

**SRAC Sub-group meeting on retention and disposal of government records
26th January 2004**

Present:

SRAC: Professor Hector MacQueen, Chairman, Professor Roger Davidson, Mr Hamish Hamill, Dr Alison Rosie, Secretary.

NAS: Mr George Mackenzie, Keeper and Ms Laura Mitchell and Ms Jane Brown of Governments Record Branch.

Professor MacQueen formally constituted the group and it was agreed to keep the name of the group as above.

1. Report on consultation on NAS selection policy

Jane Brown gave a report on the consultation and the amendments resulting from it. The policy document had been circulated to about 85 groups in total: a wide range of academic departments in Scotland (history, politics, economics, environmental studies), all Local Authority archivists and Health Board archivists, and a selection of Government Records Branch contacts in government bodies and agencies. The document was also publicised on the NAS website. The consultation period had been from July to the end of September 2003. 15 responses had been received, predominantly from archivists but including one academic, and had been very positive about the policy.

Amendments

1.3 It was agreed that when the policy document was published on the NAS website, there would be links from it to the text of the relevant Acts.

2.2 There had been a lot of comment about the policy being geared to the paper environment rather than a paper/electronic one. The Keeper agreed that the document had to be applicable to both paper and electronic copies. Mr Hamill thought that primary and secondary copies were easier to work out in a paper environment. He also wondered whether the example of the Nolan Committee was more confusing than helpful. Ms Brown pointed out that this particular example had been chosen to emphasize that the copies sent to the NAS were exactly the same as those in The National Archives (TNA).

3.1 This had been altered in the light of comments made by the SRAC at their last meeting. Prof Davidson queried whether something on funding should be added under the section on formulation and implementation of policy. In administrative records, correspondence with the Treasury on funding could prove highly revealing. Ms Brown felt that this would mean having to add further subsections and it was agreed to leave the section as is.

3.3 This paragraph had been removed as the respondents had felt overwhelmingly that this had gone too far. Prof. Davidson welcomed the amendment. As a researcher who used administrative records in his research on government growth, he felt it was important to see early drafts, even when the final report was available in printed form

elsewhere, as these revealed the contest and negotiation behind the final document, interdepartmental rivalries and the impact of pressure groups.

3.4 There was a need to develop guidance so that NAS decisions could be defensible.

4.3 Good guidance on sampling techniques could be found on The National Archives website. The NAS would provide examples of ones which had been used in Scotland.

2. Discussion

It was agreed that the policy should be reviewed regularly, particularly in the light of the uncertainty caused by FoI.

Prof Davidson wondered whether the lists of files for destruction currently circulated to SRAC members for their comment, could be publicised on the website. The Keeper thought that getting feedback in this way might skew results to the particular views of an individual. Taking the views of a representative group would be more valuable. Ms Mitchell pointed out that it would be up to each individual Executive Department or Agency to give authorisation for details about their files to be put on the web and wondered whether this should be part of each Department's publication scheme under FoI. The Keeper agreed that there was a need to publicise how the system of retention and disposal worked.

Prof Davidson suggested that in future readers completing the users survey could be asked which files they would have expected to find but didn't, and if there were any series of records they would have found useful but which had been destroyed. The Keeper agreed that this might be a cost effective means of finding out this information but the NAS would also investigate other ways which might target this audience more effectively – such as looking for suitable people through information supplied from readers tickets.

The question of macro appraisal was discussed (section 4.2) – Mr Hamill and Prof Davidson were concerned that this exercise would involve someone in the field. Ms Brown confirmed that the archivist would not work in isolation but alongside someone from the department concerned. There was inevitably some subjectivity involved but this policy was an attempt to purge it.

Prof Davidson raised the issue of newspaper cuttings which he pointed out were very useful in research. They provided an insight into what the policy makers had read and, in terms of research input, cut out time-consuming newspaper research. Ms Brown noted that the normal policy was to destroy files that consisted solely of newspaper cuttings as these could be viewed elsewhere. Prof MacQueen believed that in the Scottish Executive, these were assembled electronically from the various newspaper websites, paper copies were downloaded and circulated. Mr Hamill noted that during his time in the Executive a period of intense media activity would result in a separate file being kept, otherwise the cuttings would be integrated with the normal business kept on file. Over the last five years, however, he felt that there was an obsession with the media and the number of cuttings kept would undoubtedly have multiplied. The Keeper agreed that this was an issue which needed to be looked at.

3. Remit of the sub-group

The meeting discussed whether it was useful to continue the group in its current form, whether there was enough work load to justify it and whether its membership should be extended outwith the SRAC. All agreed that such a meeting was useful. Disposal and retention featured heavily in FoI and forming the group had a symbolic as well as a real importance. It was felt membership should be extended to some of those who had responded to the consultation exercise - eg. representatives from record creating bodies or agencies, a journalist. NAS agreed to make informal soundings before the next meeting

It was agreed that the group should meet on an annual basis to monitor the working of the policy and that NAS would submit a report highlighting any areas of doubt, problems resulting, statistics etc., in advance of the meeting.

Postscript

Professor MacQueen added that, in retrospect, he thought that the SRAC, given its statutory function in this area, should have been amongst the consultees circulated with the draft version of the policy document – as it was, he only found out about the document at a meeting of the Scottish Council on Archives.