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Culture, Media and Sport Committee
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Dear Ms Broadbridge

Response from The National Council on Archives (NCA) to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee Inquiry: Caring for our collections

This submission has been prepared specifically for consideration by the Committee.

The National Council on Archives (NCA) was established in 1988 to bring together the major bodies and organisations, including service providers, users, depositors and policy makers, across the UK concerned with archives and their use. It aims to develop consensus on matters of mutual concern and provide an authoritative common voice for the archival community. Its members include the Society of Archivists, the Royal Historical Society, Archives Council Wales, the Association of Chief Archivists in Local Government, the British Association for Local History, the British Records Association, the Business Archives Council, the Film Archive Forum, the Scottish Council on Archives, the Federation of Family History Societies, the Consortium of University Research Libraries, the British Library, The National Archives, The National Archives of Scotland, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

The NCA welcomes the opportunity to give our views to the Committee.

General points

The NCA welcomes this new inquiry focussing on collections and stewardship, which is at the core of archive services. There is a central role for archives in providing evidence of our past. Archives often contain information relating to individuals, which makes them accessible to a wide range of users. In archives, readers can expect to touch the original documents and are entrusted with them, bringing history to life in a way that neither libraries nor museums can hope to do. Yet few people realise that these resources are open to them. This is partly an awareness issue, which the NCA is tackling through its Archive Awareness Campaign, and partly a resource issue.

The archive sector structure is very diverse, including a wide range of different media, and covering every aspect of human life and society. Archives are not libraries – they contain original documents created by the normal day-to-day business of life in running government, a business or any other endeavour. As such they are the immediate, unmediated raw materials of history, whereas when reading a published book, the author comes between you and the facts of a past event. Without archives, how would we know what actually happened in the past? They defend democracy by enabling everyone to see and explore the documents of the past. Archives are not museums because most of an archives' collection will be two-dimensional, although many museums also keep archival records which shed a different light on their collections. But the biggest difference is that you will not just be allowed to explore these original items, it will be expected.

An archive is an holistic service: in an ideal archive service materials are identified as having historical value, accessioned or acquired from the donating body, assessed for physical condition and given active conservation if required (as they will be from now on throughout their life in the archive).

They will then be catalogued with a description of their contents to enable readers to find material relevant to their researches, and stored in a filing system within an environment that preserves them most efficiently. They will be brought out for consultation by being ordered by the reader from the filing system, in much the same way that books in large libraries, such as the British Library are ordered for consultation from stacks. The materials may be used to publicise the services of the archive, digitised and published on the archives' website (if they hold the copyright), used as the basis of workshops with local schools or outreach to older people's homes, or put to a myriad of other uses.

Without good conservation, fragile documents cannot be consulted and may crumble away and be lost altogether. Without cataloguing, no document can be consulted. Without knowledgeable and experienced staff, readers may not have the skills to locate the information they are looking for, nor will the archive open to readers at all. The business of an archive is the holistic management of the life-cycle of the raw materials of history.

Since humans began forming civilized societies, we have had an essential need to record and evidence our activities. The basic use and purpose of archives is to communicate and co-ordinate what we've done with other people and to future generations. Our grandchildren will not thank us if we bury nuclear waste while at the same time not keeping accurate records of where we have buried it. We also have to keep records in order to prove and justify our actions in law. With the advent of the Freedom of Information Act as well as a raft of other legislation, this need to create and preserve records, and archives (as collections of records greater than the sum of their parts) as entire datasets, has never been greater. This means that archives uniquely have both an evidential, democratic and human rights importance as well as a cultural value.

Family history may be big business, but there are much more surprising uses of archival records. Dr Dennis Wheeler, a research climatologist based at the University of Sunderland, has been using the information recorded in the extensive collection of ships' logbooks held in archives to help answer important questions in the field of climatic change: one of the biggest environmental issues of the twenty-first century. During the seventeenth-century English ships were used to forge the links of an expanding Empire that stretched from the Americas to the Orient. Each ship, and often each officer (captain, master and lieutenant) on board that ship, was required to maintain a daily logbook describing the navigation, management and state of the vessel. Close attention was also given to the weather of the day. It is estimated that some 100,000 logbooks have survived, covering the world's oceans and seas in a network of sea-born, albeit unintentional, meteorological 'observatories' that compare favourably with those that exist today. What uses might we find for the huge number of datasets created and deposited with archives in the UK and around the world every day?

If the 21st century is the age of the knowledge economy, archives truly are the powerhouse sustaining it.

1. Funding, with particular reference to the adequacy of the budget for museums, galleries and archives, and the impact of the London 2012 Olympics on Lottery funding for their sector

There are a number of serious funding issues to be addressed regarding archives. Archives in the UK are funded from a number of different sources: local record offices and archives are funded through their local authorities and the DCLG, The National Archives is funded through the DCA, the MLA administers the DCMS funding for archives development which is not ring fenced, unlike that for libraries and museums (which also may be funded through their local authorities (*see* point 1.a below)). Regional Film Archives suffer from an even more complex funding structure outlined in the NCA's and the Film Archive Forum's evidence submitted to the previous inquiry "Protecting, preserving and making accessible our nation's heritage". This lack of joined-up thinking at central government level has led to the present position where no one government department feels responsible for the archives sector in the UK. As a consequence, the sector lacks a prominent champion to help raise its profile and represent the broad range of its interests with central government.

1.a In a written answer to a Parliamentary Question (number 63290, Hansard Column 648W, 18th April 2006), Mr Lammy, Minister for Culture, reported that in 2005-6, the DCMS spent £299.4m on their sponsored museums and galleries, £40.1m on regional museums, £8.6m on local libraries and yet just £0.3m on archive development: around one thousandth of the total spend on museums. The same written answer confirmed that over the period 2001-2006, the DCMS total spending on museums and galleries has risen by over 30%, with the MLA spend on regional museums increasing by over 143%, while that for archive development has been completely static. This funding position is in stark contrast to the public value placed on history, historic documents and archival materials that relate directly to them and their interests or locality. A piece of research recently commissioned by the NCA investigating the burgeoning area of community archives has estimated that the number of community archives in the UK reaches certainly into the many hundreds and quite possibly into the thousands. This grassroots movement demonstrates the massive desire not just to be passive ‘consumers’ of archival heritage but a great appetite to be engaged in the preservation and celebration of archives. Such activity encourages social cohesion, a sense of place, skill sharing and the raising of aspirations through local community endeavours, for instance, there has been a movement in the Welsh valleys to record the experience of the communities around the pits by the communities themselves. Similarly, Sheffield ex-steel workers, ambivalent towards the depiction of their community in the films “The Full Monty” and “Brassed Off” decided to set up a community archive telling of the closure of the steel works from their point of view. Many of these community groups look to their local record offices for support and expertise but because of local government budget cuts, the archivists in local authority archives do not have the capacity to help (*see* point 1.b below).

1.b The NCA are extremely worried that some local authorities have drastically reduced the budgets of record offices and county archives over recent years, putting both the collections and public access to them at risk. A number of record offices have had to reduce their opening hours as a result of annual budget cuts, and in one instance, a retiring County Archivist was replaced by a student archivist as a one-person service. As The National Archives explain in their evidence to this inquiry, the local record offices provide one of the main areas of public access to historical documents. If the UK is truly serious about Caring for our Collections, the enormous backlog of cataloguing of archival holdings (without being catalogued, items in collections are inaccessible) and the drastic shortage of conservators to care for them are two of the biggest problems to overcome. In the report of “Protecting, preserving and making accessible our nation’s heritage”, the Committee acknowledges that the greater responsibilities placed upon local authorities should be recognised with greater resources. However, unless some of this additional funding is ring fenced for archives, the NCA is doubtful whether it will be directed in accordance with the Committee’s desires. Two of the main reasons for the development of this situation are the statutory standing of archives and exclusion of archives from the Comprehensive Performance Assessment. Archives, unlike libraries, are not a statutory service, and central government is issuing mixed messages to local government with The National Archives and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council urging councils to deliver high quality services and the Department for Communities and Local Government resisting calls for a clearer statutory foundation for local archive services, even though this has had support from local authorities themselves (*see* the evidence of The National Archives for further details on the present situation). Archives unlike libraries are not yet included in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment, which necessarily means that the temptation for local councillors is to divert their ever-decreasing funding to those activities which do. Action to rectify these anomalies would be very welcome.

1.c The UK archives sector welcomes the opportunity to draw in new audiences because of the activity surrounding the 2012 London Olympics. We are especially excited by the inclusion within the Cultural Offer of a structured community archive of experiences before, during and after the Olympics and the regeneration that will accompany it. This community archive will document the people’s experience of the Olympiad and its benefits for future generations, while also being a valuable activity in itself for those involved. But for this to happen, the reminiscences, photographs, blogs, webpages, news items, oral history and many other materials that will make up this archive must be deposited with a custodian archive with enough capacity to preserve it and make it accessible. We are concerned at the possible effects of the non-Olympic Lottery funds being diverted to the Olympics. Because of

the lack of significant funding, many archives look to the Heritage Lottery Fund as their only viable source of any development money. Should this source be diverted, it would be disastrous for many archive services, and would expose the sustained underfunding of the archive sector at a time when it would be at its most embarrassing with all the world watching us. Archives do not want to let the team down.

1.d The collections in UK archives, libraries and museums require investment in their preservation and conservation care in a sustainable way or we will lose them. These collections are important because they are the legacy of previous generations. If we are to ensure their survival as a legacy to future generations as well, there is a need for investment in appropriate building stock to ensure their care. The evidence presented to the Committee by The National Archives explains this in greater detail. There is very little funding for conservation, cataloguing, or any of the core requirements of collection care. What core funding archives have is often completely swallowed up by the priority of ensuring access to the collection and staff costs. Few archives have even a part time conservator on their staff, and must rely on general preservation measures to care for their collections. But the facilities for even this minimal acceptable level of care are uneven between archives: few archives have BS5454 quality storage facilities. There is a need to increase the supply of archival and conservation skills to ensure preservation of collections for the future: the reduction in funding for bursaries is a problem for training institutions and we encourage the government to review this policy. Regarding paper conservation the picture is precarious, but regarding digital preservation (that is ensuring that electronic documents and other articles such as spreadsheets, photographs, emails and other digital objects) the situation is critical. CD-ROMs have an estimated life expectancy of 10 years before they degrade physically or their encoding becomes unreadable. Similarly, hard drives and servers have to be updated and migrated regularly to ensure that they are accessible and their contents readable. The challenge of electronic media is not just for film and sound but increasingly for conventional archives, personal papers, and websites. Even within central government, The National Archives is finding that there are few well-embedded procedures for the care of digital objects. Within the both the House of Commons and the House of Lords, it is official procedure that all digital documents are printed out for filing, which is neither economic, efficient nor environmentally friendly. Hardly any local authorities have any facilities or procedures for archiving digital materials, which now include electoral rolls, planning applications and social services files. Obviously, the preservation of these materials is of legal and democratic importance, but there is no funding earmarked to tackle the problem, at local, regional or national levels (*see* point 3.f below).

1.e As well as the under provision and under co-ordination of core funding streams, there is a lack of non-core funding streams available to archives apart from the Heritage Lottery Fund. In the last twelve years, the Heritage Lottery Fund has awarded a much needed and very welcome £100million to archives. But this sum should be compared to the over £2billion awarded to museums and built heritage over the same period.

2. Acquisition and disposal policies with particular reference to due diligence obligations on acquisition and legal restrictions on disposal of objects

2.a Most archives services have no acquisition budget at all. The vast majority of archives are held as gifts or on indefinite loan with the local record offices. In recent years, as interest in accessing historic materials has grown exponentially, in accordance with economic laws so has the monetary value of the materials on the open market. Entire archives, often of much greater research value since they bring their historical context with them, are now appearing for sale, often for sums much greater than the entire annual budget for the whole local record office. Most worryingly, owners of collections deposited by their ancestors are now more likely to withdraw the collection for sale, or ask the record office for a commercially set sum to acquire them. The need for such action often arises not through greed but because of Inheritance Tax, and the Acceptance In Lieu of archive materials has eased such situations. Where Acceptance in Lieu is not an option, there is a consequent risk of collections being broken up to sell off piecemeal, which destroys much of their research value. Individual pieces are regularly offered on eBay. There is also the ever present risk of materials being sold abroad, or being

sold at all when it is illegal to do so. Although the National Advisory Service of The National Archives carries out limited monitoring of the markets, they are under resourced to monitor the majority of such activity. The irony is that the sums required to assist in the acquisition of archival materials are insignificant compared to those needed to meet similar crises in the national art or museum collections, many of which seem to concern works which are not British in origin, are not as integral to the UK's cultural story, nor do they add to the understanding of the United Kingdom's past in the same way that even moderately important archives do.

2.b Increasingly, archives are expected by their parent bodies to generate their own income. Archives services whose holdings include materials deposited on indefinite loan often do not hold the copyright to those materials and are thereby prevented from using their collections commercially in that way, and even when the archive owns the materials themselves, they still may not own the copyright. While deposit has had great success over the years in securing large parts of documentary heritage of local communities which would otherwise have been lost, agreements between the depositors and the place of deposit usually state that the items can only be consulted within the local record office or archive. The complexity of copyright law in this area is currently being examined by The Gowens Review and the NCA looks to The Review for clarification on this issue.

2.c More than curators in museums, librarians and archivists must be aware of choosing items to include in their collections whose cultural value justifies their retention, but the responsibility on archivists is greater because they are dealing with unique original materials. This is a highly specialised skill, but only one such among many required by qualified archivists. The point to be made is that archivists and archive services are not passively trying to acquire and preserve ever more material but to develop their value and interest to meet the needs of their readers and to widen and develop their readership and their engagement with readers.

3. The remit and effectiveness of DCMS, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council and other relevant organisations in representing cultural interests inside and outside Government.

3.a As well as the local record offices, there are cathedral and diocesan archives, charity archives, business and industrial archives, community archives and a host of other physical and virtual archives relating to specialist interest groups, black and minority ethnic groups, faith groups, single issue groups and others. Obviously, each player in the archives sector in the UK has a viewpoint that differs slightly from others in its focus. The NCA attempts to bring together all these voices to present a united view and to make sure that common themes are shared and emphasised. This pattern is reflected in the activities of other organisations and members of the Council. Despite the best efforts of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, with a discretionary budget of £300,000 per annum, supporting this sector appropriately is impossible, and their remit is unclear. As stated before, the ultimate responsibility for sections of the archives sector rests with different central government departments. The NCA is concerned that the main vehicle for co-ordination of activity between these departments, the Inter-Departmental Archives Committee (IDAC) has recently been 'downsized' and many of its powers and responsibilities reduced or annulled, particularly the recommendations from the Archives Task Force report (*see* point 3.b below). This action has obviously sent out negative messages to the archives sector concerning the value central government places on archive development, and reduced the ability of individual central government departments to take action on issues affecting their own remits.

3.b Following on from the successes of the Renaissance in the Regions programme for museums and the Framework for the Future programme for libraries, MLA commissioned a large scale analysis of what priority actions were needed to begin to develop the UK archive sector to its full potential. "Listening to the Past, Speaking to the Future: the Report of the Archives Task Force" was published in 2004 and submitted to central government. The proposals would have united archival provision and access throughout the UK through the development of a single online entry point to all archival holdings throughout the country, and a programme of modernisation of service structure, investment in archive staff skills and the creation of innovative and exciting partnerships. The DCMS accepted all of the Report's recommendations, but despite the relatively modest, value-for-money requirement

of £11.96million over three years (compared to the over £100million awarded to Renaissance and £13million awarded to Framework, both additional to core funding), no money at all was allocated to developing archives' vast potential as cultural assets or even to secure the conservation of these existing publicly owned materials for the immediate future. Some of these key actions were taken on by the MLA's partners but without additional funding. Monitoring of their progress was allocated to IDAC, but even that has now disappeared. The NCA calls on the DCMS to take the excellent start of the Archives Task Force Report, update it and support the achievement of its vision. There has been little evidence of positive support for the archives sector from DCMS since the publication of the Government's policy on archives (which came from the Lord Chancellor) and the commissioning of the Archives Task Force. Indeed, in our experience there is a lack of understanding of the archives sector at DCMS with archives appearing very low on the departmental structure. As a minimum we would like to see the creation of a post with responsibility for archives (with the word "archives" in the title) within the DCMS hierarchy, at the same level as that for libraries and museums, and that the DCMS can be seen to take their responsibilities for archives as seriously as those for museums and libraries, evidenced by provision for consistent and sustained core funding, and parity of prominence for archives on their website.

3.c The NCA welcomes the role of TNA (National Advisory Services) in monitoring collection policies of individual archive services. However the gaps in the coverage of collection policies lead to risks to parts of our documentary heritage, for instance national organisations and businesses which fall outside remit of local offices, but do not fall within the collecting policies of the national institutions.

3.d There are entire sections of archive provision that attract no public financial support, but which contribute significantly to the heritage enjoyed by the UK public. The Business Archives Council has recently entered into a partnership with The National Archives to employ a Business Archives Development Officer, but his task is enormous compared to a single post's time with no budget. Other sectors do not enjoy even the luxury of one post to assist their development. Within central government there is at present very little evidence of consideration of the vast potential public value hidden in such collections. For instance, the British Gas Archive contains valuable records of industrial heritage that once belonged to the public, but are now privately owned by a commercial body that does not see its preservation as a business priority. Consequently, it has been at risk for some time, but due to the pressure brought to bear by the Business Archives Council, the threat may be receding. does not see its preservation as a business priority. Consequently, it has been at risk for some time, but due to the pressure brought to bear by the Business Archives Council, the threat may be receding. We believe that the Goodison Review recommended tax relief for businesses for money spent on care of archives. There are a number of points that specifically concern corporations. The review recommends that tax relief should be available to corporations which gift pre-eminent objects or archives to the nation. Additionally, the *douceur* arrangement which at present is available to private individuals who offer items for sale to a museum and galleries should, it suggests, be extended to corporations. The review also notes "The risks to important business archives are particularly acute. Many companies conserve their archives professionally...other companies are more careless about these important historical records" and recommends that the Inland Revenue should issue a statement of practice making it clear that companies can include the care and conservation of business archives, and the costs of providing access to them, in their costs before the calculation of corporation tax.

3.e The NCA would like to draw the Committee's attention once more to problems of the public regional film archives. Although there has been progress since the "Protecting, preserving and making accessible our nation's heritage" inquiry, with the development of the embryonic National Strategy led by the British Film Institute, there is still a need to clarify the responsibilities and funding streams within the UK's custodians of audio-visual heritage. For instance the British Film Institute has been allocated the strategic responsibility for the regional film archives by the UK Film Council, but without any transfer of funds to assist. The need for adequate and sustained funding for the realisation of the devolved national collection of audio-visual heritage media is now urgent to make a success of the agreements made recently between the regional film archives and the BFI to form a federation of

partners. Without this funding, not only will the opportunity this initiative offers be lost, but the collections of the public regional film archives themselves will continue to degrade beyond reprieve.

3.f The NCA would like to record its concerns about the National Preservation Office which appears to be unclear as to its remit, and whose profile has diminished significantly over recent years. The mechanism to provide national advice on preservation in collections already exists in the NPO, but the reasons for its ineffectiveness are unclear. The NCA welcomes the “Collections Link” initiative of the MLA, which aims to provide a one-stop library of collection care advice and a tailored advice helpline for museums, libraries and archives. However, we are unclear how this initiative dovetails with the NPO and other bodies such as The National Archives who appear to have the central government remit for digital preservation, but who are yet to issue any useful advice on the subject for smaller archives.

3.g Despite the problems of digital preservation, we welcome the positive role of IT in opening up archive access to new audiences. Much excellent work has been done at The National Archives in digitising census records and most recently the Domesday Book. However, the impact of these achievements is marred by the fact that The National Archives was under resourced to an extent where these digitisations are not complete and contain mistakes. Similarly, when the 1901 Census went live online, the server crashed under the weight of over 1million hits per hour. The NCA trusts that The National Archives has been properly funded to make a smoother success of the launch of the 1911 Census.

3.h Although MLA of all the central government departments and agencies has taken the most responsibility for the archives sector, there is still a lack of archives representation or expertise on the MLA Board at national or regional level. It would be unthinkable that a Board member of the MLA Council would not know what the British Library or the British Museum were, but a Board member admitting without shame that they didn't know what The National Archives was has been witnessed in the recent past. MLA sees its role as primarily about promoting government policy objectives in the sector rather than representing the sector's - and more particularly the users' - interests within government. For instance, the parity of prominence of archives with museums and libraries on the MLA partnership's websites is as much an issue as with the DCMS. This seems to the NCA to be evidence of the confusion regarding such a responsibility within central government.

It is worth reiterating a statement from the report of the previous inquiry: “Once destroyed, heritage assets cannot be recreated”.

Yours sincerely,
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