Executive summary

These are the key themes and issues that Resource has identified as crucial to the investigation and deliberation of the Archives Task Force. The themes have been revised following discussion at the first ATF meeting.

### DEFINING THE ARCHIVES DOMAIN

#### Users
- Who uses archives, and who are potential users?
- What is the role of archives and records management? What are the parameters of the archives domain – where are archives? Who holds them?

### WHAT ARCHIVES CAN DELIVER

#### Digital records and archives
- Addressing the electronic records management deficit
- Securing the future of and preserving tomorrow's digital archives

#### Learning and Access
- Using archives as pathways to the past, delivering on-line life-long learning opportunities
- Mapping of collections – creating the National Electronic Archival Network so that all collections are mapped for users

### IMPROVING AND SUPPORTING SERVICE DELIVERY

#### National Archive Service – opportunities for archives and records management
- Developing the National Archives and a national archives infrastructure

#### Regionalism and the devolved nations
- Opportunities for national, regional and local partnerships to achieve critical mass and address sustainability issues

#### Training and development
- Recruit, retain and lead – developing the archives and records management workforce

#### Profile Raising and Perceptions
- What do archives and records management mean to society at large?
- Maximising and broadening use and appeal of archives
- Demonstrating worth and relevance
- Re-positioning archives in the national public and political consciousness

#### Funding the future
- Plurality of funding opportunities across Government
- Developing innovative partnerships and cross-domain working
- Funding approaches for different parts of the archives domain
- Mapping of funding needs What evidence and data is needed to profile the whole sector?
Archives in the Twenty-First Century: issues

Abstract

Archives provide the bedrock for our understanding of the past, showing us - and future generations - how we came to be what we are as a nation, a community or an individual. They are a window into the experiences that shaped their lives of our forebears. They are a national asset of manuscripts, books, photographs, maps, plans, sound and moving images, and digital records which constitute the primary record of our past, the very essence of our heritage. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport has asked Resource to undertake a close and detailed investigation of UK archives, demonstrating how this unrivalled but often neglected national legacy can be turned more fully to advantage as a rich learning resource accessible to all, a means of reinforcing our sense of local and national community and the nation's personal, corporate and public memory.

1 Archives: background
2 Context of the Archives Task Force investigation
3 Perceptions of archives
4 Audiences and impact
5 Issues to be addressed

1 Archives: background

Archives: what they are

Archives are the records generated by a family, an individual, a business or an institution in the course of its daily activities. Archives are found anywhere where activity has had to be recorded in some way. In the UK, archives are held in a wide range of over 2,000 locations. At the top are the national state archives - the Public Record Office in Kew (holding archives of England and Wales), the National Archives of Scotland, and the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland. Locally, archives are preserved and made available through local authority funded county and metropolitan record offices and archives services. These archives hold over 30,000 m³ of material. The education sector, (universities, colleges, schools and other learning establishments), holds significant archive collections. The national museums and galleries, and the network of regional museums hold a wealth of archive and manuscript material, as do the British Library and libraries across the UK. In addition to these discrete sectors, archive collections are held by charities, historic houses, hospitals and other medical and scientific organisations, professional bodies and learned institutions, religious institutions, and moving image and sound archives. It is evident that the archives domain is made up of a great number of sub domains which have distinct and separate characteristics.

The world of archives is also much wider than just the cultural or heritage dimension. Many businesses\(^2\) and central government agencies\(^3\) employ archivists and records managers, and there are over 2000 members of the Records Management Society. Throughout the UK, in private businesses and public authorities, archivists and records managers are playing a key role in the effective and efficient conduct of business transactions and the management of information. Implementing records management and knowledge management programmes, they are ensuring legal compliance and public accountability. These activities make sound fiscal sense, delivering efficiency savings and generating public relations and promotional benefits.

The question arises as to whether the whole of this complex picture can be adequately described and a logical case made which encompasses all the activities embraced within the archives and records management domain. It is a very ambitious agenda and the Archives Task Force will have to consider carefully its approach.

**Archives are important and relevant**

They do matter to people! It is one of the defining features of a civilised society that it should lay down as complete and accurate an account as it can of the history of its decisions and fortunes\(^4\). How else can we learn the lessons of history, and the citizen call to account those entrusted with our votes, our taxes and our confidence? How else can the willful rewriting of history be prevented if society is not careful to preserve the evidence intact and free from interference? Archives and information, when effectively managed, can underpin citizen’s rights and assert identities.

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\(^2\) There are currently over 400 UK members of the Business Archives Council.

\(^3\) There are currently 230 Departmental Record Officers employed in central government departments and agencies.

\(^4\) “Only the passage of time can filter out the ephemeral from the enduring. And what endure are the characteristics that mark our identity as a nation and the timeless values that guide us. These values find expression in our national institutions…institutions which in turn must continue to evolve if they are to provide effective beacons of trust and unity to succeeding generations” HM Queen, April 2001
Why archives are important - 1

Through the acquisition of records of the National Union of Mineworkers, Derbyshire Record Office has been able to support former pitmen making compensation claims for industrial diseases – “It is fair to say that they have helped our ex-members to win hundreds of thousand of pounds” (General Secretary Derbyshire NUM).

For example, each citizen becomes exposed when the records of taxes paid or pension payments or professional attainments or criminal activity are not safely kept without interference or doctoring. Society is built upon a huge measure of trust and assurance that this will be done. Failure will bring distrust between the public and the politicians who speak for and in turn depend upon them. The raft of information policy provisions, such as Freedom of Information and Data Protection represent covenants between government and the citizen that individual privacy will be safeguarded and that, conversely there will be a guaranteed right to know what the powers-that-be are doing and saying, ostensibly on his or her behalf.

Why archives are important - 2

London Metropolitan Archives holds 160,000 adoption case files for the London area and has developed a joint access service with its Social Services Department for enquirers. These files are fundamental to a person’s understanding of their identity.

Arguments can be advanced that expenditure from the public purse on archives is well spent in the defence of a citizen’s own interests and of those of his children and grandchildren. The Archives Task Force should consider what needs to be done to ensure that archives fulfil these hard-won roles effectively now and for future generations.

Investment in archives

Archives are a part of the national and local heritage in which a very considerable investment of time, energy and resource has been made over decades. In 2000-2001, annual expenditure on local authority archive services\(^5\), was just under £40 million. The annual operating cost of the Public Record Office in 2000-2001 was £30 million.

\(^5\) source: Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy Archive Services Statistics, 2000-2001 estimates
Significant investment has been made over the last 50 years by central and local government, the higher education sector, charities and lottery funding bodies, businesses and private individuals. It is already a huge and often unsung achievement that in a matter of half a century, much of the nation's memory has been placed into safe hands in perpetuity, accessible to the public. The task now must surely be to reap the harvest of that investment, to “maximise the return”, and ensure that further sustainable investment is made to ensure that this legacy fulfils its potential for the population at large.

2 Context of the Archives Task Force investigations

Audience for the Archives Task Force report

The Archives Task Force has been asked to report to government. One of the commonly cited reasons for the failure of archives to grab the national public and corporate attention is a perceived lack of central government responsibility or policy direction for the archives domain. The Archives Task Force report can articulate to government archive roles and policy. The creation of Resource has given archives (for the first time) a collective voice at a strategic policy level, and government now has a mechanism for that voice to be heard loudly and boldly. Key stakeholders of the report include local government, funding agencies, users, and the higher education sector. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport, as the parent body for Resource is the obvious point of Government to commission and receive such a report on archives, and Resource, with its experience of advocacy and sound evidence-based policy development is appropriate to deliver that report through the task force.

Machinery of government changes

The Government’s decision to create the National Archives Service by bringing together the Historical Manuscripts Commission and the Public Record Office offers a significant new opportunity for archives. Clearly encompassed within the remit of the Lord Chancellor’s Department as the lead agency in terms of financial commitment for archives, the National Archives Service will take the lead in setting archive policy objectives and establishing archive standards.

Other departments have archival responsibilities. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport has responsibilities for archives through its sponsorship of Resource, and

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6 source: Unlocking the past, securing the future, Annual report of the Keeper of Public Records, 2001-2002
through its responsibilities for archives in national museums, galleries and libraries, performing and creative arts, and the public library network. Through the Department for Education and Skills, archives can play a valuable role as content providers for the wide learning and education agenda, and the department has responsibilities for archives and records management as employment sectors. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has responsibility, (through local government) for local authority archive services. The Cabinet Office, Office of the E-envoy, Office of the Information Commissioner, and British Library all have responsibilities for elements of the broad archival agenda. The Welsh Assembly Government, Scottish Assembly and governance mechanisms for Northern Ireland all encompass some measure of responsibility for archives and records management.

The legislative framework
The underlying legislative framework for the UK archive domain is weak and permissive. A strong statutory framework does not yet exist. Current legislation does not direct activity, provide definitions of service or any system of compliance to standards. Against this background, the present government has introduced a suite of new information policy legislation, primarily in the form of the Data Protection Act 1998 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000. Both acts have significant implications for “public authorities”, in terms of responsibilities for effective records keeping supporting public rights of access to information.

In March 2001, the Public Record Office won approval in principle from the Lord Chancellor to start the initial stages of defining new archival legislation. A cross-departmental scoping group has just begun work to assess the perceived need. Assuming cross-government support can be obtained an extensive public consultation phase would follow. New legislation is required because electronic record-keeping has put a strain on existing legislation that is not adequate; there is no existing provision or incentive at regional or local level for proper records management processes; existing archival legislation does not support new information legislation. New legislation which may be enacted by 2005 might cover the long-term management of electronic or digital material whether centrally or locally created and held, the standardisation of records management across all relevant organisations; the provision of a cradle to grave management framework; bringing regional and local public authorities within the scope of national legislation, and establish the position of a National Archivist.
The likely success of any new archival legislation will depend upon the ability of the domain to prove two things to government. Firstly, that it will not produce an additional resource burden and secondly that it will not produce a creep in centralisation. There is an assumption that legislation will necessarily result in stronger infrastructure. This needs testing and here the experiences of the library and museums domains could provide interesting comparisons given that the former benefits from a statutory framework and assessed standards and the latter has no statutory basis outside the acts that provide for the national museums. Archivists and records managers will need to be clear as to the objectives of new legislation and the enabling effect will be crucial – to whom will responsibilities be given, and what will it mean for the delivery of services at grass roots? The chance to make the most of this powerful opportunity lies in the strength of the sector to respond and its capacity to implement, manage and discharge any responsibilities which it confers.

**The Government’s regional agenda**

The government’s recently published White Paper makes explicit for the first time a commitment to the principle of elected regional assemblies subject to referenda, in the English regions. Legislation is promised as soon as time allows, which would pave the way for the first of any referenda within the lifetime of this parliament. The North East, or the South West might be amongst the first of the regions to establish such an assembly in 2007. Archival bodies would not be directly affected by proposed changes; however, despite the fact that the White Paper envisages the elected regional assemblies assuming responsibility only for functions which are presently carried out by government (and its quangos in the regions), it does raise the prospect of a review of local government structures in those regions that vote for elected regional assemblies. The link between elected regional assemblies and local government reform could result in the abolition of county councils in England, especially if we consider the difference in political colours between them and the current government. This would have far-reaching implications for County Record Offices, which are generally viewed as the backbone of the public archive services in England. Major structural upheaval (following a period of local government re-organisation over the last decade) would not just affect individual services but the ability of the domain as a whole to modernise. The archives domain has clearly demonstrated that it is able to rise to the challenge of regionalism, and is reaping the benefits of partnership and collaboration. Regional Archive Councils are the voice of the archives domain, and are developing new partnerships with the regional cultural agencies that have been established by Resource.
The challenges of technology
There have been some significant steps towards the development of a national electronic archival network to unlock the hidden heritage of knowledge about our past. Public demand for such access resources is immense – the Public Record Office experienced a demand of 1.2 million users per hour when it launched the 1901 Census on-line at the start of 2002. The Public Record Office-led Access to Archives programme has resulted in the development of innovative regional partnerships to make available archive catalogue information on the web. The Higher Education Hub, and the London AIM 25 project have achieved similar results. Although the circle of comprehensive archive information on-line is almost one quarter complete, the pace of technological development continues to outstrip the capacity of archive services to harness the benefits. Projects such as the People’s Network, with large scale public investment in ICT hardware, training and content creation have raised expectations and successfully demonstrated what can be achieved but have also raised crucial issues of sustainability.

A major area of concern for all who create, manage and rely on accurate information is the technological revolution which has swept across all areas of our lives, both public and private. Archivists, records managers and information professionals are being tasked with developing solutions to the management and preservation of the immense wealth of information which is being created, stored and accessed entirely electronically, for example in e-mail and electronic filing systems. Their capacity to embrace this huge agenda needs sustaining through investment in training, development and infrastructure to address the growing electronic records deficit.

Partnerships and cross-domain working
Strong partnerships and cross-domain working are crucial to future success, particularly for the archives domain where there are many small units which lack critical mass. The models of working developed by Resource through its regional agenda and plans to create regional hubs for museums demonstrate what can and could be achieved. Set against these larger museums and library players, archives will need to consider how best they are placed to nurture, foster and contribute to such new relationships. This will be as much about practical contributions as changing hearts and minds and thinking outside cultural silos.
3 Perceptions of archives

No review of the position of archives in the UK should ignore the issue of public perception. Despite the issues of citizen’s rights, community identity and life-long learning potential which are wrapped up in them, archives fail to attract widespread interest as an element of the UK heritage. Why should it be, for example, that the threat to a gallery of contemporary art or the demolition of a mediaeval cottage evoke so much more heated an exchange than the mothballing of an archive service or the loss by flooding of the archive of a 19th-century industrial undertaking once crucial to its area? Why does not the subject of archives seem to find a ready home in the public consciousness or imagination?

There are a number of reasons why archives have not caught the public imagination in the same way as other parts of our cultural heritage. Archives evoke less concern because they are hidden, fewer people think they are directly affected by their well-being, and the value and importance of archives has usually been poorly communicated to the world at large and those not familiar with them. They do not have snob-appeal. They are not easy to imagine in an aesthetically pleasing or visually exciting way - archives are essentially textual (although this is not the complete truth – consider moving image and sound material). Textual material has to be interpreted through an intellectual effort to make it live. It is cerebral, and cerebral is not what captures the public imagination at large in the early 21st century – art and architecture are simply easier to imagine and we all respond to a picture more than to words. Furthermore, concepts of archives are abstract – they are about citizen’s rights, societal responsibilities, heritage worth. They do not have the immediacy of an abused child, a homeless elderly person, a burning house.

4 Audiences and impact

There are at present about one million visits a year across England to local authority archive services. Statistics of archive use indicate clearly that the current user base is narrow for direct on site visits - 77% of all archive visitors are aged 45 and older, 0.4% under 16 years of age, only 2% having non-white ethnicity. Increasingly, people are coming to archives through remote access routes - over 50% of users have internet access, and 15% use archives services in advance of on-site visits. The public consumes archive-based resources in many forms, and the secondary use of archives, through publication and the media cannot be underestimated.

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7 source: Public Services Quality Group Survey of Visitors to British Archives, 1999
8 source: Public Services Quality Group Survey of Visitors to British Archives, 1999
Archives are attracting new users, but services are rapidly reaching a point where public expectation and demand are outstripping capacity.

Archives can be used to support and strengthen community and personal identity. Archives have an immediacy and power of belonging to and representing a particular place – having a strong local impact. In the West Midlands in 1998, a MORI survey conducted for Birmingham City Council showed that one third of a random selection of citizens were strongly interested in local history. Archives clearly have the potential to support wide ranging public and social agendas of inclusivity, community and citizenship and the impact, given appropriate investment and shift in perceptions.

5 Issues to be addressed

Raising Profile
The Archives Task Force clearly has a remit to raise the profile of archives but we need to be clear as why we are doing this and for what benefit – for users, potential users and practitioners archive profile. Are we seeking to re-position archives in the national, political and public consciousness? If so what is the potential and capacity of archives to rise to this challenge, and what is needed to secure this new position?

Demonstrating Worth
Archives are a valuable national asset which has hitherto been undervalued and under-resourced. How should the Archives Task Force demonstrate the worth and relevance of this distributed national collection to the nation at large?

Modernising the Archives World
The pattern of archival provision in the UK has developed piecemeal over the last century. In England, and Wales, local authority archives services developed in a highly individual manner at the behest of local authorities, with no central plan or strategic direction. Local government re-organisation has fragmented this picture further. In Scotland, local authority archive services are a comparatively recent addition to the archive scene. Relationships between national, regional and local institutions have been informal and usually project-based. Links between archive institutions, in particular the higher education sector have traditionally been poor. The task force is invited to consider this network of service provision and what steps can be taken to maximise potential and opportunities for the distributed national archives.
Core to this debate is the issue of training and development. What are the skills required of the archive and information management workforce? How can those skills best be acquired and developed? Who are the archive professionals of the future? There is a need here to consider traditional archive skills of stewardship (conservation and preservation) and description, and skills of communication, interpretation, and the management and preservation of digital records. Leadership and management skills are essential to the health of the archives domain.

The Electronic World

How have archives changed in the digital age and what does this mean for the public and for government and, thus, in turn for the archives and records management community? The consequences of these changes are profound, and are happening now! There is the challenge for archivists to select for the future electronic archive, to describing records and to preserve them in whatever format, and then make them accessible. There is the parallel challenge to archivists to harness technology to increase access through digitisation of archive content and to make publicly available information about archive collections. New media is opening up fantastic opportunities to interpret archive collections to all and to engage new audiences.

Creating the national archives

The National Archive Service, together with the possibilities afforded by new archive legislation offer opportunities for partnerships and leadership for the archive domain. How can the diverse archives sectors described in this paper be brought together to serve the needs of the wider community and deliver the benefits locked up in the distributed national archive collection?

Embedding archives in the government agenda

The modernising government agenda, in archival terms, means a drive to drive to improve the effectiveness of the government’s business, including policy making, which in archival terms means the rapid deployment of ICT to deliver electronic record creation and access within government9. All government departments, agencies and bodies are tasked with delivering these objectives, and archivists and

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9 The Cabinet Office required all government departments to produce e-business strategies by the end of October 2000. The e-world agenda as summarised by the White Paper Modernising Government (cm 4310), 2000, emphasises the government's view that, 'There is no new economy. There is only one economy, all of it being transformed by information technology. What is happening is no dot com fad which will come and go - it is a profound economic revolution.' For the public this revolution means that 'by 2005 all services should be available electronically' and for records managers/archivists, 'by 2004 all newly created public records will be electronically stored and retrieved.'
records managers should be leading on these ambitious agendas.

Archives clearly have a key role to play in the achievement of information policy objectives, such as freedom of information and access and accountability. How can these responsibilities best be discharged and co-ordinated across the sector? How can archives contribute to the delivery of the wider raft of government policy objectives such as combating social exclusion, supporting learning, neighbourhood renewal, and citizenship?

The Archives Task Force is an opportunity to develop an imaginative but achievable blueprint for archive and records management development across the UK. This opportunity will not come again and Resource is determined to make the most of that opportunity.

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Strategy and Planning Team,
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