

13 January 2009

Archives Strategy

1. Summary

Carol Tullo and Nick Kingsley (National Archives) are attending the January Board meeting to talk about the consultation on a new archives strategy. A background note prepared by National Archives is attached. There are some themes the Board might like to pursue:

- What do we know about citizen expectations and use of local archives service? What materials do the public want to see – how do archives respond to citizen demand? What is being done to broaden and deepen the customer base?
- Partnership working – what will the strategy tell us about how archives can effectively support the work of schools, mental health trusts, the creative economy, etc to deliver key LAA outcomes?
- What are the options for putting the funding of archive services on a more sustainable basis? Are there successful models of integration between archive services and with other services? What are the commercial and charging opportunities, for example, from digital access?
- What are the new expectations being placed on archivists – how can we help them respond? [A workshop on archives will be held at this year's Culture conference and we are working with the Society of Archivists and National Archives on a document highlighting best practice and innovation in local archives]

2. Recommendation/Action

This is an opportunity for the Board to share its views on archives and inform the LGA response to the consultation document.

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The National Archives

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION: CULTURE, TOURISM AND SPORT BOARD

GOVERNMENT POLICY ON ARCHIVES

This short note is intended to provide the Board with an outline of the work being undertaken jointly by The National Archives and the Museums, Libraries & Archives Council (MLA) to replace the Government Policy on Archives (Cmnd 4516). The consultation document is still awaiting ministerial clearance, so we cannot share it with Council members at this point but we aim to give you an overview of how the publicly funded archive sector operates and the overall direction of the new policy,

The current policy was issued by the Lord Chancellor in 1999 and supplemented by an *Action Plan* issued by the Public Record Office in 2002. Implementation of the *Action Plan* was monitored by the Inter-Departmental Archives Committee, which concluded in 2006 that the majority of the actions identified in the *Action Plan* had either been completed or superseded.

Publicly funded archive services have a vital role to contribute to local democracy and accountability, social policy, education, history and culture within the communities they serve. The variety and historical significance of the collections held in archives empower citizens to participate in deciding the shape of their community and services and to develop a deep sense of place and identity. Around 300 institutions in England and Wales actively collect archives, a large proportion of these are within local authorities and universities forming the backbone of publicly funded archival provision.

In the nine years since the current *Policy* was issued, the landscape in which archive services are operating has changed radically. Large organisations now keep most if not all their information in electronic form, and many individuals and smaller organisations are moving in a similar direction. Technology has made the concept of the record more complex, if not obsolete, as new channels and tools for recording and communicating information proliferate. Citizens now expect information to be accessible online as a right not a privilege. The population of the UK has become significantly more diverse, mobile and transient. At the same time, the expectations of public services by both Government and citizens have become more demanding, and new public funding has become progressively more difficult to secure as the economic cycle deteriorates.

The archives sector has achieved much in the last nine years. Half of all archive catalogues in the UK are now available on line, and retrospective conversion continues in many repositories. Many archive services have transformed the accessibility of their services, and have shown how archives can contribute to broader public policy agendas through projects like Birmingham City Archives' *Connecting Histories* project. The public profile of archive services has been significantly enhanced through television series like *Who do you think you are?* There has been significant investment in new archive buildings across England and Wales, from Devon to Northumberland and Gwynedd to Norfolk, improving the standard of care for innumerable collections and providing the facilities to enable the future development of services. A cataloguing grants scheme has been established to assist services in addressing the intractable backlogs of unprocessed collections. The information gathered by The National Archives' self-assessment scheme for local authorities has provided a basis for self-improvement approaches in this part of the domain.

Reviewing the evidence from the Archives Taskforce report, self-assessment, and other sources, some key challenges for the archives sector stand out:

- publicly-funded services, and especially local authority services, face remarkable inequalities of funding from institution to institution, making it difficult for the sector to make the consistent national offer that our customers and posterity really need
- inadequate buildings put the preservation of archives at risk in some places, and are widely a real constraint on collection development and wider access
- there is a lack of proactive collection development, and at the same time backlogs of uncatalogued archives exist and are growing in almost every repository
- online access to catalogues is incomplete, and work to digitise the collections themselves is mostly small-scale and piecemeal
- most archive services are not yet able to preserve digital records effectively for the longer term, so there is a real risk that important contemporary evidence will be lost
- opportunities to collaborate with other archives or other cultural services are too often frustrated by narrow localism or a failure to comprehend the potential benefits
- there is a lack of clear and strong leadership of the sector, with a number of Government departments and agencies having a policy or funding role, and several representative bodies speaking for the sector on different issues.

In a financial climate which means there is no new money from Government to address these challenges, we need to find a way of developing the sector as a coherent whole within the resources we already have, provide levers to influence the important decision-makers who have a direct impact on our profession, and ensure that archives remain on the agenda at the most senior levels in Government. The National Archives and MLA believe the best way to achieve this is for us to secure agreement for a new Policy to be issued by Government, to replace the existing *Government Policy on Archives*. This needs to set out a clear vision for the sector, and to suggest ways in which positive change can be brought about within the financial constraints, that will enable the profession to develop over the next five years. The National Archives and MLA will then respond to the new strategy with an Action Plan that sets out the actions we will take in support of the new policy objectives.

We have now developed a draft of the strategy which is with ministers for formal clearance. We have undertaken some informal consultation with the archives sector as part of the background work for the preparation of the document, and from this we have developed the following recommendations:

- Fewer Bigger Better – working towards increased sustainability
- Strengthened leadership and responsive skilled workforce
- Co-ordinated response to the growing challenge of managing born-digital information so that it is accessible now and remains discoverable in the future
- Comprehensive online access for archive discovery through catalogues and to digitised archive content by citizens at a time and place that suits them
- Dynamic participation in cultural and learning partnerships promoting an active sense of identity and place within the community

The Management Board of The National Archives has agreed that the organisation should position itself more explicitly as a leader in the archives sector to help address these challenges, and this will be reflected in the Action Plan that we develop jointly with MLA.

Nick Kingsley
Head of National Advisory Services

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