

Old Catton Parish Council Records Management Strategy

Introduction

A record is any information held by the Council and relating to any topic, area of work, decision reached, action taken or individual and regardless of the medium in which it is held whether paper, electronic, microfilm, microfiche, audio tape, video, etc. The Council recognises that:

- Records are a corporate resource and a valuable asset;
- Information has to be looked after properly;
- A co-ordinated approach has to be taken to its management.

The legislation now in place on information handling means that there is a need to manage information and to have an effective system for servicing the enhanced rights of access under Acts such as the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA) and the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA). The FOIA in particular provides an opportunity to:

- Improve the way in which the Council informs the public it serves;
- Improve the way in which it manages the enormous amount of information it holds.

The quality of the Council's records and the efficiency of the systems that provide for their retrieval must be good if the Council is to have a chance of meeting the requirements of the FOIA. The Council must have in place a tool to be able to comply with FOIA requests, i.e., to be able to respond to requests within the statutory 20 days' time limit and to be sure that all the requisite data has been included in the disclosure. Inability to find a file will not be considered as an adequate excuse for non-disclosure.

The Council therefore accepts that it has a responsibility to ensure that records are:

- Created accurately;
- Stored effectively;
- Kept securely;
- Traced efficiently;
- Retained in their original form if required for the purpose of legal proceedings;
- Retained only for as long as necessary;
- Disposed of appropriately.

Aims of the Strategy

This strategy provides a basis for the improved management of the Council's records in order to:

- Create authentic, reliable and useable records;
- Support the Council's business functions including policy-making and service delivery;
- Document the Council's decisions and activities;
- Reduce the volume of records held;
- Reduce storage costs;
- Facilitate the paperless office;
- Enable rapid, efficient, accurate and complete retrieval of information;

- Comply with access to information requests promptly;
- Conform with relevant legal and statutory requirement and Codes of Practice;
- Dispose appropriately of records that are no longer required;
- Maintain a focus on our customers;
- Ensure that staff are suitably trained to deliver services;
- Ensure that our other assets are efficiently managed;
- Use technology to assist with the delivery of services to the public.

Policy Statement

The Council's policy is to:

- Manage its records in a systematic and planned way to prevent or at least to minimise potential risks;
- Ensure that it can control the quantity and quality of information generated from the time a record is created until its ultimate disposal;
- Maintain information in a manner that effectively services its needs and those of its stakeholders;
- Dispose of the information appropriately when it is no longer required;
- Satisfy the provisions of the Code of Practice of the Management of Records issued under Section 46 of FOIA.

This policy, which incorporates the requirements of the Code, will therefore:

- Be publicised to staff and made available for reference;
- Apply to all the Council's records regardless of how they are held;
- Be reviewed every two years at least and amended and reissued as necessary and Members and staff will be notified accordingly;
- Operate in conjunction with the Council's policy on Data Protection that will continue to be relevant.

Roles and Responsibilities of Record Managers

Responsibilities for all records throughout their lifetime will be the responsibility of each Division. The Council's lead officer with functional responsibility for Records Management is the Parish Clerk.

The Records Management Function

How the Council manages its records is a key part of its risk management strategy. Inappropriate management of information and the inability to retrieve accurate information under legislation such as the DPA and FOIA are potential operational risks. Therefore there have to be controls in place to ensure that authentic, reliable and useable records, capable of supporting the Council's business functions and documenting its activities and complying with legislative requirements, are created, managed and kept for only as long as those records are required.

The Council recognises the records management function as a specific corporate programme within the authority and is committed to giving it the necessary level of support to ensure effectiveness.

Training and Awareness

Since this strategy obliges all staff to comply with the Council's policy statement above, every officer has a responsibility to:

- Keep accurate records in an organised and accessible form;
- Keep records only for as long as necessary;
- Ensure that accurate information is available when it is needed;
- Document their actions and decisions in records;
- Document their reasons for disposing of records;
- Take documentation of their activities seriously;
- Understand their responsibilities.

The Council will provide the necessary training and support to ensure as far as possible that all staff can comply with their obligations and responsibilities. This includes providing appropriate training for all members of staff. Induction training for all new staff, whether permanent or temporary, will include awareness of records, issues and practices.

Records Creation and Record Keeping

Not all records that the Council holds are created by the Council. Examples are letters received from residents or application forms for Council services. However, when the Council creates a record it must be:

- An accurate and factual account of an event or transaction;
- Created and captured in a timely manner;
- Created and captured by an officer with direct knowledge of that event or transaction *or*
- Generated automatically as part of the routine operation of a computer system;
- Without any unsubstantiated or derogatory remarks and personal opinions;
- Relevant, complete and accurate enough to facilitate later audit, to protect the rights of the Council and its stakeholders and to prove the authenticity of records;
- Protected against unauthorised addition, deletion, alteration use or concealment.

Comments must be justified from recorded facts and the author must be prepared to defend them.

Record Maintenance

While records are retained, their location and movements needs to be recorded in a tracking system to enable quick and easy retrieval, to monitor usage for maintenance of systems and security and to maintain an auditable trail.

Non-current records should be transferred in a controlled manner to a prescribed storage facility used by individual Divisions rather than stored in offices. The storage facility should be regarded as an extension of the office space from which records can be retrieved as required. That place of storage should be the best means of storing physical information what complies both with the FOIA Code and the business needs of the Council.

The minimum periods for which various types of record must be kept can be found in the Retention Schedule provided at Appendix 1. These reflect statutory requirements, codes of practice and recommendations published by professional and other bodies. In the absence of such guidance, it will be the responsibility of the Parish Clerk to determine a suitable retention period.

Additionally, the provisions of the DPA apply and consequently no personal data must be kept for longer than necessary. All records should be closed when they are no longer of active use apart from reference (generally after 5 years). It is a FOIA requirement that no data should be held for longer than the retention period. There must be therefore regular appraisal of records and designation of those for destruction.

At the end of the prescribed retention period for a record, the record must be assessed to determine whether it should be retained for a further period. This is particularly important in respect of any record that is the subject of a request for access to information under the DPA or FOIA, even if that request has been refused, since the record should be retained until the end of the period in which an appeal can be lodged or the appeals procedure exhausted.

Record Disposal

The minimum volume of records consistent with effective and efficient operations should be retained. Unnecessary and duplicated records should be eliminated so saving storage costs as well as cost in terms of staff, time and equipment. Holding fewer records frees up both physical and computerised filing systems and makes valuable information easier to find.

Records designated as no longer required must be securely disposed of to preserve confidentiality and in accordance with the disposal procedure specified in other office procedures.

Access

Since the beginning of 2005, the public are entitled to make an application for disclosure under the FOIA. The Council, however, is not required to make a specific disclosure of information that is already made available to the public through its Publication Scheme. There is therefore a clear benefit in putting as much information as possible in the Publication Scheme as this will reduce the number of access requests that need to be processed. It also assists the public in accessing information, as they do not need to make an access request to find the required information.

Any formal requests for access to information not included in the Council's Publication Scheme must be referred immediately to the Parish Clerk. It is a criminal offence under the FOIA to tamper with any file once an FOIA request has been made. No alterations to the information held in a file must be made or any information removed or added. The destruction of any record subject to a request for information must be delayed, even if the request has been refused, until the information has been disclosed and all appeal times/procedures have been exhausted.

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