

Implementation of a national strategy for business archives in England and Wales: progress report

This paper provides an update for the Advisory Council on work undertaken by The National Archives on the early implementation of the business archives strategy which was finalised in April 2009. Council members will recall that the strategy was developed by a consultant employed by The National Archives who reported to a steering group representative of the various bodies interested in business archives, and who jointly provided 50% of the funding for the project.

In the wake of the issue of the strategy, the National Council on Archives has arranged for a high profile event to be held on 9 July at the Houses of Parliament to publicise the importance of business archives, under the auspices of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Archives. Guest speakers will include Mervyn King, Governor of the Bank of England, and Sir Stuart Rose, Executive Chairman of Marks and Spencer. The latter business has arranged to deposit its archives in the Library at Leeds University which highlights the increased recognition of the research and teaching potential of such material in the commercial and academic world. The National Archives has commissioned a promotional brochure aimed at corporate leaders to make the case for business archives which will be available at the event and which will be sent to the Chairmen of all FTSE 100 companies and selected other businesses. Other outputs from the project include a smaller and cheaper leaflet, also aimed at business executives, which will be produced in quantity and made available to individual repositories for them to use in collection development activity; and a website, to be hosted by the Business Archives Council, containing advice to those in business charged with the care and management of records.

As part of the restructuring of The National Archives' advisory services, a post of Business Archives Advice Manager has been created and Alex Ritchie, who has a specialist knowledge of the sector, has been appointed to this role. In his first weeks in post he has established a 'crisis response team' involving representatives of the Business Archives Council and Society of Archivists to co-ordinate action when business collections are identified as being at risk. The formation of the team has coincided with a number of high profile business failures, leading to a good deal of work for the team. Cases have included continuing work on the Woolworths archives and the records of other businesses such as LDV Vans, Kembles - a long-established piano manufacturer – and the Civic Trust. In each of these cases the role has been to ensure that contact is made with the company and/or its liquidator at the earliest possible time to register public interest in the archival assets, and to ensure that potential recipient repositories for the records operate collaboratively, providing the best chance for the long-term preservation of the material.

Alex Ritchie has been active in giving presentations to the Society of Archivists (Business Records Group) and the Association of Business Historians on how the business strategy is being taken forward. He has also outlined the strategy to a meeting of the business section of the International Council on Archives in Helsinki at the beginning of June where it was received with considerable interest. He learned from

fellow delegates that the strategy has been widely circulated in Japan as a model from which Japanese archivists could learn.

Elsewhere in the UK, the Scottish Council on Archives is now formulating a parallel implementation plan to that in the national strategy for business archives in England and Wales which we understand will be in accordance with the same basic principles. Discussions have additionally been held with the Director of the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland which holds many important collections of business records and which continues to keep a watching brief over any material which may fall into the 'at risk' category within its jurisdiction. The problem of business archives under threat also came up in discussions between Archives Sector Development staff and the expert advisory panel of the National Heritage Memorial Fund whose members were reassured to hear of the priority being given to such work at The National Archives. Finally, it may be noted that The National Archives will be hosting the annual conference of the Business Archives Council (BAC) in November 2009. The event will further assist in bringing our initiatives in the sector to the attention of a wider audience and in co-ordinating our work with that of the BAC.

The comments of members of the Advisory Council on developments are invited.