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**NATIONAL  
COUNCIL ON  
ARCHIVES**

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# Responding to Change

## NCA's Response to MLA's Restructuring Plans

### Background

The 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. Our members make up a specialised and highly adaptable workforce of knowledge and information managers working across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors.

This document is the National Council on Archives' response to plans announced recently by MLA for a major restructuring of the organisation, aimed at channelling more money into frontline cultural activities and engaging in a more joined-up government approach in the regions.

Whilst NCA recognises the clear benefits to the consumer in terms of reducing duplication in the delivery of cultural services across the museums, libraries and archives sectors, we would also wish to warn against the blurring of the distinct lines between the three component parts of the sector. By recognising the different skills sets, the diversity of offer and the particular needs of users of each service, the MLA will be able to work with all parts of the sector to deliver a more robust and sustainable model. There are areas of common concern where joint working will deliver real benefits to the sector as a whole, but NCA sees the danger of losing the clarity of message and benefit of each part of the sector and would be concerned about losing the potential for diversification into new work areas for each part of the sector if there was a move towards a more homogenous sector. The combined output of the three distinct elements of the MLA family is far greater than the sum of its parts and NCA would wish MLA to seriously consider making it clear that each part of the sector will be treated fairly and equally.

Increasingly, the work of the NCA is in the field of advocacy on behalf of the archives sector; in developing the advocacy capacity of the sector and in ensuring that the

policies the NCA advocates on are relevant and complementary to the wider cultural and information policy agendas.

The NCA's funding position rests on working in partnership with the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, as well as with The National Archives. Without this partnership, the NCA would simply not be able to deliver an effective service. MLA's announcement of moving to a new business model to sharpen delivery offers a chance for NCA to strengthen the existing areas of joint working and, more importantly, to identify new opportunities for joint delivery, service improvement and policy development across the archives sector. It is against this background that the NCA is responding to MLA's challenge and to put our case for how the archives sector can work with MLA to deliver the developing new mission.

## Regionalisation & Joined Up Government

The NCA is developing new ways of working with new partners outside of the traditional constraints of the archive sector in order to raise awareness of extensive role that information and knowledge management professionals can play in the delivery of public services and increasing performance outputs, across the fields of cultural services, education & learning and corporate functions.

The NCA recognises that the ethos of local government is changing and programmes are increasingly plugged into a national agenda, including cultural, educational and community focussed policy developments. The NCA also agrees that local government-based archive services need more support to promote consistency and quality.

The NCA welcomes the opportunity for the archive sector to fully engage with the new regional advisory groups. The experience of local archive professionals as deliverers of consumer-oriented, front line services will be invaluable to MLA in delivering on its aim of improving the quality of cultural service delivery for consumers. In other areas of local government work, the NCA has already seen the role of local agreements and regional partnerships push services into being offered jointly, across borders and we will positively engage with any initiatives which seek to balance the need for operational efficiencies against the objectives of offering accessible, identifiable and quality public services in the archives field.

To this end, the NCA is actively engaging with new partners such as the LGA, IDEA, DCLG and others in order to both develop our own organisational policies and priorities, but also to expose the archive sector to new influences and to identify new opportunities for the archive sector to demonstrate the wealth of skills, knowledge and experience it can offer in the delivery of cross-sector programmes and how it can add value to the "bottom line" in terms of performance measurements across the public sector.

The NCA agrees that the current set up of government agencies, NDPBs and others within each region can lead to duplication and inefficiencies. The NCA broadly welcomes the shift in focus of the MLA towards a more proactive role in delivering agendas in a cross-sector approach. The NCA is confident that the changes proposed by MLA, along with a new emphasis towards a more quality enhanced business-to-business relationship between MLA and individual archive services, delivered at the regional level, will result in a more effective service being delivered to the archive sector.

## Digitisation and eAccess

The NCA welcomes indications from MLA that there is a pressing need for a follow-on programme to the Acces2Archives initiative. There is much more to be done in terms of the digitisation of catalogues, as the latest returns to The National Archives self assessment of local authority services has shown, and we agree that this must remain an urgent priority.

As well as promoting and assisting local authority services to digitise their catalogues, there is much to do in terms of helping to improve e-access. Many archive services are at the beginning of the process of promoting e-access, but with the background of a high consumer interest in family and local history, the opportunities for archive services to raise their profile and offer quality, high demand services to the public is clearly apparent. The role of Web2 innovations must be exploited in further helping the sector to get best out of new web technology, promote interactivity and introduce new ways of delivering a service that is more relevant, more accessible to wider audiences (especially younger users) and more entertaining for the consumer.

NCA would support a greater emphasis on developing the skills agenda for the sector and believes that this is central in improving the capacity for success of digitisation, promoting e-access and providing a more consistent services across the archive sector to a wider audience.

## Cultural Change, Education & Communities

The archive sector has a real part to play in promoting greater cultural understanding, increasing performance outcomes for local authorities in terms of measurements of local satisfaction, identity with the area and about how effectively people feel they can affect change and decision-making in their communities. The archive sector must develop a greater understanding of the need to make archives more relevant to the 'here and now' and NCA has already begun to forge links with IDEA, LGA and DCLG. Recently the NCA have responded positively to the DCLG's new "Place Survey" consultation and has explored ways of developing a better understanding of the role of archives in the cultural and community programmes being rolled out by government. NCA would wish to work with MLA to develop arguments relating to the role of the archive sector in adding to the debate on place shaping and other government community-based programmes. Already, MLA and NCA are working in partnership through the Community Archives Development Group (CADG) to promote the work of community archives in providing opportunities for people to become more engaged with how archives can help to tell a community's story, share common interests and improve community cohesion.

NCA welcome the opportunity extended to the archive sector to engage with the DCSF initiated "cultural offer" programme, the 5 hours per week in schools aimed at exploring cultural activities. Working with TNA Unlocking Archives learning resource and through the provision of the NCA-led Archive Awareness Campaign, NCA sees a clear role for the sector in not just delivering in terms of school-based activities, but also in developing more activities in the adult, continuing and informal learning environments. NCA is responding to the DIUS consultation on informal adult learning and will be illustrating the case for using archive services in the development of adult

ICT, research and writing skills with real case studies of where local services have worked with education and training providers to deliver learning programmes.

## Sector Development

NCA recognises the need for the archive sector to develop its capacity to deliver on the challenging new agenda being set by MLA. Management training and staff development across the board needs urgent attention, especially if initiatives such as digitisation, e-access and developing more diverse audiences are to succeed. The NCA Public Services Quality Group (PSQG) is working to promote best practice across the sector and enables practitioners to access a network for mutual support and collaboration.

There is also a need for greater flexibility in the workforce and more effort needs to be made to break down the old barriers between archivists, records managers and other professionals in the information, data protection and knowledge management fields. There is also a pressing need to promote archivists as highly professional staff with transferable skills and to develop how they view themselves. The measure of success will be shown in the promotion of better career development and enhanced promotional prospects for both new entrants and existing professionals. Initiatives aimed at diversifying the workforce also need to be addressed and NCA would be looking to work with MLA, the wider sector and the higher education sector.

The NCA is also aware of the need for a closer examination of the structure of the archive sector. There are many different groups, representing various interest groups, professional specialists, different disciplines and types of employer bodies. The NCA brings together many of these different groups to provide a single, authoritative voice for the whole of the archive sector, however, there is a case for investigating the scope for rationalisation within the sector to provide greater clarity of purpose, minimise the risk of miscommunication from the sector and to promote greater consistency in terms of quality of service delivery. The NCA need to advocate effectively on behalf of the sector, to promote the idea of a professional archivist community and to protect the sector against the danger of services becoming de-professionalised and to ensure that archivists are seen as valued members of staff in whichever sector they work in. The NCA can best do this through a more streamlined and less diffuse archive sector.

The plans by MLA to provide more assistance to the sector in terms of advice on fundraising, identification of match-funding and developing opportunities for self-generated income are very much welcomed. The NCA are in a unique position to help MLA deliver this enhanced service to the archive sector, having already been heavily involved in the development of MLA's fundraising mentor programme and through the ongoing work of the NCA Archive Lottery Advisory Service, which has, to date, helped to lever in £68.8 million in lottery funding to the sector.

The NCA has significantly progressed plans to set up the All Party Group on Archives. This Group will provide the sector with an opportunity to discuss public policy development, raise awareness of the work of archives and influence decision-makers and opinion-formers at the highest levels. The response from the sector has been universally positive and MLA has also agreed to become a member of the Group. Events for the APG are planned for April, June, July and November.

## Conclusion

The NCA looks forward to working with MLA to deliver its new mission, centred on delivery and the promotion of excellence across museums, libraries and archives sector. The NCA will ensure that archive services engage with the developing customer-centred ethos, widening participation and promoting new ways to encourage access and modernise delivery.