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Mr Paul Dacre  
30-Year Rule Review  
c/o The National Archives  
Kew  
LONDON  
TW9 4DU

Our Ref: COR/21/2008

19 February 2008

Dear Mr Dacre

#### **REVIEW OF 30-YEAR RULE**

Thank you for your letter of 28 December regarding the Review of the 30-Year Rule.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister have consulted with the Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure in his role as the statutory Keeper of the Records for Northern Ireland.

We recognise the intention behind the proposed reduction of the 30-Year Rule – increasing access to public sector information – and the desirability of maintaining a consistent approach to the release of information. We note, however, that any reduction would create a 'backlog' of records, management of which would have significant resource implications across the Northern Ireland public sector.

Besides Central and Local Government, Police, Health and Education authorities, some 85 public bodies would be affected by the identification and management of records occasioned by a reduction of the 30-Year Rule. To put this in context, in 2007, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) appraised some 50,000 records brought forward by 37 public authorities.

In relation to the Freedom of Information Act 2000, it should be noted that, in recognition of the sensitive personal information contained in Northern Ireland records, the majority of exemptions applied at age 30 (the current watershed for historical records under FOIA) relate to Health & Safety (s.38) and Personal Information (s.40). It is unlikely that such sensitivities will diminish with a reduction of the 30-Year Rule.



Management by PRONI of a 'backlog' records management exercise across the Northern Ireland public sector – already rolling out the Reform of Public Administration – would have a significant impact on the ability of PRONI to sustain public service and prevent loss or misplacement of records. There would also be additional work for PRONI in responding to an expected increase in the number of FOIA requests it handles (currently some 350 per year) arising from the transfer of records at earlier than age 30.

In conclusion, the demands of sustaining records management standards under the Public Records Act (NI) 1923 and s.46 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000, while complying with additional requests under Access to Information legislation, would place a considerable strain on resources. Any formal decision to change from the 30-Year Rule should be based on a fully developed business case which takes account of both the considerable costs as well as the expected benefits.

Ministers welcome the opportunity to contribute the Northern Ireland perspective to this important review.

Yours sincerely



**TOM WATSON**  
**PS/First Minister**



**ANNE MARTIN**  
**PS/deputy First Minister**

