

## **Museums Collecting Archaeology in England: Briefing Note**

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*SMA is recognised by Arts Council England as the Subject Specialist Network for British Archaeology and as such provides a focus for the expertise and collections knowledge of collections managers, keepers and curators throughout the UK. The objective of SMA is to promote active museum involvement in all aspects of archaeology and to emphasise the essential role of museums within the archaeological discipline.*

1. Despite the positive contribution museum archaeology makes it is recognised across the discipline that there is an annual decrease in the number of museums that are able to collect archaeological archives from commercial, community and research projects and that budget cuts across the sector have led to staff losses, and with that, loss of expertise.
  
2. The extent of the impact was measured and then reported by SMA in March 2017 when it published the first of three annual reports commissioned by Historic England.<sup>1</sup> The report was compiled using quantitative and qualitative data gathered by online survey from 200 respondents in England that represent museums which collect or hold archaeological material. The results relate to the capacity to collect, staff resource and expertise. The headline results were as follows:
  - 119/200 (59.5%) of respondents actively collect archaeological archives, 65/119 (54.6%) of which charge for deposition.
  - 35/154 (22.7%) of respondents that have previously collected archaeological archives have stopped collecting altogether – 46/200 (23%) respondents to the survey have never collected archaeological archives.
  - Lack of space was the most cited reason for ceasing to collect archaeological archives, referenced by 32/35 (91.4%) of respondents, followed by shortage of expertise and staff resource 18/35 (51.4%).
  - 21/35 (60%) of those respondents that have stopped collecting archaeological archives are provided by local authorities.
  - 66/93 (71%) of respondents that provided estimates for their remaining storage capacity reported they had 20m<sup>3</sup> or less space available for archaeological archives.
  - 61/96 (63.5%) of respondents that provided estimates will run out of space in 5 years or less.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://socmusarch.org.uk/socmusarch/gailmark/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/HE-SURVEY-2016-FINAL.pdf>

- 45/154 (29.2%) of museums that hold archaeological archives reported a drop in the number of museum staff with archaeological collections care responsibilities since 2010.
  - 99/200 (49.5%) of respondents employ a curator with specialist expertise.
  - 56/99 (56.6%) of those with specialist museum archaeological expertise are employed by local authorities (almost twice as many as any other type of provider).
  - 166.3 FTE posts with specialist expertise are currently provided for by the respondent organisations but 39 of these relate to just 4 organisations.
3. The report demonstrated that many of the fears raised through anecdotal testimonies are based on real, on-the-ground reductions in resource and capacity although there are a small number of proactive regional collaborations and initiatives to explore sharing expertise, facilities and the adoption of county-wide standards.
  4. Many of the comments made by contributors conveyed exasperation – where staff reductions have not taken place, many curators have had to take on additional responsibilities to cover cuts in other areas of the museum service; some museums have reduced their collecting areas, while others face uncertainty over future collecting capacity.
  5. The large number of museums provided by local authorities that continue to actively collect archives highlights the vulnerability of archaeological archive provision in the face of continuing reductions and demands placed on local authority spending – the clear message from these museums was “we are expecting more cuts to come”.
  6. Despite a number of museums implementing charges for the deposition of archives many find the commercial income they can raise from developer funded excavations insufficient when compared with the cost of providing the resource required to curate them in the long-term.
  7. The reported growth in the number of archaeologists employed in the commercial sector which generates most archaeological archives is not being matched in museums. SMA believes that the growing inability of museums to collect these archives is, however, in part due to the lack of a direct source of funding or mandatory requirement for them to do so in spite of the National Planning Policy Framework requirement for ‘archives to be deposited with a local museum or other public depository’.