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Advocacy: the role of Archives *for* London

London has the greatest concentration of archive-holding bodies of any of the English regions and arguably the greatest diversity, ranging from The National Archives (TNA) and the British Library to small community holdings. Like the North West region it also has many small local authority services. Development has proceeded at very different rates and with some services being dependent on one or two professional members of staff, progress and sometimes access to the service can be affected by retirement or staff moving to other employment. There have also been a number of threats to archive services over the years and with the spending round announcements at the end of 2010, more are expected.

London archivists and users have a long record of self-help. The Greater London Archives Network (GLAN) was formed in 1982, followed by the London Archives Users Forum (LAUF) in 1987. Both bodies undertook profile-raising exercises. GLAN published a standard for archive storage and public provision in 1988 and the *Towards 2000* report of 1993 reviewed London local authority provision and contributed to improved dialogue between users, borough archivists and the then Greater London Record Office. LAUF was able to publicise the width and variety of London's extraordinary archival heritage through annual conferences.

Both bodies were also prepared to undertake fire fighting where necessary. The mutual exchange of information between users and custodians ensured that well-informed representations were made over cuts or proposed closures of publicly funded archive services. Change was never opposed for the sake of maintaining the status quo and where possible both bodies welcomed the opportunity for dialogue,

and to explore solutions where there might be a chance of maintaining service standards by different means.

Archives for London (AfL) was formed in 2005 and has inherited the dual role from its predecessor user and custodian groups. To celebrate our fifth birthday we undertook a review of our operations and structure, looking at how we could improve what we do, promote archives in London in general, and ensure we attract more institutional and individual members in coming years.

A survey of what our members wanted picked up on what is seen as our unique selling point or USP – namely that we combine custodians in a single forum, providing a chance for both to meet and communicate. This has the potential for tensions, in that users and professional archivists may not always agree on a common approach to a problem, though so far we have managed to avoid internal conflict.

A major part of our review looked at how our board operates. In the past there was no clear role for advocacy in its widest sense. Fire fighting – responding to threats – has largely been a responsibility of the chair, drawing on long experience in the two predecessor organisations. Now AfL has created a small advocacy team at board level.

Our initial focus has been on the effects of spending round reductions in the region's publicly funded services and we propose to:

- Seek to act as a coordination point on the impact of cuts, through direct contact with lead professionals and a checklist survey for services to complete and return to us (see www.archivesforlondon.org/healthcheck)
- Work closely with TNA Advisory team and the Archives & Records Association (ARA)
- Liaise and work with the British Records Association
- Ensure that the AfL team includes sector champions for local government and higher education in the first instance with the potential to expand to other areas.

Developing our web site at www.archivesforlondon.org should also allow more member use and information exchange – to add to the Twitter messages already being sent.

In continuing to make direct representations where services are placed under real threat, we have taken a different stance from ARA. Our role of advocacy is helped in

that we are not a professional body and we take a view on the long term viability and strength of an archive service, not the position of any individual staff member, however highly they may be esteemed in their local community. Where appropriate we also advocate partnership working – the kind of creative thinking The National Archive Strategy put forward as one possible route to create stronger and more sustainable services.

London local authority and higher education services face considerable challenges in the coming months. One service may well have been suspended by the time this piece appears. Advocacy, good news stories and demonstrating the value of what archives do for their specialist and geographic communities will become an increasingly important part of what AfL does. However doing our best to support services under threat may take precedence in coming months.

David Mander

Chair, Archives for London