

Sustaining community archives: where practice meets theory

Joanna M.A. Newman

Community archives are collected by a variety of heritage organizations, from council-controlled archives to voluntary historical societies. Many face challenges in fulfilling their mandates to collect, preserve and make accessible the documentary heritage of their communities. Eleven factors have been identified as necessary for their sustainability and these are examined in turn, along with the interdependencies and relationships between each. For each factor, strategies and actions which might be taken to enhance sustainability of the three components of the community archives system (the records, their custodians and the link with the community) are also proposed.

Introduction

I would like to start with three short stories about the establishment of Community Archives in New Zealand. The first comes from the Marlborough Historical Society:

Begun in 1955 as a result of interest throughout the Province with the oncoming centennial in 1959. . . It began as a 10 x 3.6 metre shed on Mr Norman Brayshaw's property to house predominantly his collection of photographs. . . In 1959 he was offered by the Land Registrar in Blenheim 20,000 land title documents. . . These he sorted into land allotment areas which then served as the basis for filing the other records as they came in later. The Archives are, consequently, arranged mainly in geographical form. . . As people came to learn of and respect the Society's attempt to preserve the Provincial history locally rather than centralized in Wellington. . . records came into the second shed he had built and by the mid 1960s both sheds were full¹.

Seven years later, an article describes how the Tinui Archives started as a community trust to preserve its country store and how a community archives grew from that, "individualistically out of a sturdy sense of local identity"².

Then, in 1998, a report describes how the North Otago Museum arose out of a strong sense of parochialism, with community involvement evident from the day it opened in 1987, when local genealogists assisted with the move to new premises. After that, not only were services provided to school students, but the students assisted with sorting and cataloguing³.

These reports contain a number of elements which are probably common to the history of many such archives and exemplify some of their defining characteristics.

Today, community archives are held in many institutions throughout New Zealand, varying in size and type from large organisations, such as museums, to small, stand-alone, voluntary ones. A Community Archives Survey Report undertaken by Archives New Zealand in 2007

¹ MCNAMARA, B. L., The Marlborough Historical Society archives. *Archifacts* (September), 1980. 345-353.

² DAVIS, C., Conference papers 1986: Regional Archives. *Archifacts* (1987/2), 1987. 24.

³ MCCULLOCH, B., The evolution of a community archive: The story of the North Otago Museum archive. *Archifacts* (October), 1998. 43-56.

suggested that a high proportion are voluntary or within the local government sector. A total of 22% are clearly the direct responsibility of local government and this may be significantly higher if even some of the 30% in “museum or art gallery” are council-controlled. Another 30% are held by a “voluntary organisation” (14%) or “historical society” (16%), the latter likely to be also a voluntary organisation⁴. At the same time, most hold archives dating back to the nineteenth century.⁵

In recent years I have become increasingly concerned about the challenges facing community archives in New Zealand and anecdotal evidence of the difficulties facing them was supported by findings in that same Archives New Zealand survey: 40% of archives responding had no paid staff, 35% had no qualified staff, and funding was seen as a major challenge and a priority for 32%.⁶. The opportunity to explore community archives in depth, through a research Masters, satisfied a desire to learn more about the issues they face but, more importantly, to explore how this important part of the archival sector might become more sustainable.

Community archives reflect our culture and identity and are therefore an important part of our heritage. Without them, or without appropriate management of them, our ability to understand where we have come from is diminished. An American guide to local history explained it this way: ‘local neighborhood, town, or city, much like the family or the ethnic group to which one belongs, are social realities that help provide individuals with a sense of identity’⁷. Or, as one of my interview subjects described it:

I think, in many respects, it is the unique part of a heritage – of the heritage of a community – because it is the actual records that you’ve got – it’s the hard copy of where you’ve been and how you’ve got to where you are. And that, to me, is - in the world of education or in the world of knowledge - that is really, really important.

Regimes for the management and preservation of community archives must therefore be enduring and sustainable. Archives held within structures or environments which are not sustainable are potentially as much at risk as those which are never identified and preserved.

The key aspects which should be sustainable for any community archives are:

- The archival records themselves and the evidence they contain. Will they endure; can they be maintained at a proper level or standard over the long term?
- The custodial structure around the archives. Will some supporting organisation (including the people) remain in existence to care for the archives long term?
- The community connection. Can the archives and the organisation retain their relevance to the community over time?

⁴ ARCHIVES NEW ZEALAND, *Community archives survey report 2007*, Wellington, 2008. 10.

⁵ ARCHIVES NEW ZEALAND, *Community archives survey report 2007*, Wellington, 2008. 6.

⁶ ARCHIVES NEW ZEALAND, *Community archives survey report 2007*, Wellington, 2008.

⁷ COX, Richard J., *Documenting localities: A practical model for American archivists and manuscript curators*, Scarecrow Press, Lanham, MD & London, 1996. 7.

Definitions

Before going further, it is important to point out that when I talk about archives I mean only with those parts of collections held by community archives which meet that theoretical definition of archives, that is the records of continuing value created by individuals or organisations. (Community archives often collect local history materials which they call 'archives' but which do not meet the archival theory definition of archives.)

The definition I have used for community archives is: collections of archival records that originate in a community - that is, a group of people who live in the same location or share other forms of community of interest - and whose collection, maintenance and use involves active participation of that community⁸.

The term sustainability combines the concepts of maintaining at a proper level over time, and of responsibility to do so for future generations. Another important aspect of the term 'sustainability' in its contemporary sense is that it is generally applied to systems, where a number of components are interdependent and related⁹. This is particularly relevant in the case of community archives, where a number of entities (archives, organisation and community) and processes are involved, as well as a temporal dimension.

Research overview

My research was motivated by an interest and concern for the collection, maintenance, preservation and accessibility of original archival records created by communities, so archival theories aimed at preserving the evidence or 'recordness' of archives, and modeling the complexity of the system of which they are part, provided the essential framework against which to assess community archives.

The records continuum theory, represented by the recordkeeping continuum model developed by Frank Upward, provided particularly valuable insights¹⁰. It represents a way of thinking about recordkeeping in society, identifying key evidential, recordkeeping and contextual features of the recordkeeping environment and showing their relationship to each other¹¹. The model highlights the concept that archives are part of a system. It also emphasises the evidential nature of the record and the fact that recordkeeping actions occur even once a record has reached the fourth dimension, where a community archives would be located.

The methodological framework developed for the research was based largely on the work of archivists in the United States, who have outlined essential elements which must be in place specifically for maintaining community, or local history, archives. Key sources used were a

⁸ Ander, Erica, *Black and minority ethnic community archives in London*. London: Museums Libraries Archives London, 2007.

⁹ ADAMS, Eleanor, *Towards sustainability indicators for museums in Australia*, Collections Council of Australia, Adelaide, 2010.

¹⁰ UPWARD, Frank, *Structuring the records continuum, part one: Postcustodial principles and properties*, Archives and Manuscripts, 24(2), 1996 and *Structuring the records continuum, part two: Structuration theory and recordkeeping*, Archives and Manuscripts, 25(1), 1997

¹¹ MCKEMMISH Sue, *Yesterday, today and tomorrow: A continuum of responsibility*, Paper presented at the Records Management Association of Australasia 14th National Convention, 1997. Retrieved March 1 2009 from <http://www.sims.monash.edu.au/research/rcrg/publications/recordscontinuum/>

pamphlet produced by New York State¹², which provides a checklist of ten factors to be evaluated to determine how well records are being collected, preserved and made available, and Bruce Dearstyne's *Managing historical records programs: a guide for historical agencies*¹³, which outlines pre-requisites for successful local history archives programmes and basic programme elements.

These provided eight factors required for maintenance of Community Archives and characteristics for each.

Having defined the characteristics required for maintenance of Community Archives, and what absence of these would look like, the factors were grouped according to the three key aspects which need to be sustained; namely the archives, the organisation and the community connection. Four archives were selected as case studies - two voluntary, one directly controlled by a local authority and one indirectly controlled (a council-controlled Trust) – and the position of each of the archives in relation to the different factors was assessed against the model.

Findings and conclusions

Analysis of the case studies revealed three additional factors which impact on sustainability that were not covered by the literature. These emerged consistently across all four case studies. These were:

- Collections (the nature of them)
- Archivist (character)
- External support

The result was that eleven factors were shown to have an impact on sustainability of Community Archives. The key findings for each are summarised below, along with conclusions.

Governance

The nature of internal governance arrangements alone did not appear to be a determining factor in the sustainability of community archives. The reliable, higher levels of funding and ability to employ staff which result from being associated with a 'corporate' structure of some form did, however, appear to be significant. The findings indicated that 100%-voluntary archives may be essentially unsustainable while those within local government, whether directly or indirectly controlled, have a much greater likelihood of being maintained over the long term. Furthermore, an archives in direct control of a local authority appears to have the highest likelihood of being sustainable.

If community archives are to be associated with an accountable organisational structure, local authorities appear to be the obvious entity because of their legislative requirement (in New Zealand) to consider the cultural well-being of their communities and because of their current involvement in archives. That involvement suggests that there are two established models for this - direct, through a council function, or indirect through a museum or library. A third

¹² NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES, *Ensuring a usable past for your community: The New York citizen's guide to evaluating and improving historical records programs* Albany, N.Y., 1988.

¹³ DEARSTYNE, Bruce W., *Managing historical records programs: A guide for historical agencies*, Altamira Press, Walnut Creek, CA, 2000.

possibility could be arms-length involvement through greater support of voluntary organisations. Whichever model is applied, it must be accepted that specialist skills and knowledge, different from those generally found in library, museum, volunteer or clerical staff, are required.

Funding

Funding was shown to be key to maintenance of many of the factors which contribute to sustainability of community archives, therefore understanding the factors which influence it is essential. Money purchases skilled staff, preservation and other essential requirements for archives maintenance. The only situation studied which provided an adequate level of funding was that of the Archives as council function. It is hard to see how purely voluntary community archives can achieve more reliable or significant funding than they currently do, given the typical sources of their funds.

The implication is that the only options for stable and adequate funding are more formal associations with, or incorporation into, the organisational structures of enduring entities such as local authorities. Greater collaboration with external parties may provide this if long-term partnerships can be assured. There is likely to be a trade-off for the community archives however, in terms of independence or accountability, which would require sensitive handling, as community archives can be very protective of their independence¹⁴. If this ensures the sustainability of the organisation, the archives and the community connection, however, it should be considered a worthwhile trade-off.

Skilled staff

Individuals with knowledge of archival theory and practices are needed to preserve the physical archives and the integrity of the records so that they retain their evidential value but findings showed these were lacking in the majority of the community archives studied. The issue needs to be considered within an environment where half the 'archivists' are voluntary. Although all those in the study showed extraordinary commitment to the role, managing community archives is not just about providing an interesting pastime for volunteers. The archives exist to hold records in trust for current and future generations, therefore a basic level of archival skill and knowledge should be an accepted requirement.

Ways must be found to support these archives with skills and, possibly, specialist services without losing the passion and connection to the community brought by enthusiasts. Solutions might include local government support which allows for significant volunteer involvement; greater collaboration by archival institutions within a geographical area to allow development and/or sharing of expertise; provision of a pool of expertise by an external agency such as local or central government; or more co-location by community archives so that pooling of resources can allow employment of a skilled archivist.

¹⁴ FLINN, Andrew, STEVENS, M., & SHEPHERD, E., 'Whose memories, whose archives? Independent community archives, autonomy and the mainstream' in *Archival Science*, 9, 2009. 80.

Collaboration

The research showed that collaboration can be very effective when it works, but it was not formally considered as a strategy for achieving the objectives of any of the Archives. What was particularly noticeable was that none of the community archives studied had effectively collaborated with other Archives or heritage organisations, as recommended in the American guidance, possibly because of the strong parochialism felt by community archives. One archive had, however, successfully collaborated with a non-archival/non-heritage institution.

Collaborations with similar collecting institutions, or with different organisations with an interest in community archives, could bring much-needed resources if the mutual benefits can be identified. The scope could range from sharing premises, to arrangements for digital archive storage, sharing archival expertise and collecting strategies, or support from commercial or non-profit organisations. Collaboration would have the added advantage of reducing the isolation of some community archives, thus indirectly enhancing archival practices. Initiating a collaborative arrangement does, however, require time, energy and creativity, therefore facilitation by external support agencies may be of value.

Dynamic approach

Dearstyne used the term ‘dynamic approach to describe a commitment to growing collections and users, to changing and to formal planning to enable them to do more than simply react to day-to-day issues. None of the organisations studied showed dynamism in all areas considered essential by Dearstyne. Where dynamism was evident it was often focused on a narrow area and came at the cost of a balanced programme, also a basic requirement for sustainable Community Archives¹⁵. A culture which supports systematic and comprehensive planning is unlikely to exist in a voluntary or part-time staffing situation and it can also be difficult to find in the situation where an archivist is at a low level in an organisational hierarchy. As with collaboration, it may be hard to be dynamic when the small number of resources must, of necessity, be focused on basic collection work such as description and reference. Keeping up with changing technology and archival practices, let alone proactive collecting, is also hampered by lack of skills and knowledge of trends in the archival field.

Dynamism could be enhanced through collaboration, external support, or organisational changes such as increased funding and its consequential increase in skilled staff. This further emphasises the importance of these factors.

Preservation

Three out of the four community archives studied did not have adequate premises, materials or practices to ensure the preservation of the archives in their custody. This was particularly related to lack of funding because in most cases the archivists were aware of the importance of environmental control, clean and appropriate facilities, specialist storage equipment and materials.

The obvious solution to this problem is additional funding. Sources could include one-off grants (although the substantial amounts required might render success in applying for these unlikely) or dependable and substantial local authority support, particularly where the community archives holds local authority records. If funding cannot be obtained to provide

¹⁵ DEARSTYNE, Bruce W., *Managing historical records programs: A guide for historical agencies*, Altamira Press, Walnut Creek, CA, 2000.

the appropriate preservation conditions, collaborative arrangements which would allow sharing of facilities and services should be strongly encouraged and facilitated. These could include joining with other community archives or cultural institutions in their area, negotiating to occupy space which already meets requirements within established facilities such as local authorities or museums, or transferring collections to another appropriate repository. The last two options could include retaining a degree of control or involvement with the collections.

Archival practices

The two voluntary organisations included in the study lacked most of the essential archival practices and tools required to maintain community archives; the part-time and full-time-staffed Archives lacked some. Archival practices, along with staff skills and preservation, is the factor most likely to directly impact on the physical integrity and evidentiality of the records and, therefore, their ability to fulfil their role in collective memory. Archivists play an active role in constructing memory through selecting records, providing context for them and interpreting them for users¹⁶, but the evidential value of the records is only maintained by applying archival principles and standards to core activities such as appraisal and arrangement and description. The research showed how sound archival practices are linked to the availability of skilled staff and, in turn, to funding and governance.

Ways of developing this knowledge and providing access to tools such as databases need to be explored. Strategies could include increasing the number of paid, skilled-staff hours in organisations; provision of services (such as appraisal or arrangement and description) by an external support agency; collaboration between repositories; or increased training for existing staff.

Community engagement

Community engagement is essential to the sustainability of community archives, both for understanding and nurturing the source of the archives collected and for enabling them to fulfill their purpose of maintaining and providing access to the collective memory. Volunteer involvement is both an important mechanism and an indicator of community engagement. In the voluntary organisations, however, engagement did not necessarily extend far beyond the members of the society.

Voluntary community archives may benefit from external guidance on how to engage with the wider community in order to build collections and to give back to it. Strengthening this relationship with the community would also enhance understanding of the value of the archives and, consequently, their sustainability. On the other hand, for one non-voluntary organisation, a ‘friends’ group was a powerful means of connecting with the community and building support.

Collections

Two characteristics relating to collections were identified as impacting on sustainability. The first was the inclusion of local government records in holdings. The standard of care required for these under the *Public Records Act* occurred only where the Archives were a direct council function. The other characteristic was the time and resources devoted to maintaining

¹⁶ JIMERSON, Randall C., *Archives power: Memory, accountability, and social justice*, Society of American Archivists, Chicago, 2009. 19.

secondary sources and providing research services based on them. While it is valuable for such collections to be co-located with community archives from a user perspective, limited resources should be prioritised towards preservation of, and access to, unique archival records.

The findings suggest two options for dealing with local authority holdings: the local authority could contribute funding towards their management, or it could directly support the community archives. The alternative is that the local authorities resume control of the records for which they have responsibility under the *Public Records Act*. The latter solution may, however, represent a missed opportunity for providing the community with access to a comprehensive collective memory. To deal with the problem of Archives devoting a disproportionate amount of time to secondary sources, external parties could provide support and guidance on facilitating access to digitised secondary sources for users or sharing such responsibilities with related entities, like libraries.

The Archivist

Two of the community archives studied continue to exist only because of the passion and commitment of one or two individuals. This is not sufficient to sustain them in the long-term, however¹⁷. Even where there were paid staff, it was evident that the success of the Archives and the quality of service provided relied a great deal on personal commitment and unpaid work. This suggests that parent organisations may not truly value the work of the archivist, even to the extent of taking advantage of a vocational commitment to the role. The archivists could also be partly at fault for allowing their organisations to believe that all that is being delivered could be done within paid hours.

Support therefore needs to be provided to volunteers, not only to carry out archival work appropriately, but also to ensure continuity of the archive-holding organisation. It is important not to squander the dedication of volunteers, however, because of their role in community engagement and because a few committed volunteers can achieve an enormous amount. Some who have studied the voluntary sector¹⁸ consider local government the most appropriate entity to provide such support but it could also be provided by other external agencies. Paid, but relatively isolated, archivists also require support, some of which should come from their own organisations, but some could also be provided by external agencies.

External support

The findings suggested that the external support provided in New Zealand is not contributing significantly to the sustainability of community archives. The inference is that the type of assistance offered is not required or desired; that it is not sufficient; or that it is not delivered in a way which makes it accessible to most. Given the challenges facing some community archives, external support may be one of the most critical factors to address in the short term to ensure preservation of good community records.

Again, local government may be the most appropriate structure through which to deliver support to community archives. In addition to its legislated role in promoting the cultural well-being of communities, it is already directly responsible for at least 22% of existing

¹⁷ NATIONAL COUNCIL ON ARCHIVES, *The impact of community archives: Summary of independent research commissioned by the Community Archives Development Group*, United Kingdom, 2007. 11.

¹⁸ DOLLERY, Brian E., & WALLIS, J. L., *The political economy of the voluntary sector: A reappraisal of the comparative institutional advantage of voluntary organizations*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, 2003.

community archives. Furthermore, because local authorities are part of the communities to which the archives belong they may also be in the best position to do so without diminishing the passion and commitment of the keepers of the archives¹⁹. The most effective forms of support would include regular, dependable funding; provision of services such as appraisal or arrangement and description, or digital archives maintenance; and a facilitative or advisory role to encourage collaboration and planning.

Connecting the findings and the theory

When the eleven high-level factors used to analyse community archives were aligned with the axes on the records continuum model, an interesting picture emerged.

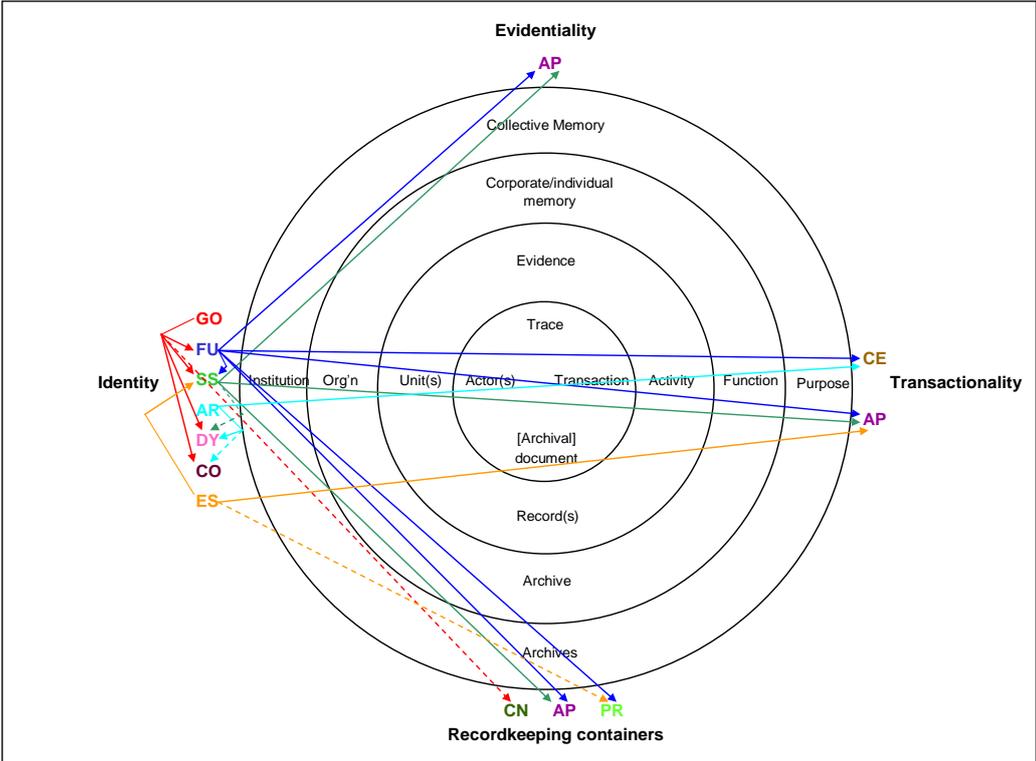


Figure 2: Factors mapped to the records continuum model
 Where GO=Governance, FU=Funding, SS=Skilled staff, CO=Collaboration, DY=Dynamism, AR=Archivist, ES=External support, PR=Preservation, AP=Archival practices, CN=Collection, CE=Community engagement. A solid line represents a strong influence and a dotted line an indirect or potential influence.

This diagram shows that governance, funding, skilled staff, archivist character, dynamism, collaboration and external support factors all align with the Identity axis – in other words, they are organisational factors. When the effect these factors have, or potentially have, on other factors is mapped, their impact on the archival documents themselves (Recordkeeping containers), on the evidential value of the archives (Evidentiality), and on the way an archives fulfills its purpose in the community (Transactionality), is highlighted.

The model therefore illustrates the importance of addressing the organisational factors if we wish to preserve the collective memory represented in the archives.

¹⁹ DOLLERY, Brian E., & WALLIS, J. L., *The political economy of the voluntary sector: A reappraisal of the comparative institutional advantage of voluntary organizations*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, 2003.

In conclusion, for community archives to be sustainable, we need to consider three key elements of the system:

- The archival records themselves and the evidence they contain
- The custodial structure around the archives
- The community connection

Within these, a number of interrelated factors also need to be present and maintained over time to ensure that the whole is sustainable. Understanding these factors, and their relationships, may help us to make community archives more sustainable and thus ensure the preservation and accessibility of the record of our communities' heritage.