

# The National Archives

## Development Networks Evaluation Report: Case Study

### Learning Lessons – benefits and barriers in a short-term partnership project The South East Midlands Local Archive Partnership (SEMLAP)

In October 2013, The National Archives (TNA) worked with this network of archives to commission a piece of research to explore how the archives services in [the SEMLEP area](#) of Buckinghamshire, Milton Keynes, Northamptonshire, Bedford, Bedfordshire and Luton can work more effectively together to improve services. Although SEMLEP exists as a regional enterprise partnership between a range of local authorities, the archive services in this area did not have a long or established history of working collaboratively and the network disbanded shortly after the project was completed.

Over the course of 12 months, work was undertaken by consultants to explore the options available to the SEM archives. The findings of the research highlighted strategic development opportunities, and the strong need for senior level buy-in in the local authorities to progress these opportunities. They included recommendations for collaborative working in relation to:

- A joint website
- Shared storage and conservation
- Digitisation facilities
- Creating capacity
- Local points of presence
- Social impact and wellbeing
- Governance

The key area of collaboration which was explored in more detail was that of a shared archive storage facility. Through a series of facilitated meetings, it became clear to the group that this was not going to be feasible and the conclusion was the future of the network as a whole was untenable.

Barriers which stopped progress included the following:

- The network had not all worked together previously. Four of the 11 local authority members had previously worked on an audit programme, but that was all.
- It was not clear to all from the outset what the benefits of collaboration were, what they were trying to collectively achieve. The network members did not set out a vision for change.
- The members of the network did not share a collective vision for SEM archives. Bedford and Northampton were two services which resigned from the partnership after the completion of the initial project as they felt it did not match the direction they wished to take their own services.
- As well as a lack of overall vision, there were clear instances of differing priorities. Bedford had a particular audience development priority which was not shared by other members.
- A perception of 'traditional borders'. There were instances where senior members of staff (budget holders) did not seem prepared to find a solution which involved moving across area boundaries.
- Senior Management support was not secured for this project which made it impossible to source match funding and progress the partnership.

'SEMLAP was an early try and other networks have evolved since in very different ways. I think the main lessons learnt were the need for common ground to start with and political structure and will that is the same across the board and not going to change overnight.'

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The process helped the participating archive services to:

- Review and focus efforts on their core priorities
- Clarify what they can and cannot afford
- Develop more robust partnerships among smaller groups of network members, as is the case with Milton Keynes and Buckinghamshire County
- The process also helped The National Archives to clarify “success factors” for collaborative networks