



The National Archives

## **THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES**

Report on the consultation exercise undertaken to consider the views of the wider archive sector on The National Archives' National Collections Strategy

FEBRUARY 2009

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# **Report on the consultation exercise undertaken to consider the views of the wider archive sector on The National Archives' National Collections Strategy**

## **1 Summary of findings**

The overwhelming response to the National Collections Strategy was positive. Reservations were expressed around its ability to deliver against seemingly aspirational aims and challenging success criteria, but the initiative was welcomed and considered beneficial.

The consultation was intended to elicit views not only on the strategy but on its underlying principles and implementation. Respondents endorsed the approach but emphasised the need to recognise the value of existing collections and to position the strategy firmly in the context of the wider archive landscape. At a local level, it was important to establish its relevance to current collection and collection development policies.

Success for the strategy meant strengthening obvious relationships across archive networks and building new relationships with less obvious partners, both from the wider cultural heritage sector and beyond. It also needed The National Archives to demonstrate commitment through active leadership, not passive support.

This report provides a summary of responses and focusses on common themes and key issues. Final recommendations are based on both implicit and explicit feedback.

## **2 Background**

The National Collections Strategy is an initiative to identify where the documentary heritage of England and Wales is under represented or not represented in archives and to address the reasons why. Its aim is to ensure that the records of key events, of the lives and activities of individuals and communities and of public, private and charitable organisations are kept in the right places, efficiently and effectively preserved, and made easily available and widely accessible.

Through collaborative partnerships, The National Archives will provide a framework of support, help and guidance in developing individual archive strategies across different sectors, themes and formats.

A consultative panel of representatives from archival and other relevant bodies has been established to oversee the implementation of the National Collections Strategy. The Terms of Reference for the panel and the minutes from its six-monthly meetings are available on The National Archives' website.

The National Collections Strategy was launched at the Society of Archivists' Conference in August 2008, with the start of a three-month consultation asking for feedback on the strategy's vision, aims and principles and suggestions for its successful implementation. The launch was followed up with an email sent via the ARCHIVES-NRA mailing list to encourage participation.

The consultation formally ended on 30 November 2008.

### **3 Analysis of responses**

The analysis has been organised around each of the questions from the consultation paper, ending with general comments received.

#### **3.1 Do we need a National Collections Strategy?**

Respondents generally welcomed – even ‘applauded’ – the initiative though cautioned against its being too aspirational. Its value would be in drawing together local and national concerns by creating a supporting network for existing archives and archive services and better coordinating collecting across the UK. To be really useful, it would need to be a ‘listening strategy’, providing a framework for, and exposing current best practice and not just concentrating on identifying perceived archive ‘gaps’.

According to some, the danger with the scope of the strategy was that it risked advocating a ‘one size fits all’ approach to archive collecting and failed to recognise and celebrate the diversity of collections. For example, one institution questioned its definition as a ‘national’ strategy when the approach seemed both Anglo-centric and TNA-centric and suggested a separate strategy for Wales.

Conversely, another body felt that the strategy’s Vision rightly placed The National Archives ‘in the lead’ and was appropriately focussed on the wider archive sector, going beyond areas of central and local government.

#### **3.2 If so, is the approach to building new collections or supporting and nurturing ‘at risk’ collections as outlined in the Strategic Aims and Principles, the right one?**

The approach was considered to be non-controversial, in part due to a lack of clarity around the strategy’s specific aims and the overly-broad reference to ‘information sources’. The language used was considered too indirect and unconvincing with respondents demanding something more ‘active, directive and interventionist’. The document lacked detail as to how the strategy might really make a difference and needed to emphasise the value of targeting through ‘national leadership’ those areas where there is a lack of archive provision.

Nurturing ‘at risk’ collections was regarded as an opportunity for new ways of working collaboratively across wider groups of stakeholders. The fear though, was that the demands on existing archive services to support building ‘new collections’ with increasingly limited resources, would prove unmanageable. Any collections work should also be clearly positioned within the context of the existing archive landscape, delivered and judged against the ‘bigger picture’.

Digital preservation was raised as an issue where ‘new collections’ actually meant ‘new formats’ and there was a serious concern that ‘sharing expertise, skills and knowledge in a non-exclusive way’ might have the negative effect of ‘deprofessionalising’ archive service provision. It was considered far better to work on joint projects across community or institutional boundaries where each partner had distinct contributions to make.

### **3.3 How do we identify gaps in the nation's archive collections and existing collections which might be deemed 'at risk'?**

Respondents felt that it was important to consider both why and when, collections might be considered 'at risk'. Suggestions included where there was a sudden cut in funding, when organisations ceased to function or with the advent of new technologies. Working alongside initiatives like the Archive Awareness Campaign would promote an understanding of the long-term value and significance of archives with publicity and advocacy raising the profile of the sector.

Consulting not only researchers and archive services but representatives from across the cultural heritage sector, would help identify both gaps in existing collections and gaps in the 'bigger picture' of national coverage. But respondents warned against a subject-based approach which might create collections of little long-term relevance. This could only be avoided by adopting a robust process for determining the worth of potential archive material and with a clear understanding of stakeholder intent.

Analysing known information sources, gathering feedback from existing archive networks, and exploiting new avenues for information gathering - including online social networking tools like 'YouTube' - would paint a comprehensive picture both of what's being done and what needs to be done to support the nation's archive heritage.

### **3.4 Which sectors, themes or formats are endangered and would benefit from strategies?**

Highlighted in responses was the need to work collaboratively and to initiate a coordinated approach to collection development. Where local archives might collect the same type of material, relating to the same type of body, it would be useful to share information and avoid duplicated effort by balancing the detail, scope and range of individual collections with similar collections held elsewhere. Equally, local organisations would be encouraged by archiving activity undertaken by national counterparts.

Suggested sectors, themes or formats included:

- broadcasting and the Media
- Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities
- charities and voluntary organisations (including residents associations)
- local pressure groups
- political parties and societies
- trade unions
- private collections
- ecumenical records
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) individuals and groups
- economic migrants
- regionally-based groups
- sport
- small businesses
- audio-visual records
- bulky paper records
- music collections

- digital records

There were a number of reasons why the suggested sectors, themes or formats were considered 'endangered'. Local groups represented communities less reliant on documentation and administration and more wary of official or public intervention; regional bodies had no obvious relationship with an archive repository; private collections were either unrecognised for their long-term value or sold, in preference to being donated to an archive; digital records required an adequate level of ongoing investment in training and resources.

### **3.5 What will the big challenges be and what would make a 'successful' strategy?**

The big challenges were:

- capturing and preserving digital records, and making them accessible
- where and how to store newly-identified collections
- coping with the volume of material and deciding between small local repositories or regional 'super archives'
- establishing leadership and collective ownership
- inability to manage current backlogs
- funding, time and resources
- engaging the wider cultural heritage sector and those with little experience or knowledge of archives
- making a national strategy relevant at a local level
- protecting existing collections

A 'successful' strategy would:

- increase public awareness and promote the value of archives
- improve the consistency of collecting policies
- celebrate the value of existing collections
- challenge collecting habits across the cultural heritage sector
- secure sustainability and accessibility
- encourage efficient collecting and improve 'Value for Money'
- extend type and range of archive collections

One respondent commented that the strategy required a methodology for measuring success, with targets and timeframes for demonstrating progress and achievements; and another warned that the strategy might attempt to do too much and be seen to achieve very little without simpler, smaller and more practical aims.

### **3.6 How do we open debate with the broadest range of communities and how can we encourage continuing engagement from them?**

Suggestions focussed on the need for a formal communications plan, harnessing the power of national and local media to raise the profile of archive services and convince a wide audience of the relevance and value of those services. One example was to build on the current popularity of family history and so 'keep people connected to the past' in a personal and meaningful way.

Though labour intensive, it was important to be proactive and to understand local cultures by identifying key individuals and groups and establishing relationships within local communities. However, maintaining those relationships would depend on practical outcomes and tangible results, and on providing channels for continuing debate and sharing ideas, including via the web and social networks.

Being honest and open with records creators and listening to the 'voice of users' would help establish trust but this could only be sustained if reinforced through action.

### **3.7 How can we best communicate progress on the development of strategies: through The National Archives' website and those of other stakeholders? mailing lists or online forums? meetings or seminars?**

The means of communication would depend on the message and the intended audience, but respondents agreed that with limitations to any approach it was better to use all available mechanisms while embedding the communications plan into The National Archives' wider corporate strategy.

Suggestions included:

- online forums, though these required active participation
- mailing lists for simple updates on progress
- meetings and seminars to generate publicity
- dedicated pages on The National Archives' website for publishing documents
- regular features in professional publications, for example, ARC magazine
- local and national media
- using other initiatives, for example, the Archive Awareness Campaign

Respondents reiterated the importance of communicating both to existing archive networks and current stakeholders, and extending the reach to new communities within related sectors - for example, museums and libraries – and beyond.

### **3.8 General comments**

Comments centred on the definition of 'national', the role of The National Archives and its relationship with other national archives and cultural heritage institutions. Certain record types – including within business and private or personal collections – cross national boundaries and could only be managed through a UK-wide approach. On a strategic level, any proposition intended for England and Wales could have a much wider impact.

A repeated theme was the need to define relationships between local and national bodies to determine how work is to be done. For example, publishing guidance on records to target, providing toolkits for identifying gaps in existing collections and sharing examples of best practice, would help focus local efforts and encourage collaboration, not competition.

The strategy was applauded for its challenging success criteria though without increased funding, it was questionable as to how individual archive services could effectively meet them. For example, the strategy might advocate 'dynamic collection

building' but wasn't the reality that archive collecting would remain ostensibly passive and responsive, restricted by limited resources?

There was a plea for clarity around the use of the word 'information' and a reminder that archives were concerned with 'records as evidence of activity and decision-making' and not general objects or publications. It was important to recognise our own professional value and values and while working across the broader cultural heritage sector was commendable, we risked forgetting that archives were unique in their provision of services to the individual. Archives were less about broad interpretation and more about the significance of collections to specific users.

#### **4 Recommendations for revision of the National Collections Strategy**

The following recommendations cover both the strategy and its implementation:

- The Strategic Aims to be more clearly stated, including definitions of 'new' and 'at risk' collections in the context of the current archive landscape.
- The Success Criteria to include how the National Collections Strategy has driven individual strategy development and implementation; how it has established a coordinated approach to 'active collecting'; and how it has shared best practice and learning.
- A communications programme to be developed detailing the intended 'message' and audience, suitable platforms or vehicles for information sharing and gathering, and potential benefits.
- Links to be forged with other initiatives or key events, for example, the Archive Awareness Campaign and the Digital Preservation Awareness Roadshows.
- Criteria to be produced for prioritising work on individual strategies, allocating resources and measuring success.
- Lists of potential themes, sectors and formats, progress with individual strategies, high-level implementation plans and details of key stakeholders to be made available online.
- Work to be conducted on how to assess the long-term value of potential new collections and to be published as part of a broader 'toolkit' supporting individual strategy development.
- Membership of the National Collections Strategy Panel to be extended to include representation from Wales.  
**Please note**, this recommendation has already been satisfied with a delegate from CyMAL's having attended the Panel meeting held at The National Archives on 21 January 2009.

#### **5 Next steps**

The National Collections Strategy Panel will be asked to consider the recommendations made in this report and redrafting will be undertaken by Cathy Smith as The National Archives' Collections Strategies Manager.

Following approval from the Panel, the final version will be published on The National Archives' website at the end of May 2009.

## Appendix A Draft National Collections Strategy

# *The National Collections Strategy*

### *Vision*

To support the development of collections within and beyond The National Archives by leading an initiative to identify public and private records, archives and information sources across England and Wales whose potential value has yet to be recognised and to encourage their preservation, safekeeping, use and reuse.

### *Strategic Aims*

**The National Collections Strategy (NCS) provides a framework for:**

- discovering where important information is not being collected, maintained or preserved to facilitate access and reuse
- promoting active collections' development across all sectors of society
- nurturing collaboration between creators, owners, custodians and users of information
- sharing expertise, skills and knowledge in a non-exclusive way across professional, institutional and cultural boundaries
- encouraging and assisting in the development of individual strategies targeted at specific sectors, themes, platforms or formats
- supporting investigation into the acquisition, management, preservation and long-term availability of digital information including costs and other resource implications for repositories of all kinds
- identifying and stimulating potential opportunities for increased funding and resources to ensure collection sustainability
- recognising, celebrating and publishing success to as wide an audience as possible

### *Principles*

**The National Collections Strategy (NCS) is built on the following principles and recommends their adoption in the development of individual strategies:**

- 1) **Scope:** To document across all media and on all formats, key events, activities, decisions and policies that have had an effect on people's lives.
- 2) **Diversity:** To encourage the recording of the lives of all individuals and communities to ensure a balanced representation of society.
- 3) **Consultation:** To establish a process of open consultation and debate with all identified stakeholders and to agree and prioritise objectives.
- 4) **Comprehensiveness:** To consider all potential partners and information sources, media and formats across the public and private sectors.
- 5) **Access:** To facilitate public access to digital and other information, or to provide clear explanation as to why, when and how access might be limited.
- 6) **Availability:** To implement mechanisms for making collections available to and understood by users, for example online or on-site guides offering advice, context and appropriate supporting information.

- 7) **Information rights:** To acknowledge and communicate the legitimate information rights of creators, owners, custodians and users.
- 8) **Inclusion:** To encourage the contribution of a broad range of interests, views and issues from all sectors of society, including marginalised and minority groups.
- 9) **Community participation:** To support and encourage voluntary community participation in managing and promoting collections to a wider audience and in demonstrating their value for enhancing citizenship, identity and social cohesion.
- 10) **Collaboration:** To overcome conflicting approaches to collection acquisition, management, preservation and access between collaborating partners and to avoid competition, overlap and duplication where possible.
- 11) **Flexibility:** To be consistent but flexible in approach, recognising the varying impact of factors such as available resource, technical constraints and information ownership on the success of individual strategies.
- 12) **Preservation:** To observe best practice, seek guidance and implement standards in preservation where appropriate and practicable.

### **Success Criteria**

A successful National Collections Strategy (NCS) will demonstrate:

- The proactive engagement of a broad and inclusive range of communities and sectors leading on, creating, publishing and implementing their own collection strategies.
- Continuing support from both professional and non-professional stakeholders and a willingness to collaborate with The National Archives on identifying, planning and shaping potential collections strategies.
- The widespread adoption of an active approach to collections development and a significant, positive change to an expanding archive landscape.
- Increased funding opportunities for establishing sustainable archives.
- Open dialogue between The National Archives and its stakeholders, visible through simple mechanisms for feedback and communication.

### **Context**

**The National Collections Strategy (NCS) reflects and supports The National Archives' Vision by:**

- *Leading and transforming information management* through the development and dissemination of guidance to ensure that the proper management of digital and other information contributes to business and research needs now and in the future.
- *Guaranteeing the survival of today's information for tomorrow* through new thinking in collections' development across government and the wider public and private sectors, and identifying preservation needs for securing the long-term management and accessibility of information.
- *Bringing history to life for everyone* through meeting user expectation in the range of resources available and the provision of tools to support access, reuse and sharing of information.

## Appendix B A Consultation on the National Collections Strategy



The National Archives

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### A Consultation on the National Collections Strategy

The National Collections Strategy is an initiative to identify in what areas the documentary heritage of England and Wales is under represented or not represented in archives and to address the reasons why. Its aim is to ensure that the records of key events, of the lives and activities of individuals and communities and of public, private and charitable organisations are retained in the most appropriate places, preserved and made easily available for as many purposes as possible.

Through collaborative partnerships, The National Archives will provide a framework of support, help and guidance in developing individual archive strategies: for example, for the health and business sectors, for the performing arts and sporting events, and for websites and digital information.

The following Vision and Success Criteria have been taken from the full strategy document available on The National Archives website, [nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives/national-collections-strategy.htm](http://nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives/national-collections-strategy.htm)

#### Vision

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#### Success Criteria

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- The widespread adoption of an active approach to collections development and a significant, positive change to an expanding archive landscape.
- Increased funding opportunities for establishing sustainable archives.
- Open dialogue between The National Archives and its stakeholders, visible through simple mechanisms for feedback and communication.

## Consultation process

Please let us know your views on the National Collections Strategy and give us your suggestions as to how to achieve its vision. We'll keep the consultation open for three months until 30 November 2008 and publish our response on The National Archives website by the end of February 2009. The full version of the document is available at: [nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives/national-collections-strategy.htm](http://nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives/national-collections-strategy.htm)

We really do want as many contributions as possible, so please feel free to add the above link to your own websites and to encourage your colleagues to participate.

Below are the questions we would like you to consider, though general comments are also welcome. Please let us know too, if you would be happy with our contacting you for further feedback:

1. Do we need a National Collections Strategy?
2. If so, is the approach to building new collections or supporting and nurturing 'at risk' collections as outlined in the Strategic Aims and Principles, the right one?
3. How do we identify gaps in the nation's archive collections and existing collections which might be deemed 'at risk'?
4. Which sectors, themes or formats are endangered and would benefit from strategies?
5. What will the big challenges be and what would make a 'successful' strategy?
6. How do we open debate with the broadest range of communities and how can we encourage continuing engagement from them?
7. How can we best communicate progress on the development of strategies: through The National Archives website and those of other stakeholders? mailing lists or online forums? meetings or seminars?

## How to respond

Either as individuals or on behalf of groups and organisations:

- By email or telephone:
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