

CORRESPONDENCE

Letters intended for publication in *LPS* should be sent to Kevin Schurer, 27 Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1QA

Editors' note

LPS readers are reminded that the editorial board is always prepared to offer advice on subjects within the scope of *LPS*. Sometimes queries which have been raised are discussed in print in this section of the journal but there are many others which are not published, so if you think we can help do not hesitate to contact us.

Archive services in danger

Dear Sir,

All readers of *Local Population Studies* will of course be aware that the government is now committed to the abolition of the community charge or poll tax. Few issues have aroused such widespread and keen interest, as few issues have had such immediate effect on so many people. Inevitably there was much less general interest in the statement which accompanied this announcement by government, that a radical review of local government organisation and structure was to be undertaken.

Yet for users of record offices, and for the much larger numbers who value this country's unique archive heritage, such a review may be of the greatest significance and the outcome may do untold damage. It is essential that all these supporters should understand the issues and should be willing to make their views known before decisions are made. The government's consultation paper, *The structure of local government in England*, emphasises that local people's views will be considered in determining the form of local government to be set up in their area, so it is most important that these views should be expressed. The many academics who read or contribute to this periodical can play a further role in making their views known in a wider, national forum.

The government considers that the dual system of local government which has existed since 1974, whereby some services are provided by County Councils and others by District Councils, is confusing to the public and has made local government less accountable to the electors. A dual system in fact of course predates 1974 by a long time, with the old urban and rural district councils exercising many of the powers of the present districts. In the shire counties it was the old county boroughs which had been unitary authorities (a single authority responsible for the provision of all local government services in the area) before 1974.

The government will therefore establish a Local Government Commission which will consider in turn the various parts of the country, and, after hearing local submissions, will recommend on what it considers the appropriate structure. Normally this will comprise unitary authorities. These might be based on existing districts, existing counties, or something between, though it is intended that the new authorities will 'reflect community loyalties'.

So what does this mean for archives? The local government archive service in this country is based overwhelmingly on shire counties. Of English shire counties, only Avon (a creation of the 1974 reorganisation) has no county record office. Of 296 shire district councils only six run archive services. County archive services have many achievements to their credit. A whole series of new record office buildings, designed to the highest environmental standards, have been erected or are being planned; education services are making a valuable contribution to the development of National Curriculum history; publication programmes are making the contents of archives more widely available; and talks, exhibitions and open days are increasing awareness of this important part of our heritage. Throughout the network there is increasing concern to provide the sort of service which the customers want, while recognising, of course, that the needs of the archives themselves must come first.

If county councils are abolished and replaced by a number of smaller authorities, what will happen to those archive services and the collections they hold? The logic of unitary authorities is that all services should be provided by them. So if unitary authorities were based on existing districts we might in place of 44 local authority record offices in shire counties have 296. This might sound like good news to those who would like a record office nearer their doorstep; in fact it would mean either an enormous increase in expenditure, in providing staffing, storage, and specialist facilities at all these new sites to the necessary standard, or, more likely, a proliferation of small and under-funded services providing at greater cost a much less good service than what it replaced. And how would the holdings of a county record office be divided between the new authorities? Many collections relate to the whole county area, which in most cases has existed more or less as an administrative unity since medieval times and beyond.

One solution might be for the new authorities to combine in providing an archive service, effectively continuing something like the present county-wide service. But how will this be funded? What will happen if one of the authorities wishes to reduce or withdraw its contribution? Some of the problems of voluntary co-operation have been illustrated in the development of archive services in the former metropolitan counties, abolished in 1984. A well co-ordinated and hard-hitting campaign to give statutory protection to archive services in these areas ultimately failed, the government preferring to state that it 'looked to' the districts to co-operate. The result has been that two of the former five metropolitan county archive services have been dismembered, and two of the others have found it impossible to reach long-term agreement on funding.

The future of local government structure will not be decided on the basis of the needs of the archive service, but the needs of that service must be borne in mind as decisions are reached, and its many supporters must be vociferous in ensuring that this happens. The National Council on Archives, the national umbrella body for archive professional and user groups, is working with the Society of Archivists and the Association of County Archivists to raise and co-ordinate support. Please do all you can to help. If you would like to express your support and to receive further information and updates, please contact me at the address below.

Yours faithfully
Rosemary Dunhill

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Hampshire Record Office, 20 Southgate Street, Winchester, SO23 9EF, telephone
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