

A REVIEW INTO LOCAL STUDIES PROVISION IN SUNDERLAND

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Annual Scrutiny Conference was held at the Stadium of Light on 11th June 2009 and at the Sustainable Communities breakout session a number of viable policy review proposals were formulated for discussion by Members of the Committee. At its meeting on 15th June 2009, this Committee discounted a review of Local Studies as the in-depth policy review for 2009-10, however it was decided that a smaller review should be undertaken by the Committee.
- 1.2 Further to this a Scoping Paper for a review into Local Studies provision was presented to, and agreed by the Scrutiny Committee at the meeting of 15th December 2009 which contained the background, context and terms of reference for the review.

2. Aim of the Review

- 2.1 To review the current service provision for Local Studies in the City, considering how to further promote local history in a joined up way, and provide a clear strategy for development in the area.

3. Terms of Reference

- 3.1 The Terms of Reference for the review were:
- (a) To provide a national and local context to the provision of Local Studies;
 - (b) To consider the current service provision and remit for Local Studies in the City;
 - (c) To identify and highlight the issues that may affect effective service provision;
 - (d) To explore the possibilities of developing working arrangements with other local authorities in the region.
 - (e) To consider examples of best practice and innovative provision from local authorities and other key stakeholders across the country in relation to Local Studies.

4. Methods of Investigation

- 4.1 The following methods of investigation were used for the review:

- Desktop research
- Site visits
- Council Officers
- Local Studies Users
- Local History Societies (through the Sunderland Heritage Forum)
- Partner organisations

Full details of evidence gathering can be found in **Appendix 1**.

5. Findings of the Committee

National Context

- 5.1 There are no statutory requirements with regard to the provision of Local Studies, although the Public Libraries & Museums Act (1964) requires local Councils to provide a local library service which is comprehensive and efficient and that is available to all who wish to use it.
- 5.2 There are many differing models within local authority areas, these vary in size and delivery, and recently there has been a trend to merge Local Studies collections with Archives Services.
- 5.3 The CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) published national guidelines for the provision of Local Studies in the late 1990's. More recently CILIP published guidelines for Local Authorities, in which the provision of Local Studies featured prominently in what makes a good Library.
- 5.4 The BBC 1 programme 'Who do you think you are' is a **genealogy documentary series** in which celebrities go on a journey to trace their **family tree**. Seven series have now been broadcast and the show regularly attracts an audience of more than 6 million viewers. The popularity of this, and other similar television and radio programmes have lead to an increase in public interest in researching family history.
- 5.5 Research suggests that customers researching their family history make up between 60-70% of the visitors and enquiries to Local Studies. Other aspects of research undertaken within Local Studies include local history, the history of a house or building, information about local businesses, planning related enquiries and school or college projects undertaken by students.
- 5.6 The Heritage Lottery Fund and the New Opportunities Fund offer funding for innovative projects in the area of Local Studies.

- 5.7 Projects undertaken within Local Studies' can encompass a wide remit in terms of community participation including themes such as Sense of Place, Community Identity and Social Inclusion.

Local Studies Provision in Sunderland

- 5.8 The Committee found that Sunderland has two main centres for local studies provision, the main centre within the City Library and Arts Centre on Fawcett St, and a Heritage area within Washington Town Centre Library.

- 5.9 The main Local Studies centre is dedicated to the collection of local information in various formats to ensure the ongoing collection of history in Sunderland and the local area. It holds a number of locally significant collections including;

- The Washington Armstrong Collection – black and white images from the early 1960s;
- The Lilburne Collection – a unique collection of pamphlets and posters relating to Sunderland dating from the late 18th and early 19th centuries;
- The Corder Manuscripts – a collection of 38 complete volumes relating to topography and family history;
- The Sunderland Yearbook from 1904; and
- Shipbuilding collections

- 5.10 Equipment in the Centre includes a digital reader, four microfilm readers, four microfiche readers and one public access pc specifically for use in local studies research. Machinery within Local Studies is limited and regularly breaks down, however every effort is made to ensure machines are regularly serviced and maintained, including the introduction of a rolling replacement programme for the machinery.

- 5.11 The Committee were pleased to note that all PCs throughout the library network in Sunderland have access to Ancestry Online, which is a very useful source of information for census and birth, marriage and death information. This is purchased through a yearly subscription and is a well used resource in the City, receiving approximately 80,000 hits last year.

- 5.12 The growth in popularity of local and family history has seen an increase in the demand placed on the Local Studies centre. In 2008/09 there were 62,000 visitors to the centre and 13,766 enquiries. Email enquiries have increased significantly in recent years and originate from all over the world, including Australia, Canada, France and Spain.

- 5.13 The size of the Local Studies centre is an issue. It restricts the development of the service in providing educational and practical handling sessions as well as being unable to display materials. Regular users of the centre are frustrated by the lack of space and physical issues such as the lighting within the centre.

Limitations in funding and the inability to identify a suitable location have hampered previous attempts to source alternative locations.

- 5.14 The Committee were concerned to note that the capacity to preserve and store old and delicate materials is an issue for the Local Studies service. There are no environmentally controlled conditions available and this makes the effective conservation of historical collections challenging. The Committee found that these types of storage facilities are extremely expensive to purchase and whilst these were in place in Newcastle City Library, this was planned and budgeted for in the initial plans for the state of the art facility.
- 5.15 The dedicated Heritage area within the newly refurbished Washington Town Centre Library is also well used. The Heritage area has two digital reader printers and six public access PCs. Locally relevant materials are displayed, currently the display promotes the connection to Washington DC, including a signed copy of the Friendship Agreement and a copy of George Washington's will.
- 5.16 The Heritage area is large and this space is utilised to host 'talks' from local historians which had proved to be very popular. A dedicated learning centre, equipped with PCs is attached to the Heritage area which is used to deliver Family History courses.

Staffing Resource

- 5.17 The Local Studies Librarian post is a dedicated post. The remit of this post has been changed recently to reflect the increasing need for business development, community participation and funding opportunities. The Committee found that the Heritage Service Manager role in Newcastle City Council is mostly strategic and outward looking, which has increased the identification of opportunities to develop partnership working; play a more active role in local history societies and groups and increase the range of work being undertaken to promote audience development.
- 5.18 The Committee found that staff within the service are highly regarded by those accessing the Local Studies service in Sunderland and their knowledge and expertise is invaluable. At any one time the centre is usually staffed by the Principal Librarian and one Library Assistant, who give advice and assistance to those coming into the centre, as well as those making enquiries via email. The Committee noted that whilst no research facility was in place, staff could often spend a large amount of time answering queries.
- 5.19 The Committee established that other organisations in the region charged for the use of staff time in researching family history and this was limited to one or two hours at a rate of £60 per hour. This had the advantage of generating an income

for the service, as well as limiting the amount of time spent on more detailed enquiries.

Partnership Working

- 5.20 The Committee found that traditionally, cultural organisations have worked in silos, so there is much scope to increase regional and cross-sector working. Newcastle Heritage has begun to tackle this and is working with local organisations including Tyne and Wear Archives Service, the Laing Art Gallery and local universities.
- 5.21 The Local Studies service is engaging in some partnership working, for example, there are good links with organisations such as Tyne and Wear Museums. In addition there is currently work ongoing with colleagues in the Conservation section, who deal with the city's built heritage, to develop a more joined up approach to the overall management of Sunderland's heritage.
- 5.22 The Committee noted that other cultural organisations had found many benefits to increased partnership such as;
- Increased problem solving through the identification of common issues
 - Pooling of resources, including the ability to 'borrow' items for display in the City
 - Increased collaboration, including jointly funded projects
 - Increased access to services for members of the public
 - Reduced duplication of work (for example, through the transcription of records)
- 5.23 The Committee also found that links were in place with other local authorities in the region. The Principal Librarian sits on the regional Local Studies group of the Society of Chief Librarians which are meetings aimed at sharing best practice and discussing regional issues. In addition the Cultural Heritage Development Officer is also a member of SLAM, which is a regular meeting held between staff from Culture and Tourism and Museums where a project is planned to undertake joint developments.

Volunteering Opportunities

- 5.24 The Committee learned that cultural organisations in the region, particularly within the local studies/heritage areas of local authorities use volunteers as a way of increasing capacity. There does not appear to be any dialogue between local authorities regarding the use of volunteers and it is not known whether in some instances volunteers are duplicating work being completed elsewhere in the region, for example in the transcription of records.

- 5.25 The Committee were pleased to note that regular users of the Local Studies service often spend a large amount of time within the centre and get a lot of enjoyment from conducting research into family history.
- 5.26 The Committee found that users often provide informal support to staff in the Local Studies centre by providing assistance to those people who need help with researching family trees. Regular users also transcribe handwritten records into electronic format, this not only enables records to be more easily located, it also makes it easier for users to read the information and make use of it accordingly. In this way they effectively act as volunteers for the service. This informal activity is not currently coordinated; those who wish to participate do so informally and on an ad-hoc basis.

Accessibility

- 5.27 The Committee found that the internet has transformed family history research, making it more accessible to those who wish to research their family tree. The digitisation of historical material not only increases accessibility but also assists with the preservation of materials. Digitisation costs are significant however this appears to be a priority for the future of local heritage.
- 5.28 In Sunderland, the digitisation of photographic material is now ongoing through the 'Then and Now' project. The website Flickr now holds 339 images of photographs of the City and there are approximately 1000 images waiting to be uploaded to the site. The Flickr website received 20,000 hits last year from Sunderland.
- 5.29 The Committee was concerned that there can be copyright issues around the production of photographs, however the Local Studies service have a policy in place for all new photographs being donated to the collection. Existing materials received in the past may have some issues attached which would be explored individually.
- 5.30 The Local Studies service delivers free Ancestry Website Taster sessions throughout the City and the Worker's Education Association (WEA) also delivers Family History courses at the Central Library and Washington Town Centre Library. All courses relating to family history research are very well attended. In order to attract a wider range of people, Washington Heritage recently delivered a course on a Saturday morning, this proved very popular with those who cannot access sessions on a week day.
- 5.31 The Committee established accessibility as an issue for those researching their family tree, however this is not just an issue for Sunderland. Members of the public often have to visit several different organisations and services in order to access the records they require to research their family tree. Users of Local Studies find this frustrating and people may be deterred by the complexities of

accessing the necessary information. Often the organisations that hold the information are spread across the region and can be difficult to access using public transport. The Committee felt that better signposting was needed to assist and support those people who were inexperienced.

- 5.32 The Committee found that whilst ideally more historical material would be held within local communities, to do this would reduce the accessibility as it would increase the amount of travelling required.

Audience Development

- 5.33 The Committee found that work is being undertaken by the Local Studies service in local schools including the 'Their Past, Your Future' project, to promote the history of Sunderland. In addition, a project is also being delivered with local schools to encourage them to think about Local Studies and what should be preserved now for future history.

- 5.34 The Committee learned that audience development is a priority for Newcastle City Council. Heritage Librarians are 'getting out' into local communities and using local historical topics as a hook to get people involved. An example of this was a project about migrants to the City. They had found this to be a good way of engaging the people who are traditionally hard to engage in the Heritage service.

Consultation

- 5.35 At present the Local Studies service within Sunderland does not regularly consult or share information with users, however through the focus group conducted as part of the evidence gathering, the Committee found that users had a lot to contribute in terms of developing the service further. The Committee found that consultation had been used substantially throughout the development of the Heritage Area within Newcastle City Library and this had brought many benefits to the service, including a sense of ownership for users, who are pleased to see that they are being listened to.

- 5.36 In addition to consultation Newcastle Heritage held a number of 'Friends' groups, one of which being for the Theatre Royal in Newcastle.

6. Conclusions

The Committee concluded:-

- a. That Local Studies is an important service for the residents of the City and contributes to several agendas for the City, particularly that of community cohesion;

- b. The Local Studies service is a well used service which has seen an increased demand placed upon it in recent years and that as a result of the increased demand the size of the Local Studies centre in the City Library has become an issue and limits the development of the provision;
- c. The effective conservation of historical material is of great importance, however there are significant costs involved in purchasing a storage facility of this kind;
- d. The dedicated Heritage of the Washington Town Centre Library is an important and well utilised service for local people;
- e. The Principal Librarian post for Local Studies should have a strategic, outward looking focus, thus encouraging the development of the service in terms of partnership working and audience development;
- f. That staff within the Local Studies section are a valuable asset to the service and well regarded by users of the centre, however capacity is limited in being able to offer a research facility for users and answering general enquiries. Other more complex enquiries could have the potential of generating a small income for the service;
- g. That efforts had been made to work in partnership with other organisations, and that increased partnership working would bring many additional benefits to the Local Studies service;
- h. That a more coordinated approach to the use of volunteers would increase the capacity to provide advice and assistance, whilst ensuring the most effective use of time spent transcribing records held within the service;
- i. That accessibility is a common issue across the region and better signposting is needed to ensure people know how and where to access records and information. Increased digitisation of historical material will not only preserve them more effectively but will increase accessibility through use of the internet;
- j. That the Local Studies service does undertake a lot of work within schools but the importance of 'getting out' into the local community should be acknowledged as a way of engaging with those who would not otherwise utilise the service;
- k. That the provision of courses on an evening and weekend attracts those people who cannot attend on a week day;
- l. That regular consultation with users of Local Studies would increase customer satisfaction and raise the services' awareness of any issues; and finally
- m. That many of the issues the Committee found were impacted upon by financial resourcing. This is a considerable issue at the present time for all services and

in recognition of the current financial climate, an innovative approach should be taken to ensure local studies provision is adequate.

7. Recommendations of the Committee

7.1 The Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Committee has taken evidence from a variety of sources to assist in the formulation of a balanced range of recommendations. The Committee's key recommendations to the Cabinet are as outlined below:-

Recommendation 1: That the Principal Librarian role incorporates a strategic overview of local studies.

Recommendation 2: That an assessment of the feasibility of a research facility be undertaken as a means of generating income and increasing capacity.

Recommendation 3: That partnership working with other cultural organisations in the region including archiving bodies, records offices, museums and other local authorities in the region is increased.

Recommendation 4: That volunteers are formally coordinated through the development of Family History Champions and Family History Surgeries, and that appropriate training and development is given.

Recommendation 5: That a guide is produced which explains the different organisations in the region who may hold information relating to family history, where they are based and how to get there.

Recommendation 6: That new projects are identified for increased work within local communities and that funding opportunities are sought to undertake these.

Recommendation 7: That the Family History and Ancestry Website Taster session be delivered in the evenings and at weekends to attract a wider range of people.

Recommendation 8: That there is increased consultation with users of Local Studies by implementing a 'Friends' group or other such means of regular consultation.

Recommendation 9: That funding opportunities continue to be explored and accessed whenever possible, particularly in order to make improvements to the current provision and develop further community projects.

8. Acknowledgements

8.1 The Group is grateful to all those who have presented evidence during the course of our review. We would like to place on record our appreciation, in particular of the willingness and co-operation we have received from the below named:-

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Julie McCann, Principal Librarian, E-Resources and Information Services;
John Wood, Librarian
Karen Newton, Washington Town Centre Library Manager
Kath Cassidy, Heritage Service Manager, Newcastle City Council
Stuart Miller, Chair of the Sunderland Heritage Forum
Margie Stewart-Piercy, Regional Manager for the Museums, Libraries and Archives Service
Service Users

9. Glossary of Terms

Microfiche and Microfilm: A piece of photographic film, containing printed information

Ancestry Online (www.ancestry.co.uk): A website holding records for birth, deaths and marriages as well as other information which enables users to trace their family tree

Flickr (www.flickr.com): A website for posting and sharing photographs

Digitisation: The process of creating a digital representation or image of an original through scanning or digital photography

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