

Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP
Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport
Department for Culture, Media and Sport
2-4 Cockspur Street
London
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20 May 2004

Dear Secretary of State,

Archives Task Force Report

I am writing to you with the National Council on Archives initial views on the Archives Task Force (ATF) report and to raise with you some issues about how the recommendations might be progressed.

The National Council on Archives (NCA) is a membership organisation, which represents a broad spectrum of the archival community including user groups, professionals, national and regional bodies. It aims to provide a single voice for the archival community and to lobby on matters of common interest. The NCA works in partnership with The National Archives, The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries (MLA), the Society of Archivists and the Association for Chief Archivists in Local Government. You will be aware that I was a member of the Task Force, although in a personal rather than a representative capacity.

I should start by saying that the NCA is truly excited by the possibilities which the report offers to us. We congratulate you on commissioning the report - the first strategic look at archives by DCMS. We interpret this a sign of your department's commitment to supporting the development of our sector, which, to date, has not featured as prominently as it could in the cultural landscape.

NCA broadly welcomes the ATF recommendations. In particular, we endorse the emphasis on raising the profile of what archives have to offer people, the creation of greater diversity of use and the importance of meeting user and potential user needs through more online access. We support the main recommendation of the Gateway and its clear links to the existing National Archives Network.

We do, however, note that not all evidence gathered in the course of the ATF's gestation has followed through fully into the recommendations. To our minds, this has led to an underplaying of the infrastructural funding and scale of investment required to make the other recommendations a sustainable reality.

We would also like to have seen at least some of recommendations framed in the context of MLA's promotion of partnership working between museums, libraries and archives.

Whilst recognising the current constraints on public expenditure, and the place of the ATF within the MLA's own *Investing in Knowledge* bid to your Department, we are disappointed that the report makes no explicit funding bid to you. We would urge you and your officials to think creatively about how archives might take advantage of existing schemes funded by your department, outside of your consideration of MLA's bid.

As you know, government responsibility for archives is spread across a number of departments and, in the past, this seems to have weakened the ability of our domain to lobby effectively for attention. We need to collectively develop better strategic leadership and direction for the domain. We understand from MLA that your department holds responsibility for advocating for the ATF with other departments. Your support is vital if elements of the ATF that involve other government departments are to proceed. We would be pleased to learn about DCMS's plans for doing this and would be more than happy to help in this process, if you felt that this was appropriate.

The very process of discussion and consultation, which the report has generated, has been invaluable. Those of us who believe in the power of archives to change lives have thought more critically than before about what that means for people in the 21st century.

Archives have never been more popular – there were 116 million hits on The National Archives website last year and a third of our potential users are likely to research their family history over the internet in the next 2 years. We must ensure that the momentum created by the ATF to fulfill this demand is not lost and that we seize the possibilities that it offers for the people of the UK.

Before you make a formal response to the report, we would welcome the opportunity to discuss with you and your officials how we can best make the recommendations come alive.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Nick Kingsley,
Chairman, The National Council on Archives