

CIPFA Statistics Analysis

1 Introduction

1.1 AKA Partnership (Amanda Arrowsmith and Kate Thompson) has been contracted, with the support of Re:source, by the Public Services Quality Group (PSQG) of the National Council on Archives (NCA) and the Association of Chief Archivists in Local Government (ACALG), to review the data on archive services in local government collected and published since 1988/89 by the Chartered Institute for Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) in association with ACALG and its predecessor body.

1.2 The principal aim of this review is to consider how the collection and interpretation of the data could be improved, in particular by a tighter definition of the questions posed annually to local authority archive services. A secondary aim is to consider how data collection could usefully and validly be extended beyond the local government sector.

1.3 The Library and Information Statistics Unit (LISU), based in the Department of Information Science at Loughborough University, produced a report for Re:source in September 2001 (*Local Authority Archives Statistics: Data Refining Study*). We have been asked to:

- assess this work and interpret its analysis;
- report on trends demonstrated by the data;
- make recommendations on what are useful and robust data;
- and identify inconsistencies and weak areas within the information gathering and presentation.

1.4 We have studied the published returns in detail, together with the LISU report. We are grateful to Richard Childs and Deborah Jenkins of ACALG, Adam Green, who worked on the survey for almost ten years, a number of chief archivists who have volunteered their comments, Christine Shearman of Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies for allowing access to her (incomplete) set of reports, and Claire Creaser of LISU, for their reflections and suggestions on the data's strengths and weaknesses.

1.5 As a result of the meeting of the Public Services Quality Group meeting on 7 July 2003, recommendations for future action are set out in the conclusion to this report.

2 LISU findings and update

2.1 The LISU report attempts a detailed analysis of the data on local authority archives in England and Wales collected by CIPFA and ACALG and its predecessor, since 1988/89 – an exercise which required what LISU describe as a 'tidying up' of the data. Using this tidied up data, LISU then produced a trend analysis of some key measures.

2.2 We have looked at the returns published since the LISU report, in order as far as possible to update the report's findings.

2.3 LISU, as its report clearly sets out, wrestled with a number of major difficulties in carrying out its assigned tasks. The problems included:

- considerable changes in coverage over the period for which data were available – for example, the growing level of inclusion of so-called ‘small’ services, where the report states that ‘[t]his pattern of expansion renders trends for the sector as a whole impossible to establish over any length of time’, and changes in the data collected over time (the dropping or addition of headings, and changes in their definition, eg in relation to capital financing);
- non-submission, intermittent, estimated or inconsistent submission of data by a range of services over the years (‘relatively few authorities have made complete returns each year’), particularly but not wholly in relation to the ‘small’ services (districts were only included from 1994/95, and financial and some other data from these have not been consistently collected); LISU’s restrained comment is that ‘the figures presented in [its] report should therefore be treated with some caution’; it states it is only from 1997/98 that figures are ‘believed to include all archive services in England and Wales’;
- changes occurring as a result of local government reorganisation in 1996/97, resulting in the establishment of newly constituted authorities in both England and Wales; it has proved difficult to produce data which map sensibly on to statistics from the situation before reorganisation, or to reflect a diversity of situations (for example, where new authorities established an autonomous archive service, or where they decided to enter into a joint arrangement);
- the distinction between ‘large’ and ‘small’ authorities over a number of years, made principally on the grounds of current authority status and consequent compatibility of supplied data; LISU notes that neither definition is ‘related to the magnitude of the operations of each service’, with some ‘large’ services, for example, running relatively small operations (four in 2000/01 with less than two fte staff) and one ‘small’ authority in that year with 21 fte; the distinction between ‘large and small’ is no longer made;
- the inclusion of only English and Welsh authorities.

2.4 LISU’s report bravely attempts to bring some order out of chaos in Appendix 1, listing authorities and trying to chart change, but there are understandable inaccuracies in its description of the recent situation and, more challengingly, a picture of the difficulties faced by all wishing to draw valid and helpful comparisons and derive useful indicators from the data. One additional difficulty which it does not note is the poor fit of CIPFA ‘family groups’ of authorities with archives services whose background has dictated very different speeds and levels of development.

2.5 In preparing a database from the published submissions, LISU draws attention to the scope for using the statistics to develop performance measures and benchmarking. But it cautions that this will require ‘a comprehensive range of checks and estimation procedures’ to assure the quality and reliability of the data.

2.6 Related to this point, LISU also notes that it has had to employ techniques of data splitting, interpolation, extrapolation and, ‘as a final resort’, estimation using *per capita* ratios calculated using authorities which have submitted data, essentially to fill in the gaps in the data from which it derives trends: as the report says, ‘for archives

services, this is a particularly hazardous process'. A further cautionary note refers to 'unusual or suspect figures' and potentially 'rogue data'.

2.7 As a postscript to this section, we should add the comments of a number of chief archivists with whom we have discussed the process of data collection, and who admit to questionnaire fatigue and the consequent temptation to rush the process, estimate or, as a last resort, omit some data. If future questionnaires are to be of real use to the sector and its allies, they must be demonstrably relevant, clear in their definitions, manageable in terms of workload, and the outputs readily useable.

3 Trend analysis

3.1 LISU has worked hard to carry out trend analysis of key data - but against the complex and difficult background set out in section 2 above.

3.2 The purpose of such analyses is to form a picture of movements in the sector as a whole and to attempt benchmarking against which individual services can measure their own performance. Without consistency of data, these become Sisyphean tasks.

3.3 An additional complication in relation to financial data, apart from the CIPFA family approach noted in 2.4 above, relates to the visitor profile of local authority archive services, which has much more in common with museums and galleries than with libraries – serving a public often travelling from well outside the authority's, even each country's, area, thus making cost *per capita* of population a relatively unuseable figure. Financial data included in the returns are in any event part year estimates.

3.4 We have produced graphs based on a range of LISU's tabulations, updated where possible to 2002/03, in the hope of identifying more clearly some useable trends; these are attached as an appendix. They cover:

- level of participating services;
- total expenditure;
- archivists in post;
- conservators in post;
- other staff in post;
- total staff in post;
- number of readers;
- documents produced;
- postal enquiries.

[NB Figures are per thousand]

3.5 Comments on the level of participating services and the nature of their contributions are set out in section 2 above.

3.6 The **financial** data is patchy, approaching completeness only for county and metropolitan services. It does however show a generally steady increase in expenditure well in excess of the retail price index over the past five years – an interesting trend which could usefully be further analysed. LISU's analysis indicates

that 60% of expenditure in 2000/01 went on staff, with 15% going on buildings-related costs. Poor relations in the spending league remain document purchase and conservation materials and equipment, though a number of services will be supplementing at least the first of these heads with grant support (grants made up 8% of income in 2000/2001). Income itself makes up 15% of total expenditure, having increased in proportion rapidly in recent years.

3.7 Again, **staffing** data has not been consistently collected across the board, with the greatest detail coming from 'large' services. Nonetheless some trends are discernible. The proportion of archivists and conservators has fallen steadily since 1991 and in 2000/01 made up 35% and 8% of staff respectively; numbers also fell in the mid 1990s, though there have been recent signs that this is picking up (grant aid again?). LISU suggests that the proportionate figures may derive partly from the inclusion of smaller services in the database; other reasons may relate to the development of 'paraprofessionals' such as archive and conservation assistants. Specialist education staff remain an endangered species (down from a lowly 20 in 2001/02 to 15.5 in 2002/03).

3.8 We have not attempted to analyse trends in **holdings and storage capacity**, since again the data are fragile: LISU notes issues around the reporting of temporary or longer term 'negative vacant space' (when records are held in gangways, on floors, etc), unexplained drops in archival holdings (down 10,000 cubic metres in one metropolitan service in 2000!) and some odd-looking movements in the data submitted on air conditioning and fire extinguishing systems, for example. In addition, the tables setting out total and archival holdings *per* 1,000 population are of no obvious practical use (see 3.3 above). We would only wish to state what is obvious to all archivists, that in almost all cases archival holdings are steadily growing, and vacant space decreasing unless and until a service obtains expanded premises.

3.9 Again, an analysis of trends in **opening hours** has posed problems, partly because of incompleteness of returns pre 1997/98, partly because of uncertainties on how to deal with branch offices; LISU's estimation is that 'there is no evidence of any trend in the changes to opening hours' and no overall increase. In 2002/03, indeed, it appears that opening hours overall dropped by 9%, alarmingly reflecting a situation common to many library services. Generally, more reader seats are now provided, and more microform readers. On other, arguably more important, **access** issues, information is now being collected from 2002/03 on evening and weekend opening hours, and on the availability of computer access for the visiting public.

3.10 LISU looked at individual **reader visits**, and visits per 1,000 population, though for the reason stated in 3.3 above the latter provides less useful information. These show a consistent increase, which may have implications for resources available for other activities, for example cataloguing. Data not collected, of course, include the number of individuals using the services over a period, as opposed to visits.

3.11 Although we have added a graph on **production of documents**, we note LISU's caveats that production is 'calculated according to the method usually employed by the service (units of production *of whatever size*)' (our italics) and that figures exclude microforms – often accessed now on a self service basis - and local studies material.

Unsurprisingly, production of original documents is decreasing as the use of surrogates, albeit often unrecorded, becomes more common.

3.12 **Postal enquiries** continue to grow, with email adding to their number. We have not commented on the area of **exhibitions and displays**, since the data give no information on the size or duration of the exhibits, and cannot of themselves indicate the extent to which it contributes to an outreach strategy.

4 Usefulness and robustness of the data

4.1 In sections 2 and 3 above, we comment on the weaknesses of the data supplied over the years since the survey's inception; we agree completely with LISU on the difficulties posed by inconsistencies, incompleteness, and inaccuracies. These mean that it is difficult to base much meaningful analysis on the survey, certainly before 1998/99 and to some degree thereafter. Such conclusions as can be drawn for the sector as a whole tend to be obvious ones (more documents, more readers, less space, fewer professionally qualified staff) and so do not encourage repositories to put time and effort into completing the questionnaire. Even the value for individual services of making comparisons with like authorities - which a number of chief archivists have told us is their principal interest - is arguably undermined by the weakness of much of the information. For bodies such as NCA, PSQG and Re:source to place broader reliance on analyses derived from the survey findings over the years would be a considerable risk.

4.2 We understand that a second stage of this review will consist of a development of new approaches to the CIPFA and/or other archive surveys. What follows are preliminary suggestions to inform this work.

4.3 What we have said is not in any way intended to undervalue the considerable vision which led to the inception and development of the CIPFA/ACA/ACALG surveys, or the great efforts which have been put in against heavy odds over the years to compile, study and analyse them. However, we do believe the time is right to stand back from what has been undertaken up to now. It is essential:

- to consider what the archives sector and its supporters and allies need to know in 2003 and beyond, in an era of cross domain and partnership working;
- to review how to move from essentially input based measures to ones which can give information on outputs/outcomes, and so help produce robust and valid performance measures ;
- to draw together the work of other bodies such as PSQG, and initiatives such as the access standard, to ensure that all key areas are covered, there is minimal duplication, and results are coherently and consistently presented;
- to review developments in allied disciplines, in particular museums and libraries, and consider what lessons archives could draw from them;
- to start again, in discussion with appropriate institutions, on the definition, collection and analysis of financial data, to ensure that they are factual, genuinely comparable and demonstrably relate to service outcomes;
- to be bold enough to draw a line under the survey questions asked up to 2002/03 and where necessary to start afresh;

- to think hard about, and to consult with and test on respondents, a simplified questionnaire which will take minimal time to complete but which will contain defensible data.

4.4 Broadly, we consider that current baseline information on staffing levels and breakdown do provide useful data, as do data on income and expenditure (but not set out as a population *per capita* ratio), and to some degree on use and opening hours, though the definition and presentation of these need much refining: for example, we should like to see information collected, either here or via the PSQG or other surveys, which indicates where users come from, how many times an individual has used a service over the year, what in broad categories the subject of their research is, what other services they used for this work, and (as is now surveyed) what hours a service is open outside 9am to 5pm on weekdays. A more detailed analysis of income, particularly in identifying lottery and other grant funding, could be helpful. Additional data on records management – intake, review, deaccessions and archiving, staffing and expenditure/income *per* agreed unit of storage – would be valuable.

4.5 A fresh look at how to assess accruals, storage capacity and accommodation standards accurately is overdue. Adam Green has suggested, for example, that the cubic metre unit has proved impossible for many to use, and proposed a simpler method of box counting. We should like to see questions on cataloguing, including catalogues available on line, conservation and education output which could be clearly measured against costs. The increasing concern about cataloguing backlogs should be reflected in data relating to the amount of uncatalogued material and progress on reducing the backlog. We are unconvinced that document production figures now offer any useful data, nor that exhibition and display information is of value. If enquiries continue to be measured, they need to be broken down into postal, telephone and email for trends to be measured. More information needs to be collected on the use of ICT in services, both by staff and public. Conformity with current and new standards needs to be established.

5 Potential for extension beyond local authority archives

5.1 Our view, set out in section 4, is that the CIPFA/ACALG survey needs to be thoroughly reworked, consulted on and tested **with its present constituency** as a first priority. Recent developments, such as the move away from now artificial distinctions between ‘large’ and ‘small’ authorities, and the production from 2002/03 of regional analyses, provide positive pointers for the future.

5.2 We have been asked to express a view on which data might not translate well to the archive sector beyond local government – and therefore, by implication, on how this and/or other surveys might be extended into archive services such as those in business, universities, religious organisations, charities and the private sector, giving Re:source and other national and regional organisations a bigger picture.

5.3 We believe that most archive service groups could benefit from the collection, analysis and comparison of information on:

- levels, nature and cost per reader of using a service;
- staffing levels and nature;

- access conditions, including remote enquiries and website hits;
- conservation expenditure and arrangements;
- capacity, standards and costs of accommodation;
- size of holdings and accrual rate;
- percentage of holdings catalogued and cataloguing achieved over the year; electronic holdings;
- income, including a breakdown of sources, and expenditure, similarly under broad heads;
- use of ICT;
- records management data.

5.4 The purpose of this data collection would be to enable each service to measure itself against comparable services and look for pointers or ‘sore thumbs’ in order to improve its performance. The information and comparisons could also be of value in applying for external (or indeed internal) funding.

5.5 Having made these suggestions, we have to underline that many of the services referred to in 5.2 are extremely sparsely staffed, many with only one archivist. Compiling even a streamlined return would present many with considerable resource problems; it would be interesting to see to what degree the new regional Museums, Archives and Libraries Councils or other agencies would think it worthwhile to provide assistance, at least to get a scheme off the ground. What would be crucial would be enlisting the support of specialist archives groups within and beyond the Society of Archivists if this were to move forward.

5.6 We look forward to presenting an outline of this report to the PSQG Steering Group and, if required, to incorporating their comments in a final version.

5 Conclusion

6.1 It is clear from discussion for the composition of this report, and subsequently, that the CIPFA statistics *in their present form* are unwieldy and unworkable: issues included questions about accuracy of the data, its usefulness, anomalies, problems with interpreting financial data and the strong potential for ‘guesstimates’ being used.

6.2 AKA Partnership believes that a shorter and more focussed document should be devised, concentrating on key questions such as staffing levels, visitors (personal and ‘remote’), and cataloguing backlogs.

6.3 The questionnaire should be easy to complete and meaningless data, such as holdings calculated in cubic measurements, should be dropped.

6.4 The PSQG, in conjunction with CIPFA and The Association of Chief Archivists in Local Government, should investigate whether the questionnaire should or could be extended beyond its current contributors.

Table 1: participating services

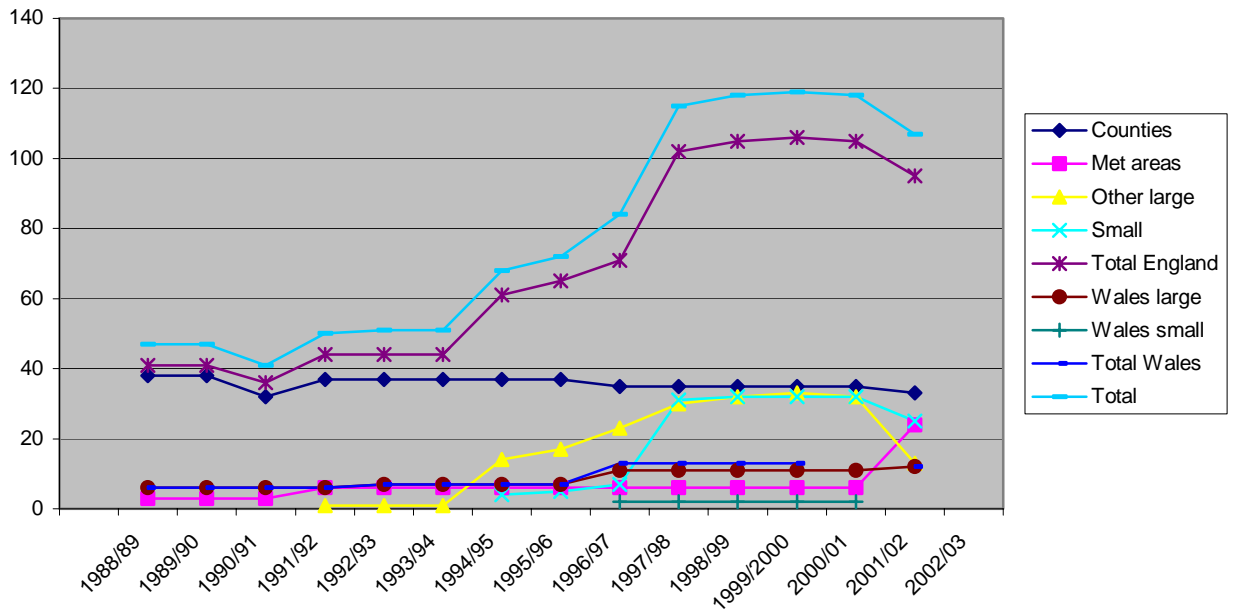


Table 2: total expenditure

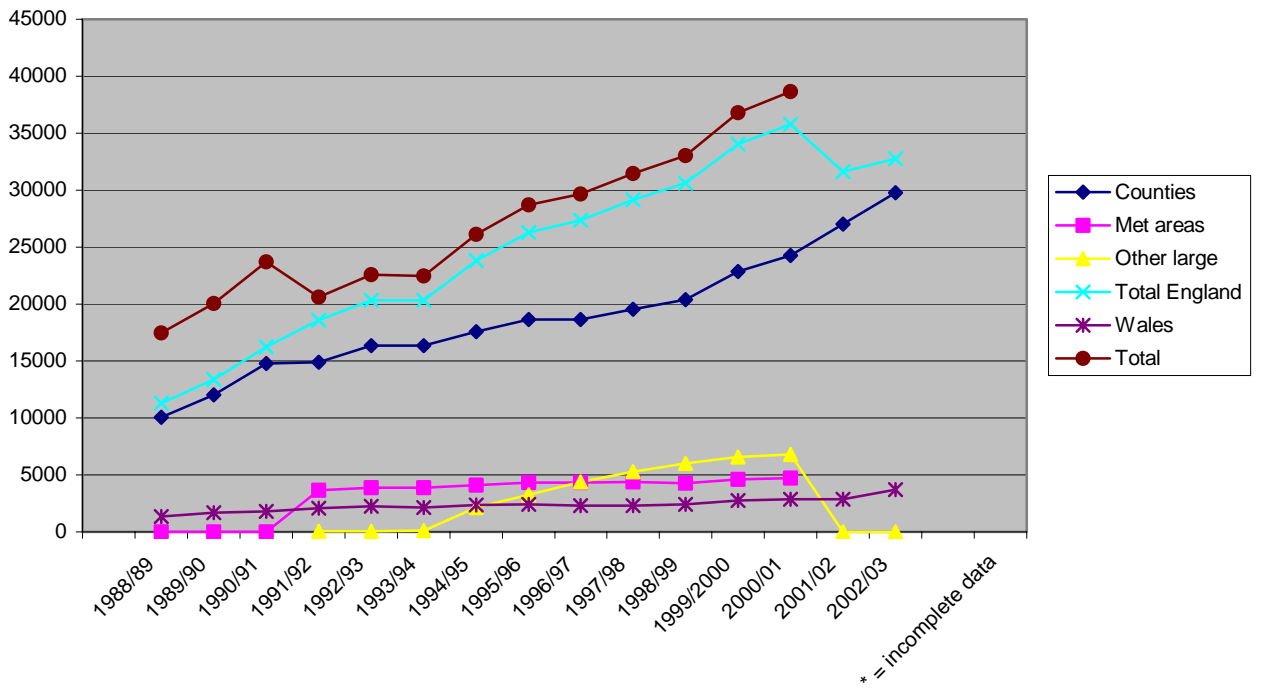


Table 3.1: archivists in post

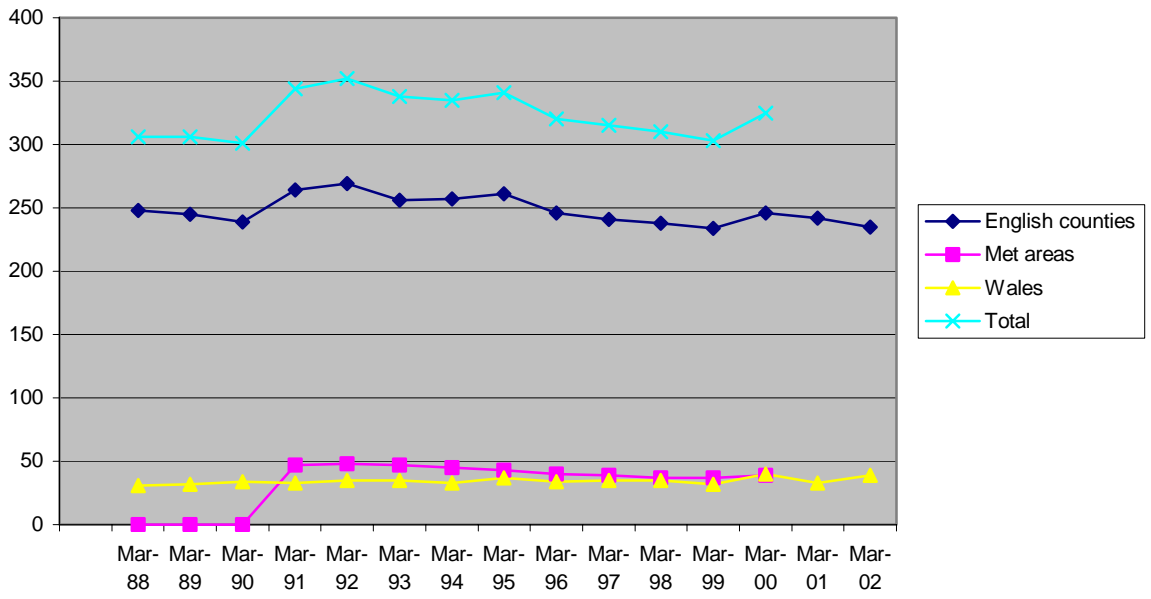


Table 3.2: conservators in post

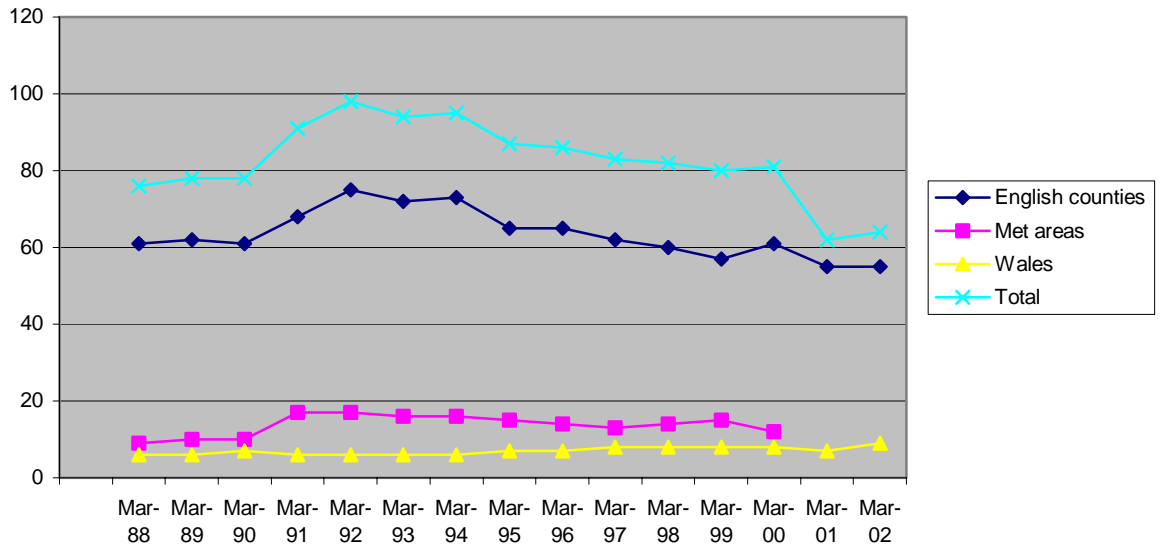


Table 3.3: other staff in post

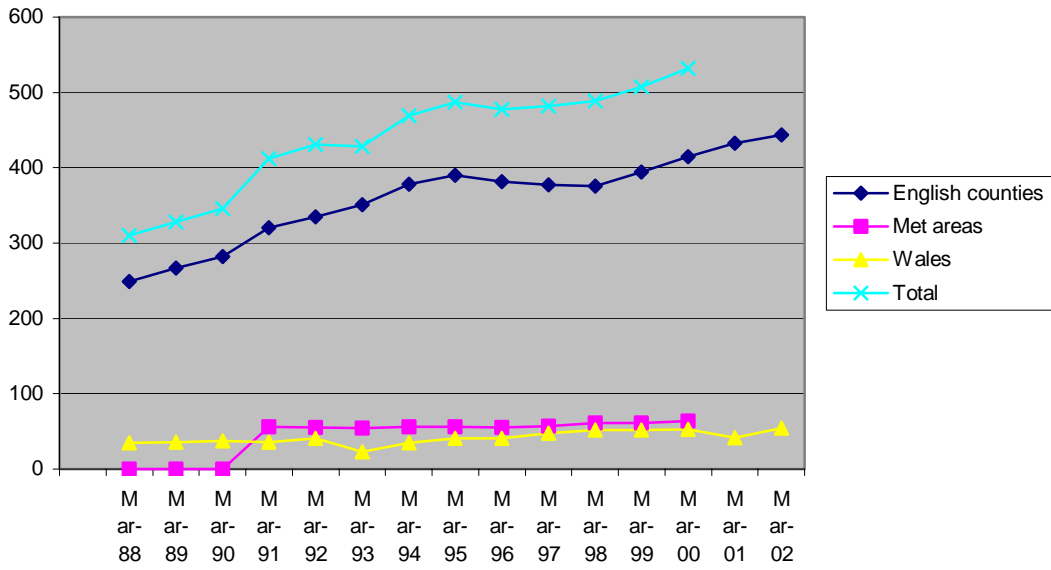


Table 3.4: total staff in post

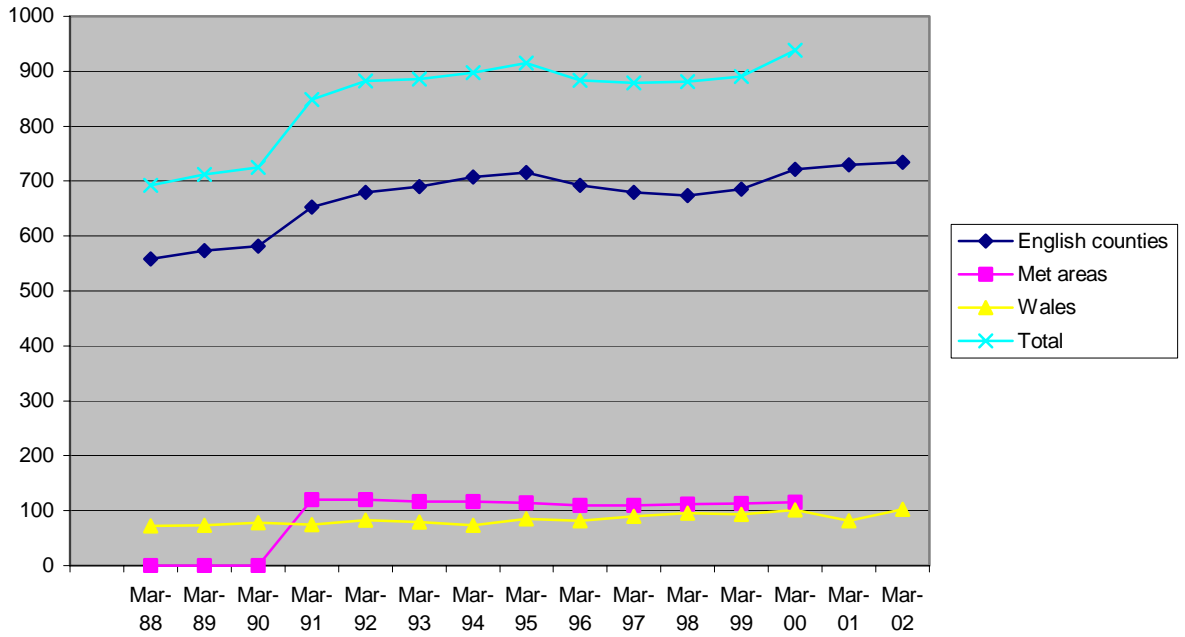


Table 4: number of readers

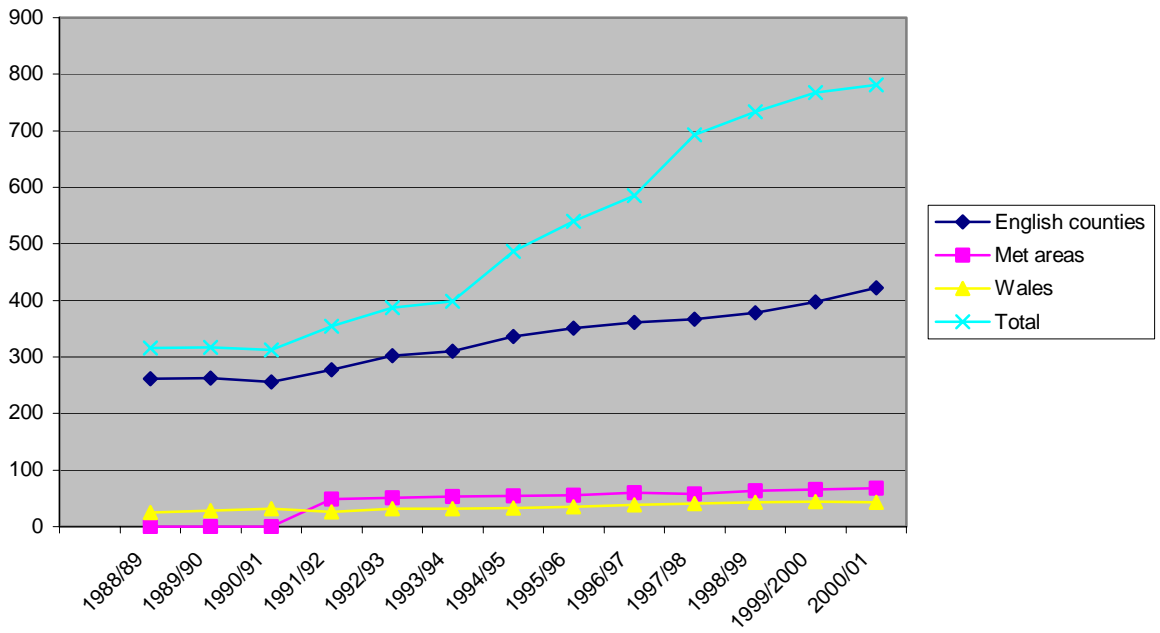


Table 5: documents produced

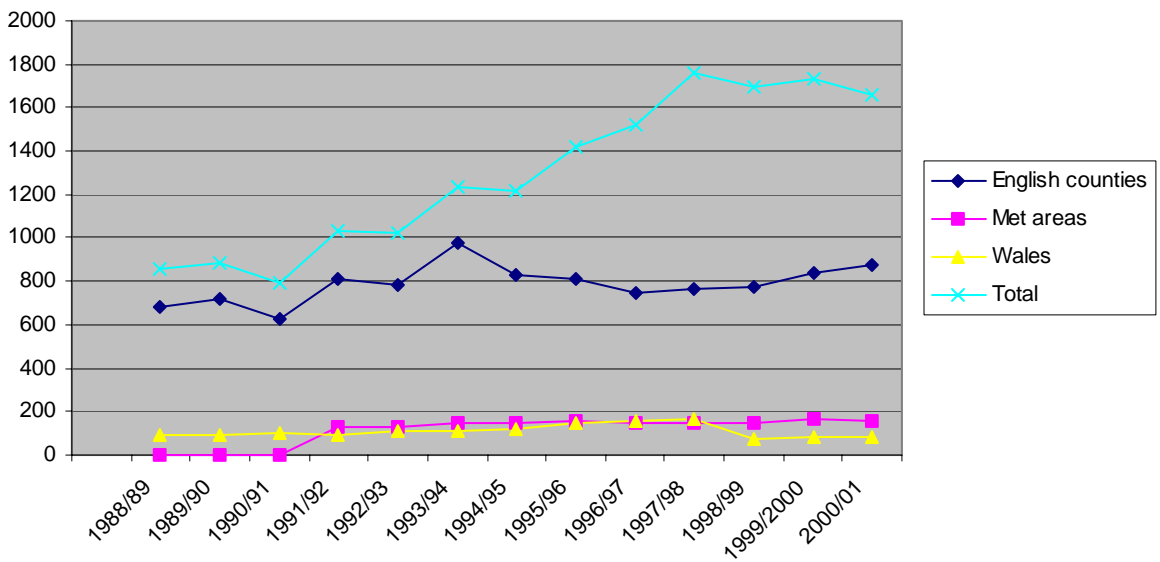


Table 6: postal enquiries

