



## Adequate Records Management in Perspective - Reliability of Official Records

### Why is reliability of official records important?

The official records of an agency provide an invaluable tool for proving, and if necessary defending, the actions and decisions of an agency. As a result it is crucial that the records can be relied upon.

By ensuring that its official records are reliable, an agency will satisfy the requirements of Outcome 6 of the *Adequate Records Management - Meeting the Standard*.

### What are the responsibilities of an agency?

To ensure that its official records are reliable an agency is responsible for the following:

- assigning responsibility for the authority to alter or correct official records
- having procedures in place to manage instances where official records have been altered or updated without approval
- implementing measures to ensure the reliability of its records
- ensuring that record reliability is part of the agency's risk management plan.

### How important is perception?

The reliability of official records can be a matter of perception. If there is the perception that records have been altered or adjusted this may affect the way the agency's records are regarded as a whole.

Official records may be found unreliable because of the fear that they have been tampered with. Any doubt over an official record's reliability will weaken the agency's standing in the view of the South Australian public and will not do justice to the good work of its employees.

Importantly, official records will also not stand up in court as evidence if their reliability is in doubt.

Fundamental to issues surrounding reliability is the notion that records must be inviolate. This means that no information on the record may be altered, deleted or lost once the transaction it documents has occurred.

In addition, information should never be added to an official record so that it appears to be part of the original record.

## What practical measures can ensure the reliability of official records?

Agencies are advised to make use of the following records management processes to help ensure the reliability of their official records:

- **apply disposal schedules** (see *Recordkeeping Advice 12, Adequate Records Management in Perspective, The Disposal of Official Records* for further information) – this will ensure that nothing is prematurely or incorrectly disposed of
- **monitor access** (see *Recordkeeping Advice 5, Adequate Records Management in Perspective, Creating Official Records* for further information) – this will lessen the chances of records being altered, removed or disposed of in an inappropriate manner
- **classify records** (see *Recordkeeping Advice 7, Adequate Records Management in Perspective, Classifying Official Records* for further information) - this will ensure that only the appropriate staff have access to records
- **anticipate disaster** (see *Recordkeeping Advice 16, Adequate Records Management in Perspective, Disaster Management* for further information)– have an emergency disaster plan that will allow the agency to recover damaged information quickly
- **implement procedures** (see *Recordkeeping Advice 14, Adequate Records Management in Perspective, Records Management Policies, Procedures & Practices* for further information) – set in place procedures for handling record alteration or disposal in an authorised manner. Keep an up to date listing of staff names and their roles so that the creators of records can be correctly identified later
- **maintain audit trails** – these help to ensure the integrity of records through allowing the tracking of changes and additions. These trails are particularly important for electronic records but are relevant to records in all formats.

## Is there particular legislation relevant to the reliability of official records?

The reliability of records is fundamental to their admissibility as evidence in a court situation. Ensuring this reliability is part of the risk management process.

Legislation needs to be taken into consideration and in particular the *Evidence Act 1929* and the *Electronic Transactions Act 2000*.

For a brief overview of the recordkeeping considerations of this and other legislation refer to State Records' *Recordkeeping Requirements within South Australian Legislation Guidelines* (2002).

## Further information

- State Records of South Australia, *Adequate Records Management - Meeting the Standard, Implementation Plan and Improvement Matrix* (2002).
- State Records of South Australia, *Recordkeeping Requirements within South Australian Legislation Guidelines* (2002).
- Standards Australia AS ISO 15489 – 2002 *Records Management* (2002).
- Standards Australia, HB 171-2003 – *Guidelines for Management of IT Evidence* (2003).
- Archives of Ontario, Fact Sheet #3, *Security and the Integrity of Recorded Information*. <http://www.archives.gov.on.ca>
- State Records Authority of New South Wales, *Standard on Full and Accurate Records* (2004).

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