

# Decentralisation and Records Management

by Martin Bradley

Decentralisation provides an unparalleled opportunity for Government Bodies to address their ongoing Records Management requirements and to resolve any deficiencies that may exist in relation to accessibility and conservation of their historical/archival material as well as the ways in which they access, track and manage the life-cycle of current and future records.

Physically moving archives, records and infrastructure into new storage and retrieval centres, outsourcing the running of records centres, cataloguing and barcoding material as it is checked in to ensure efficient future tracking of files, setting up servers with taxonomies that mimic file organisation charts for hard copy files, implementing new procedures for file creation and disposition and the formulation of policy for Records Management are all key areas that will absolutely need to be addressed as part of decentralisation.

Oddly The first *Report of the Decentralisation Implementation Group* of 19 November 2004 makes no mention of Records Management, Files or Archives even within the context of the requirement for storage space within new properties. Given the considerable historical archives and current paperwork of Government Departments and Agencies dating back to the 1920s this seems somewhat of an oversight.

The *Second Report of the Decentralisation Implementation Group* of 30 July 2004 makes reference to Archives and Records Management by stating that '*Procedures on best practice in fundamental records management are being updated and circulated*'.

The Decentralisation Implementation Group's *Progress Report to the Minister of Finance* of 30 June 2005 makes no mention of the issue but states that space requirements in new accommodation be limited to '*20 square metres per person inclusive of all circulation and ancillary space requirements*'.

Anyone who has seen, as I have, the warehouses containing 80 years' worth of accumulated documents held by most Government Departments and Agencies, will know that 200,000 square metres would barely be enough to handle this paperwork, let alone staff. Government Departments and Agencies are going to have to fight for storage space based on linear measurements of their existing records, or perhaps more pertinently look at outsourcing the requirement for storage, tracking and management of their records to a provider of offsite facilities. Care should however be taken to choose a provider that has been certified to ISO 15489 level (The International Records Management Standard) as there are many warehouse owners and furniture removal companies who purport to offer '*Records Management*' services with very little in the way of qualifications or experience.

The Deloitte report *A Financial Assessment of Decentralisation Costs and Savings* of October 2004 identifies the moving of files and filing equipment as a major cost in Decentralisation and recommends the approach of '*Archiving of inoperative files, this would give rise to alternate costs in terms of staff time in classify/reviewing files and costs of off-site storage. However, these costs would not be incremental to*

*decentralisation as the archiving of inoperative files would be part of the ongoing operations of Departments / Agencies*'. This approach makes sense, but Government Departments and Agencies will have to move fast in producing Retention Schedules that identify inactive files, a process that will involve surveying, listing and assigning retention periods to all their existing filing.

CMOD have published two excellent guides entitled *Records Management in a Nutshell* and *Old Rules are Still Good Rules*, but neither of these volumes make specific mention of the Records

Management requirements imposed by Decentralisation other than stating that '*The Whole area of Records Management has now become more critical as many organisations anticipate significant staff turnover during the Government's Decentralisation programme*'.

Aside from issues around where to place records once they have been moved the whole question of how to ensure that all records arrive at their new locations, are checked out, checked in and placed on shelving in the order in which they left will need to be examined.

Indeed, this is such a pertinent issue that the Society of American Archivists has dedicated an entire publication to the business, entitled *Moving Archives*. The accounts depict in-house, cross-town, and cross-country moves. The contexts of each move vary, of course, and involve renovated and new buildings, disaster situations, and administrative changes. The main value of this volume lies in the attention to management issues pertinent to any move. These include planning, moving, building design and construction, preservation, and security.

Clearly there are very real risks in moving Archives and Records as part of decentralisation running from the mild – misfiling, delivery to wrong sections to the serious – damage or destruction through mishandling, bad packing, being left outside pending shelving etc. Given the number of high-profile and embarrassing incidents involving missing, misplaced or unavailable files that have afflicted a variety of Government Departments and Agencies in the recent past it will not be hard to justify relatively modest expenditure on ensuring that these tasks are carried out efficiently by experienced professionals.

In the apparent absence of any clear directives on these issues it would appear that it is up to individual Departments and Agencies to obtain guidance from their own resources. Thankfully there are a number of sources of assistance, such as the *Archives Ireland* website at [www.archives.ie](http://www.archives.ie) which provides free advice, links and information as well as a list of approved consultants.



## Useful Websites:

Society of American Archivists' *Moving Archives*  
[www.archivists.org/periodicals/aa\\_v66/review-engseth-aa66\\_2.asp](http://www.archivists.org/periodicals/aa_v66/review-engseth-aa66_2.asp)

Archives Ireland  
[www.archives.ie](http://www.archives.ie)

Government Decentralisation Website  
[www.decentralisation.gov.ie](http://www.decentralisation.gov.ie)

About Martin Bradley:

Martin is a professional Archivist and has been a provider of Records Management Consultancy to the State, Semi-State and Private Sectors since 1997. Since May 2005 Martin has been the Executive Director of Archives Consulting Services Ltd a company formed to meet the

increasing demand for consultancy in this area. Martin can be contacted at Tel: 1850 78 67 48 Email: [info@archivesconsult.com](mailto:info@archivesconsult.com) or Web: [www.archivesconsult.com](http://www.archivesconsult.com)