



Making Charity Records Matter: a strategy for charity and voluntary sector archives and records

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1 Introduction

This document sets out a strategy for the management, development and promotion of the archives of the UK charity and voluntary sector. It first sets the scene by looking at the nature of both the sector and its archives, and then outlines the strategy's aims, scope, objectives and audience.

Where the term 'charity' has been used for brevity and clarity, it should be read as referring to both charities and voluntary organisations unless otherwise specified. Further definitions can be found in the glossary.

2 Background

2.1 The sector

Diverse is probably the most apt description for the charity and voluntary sector in the UK. Individual organisations can be tiny or large and their geographical focus ranges from the local through national to international activity. They operate under a wide variety of governing documents, including trust deeds, royal charters, memorandum and articles of association (incorporation as a company) and they can also be unincorporated associations or societies. Sources of revenue are donations from the public and corporate bodies, legacies, income from trust funds, investment income, grants from other bodies to fund specific work or a mixture of these. The incomes of individual organisations range from very small amounts to millions of pounds a year. Some involve large numbers of people in their activity, while others involve very few. The public perception of an organisation can be high in local, national or international arenas, while others have little public profile.

Many organisations are directly engaged in providing services or undertaking research, but others fulfil their aims by awarding grants from their funds to enable others to undertake the necessary work. Some are campaigning organisations, which attempt to achieve improvements in the area they are interested in by seeking to change public attitudes about what is acceptable or seeking legislation to deal with the issue.

A few figures give an idea of the nature of the sector. There are approximately 350,000 registered charities in England and Wales and approximately 25,000 in Scotland (Northern Ireland's system of charity oversight is currently being established, so figures are not yet available). In England and Wales 747 charities have an income of over £10 million a year, accounting for 53% of the total of the £48.4 billion annual charity income. At the other end of the spectrum, nearly 80,000 charities have an annual income of under £10,000 a year. [December 2008 or latest figures from <http://www.charitycommission.gov.uk/registeredcharities/factfigures.asp> and <http://www.oscr.org.uk/AbouttheRegister.stm>]

A similar pattern applies to voluntary organisations, of which there are more than 600,000 operating in the United Kingdom.

The charity and voluntary sector has been compared to the business sector, but in terms of scale caution should be exercised when making comparisons. Even the largest charity organisations have annual incomes that are dwarfed by major companies' profits, yet a charity's impact is not necessarily related to its size. The work of a small charity, and the records it generates, can provide a rich archival legacy that is not necessarily matched by a large company.

2.2 The sector's records

Every archive community can point to what makes it special and charity archives are no different. It is a charity's beneficiaries that are key to the existence of the organisation and to what makes their archives particularly special.

Charities frequently work in areas of huge political, cultural and social interest, on a range of issues from debt and poverty, famine, war, the environment, and human and animal rights, to education, health, social care, religion, and the arts. They have introduced or been part of technical and social innovations, sometimes successful, sometimes failures, but often significant and of historical interest.

The organisational histories of charities are also often highly compelling, many being established by extraordinary people who want to "do something" and who have an inordinate impact on society. From the late 18th century anti-slavery movements to the late 20th century environmental organisations, charities can bring about long-lasting historic change. Their subsequent growth and development (and/or demise) can also be fascinating and their archives are a rich resource for historians and other academics, while providing a beneficial understanding of their own and other organisations' pasts to charities themselves.

Politically, culturally, and socially, charities are worthy of study but this very outward looking dynamism can lead to under-development of their own records and heritage management. Historically, their drive to do good work leads to a focus on the 'here and now' rather than on the past. Short of funds for front-line services, charities often give low priority to keeping archives which, if they even exist, are often under-resourced and under-staffed.

Charities are required, for statutory and legal reasons, to keep certain categories of records for an appropriate period of time so there is usually an awareness of records management issues, particularly relating to financial, donor, and personnel matters. This is particularly the case in larger organisations. Some charities are required by statute to provide historic information to beneficiaries, for example people who have been in care, and this information is usually provided from a charity's historic records.

The growing need for accountability of charities as organisations receiving individual and public donations means that they are often subject to scrutiny. Questions of "how can they prove they really make a difference?" to "what legitimacy do they really have?" and "what is the basis of their expertise?" are helping to make charities realise that opening their records to wider public scrutiny could be a positive move towards greater accountability. However, unlike public authorities, charities are not under any general obligation to adopt any form of systematic records management or to maintain their own archives.

Some charities do recognise the usefulness of certain historic records for fundraising and promotional purposes. But most large charities cannot even resource an archive to support their own corporate needs, let alone provide an historical and cultural research service to the public. The situation in smaller organisations is even more limited.

Where they exist, staffing levels of charity archives are unpredictable. Many large well known charities cannot be assumed to have an archivist of any kind on staff. Staffing resources are frequently at a minimum and, in many cases, staff having sole responsibility for providing archive and records management services do not have appropriate qualifications or training. This lack of resourcing limits service provision in all sorts of ways. The service to members of the public, if available, is usually restricted. Development and promotion of the material is minimal. Applying for external funding is difficult owing to the complexity of procedures, time constraints and the frequent requirement to provide partnership funding.

3 Aims of the strategy

- To bring charities and voluntary organisations, government, archive, heritage and academic stakeholders together in partnership to preserve, explore, research and reveal to the nation the cultural, historic and social value of charity and voluntary organisation archives for current and future generations.
- To ensure charity and voluntary organisation archives are supported by funding from parent bodies and external, national grant funding stakeholders to create sustainable, long-term inspirational service provision.
- To create and maintain the highest standards of training and quality assurance in charity and voluntary organisation archives in order to release the collective talent of archivists working in the sector to enable them to raise its profile and value for the nation.

- To make the content of charity and voluntary organisation archives available to a diverse range of audiences, using innovative media to gain their support and be advocates for the sector.

4 Scope of the strategy

- Charities and voluntary organisations operating in the United Kingdom irrespective of scale, income, purpose and geographical focus.
- No organisations in the sector are excluded, although the strategy will not specifically focus on registered charities whose core operating costs are funded by central or local government.

5 Strategic objectives

5.1 Raising awareness

Raise awareness of the significance and business value of archives and records management within organisations in the sector and promote best practice standards across the sector.

- Develop and promote published information about the business need for records management and archive practice, advising about the establishment of relevant systems and services in the charity sector.
- Ensure standards of record keeping practice are developed with charity regulatory authorities and are included in their accountability and inspection processes.
- Develop and provide a support network of appropriate resources and methods of delivery to create, nurture and sustain professional standards in records management and archive practice in the charity sector.

5.2 Promoting the significance of charity archives

Promote the significance of charity archives to the national heritage, both within the sector and to external audiences, and widen access to charity archives.

- Ensure that archives are provided with sufficient resources to catalogue collections and make them available to the public.
- Develop innovative projects to encourage the participation and inclusion of diverse communities and the general public in the use of and interaction with charity archives.
- Ensure representation from the sector on relevant professional and advocacy bodies.
- Contribute to conferences, seminars, policy debates and publications arranged by the archive, records management, charity, academic and public sectors.

5.3 Ensuring long-term viability

Ensure that charity archives and records management services attract effective, sustainable funding from their parent organisations and external sources.

- Encourage charity archives to participate in strategic programmes organised or funded by strategic archive, museum and library domain agencies and heritage funding providers.
- Develop partnerships with The National Archives and the National Council on Archives to advise, support and inform parent organisations regarding appropriate funding for charity archives and records management services.
- Promote the long-term aim of joint charity partnerships to generate heritage, higher education and business sector grant funding and sponsorship.

5.4 Providing ongoing guidance

Provide ongoing professional guidance on the management and development of archives and records management within the sector.

- Create specific guidelines for archive and records management for charities, to be disseminated by the Charity Commission, NCVO and other organisations. These should relate to disposal of records and locating suitable repositories, information audit, retention of records, appraisal, documentation, storage, access, and implications of the Data Protection Act and other legislation.
- Develop and publish case studies of successful archive and records management within the sector.
- Maintain a support network of archivists, records managers and others with responsibility for records within charities, providing exchange of information, contacts for informal advice, and events offering guidance on issues of interest.
- Develop and disseminate class-leading charity-specific professional expertise through publications, websites and consultancy.

5.5 Ensuring provision for archives at risk

Ensure that professional guidance and support is available to charities whose records are at risk in order to ensure potentially vital records of charities' activity are preserved.

- Provide a 'point of contact' for any organisation or individual that requires assistance, with the ability to assess the nature and state of each individual case and provide appropriate advice and options to ensure that vital records are not lost or destroyed owing to a lack of action by professional bodies.
- Support liaison between professional bodies such as the National Advisory Service and the British Records Association in order to ensure that the best possible professional advice can be provided.

- Identify potential repositories, particularly for at risk collections, in order to ensure that future preservation and access can still be assured, even when the originating organisation has ceased to exist.

5.6 Developing networks

Develop a network of stakeholders.

6 Conclusion

The UK charity and voluntary sector has existed for centuries, encouraging the development of innovative projects, creating opportunities for its citizens to make a mark on their communities, providing support to those in need, and demonstrating that individual profit need not necessarily be the highest aim of a mature and civilised society. The sector's archives are the most reliable and accurate source of information on and evidence of the activities of this vital part of the UK's ongoing development.

This document has set out a series of steps to formalise a strategy for the management of those archives.

Glossary

Charity: a body set up under law, established for exclusively charitable purposes and for the public benefit. Public benefit means for the benefit of the community or a significant section of it. For further information see www.charitycommission.gov.uk/index.asp

Voluntary organisation: an independent self-governing body created to take action for the betterment of the community, and not for financial gain. For further information see www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/about

Record: a document or other media containing recorded information which is produced during the course of an activity

Archive: a record which has been appraised and designated as of sufficient heritage value for permanent preservation

Audience for the strategy

All organisations and individuals interested in charity archives, including:

Charities and voluntary organisations

The Charity Commission for England and Wales
The Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator
Charity Commission for Northern Ireland
National Council for Voluntary Organisations
The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations
The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Organisations
Wales Council for Voluntary Organisations
Directory of Social Change
Local charity networks

Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators

Central government departments with responsibility for archives and heritage

The National Archives
National Archives of Scotland
PRONI
National Library of Wales
Local authority record offices
Specialist repositories
Museums Libraries and Archives Council, especially MLA London
CYMAL
Society of Archivists
International Council on Archives

Charity Archivists and Records Managers Group (CHARM)

Local community archive and heritage networks
National and local family history organisations

Voluntary Action History Society
Academic research community

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