

Adult Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Complaints Working Group

Notes from a meeting with Roger Bettridge, County Archivist on 19 September 2005

Present: Cllr Bruce Allen
Roger Bettridge
Clare Capjon

The Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies (CBS) is an archive and records office. It holds documents relating to both Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes (through an arrangement with the Milton Keynes Unitary Authority), as well as having national microfiched sources, such as census index, 1881, and indexes to births, deaths and marriages, 1837-1999. Visitors to the CBS can use the local studies area for publications and microform and digital sources, and the archives searchroom to use original archives. The CBS is open six days per week generally (although staff shortages may sometimes impact on this) and people can book time to use the Centre, although some do arrive without prior booking. Users include family historians (over 50%), academics and school and university students, local historians and professionals, such as lawyers, and come from Buckinghamshire, the UK in general and overseas. The CBS is security-conscious – many of the documents are original and unique, the earliest dating from about 1200AD – and visitors using the archives are required to produce identification and to only use pencils in taking notes. Staff explain the reasons for these requirements.

The CBS has a budget in the region of £400,000-500,000 pa, including generated income. Staffing is an issue and there are two temporary staff at present who, because of funding limitations, will not be retained after the end of September. Staffing restrictions mean that the CBS is not able to offer a research service for people. If an enquirer asks for this, the CBS signposts to independent records agents (a list is available) or to family history societies.

The CBS attracts around 25,000 visitors per year plus enquiries via email, letter and telephone. The Internet has improved the way in which information can be made available to a wider audience, however it has generated more enquiries. The CBS is keen to develop its own website and is looking at digitising the wills held by the Centre, to put online. This would be a charged service and is something that The National Archives at Kew has done. The CBS is using the Libraries & Heritage web team to develop this work.

The Centre also works with schools to encourage an understanding of the local aspects of the national curriculum. As an example, a member of staff is developing modular information about the second world war in Buckinghamshire for use by schools.

In addition to the public archives and records, the Centre also has a qualified archive conservator, who works on preserving and restoring the archives. The Centre, through its Modern Records service (MR), stores the records of the County Council when they are at a semi-current stage (not needed daily). These are kept in paper form for designated periods, according to legal, financial and administrative criteria (often 5-7 years, but in some cases much longer). Back-scanning is considered an inefficient use of resources and the emphasis should be on procuring an electronic documents

records management system to ensure that records are not printed out to paper in the future. There is also the question of evidential weight of scanned records in court. Meanwhile, the amount of paperwork held by the Office is substantial. Storage both for the archives and the MR service is in the basement of County Hall, but this space is filling rapidly. Storage limitations pose a problem for the Centre, as the CBS is still often offered archives relating to Buckinghamshire and has a duty to preserve those it accepts on behalf of the public for the future.

Complaints to the service are occasional – approximately one per month is received – and customer satisfaction with the service is considered good. Complaints tend to be about issues which are ultimately related to staffing, eg. documents not available immediately on request, or budget, eg. unable to acquire additional stock. Complaints are dealt with either by Roger, or, if sent directly to Bob Strong (Head of Libraries and Heritage), by Roger on Bob's behalf. If complaints cannot be resolved, the complaint is handled through the County Council's complaints process.

A comments and complaints form is freely available for visitors to complete. In addition complaints may be received by email or letter. The Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies (CBS) follows the Libraries and Heritage procedure for handling complaints and all correspondence is logged (part of the requirement for Charter Mark status, which the CBS holds).

Roger agreed to provide a brief 'facts and figures' summary of the service for circulation to the Committee at its next meeting on 12 October.

C Capjon
Sept 05