



## The Swedish National Archives

The Swedish National Archives is one of the country's oldest government agencies. The first mention of a national archive, *Riksens archivum*, is found in a chancery directive issued in 1618, in which the agency's tasks and staffing were defined. Before this, state documents were kept in chests at the royal palace. These often accompanied the king on his travels around the country. The National Archives collections span over a thousand years of history.

The principle task of the National Archives is to preserve state records, but the agency also accepts private archives such as those generated by associations, businesses, estates and individuals. The National Archives is tasked with safeguarding and maintaining an overview of Swedish society's archival materials. This includes regulating and supervising the management of the archives of Sweden's government agencies.

Preserving information and making it freely available to the public is an important element of the National Archives' mission and a fundamental condition for an open and democratic society. Organised and catalogued archives provide transparency for citizens, now and in the future, and allow for a greater understanding of societal developments.

Research conducted in the archives generates knowledge about how the country has been governed and administered over time, but also how previous generations thought, felt and acted – knowledge that helps us understand our own era and navigate towards the future. Irrespective of how much history has accumulated in the National Archives, the agency's mission has always been future-oriented; it is about preserving information for present and future generations. Tomorrow's archives are the result of the work we do today.

The information contained in Swedish archival documents is not solely a domestic matter, it is also of significance to other countries. One topical example of this is provided by the Ukrainian hetman Philip Orlik's constitution of 1710, which has great symbolic value for present-day Ukraine.

### Public administration in Sweden is based on transparency

Swedish public administration has long been characterised by openness and the principle of access to official documents. The first legislation of its kind in the world, the Swedish Freedom of the Press Act of 1766 established the right to print and distribute publications without prior censorship, as well as the right to access official documents.

Today, the right to access such documents is regulated in the Swedish Freedom of the Press Act of 1949, one of the four fundamental laws in Sweden, and is the point of departure for the work of the National Archives. The fundamental laws contain provisions concerning how the country is to be governed and on the rights and freedoms of its citizens. One of these is the principle of public access to official documents, which provides everyone in Sweden with the right to access information regarding the activities of public authorities and decision-making bodies. As a general rule, everyone in Sweden has the right to access official documents regardless of the age of the document in question. This right to public access may be restricted by a secrecy provision.

The right to access official documents extends to archival documents that have been transferred from a public authority to the National Archives. Anyone wishing to access official documents held by the National Archives retains the right to anonymity and may access the information free of charge. There is thus no requirement for a visitor or someone making an inquiry to the National Archives to identify themselves, present any certificate or give a reason for requesting access to archival information. It is the responsibility of the National Archives to examine whether documents can be disclosed or if they should be subject to secrecy. The National Archives also accepts private archives, access to which is regulated by agreement with the depositor or donor.

## The Swedish public administration model

Sweden is governed at three levels: national, regional and local. At the national level, the Riksdag passes laws and ordinances and the Government implements these decisions and proposes new legislation. Sweden has some 400 government agencies reporting to ministries. There are also 21 regional authorities and, at the local level, 290 municipalities. Regional authorities and municipalities are responsible for different activities in their respective geographical areas. Some of these are statutory requirements, while others are voluntary.

The National Archives is a government agency reporting to the Ministry of Culture. The Swedish model of public administration is characterised by the organisational independence of government agencies from ministries. The Government controls the activities of agencies through general instruments that establish their main tasks and direct their operations at an overall level. Each government agency constitutes a freestanding organisation with its own management; the Government appoints the head of the agency but has no powers to intervene in an agency's decisions in specific matters relating to the application of the law or the due exercise of its authority.

The present operations of the National Archives are regulated in the Swedish Archives Act of 1990 and Archives Ordinance of 1991, as well as the Swedish Ordinance with Instructions for the National Archives of 2009. The agency's operations are also controlled by the Government's annual appropriations directives and the terms of reference for specific tasks assigned by the Government.

## The Swedish Archives Act

The Archives Act contains general provisions concerning public archiving. The key provisions are those regulating the purpose of archiving. In accordance with the Archives Act, the archives of public authorities shall be preserved in order to:

- safeguard the right of the public to access official documents;
- meet the need for information for public administration and the administration of justice;
- meet the needs of research.

The Archives Act also states that archives are part of Sweden's shared cultural heritage.

The Archives Act reflects the structure of public administration in that it prescribes archival authorities at national, regional and municipal levels. The National Archives is the archival authority for the archives of government agencies, while each region and municipality has an archival authority of its own. Although the remit of the National Archives includes maintaining an overview of the entire archive sector, the agency's role vis-à-vis regional authorities and municipalities is purely advisory.

Archival authorities may issue specific rules on matters such as how information is to be preserved, how it should be catalogued so that it can be understood and used over time and which information may be disposed of. They also conduct inspections and offer advice and support on matters such as preservation and disposal.

One important regulatory point is that public authorities are responsible for their own archives until such time as they are transferred to the relevant archival authority. Among other things, this responsibility implies following the rules laid down by the archival authorities. Swedish archive legislation differs from international regulations somewhat when it comes to transferring archives from public authorities to archival authorities. For example, Swedish legislation does not set time limits within which this must take place. There exists a need to review Swedish archives legislation in order to better accommodate digital administration.

## Private archives

There are many private archival institutions in Sweden at national, regional and local level that preserve the archives of companies, trade unions and popular movements. In many cases, these archives play an active role in local cultural life and their operations are partially financed by public funds.

Private archives are not currently subject to statutory regulation and thus lack legal protection. There are no provisions concerning what should be preserved for future generations. The boundaries between the private and public sector have also shifted over time, meaning that documents generated in organisations that were once in the public sector but have now been privatised are no longer subject to the Archives Act. Documents held in private archives help to create a more comprehensive picture of activities which have been important to society. The

National Archives therefore considers it essential that these archives be brought under the Archives Act.

The National Archives has a national remit to oversee archive issues in the private sector. This is achieved through consultation and cooperation with private archival institutions, associations and interest groups.

## The National Archives: Linking past, present and future

Access to archival information is a matter of democracy. The National Archives works in a number of ways to provide and disseminate information concerning the content of the archives.

The archives are made available in the National Archives' twelve reading rooms, via our Digital Research Room and as open data sets. The National Archives is also responsible for the National Archives Database (NAD), where users can retrieve information about archival holdings at the National Archives and other archives in Sweden. The information in the National Archives Database is also available via Archives Portal Europe.

In order to disseminate knowledge about the content of the archives to as many people as possible, the National Archives produces for example webinars and podcasts that are available via the agency's website and social media platforms.

The National Archives' digitisation centre digitises paper documents, newspapers, maps, drawings and books to make the archives more accessible nationally and internationally. Digitisation of particularly valuable documents also serves as a back-up in the event of damage to, or loss of the original.

The Swedish National Archives has premises at eleven different locations from Lund in the south to Ramsele and Östersund up north. Our facility for scanning is situated in Fränsta.



Riksarkivet

The National Archives sets great store by cooperation with organisations, higher education institutions and other public authorities. In collaboration with other archival institutions and associations, the National Archives is working to raise awareness of the significance of Swedish archives. Swedish Archives in Collaboration for Visibility (SASS) is a collaborative body through which the National Archives and a number of archival associations arrange public events and experience sharing, including Archives Day and Archives Week.

The National Archives plays a fundamental role in Sweden's research infrastructure. The agency is responsible for the *Dictionary of Swedish National Biography*, *Diplomatarium Suecanum* and *Medieval Sweden*. The National Archives is also responsible for national and civic heraldry and for the archives of the Royal Palace in Stockholm. The National Archives is a member of the Swedish consortium of the European Common Language Resources and Technology Infrastructure (CLARIN), which provides data, tools and services to support research based on spoken and textual material. In a joint project, the National Archives and the University of Gothenburg have combined citizen science with AI-based technologies such as Handwritten Text Recognition.

The National Archives contributes to digital, sustainable and efficient information management. For example, in collaboration with the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR), the agency is trialling Archiving by design, a European concept for building archiving requirements into public-sector IT systems to make it easier to preserve and utilise information.

The National Archives is also involved in setting up national digital infrastructure for the exchange of information, taking a long-term view of accessibility, reliability and utilisation. Work on these issues is ongoing within the programme eSam, a collaboration between several Swedish government agencies to promote greater digitalisation.

The Swedish National Archives – like our European counterparts – contributes to an open and democratic society, where citizens and historical and socially important archives are in focus.

### The Swedish National Archives in numbers (2022)

- About 400 co-workers on 11 premises
- 750 000 shelf meters of paper documents
- 6 millions registered maps and drawings
- 8 petabyte digital files
- 70 million digital images available for free on line in the digital reading room
- 20 000 on site visitors/researchers
- 75 000 archival volumes used in our reading rooms
- 6 million on line users to the National Archival Database and the digital reading room
- More than 10 million image viewings

