

REPORT OF THE SCOTTISH RECORDS ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR 2005/06

The Council met formally on two occasions in this year, and also held a special meeting in June 2006 to discuss its future activities. The retention and disposal sub-committee, established in 2004, held its third annual meeting in February 2006.

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 2005/06 were Professor L Abrams, Mr P Daniels, Professor R Davidson, Mr J Hamill, Professor H MacQueen (Chairman), and Sheriff D Smith. Invited members representing the Society of Archivists in Scotland were Mr K Wilbraham (archivist, Dumfries and Galloway Archives) and Ms L Richmond (archivist, Glasgow University). Mr S Bruce of the Freedom of Information Unit Scottish Executive continued to attend the meetings of Council, reporting to it on public records and freedom of information policy in the Executive. Mr Bruce's replacement from the Scottish Executive, Mr G Barrie, attended his first meeting in June 2006. Vacancies still exist on the Council: Dr M Barfoot, Mr J McGonigle and Mr F Rankin as well as, from an earlier resignation, Dr F Watson have 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, also resigned before the start of the year and has yet to be replaced. The advice to Council was that no steps should be taken to replace retiring members pending a Performance and Financial Management Review, which has however not taken place. The Council continues to be well served by the continuing members, but the loss of highly experienced and able members threatens to destabilise and demotivate those who remain. There is now an urgent need to reinforce the Council with new blood. In the circumstances the Chairman has felt unable to give any priority to the formal appraisal of the existing members (who provide their expertise to the Council in effect of their good will and public spirit, and for no financial reward). The Council urges Ministers to give attention to the situation in which the Council has been placed through no fault of its own, and to permit the recruitment of new members as a matter of urgency. The Chairman is of the view that the position is becoming increasingly untenable.

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.scottishrecordsadvisorycouncil.info/>.

Freedom of Information

Freedom of information remained an important subject for the Council, which continued to monitor closely the implementation of the new legislation. 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 February 2006 meeting further 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). An issue of some concern was that FoI requirements sometimes appeared to prevent access which had hitherto been freely granted for the pursuit of historical research.

Possible Archives Legislation: Public Records Strategy

The Council was disappointed when it learned from the Minister for Parliamentary Business that there was no prospect in the current Parliamentary session of the comprehensive modern archives legislation which it has been recommending to Ministers for many years. Nor did it seem that there was any prospect of any Bill in the 2007-2011 session. This was a regrettable conclusion to the Scottish Executive project of the Public Records Strategy. The Council continues to be strongly of the view that such legislation would complete the picture which began with freedom of information. The need for a much stronger regulatory regime in relation to archives became even more apparent during the year, as the Council received information about problems with the local authority archives in Dumfries and Galloway, Edinburgh and Argyll & Bute. Several of these problems received media attention and were the subject of informed public criticism. The Council was happy to support the informal approach to these problems adopted by the Keeper of the Records of Scotland and to learn that at least some of the authorities involved proved responsive to his interventions, but noted that he had in fact no power to do anything more. The resultant threat to the integrity and professionalism of public archive services in Scotland is a matter of deep concern to the Council, and one which it will continue to monitor as closely as its extremely limited resources allow.

The Council understands that there will be some provision for archives in a forthcoming Culture Bill, following on from the Report of the Culture Commission published in 2005. Members were pleased that this promises the availability of greater resources for archives. In the meantime, while noting that Ministerial responsibility for archives had passed to the Minister for Tourism Culture and Sport, the Council considers it important to remember that archives are not only cultural but also, and in some ways more importantly, part of the essential machinery of government.

In all this, the future of the Council itself remains quite unclear, not helped by the uncertainty referred to in the comments about membership. The Council remains of the view that there is a role to be played by an advisory body set up to support the public interest in archives and to interact with the Keeper, archive professionals, the Scottish Executive and Ministers. Such a body will require an appropriate level of resources.

Accommodation

The Council was pleased to learn of improvements to reader facilities at West Register House and to follow the development of the Scottish Family History Centre premises on the General Register House campus

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 continues to monitor the postgraduate archivist training programmes at Glasgow and Dundee, which appear to have been recruiting successfully so far.

Professor H L MacQueen
On behalf of the Members.