

REPORT OF THE SCOTTISH RECORDS ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR 2004/05

The Council met formally on two occasions in this year, and also held a special meeting in January 2005 to discuss the Scottish Executive's Public Records Strategy. The retention and disposal sub-committee, established in 2004, held its second annual meeting in January 2005. In addition, in May 2005 members of the Council took part in a visit to the National Archives of Ireland at the invitation of the Irish National Archives Advisory Council.

The expertise of the Council continues to be called upon regularly in correspondence. Its Secretary acts as a centre for electronic communications, which enables the Council to respond timeously where appropriate to consultations by the Scottish Executive, the Scottish Parliament and other bodies.

Membership

Members of the Council for 2004/05 were Prof. L Abrams, Dr M Barfoot, Mr P Daniels, Prof. R Davidson, Mr J Hamill, the Rt Hon Lord Kingarth, Mr J McGonigle, Professor H MacQueen (Chairman), Mr F Rankin, and Sheriff D Smith. Invited members representing the Society of Archivists in Scotland were Miss M Stewart (archivist, Dumfries and Galloway Archives) and Ms L Richmond (archivist, Glasgow University). 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. Vacancies still exist on the Council: Dr F Watson has not been replaced, while the vacancy for an appropriate representative of private archive holders also unfortunately remains. The one serving judge on the Council (Lord Kingarth) has intimated his resignation at the end of the year under report. The Council continues to be well served by the present group of members, but the formal requirements for appointments to public bodies continue to create difficulties in reinforcing the Council with new blood. Miss M Stewart leaves us at the end of this year, after much excellent service, but happily her replacement for the coming year has now been arranged with the Society of Archivists in Scotland.

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 its new website <http://www.nas.gov.uk/srac/index.asp>.

Freedom of Information

Freedom of information continued to be an important subject for the Council as the implementation date of 1 January 2005 came and went. Kevin Dunion, the Scottish Information Commissioner, attended a meeting of the Council in October 2004, and a useful exchange of information and views took place. Mr Bruce kept the Council fully informed on developments after 1 January 2005, and the Council's retention and disposal sub-committee also heard at its January 2005 meeting some of the implications

of freedom of information for retention and disposal work in the National Archives of Scotland. The Council was satisfied that there had been a professional and committed response to freedom of information in the National Archives of Scotland, but one result of its Dublin visit in May 2005, during which there was considerable discussion of the equivalent and much longer Irish experience of freedom of information, was a clear sense that there is still much to learn from other countries in this area (although Scotland does have a good story to tell in return).

Possible Archives Legislation: Public Records Strategy

The Council has continued to be closely engaged with work towards a specifically Scottish Archives or Public Records Act, embodied in the Public Records Strategy of the Scottish Executive. The view expressed in last year's Report, that this would complete the picture which began with freedom of information, remains one firmly held by the Council, as also the position that in an increasingly complex environment there is a need for a widely-based body playing the advisory role in the general public interest which the Council enjoys in relation to the Keeper and the Scottish Ministers. The Chairman set out what were in essence the views of the Council on the Public Records Strategy in a lecture given in Dublin in October 2004, subsequently published in the Winter 2004-2005 issue of *Irish Archives: Journal of the Irish Society of Archives*. Irish colleagues were impressed by the open-ness and thoroughness of the consultations on these issues in Scotland. At the time of writing, however, it was still unclear when the Scottish Executive would determine its next steps in the Strategy, and the Chairman wrote to the Minister for Parliamentary Business to express concern over the appearance of delay. The Minister's courteous reply did not indicate when more information might be forthcoming. The Council also noted with interest the Cultural Commission's consideration of the importance of archives for the national cultural strategy, and the Chairman held informal discussions on the matter with the Commission chair, James Boyle.

The Council's main reasons for thinking that the time is now ripe for an Archives Act are as follows:

- The consultation process to date has produced substantial consensus about the need for action and the form it should take. It has also generated expectations that there will be action.
- The development of freedom of information and data protection legislation has helped lay some of the ground work with regard to proper records management in public authorities.
- The Scottish Information Commissioner advised the Council at its October 2004 meeting that national archives legislation was urgently needed to complement the Freedom of Information Act. Freedom of information and data protection may discourage the recording and preservation of information, and this will be offset if there are also legal and enforceable obligations in relation to the creation and management of archives.
- As the Cultural Commission recognises, archives are significant for the people of Scotland, in terms not only of national but also of family and local history. We are beginning to realise their potential in attracting visitors to Scotland in large numbers. Business is also becoming more aware of the commercial value

of much of the information held in public archives, and this will be reinforced when the Public Sector Information Directive is implemented across the UK from July 2005. The good management and governance of archives therefore has huge cultural and economic significance and potential.

- Over the last few years considerable strides have been made in the digitisation of archives, rendering them potentially more accessible to more people everywhere. If the possibilities that now exist are to be fully realised, however, systems of good management and governance must be in place, to ensure the widest possible dissemination of knowledge and best practice.

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. The Council noted with interest that the opening of a railway station (Edinburgh Park) close by Thomas Thomson House made the possibility of readers reaching that facility, should a reading room be created, rather easier than hitherto.

Other user issues

The Council continues to monitor and comment upon a number of issues of concern to users of Scottish archives, notably the extension of opening hours and the digitisation of archive material in order to make it more readily accessible to users not in the physical premises of the National Archives. It welcomed the establishment of the online Scottish Family History Service, linking the National Archives of Scotland with the Office of the Registrar General for Scotland.

Links

The Council is represented by the Chairman at the Scottish Council on Archives and on the Board of the Scottish Archives Network Ltd. 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)).

Miscellaneous

The Council was pleased to learn of the successful introduction of postgraduate archivist training programmes at Glasgow and Dundee, which should help to promote still further the high levels of professional skills needed to maintain and develop the crucial resource constituted by the country's archives.

Professor H L MacQueen
On behalf of the Members.