**What are Archives? Source Sheet No. 1**

**Definition of Archives**

The term ‘archives’ commonly has two meanings. It can be used to refer to either

* the records of an individual or organisation that have on-going value, or
* an agency or building responsible for the selection, storage, preservation and use of archival records.

People and organisations create records of their daily activities and interrelationships. At some stage, preferably early in their existence, these non-current records are appraised by the archivist on the basis of their likely continuing administrative, financial, legal, and informational values. Those records selected as possessing continuing value are called *archives.*

When these records are no longer required for day-to-day administrative use, they may be transferred to the custody of an archives, which can be either an in-house facility or an external agency. They are arranged and described by the archivist, and where necessary any conservation or repair work is carried out. Archival institutions provide specially designed repositories in which temperature and humidity are closely controlled in order to minimise the physical deterioration of archives. Archives exist in a wide variety of physical formats: volumes, files, documents, photographs, maps, plans, computer printouts, microfilms and sound recordings are some examples.

As technology advances, so does the range of formats in which archives can exist. Archives are not necessarily ‘old’ records. It is one of the archivist’s roles to decide which records should be retained permanently as archives.

Archives management is increasingly coming to be recognised as part of a records continuum in which archivists and records managers perform specialised but inter-related roles in managing the whole extent of a record’s existence, from the time of the creation of records (and before creation, in the design of record-keeping systems) through to the preservation and use of records as archives.

Standards Australia defines archives as being ***those records that are appraised as having continuing value***(Australian Standard **Records Management** Part 1: General AS 43901.1 - 1996)*.*

The same document defines records as being recorded information, in any form, including data in computer systems, created or received and maintained by an organisation or person in the transaction of business or the conduct of affairs and kept as evidence of such activity.

**Use of Archives**

Archives preserve and make available records of continuing value to the creating organisation and to the community. While archives’ staff do not normally carry out extensive research for public enquirers, they do assist them in identifying and selecting records relevant to their research.

An archives is not like a Library. There is not generally a comprehensive subject-based catalogue of holdings. Instead records are retained in the order in which they were kept by the organisation or individual that created and used them in order to preserve as much evidence of the transaction they record as possible.

Access to archives is generally via a functional approach whereby a search is undertaken of the records of the person or that part of the organisation responsible for performing a particular function. To find information by this process researchers will invariably need to rely on the help of the archivist and any finding aids which the archives has produced (for information on finding aids see Source Sheet No. 3 *What Are Finding Aids?*).

Because archival records are to be preserved permanently, archives staff are committed to closely supervising their use to ensure that the utmost care is taken to minimise any deterioration in the condition of the record.

Access to records which are in poor physical condition is not generally permitted, while those containing information of an exceptionally sensitive nature, or to which access has been expressly barred on account of their content or because insufficient time has elapsed since their creation, are also withheld from public access (for information on access see Source Sheet No. 5 *Access to Archives*).

**Further Reading**

More information about archives may be found in:

***Keeping Archives. 3rd Edition*** (Australian Society of Archivists Inc, Canberra, 2008)

Australian Society of Archivists booklet ***Archives Matter*** (Canberra, 2007)

Australian Society of Archivists bi-annual journal ***Archives and Manuscripts***.

**Further Information**

**City Archives:** Topham Mall, off Currie and Waymouth Streets, Adelaide 5000

**Counter / telephone enquiries:** 9**.**00 am to 5.00 pm Mondays to Fridays

**Search Room open for public research:**10.00 am to 4.00 pm Tuesdays to Thursdays

**Telephone:** +618 8203 7439

**Email:** [cityarchives@cityofadelaide.com.au](mailto:cityarchives@cityofadelaide.com.au)

**Web:** <https://cityofadelaide.com.au/cityarchives>