

Hong Kong Territory Report from the Government Records Service, Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

Jessica Lau

Government Records Service of Hong Kong

Foreword

Digital technology has transformed the way we create, capture, share and access records. The ever-evolving digital technology has also greatly increased the volume of information and records being dealt with by all organisations and making the task of records management more complex. These changes in the volume and complexity of information, along with increased public expectation have posed great challenges to us. Among them, one of the greatest challenges facing by all archival institutions in the 21st century is the need to transform records and archives management practices and system significantly and to address the fundamental paradigm shift brought about by the widespread use of digital information technologies. As a result of these changes and new technological development, the roles of archives authority and archivist have evolved, been reshaped in order to meet these challenges. This report will report the works of the Government Records Service (“GRS”) of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (“the Government”) in responding to the challenges of technological change, to reflect on where we are now, and to look ahead to where we would like to go.

2. GRS is tasked to oversee the overall management of government records and ensure the government records are properly managed and those with archival value are preserved for public access. Currently, GRS has a total of 124 staff members. They are from different civil service grades, including Archivists, Curators, Executive Officers, System Manger and Administrators and others, all working together to promote better records and archives management in the Government. Traditionally, GRS performs two distinct but related roles. One role is as a central agency of the Government focusing on ensuring effective recordkeeping. The other role is to promote the preservation and use of archives for research, education and the documentary heritage of our community. Among other grades in GRS, Archivists play a key role as gate keeper in archives functions.

3. With the rapid progression of digital technology, the need to manage records from the point of creation or even before it demands an integrated approach to recordkeeping. While we see digital technology has offered new options and solutions to archival institutions to reshape and enhance their services, we believe that people (both users and staff) are of crucial importance to GRS in developing strategy in meeting the challenges. GRS needs a skilled and vibrant team of information professionals, such as archivist, records manager, executive officer, curator, IT professional, working collaboratively to meet the ever-increasing challenges arising from the digital era. We are also aware of the higher public expectation on access and

use of government records and the remarkable efforts now underway in other jurisdictions to make public archives more participatory. Against this background, we have re-examined the roles of GRS with an aim to better meet the needs of our community as well as the way we work in meeting such needs. Hence, GRS has developed its vision and mission statements in 2014, positioning ourselves more strategically to address the new challenges brought about by the new era.

Vision

“To be the leading, most insightful and resourceful public archives in Hong Kong that excels in preserving and promoting the documentary heritage of our city in the digital era.”

Mission

- To build comprehensive and diversified archival collections;
- To provide user-friendly and convenient access to the archival collections;
- To build a digital archive with modern technologies;
- To promote good records management practices among government bureaux and departments and public organisations;
- To provide advanced facilities for storage, preservation and retrieval services;
- To promote awareness, appreciation and proper use of documentary heritage in our community; and
- To foster a closer partnership with other archives.

Management and long term preservation of digital records

4. With the rapidly changing technology adopted in the management and preservation of digital records, there appears to be no perfect solution which records and archival institutions can adhere to once and for all. Amid the challenges posed by widespread use of digital records, GRS has drawn on the experience of other records and archives institutions as well as records management and IT consultants, and has developed and implemented a series of initiatives to keep pace with the evolving technology. Our major initiatives are highlighted below:

Implementation of Electronic Record Keeping System

5. Electronic Record Keeping System (“ERKS”) is an information system with the necessary records management capabilities designed to electronically manage the creation, storage, retrieval, disposal and preservation of records. Implementation of ERKS is a mandatory component to drive electronic records management in the Government. As we reported in the 12th General Conference of EASTICA & Seminar in 2015, five government bureaux and departments including GRS had implemented or in the course of finalising their ERKS. Since then, I am pleased to say that we have made considerable progress, now

having eleven government departments which have already implemented or are implementing their ERKS. Nonetheless, we cannot afford to be complacent and we have been taking active steps to plan on the full implementation of ERKS across all bureaux and departments in the Government. Recently, the Chief Executive has just announced in her Policy Address the new initiative to roll out electronic record-keeping system to all government bureau/departments by end-2025 to enhance efficiency in preserving and managing government records. GRS will work closely together with the Office of the Government Chief Information Office (“OGCIO”) and the Efficiency Office of the HKSAR Government, taking all the necessary steps and securing the resources to implement ERKS across the Government.

6. The planning and implementation of ERKS across all government departments requires collaboration and expertise of different professionals. While the system configuration and IT infrastructure demand specialist knowledge in IT, the executive professionals and the records users contribute to the management and implementation of this complex and far-reaching project. The archivists of GRS also play a crucial role in the planning and implementation of ERKS. The early appraisal and identification of digital records with archival value by the archivists could facilitate their timely transfer and appropriate preservation. Put this into the context of the Government, GRS is undertaking a major project to review the disposal schedules so that the archival value of records could be appraised and ascertained as early as possible at the creation and active usage stage. In such review exercise, the archivists will play a crucial role in applying their expertise in functional analysis and identifying the scope for rationalising departments’ disposal schedules which in turn will facilitate devising records classification schemes in the planning of ERKS.

7. To drive electronic records management in the Government, GRS has been taking an active role in developing standards, best practices and guidelines for government-wide implementation of electronic records management and ERKS, and providing support and assistance to government departments to develop an ERKS. GRS has so far developed ten sets of electronic records management standards and guidelines for reference and compliance by the government departments. All these electronic records management standards and guidelines are available on the website of GRS (https://www.grs.gov.hk/en/hksar_government_administrative_guidelines_on_record_management.html).

Storage Allocation and Records Centre Information System

8. On the records management front, GRS rolled out a Storage Allocation and Records Centre Information System (“SARCIS”) in 2017 for managing the scheduling and disposal of government records and the use of records centre service. SARCIS is built with capabilities for storage allocation management, physical object management, database management and workflow management. Government departments are able to conveniently submit draft disposal schedules, requests for transfer of records and disposal of records online through SARCIS. It has brought great improvement to the operational efficiency in both GRS and government departments by, for example, screening out records which have yet to fulfill their retention period prescribed in a disposal schedule and approving the requests and draft disposal schedules online.

Setting up of a digital repository

9. To address the long-term preservation needs of digital records, it is incumbent upon GRS to develop government-wide policy, strategies and solutions for preserving electronic records created and preserved in computing environments in government departments. GRS has been taking steps to conduct a comprehensive study on long-term preservation of digital records by phases after conducting extensive market research to explore various technical options and solutions for the implementation of a digital archive. In 2019, GRS has engaged a consultant to conduct consultancy study to formulate government policy, strategies, standards and guidelines for the preservation of digital records in government departments as well as the preservation of archival records in digital form in GRS.

10. Due to the significant growth in born-digital records and the implementation of ERKS in government departments since 2010, the need for transfer of electronic records to GRS will rise significantly in the near future. It is imperative for GRS to set up a digital archive with modern technologies for the long-term preservation of archival records through electronic means to enhance their accessibility and usability. As an interim measure, GRS has procured a digital repository for the storage of digital archival records and the implementation project just commenced in October 2019. As the digital archiving technology is still developing, we will continue to look out for best practices among our counterparts in other countries and work towards the goal of setting up a digital archive which will be sustainable for the preservation of digital records over time.

Archiving of Government websites and social media

11. To provide members of the public with access to Hong Kong's documentary heritage in the cyberworld, GRS is exploring the feasibility of archiving those Internet websites of the Government with high archival values on a regular basis by using suitable web archiving tools. To kick start the web archiving initiative, GRS has completed a pilot project on archiving of Government websites in 2019. Under the pilot project, about 600 Government websites and thematic websites with archival value were crawled. GRS is consolidating the experience of this pilot project to consider the long-term strategy for web archiving. Apart from web archiving, we are also aware of the information existing in Government social media accounts. GRS is now exploring the feasibility of social media archiving. We are still in the initial stage of planning a social media archive and would be grateful to learn from the experience of other archival institutions.

Records discovery and public engagement

12. Providing user friendly and convenient access to archival collection is one of GRS' missions. Putting people in the centre of our public service, we need to understand users' information requirements and to

facilitate access in the ways that work for them.

Ten-year Digitisation Plan

13. GRS currently preserves more than 1.6 million of archival records. Among them, about 100,000 archival records have been digitised to produce more than 2 million digital images. To achieve the mission of providing convenient access to meet with the imminent demand from the public, GRS has drawn up a ten-year digitisation plan (2018-2028), with a target of producing 350,000 digital images this year and progressively increasing to a total of 6 million digital images in ten years' time. Till then, there will be approximately 15-20% of GRS' archival holdings to be digitised.

GRS website and online catalogue

14. Websites and online catalogues are not only effective means to connect users with our archival holdings but also an integral part of GRS' corporate image. How to curate digital content in an appealing way is essential to promoting appreciation of documentary heritage and engaging users in our services. To this end, GRS launched the revamped website (<http://www.grs.gov.hk>) in 2017. The revamped website provides a more user-friendly interface for users to browse the information therein and to access our archival holdings. The new design helps improve user experience and promote the awareness, appreciation and proper use of documentary heritage in our community. More digitised archival holdings are accessible under "Our Holdings" on the website. Besides, a wide range of records management publications and guidelines are also uploaded. Hits to the website reached an all-time high of more than 13,756,000 number in 2018.

15. In December 2018, we launched the new Online Catalogue of Public Records Office ("PRO") holdings known as @PRO to replace the old system. @PRO is not only to enhance user's records discovery experience but also to provide a comprehensive system to manage different archival processes. By streamlining the archives management workflow and providing enhanced functionalities, it captures the essential information relating to an archival record from its acquisition and appraisal to its transfer, accessioning and description, such as the acquisition history of the record, its metadata and archival description. With a more powerful search engine and user-friendly interface, users can locate the required archival and library items in a much easier and faster way. Besides, @PRO allows users to create account, reserve holdings and apply for access to records through the Internet. A collection of digitised holdings is also available online to facilitate viewing and downloading without time and space constraints.

Public engagement

16. To support life-long learners and the education sector at all levels and to let the public know more

about the GRS holdings and services, GRS organises a wide range of public engagement events throughout the year such as visits, seminars, workshops, thematic film shows, exhibitions and other educational activities. In 2019, we have launched our public exhibition with the theme of “Pleasure and Leisure: A Glimpse of Children’s Pastimes in Hong Kong”, showcasing how children’s pastimes in Hong Kong evolved from the 1950s to the 1980s through the display of a variety of the GRS’ holdings. Apart from reliving the joyful childhood moments, one can also learn more about the transformation of our society and livelihood in those years. To encourage public participation in the exhibition, GRS has also launched two public engagement programmes namely “Childlike Innocence on Camera” and “Share the Joy” inviting members of the public to contribute old photographs taken from 1950s to 1980s depicting their children playtime and contribute toys popular during the same period. Such public engagement programmes are well received by the public. To enable people to participate personally in the archival process and have fun, GRS is going to create a Facebook Page which will be used for promoting the upcoming exhibition, inviting members of public to tag the digital photographs uploaded to the page and share their stories relating to the photographs, etc. We are also planning to form a users’ club to foster a long-term interactive relationship with users and to reach out to new audiences. We hope that, by finding new ways to promote public participation, we can create stronger bonds with users and arouse wider public interest in our archival holdings.

Professional development

17. To achieve GRS’ missions and to meet the digital challenges, GRS attaches high priority to training and continuing professional development, ensuring that our staff members are equipped with the skills and knowledge they need. As explained above, GRS workforce is composed of a wide range of staff members including Archivists, Executive Officers, Curators and IT professionals (e.g. System Manager, System Administrator), supporting different areas of archives and records management related work in the Government. They need to continually update and develop their capabilities, skills and knowledge to face the new challenges through professional development. GRS has therefore developed a structured training and development programme with focuses on strengthening core archival and records management knowledge as well as developing digital capacity and inter-disciplinary knowledge and working experience. GRS supports its staff to take online courses / webinars on archives and records management and to attend duty visits and professional conferences to upkeep their professional knowledge. GRS has also developed a wide range of records management training programmes including online training to all level of government officers. We have just announced our new initiative to include records management as part of the induction training for newly recruited government officers. We have also prepared a comprehensive service-wide training plan, aiming to significantly increase the number of training targets on records management from about 4,000 to 10,000 per annum.

Collaboration across professions

18. We believe collaboration across professions is essential. GRS has established closer connection with local archives community as well as those outside HKSAR by a series of visits and outreach programmes. These outreaching efforts enable GRS to tap into the wisdom and professional experience of our counterparts. We will continue to explore possible collaboration opportunities on the preservation and use of documentary heritage. Besides, cross-domain collaboration with libraries, data sciences, software development, museums is also important to address our shared priorities in the digital world. Within the Government, we have also established a close partnership with OGCIO and we look to them for guidance on the latest development trends on information technology and technical solutions.

Looking ahead

19. Change is upon us and we are all set for meeting the new challenges ahead of us. We believe that collaboration is essential in the digital era. GRS is working hard to enhance our organisational and digital capacity to seek more collaboration in future. We will look for opportunities through technologies and partnerships, such as Artificial Intelligence to enhance our services. Archivists, as one of the key team players in GRS, play vital roles in records and archives management. While we will continue to uphold our traditional roles, such as record keeper, collection manager, we will spare no effort in strengthening the new ones such as those of educator, advisor, and facilitator.