

## Norfolk Records Committee

**Minutes of the Meeting held on 19 April 2024 at 10:30am at County Hall, Norwich**

**Present:**

Cllr Michael Chenery of Horsbrugh (Chair)	Norfolk County Council
Cllr Kathryn Cross	South Norfolk District Council
Cllr Phillip Duigan	Norfolk County Council
Cllr Robert Kybird (Vice-Chair)	Breckland District Council
Cllr Judith Lubbock	Norwich City Council
Cllr Grant Nurden	Broadland District Council
Cllr Saul Penfold	North Norfolk District Council
Cllr Ben Price	Norwich City Council

**Also present:**

Revd' Charles Read	Representative of the Bishop of Norwich
Laine Tisdall	Committee Officer
Gary Tuson	County Archivist

**1. Apologies and substitutions**

- 1.1 Apologies were received from Dr G. Alan Metters and Dr Victor Morgan

**2. Minutes**

- 2.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 2 February 2024 were agreed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

**3. Declarations of Interest**

- 3.1 The Chair declared a non-pecuniary interest, as he was currently a trustee of the Norfolk Archives and Heritage Development Foundation (NorAH).

**4. Finance and Risk**

- 4.1 The Committee received the annexed report (4).
- 4.2 The County Archivist introduced the report to the Committee, which covered the Norfolk Record Office (NRO) revenue budget for 2023/24, capital programme, reserves, and provisions. An update on the service risk register was also included.
- 4.3 The NRO recorded a small underspend of £17,000 for the 2023/24 financial year, This had been achieved by the service exceeding its expected income generation targets and the County Archivist working on Change Minds in a consultancy role, which meant that a dedicated consultant no longer needed to be recruited.

#### 4.4 The following points were raised and discussed:

- A Committee Member commented that additional storage space for the NRO was a risk which would increase with time and asked when this was due to be reviewed. The County Archivist stated that the business case and options appraisal had been submitted to the Finance department for consideration in the 2024/25 capital budget. An update and decision were expected later in 2024 but an exact date was not known at present.
- A Committee Member queried if there were any known challenges in the next financial cycle which could cause issues towards achieving a balanced budget in future years. The County Archivist stated he expected further savings to be requested in future budget setting processes. 40% of the NRO's budget was based on income generation, which posed a risk if this were to decline.
- A Committee Member stated that one of the risks on the risk register related to loss of external funding and asked if this referred to any projects funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF). The County Archivist stated that the Archive Centre was constructed following the award of a grant from the NLHF in 2003. The grant was awarded on the basis of a 25 year contract, meaning that four years remained until it expired. The contract had several conditions relating to service levels, education and outreach facilities, and accommodation for the East Anglian Film Archive. The level of risk was decreasing; however there was still a residual risk to be managed. A Committee Member asked if there was a future risk to be considered if NLHF requirements were not met for the Archive Centre, given the possibility of a future grant to increase storage space for the NRO. The County Archivist stated that the NRO was applying for capital funding to increase storage space, as it was highly unlikely the NLHF would agree a grant for a storage building. Going down the grant route for extra storage was considered a high risk option.
- A Committee Member queried if there had been any further progress regarding metadata, as this was scheduled to go live in the autumn of 2023. The County Archivist confirmed this had now gone live, but acknowledged this had taken time to arrange, with several family history websites being contacted for inclusion in the project. The NRO had seen an increase in the number of digital orders since it went live.
- A Committee Member asked if the NRO risk register was a "live" document, as it appeared no risks had been added or removed recently. The County Archivist confirmed the risk register was reviewed on a quarterly basis, with risks being updated, added, or removed over the past 18 months. Some of the risks on the register were considered long-term ones.
- A Committee Member proposed a vote of thanks to the County Archivist and his team for achieving a balanced budget. This was unanimously **AGREED** by the Committee.

#### 4.5 Having considered and commented on the report, the Norfolk Records Committee **RESOLVED** the following:

1. To **NOTE** the final revenue, reserves and provisions position for 2023/24.
2. To **NOTE** the management of risk for 2023/24.
3. To **THANK** officers for their work towards achieving a balanced budget for the 2023/24 financial year.

## 5. Changes to Searchroom Opening

5.1 The Committee received the annexed report (5).

5.2 The County Archivist introduced the report, which provided information on the results of the public consultation to proposed adjustments to the NRO's searchroom opening arrangements and hours. Some of the information was provisional, with amendments likely to be made before the report was to be submitted to Cabinet.

5.3 The following points were raised and discussed:

- A Committee Member expressed concern regarding the lack of response from minority groups despite the generally strong response to the consultation. The Committee Member asked if there were ways and methods for the NRO to reach such groups. The County Archivist acknowledged that diversity and equality was an issue facing all archive services across the country, due to collection work largely being passive. The NRO took outreach opportunities wherever possible, however the service did not have sufficient resources to be constantly visible in the community. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the NRO launched a YouTube channel to provide video outreach during lockdown. This had seen strong engagement for a service of the size of the NRO.
- A Committee Member expressed concern that most of the 232 respondents to the consultation indicated that they did not use the NRO's services, which could skew the results. There was also concern regarding the minimal level of response from the student population in Norfolk. The Committee Member asked if it was possible to quantify the data to identify trends from regular users of the service. The County Archivist stated the qualitative data was most important due to the need to make budget savings, acknowledging there was a divide between those who used the NRO and those who did not.
- A Committee Member remarked that Cabinet should be provided the extrapolated figures of those who used the NRO's services rather than the top-line figures provided in the report, to see if it was possible for the savings to be reconsidered. Concern was expressed that continuing to reduce searchroom hours would affect access to knowledge, which could be seen as discriminatory in some respects. It was therefore important Cabinet had the correct information to decide whether the budget savings would go ahead. The savings requested for the 2024/25 financial year were minuscule in the context of the overall Norfolk County Council budget. The County Archivist stated that the NRO was not the only public service facing budgetary savings. The Vice-Chair stated that the comments provided by respondents demonstrated strong support for the availability of the NRO's services and its comprehensive record collection.
- Cllr Ben Price proposed that a report be submitted to Cabinet on the public consultation on searchroom opening arrangements containing extrapolated data from respondents who had used the NRO's services. This was seconded by Cllr Kathryn Cross and was unanimously **CARRIED** by the Committee.
- A Committee Member proposed a vote of thanks to the County Archivist and his team for all their work and time in supporting the services provided by the NRO. This was unanimously **AGREED** by the Committee.

- A Committee Member suggested that an extension to the searchroom opening hours should be considered if the NRO's finances improve in the future.
- A Committee Member requested assurance that the proposed savings would not affect online services provided by the NRO, given the income that this brought into the service. The County Archivist stated that increased income from services would offset any changes to the operation of the NRO.

5.4 Having considered and commented accordingly, the Norfolk Records Committee **RESOLVED** the following:

1. To **NOTE** the report.
2. To **ASK** officers to produce a report to Cabinet on the public consultation on searchroom opening arrangements, containing extrapolated data from respondents who had used the NRO's services.
3. To **THANK** officers for all their work and time in supporting the services provided by the NRO.

## 6. Performance Report

6.1 The Committee received the annexed report (6).

6.2 The County Archivist introduced the report, which provided the Committee with an outline of the delivery of Norfolk Record Office (NRO) services and improvements made between 1 October 2023 and 31 March 2024.

6.3 The NRO held an event in February 2024 to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Archive Centre officially being opened by HRH Queen Elizabeth II. The County Archivist gave a speech at the event to highlight the future aims of the NRO.

6.4 The County Archivist highlighted the importance of volunteers to the NRO, as the St. Andrew's Hospital project had now been completed. Every single casebook between 1846 and 1923 was now fully catalogued, thanks to the efforts of volunteers.

6.5 There had been 77 accessions since the last Committee meeting. Highlights included almost 250 years of records from the Octagon Unitarian Chapel in Norwich up until 1931, and a collection of architect sketchbooks from Francis Harold Swindells, spanning the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

6.6 The following points were raised and discussed:

- A Committee Member queried how the NRO would make the best use of artificial intelligence (AI) and how the Committee could assist with this technology, given the benefits it could have towards increasing the digitisation of records and access to archives. The County Archivist acknowledged that only 3% of the NRO's records were currently digitised, a percentage which decreased every year due to new collections being accessioned. There had been research into how AI could be utilised at the NRO, with a trial taking place using embedded AI in the Microsoft 365 suite. In addition, the County Archivist currently sat on a governance board regarding ethical issues with AI.

- A Committee Member asked how volunteers were supported by the NRO and whether there was a regular programme of volunteer training. The County Archivist confirmed there was a training programme in place. When a volunteer project was announced, a role description would be produced identifying the requirements. Training would then be given. To aid retention there was a calendar of trips and outings for volunteers. A recent trip took place which saw NRO volunteers visit Holkham Hall.
- The Chair asked about seal socks and whether copies of rare seals were taken in case of them being damaged or destroyed. The County Archivist stated this was not the case, as the NRO had an emphasis on preserving seals.
- A Committee Member asked if there were future Change Mind programmes planned which would cater for young people. The County Archivist confirmed there were currently six iterations of Change Minds operating around the country, with different models being considered. A meeting with City College Norwich took place the previous week to consult regarding the best model of Change Minds for a further education environment. There was a positive response from stakeholders, with another meeting scheduled with the college and a potential trial scheme expected. Mental health awareness was key to Change Minds succeeding in an education environment. The Chair commented that he had spoken with mental health trusts recently and they had expressed interest in Change Minds, which would hopefully push the scheme forward.
- A Committee Member stated it was important for the NRO to record the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for historical reference. The County Archivist agreed with this, stating that he co-authored a letter published in the Telegraph in 2022, which pointed out that COVID was the first significant world event which would largely be captured digitally by archives worldwide. The long-term memory of such events relied on digital solutions.
- A Committee Member noted that a collection of school magazines was included in the latest set of accessions and pondered whether these should have been deposited with the Norfolk Heritage Centre at the Forum. The County Archivist stated these magazines were never published as they were not expected to survive more than a few days after printing. As they did not have an ISBN number, the magazines would fit in with school collections at the NRO.

6.5 Having considered and commented accordingly, the Norfolk Records Committee **RESOLVED** to **NOTE** the report.

The meeting closed at 12:00

**Cllr Michael Chenery of Horsburgh, Chair  
Norfolk Records Committee**



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