

REPORT OF THE SCOTTISH RECORDS ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR 2003/04

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. In 2003 the Council commented in particular on the consultation exercise conducted by The National Archives in London.

Membership

Members of the Council for 2003/04 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 has continued to attend the meetings of Council, reporting to it on public records and freedom of information policy in the Executive. Dr Watson felt obliged to resign through pressure of other commitments, and has not yet been replaced, while the vacancy on the Council for an appropriate representative of private archive holders also unfortunately continues. It also remains the case that there is only one serving judge on the Council (Lord Kingarth), Sheriff Smith being retired from the bench; as previously pointed out, the Council should have appropriate judicial representation in its membership. Finally, Ms Wilkinson has resigned as one of the invited archivist members and will also need to be replaced. There has been little opportunity to appoint new members in the course of 2003/04, but the several of the existing members of Council were successfully appraised during the year. Although it is clear that the Council is well served by the present group of members, it is unfortunate that the formal requirements for appointments to public bodies create difficulties in reinforcing the Council with new blood.

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. The importance of this form of disclosure in the light of the coming into force of the Freedom of Information legislation on 1 January 2005 is apparent to the Council.

Freedom of Information

Freedom of information continued to be an important subject for the Council as the implementation date of 1 January 2005 loomed ever closer. Concerns arose about the implications for archival practice and these were communicated to Kevin Dunion, the

Scottish Information Commissioner. Although he was unable to attend a Council meeting during the year, the Commissioner has responded in writing to the Council's concerns and it is hoped that Mr Dunion will be able to attend the next meeting in October 2004. The Council is submitting its own FoI Publication Scheme to the Commissioner.

Possible Archives Legislation

The Council was delighted when its long-held view that a specifically Scottish Archives or Public Records Act would be of considerable value in the modernisation and further development of public records policy seemed to bear fruit with the holding of a series of Scottish Executive workshops on the issue in the winter of 2003/04. The Council discussed this issue several times during the year, and members attended and contributed to the Executive workshops. The question arises on what if any role the Council itself should be given in any new dispensation. It seems clear that in an increasingly complex environment there is a need for a body playing the advisory role which the Council enjoys in relation to the Keeper and the Scottish Ministers. But it is suggested that this is not a purely technical role, and that one of the important features of the present body is its diverse membership, in which professional archivists as such have only an invitational status. The Council in its present form ensures that the public interest – that of ordinary members of the public, schools, colleges and universities, the courts and other bodies across the whole country – which exists in relation to the public records of Scotland, is as well represented as possible. It is that breadth of interest which makes the Council's advice of particular value to the Keeper and to Ministers.

Accommodation

There has been little specific new development in this area during the year, and the comments made in previous reports, about user facilities at Thomas Thomson House and West Register House and the refurbishment of the General Register House, largely hold good.

Other user issues

The Council continues to monitor and comment upon a number of issues of concern to users of Scottish archives. The review of the 2003 trial of extended opening, mentioned in the last report of Council, concluded that there was significant demand, but NAS had been unable to find sufficient volunteers among staff to continue it during the winter months. NAS is understood to be looking at options for extending hours again, initially on a temporary basis for the summer months. The Council hopes that resources can be found to enable readier access to the records at the only times of day when many people are able to come. The Council also continues to take a close interest in initiatives for 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 successful conclusion and public launch of the Scottish Archives Network (SCAN) at an event where the Chairman was among the speakers, was particularly notable this year. The Council discussed the report of the Archives Task Force on new ways of exploiting the UK's archival heritage and, while recognising that Scotland might wish to go its own way on many of the issues raised, considered that the basic policies underlying the report's recommendations deserved support. During the year the Council also set up a sub-group to keep under review selection and disposal policy with regard to Government

records; this may evolve into a 'user group' over time, but for the present it will meet annually as necessary.

Links

In addition to the Board of SCAN, the Council is represented at the recently established Scottish Council on Archives, again by the Chairman. This is proving a very helpful forum for the discussion of issues relevant to the Council's work. The Council also receives reports at its own meetings from the Archivists of Scottish Local Authorities (ASLA, formerly Association of Scottish Local Authority Archivists Working Group (ASLAWG)). In autumn 2003 the Council was visited by its Irish counterpart body, which wished to discuss issues relating to the construction of modern accommodation for archives, freedom of information, and archives legislation. The Chairman will speak at a conference on these subjects in Dublin in September 2004, and it is hoped that this link will develop further in future.

Miscellaneous

The Council was pleased to learn of the introduction of postgraduate archivist training programmes at Glasgow and Dundee, as the requirement for well trained archivists is evidently growing in Scotland. At the same time it was concerned that the importance of public archives and proper arrangements for their maintenance, management and preservation remained poorly understood in many quarters.

Professor H L MacQueen
On behalf of the Members.