

HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

**COMMUNITY INFORMATION AND PROTECTION
SELECT COMMITTEE**

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Agenda Item No.

5

**HERTFORDSHIRE ARCHIVES & LOCAL STUDIES (HALS)
ACCOMMODATION**

Report of the Director of Community Information

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1. Purpose of the Report

To provide information about Hertfordshire Archives & Local Studies (HALS) and to highlight the accommodation problems the department currently faces, as requested by the Community Information & Protection Property Strategy Panel on 26 April 2001.

2. Summary

As part of a national network of local authority archive services, HALS has a responsibility to collect and preserve archive resources relating to Hertfordshire. The Public Record Office (PRO) identified that HALS' accommodation and storage facilities are inadequate for the task. Unless the problems are rectified and improved they are likely to result in the loss of HALS' designation as a place of deposit for public, manorial and title records after the next PRO inspection in 2004.

3. Conclusions

- 3.1 It is important for HALS to retain its status as a Place of Deposit.
- 3.2 HALS accommodation problems, particularly the space and storage conditions, require an urgent resolution to ensure HALS does not lose its Place of Deposit designation. Proposals for appropriate action need to be addressed through the capital programme planning process as a top priority.
- 3.3 Alternative methods of records management and storage provision need to be explored and progress to be reported to the January meeting of this Committee.

1. Background

- 1.1 Hertfordshire Archives & Local Studies (HALS) was established in January 1997 by merger of the former Hertfordshire Record Office and the Local Studies Library. HALS' mission is to '*preserve and provide access to archive and library resources for the study of Hertfordshire past and present*'.
- 1.2 The department currently holds 5,675 archive collections (totalling over 3 miles of shelving), 30,000 books, 30,000 photographs , and 10,000 maps. These are made available to the public in the reading rooms at the Register Office Block, County Hall.
- 1.3 Special services include a paid research service, education service, reprographics service, and a Family History Centre.
- 1.4 HALS assists a growing number of researchers (c.34,000 enquiries in 2000/1) as family, local and house history all become increasingly popular. The service has a good reputation and staff receive constant compliments from the public. In order to promote its education and lifelong learning role, HALS employs an Education Officer.
- 1.5 Following comments from the Archive Inspectors, HALS is about to embark on automating its archive cataloguing procedures (in common with most other record offices).
- 1.6 HALS is also responsible for the Records Management Service, based at Beaconsfield Court, Hatfield, which cares for the County Council's semi-current records, 5% of which will be admitted into the archives as historical records.

2. Political context

- 2.1 The process of regionalisation and the bringing together nationally of the three sectors (museums, libraries and archives) under the umbrella of *Re:source* has meant that archives are now higher on the political agenda than ever. Lord Evans recently stated in a speech to the Society of Archivists, *Re:source* aims to 'bring archives in out of the cold' so they have their 'day in the sun'.
- 2.2 As a result of this attention *Re:source* has just published a consultation paper on its Archives Agenda. This sets out three key priorities for archives:
 - Reinforce the special role of archives in relation to education.
 - Look into the training and development of archivists focussing on leadership, lobbying and fundraising, diversity and cultural inclusivity and Information and Communications Technology (ICT).
 - Raise the public profile of archives among politicians, decision-makers and the public.
- 2.3 New legislation governing the management of current records by local authorities, such as the *Freedom of Information Act 2000* and the *Data Protection Act 1998*, place obligations on local authorities to follow best

practice in maintaining and managing their records, in both paper and electronic formats. It is essential that records are well-organised and easy to retrieve in order to comply with the time limits set by these Acts (20 days and 40 days respectively) in which to satisfy public requests for information.

- 2.4 The role of archives as a statutory service is likely to be further strengthened by an Archives Act expected around 2004.

3. Statutory responsibilities

HALS is part of a national network of local authority archive services, headed by the Public Record Office (which is responsible for keeping the archives of central government). HALS' responsibilities fall into several categories:

3.1 Appointed Place of Deposit for Public Records

Public records are controlled by the *Public Records Acts* of 1958 and 1967. Under this legislation the Lord Chancellor appoints Places of Deposit for public records, by agreement with the custodian authority. The Public Record Office (PRO) inspects appointed Places of Deposit on behalf of the Lord Chancellor on a five-yearly cycle.

HALS is an appointed Place of Deposit for the following classes of public records:

Coroners' Court; County Court; Petty Sessions; Probate Court; Quarter Sessions; Advisory Committee on Justices of the Peace; Department of Health NHS records; Board of Inland Revenue: Area Assessment Committee minutes; Advisory Committees on General Commissioners of Income Tax; World War 1 Military Service Appeals Tribunals; Territorial and Auxiliary Forces Association; Commission for the New Towns.

3.2 Appointed Place of Deposit for Manorial and Tithe records

The care of manorial and tithe records in Places of Deposit is controlled by the Historical Manuscripts Commission (HMC) on behalf of the Master of the Rolls. To gain HMC approval, Places of Deposit must meet the HMC *Standard for record repositories* and are inspected on a 5-year cycle by HMC.

3.3 Appointed Diocesan Record Office for St Albans

Diocesan and parish records are controlled by the *Parochial Registers and Records Measure 1978* which sets out the standards Diocesan Record Offices must meet. Diocesan Boards are required to appoint a Diocesan Record Office (DRO); Hertfordshire Record Office was appointed DRO for the Diocese of St Albans in a formal agreement dated 1934.

3.4 Keeper of the records of the County Council and other local authorities within Hertfordshire

Local Government records are controlled by the *Local Government (Records) Act 1962* and the *Local Government Act 1972*. Under this legislation the County Council has a duty of care for its own archives and records, and for those deposited by other local authorities within the county. This includes making proper arrangements for current records as well as the archives.

3.5 *Community service for the safekeeping of other local records*

3.5.1 HALS also collects records from the following bodies in Hertfordshire: businesses; utilities; community organisations and societies; families and private individuals; solicitors; estates. Although not required by legislation, such collecting has been common practice among local authority archives since the 1930s. This practice has ensured the creation and preservation of a comprehensive resource for the study of the county for the benefit of its citizens.

3.5.2 An increasingly large proportion of the records acquired in this category are purchases or gifts and, therefore, County Council assets. This includes accessions such as the Panshanger archive, which is valuable and of national significance.

3.6 *Provision of local studies materials*

Printed and published materials about the county are collected for HALS' library as part of the county's statutory duty under the *Public Libraries Act 1964* to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient library service'. This involves material in a range of formats including books, pamphlets, periodicals and newspapers, maps, photographs, CD-ROMs and other electronic resources.

4. Accommodation issues

4.1 The two most recent inspections of HALS by the Public Record Office (December 1999) and the Historical Manuscripts Commission (July 1997 - due to re-inspect in 2002) both highlighted serious problems with HALS' accommodation.

4.2 The inspections are carried out against the two principle standards for archives: BS5454 (2000) *Recommendations for the storage and exhibition of archival documents* and the HMC's own *Standard for Record Repositories on constitution and finance, staff, acquisition, access (revised 2001)*. They cover a range of issues such as security, preservation and conservation, the construction of the repositories, storage conditions, public facilities and staffing. The full text of the last inspection undertaken by the Public Record Office in 1999 is set out in Appendix 1.

4.3 HALS' problems can be summarised as follows:

4.3.1 Lack of accrual space

Records are held in perpetuity and in their original format, therefore HALS' space requirements grow year on year. There is now virtually no space for accruals and HALS would not be able to accept any large new accessions. The PRO inspector stated: **'I particularly note concern over the pressing need for accrual space which, unless addressed in the near future is certain to prejudice such approval [as a Place of Deposit] in the next inspection visit.'**

4.3.2 Records are held on a split site

Repositories are situated directly under the reading rooms in the Register Office Block (ROB), and also in the Undercroft underneath the County Hall canteen. This results in a delay in retrieving records for the public from the Undercroft and presents an unacceptable security and conservation risk to the records in transit, as they have to be taken outside the building and carried to the Register Office Block.

4.3.3 Repositories do not meet standards

- i. The strongrooms in the Register Office Block, built in 1939, do not meet modern standards: both temperature and humidity are generally too high, they suffer poor air circulation and have been prone to damp and mould. A multitude of water pipes and nearby outside drains also bring the risk of flooding. Lack of space has led to poor storage of maps and large items, and records being stored in corridors.
- ii. The Undercroft is, according to the PRO inspector, **'wholly unsuitable for the long-term storage of historical documents'**, lacking air conditioning, with poor air circulation and extremes of temperature in summer and winter. There is evidence of leaks and water penetration (white stalactites) and recent fires and floods in the canteen kitchens have presented an unacceptable risk resulting in actual damage to the records. Furthermore, the adjacent plant room poses an obvious risk, and the caterer's bins outside the repository doors attract vermin.
- iii. Wooden repository doors in both areas offer inadequate fire and intruder resistance.

4.3.4 Conservation workshop is inadequate

HALS' conservation workroom is too small and cramped. The room lacks drying racks and adequate work and storage space. Essential pieces of equipment have to be kept in repository lobbies as they are too large to be kept in the workroom. There is a need for a separate reception room to house new accessions which may be damp, dirty or infested.

4.3.5 Public facilities cannot be improved in the current building

Despite operating as a single service, HALS continues to serve the public from two separate reading rooms, due to the inflexibility of the listed building, which does not make best use of staffing resources. Locker facilities are incorporated into the reading rooms, compromising the security of unique documents. Facilities that the public have come to expect from a modern archive service, such as a shop and refreshments area, exhibition space and lecture rooms, are unavailable or inadequate in the present building.

The PRO inspector summarised the situation as follows:

'Current storage accommodation is full, and existing accommodation requires extensive work to bring it up to modern standards. Further expansion on the County Hall site is unlikely, and improvement of the existing accommodation is likely to prove expensive for relatively little gain in space. Given these factors, re-location or rebuilding must be considered an option.'

4.3.6 Records Management Service needs more capacity

A separate, but closely related, function of HALS is the Records Management Service (RMS), occupying storage space at Beaconsfield Court, Hatfield. However, this space cannot cope with the demand from departments to store their semi-current records. There is currently a 4-year backlog of records awaiting storage which presents departments with a health and safety and fire risk as boxes of records are stored inappropriately within offices. It also compromises the County Council's ability to comply with the *Lord Chancellor's Code of Practice on Records Management*, resulting from the Freedom of Information Act. For efficient retrieval purposes the RMS needs to be located at County Hall, where it would be close to departments.

5. Next steps

5.1 At its meeting on 26 April 2001, the Community Information and Protection Select Committee Service Property Strategy Panel approved the 2001/4 programme of action outlined in the Service Property Strategy for the Community Information department.

5.2 A priority of the action plan is, 'to secure new accommodation for HALS which meets all relevant national standards by 2005'. This was endorsed by the Panel.

- 5.3 The next step is to review the service provision and explore possible alternative options during the summer months. A detailed specification for the accommodation and storage requirements will then be drafted and developed into a capital project business case for consideration as part of the budget planning process during the autumn and winter of 2001/2.
- 5.4 In the meantime measures are being taken to improve storage conditions where possible, within the limitations of the existing building. These measures include investigating the use of de-humidifying equipment, moving maps from floor level storage, and investing in UV film for the Archive Reading Room windows.

6. Financial Implications

There are no immediate financial implications arising from this report. However, there may be costs attached to any remedial work or alternative service provision resulting from the action plan for the 2001-2004 Service Property Strategy for Community Information. If that is the case, these will be reported at a later stage.

Background papers used by the author in compiling this report:

Community Information: Service Property Strategy 2001-2004.

Report to the Service Property Strategy Panel of the Community Information and Protection Select Committee, 26 April 2001, Agenda Item 2 and Minutes of the meeting.

Letter (dated 17 July 1997) from Dr CJ Kitching of the Historical Manuscripts Commission following HMC Inspection.

Letter (dated 3 December 1999) from Justin Frost of the Public Record Office following PRO Inspection (attached at Appendix 1).

APPENDIX 1

Letter from Public Records Office: Inspection of Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies