



An Chartlann Náisiúnta
National Archives

General Access Policy

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Document Control

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1. The National Archives access regime

1.1 The 30- and 20-year rule

The National Archives operates under the auspices of the National Archives Act, 1986. This legislation places obligations on government departments and other relevant bodies to transfer certain records to the National Archives once they are 30 years old. Such records are made available to the public when they have been processed by National Archives staff. Departmental records are generally released every year in early January. This procedure is commonly referred to as the *30-year rule*.

Not all 30-year-old government records are kept and transferred to the National Archives, only those records that have been deemed 'worthy of permanent preservation'. Operational routine records created by government are disposed of with the permission of the Director of the National Archives, in accordance with the provisions set out in section 7 of the Act.

In 2018 the National Archives Act was amended to allow the reduction of the 30-year rule to 20 years in limited circumstances. To date, this provision has been extended to records relating to Anglo-Irish relations and the Northern Ireland peace, process that were created by four specific bodies:

- Department of the Taoiseach
- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
- Department of Justice
- Office of the Attorney General

To date nearly all records received by the National Archives are in paper format. However, the National Archives is currently developing its digital capacity to facilitate the transfer of records in digital formats, including records now falling within the scope of the 20-year rule.

1.2 Annual media preview:

Every year in early December, the National Archives holds an event, commonly referred to as the *media preview*. This usually lasts between 3 and 5 days.

Members of the media are given access to departmental records that have been transferred to the National Archives for release to the public the following January under the 20- and 30-year rules. Such records are often referred to as the *annual releases* or *annual transfers* and their contents are widely covered in the media, between Christmas and the New Year. The records are freely available to the public in the Reading Room from the first working day in January each year. Draft finding aids for these records are also available from that day. When the finding aids to the records have been uploaded to the National Archives catalogue, they are available for searching online on the National Archives website under [Search the collections](#). Finding aids are available for each department on the National Archives website and in the Reading Room.

2. How records are released to the National Archives from government departments and relevant bodies

Records that are worthy of permanent preservation are officially released to the National Archives by a departmental official known as a *Certifying Officer*. This Officer signs a *certificate of transfer and release* which includes a list of the records to be made public.

In certain cases, individual files (or parts of files) may contain information that is not eligible for release to the public. Section 8(4) of the National Archives Act, 1986, permits records to be withheld from public inspection if their release:

- Would be contrary to the public interest
- Would or might constitute a breach of statutory duty, or a breach of good faith on the ground that they contain information supplied in confidence
- Would or might cause distress or danger to living persons on the ground that they contain information about individuals, or would or might be likely to lead to an action for damages for defamation

Such files are kept in the creating department and *withheld* from consultation by the public. The administration of this process is the responsibility of the departmental *Certifying Officer*, who works in liaison with an official in the Department of the Taoiseach, known as the *Consenting Officer*. Decisions on the withholding of individual files (or parts of files) should be reviewed every 5 years.

2.1 Departmental records that contain personal sensitive data relating to living individuals

In light of increased legislative controls on personal data through the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the National Archives must balance access and privacy rights accordingly.

In a very small number of instances, some departmental records that are currently available in the National Archives Reading Room may still contain personal data relating to living individuals. This mainly occurs where records were deposited in the National Archives before the full implementation of the National Archives Act, 1986.

The two most prominent classes of such records are:

- Department of Education national school teacher salary books, 1919-1965 (a collection referred to as ED/4)
- Department of Education national school administration files (ED/2) that reference living individuals - also mainly teachers

In those instances, researchers must sign a Data Protection undertaking, before they can view material and must not reveal any personal information of living individuals. This ensures that the National Archives complies with Data Protection Act 2018 (which incorporates GDPR into Irish law).

2.2 Court records

The National Archives is the legal repository for records from the courts. The courts have a long and established relationship with the National Archives, transferring records initially under the Public Records (Ireland) Act, 1867 and continuing this work under the current National Archives Act, 1986. Consequently, the National Archives holds an extensive quantity of court records, with the earliest being from a chancery bill from the Court of Chancery in 1590, up to probated wills from the early 1990s. However, due to the destruction of the Public Record Office in 1922 many records from the 17th century to the late 19th century were lost. Where records have survived but were badly damaged, no access is given until they are conserved. Researchers should also be mindful that many records from the courts, in particular criminal and inquest records, contain high levels of personal and sensitive information which they may find upsetting.

The 30-year rule for transferring records applies to courts. However not all court offices are in compliance with the legislation, and the last date of transfer for records will vary for each office. Records of the courts are comprised of volumes and paper files. Finding aids for the Supreme, High, Circuit and District Courts are available in the Reading Room.

The National Archives holds all surviving probated wills and grants of probate and administration for the State. These records include wills; letters of administration (intestate papers); grant books; will books; caveats; contentious papers and schedules of assets. Finding aids for these records are available in the Reading Room and on the National Archives website. Probated wills and intestate papers up to 1904 were destroyed in the shelling of the Four Courts in 1922.

Coroners are required by law to deposit their papers with their county registrar. Coroners work independently of the courts and keep their own records; therefore the quality and quantity of inquest files vary by county. Details of inquest files are included in the Circuit Court finding aids for the relevant county.

3. Legislative compliance

Not every department or court has complied with their obligations to transfer their 30-year-old records that are worthy of permanent preservation. Therefore, records that may be 30 years old (or older), might not be available in the National Archives at this time as they are still held in the relevant department or court. Work is continuing to identify and make arrangements for such records to be prepared and transferred to the National Archives. This is an ongoing process, determined by resource allocations.

4. Private accessions

Under its legislation, the National Archives may also accept deposits of records from private individuals and organisations. The type and range of records acquired through private sources is varied, and aligns with our collecting policy. Such *private accessions* are subject to a deposit agreement between the depositor and the National Archives.

These agreements may contain terms and conditions that limit access to some records in certain cases, for instance in cases where records contain personal sensitive data relating to living individuals. This is especially true of collections relating to hospitals and health care facilities or organisations, trade unions, co-operative societies, businesses and charities.

5. Access restrictions

The National Archives will ensure open and equitable access to records as far as possible, compatible with respect for other concerns such as data protection, physical condition, intellectual control, and security.

The National Archives does not allow the removal of records from our premises, and we have no public lending facility.

Some parts of collections may be temporarily unavailable for public access if they are being conserved because they are damaged or too fragile to be safely handled in the Reading Room.

Records that have been microfilmed or digitised (scanned) are not generally made available in their original format to the public. This includes the following:

- 19th century Ordnance Survey Field Name Books (OS/88)
- 1901 and 1911 Census
- Dáil Éireann Ministry and Cabinet: minutes of meetings, 1919 – 1924 (DE/1)
- Dáil Éireann Secretariat administrative files, 1919 - 1922 (DE/2)
- Proceedings of the First and Second Dála, 1919 – 1922 (DE/4)
- Petty Sessions Order Books, 1851-1922
- Dublin Poor Law Union, Minute Books and Registers, 1840-1918

Some collections may not yet be available to the public. This is the case with the following:

- 19th and early 20th century Land Commission files relating to the Fixing of Fair Rents: c350,000 files for 19 (of 26) counties
- 19th and early 20th century records of the Congested Districts Board
- Records created by the Department of Local Government (and Public Health) dealing with the co-ordination, funding, management and provision of services by local authorities, 1920s-early 1980s: only records for 5 of 26 counties are currently available to the public (Carlow, Cavan, Clare, Cork and Donegal)

There may be restrictions to records which have not yet been catalogued. The National Archives has acquired records of national significance from a wide range of official and private sources. The quantity and extensive nature of these collections means that it takes time to process and make these records available. At present, staff are cataloguing and re-numbering certain portions of 19th century records from the Office of the Chief Secretary (CSO) and so these records are temporarily unavailable to the public:

- Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers (CSORP):
 - 1833 Outrage Papers
 - 1834 Outrage Papers
 - Regular Series for 1835 (the 1835 Outrage Papers are still available)
 - 1919 CSORP
- The papers of the Chief Crown Solicitor, 1859-1890

All Census returns from 1926 onwards are closed for 100 years in accordance with the Statistics Act, 1993. The 1926 Census will be made available online in April 2026. In line with our policy on microfilmed or digitised (scanned) records, access to original 1926 Census records will not generally be granted to the public.

Records acquired through private accession may be subject to deposit agreements which limit access in certain circumstances, for example where records contain personal sensitive data relating to living individuals.

Hospital records are private accessions and due to the personal and sensitive nature of their content will be subject to access restrictions. National Archives staff can provide guidance on obtaining access to closed or restricted hospital records.

The National Archives holds some matrimonial (family law) files from the High Court. These records are closed and can only be accessed with permission from the High Court.

Circuit and District court records relating to family law can only be accessed with the written permission of the relevant County Registrar.

All National Archives staff will discharge their duties in a timely, fair and equitable manner, without consideration of personal interests or affiliations. Staff will adhere to the National Archives access regime, and act in compliance with relevant legislation. No privileged access or material advantage will be sought by staff beyond that available to the general public.

Access restrictions

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