

Ed Vaizey MP, Shadow Culture Minister

Speech to National Council on Archives Annual Conference

17 July 2008, Birmingham & Midland Institute, Birmingham

Evidence for advocacy to government and policy-makers

The importance of the archive sector

Archives are nothing less than the raw materials which tell our story.

The story of this nation.

The story of the peoples who have made this nation what it is today

The story of setbacks and crises...the story of progress and reform.

And you, the archive profession, are the gatekeepers of where the narrative of British history is to be found.

It may be the large national institutions such as The National Archives and the British Library which spring readily to the public mind.

But the story of our nation, of our people and our communities, can also be revealed in the many smaller archive collections, where the records of those agents of social change and cohesion - the churches, trades unions, families and clubs - are to be found.

This hugely important sector needs and deserve the support of politicians. It falls upon the shoulders of the profession to ensure that government and policy-makers meet the challenge of preserving our archival heritage and assuring access to it for future generations.

Public perception

In the last thirty years, we have witnessed a huge growth in interest across the country in local and family history studies.

There has been some interesting debate around why it is that we have found this new interest in who we are, where we come from and what makes our local communities look, feel and sound the way they do.

Is this burgeoning in family history studies caused by the fragmented nature of British society? Does our interest in where we come from increase as we move further away from our roots? Does the growth in participation in local history groups reflect the wider disconnect between people and places?

Whatever the answer, us politicians know that there is a sizeable chunk of the British population who are hungry for more and more information about their own history and that of the place they live in.

BBC's "Who Do You Think You Are" television programme and magazine, the myriad of genealogy websites, all show that both public and commercial providers of information are positioning themselves to meet an almost insatiable desire for family and local history.

Back in 2002, when the 1901 Census first went live, designers had allowed for 1.2 million users per day. Instead, after a huge launch fanfare on 2 January, the website attracted 32 million hits per day and collapsed just three days later.

And you in the archives sector need to show us how this demand will be met, what quality control methods will be put in place and how the satisfaction will be monitored and performance managed.

Different areas of interest to politicians

There are many subject areas of interest to politicians that the archive sector regularly has a significant impact on.

The huge information resource offered by our archive services means that individual citizens have open to them detailed records of decision-making and how government at all levels have considered important public policy questions.

At the local level citizens can find out about such matters as the routes of rights of way and the history of open spaces which have been threatened with housing development.

This civic participation aspect of the archives service needs to be highlighted to politicians. The users of archive services are more than aware of the impact of the sector on citizenship, with over 69% of respondents to the 2007 Visitor Survey identifying the role of archives in supporting the rights of the citizen.

Evidence

We need to be told about how GOOD your service is.

Politicians do not often get told that a particular service area is scoring a 95.9% “Good” and “Very Good” approval rating from its users.

And I note that my own county’s record office scores 92.4% - which is above the regional average of 82.1%, so I will have every reason to be assured that the archivists and their support staff in my county record office are offering a really great service to my constituents.

As I said, it is not every day that an MP gets to hear about such high levels of satisfaction with a public service. Yet, that is what public sector archive

services up and down the UK achieved as recorded in the 2007 Survey of Visitors to Archives.

I congratulate the work of the NCA and the Public Sector Quality Group for having the foresight to develop this excellent test of user satisfaction. Such performance measurements are invaluable when trying to prove the value and impact of any service and the archive sector go further than most in putting together the annual visitor survey.

The National Archives also push for better performance in the Local Authority Archive sector through the Self Assessment Exercise. Again, with some degree of pride, I see that Oxfordshire Record Office comes out with a 2* rated service, scoring particularly well in terms of buildings and environment, which is the aspect of the service that the UK Visitor Survey found that, from amongst those who expressed an opinion, most respondents thought needed improving.

Given the wide, varied and excellent data made available by the UK Visitor Survey and The National Archives Self Assessment, I would strongly advocate to archive services up and down the country that they make every effort to participate.

There are still too many services not responding to the Self Assessment exercise and others who do not do enough to engage with their users and encourage a greater completion rate of visitor surveys for the PSQG Annual Visitor Survey.

In London alone, 8 services out of the capital's 33 local authority archive services declined to take part in The National Archives Self Assessment.

In order to help you to get the resources you need to offer the quality of service you want to deliver to your users, it is vital that us politicians, at the local and national level, get as clear a picture as possible as to the level of

performance of services in our areas and gain a better understanding of the pressures the service is under.

Only with this information readily at our disposal can we help to advocate for more resources or for the service to be helped to provide its services in a more effective way.

How has a project/service added value to above areas?

Case studies

Show public support

Communicate with politicians

There are many ways in which you should all be engaging with the politicians within your area.

MPs should be invited to services either when newly elected, or particularly when a new exhibition is being launched or when a new service comes online.

MPs are always very keen to receive invitations to speak at events in their constituencies and can often be relied upon to help launch a document, a service or to open a new building, room or exhibition.

Just make sure you also invite the local paper and their photographer!

Of particular use to the public sector services, or those in the community or private spheres who may receive elements of public money or in-kind support, it is essential to engage with your MP if problems with funding.

Disregarding whether or not the MP is from the same political party as the ruling Council Group, the opportunity to take part in a campaign to help to

save, protect or promote a service which is much valued by local people is not something that any self-respecting MP is going to want to miss.

Local councillors are often overlooked by many sectors who are seeking to influence decisions. It is vital that you keep local councillors briefed about the archive service in their area. Send them your annual report, if you do not already do so. Include them on your mailing lists for newsletters, service information updates and invites to exhibition launches.

These days, given the local government reforms of the past few years, most local authorities now operate under the executive arrangement for decision-making. This means that along with backbench councillors, the Leaders and Executive, or Cabinet Members, on each council are very influential people who can often take major decisions on behalf of their communities without much in the way of challenge.

When considering who you should be keeping in the loop, make sure you include at least your local Council Leader and the relevant Executive or Cabinet Member responsible for your service.

They will want to hear the same information as central government about the value of the service you offer, the performance of your service and what challenges you think you can overcome or what step change in outcomes you can deliver with extra resource.

Conclusion

We could go a long way to provide a fuller story of our nation's story through improving our archive services, widening participation in archive services among non-traditional users, developing a more comprehensive system of online access and making sure that we capture the electronic records of today, so that the story does not come to a full stop during our stewardship.