Minutes of the Standing Conference on Archives held at the Royal Berkshire Archives on Friday 24th November 2023 at 2pm

Present: Cllr Stephen Conway (Wokingham Borough Council, Chairman), David Cliffe (Berkshire Local History Association), Cllr Guy Gillbe (Bracknell Forest Council), Donna Pentelow (Reading Borough Council), Mark Stevens (Royal Berkshire Archives), Cllr John Story (Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead), Ivone Turnbull (Royal Berkshire Archives, minutes), Dr Jacqui Turner (University of Reading)

Apologies: Cllr Jason Brock (Reading Borough Council), Joan Dils (Berkshire Record Society), Felicity Harrison (West Berkshire Council), Angela Huisman (Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead), Jacquie Kavanagh (Diocese of Oxford), Cllr Janine Lewis (West Berkshire Council), Catherine Sampson (Berkshire Family History Society), Cllr Zafar Satti (Slough Borough Council), Jules Spanner (Berks, Bucks and Oxon Law Society).

1 Minutes of the meeting held 30th June 2023

The minutes were agreed and signed.

Matters arising:

2: Annual report: the University of Reading had awarded a £5K grant for development work around historical rural diversity. The grant would fund engagement work with a small number of schools and create a piece of graphic art based on George Freeman, the African boy who came to Georgian Remenham.

7: Digitisation of parish registers: the contract had been awarded to Ancestry and a draft was with West Berkshire's legal team. As part of the contract, Ancestry would provide free access to its resources onsite at all council libraries across Berkshire.

2 Half-year report 2023/24

Mark Stevens highlighted the following aspects of the report:

- Generous financial help to purchase new material, most notably from the Friends of the National Libraries for a 1733 estate map, Basildon
- A large deposit of magistrates' court records that would qualify for additional Government funding

- Cataloguing collections including the final deposit from the Community St John Baptist, Clewer, which worked globally to provide welfare and education services
- Good progress with externally-funded projects to catalogue the Bracknell Development Corporation archive and repair items from the Thames Conservancy
- 75th anniversary events, including the exhibition 'Our Favourites' and associated videos, which were launched on Monday, the successful rebranding to the Royal Berkshire Archives and associated Royal visit

Mark Stevens extended his thanks to staff and volunteers for all their achievements during the past six months. The Chairman added his own thanks and those of Standing Conference.

Cllr Story asked where storage issues were most acute. Mark Stevens replied that the allocated shelving for large flat items and large volumes was full.

Cllr Gillbe asked about the Windsor Conservatives Association material. Mark Stevens replied that this had been rescued via Cllr Story and included the Association's earliest records. The three main political parties all encouraged deposit of constituency material in local archives and members were invited to refer collections they discovered.

Cllr Gillbe asked if there were staff vacancy pressures. Mark Stevens replied that currently there were not, and that generally recruitment in recent years had not been a problem. However, it had been harder to retain professional staff, who had more opportunities to move into better paid sectors or into areas where housing was cheaper. This issue had been recognised by Archives Board, which had recently agreed to improve terms for these staff.

3 Capital works update

Since the last meeting of Standing Conference, chief finance officers had progressed the request for extension budget uplift through their internal processes. Five councils had now delivered the necessary approval. The remaining authority, Reading, was progressing the uplift as part of its capital planning for 2024/25. Donna Pentelow indicated that a decision was likely to be made around Christmas. Once Reading had given approval then West Berkshire would move to tender for construction contracts.

4 Accreditation

The service's application for re-accreditation had been successful. In addition to meeting national standards, this meant the service would retain its licence under the Public Records Acts and, in so doing, fulfil compliance required by the joint agreement.

The awarding panel had provided a positive commentary together with a series of improvement actions for the coming years. The principal actions for Standing Conference's attention were delivering the extension and planning for the expiry of the current joint agreement, which would happen in March 2028.

Cllr Story asked when planning for beyond the current joint agreement would begin. Mark Stevens replied that Archives Board had expressed a wish to commence work during 2025/2026.

Cllr Story also asked if there was an opportunity for the six councils to use Preservica. Mark Stevens replied that the system was available to all six for electronic material deposited with the service and that the six council heads of IT had been made aware of this as it might offer them a cost saving. As contract signatory, West Berkshire was also able to use Preservica for material that would not be archived; the other five councils would need a separate contract if they wished to act similarly.

The Chairman proposed a vote of thanks and congratulations to staff on behalf of Standing Conference for being re-accredited with such a positive verdict, and this was agreed.

5 Survey of Visitors to UK Archives 2022

Ivone Turnbull reported that the visitor survey had been the first since the pandemic. The overall satisfaction rating for the service was high, at 9.3 out of 10, with highlights being a score of 9.9 out of 10 for staff attitude and 9.8 out of 10 for the quality of advice.

These results were comparable with the previous survey. All aspects of the service received high scores but the slightly lower elements revolved around technology. Action had either been taken or was planned to improve these. Since the survey the public PCs have been refreshed with thanks to a kind donation from the Berkshire Family History Society. During the autumn there would be work to modernise the online catalogue and upgrade the public WiFi. The impending parish register digitisation would also increase ways to access material.

Cllr Gillbe asked why satisfaction was lower for facilities to charge personal computing devices. Ivone Turnbull replied that the design of hidden charge points within tables meant customers may not be aware that they are there, and staff would investigate ways to increase awareness. Cllr Gillbe asked similarly about the slightly lower satisfaction for microfilm and microfiche facilities. Ivone Turnbull replied that this was likely a comment on the quality of film and fiche images, many of which were brought from other archives many years ago and the quality of which is much poorer than digital images today.

The Chairman commented that 100% of visitors identified as white. Mark Stevens replied that this outcome was dependent on who visited during the survey period, but also it was true nationally that archive users predominantly identified as of white UK ethnicity. This partly reflected the collections, which had a historical bias towards property ownership, justice, local government and the Christian faith. The service recognised that it needed to build trust with communities that did not traditionally use local archives. Part of this work was to build collections that reflected their lives. This was a long-term aim that was being pursued through advocacy and project work, though it was hoped in the short-term that the name change would help to demystify the service.

The Chairman recorded thanks to staff on behalf of Standing Conference for achieving such high satisfaction results.

6 Any other business

Mark Stevens noted that the meeting was being bookended by members of staff talking about their recent activities. Standing Conference agreed that it would like to have similar opportunities to hear from staff in the future.

7 Date of next meeting

The next meeting of the Standing Conference on Archives would be held at the Royal Berkshire Archives at 2pm on Friday 21st June 2024.