

# Records Advice for Synods



## 1. Introduction

### **a. What this covers**

This document gives guidance and advice on how URC synods should care for their paper and electronic records. It includes information on how long records should be kept for, how records should be stored, what to do with the synod's archives, how to manage electronic records and how to care for ministers' personnel files

### **b. The importance of managing your synod's records**

Each synod has a duty to care for its records, both electronic and paper; they are one of its important business assets and a valuable resource.

*Some of the reasons a synod 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.
- As well-managed records are only kept as long as they are required, valuable office space is freed up.
- Many areas of synod 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 synod's accountability to its churches, 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 synod, are identified and preserved.

Synods should also encourage their churches to care for their records and to deposit their archives in their local public record office (please see *Records Advice for URC Churches* for further details).

## 2. Records retention - how long to keep records

### **a. Synod record retention schedules**

Records must be kept for as long as they are required to meet the synod's operational business needs, statutory and fiscal requirements and for the synod's historical record. However, synods should also ensure that records that are no longer required are destroyed. The Synod Records Retention Schedule found in appendix 1 gives assistance to synods in determining how long to keep their records for and what should happen to those records once they are no longer required.

### **b. Why use the synod retention schedule?**

- The synod ensures its records are managed consistently and are under its control.
- Staff have confidence to know when and how to dispose of records.
- Obsolete records can be removed thus saving space, equipment and staff time.
- Staff know what records exist and how to find them.
- Keeping and disposing of records in accordance to the retention schedule protects the synod against the risk of destroying records prematurely, being unable to produce them when required and being accused of wrongly destroying records.

### 3. Keeping records

#### *a. Know what records exist and where they are located*

Knowing what records, paper and electronic, exist and where they are located shows good management of an important business asset and helps the synod to comply with regulations and legislation such as Data Protection.

#### *b. Paper records*

Ideally, any records that need to be kept for longer than ten years or that have been designated as archives should be printed as soon as possible after creation and kept as paper records.

Paper records should be stored in boxes or filing 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.

Off-site storage can be a good solution if office space is at a premium and records need to be kept. However, retention guidance should be used to ensure that the synod is not paying to store obsolete records.

#### *c. Electronic records*

##### *Introduction*

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

##### *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 synod 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. Also, synods should seriously consider the implications of actions such as scanning in all paper documents with the aim of becoming a 'paperless' office. This should not be done for records with archival value or which need to be kept for more than ten years

##### *Storage*

The synod's electronic records should be saved onto a centralised server rather than individual computers. This protects them from loss in the case of a hard drive failing and means that information can be shared and accessed by team members. The server itself should be protected by being backed up regularly off-site.

Staff working away from the office should be enabled to log into the central server using programmes such as GoToMyPC.<sup>1</sup> Records can then be saved straight onto the server and not on personal computers and laptops.

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<sup>1</sup> GoToMyPC website: [http://www.gotomypc.co.uk/remote\\_access/remote\\_access](http://www.gotomypc.co.uk/remote_access/remote_access)

## Management

Electronic records should be subject to the same management as paper records to ensure they remain under the synod's control and that their volume does not become overwhelming.

- *Filing and retention:* electronic records should be saved into an organised electronic filing system and subject to retention and disposal.
- *Titles and dates:* electronic records should have 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.
- *Version control:* As electronic records are easily altered it is helpful to identify different versions of a document by including version numbers (e.g. consecutive whole numbers or numbers with points to reflect major and minor changes 1.1, 2.1, 2.2 etc) 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 of emails that they send and receive.

*Some simple steps to managing emails as records include:*

- 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 synod 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.
- Set aside regular times (a short time each day and a longer period of time every month) to review your email inbox, folders and 'sent items' and to delete, move or save emails elsewhere as required.
- Where possible each email should be restricted to one topic. When a new subject is introduced into an email discussion, a new email should be started.
- The original text should be included in a reply to an email as this ensures that there is a complete record of the conversation.
- All emails should be given a meaningful subject line.

## 4. Archives

Archives are the small percentage of the synod's records that are preserved indefinitely because of their continuing value for legal, historical and research purposes.<sup>2</sup>

### a. Where to deposit archives

The URC advises all churches and synods to deposit their archival records at their local public record office. Records will be looked after by professional staff, will be safeguarded for the future and will be catalogued and made available to researchers. If a synod 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 and terms of transfer

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 synod and record office setting out these terms. The deposit agreement between the URC and the Congregational Library for the deposit of the URC's national archive is available from the Church House Records Manager as an example.

When transferring archives to a public record office, the following should be considered:

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

### *Loan/ gift*

Are the records being given as a gift (so transferring ownership) or a loan (retaining ownership)?

### *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.

### *Access to the records*

Once records are transferred to the record office they will be made available to researchers according to the record office's access policy. Check with the record office whether they will accept records which the synod wishes to keep closed to researchers for a fixed period of time (e.g. records which contain sensitive information). If the record office IS not happy to accept 'closed' records, the synod should consider keeping them until they are happy for them to be accessed by researchers.

### *Data Protection issues*

When arranging to deposit records, the synod should talk to the record office about their data protection policy. A code of practice on the Data Protection Act for archivists, produced by various bodies including The National Archives, encourages depositors not to let concerns about data protection prevent them from depositing their records.<sup>3</sup> It particularly states that organisations should not weed, anonymise or destroy files that would otherwise be passed to the archive simply because they contain personal data.<sup>4</sup> 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 as soon after creation as possible and kept as paper records (although an electronic version may also be kept) as most synods and 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 synod's website**

The UK Web Archive (<http://www.webarchive.org.uk/ukwa/>) offers an easy way for synods 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 other URC websites are archived in this way. To arrange for a synod's website to be archived, simply contact the Web Archive using the form on their site.

### **e. Church records**

Any church records that come into the possession of the synod (for example, for closed churches) should be transferred to the appropriate public record office. The Synod Retention Schedule outlines which church records to preserve as archives.

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<sup>3</sup> *Code of practice for archivists and records managers under Section 51(4) of the Data Protection Act 1998*, The National Archives, the Society of Archivists, the Records Management Society and the National Association for Information Management, 2007. Accessed at <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/information-management/legislation/data-protection.htm> (September 2012).

<sup>4</sup> *Code of practice for archivists and records managers*, p.30.

## 5. Ministers' records

Synod should keep a personnel file for each minister serving or retired in that synod. Ministers' personnel files must be kept in hard copy and stored in locked filing cabinets. *Appendix 1: Records Retention Schedule* lists what records to include in the personnel files.

If a minister changes synod or retires into another synod, their hardcopy personnel file must be passed on to the new synod. On the death of a minister, the personnel file should be sent to Church House to be reconciled with the central personnel file held there. This file will eventually be sent to the URC archive where it will be open to researchers thirty years after the minister's death.

## 6. Key/ vital records

Certain records and information are vital to the running of the synod; without these it would struggle to function. As part of the business continuity plan, these records should be identified and copies kept off-site so that if the synod's premises ARE destroyed this information will still be accessible. If the synod backs its server up off-site many of these records will be automatically protected. However, it is worthwhile giving regular thought to which records are 'vital' to ensure all are being protected.

## 7. Data protection

All synods are subject to the 1998 Data Protection Act. The Act sets out eight Data Protection Principles which must be considered when handling any records containing personal data. Information on Data Protection can be found on the Information Commissioner's Office website: [http://www.ico.gov.uk/for\\_organisations/data\\_protection.aspx](http://www.ico.gov.uk/for_organisations/data_protection.aspx).

## 8. Further information/ advice

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

Jenny Delves, Records Manager (Mon-Wed)  
United Reformed Church House  
86 Tavistock Place  
London WC1H 9RT  
Phone: 02079162020  
Email: [recordsmanger@urc.org.uk](mailto:recordsmanger@urc.org.uk)

Helen Weller, Archivist (Mon,Wed-Fri mornings)  
Westminster College  
Madingley Road  
Cambridge CB3 0AA  
Phone: 01223741084  
Email: [hw374@cam.ac.uk](mailto:hw374@cam.ac.uk)

## Appendix 1: Records retention schedule: how long to keep your synod's records

### Key to terms

Retention periods which based on legal/ regulatory requirements are marked “[requirement]”. Records which are to be kept as archives and passed to the record office simply say “archive”. “Review for archive” means review to see if the record is worth passing to the archive. If not, it should be destroyed.

### Synod committee meetings

This section relates to committee meetings organised by the synod. There is no need to keep copies of other synods', organisations' or the national URC's meeting records.

| Type of record   | How long to keep it for   | What to do with it |
|--|---|--------------------|
| Final/signed minutes, agendas and supporting papers                    | Date of meeting + 15 years<br>OR Closure of committee<br>(whichever is first) | Archive            |
| Draft notes/ minutes which have been written into an official document | Date of meeting + 1 year  | Destroy            |
| Correspondence relating to a committee's business                      | Current financial year + 3 years  | Review for archive |

### Communications

| Type of record   | How long to keep it for                | What to do with it              |
|--|--|---------------------------------|
| Publications and resources including: synod newsletters, memorabilia of special occasions in synod etc | 1 copy to archive                      | 1 copy to archive               |
| General correspondence, enquiries etc  | Last action on correspondence + 1 year | Destroy                         |
| Databases, mailing and contact lists   | Keep most recent version               | Destroy when no longer required |

### Arranging events including meetings, travel and conferences

| Type of record   | How long to keep it for       | What to do with it |
|--|-------------------------------|--------------------|
| Records documenting the organisation and administration of synod events and travel | Completion of event + 1 year  | Destroy            |
| Records documenting synod events including: reports, programmes, photos            | Completion of event + 3 years | Review for archive |

### Ministers' records

#### Ministers' personnel files

The ministers' personnel files should contain:

| Type of record                                     | Note  |
|--|---|
| Basic biographical information                     | E.g. name, DOB, contact details, education, training received, previous churches.<br>A standard form could be created to record this information. |
| Final year assessment report from training college |   |
| Relevant training information                      | E.g. sabbaticals, EM3 etc   |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Record of any further experience gained following agreement with the synod</b> | E.g. international visits, ministerial exchanges etc   |
| <b>Copy of change forms</b>   | A copy of each change form should be kept  |
| <b>Notice of formal disciplinary process and the outcome</b>                      | The actual documents e.g. witness statements etc relating to the case must be kept separately. |
| <b>Grievance records</b>  |  |
| <b>Correspondence with minister relevant to their ministry</b>                    |  |

### **Other ministers' records**

These records should not be kept on the ministers' personnel files.

| <b>Type of record</b>   | <b>How long to keep it for</b>   | <b>What to do with it</b>                                 |
|---|--|---|
| <b>Exit interviews</b>  | Send copy to Church House  | Destroy other copies                                      |
| <b>Application form and related papers</b>  | Until minister is ordained   | Ensure copy is held by Church House. Destroy other copies |
| <b>Records relating to disciplinary issues which have not developed into "Section O" cases</b>                | End of case + 10 years<br>These documents must be kept separately from the minister's personnel file [requirement] | Destroy   |
| <b>Records relating to disciplinary issues which have developed into "Section O" cases</b>                    | Transfer to Church House [requirement]   | Destroy copies  |
| <b>Correspondence with minister not relevant to their ministry</b> e.g. minister's comments on URC policy etc | Keep as long as required for working purposes  | Destroy   |

### **Finance and property**

Most finance records need to be kept for 6 years after the year they were created ("current financial year +6 years").

| <b>Type of record</b>   | <b>How long to keep it for</b>  | <b>What to do with it</b>                 |
|---|---|---|
| <b>Finance records including:</b><br>PAYE and National insurance records<br>Accounting records<br>Budgets and periodic financial reports<br>VAT records<br>Records documenting tax returns<br>Bank statements and reconciliations<br>BACs confirmations<br>Bank deposits, withdrawals and transfers | Current financial year + 6 years [requirement]                                      | Destroy                                   |
| <b>Final annual accounts (preferably signed)</b>  | One copy to be kept permanently<br>One copy to be sent to the archive [requirement] | Keep one copy<br>Send one copy to archive |
| <b>Receiving and administering legacies, covenant payments and trusts</b>   | Life of legacy/ covenant/ trust + 6 years [requirement]                             | Destroy                                   |
| <b>Register of Seals</b>  | Keep permanently [requirement]  | Keep permanently                          |
| <b>Records documenting individual churches' finance details</b>   | As long as required. Update as necessary  | Destroy                                   |
| <b>Records documenting the negotiation, establishment, review and alteration of contracts and agreements between the synod and others</b>   | End of contract + 6 years [requirement]   | Destroy                                   |

|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <b>Records documenting the arrangement and renewal of insurance policies</b>  | Expiry of insurance policy + 6 years [requirement]                      | Destroy  |
| <b>Records documenting claims, and the outcomes of claims, against insurance policies</b>                             | Settlement of claim + 6 years [requirement]                             | Destroy  |
| <b>Records documenting the acquisition of ownership of properties</b>   | Disposal of property + 12 years [requirement]                           | Destroy  |
| <b>Records documenting the disposal of properties by sale, transfer or donation</b>                                   | Disposal of property + 12 years [requirement]                           | Destroy  |
| <b>Records documenting leasing-out arrangements for properties</b>  | Expiry of lease + 12 years [requirement]                                | Destroy  |
| <b>Deeds of title for properties</b>  | Disposal of property [requirement]                                      | Transfer to new owner  |
| <b>Records documenting applications for planning consents and consents granted</b>                                    | Disposal of property OR Expiry of consent                               | Transfer to new owner OR Destroy                                       |
| <b>Records documenting major maintenance and development works on property</b>  | Completion of the work + 15 years OR Disposal of property [requirement] | Destroy OR Transfer to new owner                                       |
| <b>The Trust Deed(s), and any related documents, of any churches for which the Synod Trust is trustee<sup>5</sup></b> | Keep permanently  | Keep permanently in a locked filing cabinet or safe or with solicitors |

### Human Resources and safeguarding

| <b>Type of record</b>   | <b>How long to keep it for</b>               | <b>What to do with it</b> |
|---|--|---------------------------|
| <b>Records documenting the application and interview process</b>  | Completion of recruitment process + 1 year   | Destroy                   |
| <b>Records relating to the advertising of vacancies</b>   | Completion of recruitment process + 6 months | Destroy                   |
| <b>Personnel records: summary record of employment details kept after the termination of employment.</b><br>Includes employee's name; dates of employment; positions held | Until age 100                                | Destroy                   |
| <b>Personnel records including:</b> contracts, appraisal records, job descriptions, training records, sickness records, termination of employment documentation           | Termination of employment + 10 years         | Destroy                   |
| <b>HR policy and procedure documents</b>  | Policy/ procedure superseded + 6 years       | Review for archive        |
| <b>DBS certificate information<sup>6</sup></b>  | Six months maximum [requirement]             | Destroy                   |
| <b>Records relating to concerns about those working with children and young people</b>  | Date of concern + 50 years                   | Destroy                   |

<sup>5</sup> Congregations whose property is not held under the Synod Trust should inform the synod of the names of the trustees of the church buildings.

<sup>6</sup> 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**.



|   |  |         |
|---|--|---------|
| <b>Allegation of a child protection nature against a member of staff/ volunteer, including where the allegation is unfounded</b>  | Date of allegation + 50 years                    | Destroy |
| <b>Records of children's activities and events</b> 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 |

## Churches

The following church records should be sent to the archive:

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