

SAFER AND STRONGER COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 30 APRIL 2012

History Service and Archives Report

Background

1. Under the budget setting process to deliver the Business Strategy 2011/12 – 2014/15, it was agreed to merge the services of Oxfordshire Record Office (ORO) and Oxfordshire Studies (previously in the Central Library) at St Luke's Cowley to form the History Service. The service acquires, cares for and provides public access to the documentary and printed heritage of the county – it includes one of the largest county photographic archives and a significant collection of oral history recordings. Capital funding and funding from Oxford Health Trust allowed the creation of sufficient additional storage space to enable the two services to be brought together.
2. Oxfordshire County Council is obliged to run an archives service under the Public Records Act (1958) and the Local Government Act (1972). These Acts require the care of and provision of public access to public records (records of public bodies, health records and court records), and the records of local authorities (County, District and parish councils). ORO is the designated Diocesan Record Office for Oxfordshire under the Parochial Records and Registers Measure (1978), and has an explicit legal agreement with the Diocese to preserve and make available Church records.
3. Combining the services enabled savings to be made whilst concentrating access to the unique and rare history resources on one site at St Luke's. This has improved the conditions in which the local studies collections are housed, with BS5454 environmental standards being met, preserving them for future users; provided facilities for historical research on a single site, avoiding duplication and establishing clarity on where to access this material for users; and enabled the services to maintain their full range of collections. Public access to the unique history resources is now managed in one public search room under the supervision of specialist staff. However, it has meant the loss of education and exhibition facilities at St Luke's and a reduction in the space for dealing with the resources thereby increasing the risk of damage.
4. Central Government has repeatedly stated its belief that archives are a fundamental part of our society which must be supported. Archives

and local studies are the social and corporate memory of the county, not simply leisure activity. The Government's National Policy on Archives has identified their value for the right of citizens to have access to knowledge, open government, education, social inclusion, economic regeneration, and electronic government.

Purpose of Report

5. This report has been prepared to update the Committee on progress and performance to date of the History Service and on the opportunities and challenges facing it in delivering corporate and national priorities.

Progress and Performance

6. The History Service delivers what many consider to be a good level of direct public service. Although being well down in the bottom quartile of funding, the service is rated 3 star by the National Archives, putting it in the second highest quartile for achievement. The Public Services Quality Group's¹ annual national user survey has recently found that 99% of users rate OHC as Good or Very Good, which puts it above 27 of the 37 English county record offices. The History Service has recently obtained external funding to put it at the forefront of document digitisation, and has pioneered both a child-orientated website to encourage interest in history and a History Shop in the Templar Square shopping centre to reach out to non-users, ideas now being taken up by services elsewhere.
7. The National Archives has commented that "there is much to praise about the History Centre's development, particularly in the extensive efforts to expand online services, enlarging the potential audiences for the history of Oxfordshire. The recent building works and agreement to host the Oxfordshire Health Archives are evidence of a service capable of meeting positive change effectively and delivering better services for researchers. We remain keen to see the Centre fulfilling its remit across the board, including proactive collecting to document the more recent history of the county and reaching a wide range of audiences who can benefit from engagement with Oxfordshire's past. We look forward to working with you on this in future". They have agreed to extend the appointment of the service as a place of deposit under the Public Records Act 1958 and concur with our suggestion to see how the service settles in the post merger period before reassessing the

¹ Public Services Quality Group - <http://www.archives.org.uk/si-psgg/public-services-quality-group-psgg.html>

approval of the Centre against the National Archives' *Standard for Records Repositories*.

Opportunities

- a) External funding strands. Over the past 13 years, the History Service has obtained in excess of £3.2 million from external sources to fund its activities; more than five times its current annual budget. Recently the service has received a number of bequests and donations enabling digitisation and other activities to take place. A developing "Friends Group" should enable fundraising to become a priority over the next year which may deliver both a sustainable funding stream and valuable project income for the service. Some additional funding has been raised through leasing out the small amount of storage space the Centre currently has available.
- b) Volunteers. In common with other services, the History Service has made extensive use of volunteers and will need to continue to do so. At present there are 24 volunteers working with the service, in addition to a flexible team of three from the Oxfordshire Family History Society who work with the History Centre three days a week to deal with straightforward family history enquiries, freeing public service staff for other activities.
- c) Partnership with external bodies. The History Service has always worked closely with many other organisations eg the Family History Society, the Local History Association and the University Faculty of History. The service will seek to strengthen these and develop new ones.

Challenges

- a) Storage space: In the formation of the History Centre, more strongroom accommodation was added at the expense of office and exhibition space. However, most of this strongroom accommodation has been taken up by the holdings of the former Oxfordshire Studies. It is estimated that in six to seven years, the History Centre will be full. It is essential that in the interim consideration is given on how the written and printed history of the county can be stored after that date.
- b) Digital records: Increasing numbers of future archives and publications are being produced only in electronic format. This creates a number of problems with organisation and storage which hard copy items do not. ICT have confirmed that their servers are for operational, not archival, use only; the history service requires a dedicated server for storage, regular migration or emulation to ensure the material remains readable, and direct access from terminals in the History Centre for the public to

use them. Appropriate software is also needed to maintain and organize the material.

- c) Cataloguing and Conservation: In order to maintain direct public service and answer enquiries, cataloguing and conservation of documents has been reduced to a minimum. There is currently a significant backlog of cataloguing and conservation, while over half the existing catalogues still require electronic retro-conversion.
- d) City Archives: Oxford City owns one of the most significant archive collections in the county. However, only 20% of it is catalogued and stored at the History Centre; the rest remains uncatalogued and in poor conditions in the Town Hall. The service does not have the staffing or storage resources to deal with this but we are advising the City as it seeks to identify the condition and the work required to protect its archive collection and resolve its long term storage.

Conclusion

- 9. The History Service currently delivers a well regarded public service although much work remains to be done before the full benefit of the integration of the two services can be realised. The service will need to ensure that plans are drawn up to address cataloguing and conservation backlogs, space constraints and ICT needs to ensure the service continues to meet its legal requirements and the public expectations for ongoing collection and documentation of records and material. The service will need to continue to be proactive in seeking out external funding opportunities and creating a sustainable Friends organisation to assist with these challenges.

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