

Frequently Asked Questions on the changes to the Record Office Service in north-east Suffolk

1. Q - Why are you looking at the Record Office service in north-east Suffolk?

A – We want to see a continued Record Office service in Lowestoft that reflects the way people want to access information.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable reduction in the number of people visiting all three of our Record Office branches; located in Lowestoft, Bury St Edmunds and Ipswich. In Lowestoft, there are less than 200 visitors each month.

Customers are increasingly accessing records and archive materials online through digital copies and we need to develop a service that reflects this change in culture. We are looking at how we offer these services to meet future demand. The proposed approach includes providing greater access to records digitally, so more people can find what they want regardless of where they live.

2. Q – I’ve heard you want to change the service in Lowestoft?

A - Lowestoft Record Office holds 8.63% of the county’s archive collections and the current building is now at capacity. The storage of vulnerable materials in the strong room on site is of chief concern and we must find the best solution to protect these precious materials for future generations to enjoy. But to be very clear, we will deliver a continued Record Office Service in Lowestoft.

To do this, we need to consider how best to:

- Operate a continuing service in Lowestoft that provides access to collections and materials
- Deliver the necessary future investment needed to bring storage facilities up to 21st century standards for collections care - to safeguard vulnerable collections for future generations.

3. Q - I’ve heard you are taking materials away from Lowestoft Record Office?

A – The Lowestoft Record Office building will continue to hold a wide array of documents and collections covering the whole of the Waveney area.

Within the current ‘strongroom’ vulnerable collections and materials are increasingly at risk of damage and loss because conditions do not meet the national 21st Century collections care standards.

- There are several flooding and damp hazards due to the basement location

- The humidity is high with the risk of mould growth and damage
- Fire protection is basic and fire resistance is very low

For the future preservation of these documents, we need to retain records in the best possible condition to enable future generations to access and enjoy these materials, regardless of where customers come from.

4. Q - Do you plan to move the Record Office service in Lowestoft?

A – A variety of locations were explored for the new service, as part of the development of proposals for the transformed service. During the evaluation it became clear that the current location of LRO within the Lowestoft Library building was the only one which met the key criteria established through the pre-engagement. The service will remain in the current location, in the Lowestoft Library building

5. Q - Is Lowestoft Record Office being compromised for 'The Hold' project in Ipswich?

A – No.

We need a Suffolk archives service that is fit for the 21st Century and a key part of this is finding a way to protect the vulnerable collections that represent the history of the north of our county. This problem would need to be solved with or without 'The Hold' project. Whatever the outcome of the consultation regarding Lowestoft Record Office, the council will maintain a Record Office service in Lowestoft.

6. Q - Why do the Suffolk Record Offices need to meet with National Archive Standards?

A - The National Archives (TNA) monitors the Suffolk Record Office service (SRO) to ensure we continue to meet agreed national standards. If these standards are not met, The National Archives has the power to 'de-appoint' SRO as a 'Place of Deposit'. If this was to happen, SRO would be unable to store certain types of records in future. It is therefore incredibly important that we maintain materials in the safest way to uphold their condition and availability for future generations.

To gain national Accreditation and remain a 'Place of Deposit', SRO must apply to the national scheme by end of November 2018 with clear plans for the future storage of its collections across the entire county. This plan will address the current significant weaknesses with storage, including vulnerable materials in the strongroom at Lowestoft Record Office.

7. Q - Why are you so keen to digitise records?

A - Creating digital copies of records and important reference materials enables us to create a library of high-quality digital versions of our original documents which can be accessed by everyone who is interested, regardless of where they are from. SRO has been digitising popular material from all of its Record Office branches during the last four years. This is the reason why each branch is closed to the public on Wednesdays.

This process significantly increases accessibility to documents, protects original materials from wear and tear/overhandling and ensures survival of documents for future generations. This is a widely used practice that record services in other counties have already adopted in accordance with The National Archives policy. Customers increasingly expect to be able to access digital versions of documents.

When a customer orders a particular document that has been previously digitised, the Record Office can refer the customer to the required document. The service does not retrieve the original material from the strongroom.

8. Q - What is the outcome of pre-engagement?

A - Pre-engagement events were held in April in Lowestoft. These were opportunities for local residents, historians and any other interested parties to help us shape the future Record Office service in Lowestoft. We received a lot of useful feedback and information from passionate residents who value the service as much as we do. The period of engagement gave us a number of things to consider about how a reshaped archive service for Lowestoft and north-east Suffolk could work in practice.

9. Q - What will the full consultation include?

A - The consultation will focus on asking local people what they think about key aspects of any future record office service we can deliver for Lowestoft and north-east Suffolk. We want the future service to retain local access to collections and materials and provide outreach services to those who are interested. We will seek feedback on opening hours, digital access, volunteering opportunities and the sorts of events and activities that people would enjoy.

As a direct result of feedback from our pre-engagement sessions, we are now committed to ensuring the reshaped service is staffed in the future.

The consultation is now live and can be accessed here:

<https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/lroconsultation>

The consultation process and timeline is outlined below. This will continue to be updated and developed as we move forward.

Spring 2018 Pre-Engagement (Complete) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Engage with Stakeholders to seek draft proposals and alternative solutions• Collate results to inform content of formal consultation
July/August 2018 Options appraisal (Complete) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Exploration of location options, informed by results of the pre-engagement• Cost analysis and feasibility work• Agree content of formal consultation
21st September – 1st November 2018 Formal public consultation <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Articulate vision and consult on proposals
November – December 2018 outcome <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Complete analysis and review of consultation• Report consultation outcomes and final decision presented to Cabinet – 4th December• Apply for TNA accreditation
Early 2020 New Service <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The new Lowestoft Record Office service begins• The Hold building in Ipswich opens• Vulnerable collections are moved to the new strongrooms

10. Q - What happens next?

A – Following the outcome of the consultation, we will work with local people and interested parties to develop a revitalised, sustainable, service location in Lowestoft which reflects how people want to access information.

Collections and materials that can be safely housed on open shelving will remain in the Lowestoft Record Office. This includes key collections (e.g. parish register transcripts), fiche and film, maps and indexes, journals etc. There will also be access to digital records – all of which are the reason many customers visit the Lowestoft branch already.

A proposed full list of the collections in the new service location is available. These can be viewed from the consultation webpage - <https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/lroconsultation>

The new service will improve interpretation, through new events, exhibitions and activities, and will be the base for a new Community and Learning Officer to improve outreach work in this area and connect with other heritage initiatives in Lowestoft (e.g. the Heritage Action Zone and 'Making Waves' project).

Vulnerable collections at risk of damage or loss will be safeguarded in The Hold when it opens in early 2020.

11. Q - Will anything change before The Hold opens in 2020?

A – No

12. Q - Are you considering similar things with the Bury St Edmunds Record Office?

A - A Record Office service will continue to operate from the main Bury St Edmunds Record Office building which will include access to original archives as well as printed local studies materials. Events and activities will also continue to run from Bury Record Office.

The Bury Record Office facilities consist of a main building with strong room and a separate Annex/Outstore.

It has always been the intention to remove the unique, original archive collections from the Bury St Edmunds Storage Annex/Outstore to modern state of the art storage in Ipswich when The Hold opens in 2020, as the storage facilities in Bury Record Annex/Outstore are subject to similar flooding and damp hazards to those at Lowestoft Record Office.

Other collections will remain in the main Bury Record Office strongroom, which is above the flood plain and has fire suppression systems to protect the collections.

13. Q - Where can I find previous FOI questions about this?

A - Responses to any FOI requests about the Lowestoft Record Office can be found [here](#). Information is updated monthly so the latest information will correspond to the previous month.

14. Q - Why make the announcement now when changes won't take place until 2020?

A - We want to be as open and transparent about the changes with the public, as early as we could be. In doing so, we are giving local historians and other interested parties the

opportunity to engage with us fully over decisions about the future of the service such as which records should be digitised first and the activities which will take place, ahead of a public consultation.

15. Q – Has the impact of the proposed changes on different types of people been fully considered?

A – Yes. An early equality impact screening by SCC's Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) Review Group considered the effects of the proposed changes on people with protected characteristics. It acknowledged those living closer to Lowestoft will have further to travel to see original vulnerable collections in Ipswich. It will be more time consuming and costly especially if they are reliant on public transport. However, the majority of those currently visiting the LRO do not use the vulnerable collections and due to the prioritisation of the digitisation of popular Lowestoft collections the impact will be low or neutral in the first instance and medium positive in the longer term, as more becomes available digitally.

Digital surrogates of originals will be available for free to view in the Lowestoft Record Office (and at the other SRO branches). Free viewing could also be offered in other SCC locations in north-east Suffolk to further mitigate the effect on customers unable to travel to Ipswich e.g. in local libraries.

Digital documents are easier to use than physical documents for people with some disabilities as they can be manipulated on screen for those with visual impairments. Having more information available digitally may result in some people not having to travel even to the Lowestoft Record Office, as they will be able to access information from their own home, place of work, school, or college. Schools currently find it difficult to come into the Record Office due to timetable pressures etc. Loan boxes will be provided to local schools including supplementary schools as well as residential homes on particular themes of interest together with online and travelling exhibitions encouraging more intergenerational and community dialogue.

The equipment and furniture etc. in the refurbished Lowestoft Record Office will be replaced to make it more user friendly. The space will be designed so it is a more fun, interactive experience with an exhibition interpreting and telling the story of Lowestoft in an easily digestible form, including using more audio recordings. Extensive printed collections and other materials will also remain in the new or refurbished space.

A full EIA will be produced following this consultation which will be published with the December Cabinet papers.

Updated as at 21st September 2018