



**RECORDS MANAGEMENT SOCIETY OF GREAT BRITAIN
LOCAL GOVERNMENT GROUP**

**Information Audits – Guidelines
Version: 20 July 2004**

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These guidelines have been compiled by members of the Local Government Group for use by records managers and other information management professionals who need to complete information audits in the course of their work.

The guidelines are designed to give a basic introduction to the process. Users of the guidelines should be aware that there is a great deal of other literature relating to information audits.

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1 What is an information audit?

An information audit is a process which identifies and evaluates an organisation's information flow and recorded information. The audit looks across all resources, users and uses and may identify the need for further steps which need to be taken to enhance information flow around the organisation.

The information audit provides an understanding of the administrative, legal, business and social contexts in which the organisation operates; identifies major factors influencing the need to create and maintain records in the organisation; provides a general appreciation of the organisation's main strengths and weaknesses in managing its records; and provides a firm basis on which to scope a records project and a present a business case to management¹.

2. What is the purpose of the information audit?

There can be a number of reasons for carrying out an information audit. It is usually part of the process which needs to precede the creation of a records management programme or the introduction of electronic document records management systems. The Data Protection Act 1998, the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Environmental Regulations 1992 all require authorities to be able to produce information from the relevant records when a request is made. The information audit will identify the actions and procedures required to ensure that the "right information is with the right people at the right time". The information audit should be part of an on-going cycle of organisational learning.

The purpose of the information audit needs to be clear before the audit starts and relevant to the environment. A clear purpose will ensure that the appropriate level of people are involved in the audit. This is of benefit to the records management staff as well as to the staff in the different departments.

Once the purpose of the audit has been clearly established the scope of the work needed to undertake the audit can be defined and any links with other projects undertaking similar work can be established. Provided the purpose of the audit is clear then it should be a straightforward task to define the boundaries between different projects, to share out the work in areas which overlap and to agree management accountabilities.

¹ PD0025

3 What are the benefits of an information audit?

3.1 There are a number of potential benefits which can result from the information audit. These benefits include:

- the improvement of corporate governance by providing an accurate view of the information held within an organisation, thus allowing the organisation to determine how it should be managed;
- increased management and operational effectiveness and efficiency by providing better access to information including the identification of where information is stored and how it is managed. This leads to better accessibility and speed of retrieval;
- compliance with legislation and regulations by providing information for an information asset register and/or retention schedule (examples of these include freedom of information, data protection, environmental information regulations and regulations specific to particular sectors or applications);
- the improvement of records management systems including enhanced security and the development of business continuity plans;
- the opportunity to undertake some form of risk assessment relating to the record keeping systems;
- the identification of information which is worthy of permanent preservation to preserve the corporate memory;
- collecting the information to support the implementation of electronic document and records management systems;
- support for the implementation of corporate IT systems;
- the reduction of storage costs by identifying information which can be disposed of safely and by reducing duplication;
- collecting the information to quantify the cost of managing information, to identify savings and to improve customer service.

3.2 When putting together a business case it is better to use the benefits which will mean most to the managers you are speaking to. Improved records management practices are not always the top of the agenda and it is sometimes better to use some of the other benefits, such as the reduction of storage costs in the first instance.

4 What can be achieved through an information audit?

4.1 Several outcomes which can be achieved through the information audit depending on the way in which the audit is carried out. Which of these outcomes you require needs to be clear in your mind when you decide the purpose of the information audit.

4.2 The following are potential outcomes of an information audit:

- Classification scheme
- Retention schedule including the identification of material for archives
- Records management policy
- Access to information
- Complete picture of information held

4.3 The information audit :

- identifies gaps and overlaps in record keeping practices and thus identifies improvements to ensure consistency in record keeping practices which reduces the potential loss of information. It also identifies records which have been duplicated and information which can be disposed of safely which leads to savings in cost and space;
- supports the identification of vital records including identification of the master version of information held in more than one place. This information can contribute to a business continuity plan and salvage plans;
- identifies bad practice and allows measures to be taken to rectify it. It supports the clarification of procedures and identifies improvements required to ensure that all the different record keeping processes support business needs;
- identifies access needs and restrictions. This can lead on to the formation of access and retrieval policies to assist this;
- creates an opportunity to identify both exempt records and further information to include in the publication scheme;
- creates an opportunity to identify records which can be stored in alternative formats.

5 How to conduct an information audit

5.1 There are a number of different ways to complete an information audit depending on the time and resources which you have your disposal. Whichever way you choose to do the audit (see below) there are a number of things which need to be sorted out before you begin.

5.2 Before beginning the audit

The purpose of the information audit needs to be clear before the audit starts and relevant to the environment. A clear purpose will ensure that the appropriate level of people are involved in the audit. This is of benefit to the records management staff as well as to the staff in the different departments.

Before beginning the audit it is essential to get senior management to “buy in” to the project. For an authority-wide audit, this means Directors, including the Chief Executive. Without this level of support you will not have sufficient authority to insist that members of staff put aside time for the audit. This can be done in a variety of ways, by briefing senior management teams, by briefing individual managers, by using presentations to alert managers about the issues which need to be addressed. The briefing/presentation should include the benefits of completing the audit and the consequences if the audit is not completed. It is always useful to have an example to include to illustrate the consequences of about poor records management which had serious consequences. You should also have given some thought about the method you wish to employ (see below), how you will collate the information you collect and what you will do with it, and have a rough costing of the different options.

This can be a very frustrating part of the process and it may take more than one attempt to win senior management over to any proposition to undertake an information audit. It may be that senior managers need to assess business risks before they can make a decision about how to proceed.

At a minimum it is necessary to identify one senior management sponsor for the audit, ideally at Director level, and definitely no lower than Assistant Director. It is necessary to involve the sponsor as much as he/she will allow in preparing for the audit; and later keeping him/her in touch with its progress. The sponsor will act as the first point of contact in the event of difficulties, typically lack of co-operation from some part(s) of the authority.

The audit needs to be linked to other projects on-going in the authority, such as the IEG statement or work on the electronic social care record. This may give you access to additional members of staff and money to help with the project. Linking up with the Data Protection Officer (and the Records Manager if he/she is not undertaking the audit) is also essential.

Where possible a freedom of information or information management champion should be identified.

Depending on the level of support which is required it may be appropriate to brief councillors as well.

You also need to identify the resources you need in the way of staffing and equipment. You may need a lap-top, remote access to e-mail.

5.3 Preparing the staff

Whichever method you choose (see below), the staff need to be informed about the work you are going to undertake. This can be done in a variety of different ways as follows, although a personal approach is likely to be more effective:

- global e-mail;
- presentations at team meetings;
- briefing senior managers who cascade the information to their teams;
- briefing notes;
- workshops and seminars;
- staff newsletters;
- intranet and internet.

It is essential that such communications emphasise the senior management commitment. If the individual members of staff are not fully informed the audit will take a lot longer than it should do and/or it will not be completed properly. Members of staff also need to be reassured that the information audit is not being undertaken to downsize numbers of staff (unless it is) but to help the flow of information around the authority.

5.4 Choosing the right method

There are three methods which can be used to undertake the information audits. It is usual to use a combination of approaches.

5.4a Using consultants

Using consultants is an option if your authority has no established records management policy and needs to start from scratch. Here are a number of benefits in using consultants in this situation:

- the audit is performed and guided by personnel who have prior experience in audits, and thus avoid the pitfalls which can delay the project;
- the job is completed at the first attempt with a management report at the end of it;
- senior management will generally listen to what consultants recommend even if it is identical to what you have recommended before;
- the recommendations may be properly resourced.

The benefits assume that suitably skilled and experienced consultants are appointed. The disadvantage is that the use of consultants involves external expenditure which may be significant. The other two approaches, described below, do not involve external expenditure.

5.4b **Questionnaire**

It is generally agreed that a questionnaire distributed to staff is not the best way of completing an information audit. In the first place you might find it difficult to get members of staff to complete the questionnaire and return it to you. Also, it almost always results in a lack of consistency and completeness in the way in which different members of staff respond to the questionnaire.

However, if you are working to a tight timescale and with a limited amount of resources a questionnaire ensures a quick response and may give you an idea of any “hot spots” which need to be tackled.

You need to make sure that the questionnaire has been carefully designed to be as unambiguous and concise as possible and to help you collect the information which is needed. It is essential to pilot any new questionnaire with a few people to identify any obvious problem areas.

A questionnaire can be distributed on paper, or more likely, electronically. If distributed electronically, then the simplest method is to send a straightforward questionnaire by e-mail; however, a much more efficient and effective approach is to use an on-line data entry form which automatically feeds responses into your database or spreadsheet (this will normally require support from the ICT department).

It is also worth finding out if anyone else in the authority is putting together a questionnaire for a similar piece of work to which you may be able to add questions.

You can combine the questionnaire with workshops which fill in a little more of the detail for individual departments.

You will need to prepare a spreadsheet, database, or similar to capture all the information you will collect. It is important that this should be prepared in a way which will allow you to extract the summaries or analyses you want – so these need to be clearly defined from the outset. In practice, this is developed in parallel with the questionnaire.

5.4c **Interview**

It is generally accepted that interviews provide the best way of undertaking the information audit. However, this method is time and staff intensive.

In order to conduct effective interviews you will need to take into account some of the suggestions below:

- Make sure that staff are properly briefed before you book the appointment using some of the methods outlined above.

- Book the appointment avoiding school holidays or other pressure points in the organisation (e.g. trying to book an information audit with Finance around the end of the financial year is pointless).
- Before the interviews you need to prepare an interview checklist (or script), and pilot it with a small number of “friendly” staff to check its usability and to make sure that you will be able to capture the responses in the interview setting.
- You also need to prepare a spreadsheet, database or other similar tool to capture all the information you will collect. Once the interviews start it will be too late to do this. It is important that this is prepared in a way which will allow you to extract the summaries and analyses you want, so ensure that these are clearly defined from the outset. In practice this is developed in parallel with the interview checklist.
- Before each interview you need to look at the relevant business plan to get an idea of the functions and responsibilities of the person(s) you are visiting. You may wish to send a briefing paper to the individual(s) outlining some of the information which you require so that they can be prepared when you arrive.
- Make sure that you explain fully when you arrive and offer any reassurance which is needed. Make sure that you arrive for the appointment on time and remain courteous regardless of the fact that the person you are speaking to may be hostile or indifferent.
- You will need to work through a list of questions and record the information either electronically on site or take notes and write it up later. In the latter case, ensure that you allow enough time between interviews for the writing up. Make sure that you supply a copy of any notes or findings to the person concerned.
- The interviews are a good opportunity to talk about access to information and any exemptions which might apply to the information under freedom of information and the Environmental Regulations.
- Once you have completed the audit you need to enter findings into the database or other recording mechanism you have chosen.

5.5 Reporting the information audit results

The value of the audit will lie largely in the effectiveness with which its findings are presented and reported.

If consultants are employed to perform the audit, they usually will present the findings. They need to be instructed on the level of detail sought, typically a summary report for senior management and a more detailed report and database for the Records Manager.

If the audit is performed with internal resources, reporting will also be produced with these resources. Typically, reporting should include:

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- preparation of a short written report for senior management – preferably five to ten pages;
- if possible, personal presentation of the summary to senior management, or at least to a senior management sponsor;
- collation of detailed results for later use.