



The National Archives

Press release

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Size really does matter for local archives

This year's local authority archive survey reveals that, despite improvements in certain services, there remains huge disparity between archives across the country. These inconsistencies mean that archives are not fulfilling their full potential, and communities could be missing out on a fantastic resource.

According to the survey, co-ordinated by The National Archives, the disparity of service often mirrors the scale of operation: larger services are more likely to be high-performing than smaller ones. The main challenges identified by the survey are:

- Preserving digital records: no archive service yet has an active digital preservation programme, although some promising developments have been brought to light
- Cataloguing and access: most services still have large backlogs of uncatalogued or inadequately catalogued material, which makes it harder to access
- Buildings and facilities: many archive services need better facilities to secure a sustainable future and quality of service provision

Nevertheless, the survey also revealed some champions in the archive sector, demonstrating the real value of these important institutions. The top five were:

- London Metropolitan Archives (88%)
- Norfolk (85.6%)
- Hampshire (84.5%)
- East Riding of Yorkshire (81%) joint with West Sussex (81%)
- Westminster (80.5%)

The survey also shows that investing in archive buildings is a key driver for improving scores. Better buildings go far beyond transforming the care of collections and general facilities, creating opportunities for innovative services, catering for volunteers and school-children, and expanding collections. New buildings improved scores dramatically for Wiltshire and Swindon Record Office, and the Wirral Archives. Improvements to existing buildings meant better scores for the West Glamorgan Record Office (new search room) and the East Riding of Yorkshire Archives, which added a conservation facility to the new buildings it moved into last year.

Generally, the fact that archive services are putting together improvements plans based on the survey findings is really good news. By identifying strengths and weaknesses, and taking simple and affordable practical steps, local archives are able to make tangible improvements to the services they provide.

Nick Kingsley, head of archive sector development at The National Archives, said: “Archives are an irreplaceable resource and when at their best, they can offer a fantastic service and empower local communities. Although there is still a long way to go, this year’s survey shows that things are beginning to move in the right direction to ensure a sustainable future for these invaluable institutions.”

The results of the 2009 survey, and previous years, can be found [here](#).

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Notes to editors

About the Local Authority archive survey

More information about the survey can be found at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives/self-assessment.htm

The survey took place between June and August, run on a voluntary basis. Over 90% of services responded, completing a lengthy questionnaire, measuring five aspects of each service:

- Governance and resources
- Documentation of collections
- Access services
- Preservation and conservation

- Buildings, security and the environment

The National Archives scored each questionnaire, and the scoring was then reviewed by an independent panel composed of representatives from the sector and other interested bodies. Initial results were sent out in December, with an opportunity to appeal before publication of final results. Results for individual services are available at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives/self-assessment.htm

The National Archives, www.nationalarchives.gov.uk, is a government department and an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). As the official archives of the UK government, it cares for, makes available and 'brings alive' a vast collection of over 1000 years of historical records, including the treasured Domesday Book.

Not only safeguarding historical information, The National Archives also manages current digital information and devises new technological solutions for keeping government records readable now and in the future. It provides world class research facilities and expert advice, publishes all UK legislation and official publications and is a leading advocate for the archive sector. At the heart of information policy, The National Archives sets standards of best practice that actively promotes and encourages public access to, and the re-use of information, both online or onsite at Kew. This work helps inform today's decisions and ensures that they become tomorrow's permanent record.

The National Archives brings together the Public Record Office, Historical Manuscripts Commission, the Office of Public Sector Information and Her Majesty's Stationery Office. See also www.opsi.gov.uk