

NATIONAL SURVEY OF VISITORS TO BRITISH ARCHIVES

FEBRUARY 2001

Introduction

The third National Survey of Visitors to British Archives took place in February 2001 under the leadership of the Public Services Quality Group (PSQG) and with the technical support of the Institute of Public Finance Limited (IPF). PSQG was established in 1996 as an informal network for those working in archives to share best practice and develop new approaches to delivering quality services. It has organised the two previous national visitor surveys (in June 1998 and October 1999), drawn up the Access Standard for Archives which is currently being drafted as a British Standard, and is researching the use and development of a suite of performance indicators useable across the spectrum of archival institutions.

126 archives took part in the 2001 Survey and 13,200 questionnaires were returned. This has provided a substantial body of evidence for assessing the popularity and value of archives across Britain and Northern Ireland. Each survey has used a core of broadly similar questions designed to understand the profile of the archive user population and to gauge its views on the services we provide. Beyond this core, each survey has taken a particular issue to study. In 1999 this was the welcome and service given to first time users; in 2001 it was the wider cultural and economic role archives play in the community. By its nature, this is not an easy subject to tackle within a limited number of questions and more research is required both regionally and nationally. However, although there was concern expressed by some users and archives about the value of this approach, the data collected has already highlighted important evidence which will impact on a range of agendas, such as Resource's framework for access and learning.

The issue of further research is a crucial one. The National Visitors Survey is now a key element in providing evidence by which we can evaluate the services we provide and assess priorities. But it is not the only element. With the now established framework of regional archive councils in England and devolved government in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, much more research (such as the second phase of the Archival Mapping Project for England) is being undertaken on the regional impact and development of archive services and for the first time the 2001 report includes a regional breakdown of the survey results. While there are some general and genuine regional differences that can already be drawn from the data, comparison with other evidence will be essential to provide a mature analysis of the similarities and differences between regions. For example, the fact that the Family Records Centre is included in the London region has had some effect on that region's results because of its size and its special nature (such as not having 'original documents' to produce). It must also be said that the National Visitors Surveys concentrate on in person individual visits to archives and further work is needed to understand the uses made through distance enquiry services and interpretation and education programmes.

The report also provides, particularly for those local authority archives involved in the Best Value process, a breakdown of the upper quartile (top 25%) benchmarks for questions 2 and 3 where users are asked to rate the services we offer. Each table shows the upper quartiles for the 'Excellent' category and the 'Excellent' and 'Good' (i.e. positive) categories combined and indicates both nationally and regionally the target an individual office needs to achieve to reach the top 25%.

It is important to point out that the UK and regional figures in the report are ‘weighted’. The need to weight arises from the differences in size (measured in visits) between the various repositories. By introducing a weighting factor the figures provide a balanced representation at both regional and UK level. The same procedure was used in the 1999 survey and a fuller description of the method used is provided in that report. It should also be noted that the absence of the Public Record Office from this report does not signify a hesitation on its part about either the Survey or the Public Services Quality Group. Certain administrative and technical factors prevented its inclusion this year.

Key findings

Section A: about your visit

- 83% of visitors to archives come because of personal interest or a hobby (73% in 1998 and 78% in 1999)
- User appreciation of the services provided by archives remains high with every aspect, except visitor facilities, rating over 80% good or excellent. This does, however, disguise some worrying trends, particularly a gradual swing from excellent to good in a number of areas.
- 70% of visitors with physical disabilities and 61% of visitors with hearing disabilities rate archives as good or excellent but this falls to 50% for visual disabilities and only 44% for learning difficulties. These figures, based on a much lower data set than in 1999, are significantly worse than those for that year and suggest a greater awareness by visitors of what can be achieved under the provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act and the challenge facing archives implementing the Act.
- Staff continue to be the greatest asset and highest rated resource in archives with 99% of visitors finding them friendly and helpful (55% excellent) and 98% knowledgeable (48% excellent). The figures are virtually identical to those in 1999.

Section B: about yourself

- Visitors, most of whom use archives because of personal interest, are experienced and dedicated. 31% have been using archives for over 5 years and a further 33% over 1 year. The number of first time users has gone down from 22% in 1999 to 15% in 2001 but this suggests that archives are better able to retain new users. In 1999 96% of new users found archives welcoming and 87% felt they were easy to use.
- The age range of users has remained consistent since 1999 with 79% over 44 and 21% under. The percentage of individual users under 24 is still low (3%) but this primarily reflects the alternative programmes archives use, through educational and interpretative services, to work with young people.

- Archives continue to serve their local communities with 50% of visitors living within 20 kilometres of the repository and 25% living within 9 kilometres. 2.6% of users come from overseas.
- Access to the internet continues to increase dramatically. 69% of users now have access compared with 52% in 1999 and 30% in 1998. Given that 43% of all users are over 60, the fears of a computer excluded generation appear unfounded and this bodes well for the success of such projects as SCRAN and A2A.
- For the first time, users were asked what formal educational qualifications they have. Although it is sometimes assumed that archives cater mainly for the academic community, the evidence shows that users have a broad educational background with only 12% having a research degree and 30% a first degree. 13% did not claim any qualification. Some care should be taken in using these results as users were not asked to record only their highest qualification and many ticked several boxes.
- The ethnicity categories for this survey were those used in the 2001 Census whereas the 1991 Census categories were used for the 1998 and 1999 surveys. This produced some concern, particularly in Scotland and Wales and because the survey took place before the Census itself. Nevertheless the overall figures suggest that there has been little change nationally in visits made to archives by people from ethnic minority groups since 1999, holding steady at about 2%.

Section C: considering the contribution made by archives to the economy

- Given that 50% of users live within 20% kilometres of the archive they visited during the survey, it is not surprising that 78% used local public transport and only 5% paid for overnight accommodation, although this was much higher in the South West and Scotland for obvious geographic reasons.
- For 87% of users, visiting the archive was their main purpose for visiting an area but it is significant for the economic impact of archives that 29% ate out locally, 36% used local shops/services and 18% visited other places of interest. As 12% of users intended to stay more than a day in the area, the impact will be magnified.

Section D: exploring motivation and methods for the use of archives

- We know from earlier results that most users are pursuing a personal interest when visiting an archive and will continue to do this for many years. It is also clear that many (68%) began by getting involved in an activity (such as family history), have since moved on from their original purpose to research other subjects (61%) and most (81%) have gone on to use other repositories. Archives are clearly very good at retaining users and developing their interests and expertise.

Section E: considering the cultural role of archives

- It is common for archives to undervalue the ways in which they inspire their users and enrich their experience, concentrating primarily on providing intellectual and physical access to records. However, many users recognise the wider, more subtle, effects of visiting an archive. 79% say that it is a useful and enjoyable learning experience, 70% an important source of leisure enjoyment and personal satisfaction and 62% that it stimulates or broadens their understanding of history and culture. Importantly, given the leisure nature of much current archive use, 30% feel that their abilities, skills and confidence have increased through using an archive and 19% that it has helped develop their ICT skills.
- Users also have a mature view of the role archives can play in society with 82% saying that they contribute to preserving our culture, 72% that they help towards strengthening family and community identity and 66% that they provide opportunities for learning. Given the low number of business and professional visitors to archives (who typically are more likely to use distance research services) 20% of all users think that archives support administrative and business activity.
- Archive use spreads far beyond the actual users who visit our repositories and many more people have an understanding about what we provide than come through our doors. Apart from mainstream interpretation uses that will ultimately reach a wider audience such as publications (15%), talks (11%), exhibitions (4%) and broadcasts (2%), the majority (74%) will share their experiences with their family and 38% will do so with friends or colleagues
- 95% of visitors feel that archives, the 'written and recorded heritage', should be supported through public funding, a figure close to the 93% support for similar funding for historic sites and buildings but well in advance of those for the visual and performing arts and for sports and physical recreation. These bare figures merit more investigation to identify their real value in placing archives within their cultural context.

Conclusion

The 2001 National Visitors Survey was developed and led by the PSQG's NVS working party under the chairmanship of Chris Pickford. Chris has been instrumental in establishing a national role and voice for PSQG and in particular has driven forward the introduction of regular, high quality, visitor surveys which have already been of great value to the archive community. All the members of the working party have contributed much time and thought to this years survey but specific thanks should be paid to Jonathan Gordon at IPF for masterminding the data gathering and processing. Chris Pickford stood down as chair of the working party in July and I have taken over this role. The working party will continue to meet to plan future surveys and to establish their long term future. We will be consulting widely to develop this strategy and have already agreed that we should be looking towards a three survey cycle, using the same core questions for the cycle. The next survey is planned for October 2002.

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October 2001