Structures: Issues and possible solutions

Summary

How the UK archives domain is structured may have a significant influence on its ability to deliver high quality accessible services to users.

The structure is fragmented. Government, local government, other public service bodies, businesses, private owners and many others hold archives and have a stake in them and their future. But these interests are not joined up in domain-wide structures.

The historical development of archives and records management accounts for much of this fragmentation.

Structural issues:

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How achievable are structural 'solutions' to issues in the UK archives domain? Would ATF energy be better focused elsewhere?
Structures: Issues and possible solutions

1 Introduction

In considering archives in the 21st century the ATF cannot avoid the 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 it is messy and unsatisfactory. Rather more challenging is to agree what structures would be better and decide what the ATF might actually do about it.

Structures should follow vision, purposes and objectives. The ATF has already identified some key objectives for the publicly-funded archives domain - to release the learning potential of archives - to increase and broaden the user base and appeal to a wider range of users – to increase access to information – to raise the profile of archives, and to balance these priorities with the conservation and preservation requirements of archives in all media. These objectives arise from discussion of the issues identified at the first ATF meeting.

There may be many innovative strategies for finding new or improved ways (solutions one might say) for meeting these key objectives. Structural change is one of them. If we can organise and support the archives domain in a different way and by so doing release resources or energy, then recommendations for change might be an important part of Task Force’s work.

There are however quite divergent views on how much energy should be devoted by the ATF to structural matters. Two views from the sector:

‘It is my opinion that structures are equally as important as funding to the future development of the archive domain. Indeed, if the structures are not right, the funding won’t happen. The ATF must therefore give serious attention to this issue, and its recommendations on structures must underpin its other proposals.’

‘I am not sure whether the ATF should invest time and effort in agonising over structures. Our ability to reform the domain’s (admittedly ramshackle) structure is probably limited and - frankly – there are more important things (such as funding, access, and the profile of archives) for the ATF to worry about.’

Capacity and structural issues certainly go together. But the ATF probably should focus its efforts on a short list of objectives which it believes it has a good chance of achieving. In short where is the ATF most likely to make a difference?

Archives clearly have needs and priorities arising from existing fragmented structures and a failure of capacity to meet the increasing demands being placed upon archive services. This paper outlines some of the key issues affecting structures, looks at the structures we have got and proposes models of structural development. Approaches to developing solutions which involve structural change might include the hubs/beacons/centres of excellence model which is being adopted by regional museums and galleries as recommended by the Renaissance in the Regions report1, and being considered in the Framework for the Future plan for public libraries in the regions. This is built on the belief that scarce central government resources should

be focused in such a way as to demonstrate what local services are capable of in terms of making a difference to local communities and contributing to a wider social and economic agenda; and to do this through partnerships and a plurality of funding sources. However, "hubs for archives" may not be the only viable option for structural change in the archives world and this paper will look at some others. More fundamentally though there is the whole question of whether or not we should even regard structural reform as a priority for the ATF or indeed even desirable.

2 The structure of the archives domain in the UK

ATF Discussion paper 1 Archives facts and statistics gives a full breakdown of the UK archives domain, but it is useful to remind ourselves of the shape of the domain here. Archives did not develop in the same way or at the same time. The major thrust of development came between 1930 and 1960 and was based upon the County Councils. There are in most regions a number of publicly-funded higher education and local authority institutions of about the same standard with different strengths and weaknesses, for whom the problem is often capacity not vision. There are a much larger number of private and some smaller public institutions which may lack both and are not necessarily mandated by their controlling bodies to respond to the full archival agenda. Local authority archive services comprise the largest and most heavily used of these, but the Task Force should not focus entirely on the local authority sub-domain. The diagram at Appendix One indicates the key players and relationships in the archives domain.

3 The purpose and role of archive institutions

Archive institutions fulfil two roles – there are the good governance and culture arguments for archives. The good governance model, considers the life cycle of records, and emphasizes the importance of records management, concerning issues of regulation, accountability and trust. The culture model emphasizes the common national memory, part of the cultural heritage of a nation. Some archives exist (in the eyes of their funders) purely to support one model or the other; but inevitably they fulfil both roles, whether the creators like it or not. Achieving the balance between these two models can cause problems for archives.

This twin justification for archives creates an ambivalence about the nature of the service that is reflected at national level (currently Lord Chancellor's Department and DCMS) and in local authorities in the ongoing debate about where archives 'fit' in local authority structures and in the balance of their responsibility for historical and private archives and for records management. Even in the private sector - charities, businesses, landed estates - archives have both roles, and there are occasionally conflicts of interest when material in archives established for cultural purposes are used to hold the parent organisation to account.

This ambivalent purpose makes some people in the archives domain uncomfortable about pushing too far the connections with libraries and museums (too great an emphasis on the 'cultural') or becoming too much part of the internal bureaucracy of a parent body (too 'records management' orientated). The former can lead to the archive being seen as too distant from administration to be relevant, and 'not serious enough' to be trusted with records. The latter can lead to too narrow a view on what is worth preserving and even put the archivist under pressure to defend the

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2 These models are further explained in Democracy, Culture and Archives of the European Union, Trudy Heskamp Peterson, Report from an EU Conference on Access to Official Documents and Archives, Sweden, 2001
organisation; ultimately to preserve or create records which suit its purpose (Soviet experience relevant here, perhaps). One view might therefore be that archives need to be independent but not remote; connected to but not submerged by cultural service partners. This professional standpoint argues for a degree of independence which may not be sustainable. Can the archives domain ever be strong enough to achieve this independence of action – to in effect be immune to the pressures of legitimate (and much more financially and politically powerful) stakeholders? This seems unlikely; is a compromise between the professional high ground and the swamp of reality inevitable? History suggests that compromise – perhaps unsatisfactory compromise – usually triumphs over idealism.

4 History

Historically, the fundamental backbone of UK archives has been the Public Record Office (and the National Archives of Scotland and the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland) and the network of local authority archive services. The national archives have always acknowledged the duality of their roles, and critical mass and resourcing have been key to achieving success. In the local authority archive sector, some services have achieved the balance between records management and historical archives, but others have been pushed into almost wholly cultural roles. In the higher education sector few institutions with archive collections have integrated their records management and cultural heritage functions effectively. Some institutions look after their records purely through academic registries and ignore their cultural significance; other institutions have major collections of literary, political or social importance which are actively exploited, but are distant from the institutions internal records. Outside these categories of publicly-funded institution, there is a wide world of infinitely variable private organisations that care for archives, in pursuit of both good governance and cultural functions.

The County Record Offices have been variably successful. Some have achieved the balance between records management and historical archives. Others have been pushed into almost wholly cultural roles. Those without an active engagement in records management have tended to be weaker than those which do have it (Cambridgeshire or North Yorkshire, as against Gloucestershire or Tyne & Wear). This is partly because central services have tended to have better access to funding in local government than cultural services. Not all local government archives are County services; numerically probably most are not. Services in London boroughs and unitary authorities are especially likely to lack a records management role. Because they also tend to serve smaller areas and populations (especially historically) they tend to have smaller collections and lack critical mass in resources and staffing, even by comparison with the county services. Diseconomies of scale mean they are inefficient; lack of specialised facilities and services can mean they are ineffective.

Few higher education institutions with archive collections have integrated their records management and cultural heritage functions effectively. Some institutions look after their records purely through academic registries (e.g. Aston) and ignore their cultural significance; other institutions (e.g. Leeds) have major collections of literary, political or social importance which are actively exploited, but which have no contact with - let alone responsibility for - institutional records. In the HE sector, it is of course true that the existence of the institution does not automatically create a remit for archive collecting (beyond the records of the institution itself), but many do collect on a cross-cutting subject-focused basis that is sometimes helpful (in providing a home for the records of organisations which are not locality-based, e.g. the Church Missionary Society at Birmingham University) and sometimes competes
with other institutions (e.g. Churchill College and the Bodleian Library competing with the British Library for modern political papers).

Outside these categories of publicly-funded institution, there is a wide world of infinitely variable private organisations that care for archives. These range from independent charitable trusts set up explicitly to care for an archive or to collect in a field — or with that as one of their objectives — to companies and landed estates which continue to look after their own records. Sometimes these bodies serve both public and private purposes, providing open access for research and maintaining an accurate record for the institution’s own needs. Sometimes their purpose is wholly or largely one-sided. A few independent charitable trusts offer excellent examples of bodies that are independent; not remote; connected; not submerged. Others are controlled closely by the parent institution, and offer public access — if at all — only on the terms of the institution. In between are a large group which offer decent public access and save the public purse money which might otherwise be spent by public institutions on their care. In thinking about archival structures, however, we need to make distinctions within this group between those which are quasi-public bodies and those which are really still archives-at-large (possibly archives-at-risk).

5 Structural issues

*Government* may be considered to be the root cause of all structural problems. Archives have not been the sole responsibility of any one government department or minister. Inevitably different structures have evolved from this situation and archives will always be subject to the unintentional consequences of ministerial and policy changes, not having a single and strong voice to ensure at least a measure of consistency and continuity. To a degree this has been provided by the national institutions and local government but hardly as part of any cogent national plan or strategy for archives (although the Government Policy on Archives and its Action Plan go some way to addressing this). The situation has further been complicated by devolution and emerging national policies for archives.

*Stability* is another key issue. An archive is for ever, not just for the next five years. We live in an increasingly short-term world, but archival structures have to offer security. Privately funded archives are particularly vulnerable, and there have been a string of high profile cases where they have been shut down or put into suspended animation or had their funding and activities drastically curtailed (e.g. Whitbread, Pilkingtons, BP). Sometimes the public sector is able to provide a safety net, but not always.

*Lack of resilience* (especially in the public sector). Archives without any statutory protection can be closed or starved of funding to the point where they become ineffective. Even if closure remains a remote risk for most services, how stable is their funding (in its structural context) and hence their ability to continue to meet their obligations, let alone to extend their work into new areas? For local authorities, under mounting pressure to do more, better, for less, the non-statutory nature of archive services makes them an easy target.

*Fragmentation* is a problem. The archives domain can be divided into publicly-funded archive institutions; other publicly-funded institutions which hold some archives; and private institutions with archives. This fragmentation of the domain creates many problems for archives. In one sense the wider the incidence of archives the more likely people will be to encounter them and perhaps value them. There are, however, major disadvantages which together create an obstacle to achieving the vision and objectives of the archives domain.
▪ Barriers to access - inconsistency of objectives across the different parts of the sector. (for example, a university archive has very different goals from a local authority archive or from a health service archive. How does a member of the public know what to expect?)
▪ Barriers to creating a more rational structure - plurality of funding sources
▪ Fragmentation tends to be accompanied by unsustainably small unit sizes (lack of critical mass)
▪ Lack of critical mass impedes training and development programmes because it is accompanied by lack of capacity
▪ Lack of capacity also impedes progress on digitisation, content creation for the web and all traditional archive activities (including adequate collections management)
▪ Difficult to implement standards where they exist, or to create and manage a monitoring and advisory regime
▪ Synergetic opportunities are missed and funding opportunities are not efficiently deployed
▪ Lack of leadership and succession planning
▪ Significant numbers of important collections lie outside professional care of any sort
▪ Diversity of funding streams and the barriers which they, in themselves, create to synchronised development

The national and local levels of public archive services are disconnected; the regional level is in its infancy. Public services are only sporadically linked to private archives for which there are no structures and if it were not for the HMC would be all at sea. As it is there is little to justify regarding the bewildering diversity of Private archives as a coherent group. Among local authority archive services some are simply too small to be viable. Sometimes this is because of inappropriately small resources; sometimes it is because the area and population served is too small.

***Local government policies and structures*** may be a threat – and not just be the local authority services. County Record Offices may seem well established but the current culture of both regionalisation and community – based initiatives does not always fit easily with them. Archives are rarely – if ever – a stand-alone department with a chief officer. Most senior archivist are subsumed in much larger departments or divisions, and usually at local authority third or fourth tier level.

***Critical mass and local accountability*** may impact upon structural issues. There are moves in some communities to create voluntary ‘Community Archives’, and in some cases these have secured Lottery or District Council support. Such projects can be wholly beneficial, offering local access to a wide range of copy resources and complementing the work of professional institutions, but sometimes they have other agendas, usually related to a lack of trust in the independence or objectivity of the professional bodies, or a lack of faith (sometimes justified) in their ability to balance interests and meet the full range of service needs. There is an important tension between the need for an archive service to be close enough to the community it serves (whether geographical or not) to secure its trust and to be accountable; and the need for it to operate on a large enough scale to work efficiently and to command quality leadership and management.

***Regionalism and devolution*** in and will inevitably impact upon the UK archives domain, whether it is regional government or the regionalisation of government. The development of regional structures – not least of all by Resource – cannot be ignored. It offers both opportunities and threats to archives. Devolution has created a whole new set of lines of accountability and there is sometimes little clarity about how Whitehall now relates to the new Parliaments and Assemblies.
Support structures (for archives of all sorts and types) have until recently been very weak in the UK archives domain, traditionally relying heavily on professional societies and a great deal of voluntary self-help and support. But archives have not enjoyed the same level of regional support equivalent to that provided by the (now defunct) Area Museum Councils.

6 Structural changes: the case for developing service delivery and strategic support mechanisms

6.1 The National Archives

From April 2003 we will have a National Archives for England, with current responsibility for Welsh public records. Could this new body extend its remit in a way that would significantly reduce fragmentation - or the consequences of fragmentation – in the regions? Is there a role for Regional Agencies in supporting the national archive agendas? Similarly could (or should) the National Archives of Scotland and the Public Record of Northern Ireland exercise similar roles for their geographical remits? How should Resource define its role within this context?

Government interest is spread across a number of departments in different ways. This is the root of much of the fragmentation but it is also a strength in that it provides a “way in” to government at a number of different points. The creation of the National Archives maybe as much as can be expected in joined-up structures for the present. Perhaps focussing now on the local and regional structure might be where the ATF can have the greatest impact? However, there does seem to be a genuine opportunity now to explore how the new national structure in England might be connected to the regions at a time of emerging new regional structures. This period of significant change could create some form of national framework, perhaps underpinned by a National Archives Strategy (and building on the Government Policy on Archives Action Plan) which would bring together the National Archives, Resource and all other stakeholders.

6.2 Hubs: The classic (regional museum) model

One option is to explore a “hub” model for archives similar to that now being implemented for museums in the English regions. A hub may be a single institution or a small consortium of institutions which receive government investment (in addition to the core funding that they receive from their current governing bodies) in order to develop as centres or beacons of excellence within their region. This excellence will generally relate to them being sufficiently resourced and supported to provide leadership in professional practice and development within their region. This will include having sufficient capacity to provide practical services to other institutions within their region on an economic or subsidised basis. Typically they would map service needs and organise collaborative responses to common issues, problems and opportunities across the region. They work closely with regional agencies and Resource to maintain standards, attract investment into the sector, demonstrate the value of the sector and above all to provide quality services to customers. Hubs are at the heart of a network or framework of kindred institutions which work together from the base strength of their professional knowledge and understanding to improve services to present and future publics.

Would this model work for archives? Hubs might be good in that they would signal change and the need/willingness for radical reform and re-focusing of archives domain towards wider objectives and a more acknowledged importance in society. They could offer a basis on which to improve archive practice across the whole of the
archives domain within a region and to look at professional needs, issues (orphan collections etc) but the concept may not fit well with the historical development of archives in the regions – creating them may knock archives back (as one archivist has described to us) and a lot of energy may be dissipated on their creation. Success may depend upon levels of funding support, and these cannot be guaranteed in advance. Also, there are no – or very few – non-national archives which have a clear leading position to provide a basis for them.

6.3 The Hub alternative: creating centres of excellence

The hub concept depends on selecting centres in which to build excellence for the greater good of the whole domain. In the case of archives, however, there is probably a case for looking at both need and provision in a more diffused way. It is unlikely that in any given region individual service points will have the physical capacity to provide region-wide support across a whole series of service elements. There is, on the other hand, an argument for looking at the type of service needs that together make up an effective archive service and deciding how far they would benefit from demonstration of good practice and/or from practical support focused on centres of excellence for each service. Some of these are examined below:

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.

There is already ample evidence of a growing crisis in many of these key areas in the regions, 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

There may be scope for looking, in each region, for a centre for expertise in each of these areas 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 the "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.

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 a high level of regional determination as to which priorities to set.

The benefits of this approach would be:

- 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.

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).

6.4 Other strategic alliances and frameworks

Hubs are based on the assumption of domain institutions working in partnership with each other to improve the condition of the whole domain. There are at least two alternatives to this approach which retains the partnership and support principles but adopts a different configuration.

6.4.1 Regional networks

Rather than looking at institutional fragmentation and concluding that the answer is to bring together some leading archives into a hub in each region, one could instead – probably still on a regional basis – create funded networks which focus on key service functions or even key policy outcome areas. An example might be health archives (in the broadest sense).

From that starting point the concept could grow in more than one direction. Archives in the health sector could link into health records management. Or the jump could be made in the development of some rather exciting cross-domain links – health archives could be grouped with related health libraries and scientific and medical museums and university collections. This has the benefit of bringing together collections and information in a manner which emphasizes the user perspective, perception and use, and can help develop synergies and partnerships that can support capacity development. These networks would not necessarily need new structures, but could become part of the existing regional agency role. This approach is not inconsistent with the Centres of Excellence model outlined above. In identifying regional needs, a Regional Agency could conclude that one of these networks was the best way of achieving a specific goal.

6.4.2 Regional Archive Agencies

If the ATF’s objective is to propose a structure within which viable, stable, efficient services in the public sector are likely to be developed, (and from which smaller private services could gain advice, support and partnership), is an entirely new agency required? Do archives need the support of bodies, probably at regional level, that will have the provision and development of archive services as their first priority. These agencies need to have and share a clear strategic vision for archive services
in the UK and in their region, and to work to transform the existing services to play a full role in achieving that vision. That implies a close level of engagement with each publicly-funded service and its funding bodies. They might directly provide some services (e.g. regional electronic preservation and management services, film and sound archives) and co-ordinate the provision of other public services. As circumstances dictated, they might broker the merger of services; and the provision of co-operative facilities between services. If given a statutory status, they could play a role in setting funding targets for publicly-funded services. They could set and monitor standards for the management of archives in other publicly-funded institutions. They could support the work of the private and voluntary sector and help it to build partnerships with publicly-funded bodies. They could be a channel for new funding from central or regional government aimed at achieving these structural and service improvements.

Such regional archive development agencies could be constituted in several ways. They could be created by government; or established as regional directorates of the National Archives; they could be created by regional cultural consortia; their roles could be carried out by the Regional Agencies or they could be created as independent entities, perhaps based upon the existing Regional Archive Councils.

Unfortunately this approach seems to cut across Resource’s regional policy, and particularly its intention of funding only one (cross-domain) agency in each English region Nor does it take into account the situations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland where it may not be possible to address structural change in quite this way. Most of the functions described above are properly the remit of the Regional Agencies though the continued existence of Regional Archive Councils as focal points for collaborative effort on good archives practice in the archives domain is still very desirable at least in the short term.

6.4.3 Regional Archive Councils

What sort of a role might they have in the future? There is a strong case for ensuring that a forum – and the RACs are the obvious candidates – exists to act as a focus for archivists and users to meet and discuss professional issues and to advise the Regional Agency. Currently the RACs only have guaranteed support from Resource until March 2004, and many are in the process of evolving as policy advisory groups, or representative committees of regional archives. The ATF might wish to have a view on their future role.

6.4.4 Joint services

One solution to issues of critical mass and structural vulnerability maybe to encourage the further development of joint services: the bringing together of the archives of a number of governing bodes (usually local authorities) in a tight geographical area to deliver more efficient services. Existing joint services include those for Tyne and Wear and West Yorkshire; another one is currently being discussed in the Black Country. Joint services are inherently more fragile, however, and just creating a joint service will not solve all the problems without a stable structure for the service and adequate funding.

6.4.5 Independent trusts (for public services)

Much talked of in the museums and galleries domain (but little done) as a ‘solution’ to the shortcomings of local authority control. But, again, seems to only work if the new
trust is generously endowed at the outset. An inadequately funded trust is no better a stable structure.

7 Legislative change

The hub approach requires the voluntary creation of new structures and a strong push from the centre almost certainly supported by some significant injection of funding. An alternative approach would be to bring about change through legislative intervention. If we think that the key objectives are to strengthen the access and preservation functions of archives and archivists then the best way may actually be to take the view that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with the existing institutions and structures but they need greater powers to realize their aspirations. Creating a strong legislative framework for local archives services and records management could be the best change for securing a sustainable future.

The first is to make archives mandatory services within local authorities. A key reason to push for legislative status is the intangible benefit in alteration of attitude it brings in local authorities. This has already been experienced with regard to Freedom of Information legislation in the last two years. Records management (both paper and electronic records) and related activities are now being taken seriously in a way they were not two years ago. Conversely, there may be a down-side to legal status in terms of reduced access to lottery funding or sources such as Regional Development Agency resources. Local authorities and universities have proved themselves inadequate guardians of our archival heritage, largely because their core functions are about other things; Archives rarely hold centre-stage for very long. If these bodies are to retain the responsibility for providing archive services, local authority and university archives urgently need statutory protection that effectively bolsters their stability. The second is to create a framework for records management (most countries have this sort of legislation) and the third is to extend framework to all public authorities.

There are already moves underway to bring forward new archival legislation to strengthen the position of the national archives and to develop a framework for local authorities to discharge effectively their record keeping responsibilities. The HMC and PRO come together as the National Archives in April 2003, in advance of the enabling legislation. The second big issue is electronic records. The current legislation (Public Records Act) does not adequately deal with e-records, because there is an assumption in the Act that a record is a tangible object. Both these issues give a sound reason for new legislation, to which could be attached three other objectives.

Other legislation affecting access to information, civil registration, court records and legal deposit of information may all have (unintended) consequences for archives and records management. It is also possible that successful legislation might strengthen support for the kind of structure set out in the centres of excellence approach.

Legislation could be introduced which forced the deposit of records/archives in certain well-funded places. Given the pressures on legislative time, this seems an unrealistic goal, but what could be explored further is the creation of tax incentives or other benefits to encourage the passing over of archives to appropriate and accessible repositories. Similarly, society could offer incentives to those who behave in a public-spirited way by giving or depositing their records to public institutions, or by looking after them themselves, in accordance with reasonable standards for access and preservation.
The ATF may feel that greater might be a more fruitful way of improving the capacity of archives to deliver services. Further this legislative agenda has already been conceived and is being developed by the Public Record Office. The ATF has only to strongly support the work that is already being done.

8 Hybrid solutions

None of the above are necessarily mutually exclusive. If the ATF wishes to seek ‘solutions’ to the structural problems of the UK archives domain then it may well wish to select ‘solutions’ that seem to have the greatest chance of success and to deliver the greatest benefits in the short-term and the long-term, and particularly with users in mind. The greatest need may be at local and regional level. It is suggested that the ATF’s objective should be to propose a regional structure within which viable, stable, efficient services in the public sector are likely to be developed, from which smaller private services could gain advice, support and partnership.

Local authorities and universities have proved themselves inadequate guardians of our archival heritage, largely because their core functions are about other things; Archives rarely hold centre-stage for very long. If these bodies are to retain the responsibility for providing archive services (and I do not under-estimate the difficulty of disentangling them), local authority and university archives urgently need statutory protection that effectively bolsters their stability. Archives also need the support of bodies, probably at regional level, that will have the provision and development of archive services as their first priority. These agencies need to have and share a clear strategic vision for archive services in the UK and in their region, and to work to transform the existing services to play a full role in achieving that vision. That implies a close level of engagement with each publicly-funded service and its funding bodies. They might directly provide some services (e.g. regional electronic preservation and management services, film and sound archives) and co-ordinate the provision of other public services. As circumstances dictated, they might broker the merger of services; and the provision of co-operative facilities between services. If given a statutory status, they could play a role in setting funding targets for publicly-funded services. They could set and monitor standards for the management of archives in other publicly-funded institutions. They could support the work of the private and voluntary sector and help it to build partnerships with publicly-funded bodies. They could be a channel for new funding from central or regional government aimed at achieving these structural and service improvements.

9 How important is structural change to the archives domain?

Sustainability and stability are key, and if these can be achieved through structural change, then change is essential. Many feel that we need to strengthen the resilience of the public archive network, so that it is more stable, more independent of external influence, better able to work in partnership where appropriate, and able to respond to the challenges which face archives today (e.g. electronic records, digitisation, backlogs, expanding technical conservation possibilities). An archive is for ever, not just for the next five years. Public sector archives take on collections in perpetuity by gift and deposit, and the public expectation is that they will continue to discharge their responsibilities. The record of the past in this respect is good; many institutions founded in the 1930s and 1940s continue to care for collections received then, in some cases despite radical change in their governing institutions. But increasing pressures may make this unsustainable.

Are existing structures strong enough to build on? The national archives and local authority archive services possibly. Is the remaining archives domain just too
fragmented to be an adequate foundation for reform, growth and development? Is the answer to tie them together not in a controversial hub structure but through a network approach building on existing structures – notably the regional agency? If that is possible – can we see a real role for the Regional Archives Councils – do they effectively become hub organisations given constitutions and modus operandi which ensure they are able to focus on what is important?

Are the issues concerning structures insurmountable in the current funding and political climate? Should we just forget about structures and focus on advocacy, electronic access and serving users?

Is there a feasible structural solution at all? Should the ATF be thinking of ways to work with the reality of fragmentation rather than trying to rationalise the way the domain has historically 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.

**Resource**

January 2003
Appendix One
This diagram shows the main departments, agencies and relationships that shape and influence United Kingdom archives.

**CENTRAL GOVERNMENT**
- Dept for Culture, Media & Sport
- Dept for Education & Skills
- Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
- Public Record Office
- Lord Chancellor’s Dept
- National Archives (HMC & PRO)
  - Resource

**INTEREST GROUPS**
- Society of Genealogists
- Local History societies
- Family History Society
- Friends Associations
- Volunteer groups
- Business Archives Councils
- British Records Association

**DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATIONS**
- National Assembly Wales
- Archives Council Wales
- Welsh County Archivists Group
- Public Record Office of Northern Ireland
- Northern Ireland Executive
- National Archives of Scotland
- Scottish Executive
- Scottish Council on Archives

**PROFESSIONAL BODIES**
- National Council on Archives
- Society of Archivists
- Association of Chief Archivists in Local Govt

**ARCHIVE TRAINING SCHOOLS**
- Liverpool University
- University College London
- University of Wales Aberystwyth
- University of Northumbria

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT**
- Local Agencies
  - Local Education Authority
  - Museum and Heritage Services
- Library Services

**REGIONAL STRUCTURES**
- Regional Archive Councils
- Area Museum Councils
- Regional Library Systems
- Regional Chamber/Assembly
- Regional Development Agency
- Regional Cultural Consortiums
- Resource regional agencies