Suffolk Record Office
Gatacre Road
Ipswich
IP1 2LQ

19 December 2012

Dear [Name],

The National Archives’ inspection of Suffolk Record Office

I am writing following the inspection of Suffolk Record Office in 2011. The agreed reports on each repository are enclosed for your information and we are grateful for your kind assistance during the inspections.

The inspections were undertaken as part of The National Archives’ programme to review repositories that have been assessed as meeting the requirements of The National Archives’ Standard for Record Repositories. In addition, a considerable period of time had elapsed since all three locations comprising Suffolk Record Office were subject to a formal inspection and there have been numerous improvements and changes at the sites in the meantime necessitating a return.

This inspection provided The National Archives with an opportunity to assess whether the repositories still meet the objectives of the Standard and to ensure that appointment as places of deposit for public records could continue.

The reports provide evidence for a high standard of performance against the Standard and I am more than content to confirm that Suffolk Record Office can continue to be a place of deposit at all of its sites. It would also be possible to continue ‘TNA approval’ of Ipswich, and possibly Bury and Lowestoft, if the lack of accrual space was not such a concern. Regrettably, approval is therefore suspended.

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If the Record Office is able to develop an effective strategy for managing expansion space based on the existing three site arrangement then we would be very willing to reconsider the restoration of TNA approval. The development of long-term plans for new accommodation would also enable us to reconsider whether approved status is appropriate. However, you should be aware that from 2013 The National Archives and partners will be rolling out the accreditation scheme for archive services, which will replace The National Archives’ Standard for Record Repositories, and Suffolk Record Office should find itself well placed to benefit from the scheme. Nevertheless, an inspection regime for places of deposit will continue.

It is clear from the reports that Suffolk Record Office continues to provide a very high standard of care for the county’s collections and to offer a wide variety of innovative services to researchers, local communities and other stakeholders. The range of outreach, educational and promotional activity delivered across the county, the extensive relationships with volunteers, local institutions and groups, and the way in which this is integrated into the development of collections is impressive. This activity also demonstrates how the Record Office contributes to the overall objectives of Suffolk County Council in a very positive way and supports the promotion of well-being.

The inspections are therefore a validation of Suffolk Record Office’s high performance recorded in The National Archives’ self-assessment survey and shows that continual improvement has been a feature of your operations in recent years. You and your staff are to be congratulated on your achievements to date, particularly in the context of constraints imposed on the service by the existing buildings and operation on three sites.

Nevertheless, it is readily apparent that Suffolk Record Office has reached an important crossroads and serious thought needs to be given to planning for the next 25 to 50 years. There has been significant and invaluable investment in the three locations which has brought about important improvements in the care of collections; however, ultimately with the current arrangement on three sites this can only be incremental and this is a good time to consider the strategic direction of the service as a whole.

The inspection indicates that each site has its own areas of weakness and that a lack of expansion space for the service is a fundamental issue which has the potential to hinder the fulfilment of the Record Office’s objectives as a dynamic archive service for the county. Staff resources also appear to be stretched and this is having an impact on core functions, such as cataloguing.

The inefficiencies associated with operation on three sites have again been highlighted and whilst a presence in each locality provides a base for outreach and engagement with communities this may now be an obstacle to the strategic development of an integrated, county-wide service that can meet the changing needs and expectations of researchers and other stakeholders. We would urge you to consider carefully proposals for bringing together collections and core staff at a single location that could offer a sustainable basis for the future of Suffolk Record Office and its collections, the support it can provide for Suffolk County Council and other partners, and the delivery of benefits for users. Building on existing networks and relationships to create partnerships will also be a critical part of this work. This approach reflects the key recommendations contained in Archives for the 21st century and further information on the policy and refreshed action plan can be found on our website. It would be disappointing to see the
achievements and ambitions for the future frustrated by the weight of the current infrastructure.

I hope you are not too disappointed by this outcome: but for the question of accrual space the status of Suffolk Record Office as a set of approved repositories would have been less problematic. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any comments on the inspection and we hope that it will be possible to continue the productive dialogue concerning the future of Suffolk Record Office.

Yours sincerely,

Nicholas Kingsley MA Hon. DLitt FSA RMSA
Head of Archives Sector Development