Minutes of the Standing Conference on Archives held at the Royal Berkshire Archives on Friday 20 June 2025 at 2pm

Present: Elise Battison (Bracknell Forest Council), David Cliffe (Berkshire Local History Association), Joan Dils (Berkshire Record Society), Cllr Nigel Foot (West Berkshire Council), Cllr Guy Gillbe (Bracknell Forest Council, Chairman), Angela Huisman (Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead), Andrew Moulton (Wokingham Borough Council), Donna Pentelow (Reading Borough Council), Catherine Sampson (Berkshire Family History Society), Mark Stevens (Royal Berkshire Archives), Ellie Thorne (Royal Berkshire Archives, minutes)

Apologies: Cllr Stephen Conway (Wokingham Borough Council), Felicity Harrison (West Berkshire Council), Jacquie Kavanagh (Diocese of Oxford), Cllr Neel Rana (Slough Borough Council), Cllr Liz Terry (Reading Borough Council), and Dr Jacqui Turner (University of Reading)

1 Election of chairman for the municipal year

Cllr Stephen Conway had offered to act as Chairman for the municipal year. In his absence, Cllr Guy Gillbe had offered to chair the meeting. Cllr Nigel Foot proposed both arrangements and all present agreed.

2 Minutes of the meeting held 22 November 2024

The minutes were agreed and signed.

Matters arising:

4 Wessex Film and Sound Archive: nothing further to report.
5 WiFi: the public WiFi speed had been increased firstly to 15mbps and then to 30Mbps. Thanks were due to Donna Pentelow for appealing the case within Reading.
6 The National Archives' Strategic Vision for Archives: the document was still awaited.
7 Bracknell New Town 75: the exhibition and related activities had been well-received.

3 Annual report 2024/25

Mark Stevens highlighted the following aspects of the report:

- The launch of an accessible digital repository
- Work to fulfil the Ancestry contract to digitise and publish Berkshire Anglican parish registers online
- High satisfaction scores achieved in the UK archive visitors survey
- Berkshire on Film collaboration with the Wessex Film and Sound Archives, which resulted in three successful film events; a well-received conservation training day for the Archives and Records Association; social media becoming part of core work without detriment to more traditional output; the introduction of the new office mascot 'Godric'
- New collections including for the Loyd family and Miles Aircraft Ltd; and the purchase of Barrington family papers with support from the Friends of the Nations' Libraries
- Cataloguing output of over 9000 items, including the sale catalogue collection of Nicholas Estate Agents; Samuel Elliott and Sons Ltd business records; Pinkney's Green Scouts; the Breedon family of Pangbourne; and the Reading Blind Aid Society
- A project to improve the condition and storage of Victorian railway plans, following funding from the late John Cox
- Celebrations for Bracknell New Town's 75th anniversary; the publication of creative outputs from the George Freeman project; and work on the extension

The report closed with many thanks to staff and volunteers for their help and support during the year.

The Chairman remarked that it was an excellent report. He suggested that future annual reports might include business plan objectives for the year. Mark Stevens offered to include these in tabular form after the page of statistics.

Various comments were made. Elise Battison offered thanks for the engagement with the Bracknell New Town anniversary. Andrew Moulton praised the UK survey satisfaction figures.

There were also questions on collections access. The Chair asked if the *Berkshire Chronicle* had been digitised. Mark Stevens explained that the British Library was digitising its deposited set of local newspapers for its *British Newspaper Archive* online. The *Berkshire Chronicle* formed part of that work. The Archives' set was the publishing company's own and included marking-up with advertisement fees.

The Chairman also asked when the additional Royal Merchant Navy School material would be processed. Mark Stevens replied that this is likely to happen before 2027, as the school's founding charity would celebrate its bicentenary, for which various events were being planned.

Cllr Nigel Foot asked if the Barrington material exported to the USA could be viewed online. Mark Stevens understood that it had been purchased by the University of Michigan. The university had digitised many of its collections and it was presumed that Barrington would be published at some future point.

4 Capital works update

The stage one tender for the main contract was advertised on 24 February. Five contractors had been shortlisted for stage two, for which an invitation would be issued on 23 June. Final submissions would be received in August and a recommendation to appoint made in September to West Berkshire's internal procurement board. At that point, West Berkshire would invoice the other councils for this year's contributions.

Because appointment would come too late to meet the planning permission deadline, a small contract had been let to allow 'meaningful start' before 12 August. This covered work to divert the rainwater drains. Submissions had been made to clear the pre-commencement planning conditions, and it was hoped to begin work in mid-July.

Standing Conference was also asked to note that West Berkshire intended to let a concession for parking enforcement during construction. Mark Stevens would write to neighbours and Reading ward councillors to alert them. It was also noted that Reading had obtained a buyer for Yeomanry House.

For the benefit of new members, the Chairman asked why the project had been delayed until close to expiry of planning permission. Mark Stevens explained that it had taken a year from planning application to planning approval. As a result, the project budget agreed originally by the Berkshire Chief Executives had become insufficient. A revised, uplifted budget was prepared and it was not until April 2024 that all six councils approved that. West Berkshire then appointed a project officer, Emily Owles, and commenced procurement. The latter began in September 2024, by which time there was a high risk that a main contract could not be let before planning expired.

Cllr Nigel Foot noted that the project was novel. The Archives was the county's only joint service building, and no precedent existed for the six councils jointly managing a capital project. He offered congratulations to all parties for having reached the point of project delivery.

The Chairman asked who would evaluate the main tender submissions. Mark Stevens explained that they would be evaluated in line with West Berkshire's procurement processes. He, Emily Owles and the external project manager, Mike Thurlow, would evaluate the tenders and make a recommendation. West Berkshire's procurement board would take a decision whether or not to appoint.

Donna Pentelow commented on the risk that tenders came in over budget. This was noted.

Angela Huisman asked how long the construction would take, and Mark Stevens confirmed that it was estimated at 49 weeks.

Catherine Sampson asked if there would be a photographic archive of the build. Mark Stevens said that the Archives hoped to film the build and create a timelapse video. Catherine Sampson also asked if there were plans to make a photographic record of Yeomanry House before it is sold. Donna Pentelow would speak to Reading.

5 Standing Conference on Archives: terms of reference

Standing Conference's existing terms of reference had been agreed in 2004. The Chairman had suggested that they were revised, and a draft revision had been circulated. Standing Conference was invited to make comments and/or suggest amendments.

The Chairman suggested that an additional statement be added that 'meetings may be held online in whole or in part subject to agreement by chair'.

The revised terms of reference were agreed, subject to that amendment.

The Chairman asked for a note explaining how membership of Standing Conference was identified. Mark Stevens would refer the matter to the Archives Board.

6 Any other business

None.

7 Date of next meeting

The next meeting of Standing Conference will be at 2pm, Friday 21 November 2025, at the Royal Berkshire Archives.