of a website and makes them available via its website for free. The main URC website and several church websites are archived in this way. For more information, contact the Web Archive using the form on their site.

5. Data protection

All churches are subject to the Data Protection Act 2018, including the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) which promotes best practice when collecting and using personal data. Information on Data Protection can be found on the Information Commissioner's Office website: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/>.

6. Further information/ advice

For assistance or advice on matters of records and archives management, please contact Helen Weller or Shahera Begum on the contact details below.

Helen Weller, Archivist (Mon-Thur, mornings)
Westminster College
Madingley Road
Cambridge CB3 0AA
Phone: 01223 33 06 20
Email: hw374@cam.ac.uk

Shahera Begum, Records Manager (Mon-Wed)
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86 Tavistock Place
London WC1H 9RT
Phone: 020 7691 9864
Email: shahera.begum@urc.org.uk

Appendix 1: Records retention schedule

Key to the retention schedule

Retention periods which based on legal/ regulatory requirements are marked “[requirement]”.

Records to be sent to the public record office

The following are records that should be preserved on a permanent basis. When they are no longer required by the church for operational purposes they should be deposited in the local public record office.

Type of record	Notes
Meeting minutes, agendas and supporting papers for church meeting, elders’ meeting, church groups	
Publications and resources	Includes church histories and magazines, memoirs of ministers or church members
Records documenting church events	Reports, programmes, photos. Not including records documenting the organisation of the event e.g. RSVPs
Baptism, marriage and burial registers	Store in a secure location, ideally a safe
Lists of members, and/or adherents	These should be dated
Orders of service	
Photographs	Dated with people and events identified
Final annual accounts (preferably signed)	
Architectural drawings, photographs, and plans for church and hall	
List of tombs in graveyards and inside the church	Copy inscriptions where possible

Other records

Type of record	How long to keep it for	What to do with it
General correspondence, enquiries etc	Last action on correspondence + 2 years	Destroy
Databases, mailing and contact lists	Keep most up-to-date version	Destroy when no longer required
Finance records including: cash books, bills, bank statements, budgets, accounting records and other subsidiary financial records	Current financial year + 6 years [requirement]	Destroy
Receiving and administering legacies, covenant payments and trusts	Life of legacy/ covenant/ trust + 6 years	Destroy
Records documenting the acquisition of ownership of properties	Disposal of property + 12 years [requirement]	Destroy
Records documenting the disposal of properties by sale, transfer or donation	Disposal of property + 12 years [requirement]	Destroy
Records documenting leasing-out arrangements for properties	Expiry of lease + 12 years [requirement]	Destroy
Deeds of title for properties	Disposal of property	Transfer to new owner
Records documenting applications for planning consents and consents granted	Disposal of property OR Expiry of consent (whichever is sooner)	Transfer to new owner OR Destroy
Records documenting major maintenance and development works on property	Completion of work + 15 years OR Disposal of property [requirement]	Destroy OR Transfer to new owner

Records documenting the negotiation, establishment, review and alteration of contracts and agreements between the church and others	End of contract + 6 years [requirement]	Destroy
Records documenting the arrangement and renewal of insurance policies	Keep permanently	Keep permanently
A note on the whereabouts of the Trust Deed(s), and any related documents, of the congregation³	Keep permanently	Keep permanently
The Trust Deed(s), and any related documents, of the congregation	Keep permanently	Keep permanently in a safe
DBS certificate information⁴	Six months maximum[requirement]	Destroy
Records relating to concerns about those working with children and young people	Date of concern + 75 years	Destroy
Allegation of a child protection nature against a member of staff/ volunteer, including where the allegation is unfounded	Date of allegation + 75 years	Destroy
Records of children's activities and events e.g. registers, risk assessments; consent forms; insurance, health & safety records, incidents and application records; medical information; volunteers; accommodation lists	Date of activity/ event + 25 years [requirement]	Destroy
Personnel records including: contracts, appraisal records, job descriptions, training records, sickness records, termination of employment documentation	Termination of employment + 10 years [requirement]	Destroy
Accident report	Adult: date of incident + 3 years Child: until child reaches 21	Destroy
An index to any church library	Keep permanently	Keep permanently ⁵
A record of furnishings, lighting fixtures etc (with dates); artefacts given to church (include dates and origins); church silver, plate, china, mugs etc (with photographs in case of theft); memorial tablets (with a note of the text); war memorials (including note of text); stained glass.	Keep permanently	Keep permanently

Objects and memorabilia

Most churches will have collections of objects and memorabilia such as church silver, badges and banners from uniformed organisations etc which they will wish to keep. These items are not normally held by record offices. In the event of the closure of the church, the fate of such artefacts should be discussed with the synod and the record office who will be able to advise on a suitable home for them. Please note that items relating to Pilots companies can be given to the Pilots office in Church House.

³ If the Synod Trust is the trustee of the church building, ascertain whether these documents are held at the synod offices or with their solicitors. Congregations whose property is not held under the Synod Trust should inform the synod of the names of the trustees of the church buildings.

⁴ The actual disclosure form must be destroyed after 6 months. However a record can be kept of the date of issue of a certificate, the name of the subject, the type of certificate requested, the position for which the certificate was requested, the unique reference number of the certificates and the details of the recruitment decision taken. A record of whether a disclosure was clear/ unclear or blemished **must not be kept**.

⁵ This should not be transferred to the archive in the event of the church closing.