

Position Paper of the Federal Conference of Municipal Archives with the Convention of Municipal Authorities (BKK)

Municipal Archives

**“Nur wer weiß, woher er kommt, weiß wohin er geht”
(„Only he who knows where he has come from can also know
where he wants go to“)
(Theodor Heuss)**

1. The preservation and communication of the local historical heritage is a public task

The historical heritage of cities, towns and rural districts does not only manifest itself in significant buildings, in cultural, political and economic traditions but also within the archival tradition of deeds, files, maps, pictures, sound carriers, plans, documents from digital systems, etc. As a whole, they make up the unmistakable cultural appearance of a town and help the citizens to identify themselves with it and make it theirs. The more deeply linked a person is to his/her place of residence and its landscape, the more willing is he/she to participate in solidary action, whether in the form of civic commitment, in associations and groups or in political bodies as city or county councils and advisory boards.

It is therefore an essential public task to preserve the historical heritage of towns and rural districts, to communicate it today and to pass it on to future generations. Only a society being aware of its roots will be lively, and local governments as agencies „on the spot“ have a part to play in this field. They do not only have to safeguard the physical heritage, the buildings, but also to ensure that the intellectual heritage appearing in its original form as archival material is preserved and used. It is an important mission of local governments to make this clear to the public with a view to enhance its understanding of the past and the present of towns and their citizens and to further Germany’s democratic development, a mission that they fulfil in accordance with their historico-political self-image.

The archives of cities, towns and rural districts make an important contribution to this effort. In these times changing so rapidly their role is essential to ensure a sustainable local government policy. Their responsibilities in the field of records management can be defined as follows:

- To fulfil an identity-creating function by helping the citizens to get acquainted with their history,
- to guarantee all citizens’ right to information under acceptable conditions (free access, low costs, etc.),
- to preserve the documents securing the town’s and the citizens’ rights,

- to ensure the continuity and the transparency of administrative action,
- to explore the phases that have determined the town's development.

2. The local government is responsible for fulfilling these tasks

The archival tasks to be performed include the following services:

- to **appraise** (select) data storage media taking into account the town's and its citizens' legal security, the town's historical and current development and its individuality,
- to **keep and preserve** the selected data storage media permanently as archival material,
- to **make** the archival material **accessible** to the public,
- to **evaluate** the archival material scientifically and to **convey** the results.

Only qualified institutions will be able to face these challenges and to perform the appropriate services in the future. They have to work according to scientifically verifiable, objective criteria and must be independent institutions not pursuing any party's political or commercial purposes. It has to be guaranteed that they take into account the existing public records acts of the Land, regulations on data protection and the protection of personal rights and the legitimate interests of the local governments. The qualified archivists of the municipal archives will be able to perform these tasks assuring the best possible quality standard and economic efficiency.

Assuming the responsibility for the information sources and having a thorough knowledge of these sources, the municipal archives are coordination and information centres offering their services to the administration, the citizens and the researchers. They represent crystallization centres for the public image that a town promotes of itself.

Therefore the municipal archives must not only be considered as the archives of the administration but as the central archives of the entire territorial authorities. They will only be able to reflect the full scale of urban and rural life, the full range of political, economic, social and cultural events if – where necessary in cooperation with other institutions - they include the records of companies, parties, associations and other local institutions, if they acquire estates left by private persons and collect newspapers, autographs, handbills, maps, posters, cinematographic and sound documents, etc. as documents showing a town's development. Thanks to this archival material completing the field of administrative sources, the demand for current information can be met without neglecting the traditional archive users.

3. The archives' services are helpful in many domains

By offering a variety of services relating to the providing and evaluation of archival material, the municipal archives help the local governments to fulfil their duties towards society. Being involved in local administrative processes and having knowledge of local government policy requirements and priorities, they do not merely provide access to sources but also play a role in the following fields:

- They foster and strengthen democracy and the understanding of democracy by dealing with urban history (publications, lectures, exhibitions, reappraisal of historical events of the recent past, as for ex. the consequences of the period of Nazism and of the past of the GDR).
- They assume responsibility on the local level by fostering and carrying on cooperation with working groups, institutions and associations with a view to reappraise specific themes concerning the history of towns, villages and rural districts (encouraging civic commitment).
- They play an integrative role by conveying historical experiences.
- The evaluation of the records by the archives supports the research in the field of urban and rural history in the widest sense.
- They help to ensure the legal security of the town and the individual citizen.
- They are the memory of the administration and contribute to the continuity, the transparency and rationality of administrative action.

Municipal archives constitute an element of the educational system as they

- convey historical knowledge which is the basis of understanding in all spheres of life,
- can present original documents providing authentic access to historical sources,
- are active in the area of historical education (cooperation with schools, exhibitions, lectures, publications, etc.) selecting specific themes,
- create a place of extracurricular learning for pupils and adults and offer specific further education for teachers in the field of „archive education“.
- keep track of the current social and political events following the motto „to learn from history“.

4. Challenges to archivists

Municipal archivists will remain challenged to improve the presentation of their services to citizens, the administration and researchers. For example, they should benefit efficiently from the possibilities opened up by the new media (Internet and others). Only by applying proper archival methods will they be able to face the increasing flood of files and the introduction of modern information technologies in the administration.

To rise to the growing challenges they will need a certain scope of manoeuvre. They must retain access to all data storage media to allow **archival processing** taking into account the development of data technology. This implies:

- access to all documents generated in the area of responsibility of the local government concerned,
- acquisition of material relating to the historical development of the town/village,
- taking all measures required to preserve the archived records,
- obtaining the resources needed to take up scientific and contemporary issues,
- opportunities for archival activities outside the own municipal archives, and
- obtaining the proper means in terms of personnel, premises and funds.

The archives must continue to **fulfil** the following tasks:

- the appraisal of data storage media and the decision on their destruction or permanent archiving,
- the decision about access to the archival material,
- the safeguarding of the archival material,
- the use of the material, information to be given and research to be performed at the request of the administration or the public.

They can delegate the following tasks to third parties while **maintaining the responsibility** for these fields of activity:

- Technical work relating to the preservation of the archived records,
- technical process of digital archiving,
- work on specific projects (for ex. exhibition design, P.R. activities, publishing).

Before commissioning third parties, the economic efficiency has to be investigated taking into account the individual requirements specification that will be defined by the archives. Such commissioning is most easily conceivable in the technical field (preservation of archived material, digital archiving).

Depending on the local circumstances it is recommended, however, to perform the following tasks in cooperation with other partners:

- Acquiring and conveying historical knowledge,
- archive education projects,
- adult education.

If municipal archives decide to have certain services performed by third parties, this will not jeopardize the actual performance but will require a thorough quality assurance process that has to be taken into account when determining the economic efficiency. The related funds have to be appropriated **by the local governments** bearing in mind that

- the decisions to be taken on the commissioning of third parties and the related supervisory functions require higher qualified personnel;
- the work on projects and the outsourcing of technical services will involve resources of a higher structural level, for ex. in case of contracts for work and services, for transport services, insurance charges, restoration budgets, etc.
- a more flexible and longer-term resources management will be necessary.

Summary:

Oriented towards current events, the municipal archives as „memory of the administration and the community“ fulfil their tasks (and some of them have done this for centuries) for the future of towns and rural districts under changing socio-economic conditions.

Municipal archivists whose thinking is trained by dealing with the past are also used to direct their thinking towards the future. „Only he who knows where he has come from can also know where he wants to go“.

That's why municipal archives will continue to play an important role assisting local governments in fulfilling their functions.

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