Access to Archives Source Sheet No. 5

**What Does It Mean?**

Access is the term used by archivists to denote the granting of permission for persons to:

* use the reference and research facilities of the archives;
* examine archival records held by the archives;
* extract information from archival records for research or publication.

Permission may be either given or denied depending on whether certain access conditions are met. These conditions governing access to an Archives and its collection will generally be outlined in the organisation’s *Access Policy*. This is an official statement issued by the authorities managing an Archives setting out which archival records are available for access and under what conditions. In some cases, access to archives is controlled by legislation; for example, public use of Commonwealth government records is regulated by the Archives Act 1983, which stipulates that public access to records will generally be permitted 20 years after the date on which the record was first created.

Access to records held by an archives can be made available onsite in the archives own reading room or, increasingly, access is being provided online. This means persons wanting to gain access to records may not need to actually visit an archives in person but can conduct their research and all other transactions electronically from anywhere in the world.

Most access policies contain conditions excluding or restricting access to particular categories of records. These conditions are primarily introduced to protect the privacy of individuals or prevent the disclosure of confidential information, but they can also be used to protect the physical integrity of the records where withholding access would minimise deterioration or prevent damage to them.

# City Archives Access Policy

The City Archives’ policy for regulating access to its records provides for the generality of records that are more than 30 years old to be made available to the public for research use. Requests for access to records which are less than 30 years old are generally referred to the manager of the relevant City Council Program to determine what may be made accessible, while those containing information of an exceptionally sensitive or personal nature are withheld. Access may also be refused to items that are in such poor physical condition that their use would be detrimental to their preservation.

In essence the Archives’ policy on public access to its holdings states that documents containing the following information should not be made available to the public:

* Information or matter communicated in confidence.
* Information or matter the disclosure of which would prejudice the relations between another party and Council.
* Information or matter the disclosure of which would prejudice the enforcement or proper administration of the law in a particular case.
* Information or matter the disclosure of which would prejudice the fair trial of a person or the impartial adjudication of a particular case.

# Access Review

All records requested by researchers are subjected to a review process to ensure that the information they contain does not contravene Archives’ Access Policy. This means Archives staff are required to clear material before it can be released to the public. The archivist examines every document on a file requested by a researcher in order to check its content against the Policy provisions. Where the information content of a document does not comply with these provisions the whole document will be excluded from public access. This entails the archivist physically blanking out the offending document by placing a sleeve or envelope over it to mask its content. A record of the process is then entered in the Archives Access Review Register with details of why material was excluded, and any other actions taken.

Access review of archives can be a lengthy and time-consuming procedure meaning that researchers may have to wait up to several days before they can actually get to see material. Of course, this does not apply in cases where records have previously been requested and subjected to the review process. Fortunately, the bulk of records related to subjects most commonly asked about by researchers have already been cleared, and so no extraordinary delays will generally be experienced in obtaining access to them.

# Freedom of Information

The Freedom of Information Act 1991 provides a legal right for anyone to see documents held by the City of Adelaide. This includes documents, no matter how old, relating to a person’s personal affairs, as well as documents dated after 1 January 1987 relating to anything else. The Act sets out certain types of documents to which access may not be granted; amongst these are documents that the Council has determined to be confidential under the provisions of the Local Government Act.

In most cases an FOI request will be refused if it would lead to an unreasonable disclosure of someone else’s personal affairs.

**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

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