



ADVISORY COUNCIL ON NATIONAL RECORDS AND ARCHIVES

Archives for the 21st Century: response to draft consultation from the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Council on National Records and Archives

Background on the role of the Advisory Council

1. The Advisory Council (hereafter the Council) is a statutory public body set up by the Public Records Act, 1958 to advise the Lord Chancellor on all aspects of the public records system. The Council has a particular statutory responsibility to advise the Lord Chancellor on matters relating to public records, including their selection and preservation and public access to them, and the facilities provided for researchers at The National Archives. It also advises him on major strategic archival policy matters and matters relating to the preservation of and public access to local authority, business and private records, archives and manuscripts in archival repositories and in private hands. The Council also advises the Historical Manuscripts Commissioner on matters relating to non-public records. The Advisory Council on National Records and Archives embraces two further bodies: the Advisory Council on Public Records and the Advisory Council on Historical Manuscripts which provides advice to the Lord Chancellor as necessary on non-public records. This includes advice on the location, care, custody and preservation of such records and advising on the allocation of archives and manuscripts accepted in lieu of tax.

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

2. The Council fully supports the new policy to set the strategic direction for the archives sector and welcomes the opportunity to be consulted on this important issue. The challenges of the changing information landscape in managing digital information facing the archival sector ensures that the publication of the new draft policy to replace the 1999 government policy on archives issued by the Lord Chancellor is timely.

Response to Q.2: Does the document identify the right challenges and obstacles being faced by the sector?

3. The Council broadly agrees that the challenges and obstacles being faced by the sector have been addressed in the document. In addition the Council makes the following observations: first, the current economic climate begs the question of how much funding will need to be invested in the sector if the vision outlined in the document is to be fulfilled and whether the expectation of additional funding is realistic at this time. Although the document discusses the issue of digital born records, the resource implications of this area are not discussed in detail. More funding from the charitable sector to reward endeavour could be one source of funding.

4. Secondly the document summarises well the challenges facing local authority archive services and important though they are, they do not constitute all publicly funded archival provisions. More emphasis could be placed on archives within universities, libraries and museums. In the document there is an implication that universities are public sector bodies providing a good public service. This is true up to a point as in the difficult economic climate it cannot be assumed that universities can go on indefinitely supporting collection repositories with 'free' public access if the collections are not critical to their purpose and mission. The future of the academic library is the subject of a separate report being prepared by a committee chaired by Derek Law <http://www.rin.ac.uk/library-future>.
5. Thirdly the Council strongly agrees with the assertion made in the document (3.11) that many archive services not yet being able to manage digital records is not only a correctly identified challenge but is also of paramount importance. The Council regularly advises on the information management issues faced by government and has seen firsthand the problems that arise when the management of information isn't sufficiently prioritised to take account of the changing information environment. Indeed 4.7 of the document that discusses the importance of the ever-growing challenge of managing digital information doesn't stress enough the benefit of archives managing their information from the point of creation and the cultural shift required in organisations for the management of digital information to be a long term success.

Response to Q.3: Do the recommendations provide an appropriate direction for addressing the identified challenges?

(a) Fewer, bigger, better- working towards increased sustainability

Overall the Council agrees with this recommendation and takes the view that this is a sensible approach for publicly funded archives but also feels that collaboration not only with archives but also with libraries and museums would also be very valuable. Fewer and bigger archive services would be more beneficial for users but care should be taken to ensure that the amalgamation of services doesn't create a cycle of exclusion by swallowing up small collections and community archives. It is also essential for archives to maintain links with their local users.

(b) Strengthened leadership and responsive, skilled workforce

The Council agrees with this recommendation and believes that better co-ordination between different professional bodies is necessary and that the public advocacy of archives should be given more focus. For strengthened leadership to be effective there needs to be a coherent inclusive strategy to build capacity for the long term and this should include the promotion of the archival profession as a viable career path (from school to university). In order for this to be successful training for staff should be mandatory.

(c) Co-ordinated response to the growing challenge of managing digital information so that it is accessible now and remains discoverable in the future

The Council agrees that the growing challenge of managing digital information is of paramount importance if information is to be kept readable and sustained for future generations. This is not only a question of adopting technological infrastructure across the sector with more financial investment but of the new ways of working the new digital environment brings being embraced culturally by organisations.

(d) Comprehensive online access for archive discovery through catalogues and to digitised archive content by citizens at a time and place that suits them

The Council welcomes this recommendation which if implemented would improve public access to online services. The emphasis in the document on the challenge of digitisation was helpful but the discussion of online services seemed contradictory when set in the context of the cataloguing backlog. More explanation is needed on how the investment in online resources is to be balanced against the cost of cataloguing or who should set such priorities. The document also seems to be unclear on the difference between online catalogues, now a seamless bi-product of any cataloguing activity and the production of digital surrogates which have quite different resource implications. The Council believes that clearing cataloguing backlog will improve public access but will also draw attention to gaps in collection development. Specific initiatives such as the National Cataloguing Grant Scheme for Archives are very useful when considered in this context.

(e) Active participation in cultural and learning partnerships promoting a sense of identity and place within the community

The Council broadly agrees with this recommendation and believes that archives need to be positioned firmly within cultural services and promote their role in providing resources for museum displays, interpretation of heritage sites, local publication and education at all levels. The recently announced Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals briefing day ‘Beyond the silos of the LAMs- Unlocking the benefits of collaboration between libraries, archives and museums’ seems to be step in the right direction: <http://www.cilip.org.uk/interests/execbriefings/lams/index.html>. The Council firmly believes that cultural and learning partnerships need to reach beyond the local authority context with initiatives across different fields that reflect the diversity and social fabric of different national regions.

Response to Q.4: Do you agree with the model of excellence for a publicly funded archive outlined in the policy?

The Council supports this recommendation and believes that archive services should actively engage in promoting access to information through the Freedom of Information Act in order for the accountability of decision makers at a local level to achieve transparency. The issues of collection development, collection care and digital asset management are also worthy of inclusion into such a model. Some kind of prioritisation of objectives in the model of excellence and a discussion of how realistic delivery is in the current economic climate would also be helpful.

6. Please add any additional comments that you have not covered elsewhere:

Even though private archives constitute an important part of the national heritage and are mainly looked after by private owners unless given to the government in lieu of tax, the section in the draft consultation devoted to the cataloguing of private archives could be more substantial. The Advisory Council on Historical Manuscripts should continue in its role, perhaps with stronger emphasis, on advising on and supporting private archives in the United Kingdom.

Lale Ozdemir, Secretary (July 2009)

