PARLIAMENTARY AND HEALTH SERVICE OMBUDSMAN

Email Management and Data Storage Policy

Version 1.4

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1. Purpose

1.1 The purpose of this policy is to provide a framework for the effective management of PHSO's emails in accordance with all statutory and business requirements. Compliance with this policy supports PHSO's commitment to be exemplary in its administration.

2. Policy statement

2.1 The Ombudsman recognises that effective records management is fundamental to good administration and operational effectiveness and is an enabler to the achievement of our strategic aims and objectives. The Ombudsman is therefore committed to implementing and maintaining good record keeping practices.

2.2 While PHSO is not covered by the Public Records Act 1958, nor required to adopt the Code of Practice on the Management of Records, the Ombudsman has decided to adopt an approach to records management which is consistent with the legal obligations and best practice principles embodied in them.

2.3 PHSO is subject to and will comply with the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Data Protection Act 1998, taking into account the statutory bar on the disclosure of information obtained in the course of investigations other than in specific circumstances.

3. Scope

3.1 This policy applies to emails that are received, created, or held in the course of PHSO's business. It should be read in conjunction with the ICT Acceptable Use policy which details email security, content and legal liability, and acceptable use.

3.2 This policy applies to all permanent, contract and temporary staff and any organisation or body acting as agents of PHSO where contractual arrangements are in place, who have access to PHSO's computer system and who use email. Everyone should ensure that they are familiar with the content of the policy and use it as a point of reference when dealing with email messages.

4. Principles

Principle 1
All business and case management data held on PHSO's IT systems (including emails and documents) belong to PHSO and not any individual or group. This data should therefore be stored in the appropriate corporate system and be available for management and operational use subject to normal access controls.

Principle 2
'My Workspace' in Meridio is available for limited personal storage. Personal emails or those containing sensitive information should be filed in My Workspace. This area must not contain emails related to PHSO's business. Staff are required to perform regular electronic housekeeping on their 'My Workspace' to ensure that data that is no longer required is deleted.

Principle 3
When an email is sent or received a decision must be made about whether it needs to be captured as a record (see Annex 2 for further information). Once an email message has been captured as a record it should be deleted from all mailboxes.

Principle 4
Emails not retained in a corporate system within a reasonable period of time (currently defined as 90 days) will be automatically deleted from the email system (Outlook).

5. Objectives

The key objectives of this policy are to:

5.1 Ensure appropriate management arrangements are in place to ensure email messages that form records of business activities are stored appropriately

5.2 Ensure all employees have a clear understanding of their personal and collective responsibilities in managing their email

5.3 Ensure email messages that form records of business activities are stored appropriately

5.4 Ensure email messages are managed in order to comply with Data Protection and Freedom of Information legislation

5.5 Help staff manage their electronic information better

5.6 Mitigate against the risks of excessive and inappropriate data storage which includes:

- important corporate information not being shared (data is held in private drives)
- inappropriate non-corporate files being stored on PHSO IT systems
- out-of-date and duplicate information using up storage capacity.

6. Outcomes

6.1 This policy will deliver the following outcomes:

- Work is conducted more efficiently as it will enable staff to locate all the information relating to specific areas of the business
- IT system performance is improved and we reduce the risks and costs of excessive email data storage
- PHSO's reputation is protected because we have systems in place to manage email so that we can comply with Freedom of Information and Data Protection legislation.

7. Monitoring and compliance

7.1 The Head of Information and Records Management is responsible for monitoring this policy to ensure it is up-to-date, relevant and continues to support strategic aims and objectives.

7.2 Compliance with this email management policy will be regularly assessed and included within the internal audit programme.

7.3 Reviews will seek to:

- identify examples of good practice which can be used throughout PHSO
- highlight where non-compliance is occurring; and if appropriate, recommend remedial action to ensure exemplary records management standards are achieved and maintained.

8. Review

8.1 The policy will be reviewed every three years, unless there is a significant change in relevant legislation which requires a review before then.

Annex 1 - Background context

1.1 As an exemplary organisation all our records should be managed in line with the Lord Chancellor's Code of Practice on the management of records under Section 46 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. This states that the principal issues for the management of electronic records are the same as those for the management of any record, including the creation of authentic records, the tracking of records, review and retention of records and disposal arrangements.

1.2 This email policy has been developed in line with The National Archives guidance on managing emails. The National Archives are widely regarded across both the public sector and private sector as leading on records management issues.

1.3 Email is increasingly becoming the primary business tool for both internal and external written communication and as a result should be treated with the same level of attention given to drafting and managing any other documents. Email messages should not be treated as an extension of the spoken word because their written nature means they are treated with greater authority. As well as taking care over how email messages are written it is necessary to manage email messages appropriately after they have been sent or received.

1.4 Email messages are available until deleted by both the sender and recipient. All non-deleted email messages are subject to Data Protection and Freedom of Information Legislation and can also form part of the corporate record. They could therefore be subject to discovery action and used against PHSO.

1.5 Staff should also be aware that corporate email messages could be used as evidence in legal or employment proceedings. Members of staff are responsible for what they have written in an email message.

1.6 The consequence of all this is that after corporate/ business-related emails have been created, these are potential records and are required to be stored in the corporate file plan (i.e. not Outlook). Emails which are not records should be deleted within an appropriate time. This policy puts in place PHSO's arrangements for managing emails appropriately.

1.7 Specifically the policy ensures that PHSO has in place adequate mechanisms to:

- ensure email messages facilitate effective communication and ensure that appropriate records of those communications are maintained in accordance with the PHSO Email Management and Records Management policies;
- ensure compliance with information legislation that applies to email including Data Protection Act and, Freedom of Information Act
- ensure appropriate business records are maintained for audit and accountability purposes;
  mitigate against the risks of inappropriate and excessive data storage.

1.8 A record is defined in PHSO's Records Management policy as 'recorded information created, received and maintained by PHSO in pursuance of its legal obligations or in the transaction of business.' When deciding whether an email message constitutes a record, the context and content of the email message

need to be considered. A guiding principle on identifying email records might be that as soon as the email needs to be forwarded for information purposes it should be considered a record.

1.9 The email management policy compliments the ICT Acceptable Use policy, specifically: 3.2 Email Content and Legal Liability; 4. Personal Use of the ICT system; and 5. Unacceptable use of the ICT system.

1.10 The policy applies to everyone employed by PHSO who has access to its computer system and who uses email. Staff should ensure that they are familiar with the content of the policy and use it as a point of reference when dealing with email messages.

1.11 All employees have a clear understanding of their personal and collective responsibilities in managing their email.

Annex 2 - Which emails are records?

2.1 To help identify email records, a record is defined in PHSO's Records Management Policy as 'recorded information created, received and maintained by PHSO in pursuance of its legal obligations or in the transaction of business'. Messages that might constitute a record are likely to contain information about:

- substantive contributions to the development of legislation, policy or procedures including factual evidence and interpretative material relating to changes as well as accepted and rejected options;
- evidence of how far Office objectives have been met;
- material that relates to the main functions of the Office and its development, including major projects, special measures and initiatives;
- background material to decisions, rulings, opinions and advice issued to the public, MPs, bodies within jurisdiction, staff, etc;
- text of statements, speeches, Select Committee submissions, answers to Parliamentary Questions, etc along with briefing papers and background material;
- public or other notable events which gave rise to significant contemporary interest or controversy;
- contracts and contract changes as well as procedures used to select external suppliers;
- authorisation for payment of suppliers, contractors, staff, etc;
- measures taken to comply with legal and other obligations and regulations such as Health and Safety legislation, Data Protection Act, etc; and
- an individual's terms of employment or conditions with PHSO, collected through HR or management processes and which form a part of the worker's employment relationship with PHSO.

2.2 This list is indicative but not exhaustive and staff are advised to seek further guidance from their Local Information and Records Adviser or the Information and Records Manager if in doubt.

Annex 3 - Email management and storage

3.1 Email messages can constitute part of the formal record of a transaction. All members of staff are responsible for identifying and managing email messages that constitute a record of their work.

3.2 When an email is sent or received a decision needs to be made about whether the email needs to be captured as a record in the appropriate area of the corporate file plan. Once an email message has been captured as a record it should be deleted from your mailbox.

3.3 Emails will be treated in the same way as other corporate records in terms of retention and disposal. The information asset register sets out the retention periods for each section of the corporate file plan and these will ensure that records that are no longer required for ongoing business or historical reasons are deleted as soon as reasonably possible.

3.4 All important documents and emails that demonstrate action or contribute to policy or decision making must be stored in Visualfiles (where it is related to a specific case) or in the appropriate place in the corporate file plan for longer term retention and review.

3.5 Email messages that can be considered to be records should be captured as soon as possible. Most email messages will form part of an email conversation string. Where an email string has formed as part of a discussion, it is not necessary to capture each new part of the conversation separately. There is no need to wait until the end of the conversation before capturing the email string as several subjects might have been covered. Email strings should be captured as records at significant points during the conversation, rather than waiting to the end of the conversation because it might not be apparent when the conversation has finished.

3.6 Email messages relating to casework must be filed in Visualfiles.

3.7 As email messages can be sent to multiple recipients there are specific guidelines to indicate who is responsible for capturing an email as a record:

- For internal email messages, the sender of an email message, or initiator of an email dialogue that forms a string of messages;
- For messages sent externally, the sender of the message;
- For external messages received by one person, the recipient; and
- For external messages received by more than one person, the person responsible for the work relating to the message. If this is not clear it may be necessary to clarify who this is with the other people who have received the message.

3.8 Where an email has an attachment a decision needs to be made as to whether the email message, the attachment or both should be kept as a record. The

decision on whether an email and/or its attachment constitute a record depends on the context within which they were received. In most instances the attachment should be captured as a record with the email message as the email message will provide the context within which the attachment was used. Where further work is required on an attachment, the initial email message and attachment will be one record, and the copy attachment used for further work will become a completely separate record.

3.9 The subject line of an email message does not always reflect the reason for capturing an email as a record and therefore might not be the most appropriate name for the email when it is transferred to Meridio or Visualfiles. This can be avoided by following the naming convention guidelines (available on Ombudsnet) for naming emails at the point they are created. Re-naming emails is particularly important when they represent different parts of an email string as it helps to identify the relevant aspects of the conversation.

3.10 During the 90 days after the creation of the email, a decision needs to be made as to whether the email is a record. If it is it should be transferred to an appropriate place either in Visualfiles (for casework) or in the appropriate place in the corporate file plan. Any emails still in Outlook after 90 days will automatically be deleted.

3.12 A further option is storage on an individual's 'My Workspace'. However, this is only to be used for personal or sensitive, non-business emails. Any records held there must be transferred to the corporate file plan or Visualfiles as soon as possible.

Annex 4 - Access to mail accounts during absences

4.1 In the case of planned absences (eg holidays) staff should use the 'Out of Office Assistant'. The auto-reply message should ideally give an alternative contact and state when a full reply can be expected. Emails should be forwarded to another member of staff during a prolonged absence. Alternatively, where this can be done securely, access to a mailbox should be delegated to another member of a team to ensure urgent messages are dealt with.

4.2 Shared mailboxes can be created where there are a group of people responsible for the same area of work (eg an investigation team, a working group, project team or a section in Corporate Resources). This will help to ensure that queries are answered if members of the team are away from the office. One person should be identified as the 'owner' of a shared mailbox or public folder. The owner is responsible for the overall management of that mailbox or folder.

4.3 In the case of unplanned absences and/or where the member of staff has not made arrangements for access (eg sickness) the manager should arrange redirection of email; authorisation should be requested from the Head of HR Operations and Head of ICT. Access should be in the presence of the line manager. On return, the staff member should be told when and why their mailbox was accessed.

4.4 There may be occasions when it is necessary to access email messages from an individual's mailbox when a person is away from the office for an extended period. Authorisation should be requested from the Head of HR Operations and Head of ICT. Access should be in the presence of the line manager. On return, the staff member should be told when and why their mailbox was accessed. The reasons for accessing an individual's mailbox are to action:

- Subject access request under the Data Protection Act;
- Freedom of Information request;
- Evidence in legal proceedings;
- Evidence in a criminal investigation;
- Line of business enquiry; and
- Evidence in support of disciplinary action.

4.5 Staff should ensure that any personal or sensitive emails are filed in My Workspace. This area would not be subject to the review outlined in 4.3 above.