

## Records Management Guidance: Vital Records

### What are vital records?

Vital records are those records that are necessary for an organisation to continue to operate in the event of a disaster. There are four key areas of risk: Flood; Fire; Security; Infestation/ environmental pollution etc. Vital records will enable SOAS to continue functioning in the event of a disaster which may destroy all other records.

Vital records include those records which are required to recreate the School's legal and financial status, to preserve its rights, and to ensure that it can continue to fulfil its obligations to its stakeholders in the event of a disaster. Vital records may be in any format such as paper, electronic, microfilm etc.

### Why do we need to identify them?

It is necessary to identify vital records to ensure that the records remain secure, accessible and easily locatable, even during a disaster. The vital records form a vital part of disaster recovery and business continuity planning.

It is also important that we are targeting resources effectively. SOAS needs to protect the right records, not spend a large amount of resources storing non-essential records in the most secure way whilst leaving vital records open to vulnerability.

### How can I identify our vital records?

On average, less than 5% of records are identified as vital. Although losing most records will cause inconvenience, you can often work around or recreate records. Vital records are the ones required in order to operate.

There is no definitive list of vital records and what constitutes a vital record will vary from section to section across the School. To identify your vital records you should consider the following:

1. Identify the key functions, business processes and stakeholders of your department *e.g. teaching and research, student registration and administration, handling accounts etc.*
2. Identify the impact of not providing these key functions
3. Identify the records needed to support or document these functions and processes. *The summary report of the information survey of your department may help with this.*
4. Identify which of these records are vital *i.e. Can the functions these records relate to be re-established in the event of the loss of these records? If so, the record is not vital. Also consider that records can be vital for varying lengths of time. E.g., a current student record of marks is vital as the information is needed to know whether a student can graduate whereas records of a student's marks 20 years ago are less important.*
5. Identify how long you can carry out these key functions without the records

### Identifying Vital Records

It can be difficult to divide records into vital and non-vital. Some records might not be strictly vital as the School could function without them, but the effort in replacing them or their historical value might be such that they should be given the same level of protection as records essential to the business of the School. You will need to perform a risk assessment to decide how vital the record is, considering how serious the impact will be if the record were lost, and how soon you would feel it. The best approach is to divide records into the following four categories (please note the examples are not exhaustive and will vary from section to section):

Classification of records	Examples
<p><b>Vital:</b> records without which the School cannot function. These records are essential to the core business of the School (this also includes records which are critical for implementing emergency procedures in the event of a disaster, such as key staff contact details, business continuity plans etc.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Records which give evidence of the legal status of the School (e.g. the School Charter)</li> <li>• Records which protect the assets and interests of the School</li> <li>• Minutes and Papers of committee meetings in the formal committee structure, particularly where major policy decisions are taken</li> <li>• Current accounts payable and received</li> <li>• The School’s business plan</li> <li>• Student assessment records</li> <li>• Research information including on-going research and reports of research projects</li> <li>• Records which are subject to a legal requirement to be kept for a certain amount of time</li> <li>• Historical records if needed for evidential or other legal purposes</li> <li>• Key staff contact details</li> <li>• Staff and student records</li> <li>• Next of kin details</li> <li>• Contingency plans</li> </ul>
<p><b>Important:</b> records important to the continued operation of the School, they can be recreated from original sources but only at considerable time and expense</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Procedures</li> <li>• Training manuals</li> <li>• Teaching materials</li> <li>• Curricula</li> <li>• Teaching timetables</li> <li>• Minutes of some meetings</li> <li>• Current RAE submission</li> </ul>
<p><b>Useful:</b> records which, if lost, would cause temporary inconvenience but are replaceable</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most correspondence</li> <li>• Records of old curricula</li> </ul>
<p><b>Non-essential:</b> Records which have no value beyond the immediate purpose</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff and student circulars about one-off events which are now completed</li> <li>• advertisements</li> </ul>

**NB Historical Records:** Historical records that help understand a part of the School's development may not be essential for the operation of the School but have significant value for a wide range of historical research and therefore may be worth preserving on the same level of protection as a vital record. Records of historical value are generally highlighted on the SOAS retention schedule and should be transferred to the School's Archive so that they are covered as part of the Special Collections business continuity plan.

### How to Protect Electronic Vital Records

- Electronic vital records must be stored on central servers so that they are protected by appropriate back-up and disaster recovery.
- Do not store vital records on portable hardware, such as USBs, DVDs/CDs
- Do not store vital records on a laptop hard drive or on your personal hard drive
- For vital records that need to be retained for a long time, use a readable format such as PDF/PDFA or plain text or rich text format.

### How to Protect Hard Copy Vital Records

Vital Records which are only available in paper format should be duplicated, in the same or original format depending on requirements, and the originals and copies stored in separate locations if possible. There are several ways of doing this:

- **Scan and save electronically:** However, if you also want to destroy the records then it is more complicated because the records will need to reach BS 10008:2008 the standard for legal admissibility of electronic records. Please contact the Corporate Records Manager and Archivist if you are considering this
- **Off-site storage:** Copies may be stored with our off-site storage provider who specialise in secure storage. Please see the records management pages for more guidance on using off-site storage: <http://www.soas.ac.uk/infocomp/recordsmanagement/transfers/>
- **Store in another SOAS building:** This offers the least protection due to the close proximity of the buildings so it is important to weigh up the risk of losing the records against the cost of storing elsewhere. If storing onsite, check the environment for potential hazards and either take steps to protect the records against these potential hazards, such as storing records a certain distance off the ground, or seek alternative accommodation.

If duplication is impracticable or legally unacceptable, fire protection safes must be used to protect the documents.

### What next?

Once you have a list of records, it is important to document the measures that need to be taken to protect them and share these with your colleagues. It is important that a range of people can identify the vital records and know the measures in place as you do not know who will be in the office at the time. It is recommended that all vital records are listed under the relevant sections business continuity plan. It is important to review this every year as part of the review of your business continuity plan as vital records can change over time.

It is also important that staff complete the vital records log so that there is a central list of all of the institution's vital records. Every year, this will be circulated to Records Management Group members and each section will be asked to update this. This is then retained by the Directorate electronically.

#### Help Available

- IT can provide help and advice regarding IT systems and software and back up. Please contact the IT Helpdesk.
- Although the Corporate Records Manager and Archivist cannot identify your records, we can provide guidance and advice on records management issues and work in progress.