

REPORT OF THE SCOTTISH RECORDS ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR 2002/03

The Council met on two occasions in this year. Although the Council meets formally only twice per year, the expertise of its members continues to be called upon regularly in correspondence. Its Secretary acts as a centre for electronic communications. This is very useful in enabling the Council to respond timeously where appropriate to consultations by the Scottish Executive, the Scottish Parliament and other bodies. This year in particular the Council was asked by the Heritage Lottery Fund to comment on the consultation by the Department of Culture Media and Sport in London on the future of the Lottery, and was able electronically to canvass views and circulate draft conclusions for comment. In turn the DCMS report following the consultation has been circulated amongst members, again electronically, and will be the subject of further Council discussion in 2003/04.

Membership

Members of the Council for 2002/03 were Dr L Abrams, Dr M Barfoot, Mr P Daniels, Dr R Davidson, Mr J Hamill, the Rt Hon Lord Kingarth, Mr J McGonigle, Professor H MacQueen (Chairman), Mr F Rankin, Sheriff D Smith and Dr F Watson. Invited members representing the Society of Archivists in Scotland were Ms M Stewart (archivist, Dumfries and Galloway Archives) and Ms V Wilkinson (archivist, Royal Bank of Scotland). Mr S Bruce of the Freedom of Information Unit Scottish Executive attended the meeting of Council in April 2003 and will in future report to it on public records and freedom of information policy in the Executive. There is still one vacancy on the Council, as we have been unable to achieve the appointment of an appropriate representative of private archive holders, but this will be the subject of further efforts in the coming year. There is now only one serving judge on the Council (Lord Kingarth), Sheriff David Smith having retired from the bench, and it is clear that the Council should have judicial representation in its membership. There has been little opportunity to appoint new members in the course of 2002/03, but when that opportunity arises, the Council will continue to be mindful of the need to try and attract more women, members from a wider geographical area and a greater age range.

Administrative

Council meetings are attended by the Keeper of the Records of Scotland, the Registrar General for Scotland, and Dr Peter Anderson of the National Archives of Scotland (the Deputy Keeper). Dr Alison Rosie of the National Archives of Scotland [NAS] acts as Secretary to the Council. The Council expresses its thanks to these individuals for the assistance and advice which they provide. In the interests of transparency, accounts of the Council's own activities are available both via its annual report, published in the annual report of the Keeper, and via its minutes, which are on the website of the NAS. The Council is pursuing the question of having its own independent website, using its own domain name.

Freedom of Information

As mentioned in advance in last year's report, the Council joined with the National Archives of Scotland in organising a conference for archivists on the interaction between the requirements of the Freedom of Information and Data Protection legislation. The conference, which took place in the Playfair Library, University of Edinburgh, on 30 September 2002, was attended by over 100 delegates, reflecting the

widespread concerns about these Acts in the archive profession. Speakers included representatives of the Justice Minister and the UK Information Commissioner, as well as a number of persons representing archivists and users of archives. These included George Rosie, an investigative journalist and author, Kevin Dunion (then the head of Friends of the Earth Scotland a lobbying and pressure group in the environmental field) and the Director of Planning at Edinburgh University. A full report of the proceedings, with photographs, can be found at http://www.nas.gov.uk/about_nas.htm. The conference was seen as a success, both in terms of giving a better understanding of the legislation and its implications for practice and of creating a better understanding of the demands that might be created by freedom of information in particular.

The Chairman of the Council spent a good deal of time during 2002/03 in meetings and consultations outside the Council in connection with the implementation of the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002, in particular the drafting by the Freedom of Information Unit of the Scottish Executive of the code of practice to be used in connection with freedom of information by public bodies in Scotland. A link was established with Kevin Dunion when he became the Information Commissioner for Scotland, and he has been invited to attend the October 2003 meeting of the Council.

The Council continues to hold the view, expressed in previous reports, that a specifically Scottish Archives or Public Records Act, along the lines which it did itself suggest in 1999/2000, would be of considerable value in the modernisation and further development of public records policy. The current legislation, dating from 1937, is far behind present needs, practice and policy, and takes no account of the requirements of either freedom of information, data protection, or the increasingly digital nature of many records. A modernising statute, dovetailing with the implementation of freedom of information, would help to secure the success of information policy as well as underpin firmly the operation of Scottish public archives in accordance with the highest contemporary standards. This should, in the view of Council, be a priority for some time during the second session of the Scottish Parliament.

Accommodation

The Council has monitored the refurbishment of General Register House and the proposed development of Thomas Thomson House (which it visited in April 2003). The Council has encouraged the inclusion of user facilities at Thomas Thomson House when such development occurs, noting the possibility of improved public transport to the area under plans of the Edinburgh City Council and other developers. The Council has also reiterated concern about the quality of the user facilities at West Register House, and it is understood that limited refurbishment is to take place there also, although it is uncertain what the longer-term future of the building may be.

Other user issues

The Council continues to monitor and comment upon a number of issues of concern to users of Scottish archives. It was pleased to learn that as a result of the Readers Survey conducted in General Register House in June 2002 a trial late opening to 8.00 p.m. would be instituted for six months beginning in June 2003. The Council is also very interested in and strongly supportive of a number of initiatives in connection with the digitisation of archive material in order to make it more readily accessible to users not in the physical premises of the National Archives. The Scottish Archives Network (SCAN), on which the Council is represented by the Chairman, the Family History

Scotland Project, and the Scotland's People website operated by the Registrar General for Scotland have all been reported to and discussed by the Council. The Council's observations of the value of Heritage Lottery Fund support for SCAN underpinned its response to the DCMS consultation on the future of the Lottery (see above). The Council also learned with interest of the work of the Archive Task Force established by Re:source to consider new ways of exploiting the UK's archival heritage, and the Chairman attended a seminar held by the Task Force in Edinburgh at which these issues were discussed. The Task Force is expected to report in the autumn of 2003, and its conclusions will be discussed by the Council. Finally, the Keeper consulted the Council on two matters: one a new scheme of fees and charges for searches and copies (the first revision for ten years), the other a proposed change to the legislation regarding disposal of Sheriff Court records.

Links

In addition to the Board of SCAN, the Council is represented at the recently established Scottish Council on Archives, again by the Chairman. It also receives reports at its own meetings from the Association of Scottish Local Authority Archivists Working Group (ASLAWG). The Chairman met with Liz Forgan, chair of the Heritage Lottery Fund, and other trustees and managers of the Fund in September 2002.

Professor H L MacQueen
On behalf of the Members.