

**Written evidence submitted by Cambridgeshire County Advisory Group on Archives and  
Local Studies**

**United Kingdom Parliament: Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee**

**Impact of Covid-19 on the Heritage Sector**

**1 Status and Relevant Experience of the Organisation Submitting Evidence**

1.1 Cambridgeshire's County Advisory Group on Archives and Local Studies is a voluntary group, which continues work previously undertaken by a long-established, County Council-convened advisory group. The Group provides a forum for those who share an interest in the preservation and use of the documentary heritage of Cambridgeshire (including the historic county of Huntingdonshire). These 'stakeholders' include creators, depositors, custodians and users of collections. The Group's aims are to be the main point of reference for consultation and advice on matters relating to archives and local studies in the county, to provide advocacy and publicity for archives and local studies collections and services: their collection, preservation and use, and to exchange information between all stakeholders in order to stimulate and improve both individual activity and partnership working.

1.2 Membership includes representatives of the county and district councils, of museums in the county and of user groups, as well as interested individuals.

1.3 Archives services in the county are provided mainly by Cambridgeshire County Council's Archives Service, which operates research areas and archives storage accommodation at both Ely, where a long-awaited national-standard building has recently been opened, enabling the transfer of the service from the increasingly unacceptable accommodation at Shire Hall Cambridge, and within the public library at Huntingdon (where pride in pre-1974 Huntingdonshire's past remains strong). Archives are also held by a number of local museums within the county, including Wisbech Museum. County voluntary societies represented on the Committee include the long-established Cambridge Antiquarian Society and the Cambridgeshire Association for Local History who between them represent interests from the scholarly to the most general, and Cambridgeshire Family History Society who have over more than 20 years been active in support of the county service by funding the acquisition and preservation of archives.

1.4 We are concerned for the future of effective archives services within the county and also for the preservation of a record of the impact of Covid-19 and its mitigation.

**2 Specific questions on which the Committee has called for evidence**

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

2.1.1 The immediate impact has been in the loss of income resulting from closure to the public. For museums, this constitutes a significant part of their budget. For the main provider, Cambridgeshire Archives, it is a less significant proportion, but nonetheless matters greatly to a service which is anyway low-funded.

2.1.2 Whilst other heritage organisations have been able to provide additional on-line services to users by use of staff prevented from working in their buildings and in public-facing operations, this has not been possible for the small services within museums. Work on archives requires access to the buildings and archives, at present of course denied save for security checks. Whilst a few of the staff of the County Council service have been able to work from home to provide some social media

contact and on editing and related tasks, others have been transferred to the corporate Social Care operations whose work is of course of community benefit, but does not help improve the archives service.

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

2.2.1 The National Archives has continued, through its excellent on-line service, to provide advice both to local authority and to private and voluntary organisations, both in general (important for home-working on projects) and specifically, especially about the steps towards return to more normal operations. We are not aware however of any specific grant aid available, and funding remains a basic concern.

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

2.3.1 It is very difficult at present to quantify the impact either of the closure period or of the inevitable changes in the wider economy. All of the smaller museums who hold archives rely very greatly on support from the general public in their locality, upon whom very many other charitable demands will inevitably fall. In addition, the 'habit' of using those services will be lost, but diminishing revenue will make it hard to run the necessary campaigns to re-establish it. Those organisations who are still in receipt of local authority support after the decline over the past years in local authority budgets will necessarily be anxious that pressure on those authorities will lead to further grant withdrawal.

2.3.2 Cambridgeshire Archives Service is dependent upon the County Council for the majority of its budget. The Leader of the County Council reported to the Council's general purposes committee on 2<sup>nd</sup> June that there is likely, as a result of Covid-19, to be what he described as a 'great big hole' of some £13 million in the county's budget. The Cambridgeshire Archives service has always been one of the lower-funded county archives services, and budget reductions already meant that the very welcome new building at Ely could only be open to researchers three days a week. The County Council of course provides many services besides archives, most of them, especially social care and highways, much more significant in the public mind, and therefore in councillors' minds, than archives. There is therefore a very great fear that the service will be further cut in the forthcoming period. This will exacerbate for its (slim) management the problems inherent in balancing the need on the one hand to collect records at risk of loss, and care for and record the content of the existing collections so that they are truly available to the public, and on the other, the public service itself. Archives are only useful if they can be studied in depth, and the many, many records in the service's care can of course not all be made available in digital format; operation of a public research area is vital, but so is the detailed skilled archivist work in creating finding aids to enable access, and continuing to make information and copies available on line.

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

2.4.1 As we have said at 2.2.1 above, the official response to Covid-19 has been concerned with the immediate practicalities of closure and re-opening, and, as we have set out at 2.3, the ill-effects of Covid-19 upon the services we seek to support have yet to be felt. They are however we believe much to be feared.

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

2.5.1 Much of the danger to archives services both at county level and within the county comes from a low public understanding of their importance for an understanding of our society, what it was and how it has developed, and of the 'sense of place' which creates community, as well as for

academic research and leisure activity. Within our county, the County Council service has had extraordinary success in its project to make archive descriptions available on line, and also has an excellent digitisation service providing paid-for copies on request to researchers. Lack of funding (and thus of staff time) has however inhibited the number of images publicly available. Many services use social media to some effect, and national campaigns such as 'archives week' have been useful, but much more remains to be done. This will no doubt form part of our own discussions in the next years, but as a voluntary group we have no funding either to 'pump-prime' effort or to fund staff costs in the bodies we represent. Assistance for example with finding funding for projects on the model of the Cambridgeshire Acre-run Heritage Lottery landscape project which so successfully celebrated the Ouse Washes would assist our own group, and the service providers we look to support, in seeking the recognition which archives services need. This would assist their recovery and greatly improve their future resilience.

2.5.2 The importance of the records of today for the future study of our shared past is especially obvious in relation to the present extraordinary time (compare the extent of recent use of records of WW2). The community response to Covid 19 has been excellent in our county. Working together, District and Parish councils and volunteer groups have provided a very valuable service. The collection of both the archival record itself from within those organisations who have co-operated (many of whom do not have records management systems which culminate in archive preservation), collection of private photographs and videos (including of the VE Day celebrations during lockdown), and the creation of an oral record through recorded interviews with a well-thought out sample of key-workers, businessmen, local activists and ordinary citizens would be of great benefit to research and understanding in the near and more distant future, and provide, for parts of the collection, almost-immediate digital access to documentation in which the community could take pride. It is however a task entirely beyond the County Archives Service to co-ordinate and carry out, for simple lack of staff resource. A venture somewhat like that run by the Lottery-funded New Opportunities Fund over a decade ago, which introduced many local-authority funded archive services to the benefits of creating and web-mounting digital images, would make a great deal of difference to the creation of a record of these times for the future. It would also prepare the ground for an extension of local community work by volunteers working together with archives services, which would improve future services and the future record.