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Recordkeeping and Natural Disasters - the Queensland Floods and the Canterbury Earthquake: a comparison Wednesday 22 August 2.30pm

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This paper will address the recordkeeping response of Queensland State Archives and Archives New Zealand to two different natural disasters that occurred across Queensland in 2010-2011 and in Canterbury New Zealand in 2011.

Queensland covers an area of 1.7 million square kilometres which is nearly seven times larger than the British Isles and larger than South Africa. The Queensland floods which occurred in December 2010 and January 2011 resulted in three-quarters of the state declared as a disaster zone. Communities across Queensland were impacted by severe flooding with thousands of people evacuated from towns and cities and much of central and southern Queensland affected. Thirty-five people lost their lives as a result of the floods.

Cyclone Yasi followed in early February 2011, a tropical cyclone that made landfall in northern Queensland and reached as far as Mt Isa and beyond, reaching 450 kilometres inland from where it originally crossed the coastline. Winds of 290 km per hour caused significant damage in the region with Tully, Innisfail and Cardwell the worst affected areas.

As the extent of the devastation from the Queensland floods and Cyclone Yasi unfolded, Queensland State Archives responded to multiple requests for assistance from public authorities that had sustained damage to their hard copy paper records. Members of the public also contacted Queensland State Archives for advice on how to salvage and restore precious family records including photographs.

Queensland State Archives estimated that approximately 120 public authorities were located within the flood affected areas and 23 within cyclone affected areas. Once public authorities were able to assess the damage, Queensland State Archives received advice that some public records in certain locations had been irretrievably

lost in the floods or had sustained such significant damage that the cost to salvage or repair them would be prohibitive.

During this initial period, it became clear that a mechanism for the disposal of public records was required for emergency situations. Under the *Public Records Act 2002*, authorisation for the disposal of public records is required from the State Archivist. As with many archival institutions this authorisation is usually provided in a retention and disposal schedule which may take many months to develop depending on its complexity. As the scale of the natural disasters unfolded, it became apparent that the usual practices and procedures for securing the approval of the State Archivist to dispose of public records would perhaps not be sufficient due to the emergent nature of the situation and the need for a swift and efficient response. In many cases, approval for the lawful disposal of badly damaged public records was required due to the associated health and safety concerns that retaining the records raised.

Not only were some public records damaged beyond repair, Queensland State Archives was also receiving advice that records had been irretrievably lost, which would need to be documented in the event that they would be required for future legal action, Right to Information applications or audits etc. Additionally, other agencies that relied on these records for business purposes would also need to be advised of the loss.

An examination of the processes in place across the other archival jurisdictions in Australia revealed that no other government archival authority had a rapid disposal response mechanism in place that would suit the current situation in Queensland.

A number of options were considered including auditing and inspections of damaged records by Queensland State Archives' staff. However as some of these records could be located in remote areas of the state or were located in regions that could not be reached due to the devastation caused by the disasters, this option was simply not viable.

Issuing a general retention and disposal schedule for all damaged public records was also considered but it was felt that some formal mechanism of notification as to the degree of damage sustained was required. Additionally, due to the widespread effect of the floods and cyclone across Queensland, specialist conservation advice was not available to some public authorities and therefore a correct assessment of the

damage sustained by the records could not be made. This was particularly important in the event that permanent records had sustained damage or were lost and could not be recreated from other sources.

If a general retention and disposal schedule was issued, it also meant that there would be no notification or summary to the State Archivist demonstrating the level of public records lost or damaged during a natural disaster or other event. This was particularly relevant if permanent records that would usually form part of the archival collection at Queensland State Archives had been lost or irretrievably damaged. The identification of missing records would need to be documented to inform researchers and historians of the unavailability of certain records in the years to come.

During this time, there was a lot of internal discussion as to the meaning of a 'lost' record. Traditionally this may mean that a record had been burnt in a fire and 'lost' as in unable to be read or recreated. However, in the Queensland floods, we had to work with the concept that a record may be 'lost' by being swept away in a raging torrent of water and therefore 'lost' to the public authority that owned the records but may physically exist somewhere else (and possibly located further down the track) or could be re-created. This theoretical concept generated a lot of debate during the time that the disposal process was being developed.

Legal advice was sought regarding the legality of the disposal authorisation of the State Archivist under the *Public Records Act 2002* and to ensure that the chosen mechanism for providing such authorisation was clear and consistent with disposal mechanisms already in place.

Following internal discussion and consultation, a process of notifying the State Archivist of lost records and applying to dispose of damaged records was implemented. Forms were designed for public authorities to provide the necessary information to the State Archivist to make a decision about whether to authorise the disposal of damaged records and to ensure that a robust appraisal of the records could be conducted.

The minimum information requested included

- a description of the records
- their coverage in an approved retention and disposal schedule

- details of the incident that caused the damage
- whether the records could be recreated from other records.¹

Any supporting evidence e.g. photographs or an assessor's report, were also requested but not mandatory.

The forms for lost and damaged records were required to be submitted to the State Archivist by the CEO or their delegate as CEOs are responsible for recordkeeping within their own organisation under the *Public Records Act 2002*. This ensured that CEOs were aware of the damage or loss of public records within their own organisation and could take steps to rectify the situation if possible.

Once the information was received by Queensland State Archives, an assessment of the application was made and a recommendation made to the State Archivist to approve or not approve the disposal of damaged public records. Due to the health and safety issues surrounding public records damaged by flood waters, applications to dispose of damaged records were given the highest priority. One application covering records that were heavily inundated with sewerage was turned around in a number of days to alleviate the risk to staff handling the damaged material.

Of the five applications to dispose of damaged records received by 30 June 2011 relating to the Queensland floods, all were assessed and approval given by the State Archivist to dispose of the records. Individual Retention and Disposal Schedules were issued with a unique Queensland Disposal Authority Number that would allow the public authority to dispose of the records and document the disposal authorisation in their recordkeeping system. This ensured that public authorities were remaining compliant with the recordkeeping requirements of *Information Standard 31: Retention and disposal of public records*² despite the circumstances leading to the disposal of the public records.

¹ *Application to dispose of damaged public records*. Accessed 30 July 2012

http://www.archives.qld.gov.au/Recordkeeping/GRKDownloads/Documents/Application_to_dispose_of_damaged_public_records.pdf

Notification of lost public records. Accessed 30 July 2012

http://www.archives.qld.gov.au/Recordkeeping/GRKDownloads/Documents/Notification_of_lost_public_records.pdf

² *Information Standard 31: Retention and disposal of public records*. Accessed 30 July 2012. [Retention and Disposal of Public Records \(IS31\) - Current Information Standards](#)

A further application to dispose of flood damaged records was received this year, over 12 months after the Queensland floods. The application covered records of several State Government departments that were managed on their behalf by a shared service provider. The provider had secured the services of a recovery specialist that had provided a full assessment and analysis of the damage sustained to the records.

The six approvals to dispose of damaged public records in the Queensland floods were all issued to public authorities located in South East Queensland. The authorisation covered a total of 1681 items consisting of:

- 300 charts
- 1193 files
- 186 boxes
- 2 mail items.

Ten notifications of public records lost in the Queensland floods were also received from nine separate public authorities with the majority of records again lost in South East Queensland and one loss in Central Queensland. The lost records totalled:

- 6790 files
- 318 boxes,
- 57 metres and eight kilograms of unidentified records
- 15 manuals
- 95 sets of drawings.

Many of the records lost had been pulped beyond recognition making even the identification of what had been lost absolutely impossible. Many records were also simply cleared away by eager volunteers during the clean up process in the aftermath of the floods. Many others were destroyed immediately as they were badly contaminated by sewerage and posed a significant health risk to staff and members of the public involved in the clean up process.

Of the records notified to Queensland State Archives, the majority of records had been assigned a temporary retention period within an approved Retention and Disposal Schedule. A small number of the lost records were permanent but could be recreated from other sources by the public authority or information sourced from elsewhere by researchers.

In the months since the release of the forms for lost and damaged records, Queensland State Archives has also received a small number of applications for loss and damage to records in circumstances other than the Queensland floods including asbestos contamination and accidental loss. It has therefore been noted that the forms can now be used for a variety of situations. Now that the natural disasters that commenced this process have abated, the process is still in place for public authorities to notify or request disposal authorisation from the State Archivist for lost and damaged records in other circumstances. The ongoing use of these forms for lost or damaged records had always been part of their initial development as Queensland State Archives recognised that floods and cyclones were not the only events that can impact public records.

Following the Queensland floods, Queensland State Archives published a *Report on the impact of the 2011 floods and Cyclone Yasi on certain public records*³ which is available on our website at www.archives.qld.gov.au. The report outlined the loss and damage sustained to certain public records and the public authorities impacted. By documenting the loss and damage to certain public records, public authorities have ensured that such losses are recorded in the event that the records may have been needed for future legal proceedings, audits or Right to Information applications. It also ensures that members of the public are aware that certain records were lost or damaged in the spirit of open government, accountability and transparency. A summary of the loss and damage sustained was provided to integrity agencies such as the Queensland Audit Office and the Office of the Information Commissioner to advise them that some records required for investigations and audits may not be available.

A creative commons licence was applied to the forms at the time of publication allowing other archival authorities to take advantage of the work of Queensland State Archives and adapt and use them for their own purposes.

The information provided to Queensland State Archives following the Queensland floods indicated that public records are often stored in less than ideal storage conditions including basements and car parks. In some situations this increased the risk of damage to records in a flood event. As a result, Queensland State Archives

³ *Report on the impact of the 2011 floods and Cyclone Yasi on certain public records*. Accessed 30 July 2012
<http://www.archives.qld.gov.au/Recordkeeping/GRKDownloads/Documents/ImpactReportFloodsCycloneYasi.pdf>

continues to promote the benefits of good recordkeeping to mitigate the effects of natural disasters on public records.

So, as you can see, the approach Queensland State Archives adopted during the 2010/2011 floods and cyclones, has ongoing usefulness due to the robustness of the original process and can be applied to multiple circumstances. Streamlining the disposal process through the use of forms for seeking authorisation from the State Archivist in unusual situations has also led Queensland State Archives to explore this as a mechanism in other circumstances. Queensland State Archives is currently exploring the use of a form to request authorisation from the State Archivist when decommissioning a business system that contains public records in an attempt to seek consistency in the decision making process around the disposal of public records.

As Queensland State Archives continues to receive notifications of lost and damaged records, so our processes will continue to adapt to a rapidly changing environment.

Canterbury Earthquakes

On 4th September 2010, 22nd February 2011, 13th June and 23rd December 2011 New Zealand experienced significant earthquake events that caused extensive damage across the Canterbury region. These earthquake events were surrounded by numerous aftershocks that caused additional damage. One hundred and eighty five people lost their lives as a result of the earthquakes.

During these earthquakes a number of public offices and local authorities (Regional, District and City Councils) suffered loss and damage to records in their offices and storage areas. Some public offices had records located in buildings which collapsed in the 22nd February 2011 earthquake; others had (and have) records located in buildings designated for destruction. However, not all public offices and local authorities suffered loss or damage to their records as a result of the Canterbury earthquakes.

In the aftermath of the 22nd February 2011 earthquake there was more damage to public offices in the Christchurch area compared to the 4th September 2010 earthquake. A number of public offices could no longer access their buildings and records located in those buildings. A Red Zone was set up in Christchurch Central Business District which resulted in access to public sector offices being restricted.

This resulted in many public offices having difficulties in accessing vital records and resources to carry out everyday business. Some public offices have only just been able to access their records in the last few months (June 2012).

From contacting all public offices in Christchurch known to Archives New Zealand at the time, some 53 public offices, each was provided with a rating to highlight the severity of the impact in terms of risks to recordkeeping activities, including disposal. Only 11 of the 53 public offices in Canterbury were identified as being in the highest risk category. Possible unauthorised disposal of records was considered a high risk in these rankings; with public offices at most risk of losing records given the highest priority. These were also the public offices that Archives New Zealand prioritised for any assistance they might have required.

Archives New Zealand was required to provide little on-the-ground practical assistance in the aftermath of the earthquakes, with only one London box being transported to our Preservation Services section in Wellington for preservation intervention. This was partly because our own Christchurch office was damaged, and within the red zone, and partly due to the ability of public offices to manage their own recordkeeping recovery and conservation efforts.

Under section 20 of *the Public Records Act 2005* all public offices must apply for permission from the Chief Archivist in order to legally dispose of public records. In order to assist with the legal disposal of records damaged or destroyed in the earthquakes Archives New Zealand developed the Canterbury Earthquakes Disposal Authority (CEDA).⁴ This Disposal Authority (DA) is designed to assist public offices who have records located in Canterbury in applying for authorisation for the final destruction, or archiving, of records under s20 of the *Public Records Act 2005*. Prior to the development of the CEDA Archives New Zealand did not have a mechanism for authorising the disposal of records affected by disasters.

Local Authorities (Regional, District and City Councils) are not able to use this DA as their records are covered by a separate process under section 40(3) of the *Public Records Act 2005*. However, this DA is intended to be used to inform the process for any destruction or transfers under s40(3) for Local Authorities in Canterbury that have been affected by the earthquakes.

⁴ Archives New Zealand (2011). *DA466: Canterbury Earthquakes Disposal Authority*. Retrieved 26 July 2012, <http://archway.archives.govt.nz/ViewEntity.do?code=DA466>

Disposal Authority Development

Archives New Zealand considered the following Australian disposal authorities as precedents and models in deciding which disposal approach to take:

- National Archives of Australia
 - General Records Authority 30: Records damaged beyond recovery in a natural disaster, a defined emergency or other unforeseen circumstance.⁵
- Queensland State Archives⁶
 - Notification of lost public records
 - Application to dispose of damaged public records
 - Listing of damaged or lost public records

Archives New Zealand then developed three possible options for authorising the destruction of affected records:

a) An open General Disposal Authority (GDA)

The option of notifying and issuing a general schedule based DA for all public records damaged or lost as a direct result of the Canterbury earthquakes was considered but rejected on the grounds that the Chief Archivist would not have, and might never obtain, sufficient information about records dealt with under the GDA. Legal advice was that the requirements of s20 could not be met. This model is similar to the approach taken by the National Archives of Australia with their *General Records Authority 30: Records damaged beyond recovery in a natural disaster, a defined emergency or other unforeseen circumstance* where an agency can pick up the authority and immediately start to use it.

b) Issuing a general Notice to Dispose, followed by issue of individual public office one-off/ad-hoc DAs

Legal advice was that this was the option that was most consistent with the wording of s20. However, disadvantages were that the public was in no better position to

⁵ National Archives of Australia (2012). *General Records Authority 30 - Records damaged beyond recovery in a natural disaster, a defined emergency or other unforeseen circumstance*; 2011/00064423. Retrieved 26th July 2012, http://www.naa.gov.au/Images/GRA30_tcm16-47737.PDF

⁶ Queensland State Archives (2012). *Disaster preparedness and recovery*. Retrieved 26 July 2012, <http://www.archives.qld.gov.au/Recordkeeping/Disaster/Pages/Default.aspx>

know which records were proposed for destruction, and there would be a delay in authorising disposal so that the practical effect was that most records would have been destroyed prior to authorisation.

- c) A schedule based DA that requires confirmation of coverage for implementation

Issuing the DA in a form in which the Chief Archivist's confirmation that the records are within the terms of the DA is needed has the advantage that public offices must obtain Archives New Zealand's sign-off. This option was considered as it was thought that public offices would be encouraged to provide information about records already destroyed by "act of God" and, where public offices provide information promptly, records could then be destroyed under authorisation. It was considered that there was a higher probability that information about records that had been or would be destroyed would be available.

This option was considered practically consistent with s20, and had the advantage of taking into account a purpose of the *Public Records Act 2005*; namely that public confidence in the integrity of public records is enhanced by the most transparent process for dealing with this situation. This option is also closest in approach to the Queensland State Archives model of agencies notifying the State Archivist of the loss of records or applying for permission to destroy damaged records.

Archives New Zealand decided that the third option was the most viable option after considering the precedents set by Australia when it came to authorising destruction of records affected by a disaster. This schedule based option requires a public office to apply to the Chief Archivist for authorisation to dispose of records; this is modelled on the Queensland State Archives application with public offices able to add any additional reports or evidence as needed. The Chief Archivist can also ask for further evidence from a public office if it is considered insufficient.

During the development of the CEDA Archives New Zealand collected information from public offices that had public records located in the Canterbury region regarding the extent and type of damage suffered by those records as a result of the Canterbury earthquakes. This informed the class structure used in the Disposal Authority, particularly the inclusion of a that covers records that are irretrievable due to damage or destruction to the location in which they are stored. In this class the

records themselves may be in good condition, but the location they are in is too hazardous for recovery efforts to take place.

Definitions of damage and destruction were thoroughly considered in consultation with Archives New Zealand's Preservation Services section. Definitions for both terms were derived from their Oxford Dictionary meanings, i.e.:

- Destruction: "the action of causing so much damage to something that it no longer exists or cannot be repaired"⁷
- Damage: "physical harm impairing the value, usefulness, or normal function of something"⁸

Destruction is therefore defined as the situation where the physical form or carrier of the record no longer exists or has been damaged to such an extent that none of its information can be retrieved. Damage is defined as the situation where the physical form or carrier of the record still exists and there is a possibility of its information being retrieved.

The Appraisal Policy issued by Archives New Zealand in 2008 was also consulted and informed the construction of classes in the Disposal Authority so that the archival and business value of records can be taken into account when considering if the cost of salvage is reasonable or not.⁹

Canterbury Earthquakes Disposal Authority Destruction Classes

- 1.1 - Records that have been completely destroyed.
- 2.1 - High Value records that are unable to be salvaged due to unreasonable restoration costs.
- 2.2 - Low Value records that are unable to be salvaged due to unreasonable restoration costs.
- 3.1 - Records that are reasonably unable to be salvaged because they are deemed permanently inaccessible or irretrievable due to severe hazard or health and safety risk.

⁷ Oxford Dictionaries (2012). *Destruction*. Retrieved 26th July 2012, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/destruction?q=destruction>

⁸ Oxford Dictionaries (2012). *Damage*. Retrieved 26th July 2012, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/damage?q=damage>

⁹ Archives New Zealand (2008). *Appraisal Policy*. Retrieved 26th July 2012: <http://archives.govt.nz/appraisal-policy>

Canterbury Earthquakes Disposal Authority Archive Class

- 4.1 Records that are of archival value that are able to be salvaged.

At the time of writing this paper two applications to apply the Canterbury Earthquakes Disposal Authority have been approved with two other possible applications being currently drafted by public offices. Approximately 300 boxes of records have been destroyed by these two agencies.

Archives New Zealand is still assessing its overall response to the Canterbury Earthquakes and the assistance provided to public offices and local authorities. However, the initial assessment indicates that there are areas in which Archives New Zealand could do better. These include raising awareness of general disaster and business continuity planning both internally and externally and providing more advice and training to public offices and local authorities in these areas, as well as increasing coordination and communication between cultural institutions who were responding to the disaster.¹⁰ They also include increasing our understanding of the role Archives New Zealand provides in a disaster and at what point it is appropriate for us to begin responding to the disaster.

Planning and training for disaster situations is one of the most effective ways of being able to respond appropriately in a time of disaster. Archives New Zealand also learned that open and effective communication is very important in a situation such as this. Trying to establish these relationships during a disaster is ineffective; the relationships should ideally be already established before a disaster.

Archives New Zealand based its disposal response heavily on the Queensland State Archives approach and this approach has worked well so far. The approach includes using a similar application process and requires agencies to provide evidence of what has been damaged or destroyed. Archives New Zealand decided to take a schedule based approach to authorising disposal, with public offices able to apply classes from the schedule to their records and then apply to the Chief Archivist accordingly for authorisation.

¹⁰ Archives New Zealand, Karamdeep Sahota (2011). *Lessons Learned from the Christchurch Earthquakes* (Obj ID: A619272)