

Linking Arms: working together to bring the past alive

In 1998, in the report *Archives On-line*, the National Council on Archives (NCA) looked toward an archive service which would provide national and international access to all archive resources in the United Kingdom through one common gateway. *Linking Arms* aims to realise that vision. It is an ambitious and long term project proposed by a consortium partnership between The National Archives, the NCA and other national and regional institutions, community archives, local archives repositories, the higher education sector and strategic bodies, across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with support from the Republic of Ireland.

Linking Arms has the following aims:

- to enhance and enrich the United Kingdom's archival heritage;
- to make a core element of the archival gateway (recommended by the Archives Task Force in spring 2004) available online;
- to empower new and existing archives users to access their heritage through training and outreach programmes.

Linking Arms will bring together existing web-based resources of project partners, such as A2A (www.a2a.org.uk), AIM25 (www.aim25.ac.uk), the Archives Hub (www.archiveshub.ac.uk), Archives Network Wales (www.archivesnetworkwales.info) and SCAN (the Scottish Archive Network at www.scan.org.uk) as well as repository-specific resources including Guildhall Library's manuscript catalogues, and make them available through a single online service. The consortium will also work with other organisations in the formal archives sector, and with community groups, to make thousands of new digital images and detailed descriptions of archives available through the same online service.

The *Linking Arms* online service will enable existing and new users of archives to access resources through online exhibitions, Special Interest Zones, and simple and more structured searching with user-friendly Help pages. Users will also be able to add their own heritage to *Linking Arms* through a 'Your story' feature (though personal and community content will be clearly differentiated from formal archives).

Background research has been carried out to inform the *Linking Arms* project plan:

- a user and impact study with focus groups of users and non-users of archives, and an online user survey, co-ordinated by the NCA to test the project's vision and concept;
- the Community Access to Archives Project (CAAP) – for more information, see the article elsewhere in this newsletter;
- and a technical options study, to examine potential ICT options for the delivery of existing and new online content through the **Linking Arms** online service. As its baseline for technical development, the consortium has taken the NCA's *Interoperability Protocol* of November 2003, which recommended a distributed system providing central services and cross searching of all networked archive resources.

A major funding application for **Linking Arms** was submitted to the Heritage Lottery Fund in June 2004. If the application is successful, it is hoped that various development works will begin in early 2005, and that the full project will be delivered from 2006-2009. The online service should be available from late 2006.

Information about **Linking Arms** will soon be available at **www.nationalarchives.gov.uk** - or email **linking-arms@nationalarchives.gov.uk**.

Sarah Stark
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Best Practice Model for Community Archive Projects

The Community Access to Archives Project (CAAP) is working to produce a Best Practice Model for community involvement in the production of online archive content, using community archive case studies drawn mostly from Hackney and West Yorkshire.

In the simplest terms, community archives might be defined as collections of material that encapsulate a particular community's understanding of its history and identity. This will often be personal photographs, documents, ephemera and oral history - 'unofficial' records that might not normally be preserved, let alone widely available. The community itself might be geographically based, or relate to a cultural or thematic community of interest. For the communities involved, community archive projects offer a means to explore community identity and develop community cohesion and pride, and provide opportunities for capacity building, and learning and skills development. For mainstream archives, community involvement offers a mechanism for broadening audiences and combating social exclusion, developing mutual trust between the archives service and the community, and advising on the proper care of unique material. For everyone, they offer a chance to preserve and celebrate 'grassroots' heritage.

In order to investigate the extent to which community groups within Hackney might be interested in involvement in community archive activity, and what their priorities might be, CAAP undertook a survey of a selection of community groups. The results of this are now informing the work of Hackney Archives' Outreach Officer. CAAP is also investigating community archive activity taking place within the borough independently of the archive service, such as the Kingsmead Community History Project. This project aims to document the stories and experiences of residents of this once notorious estate from 1939 to the present day, and inform its future development in a positive way.

The CAAP Interim Report and Hackney Community Survey are currently available on the CAAP web pages (see below). The CAAP Best Practice Model and Final Report will be available from October 2004, and will include further details of case studies as well as fully investigated suggestions for funding streams for community archive projects. CAAP research has also provided vital information for the development of the funding bid for Linking Arms (for more information, see the article elsewhere in this newsletter), which it is anticipated will add a rich array of new sources to the archival heritage and aid their sustainability, benefiting a wide range of traditional and new users.

CAAP is led and funded by The National Archives, in partnership with West Yorkshire Archives Service, Hackney Archives Department, the National Archives of Scotland, the National Council on Archives, the National Library of Wales, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland and Commanet. For more information, please visit the CAAP web pages at:
www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives/caap

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