

Appendix 1:

1. Visit to Sunderland Local Studies Centre – 3rd February 2010

As part of evidence gathering for the review, Members visited the Local Studies Centre within the City Library on Fawcett St on 3rd February 2010. Officers present included, Vicki Medhurst (Cultural Heritage Manager); Janet Robinson (Cultural Heritage Development Officer); Julie McCann (Principal Librarian, E-Resources and Information Services); John Wood (Librarian)

The Local Studies centre holds many historical items and records that document the City's history, including those areas not previously part of the Borough of Sunderland in the Coalfields area of the City.

Resources include books, maps, parish and electoral registers, census records, newspapers and trade directories. In addition users have access to information in microfilm and microfiche format, these are heavily used resources and are supported by appropriate machinery including a digital reader, four microfilm readers, four microfiche readers and one public access pc specifically for use in local studies research with access to Ancestry Online.

The internet has transformed the researching of family history. As well as provision within the centre, the main library has thirty public access pcs, all of which can be utilised for general family history/local studies research as well as to access Ancestry Online. Sunderland hold a subscription with Ancestry Online and the website received in excess of 80,000 hits in a year from users within the City. The website was accessible in all local libraries in Sunderland.

Efforts are now being concentrated on the digitisation of photographs, which will not only preserve photographs effectively, will also increase access to them through the website Flickr, which received 20,000 hits last year in Sunderland. Several digitised photographs can now be purchased by members of the public and it is hoped this can be rolled out further if it proves popular. There are copyright issues however there is 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.

Members were also informed of the special collections held at the Local Studies Centre and were given the opportunity to look at some of these, such as the Corder Manuscripts and the Lilburne Collection.

There are storage issues involved in preserving historical collections, currently the Local Studies centre have no temperature and humidity controls in place in the storage areas which does have an impact upon conservation. This would be something that would be explored further should funding opportunities become available.

The Local Studies centre receives approximately 350 visitors per week but an average of 1000 enquiries per month including face to face, telephone and email enquiries. Enquiries come from all over the world and the time Librarians spend researching and responding to individual enquiries can often be time consuming.

Members were also interested in staff resource for the Local Studies centre and were advised that there is a Local Studies Librarian post which is currently being advertised, the remit of the post having been changed to reflect changes within the service.

Finally Member's attention was drawn to the physical space within the Local Studies centre. The area is small and this restricts the ability to hold educational or practical handling sessions.

The tour was drawn to a close and Members thanked officers working in the Library for hosting the visit and contributing to the evidence gathering.

2. Focus Group - 3rd February 2010

A focus group was held on 3rd February 2010 to gather further evidence and discuss issues local studies provision. The Group included;

- Users of Local Studies
- Officers of the library, including Vicki Medhurst (Cultural Heritage Manager); Janet Robinson (Cultural Heritage Development Officer); Julie McCann (Principal Librarian, E-Resources and Information Services); John Wood (Librarian); Sylvana Robinson (Library and Information Assistant) and Gemma Farrow (Library and Information Assistant)
- Stuart Miller (Chair of the Sunderland Heritage Forum)
- Margie Stewart-Piercy (Regional Manager, Museums, Libraries and Archives) (MLA)

Local Studies Users

Members were interested in gaining the views of regular users of the Local Studies centre. Users commented that the machines available to them were old and regularly break. The Cultural Heritage Manager confirmed that this is a recognised issue, all machines are maintained and kept in working order and a rolling programme of replacement has been introduced to ensure older machines are replaced regularly.

The regular users often give help and advice to members of the public who have not had previous experience of researching their family tree. In addition they also transcribe the handwritten records held within Local Studies in order to increase the ease with which they can be located and understood. Members queried whether this was formally coordinated, for example, within the Local Studies Centre but also regionally with partner agencies to ensure there was not a duplication of effort? It was confirmed this currently there were no formal arrangements in place with regard to the use of volunteers.

Members asked users what made them come to the Local Studies Centre so regularly, users commented it was interesting and kept them engaged and occupied.

Members were interested to know whether users were consulted with formally on a regular basis, through 'friends' groups for example. They were advised that this does not happen currently but there was an opportunity to develop this further.

Users also wished to comment on the physical area of the Local Studies. They felt that space was an issue, as was the lighting in the area and the general layout. The Cultural Heritage Manager confirmed that the relocation of Local Studies had been explored in the past; however limitations in funding and establishing a suitable location had hampered this.

Partnership Working

Members enquired as to whether the Local Studies Centre worked in partnership with other organisations in the region. The Cultural Heritage Manager confirmed that Local Studies has strong links with Tyne and Wear Museums. Sunderland is also represented on the regional Local Studies group of the Society of Chief Librarians, the objective of these meetings is to share best practice and this is a forum at which regional issues can be raised for discussion.

Members commented that increased partnership working sub-regionally and cross sector would ensure a consistent use of volunteers and avoid duplication of effort. In addition Members commented they would like to see a more joined up approach with built heritage. The Cultural Heritage Manager confirmed that this relationship is being developed and initial meetings have taken place. The Regional Director of the MLA acknowledged the tendency for cultural organisations to work in silos and there was work to be done regionally around this.

Financial Capacity

The Cultural Heritage Manager confirmed that funding was an issue and limited the capacity for the Local Studies centre to develop and improve. In light of the economic downturn it is anticipated that funding may be limited further in the future.

External funding opportunities were regularly identified, for example the 'Your Past, Their Future' project was funded by the MLA. The Regional Manager for MLA commented that the economic downturn was having an impact on the MLA's ability to provide as many opportunities for bids for funding as it previously has been able to offer.

Members commented that Local Studies cuts across a number of targets in the Local Area Agreement and that this should be clearly demonstrated to ensure adequate resourcing in the future.

Accessibility

Members discussed access to local history and queried the possibility of developing local studies/heritage areas within local areas, particularly those on the outskirts of the City. Library staff confirmed as more records are digitised and put onto the internet accessibility to historical information and records would be increased, however it would not be feasible to divide up history and give to local areas as this would reduce accessibility as users would have an increased need to travel. In addition there are limitations space and storage opportunities for the conservation of historical material.

Users of Local Studies commented on the difficulty members of the public have in understanding where they can find information. Researching a family tree often means people have to travel outside of the City, for example to Durham County Records office, poor transport links means it is not always easy to do this.

The Resources and Performance Manager commented that increased digitisation would enable people to access more information within their own home or on a pc in their local library.

Audience Development

Members asked what is being done to involve those people who do not currently use the Local Studies Centre. The Local Studies centre has held Ancestry Website Taster sessions delivered at local libraries across the City which will become a regular service in 2010. Family History courses are also delivered by Workers' Educational Association (WEA) in libraries.

In addition work is being done in schools to engage with children and young people to find out what they think should be collected now as a record for the future

Members drew the session to a close and thanked the members of the Focus Group for their input into the review process.

3. Visit to Washington Heritage Area - 3rd February 2010

Members also visited the Heritage Area within Washington Town Centre Library on 3rd February 2010, the visit was hosted by Karen Newton (Manager, Washington Town Centre Library and Customer Service Centre)

Members were advised that the Library was newly refurbished and were shown the dedicated Heritage area that holds two digital reader printers and six public access pcs. In addition Members were shown the collection of display material promoting the connection to Washington DC, including a

signed copy of the Friendship Agreement and a copy of George Washington's will, as well as a number of books and maps relating to the local area.

Members were informed that the Heritage area was very well utilised, however currently, usage of the area was not monitored so no exact figures could be given.

Member's commented that the area was large and spacious and were informed that the space had been used to host 'talks' from local historians which had been popular. In addition to the Heritage area Members were shown an education room, equipped with pcs, which was to deliver the Family History courses also held in the City Library.

Members thanked officers working in the Library for hosting the visit and contributing to the evidence gathering.

4. Visit to Newcastle Heritage Centre, Newcastle Central Library - 3rd February 2010

As part of the Task and Finish Working Groups evidence gathering a visit took place to the Heritage Area within the newly built Central Library on 8th February 2010. The tour was undertaken by Kath Cassidy, (Heritage Service Manager), Newcastle City Council.

The Heritage area was purpose built as part of the newly developed Central Library, it is a much larger facility than previous, with a larger number of microfilm readers, microfiche readers and pc's. The facility also has environmental controls within the storage facilities to ensure conservation of historic materials.

The Heritage Service Manager confirmed that her role was a strategic one and as part of her remit she collaborated closely with other organisations such as the local universities, Tyne and Wear Archives Service and the Laing Art Gallery. In addition she also sat on a number of local historical societies and groups. This strategic overview enabled better links and relationships to be developed.

The importance of digitisation was recognised and so investment was made from the Heritage budget each year in a continuing programme.

The Heritage Service Manager confirmed a lot of emphasis is placed on audience development, encouraging those people who wouldn't usually access the Heritage area to come and access the facilities available. Heritage Librarians carry out work in schools, as well as inviting children and young people into the Library to view parts of historical collections. Work is also carried out with teachers to make links to local history within the curriculum.

In addition, staff visit the local community to talk to specific groups of people about their local history and encourage them to participate. Events are also held for different groups for people, for example at present a project is ongoing with a group of people with learning disabilities.

In terms of potential sources of revenue for the Heritage area, the Heritage Services Manager confirmed that the library charged to carry out research into family or local history, the price was currently £60 per hour. The Heritage section had also purchased a rare book scanner and were currently exploring the potential for charging other organisations to use the facility. When asked whether there was a target in place for revenue and the Heritage Services Manager stated that currently there was not but this might change in the future in response to budgetary pressures.

Consultation is undertaken with users of the Heritage area, particularly so during the development of the new building. Users of the area are invited to make suggestions and comments and these suggestions are often implemented, however there are no regular focus groups in place. Consultation has resulted in an increased ownership of the service by users, who are often pleased to find their suggestions have been implemented.

Volunteers are used within the Heritage Area and they are currently indexing the electoral roles, this work was not coordinated with any other organisations in the region as the records were specific to Newcastle.

The Heritage Area in Newcastle is very well resourced, in addition to the Heritage Service Manager there are three dedicated Library Information Officers and eleven support staff, although not all of these are full time. The support staff work across the Library to cover sickness and annual leave.

Members gave thanks to the Heritage Service Manager for hosting the visit and contributing to the evidence gathering.