

Written evidence submitted by the Archives and Records Association (UK & Ireland)

Response to the call for evidence by the DCMS Select Committee on the Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors

The Archives and Records Association (UK & Ireland)

The Archives and Records Association (ARA) is the UK and Republic of Ireland's lead professional and membership body for archivists, records managers and archive conservators. There are over 2800 institutions in the UK and Ireland holding physical and digital archives, and maintaining archive and record services. These services are located in local and national government, education, private and third sectors. We are not a trade union and our several thousand members work across the entire range of sectors. We seek to design and maintain meaningful standards and innovation in the sector with partners at local, regional and national levels, for example in digital preservation. We also provide members with a range of services, including training, workplace research and policy advocacy. ARA also provides the secretariat for the All Party Parliamentary Group on Archives and History.

This submission is provided jointly by the Board of the Archives and Records Association and one of its constituent bodies, the Chief Archivists in Local Government Group, representing archives in all local government authorities in England and Wales. The response covers those working in archives, records management and archive conservation.

What has been the immediate impact of Covid-19 on the sector?

Service delivery

The immediate impact of lockdown was the closure of all physical onsite access to archive and record collections, all exhibitions and all events and direct community engagement. In its place, some services have focused on the development of a digital offer including via social media but this did highlight the lack of digital skills, equipment and capacity for many services, particularly smaller ones.

Budgetary Impact

Income generation has been an important means of maintaining service levels over the past decade in many services. In some cases, services resource up to 35% of the budget through income generation. Inevitably, services have now lost considerable amounts of income over the last few months and this will seriously affect their ability to deliver balanced budgets. This will be exacerbated by the increased pressures on local authority and other sectoral budgets generally in the coming months. Some services have seen the budget of their parent body, including business, universities and the arts, reduced and this will directly impact the budget of the archive or records management service.

Staffing

In a number of services staff have been diverted towards supporting the critical response of their organisation or have been furloughed. While this is recognised as essential, it has impacted on the ability of services to develop their remote online offers and their capacity for long term planning. Also, the vast majority of staff have been working from home since lockdown and this is inevitably having effects on their wellbeing.

Impact on Development and Legal Process

The primary duty of archive and record services is to document. They have a key (often statutory) role in sustaining accountability and providing a trusted record which can be relied upon by current and future generations to act as a place of record. As the International Council on Archives and the International

Conference of Information Commissioners said in May 2020 on COVID-19: The duty to document does not cease in a crisis, it becomes more essential.

Archive holdings are used to support a wide range of public business processes involving development control, highways and rights of way, coroners' inquests, planning, public enquiries as well as to support decision making within the parent organisation, and education and research. Whilst services have made efforts to support urgent requests for information, in many cases this has not been possible. This has also affected some services' ability to deal with Freedom of Information requests. This is largely based on the ability to make records freely available to the public onsite; something which has not been possible since lockdown.

Risk of Loss of Archives

Services have also been unable to receive any accessions (some may have been able to receive digital deposits) since the emergency began. As well as building up considerable backlogs (archives can receive over 100 accessions per month, some of which require days of processing), this puts many unique records at risk of loss, particularly those from businesses and charities that have not survived lockdown.

Wellbeing Impact

Archive and record offices have always had a significant impact on wellbeing. The age profile of individual users is heavily skewed towards the over 60s, many of whom rely on a day-long visit as an important means of connecting with other people, staying active, and continuing to learn. Others give time as volunteers and, in return receive similar wellbeing benefits; for example, in [Lancashire Archives](#), the volunteer group is one of the largest in the whole county council. And there have been increasing moves towards providing more direct interventions to improve wellbeing; for example, the [Change Minds](#) project which uses asylum records for sustained engagement with people suffering from mental health problems. Whilst some of this work has continued through remote means, its wellbeing outcomes have been reduced and, in many cases, have been lost completely during the lockdown.

How effectively has the support provided by DCMS, other Government departments and arms-length bodies addressed the sector's needs?

There have been some very welcome and timely leadership and responses to the crisis from The National Archives (TNA), for example:

- continued support for Archive Service Accreditation and the guidance on reopening services (although the last was slow in comparison with that provided for libraries and museums)
- the provision of funding to the ARA Together initiative, providing support to the archive and records professional communities
- the provision of funding to the History Begins At Home campaign

TNA works as well as it can to support the sector but it has been notable that the impression DCMS has given is that it (DCMS) does not see it has a role to give any support to or leadership for the archive sector, given that TNA comes within its family of responsibilities. There is no archive representation on its COVID taskforces and this has been widely commented on and criticised in the sector, not least at a time when cooperation across 'silos' is most needed.

There is also a continuing and longstanding issue with the minimal amount of governmental support upon which the archive sector can rely relative to its size compared with the museums, libraries and arts sectors and it cannot benefit from their economies of scale. It is also noted that emergency funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund has not been available to local government and other services.

What will the likely long-term impacts of Covid-19 be on the sector, and what support is needed to deal with those?

Financial

It is likely that budgets will come under even more pressure through 2020, 2021 and beyond at a time when archive and record services are continuing to face significant budgetary reductions that have already been in place for several years. Statutory and other functions will become further strained. Financial strain will ultimately lead to a reduction in number of professionals in the sector, and a skills drain is a likely outcome of this.

There has been little recognition of the statutory functions that archives and records carry out, and the need for funding to reflect this. Other cultural areas often rely on philanthropic support for their aims, but these aims are not comparable with the archives and records sector.

Access to Collections

Many services have digitised (and often licensed to family history websites) many of their most popular and technically straightforward collections. However, this represents only a fraction of their collections as a whole (around 3% on average) and has been dependent in the main on commercial sector funding – a source that will not be available for the majority of archive collections. This proportion is also not likely to change significantly in the short to medium term as services continue to receive more material than they digitise.

Digitisation on demand is one possible means to improve digital access. However, this rests heavily on very detailed information being listed in catalogues, which is simply not available in many cases. It could also clearly preclude those on low incomes from accessing records in this way, further widening the gap in society between lower and higher income families. Support could be developed from funding streams for both cataloguing and digitisation.

Access to physical collections will still be required and the ability for archive and record services to provide the facilities to do so going forward has the possibility of being costly and time consuming.

Digital Engagement

Clearly there is a need for increased digital engagement and access to archives. This is not something new to archive and record services which have been addressing this need for some time. However, Covid-19 has pushed services to learn more about how to engage digitally and this is one of the positives coming out of the crisis. It has also highlighted how digital access will not provide an equitable or comprehensive solution to access issues.

The archive sector is great at innovating and adapting, as has been demonstrated by services' response during the lockdown in providing engagement, education and learning events. They have had to learn on their feet and make use of the tools available to them, many of which were originally designed for different purposes. In addition, the lack of a standard and robust video conferencing tool across government departments and local authorities has been a considerable drawback and needs to be addressed as well as uneven and often unreliable broadband infrastructure across the country.

Feedback from recent online learning events has included requests that the digital engagement method of delivery continues but to support these new methods of engagement, there is a need for training and skill development in the sector, as well as a pressing need for affordable and appropriate tools for its delivery.

Digital Preservation capacity

Archive services have been developing for some time capacity and skills for dealing with digital archives and Covid-19 has made this need even more urgent. There is a need to preserve the archive of Covid-19 both for historical purposes, but also to ensure accountability of decision making during this period. Many processes and decisions have had to be made very quickly and the tracking of decision making will be almost entirely contained in digital files e.g. via emails or online discussions

There is however a lack of skills, capacity and infrastructure (including secure digital platforms) in many archive services and this needs to be addressed at both a national and local government policy level as well as through real investment across the sector.

What lessons can be learnt from how DCMS, arms-length bodies and the sector have dealt with Covid-19?

TNA and funding bodies such as the NLHF should be supported by DCMS to be able to produce guidance and support more quickly. One of the main lessons from COVID-19 is that events move very rapidly and this is very likely to continue into the recovery phase, even without any further spikes of infection. A much more coordinated approach for the cultural and heritage sector is needed with DCMS taking an active lead and with archives being acknowledged alongside museums and galleries; and ideally its own taskforce. As an example, local authority library services are represented at the taskforce level by Libraries Connected but not archives by the Archives and Records Association's Chief Archivists in Local Government Group. Coordination is happening at the local but not the national government level.

How might the sector evolve after Covid-19, and how can DCMS support such innovation to deal with future challenges?

It does appear that DCMS does not believe it has a role to support innovation and change in the archives sector, leaving this entirely to TNA. Given the need to work across traditional boundaries and to harness the exciting developments that are emerging in the sector around the models for digital and physical access, it will be disappointing if DCMS's approach does not change. There is in practice at a local level cooperation across archives, libraries and museums but at the national level this is simply not the case. The sector is, as noted above, making great strides forward in digital preservation and digital engagement but these need to be recognised separately, and encouragement and funding provided for digital resilience as a whole for future challenges.