

Proposed new Government Policy on Archives and Cumbria Archive Service's draft response

The National Archives and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council have developed a proposed new government policy for publicly funded archives. The policy, ***Archives for the 21st Century*** has been designed to support archive services around the country, particularly in local authorities and universities. The report states:

“Archive Services across England and Wales have the potential to be an even more valuable resource at the heart of their communities. Their contribution to local democracy and accountability, education, learning and culture and the sense of identity and place for local people, communities and organisations is frequently understated and consequently unrecognised”

Archives for the 21st Century sets out the government's strategic vision for the sustainable development of a publicly funded archive service across England and Wales. It highlights the need for concerted action by all parties connected to the archive sector to provide archive services with a firm foundation for the future.

It makes 5 key recommendations:

- Fewer, bigger, better archive services
- Strengthening leadership
- Developing a coordinated response to the growing challenge of managing digital information
- Providing comprehensive online access to archives
- Promoting cultural and learning partnerships

Consultation documents are available on The National Archives' website – www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archivesconsultation

The deadline for responses is 12th August 2009.

Below is the draft response to the consultation documents by Cumbria Archive Service. If you have any feedback on this, please send your comments to Anne Rowe, Archive Service Manager, at anne.rowe@cumbriacc.gov.uk

19 June 2009

Government policy – draft Cumbria Archive Service response

1 Do you think a policy to set the strategic direction for the archives sector is needed at this time?

Yes - We welcome a government policy on archives, but the need for up-to-date legislation to protect publicly and privately owned archives and regulate clearly defined standards for archive services is far more important, as is the provision of a robust funding base for archives.

2 Does the document identify the right challenges and obstacles currently being faced by the sector?

Overall, this document provides a good analysis of the current state of play, except that: -

The strategy underestimates the detrimental impact on archive services where two or more local authorities have instigated joint arrangements for service delivery. This has commonly led to unclear strategies, reduced funding, and has undermined the sustainability of services. Unless there are obligations put on all partners to achieve certain standards of funding and service delivery, this model will continue to undermine the future of archives.

The strategy also underestimates the problems facing local authorities to continue to deliver a wide range of quality services in the face of increasing government and public expectations. Archives will continue to find it increasingly difficult to compete for resources within their parent authorities unless there is a stronger statutory base for archives, a clearer definition of acceptable service standards, and a clearer definition of the level of funding and staffing necessary to achieve those standards. The expectation that local authorities can do something by themselves to address the funding shortfall for archives, and overcome the effects of decades of under-funding of archive services is unrealistic. Central government needs to come up with some of the solution to this situation.

The strategy needs to take account of the different circumstances of rural communities, and the differing service delivery and financial models which may be needed to support services in rural areas with sparse and scattered populations. Models which may be cost-effective and successful in urban centres, may not work in rural situations.

*The strategy rightly refers to staffing capacity issues. However, there is also a need to appreciate the specific lack of **strategic** capacity within services. This undermines ability to implement change, succeed with external funding, and develop partnerships.*

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The document identifies the shift in organisations towards creating digital records and away from paper records, and the problems associated with that. One further difficulty this creates is that the parent organisation's understanding of the need to manage its own older, paper records can be undermined.

The enormous cost of digital solutions and the lack of a currently agreed way forward are also barriers in this critical area

The strategy rightly points to archives being the poor relation alongside museums and libraries. This has been one of the key barriers to obtaining adequate resources for services – but central government must take responsibility for changing this, just as much as local authorities.

There is a strong statement about the contribution that archives can make to the delivery of local policy initiatives, and an acknowledgement that archives need to be embedded more closely within the business and planning processes in parent organisations. Yet there is little sense in this consultation document that central government accepts a role in helping to make this happen.

3 Do the recommendations provide an appropriate direction for addressing the identified challenges?

Yes, but they are vague. They read as a wish list rather than a clear action plan. The consultation document provides a good analysis of the current position, and an aspirational view of the true potential of archives. However, it seems to do little more than put the entire onus on archivists and their local employers to find a way forward. More is needed from central government to assist in developing and delivering a clear action plan for future improvements.

a In the longer term, there is significant value in moving towards fewer, bigger, better archive services for a more sustainable future

In our view this misses the point. The critical things are:

- that the accommodation and service delivery needs of archives are financed at a level appropriate to the public demand for access, and the extent of collections to be cared for or acquired.*
- That the provision of services is up to standard and equitable in all areas of the country*

The Archive sector does not have either of these things at the moment. To attain them would require significant capital investment, irrespective of whether this is invested in creating fewer, bigger services, or in improving the existing network. The strategy should address how large scale investment can be obtained, and from whom, as the first steps to considering the appropriate model for future service delivery.

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There is a lack of clarity about what is meant by “fewer, bigger, better” (regional / sub-regional / county?), and also a lack of evidence that “fewer and bigger” would actually be “better”. In fact, the results of Self Assessment for Local Authority Archive Services suggest size is irrelevant – it is the political support, standards of accommodation and adequacy of resources for service delivery that are critical to success. “Fewer, bigger, better” is likely to be more appropriate for urban areas than rural ones.

If we were starting archive service delivery in England and Wales from scratch, it probably would make sense from a financial point of view to go for fewer, bigger, better archive services. However, archives have been developed for well over half a century in this country. Although this has been piecemeal and patchy, there has already been considerable recent investment in some new local archive centres. This should be consolidated within future plans and not wasted.

There is a need for definitive research to determine the relative cost-effectiveness of building fewer, bigger archive facilities in comparison with improving a larger number of smaller, more local archive offices. Is building the storage capacity for the existing quantity of collections, or the provision of public access facilities for everyone who wants to visit archives, more expensive on one large site or several smaller sites? We need authoritative and objective research to determine the answers to these questions, and inform the way forward.

The critical view of the way forward here should come from the public – from both archive owners, and archive users, and potential future users. Where would they like services to be and how would they prefer to access them? The strategy is right to identify the strength of archives in contributing to a sense of place and to an understanding of the uniqueness of particular localities. Yet it does not take into account just how much a strong sense of local identity contributes to the success of local authority archive services. For example, the vast majority of collections in local authority archives are privately owned but the strategy does not appear to consider the views of archive owners at all.

From experience in Cumbria where we operate a decentralised service to reflect the rural isolation of communities in a large geographical area, it is clear that archive owners feel happiest depositing their archives nearest to the place where they belong. There is a risk of withdrawal of collections if archive owners cannot identify with the location of the archive office, or if it is in a place with a very different “culture” than that in which the archive was created, or the owner lives. The views of archive owners should be considered in planning future strategies for service provision. Otherwise the richness of collections, and the synergy of having a wide range of collections available together could be undermined. Owners may also be tempted to deposit collections with local organisations without specialist archive facilities in preference to remote bigger archive institutions, undermining the preservation of unique documents.

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The idea of “fewer, bigger, better” also ironically works against the capacity of archive services to deliver on major government and local government agendas eg access and participation.

The strategy rightly identifies the need for archive services to improve their engagement with communities. In many ways, this is easiest to achieve for a local facility near to the community it serves. The creation of digital content is crucial for future archive service delivery, but we should also remember that for many people it is the opportunity to read and touch the real document, and feel the thrill of connection with the past that is the most important and special aspect of using archives. So the archive sector needs to continue to plan for the provision of traditional visitor facilities as well as develop electronic service delivery. It is good that the strategy has gone out to public consultation, and the views of service users should be given a strong voice for the choices that are made for the future shape of services.

*Another important point is that if local people are to retain local access to collections, then the creation of digital content needs to happen **first** before any move is made towards creating a network of fewer, bigger archive services. There is a huge capital investment needed to achieve this.*

We note the option for more coordination of conservation services. Whilst having (eg) regional centres might concentrate expertise and save money in some ways, it would increase costs (and risks) in others, particularly by increasing the need to transport fragile and unique collections or documents. Conservation has always been the most consistently under-resourced aspect of archive services, yet is in many ways the most important since it is essential for the preservation of collections to enable public access. (In Cumbria, for example, we have approximately one archivist per mile of records, but only one conservator per 5 miles of records). Again there is a need for more definitive research to establish the quantity of conservation backlogs to determine a practical and effective way of harnessing conservation expertise uniformly in all areas of the country for the future.

It is important to have conservators based where collections are cared for. Over the last few decades, conservators have led a very cost-effective revolution in working practices to focus more on preservation and prevention of damage to collections in preference to very small amounts of focused, expensive conservation treatments. Conservators also contribute to informal learning, provide many volunteering opportunities, and play a role in community engagement.

We wholeheartedly support the idea of sharing specialist conservation best practice amongst partner organisations but would argue strongly that local

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access to conservation expertise is not only essential but cost-effective. Conservators' expertise in preservation is an essential "on-the-spot" resource for any archive service.

We strongly support the idea of coordinating the response to new challenges facing archives which have not yet been addressed on a more local level. The obvious issue here would be that of digital preservation, especially since success in preserving digital information will be very dependent on technical knowledge, precise technical standards and specialist facilities and equipment. We would certainly welcome a regional / national approach to the preservation of electronic media backed up by local access points – in respect of tackling new and current issues we would endorse the "fewer, bigger, better" approach.

The strategy does not appear to consider the potential waste of resources which can arise from the proliferation of very small archives below local authority or university level. Funders eg HLF need to be encouraged to support existing, well-established, larger services instead of helping to set up new, smaller initiatives.

More uniform and appropriate models of financing archive services are needed. Central government should pay local authorities to cover the costs local authorities incur preserving and making available government records deposited locally under the Public Records Act. Opportunities to apply for grants (eg TNA Cataloguing Grants Scheme) are helpful but they add to the piecemeal development of archive services since there is not enough money to go around.

Ultimately, following consultation and further research, government should introduce legislation to protect and regulate archives. The current local government acts are imprecise in defining the standards of service required. Including archives in performance monitoring regimes for local government would help to raise the profile of archive services. Government needs to be clearer about which organisations should be running archive services, how services should be staffed and financed and what standards they should achieve. Only then will we have the opportunity to achieve a consistent archive service of high standard right across the country.

b Strengthened leadership and responsive skilled workforce is necessary to raise the profession's profile at both a local and national level

Yes, archivists' leadership skills are essential to gaining and raising the profile of archives. The training sponsored by Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) in recent years has been helpful here. However, improving skills is not the whole answer. The sector also needs to be supported by stronger government and regional advocacy, a stronger statutory base and a clearer definition of service standards. We welcome the opportunity to work closely with

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museums and libraries but since there are important distinctions between the services provided by these sectors, an archives-specific sector champion is also important. MLA was certainly at its most effective when it provided these regionally.

*Lack of capacity is also a key issue as well as lack of skills – and in the leadership context, the lack of **strategic** capacity within most archive services affects success in raising profile, winning external funding and developing partnerships.*

Greater centralisation and specialisation could inadvertently have a detrimental effect on improving leadership skills since a good sense of strategy requires an understanding of the whole context of service delivery, and this may not be fostered by a narrow area of specialisation

The consultation document contains an interesting analysis of the complexity facing archive services, especially in the digital age, and the range of skills staff need to respond to and deal with these issues. However, in many organisations, the trend is towards de-skilling, and advocacy is needed from outside employing organisations to help win the argument over the need for specialist staff.

We need to address the specialist training requirements and capacity issues for the conservation profession.

Recommendations are needed for staffing capacities, range of skills needed, strategic staffing capacity, appropriate salaries and the positioning of services within parent authorities.

c Developing a coordinated response to managing digital information and for continued access in the future

We would support a coordinated approach to digital preservation. Few (if any) organisations are on top of this issue, the resources needed to address this are huge. There is a need for expert advice and a collaborative approach to making sure electronic information is not lost for present and future generations.

Advocacy in this area is needed at a high level. The fragility of digital information, the requirements to ensure digital preservation, and the implications of failing to manage and preserve electronic information tend not to be understood outside archive services.

Advocacy is also needed to promote the importance of the link between Records Management and Archive Services. To this end, it is essential that Records Management is included in the Self Assessment monitoring in authorities where Records Management services are delivered by Archive Services.

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Assistance is needed with the huge training issues associated with successful preservation of digital collections.

The importance of the digital information should not lessen the obligations on organisations to make adequate provision for the proper management of their existing paper records.

d Ensuring there is comprehensive online access to archive catalogues and content

This is another area where is an obvious advantage to a collective and coordinated approach to service delivery across the country. Much of the success of archives in developing on-line catalogues and content was prompted by the Access To Archives (A2A) project. Unfortunately, this now seems to have been discontinued – a decision we would urge The National Archives to reverse. Whilst many archive services continue to make individual progress, there is a risk that a piecemeal approach will develop for electronic service delivery. What A2A achieved was a union catalogue across the country, which is exactly what users want and need. A regional and national portal for unified access to collection descriptions is essential. This is a worthy aim, but requires sustainability of resourcing.

e Developing active participation in partnerships with other cultural and learning services

There are certainly advantages for doing this in terms of an enhanced and more coordinated service delivery, and we would support this principle. However, partnerships can be looked at in a very simplistic and unrealistic way. Partnerships work best where they are focused on a particular project or objective, and partners have come together to deliver an outcome with genuinely shared benefits. Partnerships rarely lead to cheaper models of service delivery, their success depends as much on the attitude, skills and resources of partner organisations as it does on archives or their parent authorities, and they take considerable time to develop and maintain.

Partnerships should certainly be an important part of the future map for archive service delivery, but it is important that the strategy finds a way to develop the strategic capacity within archive services to deliver partnerships in an effective, systematic and sustainable way. We do not have this capacity at the moment.

Partnerships should not be regarded as an alternative to an adequate funding base

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4. Do you agree with the model of excellence for a publicly funded archive service outlined in the policy?

This would be much stronger if it incorporated the Vision for the true potential of archives (page 8), especially in respect of what services should be delivering for communities, young people, older adults and businesses

High performing archive services would also aim to secure the deposit of the widest possible collections of unique archives, and preserve those collections for present and future access

We certainly support the coordination and close working of archives with other cultural services, but “integration” can lead to a decrease in the specialist archive skills which this consultation document identifies as essential.

Whilst we agree that there is an obligation on archivists to balance resources, we would point out that the sustainability and success of services also rests on the local authority’s ability to fund archives adequately

- Local authorities need encouragement to allow archivists to be entrepreneurial – local government financial regimes often discourage innovation in income generation and fundraising

5 Please add any comments that you have not added elsewhere

The recent changes to Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, especially the dismantling of the regional branches, has weakened the voice of all these sectors but most especially archives. This is unfortunate since the regional MLA in the north west made a significant positive contribution to the improvement and collaboration of archive services in that region.

The action plan which emerges from this strategy will be more important than the strategy itself. As this document stands, it has some worthwhile aspirations for the future of the publicly funded archive sector – but there is little sense coming out of this document that there are tangible plans to help bring these aspirations about.

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