

The Need for Service Transformation

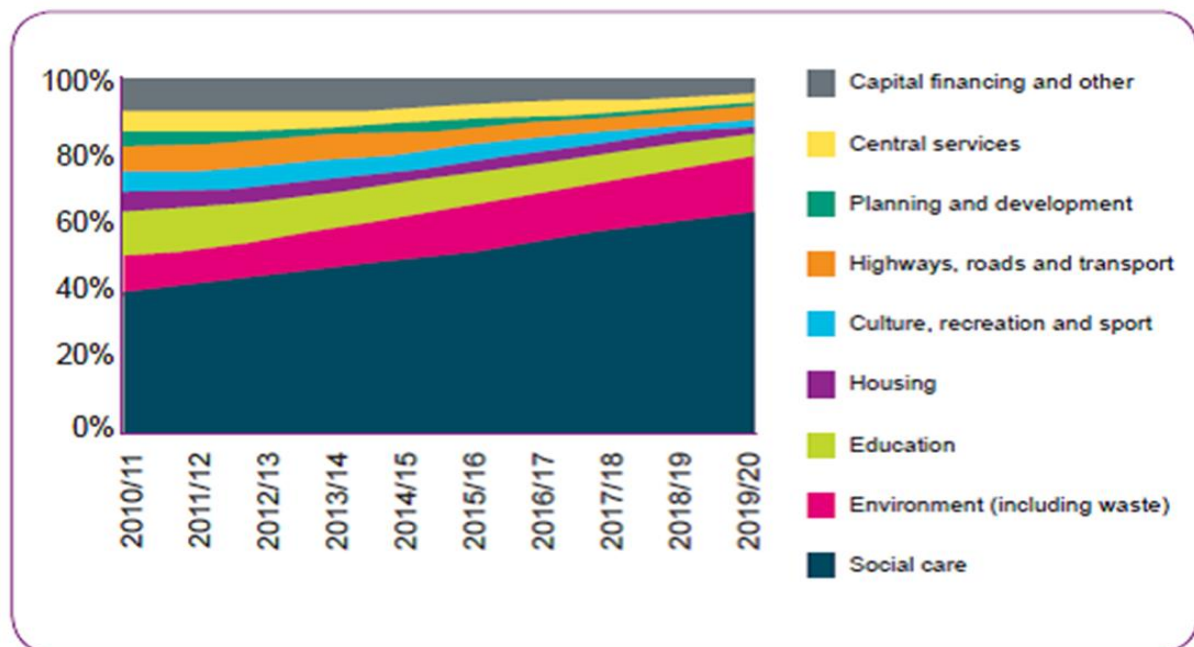
“The rate of learning should be at least equivalent to the rate of change in the external environment” Revans’ Law

Changes and Challenges

The archive sector is undergoing a period of unprecedented change and challenge. Here is a summary of the main changes and challenges relevant to service transformation:

- Local councils continue to deal with the financial challenges of the austerity policy. In some cases, medium and long term budgets have been balanced but the actual cash savings haven’t yet been made; in other cases, Councils are eating into their reserves. In most cases, Councils are projecting further bottom line reductions over the next two to three years. In this climate, all services – even mandatory services like libraries – need to change and many will be reduced significantly. Even where the funding for Council archive services remains, the funding structure is likely to change.

Chart 5 Service spending as proportions of overall budget



Austerity doesn’t just affect Councils; it has reduced the revenue and capital budgets of most parts of the public sector. This has a knock-on effect to many not-for-profit sector services. This is also a difficult time financially for many small and large businesses. Therefore, all types of archive service are potentially affected.

Although there are signs of a political shift away from austerity, this is unlikely to change the landscape of public sector funding over the next three to five years and possibly beyond (if anything, public sector funding will continue to reduce). The pressures on the health service and adult social care are likely to affect all other public sector funded services.

- The demands of users, parent organisations and funding bodies, along with the many opportunities to be pursued mean that archive professionals are often trying to do much more, for much less!
- Technological advancement is presenting a number of challenges for the sector. There is a huge variation in engagement with areas such as digital preservation across the sector. A recent report which looked across the Archives First partnership concluded that ‘...an urgent paradigm shift is needed that focusses local authority archivists’ attention on the long-term preservation of information in digital format rather than on their traditional role relating to the permanent retention of information...’. The majority of regional archive networks have identified a digital project as part of their collaborative work ranging from discovery and presentation of digital records through to digital preservation.
- The expectations of users of public services have been increasing for a number of years (fuelled by competition and a consumer-led society) and looks set to continue in the future. Archive services are no exception to this. People want and expect accessible, fast, responsive and seamless service.
- We currently have a rapidly aging population. As the demographics of communities change, so people’s need for archive services change.
- Archive services often struggle to raise their profile and communicate their value within wider parent organisations and amongst local communities. This can adversely affect the allocation of resources.
- Budgetary reductions and growing time pressure on staff is increasingly affecting the amount of time that archive professionals are able to (and/or feel able to) spend on their learning and development, especially when this involves travelling to workshops / courses.

Opportunities

These changes and challenges also present a number of opportunities for the sector, including the following:

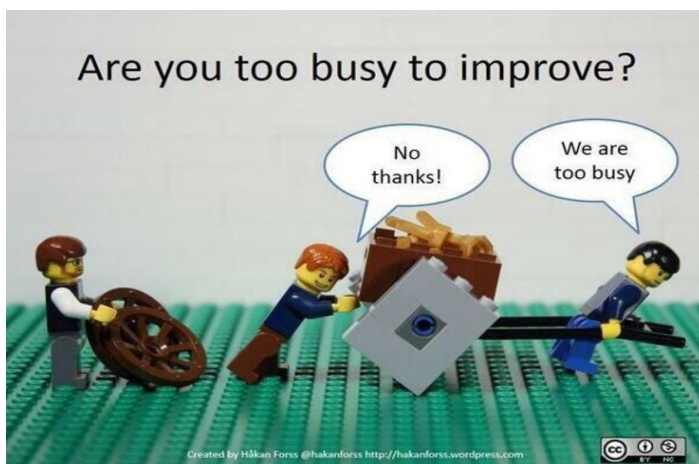
- Archive services achieve many outcomes for a variety of stakeholders, including outcomes relating to education and learning, art and literature, evidence-based decision making, mental health and wellbeing and community engagement and cohesion. These are often the outcomes that public sector bodies are focusing on in their strategies; archive services provide many of the solutions!
- The way that archive services tend to be run means that they cost relatively little (especially given the significant level of volunteering); the output and outcomes provide excellent value for the input! Given that they represent a fraction of the required savings many Councils will choose to focus elsewhere when budgetary savings are being made.

- The national focus for public sector heritage and cultural services is now firmly on **resilience**. Part of this is a shift in focus from 'efficiency' and the use of different operating models towards service innovation (including exploiting income generating opportunities) and advocacy campaigns. Archive professionals, supported by TNA, have the capability to respond well to this challenge (resilience is one of the three key themes identified in the strategy for the sector – Archives Unlocked).
- Reminiscence is now recognised as a key technique for enhancing mental health and wellbeing amongst older people (as well as helping to build communities). A significant amount of public funding in the future will be linked to health outcomes, and will be accessed via health and adult social care commissioning bodies. Meeting the health and wellbeing needs of the aging population is an increasingly significant challenge; again archive services are part of the solution.
- Collaborative working is viewed as an important part of the changes required in the public sector and the culture / heritage sector. The archive sector (led by TNA) has focused on this approach and has developed some very positive practices.

To be in a position to deal with the challenges and exploit the opportunities, archive organisations need to develop enhanced organisational resilience through a programme of continual improvement.

We know this is easier said than done!

These days everyone is so busy just trying to keep the service running. But it is definitely worth finding a small amount of time every week to use effective service review and improvement methods in a proactive way.



Archive services already have a tangible impact on communities and provide excellent value for money. However, history tells us that all organisations can and need to improve continually if they are to survive and thrive within a changing environment.