Building on Success: Developing Centres of Expertise

1 Introduction

This paper is a development of ideas first given public airing in the Archives Task Force Discussion paper 4: Structures: Issues and possible solutions which was presented to, and discussed by, the Archives Task Force at its meeting on the 30th January 2003. This paper has been produced by Resource at the request of the Archives Task Force, and represents of a model of an approach which the Archives Task Force is invited to comment on, and discuss, with the aim of making future recommendations.

2 Context for structural change

The Archives Task Force has stated that, in considering archives in the 21st century it cannot ignore issue of structures. The structure of archive provision in the UK and the organisations, institutions, conventions and partnerships that support and sustain those services needs to be closely examined. It is relatively easy to survey the existing structural landscapes for archives and records management in the UK and not difficult to conclude that the picture is uneven and fragmented. However, there are great strengths, and the challenge which the Archives Task Force has identified is how to unite those strengths so that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

In considering the wider issue of structure, the Archives Task Force has taken account of the current available research and published literature, notably [Archives at the Millennium] [mapping reports] [other evidence] [quote in full]. The Archives Task Force has noted that these exercises have developed from the archives domain and that archives have led the way in mapping work to draw these areas to wider attention and strategic analysis. These exercises represent considerable and detailed analysis of current levels of provision, funding gaps and evidence of service unevenness and fragmentation. Moreover, they have articulated a complex inter-related set of problems (and opportunities) (many of which are accidents of history and development), which can be summarised as:

- Uneven geographic development
- Variable governance geometry and mechanisms
- Funding (typically under-investment and cheese-paring, or multiplicity of variable funding streams)
- Lack of leadership
- Lack of critical mass
- Lack of unified voice at significant regional and national level
- Low awareness and political perception
- Low public profile
- Lack of unified vision, purpose and objectives to help define structural needs

3 The changing archives domain

Structures are constantly evolving and the Task Force noted (in Discussion paper 4) the following developments that are effecting/will effect structures:
• The emergence of the Regional Archive Councils
• The proposed legislative change
• The regional governance change white paper
• The setting up of the National Archives
• The vision being supplied by NCA in *British Archives, The Way Forward*
• The Government Policy on Archives, its Action Plan and the other national policies for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

4 Conclusions of the Archives Task Force

The Archives Task Force has queried whether there is a feasible structural solution and suggested that the ATF should be thinking of ways to work with the reality of fragmentation rather than trying to rationalise the way the domain has historically developed. It has concluded that in the current political and funding climate, it is unwise to make sweeping recommendations concerning structural change in the archives domain.

• The Archives Task Force was set up with a remit for pragmatic realism in its thinking – a short, crisp look at key issues

• The ATF is primarily user focussed, rather than professionally focussed and users are not interested in structures

• A prolonged period of major introspection for the archives domain would be very internally focussed and not outward in its thinking, and may only serve to internalise and entrench existing attitudes

• A period of internal “navel-gazing” will not impress political masters

• Any such exercise will be time consuming and expensive – Resource is not able to fund such an exercise alone and current work programmes are channelling funding into user services and cross domain work such as workforce development and stewardship

• Where will long-term funding to reform structure flow from?

• Such an exercise is resource-intensive, and as has already been demonstrated archives lack capacity to partake in existing agendas even without increased burden of a major period of structural review and upheaval

• Users may not see benefits for decades, and the ATF is about delivering realistic service improvements in the short term

• Background of uncertainties about proposed legislation and the shaping of the National Archives mean that to be successful any structural programme needs to be bedded in and carefully planned – the ATF has a short timescale to report which does not easily fit with existing programmes

• ATF needs to fit with Treasury Spending round for 2004

• Many local arrangements do indeed work very well

It is for these key reasons that the ATF has rejected proposals for wholesale structural reform. Rather the ATF has turned its attention to investigating how existing structures could be developed, supported and sustained to deliver service
improvements and act as a catalyst to stimulate archives domain growth in a number of core areas.

The ATF notes the “hub” model which has been adopted by the museums domain. However, it is concluded that this model is not transferable to the archives domain. There are no existing pre-eminent institutions around which a hub could be developed.

Investing heavily in structural change (including dealing with all the problems of transition) is not going to be the easiest way to secure clear “wins” for the ATF and the archives domain. However, there are currently opportunities to bring together new bodies at national and regional level, which – if underpinned by a National Archives Strategy – might secure some long term benefits through flexible networking structures rather than prescriptive bureaucratic structures.

This Archives Task Force will be bold in its thinking and the Centres of Expertise model outlined in this paper will require imagination and flair and a shift in perspective to bring to fruition.

5 Core archive domain priorities

Much has been achieved to date in England by the Regional Archive Councils. This work has largely been through voluntary effort by the domain. Perhaps the most important facet of the Regional Archive Councils has been the simple process of bringing together local authority, university and business professionals, academic and genealogical users representatives, depositors and regional and national observers to talk about what regionalism means for archives. The Regional Archive Councils themselves provide a seat at the table for all interests, and have made a number of strides in co-ordinating practical action within the regions in a way that has not been possible before, holding a special position as a filter between national bodies and local providers. The Archives Council Wales and the Scottish Council on Archives fulfil similar functions.

The Regional Archive Councils play a particularly important role in relation to the Regional Agencies for Museums, Archives and Libraries, and it is these agencies which could play a significant role in developing and supporting Centres of Expertise. Similar mechanisms would need to be found in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

There is already ample evidence of a growing crisis in many key areas of service provision and development in the archives domain. For example Phase Two of the English Archival Mapping Survey, (covering English local authority archives), which reported in 2001, found disturbing evidence of poor accommodation and storage, finding aids and reference services, implementation of Information Communications Technology, preservation and conservation, provision for electronic records, and capacity to undertake training and development and explore cross-domain working. Similar findings have been reported by Phase Two of the Archival Mapping Project for Wales (2001), An Archival Account of Scotland (1999) and the Missing Link (A survey of specialist repositories) (2002).

Listed below are some of the key priorities that the archives domain agree are of primary concern and which need to be addressed through structural support.

Conservation: A minority of archives are now able to sustain in-house conservation facilities. There is also a skills shortage in trained conservators.
**Electronic archiving:** There are very few services at a sub-national level which have taken steps towards meeting the issues and problems surrounding the archiving of electronically held records. There is both a skills shortage and a lack of good practice to emulate.

**Photographic/ micrographic/ scanning services** A small minority of archives have in-house studio facilities for microfilming, photography and scanning. In most other archives this work is either put out to commercial suppliers or is not undertaken at all.

**Social inclusion activities:** Activities are scattered thinly and randomly, are locally generated according to resource availability and, often, according to the priority given to such activity by the head of service. There is no expected norm and little support and guidance from either regional or national level.

**Educational activity:** The pattern is as with social inclusion activity. A very small minority of services enjoy the benefit of a post specifically focused on developing educational work.

**Cataloguing:** This has traditionally been the core skill of archivists, the heart of their training. It forms a significant - perhaps the significant - element of work in any archive, though almost invariably the amount of material requiring cataloguing outstrips the cataloguing resource.

**Training:** There is little provision of training at a regional level and such national CPD training for archivists as there is very limited in scope and range.

How then are these best tackled by the ATF? Is the solution to develop Centres of Expertise? This chimes with the general direction proposed in Regional Archive strategies, and being taken forward by the Regional Agencies, eg:

"The West Midlands is keen to establish centres of expertise for conservation, electronic records and records management. There is disparate provision across the region in relation to records management particularly in view of requirements of Freedom of Information and Data Protection legislation. (the West Midlands RADO) is conducting feasibility studies to define exactly what centres of [expertise] would mean in practice."

(Minutes of meeting of Regional Archive Development Officers, Sept 2001)

"One area of the strategy action plan yet to be tackled is researching the idea of centres of [expertise] in the region. (the West Midlands RADO) is exploring with Keele a regional role given their high quality digitisation equipment."

(Minutes of meeting of Regional Archive Development Officers, Nov 2001)
A way forward might be to begin by identifying areas which centres of expertise might be sustained to address. As a starting point, (offered in no particular priority order) is an indication of proposed regional activity in core areas in 2003/2004.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Conservation Activities</th>
<th>Electronic Archiving</th>
<th>Photographic/ micrographic/ scanning services</th>
<th>Social Inclusion activities</th>
<th>Educational activity</th>
<th>Cataloguing/ Mapping</th>
<th>Training</th>
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<tr>
<td>East of England</td>
<td>Digital Records Conference EEMLAC and University of Essex partnership</td>
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<td>East Midlands</td>
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<td>London</td>
<td>LARC scoping study</td>
<td>Regional Archive Education Officer</td>
<td>Celebrating the Black' teacher resource packs</td>
<td>London Signpost</td>
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<td>North East</td>
<td>University of Durham and NEMLAC Collections Care Partnership Scheme</td>
<td>Regional Digitisation Working Group</td>
<td>Teacher placements through (EBP funded)</td>
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<td>North West</td>
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<td>NWRAC LOGJAM – audit of uncatalogued collections</td>
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<td>South East</td>
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<td>Mapping of AV archives sector</td>
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<td>South West</td>
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<td>Digital Archiving conference with Plymouth University</td>
<td>Social Impact Audit</td>
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<td>West Midlands</td>
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<td>Profiles Project</td>
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<td>Yorkshire</td>
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<td>Conserver Trainee Scheme</td>
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6 The vision

Creating centres of expertise

What is meant by a centre of expertise? There may be scope for looking, in each region, for a centre for expertise in each or some of the areas of concern identified above which might build its knowledge and skills and act, in some cases as service provider (for example a regional conservation workshop or a photographic unit), or in other cases might offer peripatetic advice or training. There would be a need to provide some incentive for the provider to offer this extended service and for the participants within a region to act in this collaborative way. The most obvious routes would be by providing financial support to the provider to develop capacity and by providing some form of recognition of the role of the service as a “Beacon Service” in the specific area of activity.

Ideally a “Beacon Service” might in due course be able to become partly or wholly self-supporting through payment for services and it may be possible to see financial incentivising as a kick-start. However, it remains and will remain the case that there is little capacity in smaller services to expend funding on additional services in any of these areas and there is likely to be an ongoing need (unless the Task Force leads to an overall improvement in the financial base of archive services itself - a big if!) for the provision of external incentives to encourage the take-up of such activities - for example through a regional challenge-fund or through HLF support. By directing such funding opportunities at the buyer rather than the provider of services, it would be hoped to encourage the development of an internal market which would, in itself, help ensure sustained standards of provision. However, this model does imply that a hierarchy of service quality.

The Regional Agency should be introduced into the geometry to create a triangle of 'Centre of Expertise - Individual Archive - Regional Agency', with the Agency, advised by the Regional Archives Council, being involved in the process of selection of the Centres and the provision or allocation of continuing funding. This should help ensure a consistency of strategy and execution across services in the region. The Agency engagement will also allow the development of opportunities to look at some of this service provision in cross-domain terms. This is particularly true of training but might equally prove true of conservation and photographic facilities, among others. There would be a high level of regional determination as to which priorities to set, and Regional Archive Councils role will be critical in this process.

7 The Benefits

- To provide the means by which good practice and innovation can be demonstrated locally in every region and thus to raise the water-table both of expectation and of potential

- To raise the profile of archives at a regional level and to demonstrate this role

- To deploy limited resources to best advantage

- In the initial scrutiny leading up to the designation of Beacon services, to require a degree of mapping of existing provision and quality of provision within a given region

- To encourage collaborative working across a full range of disparate services
To provide the means by which small peripheral archive collections, often overlooked in the past, could be drawn into the notional network of British archives.

By providing a continuing role for the Regional Agency, to strengthen the presence of the Agency in their relationships with archive services and to provide the opportunity for exploring cross-domain provision.

Disadvantages

However, there are some problems about a regional approach. Services at regional level tend to be too remote from the clients (depositors and users) of archive services. Regional activity tends to mean moving either records, or people and equipment, around. It is damaging to move records around, and expensive and inefficient to move people and equipment. Collaborative conservation facilities or cataloguing hit squads may work well if there are a number of repositories in one city (as with conservation at Oxford) but it would be less efficient in other contexts. Joint initiatives may be a way forward in some cases, - electronic records preservation in particular seems to lend itself to collaborative activity, and given that there are few if any existing providers, could be developed on this basis from scratch. Audio-visual archives are already organised on a regional basis (the regional Film and Sound archives) but the structures that exist require strengthening (they are weak in funding and stability).

The reactions from the archives domain to this concept and how it might be developed will be sought during the ATF Consultation phase (Spring 2003)

8 Next steps

- Describe the local, regional, national context
- Develop Centres of Expertise guiding principles
- Identify possible costs
- Describe UK framework, and how this model might be applied in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

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