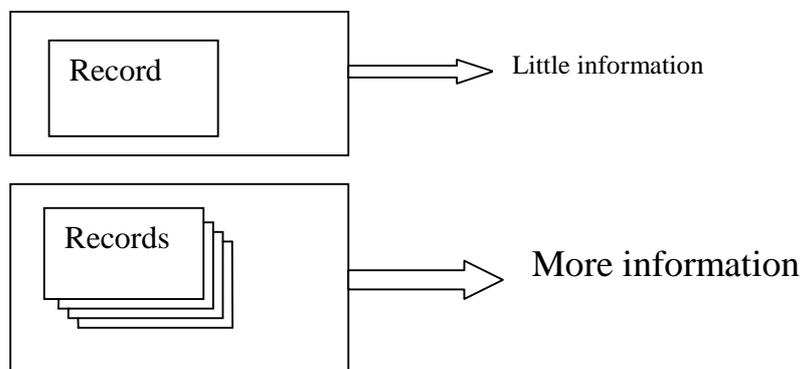


Developing a Fileplan for Local Government

A typical local authority holds millions of documents and records. Good information management practices are not just necessary to support efficient administration, they can also save lives. Both the Victoria Climbié Inquiry and the Bichard Inquiry arising from the Soham murders identified failures in information management practices. A corporate fileplan is a core part of providing effective information management to support both compliance, improved customer service and internal productivity.

Information Management and the Classification Scheme.

At the core of information management is an effective business classification scheme. Classification of records and documents is essential for several reasons. It is important to place the record in context. A single record on its own reveals very little information. Group related records together and they provide much more information than they do individually. Some government initiatives such as the Electronic Social Care Record involve placing information in a larger context to support the better delivery of services.



Classification puts records into a context

The Use of Classification

The classification scheme enables the user to browse for records. Browsing is different from searching. When searching for records we have a specific target in mind and generally use metadata, such as the name of the document or text within the document, to find what we want. When we browse for records, we do not necessarily have an idea of what we will find. To comply with the Freedom of Information Act 2000 we may need to use both techniques to identify the information relevant to an enquiry.

A classification scheme allows us to put in access controls, restricting the people who have access to a particular group of records and their level of access. Access control typically allows us to restrict the people who can know of, view or create new records. In the wider context of document management, it also allows us to control who can edit documents. Access control can be applied to individuals but is usually applied to groups of users to simplify the administration of the records.

Disposition.

Disposition, the retention and disposal of records, is an important issue. Legislation such as the Data Protection Act 1998 may require records to be disposed. Storage space is expensive and organisations cannot afford to keep records indefinitely. Storing records which no longer have any value makes the search for valuable information take longer. Within the context of open government it is important that records are disposed of in line with proper policies. A classification scheme can help us apply retention policies to a group of records, contributing to efficient administration of a records system.

Fileplan.

How does a fileplan differ from a classification scheme? The two terms are often used interchangeably. A business classification scheme is required by BS ISO 15489 (the records management standard). Together with the folders (sometimes known as files) it comprises what in the paper environment was called the "Fileplan". Records, as products of the business transactions, are brought under records management control at a point or 'node' in the fileplan. This is achieved by declaring them into a folder. Linked to this folder is records

management functionality that supports the organisation's needs for disposal and access control.

A local authority is likely to use several classification schemes. Indeed, a record management system should be capable of supporting several schemes. The significance of the fileplan is that it incorporates the primary scheme and is the structure used for storing records. It is desirable for the coverage of the fileplan to be as comprehensive as possible.

An organisation-wide approach to storage of records is important. Some local authorities operate with a culture of personal storage of information. This has many drawbacks. If information is stored at a personal level it hinders its sharing and discourages communication. Individuals apply their own approach to classifying information and there may be a lack of consistency even within a single team. This makes application of corporate retention policies patchy at best. There tends to be much more copying of information when it is kept in personal stores. There is also the problem that when members of staff leave the organisation their information tends to be no longer accessed and the knowledge that they have built up is largely lost.

A fileplan is important whether the organisation uses networked file storage or an electronic document and records management system (EDRMS). A significant benefit of an EDRMS should be to support the management of the fileplan.

A fileplan should extend to all storage both paper and electronic. From an administrative perspective, the classification scheme should also apply to the publication of information within both an intranet and an internet. Unfortunately, the classification we require for storage of information is not identical to the approach we may wish to take for publishing information. They may be similar, but a mapping is required from a classification scheme for storage to a navigation scheme for an intranet or website.

The fileplan will be a hierarchical structure of classes starting with a number of broad functional categories. These categories will be sub-divided and perhaps divided again until folders are created at the lowest level. These folders, confusingly called files in paper record management systems, are the containers in which either paper records or electronic documents are stored.

An important purpose of the fileplan is to link the documents and records to an appropriate retention schedule. The Records Management Society of Great Britain Local Government Group has produced a set of guidelines for local authorities. It is a relatively straightforward, if somewhat time-consuming, task to link the retention schedules in this document to the fileplan. It is however a worthwhile exercise as it provides guidance right down to the users.

Types of classification scheme.

There are three main types of classification scheme.

1. A functional classification scheme identifies the main functions of an organisation and then breaks these down into activities and transactions.
2. A subject classification scheme focuses on the subject of the document or the record, rather than the function. This is equivalent to the Dewey classification scheme used to classify books in libraries. While this approach is widely used in some countries such as Australia, it is not generally favoured in this country and organisations such as the National Archives do not promote its use.

3. An organisational classification scheme mirrors the structure of an organisation. While this is perhaps the simplest type of scheme to implement it suffers from a number of major drawbacks.

All three approaches have drawbacks, so a compromise or hybrid approach is generally recommended. This usually involves a functional classification at the highest levels, with a breakdown into a more subject- or service-based approach at the lower levels. Some functions, such as team meetings or staff appraisals may be directly linked to the organisation structure and these functions need an organisational approach.

Service-based systems.

When examining the types of classification scheme, it is important to recognise that many local authority records are linked to service-based or 'line of business' applications. Examples include social care records which are generally linked to the service user, revenues and benefits records which are linked to the claimant and housing records and tenancy files which are linked to the property and tenant respectively. Usually structured information is stored in a relational database application and a case file is linked (by a unique identifier) to the structured record. Much of the information in these case files is still stored in a paper format, although initiatives such as the Electronic Social Care Record means that increasing amounts of this information is being stored electronically. In developing a fileplan it is important to recognise and incorporate these service-based systems. It is both unreasonable and impractical to expect these systems to be adapted to the classification scheme. It is regrettable that the National Archives requirements for electronic records management systems do not take this requirement into account; this may be one reason why TNA guidance is not regarded highly by some local authorities.

Number of levels.

How many levels should the classification scheme have? There is no right or wrong number but some guidelines can be applied. Too few levels result in too many folders within a single class and some of the benefits of the fileplan are lost. Too many levels and the scheme is difficult to navigate and may well confuse users. Generally a scheme which has between four and six levels strikes the right balance.

Generally documents should only be stored at the lowest level of the hierarchy. Storing documents within higher level classes encourages poor use of the classification scheme and leads to a lack of clarity.

Support is vital.

It is important to recognise that developing a fileplan is a major undertaking. Introducing a fileplan involves a major culture change for staff in the way they perceive and work with information. It is not worth undertaking such a task without the support of senior management within the organisation. This means that the senior managers must recognise the importance of good information management practices. The business benefits of such practices include the ability to deliver services more efficiently; savings in storage space, both physical and electronic; and savings obtained due to better staff morale.

The aim should be to deliver a fileplan that is easy to understand and that will be used. This may involve having to compromise on occasions to achieve something that is workable instead of taking a purist approach. It is important that users understand the terms in the fileplan. This should be achieved by consulting with the users themselves. The use of a thesaurus can help to select preferred terms, but such functionality is usually restricted to an EDRMS and can require considerable effort to maintain.

There are certain key groups whose involvement is essential. IT staff will be responsible for implementing the technical aspects of the system that results from the fileplan. Information

officers or record managers will be responsible for the management of at least the higher levels of the classification scheme and for providing guidance to users. They must be committed to the fileplan if it is to have a chance of success. Most important are the users who create and store the records. They must be happy to use the fileplan or they may go to considerable efforts to subvert it. While it is extremely unlikely that universal satisfaction will be obtained, it is important to achieve agreement to the fileplan with a significant majority of the users.

To obtain support, it will be necessary to brief users on the benefits of a fileplan, both to themselves and the organisation. Once a fileplan has been approved it is important to ensure that there is sufficient support and training in use of the fileplan. This should be part of a wider programme of information management training.

Production of a fileplan.

The first step in producing the fileplan is to review the background material available. This information may include mission statements, job descriptions, directory structures and lists of registered files. The next step is to interview staff regarding the functions, related activities and the records they produce. This is best undertaken by travelling to where the users work, physically inspecting the systems that they use, and discuss with the users or their representatives how they share and retrieve information.

The development of a fileplan links well into the conduct of an information audit. An information audit is often required where there is no comprehensive list of information assets, or a limited classification of records is hampering retrieval and increasing duplication. There may be no proper disposal practices and it may be that roles and responsibilities for information are unclear. A good information audit increases the awareness of the user community to good information management practices, and this can be tied into the development of the fileplan. A proposed classification scheme can be reviewed during the information audit by considering how the records identified by the audit would be classified. This is a simple way of identifying inconsistencies or gaps in the classification scheme.

It is important to consider both the structured and unstructured information held by a unit and in particular how they are linked together. Failures to link unstructured information to structured systems led to the problems that were uncovered by the Bischard inquiry.

Developing a classification scheme.

A useful starting place for local authorities developing a classification scheme is the Electronic Service Delivery (ESD) Toolkit. Several classification schemes have been developed as part the LAWs (Local Authority Websites) Project and may be found at the ESD website, www.esd.org.uk.

LGCS – the Local Government Classification Scheme should be the starting point for all authorities. Unfortunately this scheme is currently in draft and is a very early version. The scheme is far too detailed in some areas and lacks sufficient detail in other areas, probably reflecting the responsibilities and interests of the early contributors. It is hoped that these faults will be rectified in future versions. In the meantime, the current draft version can help in devising a classification scheme but cannot be used by itself.

LGCL – The Local Government Category List is extremely useful for developing a Classification Scheme. LGCL is intended to categorise and provide a navigation route for local government websites. For all external-facing functions within an authority it can usefully contribute to the classification scheme. In fact when developing a fileplan it is worth cross-referencing the entries to LGCL. This should assist in the publication of information onto the website and help automate the classification of such material. A mapping of LGCL to the draft LGCS is already available.

LGCL is a hierarchical scheme and contains nearly 1,500 preferred terms. LGCL alone cannot serve as the corporate classification scheme. Because of the website focus in LGCL, it does not cover internal functions of the administration such as IT, finance and legal services. Some aspects of LGCL go into greater detail than would be appropriate for most local authorities. Despite this, it is worth examining LGCL when developing a fileplan.

LGCL has been replaced by the IPSV – Integrated Public Service Vocabulary. This is a merger of the LGCL with the central government GCL – Government Category List and the Seamless taxonomy.

LGSL – The Local Government Services List also forms part of the ESD toolkit. This is a non-hierarchical list of services supplied by local authorities. The level of detail of the services supplied is generally greater than that provided by LGCL. It may be helpful to refer to LGSL when defining scope notes for the fileplan. A cross-reference from LGCL to LGSL has already been developed.

Metadata.

Information about the class, known as metadata, should be stored at each level. As a minimum this should consist of scope notes that provide the user with a definition of what the class should contain. An EDRMS should support the entry of scope notes. Where the system does not support metadata (such as a network file system) then a document called “Scope Notes” should be created. The aim is to give the user a sense of what information is covered.

A good EDRMS will also support additional metadata. This can include cross-references to other schemes such as LGCL or LGSL, or include links to other related classes. It should also be possible to link into retention policies. An EDRMS provides a feature known as inheritance where a child class can “inherit” the metadata attributes of the parent class. This can substantially reduce the burden of maintenance as well as providing greater usability.

Extent of control.

An important question that has to be addressed during the development of a fileplan is how much control will be exercised by a central function and how much freedom will be given to local units. A fileplan is never a finished, static structure. It will continue to change as the responsibilities of the authority change. It will therefore require maintenance.

At one end of the spectrum, the fileplan right down to the lowest level may be administered by a centralised records management function. This may be appropriate in some organisations but is unlikely to work within a typical local authority. At the other end of the spectrum, anarchy rules. It is clearly impractical to allow each unit to have complete independence and control as this defeats the whole purpose of setting up a classification scheme in the first place. The correct balance lies somewhere between the two extremes, where the highest levels of the classification scheme are under a centralised function. The creation of the lowest level classes and folders are left to the individual unit. This generally provides a balance between control and usability.

Even where there is a significant degree of decentralisation, it can be appropriate for a centralised information management function to review the classes and folders created by a unit and recommend changes to impose some degree of standardisation across the organisation. The responsibilities should be defined clearly in policy documents.

Some units may maintain that they already have a classification scheme for their information and that they are not going to change it! Where possible try to work with these existing structures rather than invent new ones, particularly where a unit can show that its information is well managed. Obtaining user support is difficult enough without alienating whole groups of users. Other units may welcome support to develop the fileplan. They are likely to be

aware of existing deficiencies and if they feel they have a stake in the outcome they will welcome the opportunity to improve. Sometimes individuals may hold out, claiming that they are “exceptions” and should not be required to adopt the new classification scheme. These doubters must be challenged and required to adopt the new system otherwise they may form a rallying point that hinders the whole operation of the scheme.

Conclusion.

Developing a fileplan involves a significant investment in staff time. The potential benefits to the authority in delivering better services by supporting more efficient administration of documents and records are substantial. The alternative is an ever-increasing amount of unclassified information that requires either physical or electronic storage, representing a risk for compliance and hindering access to important information. A fileplan alone does not solve the problem, but as part of a suite of good information management practices, it will help to turn information from a liability to an asset.

References

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