**Conclusions from Survey of Household files performed in Nov/Dec 2016**

**What was included**

The survey was performed on Household files containing material concerning the running of a house and the public lives of the people living within it. It did not include personal finance, writings or correspondence; photographs; videos; music; specialist professional-type activities; nor administrative activities related to the operation of computing systems (though this latter was a borderline exclusion as the importance of the computer in the operation of households continues to grow). Files were considered to consist of a container and some contents (referred to as Documents), though, in some cases, no container was present.

**House inhabitants**

The house was inhabited by a husband and wife (both retired) who had been married some 36 years. They had lived in their current house for 16 months, and in their previous house for 22 years.

**Number and location of Files and Documents found**

The survey identified 113 Household Files containing a total of 9,857 documents. The Files were found in the following 15 separate locations: a wooden chest, 3 study drawers, a study bookcase, a study window ledge, 2 email accounts, 2 laptop computers, 1 iPhone, a kitchen drawer, a utility room cupboard, a garage drawer and a shed drawer.

**File Containers**

Household Files were held in the following 15 different types of containers including cardboard folders, poly folders, plastic folders, plastic pockets, plastic button wallets, a plastic zip-up wallet, 10-pocket plastic pages, presentation folders, email folders, electronic folders, an iPhone app, ring binders, a plastic bag, a manila envelope and a box. Four of the files were not in a container at all but were just lying loose. The fact that files were found in the same number of separate locations as in the number of different types of containers - 15 in both cases - is just a coincidence.

**File Contents**

The contents of the household files examined were deemed to fall into the following categories (listed in order of largest number of documents): Local Community (work done for) - 17%; Clubs, Associations & Activities (sport) - 16%; Orders & receipts - 11%; Clubs, Associations & Activities (non-sport) - 10%; House sale and purchase and renovation work - 7%; Banks & Credit Cards & Money Saving Advice - 6%; Loyalty Accounts(Shops, Nectar) - 6%; Loyalty Accounts(Airlines & Hotels) - 5%; Service contracts & Bills (Gas, Electricity, TV, Phone, Broadband, TV, etc) - 3%; Holidays - 3%; Year files (Mementos and sundry docs for possible future ref) - 3%; Pensions - 2%; Tax & Benefits - 2%; Healthcare - 2%; Legal Docs and certificates (Wills, Power of Attourney, Passports, Birth Certificates, etc.) - 1%; Recipes - 1%; Instructions, Guides and Guarantees - 1%; Cars - 1%; Insurances (House, Appliances, Health) - 1%; Budgeting - 1%; Local Community (Information) - 0.5%; Garden - 0.5%; Investments - 0.5%; Mortgage - 0.25%; Services - leaflets, business cards, vouchers etc) - 0.15%; Retirement - 0.1%; Relatives - key info about mothers/fathers/sons/daughters) - 0.04%; Death related documents - 0.04%; Inventories (items in loft etc.) - 0.01%.

**File management**

All of the files were accessible to both members of the household, however, the management of the files varied: some were jointly managed, some were primarily managed by one or other of the two householders, and some were managed exclusively by one or other of the householders. The survey provided the opportunity for one of the householders to assess and prune the contents of the files that that individual jointly managed and exclusively managed (9056 documents in 94 files - referred to in subsequent sections of these conclusions as the A&P Subset).

**File Pruning**

In the course of this survey, 36 Files in the A&P Subset were decommissioned (13 hardcopy files and 23 electronic files), and 18 new electronic files were created. No new hardcopy files were created.

**Document Pruning**

The survey provided an opportunity for the contents of the A&P Subset to be assessed and pruned as necessary. In the course of the exercise, 1982 of the A&P Subset documents were thrown away (about 22% of the total number of A&P Subset documents), of which 1066 were electronic files and 916 were hardcopy files (548 of the hardcopy files were scanned to electronic files before being destroyed). This confirms something that we intuitively know - that we fail to prune files regularly and that this behaviour is just as prevalent, if not more so, for electronic files as it is for hardcopy files. However, for documents in email folders this is not the whole story: the email pruning was only done on folder topics which were no longer relevant, and in these cases the folder and all its contents were destroyed. No attempt was made to prune within email folders.

**The changing role of the Email system**

The trend to rely more and more on email folders to store material replaces earlier strategies of either printing the contents of emails and placing the documents into hardcopy files (which the householders employed at the beginning of the email era); or by copying the contents of emails into word documents and storing them in electronic folders (a more recent strategy). A prime example of this change in approach was found in emails relating to internet orders of which some 979 emails dating from 2006 were found in the A&P subset. In contrast the equivalent laptop folder was found to contain only 101 documents of which 99 were destroyed. This change in the role of the email system has been prompted by three factors - first, the availability of large amounts of free storage; second, the fact that the large amounts of material arriving via the email system are too great to be able to easily undertake additional filing work on them; and, third, the email archive can be searched at will to find email addresses or specific content.

**Impact of digitisation on format of contents**

Across all the files surveyed, 9,857 documents were logged with 7,836 (80%) of them being in electronic form (9% in laptops and 71% in email systems). This was even before pruning was performed when some of the hardcopy material was scanned into electronic form before being destroyed. This indicates a trend to hold more and more documents electronically rather than in hardcopy format - though a large proportion of the electronic files (6944 of them - 89%) were to be found in the email folders (in fact, emails constitute . However, even when email documents were excluded, 31% of documents were found to be in electronic rather than hardcopy form - a finding that is at least partly due to the fact that many of the documents were first created in electronic form on the home computer .

**Impact of digitisation on types of content**

**Appliance instruction booklets:** Despite the growing availability of electronic instruction books, all the appliance instruction booklets that were encountered in this survey were still in hardcopy format. They were found in 5 separate locations (chest, study, kitchen drawer, garage and shed) - despite there being a specific hardcopy folder for 'Guarantees and Instructions' in the main filing chest.

**Purchase confirmations and invoices:** There has been a very large increase in the amount of purchase confirmations and invoices that arrive by email - for both goods that have been bought online and for goods bought by other means such as the telephone. In this survey, most of this material was to be found stored in the email system.

**Health related documentation:** One of the householders is now storing all health-related documentation electronically in date order, even if the material arrives in hardcopy. The main reason for doing this is to be able to quickly scan a list of file names to establish what happened when (in effect, an index entry is produced when the file name is specified). Such an assessment is far more difficult to undertake with a pile of paperwork.

**Tax documents, pension information and payslips:** One of the householders is now storing all tax and pension correspondence and payslips electronically (though the latest two or three tax letters are also kept in hardcopy format). The prime reason for this is to reduce paper clutter, and to provide easy and quick access to the material while at the study desk.

**Shared working documents:** Most of the household's active documents (i.e. those that are being used for current ongoing activities) are still retained in hardcopy form. Although this is because paper is often more accessible and flexible, it may also have something to do with the fact that the householders do not share a common electronic filing system. Therefore, hardcopy is the only viable format for effective use of the documents by both parties.

**Addresses:** The householders started storing addresses electronically in Filemaker and printing them out in a ring binder, in the late 1980s. This practice continues - though what was an advanced use of new technology at the time has now become a somewhat dated mode of operation given the prevalence of contact lists in phones and email systems. The Filemaker application is also expensive. Although the approach still works well, there is now a desire to move towards a cheaper, more generic solution, in the future.

**Finance and budgeting documents:** The householders started managing their finances using a two stage approach in the 1990s. The first stage, managed by one of the householders, is to download the bank statement into a spreadsheet and use columns to map a particular bank transaction to a type of budgeted expense. These spreadsheets are kept on the householder's computer. The second stage, managed by the other householder, is to budget for types of expense in a yearly spreadsheet which is kept on that householder's computer. Every month the householders talk through the previous each months expenditure by calling out the actual amount spent on a particular type of expense from the bank statement spreadsheet, and recording that actual amount in the budget spreadsheet. This process provides an opportunity for both householders to have a common overall view of the finances, as well as allowing practical budgeting to be performed. This same approach continues, supported by electronic files on the two laptops and a hardcopy file located in a study.

**Year files and archival storage:** The household has had a long term practice for many years to store mementos, invoices, significant notes, etc. in a hardcopy file for the current year. The backlog of such files was stored in the loft for many years until it was digitised a few years ago. Now, only the past two or three year files are retained in the main filing chest, and earlier ones are digitised into an Indexed Memento Collection (IMC). All the contents of the IMC exist in electronic files while a subset of it is also retained in its original physical form. The physical items are stored in presentation folders and plastic wallets. The IMC is not considered to be a part of Household Files and so has not been included in this survey. The Year files, prior to digitising, however, have been included in the survey. Although most of the documents included in the IMC originate from the Year Files, some documents originate from other household files. Hence the IMC is a potential storage location for any of the household files which may no longer serve an immediate need, but which the householders don't want to throw away. This approach also applies to financial documents for which the householders have established a similar Indexed Financial Collection (IFC). Hence, many of the 548 documents that were scanned in the course of this survey will have ended up in the IMC or IFC and not in the Laptop files. In effect, the IMC and IFC collections provide back-end archival storage for the household files.

Paul Wilson, 24Dec2016