

# Inspection services for archive repositories

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## Introduction

Since the formation of The National Archives the principal advisory and inspection services of its predecessor bodies have been brought together within a single Archive Sector Development department of The National Archives. Staff within this department co-ordinate advisory and inspection work and undertake inspections of repositories under our Standard for Record Repositories (2004) and the supporting framework of standards.

## Subscription to The National Archives Standard

The recommendations of The National Archives Standard are addressed to all institutions holding archives available to the public for research, although other specialist repositories and private owners (both institutional and individual) are encouraged to follow them. All record repositories in the United Kingdom are welcome to subscribe to The National Archives Standard if they intend to implement its recommendations. Subscription involves the formal adoption of the

Standard by a minute of the governing body (or by the head of the repository if he has delegated powers to do so) followed by the despatch of a statement of collecting policy to the Head of Inspection of archive services at The National Archives. Repositories are welcome to seek accreditation under our scheme of The National Archives approval if they can demonstrate that they meet the Standard in all essential respects including appropriate public access. To secure such accreditation a formal inspection is required.

## Inspections

While The National Archives has a statutory role to discharge in relation to the approval of places of deposit for public records under the [Public Records Act 1958](#) and the requirements of [manorial and tithe legislation](#), it also has a wider remit to promote the preservation of, and access to, archives of all kinds within the United Kingdom<sup>1</sup>. Our inspection work will be delivered within this wider context as we attempt to improve the 'archival health' of the nation and support our key stakeholders: custodians, owners and users of records and the nation itself. This is reflected in our new system of 'The National Archives approval'. Lists of 'approved' repositories are available on The National Archives' website. In Scotland however, apart from inspecting institutions holding public records of the United Kingdom, The National Archives will not normally accept any invitation to conduct an official inspection of a public repository unless it relates to our UK-wide functions and after consultation with the Keeper of the Records of Scotland.

Approval by The National Archives under its scheme of accreditation indicates not only that we are broadly satisfied that the repository meets our Standard, but available, the archives in its charge. In support of our general advisory functions, and subject to the availability of resources, we are also prepared to carry out audit inspections of repositories which may not be specifically seeking approval, but wish to see how they measure up to current national standards. This can be a useful way of determining future strategic priorities and assuring governing bodies that resources have been properly deployed and well spent.

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<sup>1</sup> Subject to the limitations imposed by the specific statutory remits of the Keeper of Public Records in Scotland and Northern Ireland respectively.

## Places of deposit for public and other controlled classes of records

As explained in the foreword to our [Standard for Record Repositories](#), places of deposit for public records are encouraged to meet our Standard in full, but those record-holding institutions which do not yet conform to it in significant respects may still be authorised to hold particular classes of public or presented records in accordance with specific statutory requirements if deemed 'fit for purpose.' These repositories will also be listed on our [website](#) where they will be distinguished from fully approved repositories.

The situation with regard to manorial and tithe records is slightly different. They cannot be legally held outside the geographical limits of the Master of the Rolls' jurisdiction (which extends to England and Wales). Any repository which is able to preserve and make them accessible is at liberty to do so but when places of safe-keeping are required for such material in accordance with the Manorial Documents Rules they will only be directed to 'approved' repositories within England and Wales.

## What does an inspection involve

Inspections are normally carried out in the course of a day by a member of Inspection of archive services' staff. This involves the physical examination of the repository and its operations, a general discussion of strategy and of any matters touching the particular responsibilities and concerns of the custodian particularly where controlled classes of records are concerned. Background information, for example about staffing levels, disaster planning and the like, can be supplied in advance. We shall also need to see either before, during or after the visit, evidence of the results obtained from monitoring environmental readings over a six month period to demonstrate that an acceptably stable environment has been attained. Where appropriate, we will evaluate a repository not only against The National Archives Standard but other relevant benchmarks in our framework of standards.

## What we promise to do

We will:

- discuss beforehand the scope and purpose of the inspection
- make the inspection as convenient and constructive as possible

- prepare a draft report on our findings to be agreed (with reference to the factual content) by the custodian as an accurate report of the repository's circumstances
- provide a follow-up service to discuss and carry forward any decisions or recommendations embodied in the final report

## **Why seek The National Archives' approval**

Repositories which hold public records are expected to work towards full National Archives' approval (although it is recognised that in the short term this may not be practicable for institutions holding limited quantities or classes of such material). This is because we look to places of deposit outside The National Archives to keep public records in conditions in line with national standards and best practice. The National Archives Standard was also promulgated after consultation with our stakeholders including the major professional bodies in the field. For institutions holding private records, 'The National Archives' approval' is the successor to 'HMC approval' recognising that a repository meets the best current standards and provides a good or excellent service.

For the nation, it offers an assurance that repositories which are in some way publicly accountable are operating in accordance with the best archival practice. For government, it offers an assurance that repositories are properly equipped to care for archival and manuscript material accepted in lieu of tax beyond the more limited requirements of the Public Records Acts. In the case of the private owner or depositor, our approval should offer continuing confidence in the repository and its governing body. For the user, it offers assurances that the repository is able to provide appropriate services to make its holdings accessible in an efficient and sustainable manner. Finally, for the custodian, it offers outside validation of the stewardship provided and the expenditure of resources in pursuit of the institution's objectives.

As set out in The National Archives Standard, those repositories which do not meet its provisions in all essential respects (or undertake to do so within an agreed period of time) will not normally be recommended for the permanent allocation of material accepted in lieu of tax. Nor will manorial documents be directed to their safekeeping when homes for them are required. Our judgements also carry weight with a wide variety of grant-awarding bodies which we advise. The National Archives is currently seeking to extend and reinforce these endorsements of both The National Archives Standard and 'approval'.

## **The custodian as a partner in the review process**

The National Archives' inspections and reports are carried out in full partnership with the staff of the repository concerned (and with other members of the governing body, where appropriate). We do not adopt a judgmental attitude, but are concerned to consider dispassionately whether agreed national standards are met, and if not to make suggestions for practical improvements. Our principal concerns are the well-being of the records themselves and sustainable access to them, but we can also give strategic advice on the future organisation of an archive service or its accommodation which may assist in the eventual attainment of the Standard, if necessary by incremental stages.

## **What if the repository fails to achieve full National Archives' approval?**

In certain cases, where matters remain to be addressed before a repository can meet the Standard, we may award provisional approval subject to a reassessment at a later date. Where a repository is deemed 'fit for purpose' to hold limited classes of public records and where there is no unacceptable threat to their long term preservation, it may be approved as a Place of Deposit for this limited purpose if there is a realistic prospect of future improvement. Only as a last resort, where there is a serious threat to the security of public (and where applicable, manorial or tithe records) will the removal of such material to another suitably approved repository need to be directed.

## **Inspections are part of our wider mission**

Inspections are not ends in themselves but part of our wider advisory and liaison functions and a means to ensure that our statutory obligations can be executed in an informed and accountable manner. They provide an important instrument to improve the nation's archival health, but they are only one of a range of tools employed in achieving this objective.

For further information [email](#) or write to: Head of Inspection of archive services, The National Archives, Ruskin Avenue, Kew, Richmond, Surrey TW9 4DU