

THE IMPACT OF COMMUNITY ARCHIVES

Summary of independent research commissioned by the Community Archives Development Group (CADG).

June 2007

This document is an unconfirmed final draft and may be modified before formal publication

Contents

Frequently asked questions (FAQs)	3
Summary	5
Our Findings	7
What keeps community archives alive?	11
The nature of community archives	12
Areas for further research	14
Our Conclusions	15

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: What is the Community Archives Development Group (CADG)?

A: CADG is the sponsor of this research. It is made up of organisations and individuals concerned with community archives and provides a forum for regular exchange of views and information and a vehicle for development. It has been affiliated to the National Council on Archives (NCA) since July 2005.

Q: What are community archives?

A: They are groups of evidence brought together by people sharing an interest in finding out about their community and how it developed. They preserve an account of its past and present and often build on this to create awareness, interest and activity in the wider community.

Q: What is uniquely important about community archives?

A: Community archives allow groups of people who may often be unrepresented or overlooked in their society to identify, explore and celebrate their own communities.

Q: What is the biggest impact of community archives?

A: Community archives allow users to develop new skills, and they promote historic narratives that would otherwise be lost. And because community archives are a grassroots development, participation is empowering and encourages a sense of belonging to a community.

Q: What is in community archives?

A: Photographs, documents and oral histories arranged so as to represent a community's understanding of its history and identity. The community may be based in the same geographical area, or it may be a community related by a shared interest, occupation, identity or ethnicity. Most projects are geographically based, but a number are united by a common interest instead.

Q: How many community archives groups are there in the UK?

A: Difficult to be precise, because some groups may use different terms to describe their activities. But the category of community archives is now widely recognised and our research produced a lower estimate of 1,000 community archives and higher estimate of 5,000. We feel confident that a mid-point figure of 3,000 is a realistic estimate.

Q: What is the origin of community archives?

A: The local history groups popular in the 1960s and 1970s were in some ways precursors to community archive groups. In the 1980s and 1990s the collapse of key industries threw many communities into crisis and generated a new concern with their historical identity. The recently-increased popularity of family history may also have encouraged more community archives to develop.

Q: Who runs community archives?

A: Most community archives have no paid staff and between one and fifty active volunteers. 30,000 volunteers are estimated to be actively engaged with community archives throughout the UK.

Q: What sorts of records are found in community archives?

A: 50% collect documents and sound archives – including oral history. Nearly 70% collect photographs and 80% create electronic records from these sources.

Q: How are community archives run?

A: Many community archives are loosely constituted. Fewer than 25% are registered charities and another 30% are part of an existing organisation. 45% are run completely informally. A recent development has been the intervention of local authorities (for example in Norfolk and Cambridge) to help support and link together community archive groups, often using the Internet as the linking mechanism.

Q: How are community archives funded?

A: 50% receive funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). More than 25% rely on donations and subscriptions.

SUMMARY

Background: our research

The Community Archives Development Group (CADG) commissioned independent research into the impact of community archives activity

The survey was conducted by Stuart Davies Associates during 2006 and this summary was prepared by Alistair Siddons for CADG.

46 questionnaires were completed from an initial e-mail and postal approach to 299 community archive organisations. Ten groups were chosen from these and detailed case studies were undertaken.

Our research shows that the UK's estimated 3,000 community archives already feature in the lives of up to a million people.

Those who build community archives create and engage with collections of photographs, documents, material objects, oral testimonies and other audio-visual material. These resources contain otherwise hidden narratives that trace and

celebrate the worth of communities and individuals, past and present. From them spring educational and social initiatives that may engage the wider community.

Some of the stories contained in community archives describe the distant past; others are from more recent times. They may be about a place, or about a shared experience or way of looking at the world.

Compiling a community archive brings together people of varying ages, experience and ability. Some participants in community archives have limited formal educational qualifications, but this is no obstacle to working together to understand, value and celebrate the communities to which they belong.

By contributing to their community archive, users learn new skills and use them to the benefit of the community at large. And the records they create provide a legacy for present and future generations.

Community archives offer a unique form of participation. Very few parts of modern cultural life provide the opportunity for people of all backgrounds and ages to meet, talk about what they have in common and collectively build the material that links them together. But this is what community archives can do.

Many people just aren't aware of the nature and extent of community archives in the 21st century. And that is one of the reasons why the Community Archive Development Group (CADG) is publishing this guide for policy-makers, users and potential sponsors.

One key message is that acknowledgement and enthusiastic advocacy of the role they can play in communities is as vital to the health of community archives as financial support. But experience shows that even modest financial support can maintain the viability of many community archives, enabling them to carry on enriching the social and cultural lives of communities and wider society.

OUR FINDINGS

Our research discovered that community archives make a number of distinct impacts.

Impact 1: cultural capital gains

Cultural resources used for personal and community development have been described as 'cultural capital.' Our research shows that community archives make a significant contribution to cultural capital.

And community archives do this in a way that isn't usually observed in the mainstream heritage sector.

- Young and old people meet and work closely together, developing a sense of mutual respect
- Heritage and history are re-balanced in favour of under-voiced communities
- Activities bring about a sense of belonging

Once people are engaged with community archives, they have the opportunity to meet and work with others. Working alongside others from a variety of backgrounds like this can create community cohesion and, potentially, stronger and safer communities, as a result.

Among the participants in community archive activities are many who do not traditionally engage with the community or with organised heritage projects.

Having said this, our research found that community archives complement rather than compete with the work of established heritage organisations, such as museums and record offices.

Heritage bodies and community archives benefit from working together and in partnership, respecting and celebrating their different approaches to the same goals.

For example, we found that that participants in the Northamptonshire Black History project have been able to discover the histories and personal accounts of Northamptonshire's black communities and individuals over a period of 500 years.

This required black and ethnic community groups to organise their records into archives and make them available in the county record office. This was a strongly self-affirming action which provided an opportunity for empowerment as well as participation.

Another project, this time in the Rhondda Valley, showed the various social and economic forces that have shaped the area over a century.

Our research shows how, by engaging with this study, young people came to understand how people in their own community have been affected by these changes.

This understanding has helped the young to feel more strongly rooted in their community, improved their confidence and made them more outward-looking.

Older people also benefit from projects that involve several generations of people. We found that by working on oral history projects, older people feel validated and less afraid of younger people.

Our case studies on Northampton black history, Tonypany in the Rhondda Valley, Eastside Community Heritage in Newham, east

London and the Wise archive, set up in Norfolk to collect older people's experiences of working life, are examples of such projects.

And in the My Brighton and Hove community archive project, users were able to develop a website to find out about the lives of others, including socially excluded people such as the homeless.

Impact 2: more attractive communities

Our research found some support for the idea that participation in community archives can improve the 'livability' of an area, by bringing into focus factors which make a place more interesting and tolerable to live in. A sense of social companionship may lead to the perception of improved safety in an area.

In one of our case studies, the community archive group in Winkleigh, Devon, proposed a new, income-generating use for a run-down listed building that would otherwise have been closed by the council.

Here, community-driven refurbishment helped to improve the attractiveness of a place by preserving a historic building.

Impact 3: opportunities for lifelong learning

Community archives provide people with significant opportunities for learning.

For example, over the last six years, the My Brighton and Hove community archive has given 300 people the opportunity to acquire skills and experience in using digital technology.

This is how the Eastside (London Borough of Newham) community archive project described what they discovered about lifelong learning opportunities:

“The project has trained people in cataloguing and provided volunteers...with a wider knowledge of...national, community and local history.

People have been trained in transcription, scanning and other IT skills. Staff and volunteers have learned negotiating skills, honed through working with diverse groups.”

Many of the skills learned by participating in community archives are transferable. Computer technology, research and interviewing skills are good examples, and our survey even revealed an opportunity for training in building surveying.

Impact 4: community activities

Community archives are dynamic organisations. Their activities engage groups in all sectors of the community.

The participants in our survey listed the following activities in order of popularity:

- exhibitions
- collecting sessions
- community events
- workshops and meetings
- publishing
- hosting school visits
- campaigning

Other activities include arranging community walks, film shows, going into residential and sheltered accommodation and textile projects.

More impacts: community archives in their own words

Our research shows that community archives use a number of key words and values to describe their impacts and values. We list them here in order of popularity:

- learning new skills
- promoting archives and history
- bringing community closer
- 'able to contribute'
- community pride and identity
- 'older people valued'
- learning about history.

WHAT KEEPS COMMUNITY ARCHIVES ALIVE?

Enthusiasm is the lifeblood of community archives. But they also need volunteers, users and funding.

Volunteers

It's hard to produce 'typical' figures, but many archives are run by between one and four volunteers and an equally large number is run by over ten volunteers.

This is what one survey respondent, a community archive project called My Brighton and Hove, had to say about the benefits of volunteering:

“While the chance to do something creative is the main motivating factor for many volunteers, they often also have an altruistic element. They routinely cite wanting to do something for the town where they live as one of their reasons for becoming involved in the project.”

User numbers

A typical range for user numbers is between one hundred and five hundred. Our research suggests an average of about 250 users, including online users.

Funding

Funding was received from a range of sources but most often HLF, particularly through the Awards for All programme. The majority of HLF awards were under £5000, five were between £5000 and £50,000 and two were over £100,000.

Donations are often small amounts from £20 to a few hundred pounds. Subscriptions may be lucrative for the relatively few archives that use them.

THE NATURE OF COMMUNITY ARCHIVES

Community archive types

64% of the community archives who replied to our survey were based around a geographical community, often a parish or a village. The remainder were largely linked by a common interest.

Some community archives have a local theme (like Bewdley in Worcestershire and Winkleigh in Devon, both among our case studies). Others, like the Rhondda Valley case study, have an industrial and geographical basis. A third group, such as the Northamptonshire Black History Project, are based on local ethnic groupings.

One of our case studies, the Cambridgeshire community archive network (CCAN) shows the deployment of funding to support a successful recent development: the formation of county-wide community archives, linked together into wider groupings, with the support of local authorities and the use of Internet technology.

The digitally-linked groups in Cambridgeshire can upload material, access the wider collection online and share both histories and practical advice. This project uses 'Comma' software, supplied by the charity Commanet, which serves the users of over 300 community archive groups including CCAN. Other digital solutions are also available.

Age of community archive records

The age and distribution of records in our survey is shown below. Fourteen out of 46 archives were discovered to have records older than 1800, but the large majority were built around records from the last century.

Types of community archive record

Holding documents in digital form was the most common practice according to our survey. Fourteen archives surveyed had entirely digital records. Visual records, and in particular photographs, were the next most popular, with paper and parchment almost equal third, and books a close fourth.

Quantity of material held by community archives

This varied widely. Some community archives had just a few hundred items while others had a few thousand. The smallest records were contained in just a few folders while the largest needed about fifty metres of shelving.

*** AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

This study is a positive first step. But many questions about community archives still need to be answered. There is clear scope for more research.

Geographical concentration of community archives

Our research suggested a higher concentration of community archives in some nations and regions than others. But this finding was compromised by inconsistent and limited survey returns. More research is needed.

The number of community archives

All the time new archives are appearing and others coming to the end of their active lives. This makes mapping and counting them – and especially communicating with them - very difficult. CADG is trying to attract as many archives as possible to its website www.communityarchives.org but there may be a role for some official assistance - perhaps at the regional level - in locating others.

Relationships and partnerships

An increasing number of community archives are seeking and receiving help and making links with existing heritage or community organisations. Swapping experiences and best practice is of great benefit, and more detailed studies are needed of what works and what does not.

What happens overseas?

Community archives are not just a British phenomenon. For example, in Canada and Scandinavia there is widespread interest and experience, and much could be learned from them.

Social impact

This study has started the process of charting the impact of community archives. It demonstrates what they have achieved and the potential of what they might go on to achieve. More in-depth studies are needed of the impact of particular types of community archive, for example those which are ethnically based or those focusing on shared work-experience.

OUR CONCLUSIONS

This first study of the impact of community archives demonstrates that community archives can promote understanding, tolerance and respect between generations and between diverse social, ethnic and cultural communities. They may promote active citizenship, often among people who might otherwise feel marginalised within society, and they can provide informal training in technical and life-skills.

Communities that have undergone rapid and sometimes traumatic change often feel overlooked, if not abandoned. Community archives may create a new sense of pride and interest in those places.

There is still a lot we need to learn about this movement. Many existing heritage organisations have yet to come to grips with community archives and many existing community structures have yet to recognise their value and potential.

Yet it is already clear that community archives are growing in number and confidence and that they have a valuable part to play.

Time and again, community archives demonstrate their self-sufficiency and enterprise. A helping hand at the beginning, in the shape of a grant or award, may be repaid many times over. There are benefits to the individuals who participate, to the groups learning the skills and means of working together, and to the wider communities they represent.

Community archives have no desire to be dependent. Yet by recognising the value of what community archives are achieving, formal agencies can help to ensure a future for a movement which, across the country, is quietly but definitely playing a part in bringing people and communities together.

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Suggest a Link or Reading material?

Contact: info@aughty.org

<http://www.communityarchives.org.uk/>

<http://www.ncaonline.org.uk/advocacy/campaigns/>

<http://www.commanet.org/>