

Archives for the 21st Century

The consultation draft of the new National Archive strategy

It is ten years since the UK government produced its last strategy for the UK's archives. A consultation draft has been launched by the National Archives (TNA) and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), and we are in the period for consultation.

As the draft acknowledges, there have been substantial changes to resources and expectations during the last decade. There has been a huge growth in digital resources and a matching rise in expectations that services be delivered remotely. Users often turn to the record office web sites, or pages within their host body, for service information and increasingly for search engines, including on-line catalogues. Access to digital copies of selected parts or whole series of records is expanding, together with an increasing variety and wealth of interpretative packages to support schools and life-long learning.

The popularity of family history has been sustained by programmes like the BBC's *Who do you think you are?* although some archives have experienced a drop in individual user numbers as the availability of on-line resources expands. At the same time archives in local authorities and some other publicly funded services are expected to contribute to wider goals – especially those set for education and learning, empowering and engaging communities, supporting regeneration and encouraging people to volunteer for a wide range of tasks and activities.

This environment, which has changed dramatically over the last decade for both archive users and practitioners, provides the background to *Archives in the 21st century*. It seeks to offer a vision as to how archive services, especially those in local authorities, can meet these challenges, setting out markers to overcome the considerable variation in size and capacity between services, the limitations on access, storage conditions and capacity to collect new records imposed by older buildings, maintaining and managing digital records, expanding on-line catalogue resources and meet new challenges in service delivery, especially to support learning and culture.

To meet these challenges the new strategy makes five recommendations:

- Fewer but bigger and better local authority archive services, with the potential for long-term sustainability
- Strengthened leadership at national and local level, better promotion of services, and professional development to enhance a workforce which will also be more diverse, and development of assessment mechanisms to measure and recognise service improvement
- Manage digital information so that it will continue to be accessible in the future

- Provide comprehensive online access for archive discovery through catalogues and to digitised content
- Ensure active participation in cultural and learning partnerships which will promote life-long learning and a sense of identity and place within communities.

Much of the aspirations of the new strategy are on the verge of motherhood and apple pie, in that they will receive widespread support. There may be disappointment that the emphasis remains on working with local authorities and higher education services – seen as being the most responsive to government set-targets, but the aspiration to encourage partnerships remains. This proposition is slightly incongruous as TNA has widened its remit to work with external bodies in the wider archive community, including business, private, charity etc, rather than providing advice to and scrutinizing local authority archive services in isolation.

The exception will lie in suggesting changes to the size and nature of local authority services – the model of fewer, bigger, stronger. In metropolitan areas, including Greater London, archivists will argue that they offer a personal and friendly service, based on their own close knowledge of the collections in their care. Often this is the case, backed up by the high levels of satisfaction recorded through the Public Services Quality Group Surveys of Visitors to British Archives. It could be argued that this is offset by problems with opening hours, standards of reprographic delivery, backlogs of cataloguing, levels of outreach.... But what users and local archivists see is the importance of where the records are situated – close to the communities that they document, often within easy physical access. And if the result from surveys emerges as ‘never mind the quality, feel the locality’, when it comes to service delivery, then that will be the touchstone for many service users, custodians and local politicians will always refer. The assumption is that sooner or later there will be sufficient investment made in the form of sustainable capital grants or increases in revenue funding that will bring smaller services up to the high standard to which they aspire. Sadly this bears no correlation to the record of the last thirty five years – the period of time I have personal experience of working in London local authority archives.

The authors of the draft strategy are to be praised for at least raising such controversial issues – but as with the other target aspirations, the document does not follow up the vision by any indication of how we are to achieve it. Fewer, bigger, better is likely to be seen as a threat and not an opportunity by all locally based stakeholders, if there are not to be some pointers as to how service improvement is to be reached.

I could offer some pointers. In my role as a partner in Creative Cultures, I was part of the team that undertook a review of the six archive services in North Wales. Part of our remit was to examine how the ambitions of the Beecham report, to achieve efficiencies in service delivery over current local authority boundaries could be achieved without further local government reorganisation. One of the lessons of the research demonstrated that

services won't come together unless there is some form of compulsion through local authority reorganisation. Less radical steps can be achieved, but these need to be through sustainable partnership working, not just for one-off projects, which can demonstrate the value of attracting external service investment. Stakeholders – who include employing bodies, funders, related services in education and heritage, and community bodies need to see the value of working together through benefits for existing – and new audiences, in developing education services, or sharing in digital preservation, to give a couple of examples

This takes resources and time. There is no indication in *Archives in the 21st century* at this stage how the vision can be followed by practical steps can be taken to achieve the goals of stronger and more responsive services – perhaps reflecting a practical awareness that resources from national government are unlikely to be made available. MLA's sponsoring ministry, the Department for Culture Media and Sport, has limited options to encourage proactive, radical changes to local government service provision and is itself subject to change after the next general election.

Of course, there may be more substance, following the initial consultation stages, the first ending on 12 August, when the results of the consultation will presumably feed into the forthcoming action plan. There will be chance to have our say on this document as AfL members will have contributed to this process at a meeting on Thursday 16 July at the Institute for Historical Research by the time this appears. AfL will be responding formally to this document on your behalf, including points raised at this meeting.

As the document is offered up we have the mouth, but precious little evidence of the trousers.

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