

ARA Survey of Visitors to UK Archives 2017

Those of you who visited us in October and November last year may remember being invited to take part in a Survey of Visitors. This is a national survey, organised every two years by the Archives and Records Association in partnership with the Chartered Institute for Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA).

Firstly, although we ran the survey for two months, and everyone who visited the search room was invited to take part, just 168 people completed their forms. Ten years ago the survey window was just two weeks, and we had no trouble getting 200 responses. This shows how the ways in which people are using local record offices are changing: with so much more material now available online, people do not need to visit weekly or more in order to churn through reels of census returns, parish records and electoral registers. When they do visit us, it is to consult particular documents relevant to their research, or seek the expert advice of our staff. 20% of the 168 people who visited us between October and November were visiting an archive for the first time. This is slightly above the national average of 18% and good to know because we are constantly striving to attract new users and widen our audience. Significantly, just 38% of the 168 told us they were researching their family history. Ten years ago that figure was 72%. Family historians are no longer our overwhelmingly core customers: they have been joined by more local historians, academics and professionals undertaking landscape and archaeological surveys. There may be several reasons for this. Some of those who were previously researching family history may have gone on to study the towns and villages where their ancestors lived; our work to promote the wider use of archives to new audiences may be starting to pay off and the general improvements to our own online finding aids – SURCAT, Exploring Surrey's Past and the amazing range of indexes prepared by our volunteers and now accessible via our website – may be attracting researchers who, ten years ago, had no idea that we held the very archives they were looking for.

Like most record offices, we score highly on customer service. Our visitors gave us an average of 9.7 out of 10 for the welcome they received, the availability of staff and the quality and appropriateness of staff advice. This is the same as the national average, but it is very welcome news. Surveys like this can often appear dull, but the information that we gather helps us to improve our service and also show how much we are valued by the community. The questionnaire is not completely made up of tick-boxes; there is space for customers to comment personally on the service. Grumbles about the lack of parking on busy days, the slow speed of the public computers are as helpful as nice comments such as 'A first class county archive – and I have visited many' are pleasing.

If you took part in the survey last year, thank you very much. If you'd like to take part this year but are unable to visit us, don't worry – this year the survey will be of 'Remote Users' and anyone emailing or writing to us between October and November will be asked to comment on our enquiries service.