

Resource: Archives Task Force

Response to public consultation

from

The Joint Public Affairs Committee, convened by the United Kingdom Institute for Conservation¹

UKIC and its sister organisations in the conservation community welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation. Since we collectively represent a profession (including archive specialists) and a cross-sector domain rather than an archive institution, the 'Emerging Viewpoints' questions listed in the consultation papers cannot, in most cases be answered directly. We do have views on the direction of the Task Force and would like these be taken into consideration as a part of the wider consultation.

The aims of the Task Force's work, as set out in the key points quoted below, are all warmly supported and provide a framework for our views.

1. *Existing users of archives will have access to improved services*
 - 1.1 This is very important and we very much welcome the service standard focus. At the very least the Task Force work should cause a measure of improvement in the overall level of service standards, since they vary so widely in this domain.
 - 1.2 When considering service levels, we should not lose sight of the fact that 'users' of archives include many private, corporate and public depositors of archives, not only the people who come to an archive to look at the records. Archives exist not only as heritage education venues but also as 'safety deposit vaults' for the long-term protection of valuable public and private assets. For example, the statutory role of local government archives is explicitly to protect and maintain original records of the authorities' own governance and operations. Local people have a right to expect that the level of service provided by this public records protection function is high enough at the very least to ensure the records survive in an accessible state (see also 4.2 below). Private depositors give their own records into the care of an archive on the understanding that the records will be perpetuated as well as exploited.
 - 1.3 People who come to use the records have an equally legitimate right to expect that information will be accessible. The means to find out what is in an archive and the means to have that information produced in a comprehensible form must exist in order that people can begin to make the most of it. Un-catalogued collections deny people access. Collections that remain only in their original format, with no accessible copy formats and no interpretation can be next to useless. Since this state of affairs is the case for a majority of archived records, service levels must be improved.

¹ The Joint Public Affairs Committee consists of representatives of the National Council for Conservation-Restoration (which includes the Society of Archivists) and is led by UKIC with the Institute of Paper Conservation and the Scottish Society for Conservation & Restoration. JPAC exists to act a focus for the conservation professional community in responding to public consultations.

- 1.4 A high-standard level of service includes maintaining the full range of professional competences contributing to all aspects of the service delivery. This includes involving conservators at all levels of a service's operation, where it is large enough support the full range. Poor quality collections-care standards are regularly the consequence of viewing conservation as a narrow 'document repair' role and failing to understand the benefits that a professional conservator (particularly an accredited conservator) can make to the quality of all aspects of archive service delivery.
- 1.5 Users expect to be provided with informed guidance on how to access original material without putting it at risk. Conservators are the most competent to provide this guidance, directly, and indirectly via other archive staff, and the absence of their contribution often leads to loss of information to future users.
- 1.6 The knowledge that conservators maintain about the nature and production of items is invaluable and is not duplicated at such depth within the expertise of any other archive staff except in the most exceptional circumstances and usually only for a narrow special interest. The breadth and depth of information held by conservators provides insights and perspectives that users universally enjoy and value in all domains. A good archive service is one that recognises how much its users value this information and by providing access to this knowledge ensures that they have the opportunity to gain the most from their access.
- 1.7 All people generate records and most have their own material of varying ages and significance. Archive offices are continually approached for information from the public about how they should care for their records. A high standard service is one that responds positively to this user demand by providing competent sources of advice. A professional conservator's very purpose is to be responsible for providing such advice and this needs to be acknowledged and promoted if service standards are to be improved.
- 1.8 To cause a step change in service standards it will be essential to garner support for better protective care, for more and better documentation and information support and for all forms of accessible copying and access guidance. These areas of concern have so far been relegated by Resource to a second or third level of priority, under rather muddled thinking called 'Stewardship'. Amongst other weaknesses, the Stewardship strategy (which remains incomplete and largely unpublished) does not acknowledge the fundamental contribution made by the conservation profession in delivering high standard archive, library and museum services. We will lend our weight to any efforts made by the Task Force to make a change in this area.
2. *New users can explore a new world of information resources*
 - 2.1 The intention here is not entirely clear. We certainly welcome the idea that records and other archival material should be available in modern media, if this is what is meant by 'new worlds of information resources'.
 - 2.2 It may also be intended to mean that more people will be encouraged to use archives as information sources and that the world into which these sources give insight will be brought to the attention of members of the public who are currently unaware of their potential. This greater awareness we also support, particularly as it invariably brings

with it the view, widely held by the public, that its heritage should be properly cared for. Reaching out to new people always brings with it a greater expectation from the public that the services revealed can be sustained. We would sound only a small note of caution then, that wider audiences bring greater pressure to currently under-funded services, so it will be critically important to manage the potential growth in interest such that expectations can be met effectively and sustainably.

3. *The archives, museums, libraries sector and other cultural organisations will have shared knowledge and expertise to develop effective ways of looking after collections*
- 3.1 We strongly support this aim, not least because much of that knowledge is already shared across domains. The critical mass of knowledge and expertise referred to resides in the UK's conservation professionals and is widely shared through our bodies' operations. We will warmly welcome greater support for this and we look forward to helping to develop the initiatives that the Task Force recommends.
- 3.2 We doubt that these initiatives can be delivered directly by any existing government agency. The archives domain of the "2000 locations" cited by the Resource leaflet undoubtedly covers the whole of the UK and this breadth is represented in the Task Force. No existing government agency has a remit of such breadth. Bodies such as our own collective (including The Conservation Register) and the National Preservation Office, cover the whole of the UK and Ireland. It may not be helpful or efficient for Resource, which has no remit in Scotland and Northern Ireland and none for the wider heritage care world, to attempt to deliver such a mechanism for only England and Wales. We acknowledge in particular the useful strategic and support roles played by the NPO in the past for libraries and archives and would like to see achievements of this sort exploited and enhanced, preferably in an independent environment.
- 3.3 We would support an initiative to have a single collections care focus for all three domains and across the UK in particular. Most of the knowledge and expertise for looking after heritage materials is common to the three domains. Our bodies already provide such support in specific functions, for example we manage The Conservation Register, the cross-sectoral public advice and referral service originally operated by the Museums & Galleries Commission. We urge the Task Force to recommend that Resource uses its strategic advocacy role to bring together bodies with collections care roles to plan a single focus in support of the sectors' archives, libraries and museums.
- 3.4 Resource in particular should have the confidence of its earlier MLAC conviction that looking after collections is not a direct function within its remit but rather one that it and other agencies should support with advocacy and project assistance. We are the focus of this professional expertise and we already carry out conservation functions previously undertaken by the MGC. By working closely with us, a single office supporting the collections care needs of the sector would meet some of the aims of this Task Force and others. Such collaboration would represent a genuine opportunity for 'Partnerships for Success', as described in your questionnaire.

4. *Government and funding agencies will be provided with a detailed picture and analysis of archive priorities based on sound user and professional evidence*
- 4.1 This information will be invaluable and is long overdue. We hope that we can help to build this picture and that there remains an opportunity to do so. Undoubtedly the Emerging Viewpoints questionnaire is a useful start by gathering opinions of leaders of archive institutions. It will be necessary to do more than this however and we look forward to hearing how the Task Force has or will set about gathering further statistics and identifying key indicators to help define the priorities. Our professional community can provide important information about those aspects that involve caring for collections and we are always ready to assist.
- 4.2 In seeking information relating to the public's support for the care of archive collections, the Task Force may find it helpful to review the Resource research report published in December 2001 (LIC 107 Valuing Our Recorded Heritage).
5. **Training & Skills** - Finally we should make some response to your questions about workforce development, particularly that involving conservation professionals, and with reference to the discussion documents produced on the subject.
- 5.1 We agree with your statement that 'a strongly motivated and appropriately trained workforce is essential'. The archives world is especially notable for having, in the past, viewed the role of conservators as a narrow one. We in the conservation community have for a long time understood that our role is much broader than simply repairing things and have, to a degree, persuaded some in the archive domain that this is so. However, change can take a long time and developments in parts of the museum world, where this narrow view has also been found, have caused fundamental failures by authorities to recognise the importance of maintaining some conservation professional expertise in all aspects of a service.
- 5.2 The notion that the conservation workforce can easily be bought-in as an extra is not, in itself wrong, but it is made on the assumption that this will save money over in-house collections care. This assumption is badly flawed, since the skills and contributions made by a fully rounded conservator are much broader than simply undertaking surveys and repair projects. Buying in all the many aspects of their professional competence would be considerably more expensive than maintaining in-house expertise. We support greater use of commercial practices (80% of our collective membership works in the private sector) but not where the affect and even the intent is to reduce the amount of attention paid to caring for the collections.
- 5.3 A new approach to training and development would include acknowledgement of the broad contribution that professional conservators make to the long-term viability of archive institutions. Archive directors should be encouraged to include these people in their longer-term staff development plans as future managers and leaders, so that high standard archive services can be sustained. Conservators as well as archivists have a fundamental role to play in managing and sustaining an effective archive domain and providing competent public services. We continue to foster development of this role from within the profession and urge the Task Force to support us and not to risk perpetuating narrow or exclusive workforce models in the archives domain.

- 5.4 Most public institutions with conservation facilities play a part in training future generations of professionals. To risk losing these facilities in favour of buying free-lance services alone would be a grave misjudgement. The supply of properly trained free-lance conservators, particularly in certain conservation disciplines, relies to a great extent on institutional services that are large enough to support training and professional development. We are lobbying to persuade agencies to help us to strengthen the conservation training arena, weakened after a trend away from direct conservation provision in the museums and the wider heritage domain. Unless and until we are successful in getting agencies to acknowledge the long term affects of this trend on the UK skills base and to assist in setting up an alternative structure involving support for training within small businesses, the loss of institutional practices will cause the supply of trained free-lances to dwindle. This in turn will make it harder and harder for institutions to find skilled conservators, particularly for short-term projects, a situation that has already become acute in the archives and libraries domains.
- 5.5 An important feature of the role of a conservator is providing training to those around her/him in managing and caring for collections and to the user when accessing material. When considering what training should be present for archive employees and volunteers and how it might be delivered, we urge the Task Force to acknowledge and make the best use of this important resource. It should be remembered that about 1,850 of the 2,000 UK archives do not have professional conservation staff. The many other staff employed by these 1,850 archives cannot be expected to care for collections effectively without training, guidance and support from the conservation community. Since the same can be said for the other heritage domains, we must all try to be 'joined-up' in our thinking if we are going to identify how such training can be delivered efficiently. This doesn't only mean a web-based advice portal for example, but the opportunity to develop a calendar of training events. This might helpfully start by vigorous support and training opportunities for using the Benchmarks for Collections Care standards and others that become embedded in the sector's standards-raising culture, such as for the extended Designation Scheme. We in the conservation community have the people, expertise and the networks to deliver training to meet care standards and would welcome any partnership opportunity to do so.
- 5.6 Given the views expressed above, it will not come as a surprise to learn of our disappointment at the lack of any conservation contribution in the working party discussing training and skills in the archives domain. The focus in its discussion and subsequent documents concentrates largely on the training of archivists and yet is strangely contrasted by periodic reference to the difficulties in recruiting conservators, as if the one will solve the other. It is not clear how this limited focus has occurred; it may be that we have failed to take up an opportunity offered earlier in the consultation period. If there is a further opportunity for the Task Force to have a conservation perspective in these considerations, or when a suitable opportunity arises in developing the Task Force's recommendations, we hope it will not be missed. We have a lot to offer, particularly on the subject of post-qualification assessment and CPD.
- 5.7 In Discussion Document 6a for example, a possible framework is set out, with different levels of training and development, particularly for the different staff within archive organisations. This structure is hampered by an obvious lack of knowledge of the scope and level of existing training of conservators generally and the trend in the archive domain specifically. Currently, the majority of conservators enter the profession at

graduate or post-graduate level. These individuals are not looking for low-level work of a routine support nature but rather expect to play a full part in the running and strategic development of a service. The older generation of conservators in the archive domain has not often been expected to take on such a significant and responsible role and so the levels of education and training demanded by employers has been low. To restrict the archives domain to this low level of contribution by conservators for the indefinite future would deprive the domain of some of the vital development it needs: post-graduate conservators will not want to enter the archives domain. It would also further isolate an existing group individuals often perceived as behind their peers in other domains. The aim of the Task Force, to develop an appropriately trained and strongly motivated workforce, would not be met.

- 5.8 Leadership skills are correctly highlighted in the discussion document as important to the development of the domain. These along with management skills are largely generic and need not be focussed simply on one profession (and this applies to all the domains). The core skills being taught to archivists as their first steps in the field are no more essential for the management and leadership of a service than, for example, their technical equivalents in the curatorial or conservation fields. An assumption that the development of leadership skills for this domain would be targeted principally at archivists would not only be perceived by some as furthering self-interest but would also serve to miss the opportunity of bringing other valuable perspectives into the future management of archives. The suggested notion that these leadership skills should be translated in the terms of a Doctorate are flawed and reveals a long-outdated prejudice in favour of academic qualifications over demonstrated professionalism. We hope the Task Force will have the confidence to propose that greater diversity and a modern approach to archive management will make the domain stronger and better able to respond to future challenges.

We are pleased to have provided a response to this consultation and look forward to assisting in a more detailed way in the future

Chris Woods
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