

Archives New Zealand: Archway: linking the public with the past

Information about our national archives is now available on-line. Archway delivers new ways for New Zealanders to discover evidence of their past and explore the government's role in shaping it.

At its heart, Archway is an archival documentation system that holds metadata about government records held by Archives New Zealand. However this is linked, by a web of relationships, to detailed information about the functions and machinery of government back to 1840. This contextual information about who created the records, how they were managed, and what activities they reflect ensures that the records can continue to be used and understood over time. Researchers also depend on this data to locate the documents, maps, photographs etc. that they need and verify that the information they use is authentic and reliable.

Last year 16,630 researchers, including family historians, treaty researchers, students, academic staff, and documentary makers, visited Archives New Zealand and consulted 51,772 records. Archives staff also answered 6,762 remote reference enquiries and temporarily loaned back over 5,000 records to government agencies.

Until recently, Archives New Zealand managed all of its core data about individual records, recordkeeping systems, and government agencies on paper. Lists of records and descriptions of agencies and series were routinely filed in ring-binders in each of its four offices. In addition to the National office, there are smaller offices in Auckland, Christchurch and Dunedin. Researchers could only search for public archives by visiting an office in person and each office knew only about its own holdings not the total holdings of the organisation.

Researchers were also obliged to use a documentation system that was designed principally to meet the business needs of the Archives, and could not be tailored to their needs. The reality of using a relational database that only existed on paper was that people could easily end up consulting four separate binders, simply to get the reference number for the document they wanted; then an Archivist would go to the basement to retrieve it.

Archives New Zealand's first step towards automating the data and the documentation process was the implementation in 2001 of a list management system called ELMS. This system imported records metadata in a standard format and provided a well-designed public interface for researchers to use in the reading rooms.

The next phase was to integrate the data in ELMS with a contextual management system that described the structure, functions and recordkeeping activity of government and how these have evolved from 1840 to the current day.

Archway (formerly known as GLADIS) was developed by Archives New Zealand, in conjunction with Unisys, as its core business system. In this respect, it has transformed both its internal processes and its external services to members of the public and to government clients.

Archway's primary purpose is to give researchers ready access to information about what archives are held and where they can be found, through a web-based interface. This is currently available in the reading rooms of the four offices and is ready for release on the Internet. The interface was designed with the help of Provoke Solutions Ltd and offers pathways for searching, that a wide range of public researchers can use intuitively without the help of an archivist.

At the simplest level researchers can search for a keyword in the title of a record, but the system is specifically designed to exploit the web of relationships between records and contextual entities e.g. from a description of an agency a researcher can drill down to the records it created or up to the sector of government it belongs to. Links can also take them back to the agency that preceded it in time, or forward to the agency or agencies that succeeded it when it was abolished.

Users also have a choice of searches depending on their level of experience or the complexity of their search. The Simple Search delivers quick results and/or suggestions for other lines of enquiry in plain English. The Advanced Search offers more upfront choice and flexibility for researchers who know their way around.

The Index search is a completely new feature and it uses functional descriptions that are being added to Archway. The arrangement of archives according to provenance i.e. the agency that created them has been a challenge for researchers in the past. People generally know what government does but not which Department did it at a particular point in time. Now they can base an enquiry on functional terms such as 'tourist promotion', 'liquor licensing', and 'Māori schools', which will direct them to the relevant records.. This is much more akin to the subject searching that is standard in Library systems.

Archway also positions Archives New Zealand to offer new services to the public. Future developments are likely to include on-line requesting, and on-line access to digitised and born digital records. Easier access to the information in Archway is also likely to help government agencies that transfer records to Archives New Zealand, and who periodically borrow them back. Agencies will be able to get a full picture of what has been transferred that relates to their business, and request reports on archives that they transferred but which are restricted from public view because of their sensitivity.

By the end of the year agencies will also be able to check current and past disposal authorities on-line, to confirm which of their current records can be legally destroyed and which must be transferred to Archives New Zealand.

At present Archway supports the transfer of mainly physical records from agencies to the Archive. In the long term, it is envisaged it will support agency systems in the creation of electronic records and the management of access to them.

Finally, Archway has enabled Archives New Zealand to revise its internal processes and shift the organisation towards a more integrated business model. It has been able to realise the internal benefits of an automated system in the following ways:

1. Information is more effectively gathered and shared.
Archival description has traditionally been the role of one section (Arrangement & Description) but in reality valuable information is collected by many parts of the organisation. Archway now captures and centrally manages key data from several business processes (appraisal, transfer, description, and government recordkeeping) and ensures that it is available to everyone who needs it.
2. Productivity and quality control is significantly improved.
The incorporation of workflow in Archway means Archive New Zealand can strictly manage additions or changes to the data. The review process is centralised and roles and responsibilities are clearly assigned. This helps to standardise input from staff that are located in four cities, and provides them with constructive feedback on their work. Workflow also delivers new management tools. Work is easily allocated and both managers and staff have a clear picture of their workload and how it is progressing. They can also see at any time what other staff throughout the organisation are working on.
3. Other features of system have also been designed to reduce error and increase speed. Pick-lists and controlled fields have been introduced wherever possible and many fields are automatically validated. Archway also manages version control, which encompasses not just the static descriptions of entities but the dynamic relationships between them that must be updated with every change.
4. Risk is more effectively managed.
Details about access restrictions are now managed by the system and each record is tagged with its restriction status. Archway also provides added security for data that is particularly sensitive.

Archway is available in all four Reading Rooms at Archives New Zealand and will be on the Internet in late August.