

Written evidence submitted by the Business Archives Council

Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors

About us

The Business Archives Council (BAC) is a charity that brings together business records creators, custodians and users. Founded in 1934, its aims are to advocate for the sector, promote the preservation of business archives and support those working in the business archives and history arenas.

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

- Closure to the public and some corporate archive units furloughed. Some corporate archive staff now facing redundancy. It may take years for such professional expertise to be replaced.
- Disruption to normal working routines, including impaired ability to physically check on and care for archives
- Increased responsibilities and opportunities in setting up Covid-19 collecting and documenting programmes
- Interruption of existing collecting, research, advocacy and oral history programmes

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

- The National Archives (TNA) has provided guidance as to closures and measures to be considered on reopening. The Archive Sector Development team at TNA has also provided guidance to individual archives where it is needed.

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

- Many businesses are likely to fail in the economic fallout of Covid-19 with the consequence that their archives become at risk of disposal and sale. If there is not sufficient capacity to negotiate with business owners and administrators, and sufficient capacity within the sector to take in the archives of failed companies, then this part of our national heritage could be lost for ever.

The Crisis Management Team (CMT)– a sector wide initiative to deal with situations such as these – is already dealing with records at risk at BrightHouse, Carluccio's, Debenhams Limited, Flybe Limited, Laura Ashley Limited, Oasis and Warehouse Limited, Remnant Kings and Stratford Herald. It is likely that we will see more historically and culturally significant businesses go under in the coming months.

At the moment the CMT is largely operated by volunteers from the archive sector who give up their own time to contact administrators, liquidators, the companies whose records are at risk and local repositories who may be able to take on the records. The CMT has had great successes in the past – including saving the Thomas Cook archive from being split up and sold – but they may be overwhelmed with the amount of cases in the coming months.

- Within the corporate archive sector there will be reduced capability to welcome external researchers, visitors, school and community visits; and volunteers. Support is needed to learn digital skills to move these activities online.
- Corporate archive units are likely to have reduced budgets as parent businesses and organisations experience financial difficulties with the consequent loss of collection care activities, and the potential that some archives units will be mothballed. Support and advocacy will be needed to demonstrate the value of these archive units.
- There will be changes in record creation and preservation as companies switch to online meeting platforms and file sharing. Guidance and support needed in how best to capture and preserve these records.

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

- It would be helpful for the sector if they had a stronger relationship with administrators and liquidators, so the significance of business archives was recognised, and appropriate homes sought for them. The BAC and TNA have recently written to Insolvency Practitioners' Association to offer to develop joint guidance on the insolvency firm's role and how they can work with the heritage sector.
- A business can fall into financial difficulties rapidly. The CMT has to be ready to respond to such situations rapidly.
- There is no strategy for the national collection of business archives. The current situation is a patchwork solution which depends on the collecting proclivities and priorities of each individual local, university and specialist repository. Responding to situations where business records become at risk would be more efficiently handled if such a strategy could be agreed on. This would enable business archives to establish relationships with repositories who might take their records should the parent organisation fail. This would encourage more robust business continuity planning in the sector.

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

- The impact of Covid-19 has speeded up trends that were already happening in the sector such as the increasing digitisation of records to allow remote access and online engagement. TNA is already supporting the sector with skills to support these activities and this support should be increased where possible.
- Covid-19 is a moment where people feel they are really 'living through history'. It has prompted a surge in community collection of potential archive items such as photographs, diaries, vlogs and blogs. There is an opportunity here to connect people with how history is made and by whom. The sector needs support to work with community groups to widen participation in making history, and in making that history more representative of and accessible to more people.