Archives and Local Government—the ASA NSW Branch Local Government Archives project*

Sandra Mowbray and Sigrid McCausland

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The paper covers the situation in New South Wales regarding local government records, largely during 1991–1993. It also looks at the Australian Society of Archivists Incorporated New South Wales (ASA NSW) Branch's response to the situation of councils with growing responsibilities for records and minimal resources. It is a report on a major initiative of the ASA NSW Branch in securing and administering project funds.

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*   The original version of this paper was presented jointly by Sandra Mowbray and Sigrid McCausland at the ASA National Conference at Wagga Wagga, May 1992. Sigrid held the position of chair on the Project's Management Committee, and presented Part 1, *Getting the Project Started*, and Part 3, *The Future of the Project*, of the paper. Sandra was the Project Archivist and presented Part 2, *The Purpose and Work of the Project*. The original paper has been edited and updated to provide the context and history of the project. An afterword has been added by Sandra Mowbray outlining work undertaken by the project following the Wagga Wagga conference.   Copyright © in photographs: Sandra Mowbray

Part 1 — Getting the Project Started

IN MAY 1990 THE NSW DEPARTMENT of Planning advertised for applications for its coming round of heritage grant programs. For the first time, archives appeared in the list of categories eligible for grants. The other categories, as listed on the application form, were: building, archaeological excavation, landscape, cemetery, industrial site, pipe organ, natural environment, aboriginal, heritage adviser, heritage study, local fund, moveable item, marine archaeology, stained glass, geological site, main street, general heritage promotion and miscellaneous.

The Branch chose to propose a project in the area of local government because most local government archives in the state were outside the orbit of professional care and were often at risk through both administrative change and inadequate storage conditions. We knew from the Branch's workshops program, which had then been running for four years, that attendance at our workshops by local government employees other than librarians was usually low. This was probably because our workshops were not aimed at their records specifically and because, unlike family historians and representatives of voluntary organisations, local government employees were unlikely to attend weekend workshops.

The publication of *The General Records Disposal Schedule for Local Government in NSW* in October 1988, and the amendment of the ordinance (*Local Government Act 1919*) concerning local government records as a consequence in 1989, meant that local government authorities had new responsibilities for the retention and preservation of their permanent records. Joy Hughes' survey of minute books and rate records, *Local Government . . . Local History*, published in early 1990, provided us with valuable information on these significant categories of local government records. But we were also reminded that there was no-one with an overview regarding the generality of local government records in NSW.

The ASA NSW Branch was an appropriate body to apply for funds to provide local government authorities with advice on legal responsibilities relating to their records and on how to manage their archives. As archivists we had the expertise but neither the funds nor the organisational resources to mount a program ourselves. The agreement we eventually signed with the Department of Planning described the purpose of the assistance we were to receive as '. . . to provide professional archival advice to local councils on the care and organisation of archives'.

We asked for $85 000 to employ two archivists for one year to provide on-site training and advice to councils, or for $50 000 to employ one archivist (both allowing for expenses such as travel and accommodation). The project was to be administered by a Management Committee of experienced archivists who would set up its operations and work program, manage its finances, report to the granting body and supervise the project staff. An advisory committee composed of representatives of organisations with expertise concerning local government records would also be set up to provide policy advice and publicity opportunities through their own networks.

In the end we were granted $25 000 from the NSW Heritage Conservation Fund. That we received anything at all, we discovered, was largely due to the efforts of an influential supporter on the committee which assessed the grants. We had no information about how the assessment process worked or about the total funds available for grants. To compare with the grant system in the US, details of the assessment and peer review processes are well publicised and applicants in some cases are contacted to amend or tighten their applications before the grants are decided. Even in 1995 it still seems difficult to obtain this sort of information in NSW.

This leads to an important point about the relationship between the granting body and the recipient. In our dealings with the Department of Planning, we have often had the impression that we did not fit in with their usual model of client and pattern of grant administration. To give some examples: questions about our initial budget concentrated on details such as why we would include estimates of the cost of flights to distant centres such as Bourke and why we needed our own postbox. The Department of Planning also stressed the urgency of informing it who we had appointed as the Project Officer and asked how we would know we had chosen someone qualified for the task. To this we replied that the Management Committee had extensive experience in selecting people for jobs in the archives field and that we would follow accepted selection practices. Invariably, when we presented our periodic reports, accompanied by a request for the next instalment of funds, our reports were not acknowledged and the cheque, when it arrived, was for less than we requested. Each project was also required to nominate a completion date before receiving its final instalment. It is no doubt easier to demonstrate that a house or ferry is fully restored than to state that the work of the archivist is finished.

We revised the plan for the project and submitted the acceptance form in December 1990 with the aim of running a six-month project, by employing

one archivist and locating the project within the State Library of NSW. In this change of strategy we were encouraged by the Director of the grants program who led us to believe that there was a good chance we would be granted second-year funding. He suggested that we defer the start of the project until mid-1991, as then the project could run back-to-back with the next year's expected grant. It suited us to defer until mid-1991 because of the demands of organising the ASA annual conference being held that year in Sydney.

This did not deter us from getting the Local Government Archives Project (LGAP) started. The original Management Committee, consisting of Margy Burn, Anne Picot, Marie Alcorn and Sigrid McCausland, met several times in early 1991. We initially planned to launch the project with a seminar to introduce the project's services and to provide an opportunity for discussion of current issues of concern. In other words we thought we would start off with an event which exposed the project to several councils at once. However, we later decided instead to spend several hundred dollars of the first grant instalment on the publication and distribution of a leaflet explaining and promoting the project.

We arranged a meeting of the Advisory Committee in May. This meeting was very useful and achieved what it intended: our direction and proposed methods received their blessing and they provided us with clues and contacts for getting the project off the ground.

We advertised for expressions of interest for the position of Project Archivist on 1 June 1991 with the expectation that it would run from July to November. We were well aware that this was to be a very brief period of employment and that it could be hard to find what we wanted—an archivist with experience in local government in NSW. This crucial difficulty stemmed from the Department's arbitrary decision to grant us half the smaller amount we had sought. The only solution was to run the project over a much shorter period. We were fortunate that Sandra Mowbray, who had worked in the Archives of the Council of the City of Sydney and at Rockdale Municipal Library, was able to take up the position in early August.

Reporting to the ASA NSW Branch was a regular feature of the project's work. Although the work of the project was separate from the day-to-day administration of the NSW Branch and did not involve many members directly, it should be remembered that LGAP was a Branch initiative. The project was accountable to the Branch—financial and progress reports were provided to every meeting.

Publicity for the project was through such means as the Local Government Association's *Circular*, the October 1991 *ASA Bulletin*, and the Royal Australian Historical Society magazine *History*. Sigrid spoke to the Records Management Association of Australia's Local Government Chapter before the project began, this being a useful forum because representatives of about thirty councils were present.

The State Library of NSW's assistance was vital to the success of the project. It is no exaggeration to say that without the infrastructure support they provided we would not have been able to manage. Their support took various forms—providing a home base—desk, telephone, fax and answering machine. Using the Library's payroll facilities relieved the Management Committee from taking on the role of an employer. Other benefits included access to the Public Libraries Branch network for mailing out and proximity to the Library's collections and services.

Part 2 — Purpose and Work of the project

The aim of the Local Government Archives Project was to provide advice and assistance to local government authorities in New South Wales on the management of archives. The need for this type of service was evident in the project's life two years after its proposed initial completion date, largely due to the support and contributions given by local government authorities.

The concept of the project was fundamental to the way local government records are managed in NSW. Most other states in Australia differ from NSW in legislative responsibilities in keeping records for local government.

The Council of the City of Sydney is the oldest continuous local government authority in Australia having commenced in 1842 with the Corporation of Sydney Act. The Municipalities Acts of 1858 and 1867 led to the creation of around 170 new councils by the end of the nineteenth century. As a consequence, many councils have records dating from the previous century. The NSW Local Government Act was enacted in 1919, and gave responsibility for retention of records to individual councils.

In more recent years, the efforts of NSW Action Committee on Local Government Records and notably Pat Ward, have simplified and clarified the administration of local government records. The Action Committee was not a government body, but rather was made up of historians, archivists, librarians, record managers, local government officers, and an ASA NSW Branch representative. The Committee, formed in 1981, achieved much

success. In 1985, the Local Government Act was amended due to pressure from the Committee, and fifteen classes of records were listed for permanent retention.

The Action Committee was also central to the concept of developing a disposal schedule. This aim was achieved with the publication in 1988 of *The General Records Disposal Schedule for Local Government in NSW*. The Local Government Act was again amended in 1989 to give the schedule legal authority.

During the life of the project, the NSW Department of Local Government reviewed and revised the Local Government Act, which was enacted in July 1993. As a part of this process, submissions were requested from interested parties. The ASA NSW Branch provided submissions on the discussion paper and the draft Local Government Act. It was mainly the Management Committee and the Project Archivist who provided input to the submissions, which were specifically aimed at records and archives matters in the new legislation. Some of the recommendations made were included in the new legislation. The Regulations (standards for local government) on the care of archives, intended to be included as a part of the *Local Government Act 1993*, have yet to be released.

Changes to the Local Government Act were not considered in isolation. The *Freedom of Information Act 1989* was amended in 1993 so that local government had the same responsibilities in providing information to the public as the State government in NSW. The NSW Department of Local Government has also released *The Records Management Checklist for Local Government*.

The amount of legislative change and responsibility, combined with the increased public knowledge of the historical value of local government records, led to a need to increase the awareness within councils of the importance of the competent management of records and archives.

The primary aim of the project was to provide professional advice on archives and records management to local government authorities in NSW. Priority was given to those councils in country areas, as it was felt that these councils did not have easy access to the services that Sydney provided (that is, training courses and services provided by the State Library of NSW, the Archives Authority of NSW and various consulting companies).

The first month of the project was devoted to administrative tasks and finalising insurance details. I was unable to travel during this time as there was no insurance to cover me outside of the State Library. Insurance for an employee of the ASA proved to be a major unforeseen problem. The Management Committee, myself and other members of the Society devoted considerable time and energy to its solution. Many thanks must go to Marie Alcorn, the then Treasurer of the Management Committee, for all her efforts at solving this problem.

Thus, it was September before I was able to visit a council. By this stage the project had been approached by over thirty councils requesting advice and assistance. Due to financial and time constraints, it proved impossible to visit all these councils. This sort of demand continued throughout the full life of the project. Seminar/workshops for council employees in managing local government archives were also conducted by LGAP. The following table shows the number of councils participating in the various activities of LGAP.

Local Government Archives Project Statistics

	1991–1992	1992–1993	Totals
Consultancies	19	7	26
Seminars	2	4	6
– No of Councils	27	59	86
– No of Participants	39	83	122

All the councils visited contributed in some way to the project—either by providing accommodation and travel costs, or a direct donation to the project. The contributions that councils made meant the life of the project was extended. It is interesting to note that councils provided three times as much towards expenses than the funding grants.

A typical consultation visit to a council usually took two to three days. This was done at the request of the council concerned. Generally, a program for the visit was worked out in advance between myself and the council officers. During the visit, a very basic survey was undertaken, noting such things as the storage conditions, the type and amount of records held and any control systems. This could often involve travelling all over a city or town.

In-house training session using the General Records Disposal Schedule.
*Shows Sandra Mowbray and two staff members from Casino Council.*

During visits to many of the councils, time was also devoted to training staff in the management of records and archives, and in using *The General Records Disposal Schedule for Local Government in New South Wales*. Advice was also given on training courses available, conservation needs, information flow, local history collections, archives suppliers, current records practices, implementation of computerised management systems, and of course on establishing an archives program. Some councils also requested that I participate in problem-solving sessions with staff, or attend management meetings. A written report, including findings and recommendations, was provided to the council after the visit.

I found a vast range of conditions during the visits. The intellectual management of archives ranged from knowing into which cupboards everything was thrown, to imposing an 'archives' number on every item. Only one council I visited had some kind of series system (and a staff member dedicated to its archives), and all relied on staff memory for locating items.

One of the major problems for local government in NSW was and still is staffing levels. Whilst upper management in most councils could see the

Typical council archives storage found during LGAP visits.

advantages of employing, at the very minimum, an archives clerk, councils in NSW continue to suffer financial cutbacks. Many councils are reduced to minimum services and staffing levels (i.e. garbage collection and road maintenance). However, the increased legislative responsibilities and accountability have meant that competent records and archives management is essential, and councils should be planning to implement or upgrade these systems.
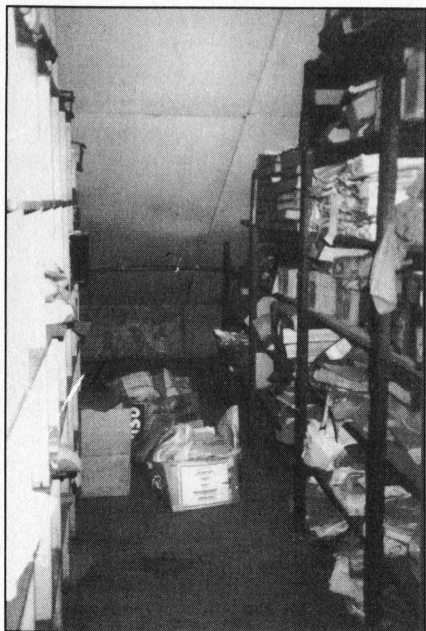
By far the worst and most immediate problem I found in my travels was the storage conditions of archives. Whilst the conditions for storing current records were generally good, local government archives were normally found in less than adequate storage areas. I found records in cupboards, theatre dressing rooms, under stages, boatsheds, garages, and of course basements and lofts. One council assured me that their rates books (a popular primary source for historians) had been transferred to the

The Loft!

local historical society, but enquiries there found that this was not so. I eventually located these records in a disused petrol depot!

There was one very nice exception to this—Kempsey Council (in the north coast region) had constructed a purpose built repository. This cost the council approximately $90 000 and was built on its own land, using council's own staff skills. The repository was built to archives specifications. I had occasion to return there later and found the Council had implemented most of the recommendations made and were now using the repository appropriately.

No matter whether it was a country or a city council, storage space always seemed scarce, so disposing of records had become a major concern. The clerks to whom this job was generally delegated were not usually informed of their legal responsibilities and felt apprehensive about using the schedule. Many of the senior council officers commented on the advantages of training staff in disposal work on-site using their own records.

However, advice to councils by the project was not limited to on-site visits. We conducted seminar/workshops in various locations around NSW. These were aimed specifically at people working in the area of local government records and included sessions on the legal framework for local government records and archives, using the Disposal Schedule and setting up an archives. Presenters at the seminars were all professional archivists from the ASA NSW Branch.
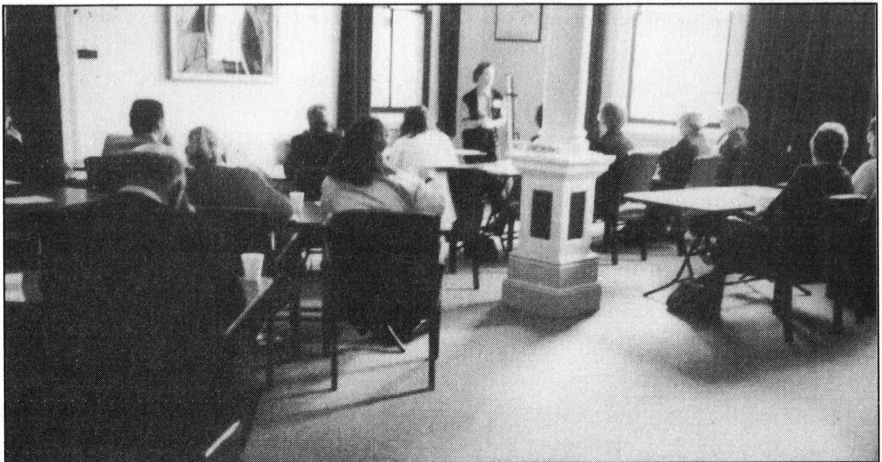
Sally Gordon giving a presentation at the Local Government Archives project seminar, Maitland.

Besides having benefited the councils themselves, the Local Government Archives Project also raised a general awareness of archives and archival problems, and a specific awareness of the existence and work of the ASA.

The response to the project over the first ten months was overwhelming, and this continued, even after the project ceased operating. We received more requests for consultation visits than we could possibly have hoped to accommodate—even with the extended time given to the project. We also continually received enquiries as to the next seminars. There was and still is a definite need in local government for these types of services.

Part 3 — The Future of the project

The project's long-term aim was to convince the Department of Local Government to employ an archivist to undertake the type of work we started: the Department has a regulatory role and the resources to support the employment of an archivist experienced in the area of local government. It also has an interest in seeing that councils are keeping their records properly.

The strengthened accountability emphasis in the new Local Government Act puts the responsibility on councils in providing more information to ratepayers and the public generally. This suggests that the in-house solution of advising councils on how to look after their own records may have increasing appeal. The release of the *Records Management Checklist for Local Government* has placed further responsibility on the Department in overseeing the management of records and archives. However, since the enactment of the new legislation, the Department has yet to fulfil the roles of advising and overseeing the administration of local government records and archives.

Overseas experience has shown that short-term grant-funded projects can often lead to the creation of positions on a long-term or permanent basis. An exercise like ours was not one where the body receiving the funds can rest on its laurels when the funds expire. The need for archives services in local government authorities will continue to increase. We believe the solution we have proposed is the most appropriate for the long-term preservation and management of an important category of records which have significant value to their creators and to the public.

Nevertheless, I consider there could be a role here for the proposed ASA Executive Officer. The ASA will be better able to pursue opportunities for outreach activities if it has such support at its centre. Voluntary committee members are frequently very busy in their own jobs and cannot be expected,

for example, to be aware of all available possible funding programs and their application cycles.

Looking Back at LGAP — 1995

The Local Government Archives Project received funding from the NSW Department of Planning until September 1993. The project lasted for two years.

The Management Committee and I have never gained a full understanding of why the funding ceased—the Heritage Assistance Scheme still provides grants to organisations working in the 'heritage' fields. It may be as Sigrid surmised in 1992 that 'it is no doubt easier to demonstrate that a house or ferry is fully restored than to state that the work of an archivist is finished'.

The subsequent activities of LGAP went beyond those outlined in this paper in 1992. During the second year of the project, less of my time was devoted in direct consultancies. This provided more opportunities to reach a broader local government audience. Seminars for local government employees, on managing archives, were held in regional and metropolitan areas. I was assisted in these seminar presentations by professional members of the ASA NSW Branch. My special thanks go to Vanessa Goodhew for her extra efforts in setting up and presenting at LGAP Seminars.

I also spent time giving papers/presentations to senior management groups. This involved addressing regional organisations of councils and the Institute of Municipal Management groups. The presentations provided an opportunity for senior management to understand the benefits of an operational records and archives program, and resulted in a number of consultancies for those councils which had staff attending.

During the last stage of the project, we decided to survey those councils which had consultancies carried out for them by LGAP. It was an indication of the good will LGAP was held in that the survey received a 100 per cent response rate. All councils found their reports useful, and 79 per cent had implemented some of the recommendations. Reasons given for not implementing the recommendations were that finances were not available or staff time was limited. Almost two-thirds of those surveyed replied they would be interested in a return visit by the Project Archivist for further staff training.

Unfortunately, further consultancies, seminars, presentations or training were not to be realised. Despite the contributions from councils and the invaluable support given by the State Library of NSW, LGAP still required

the basic grant from the Department of Planning to continue operations. We had been encouraged by the Department of Planning to continue planning for the project, and were reasonably sure of the continuation of the grants. The last minute decision by the Department not to provide the next year's grant meant the immediate cessation of the project, as no alternative sources of funding were available.

There is still a need for the services that LGAP offered—especially on a cost only or free basis. Local government in NSW has dealt with significant and fundamental legislative change during recent years in all areas of administration. Many councils do not have the means for employing consultants, yet the need for some kind of advisory/consultancy service will be even greater with the release of the regulations for standard of care in records and archives.

Looking back after some two years, I see the true success of the project as a seeding program. While not many councils have implemented a full archives management program, there are a number now which are aware of their archives, and are implementing practices to manage those collections. There are also more local government authorities with professional archivists employed.
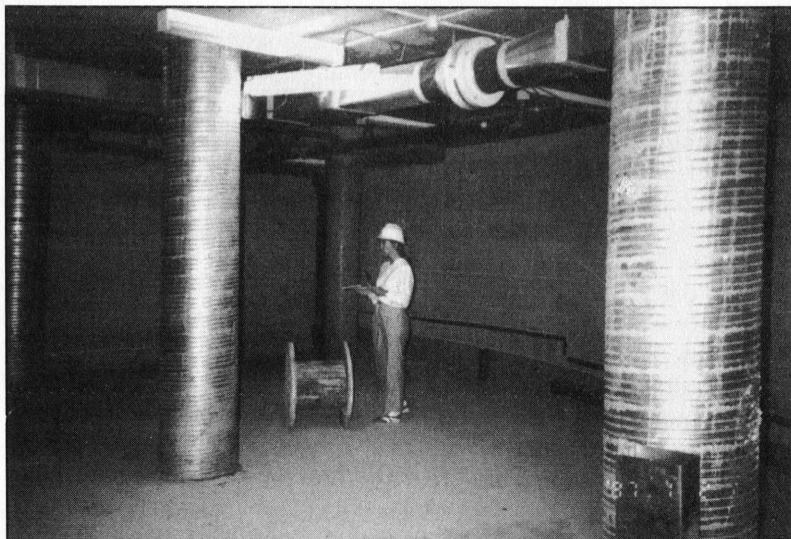
Sandra Mowbray assessing storage area use in a new council building.

To recapitulate: the Local Government Archives Project achieved much with slender resources in a short period of time, but the task of ensuring the long-term preservation of such a significant category of records in New South Wales requires continuing support and funding. The ASA has gained useful experience in seeking and administering grant funds through the project, experience which can be used in developing other proposals which involve the ASA in providing archival leadership and support in the community.

Our Thanks

Many organisations and people contributed to the success of the project. Without this sort of contribution, LGAP would not have achieved what it did. The Management Committee and I would like to take this opportunity to thank the following organisations which participated on the Advisory Committee:

Australian Society of Archivists

Archives Authority of NSW

Records Management Association of Australia, NSW Local Government Chapter Local Government and Shires Associations

Royal Australian Historical Society

Action Committee on Local Government Records for NSW

State Library of NSW

The LGAP seminars *Issues in Local Government Archives Management* would not have been possible without the assistance of members of the ASA NSW Branch. The Management Committee and I would like to thank those Branch members who participated in the project as seminar presenters:

Rhona Clement   Vanessa Goodhew
Sally Gordon   Sigrid McCausland
Angela McGing   Kylie Percival
Renato Perdon   Anne Picot
Mark Stevens

I would also like to thank the members of the Management Committee who all worked in voluntary capacities and devoted considerable time and effort ensuring the success of the Local Government Archives Project. The Management Committee was served by archivists from the ASA NSW Branch.

Original Committee: Anne Picot, Marie Alcorn, Sigrid McCausland, Margy Burn

Final Committee: Margy Burn, Rhona Clement, Vanessa Goodhew, Ross Connell

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Note: The Local Government Archives Project Annual Reports and administrative records were transferred to the Noel Butlin Archives Centre in Canberra, where the ASA records are held. The records have been organised into series. If you wish further information on the Local Government Archives Project or local government generally please contact Sandra Mowbray on 041 113 8621 (mobile).

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