Jisc
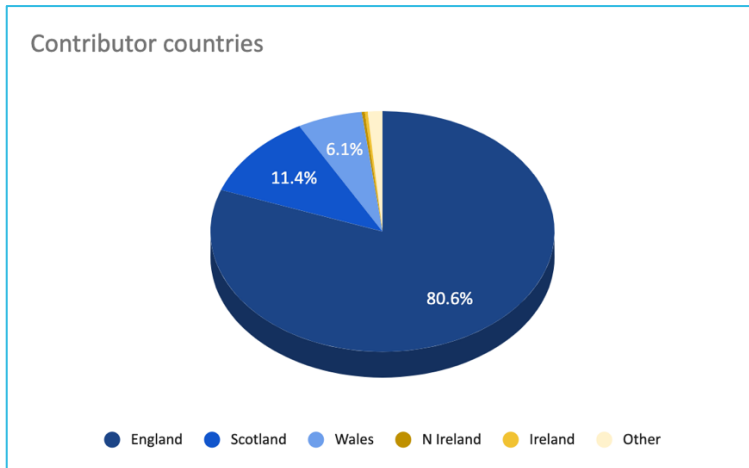
Archives Hub Survey 2020

Contributors

Contributor types

42.9%

23.8%

14.1%

6.4%

● University ● Specialist ● Local Authority ● Museum ● Religious ● Business ● National
● School ● Other

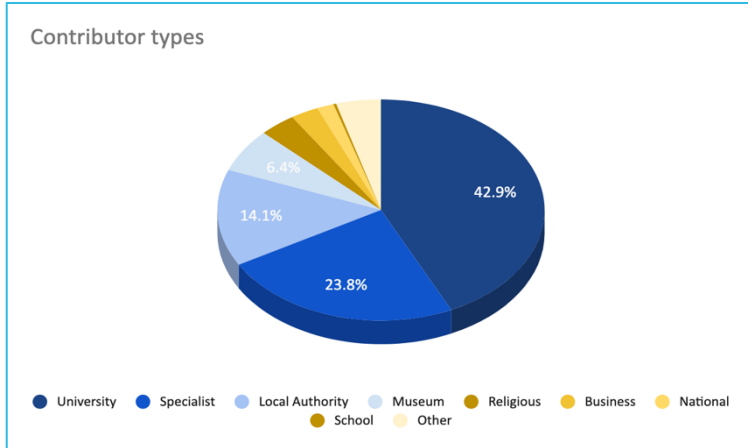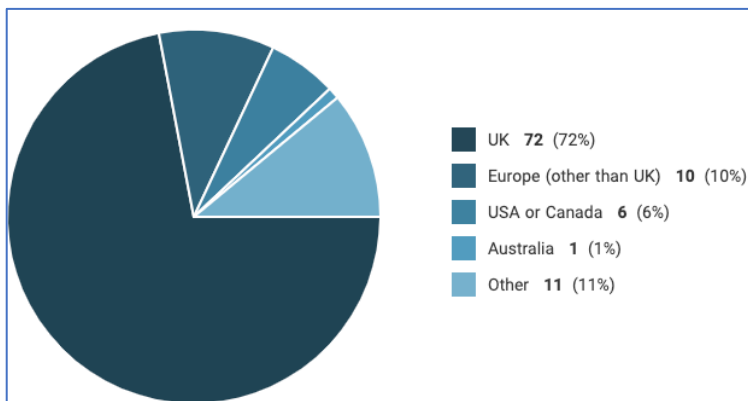### Contributor countries

80.6%

11.4%

6.1%

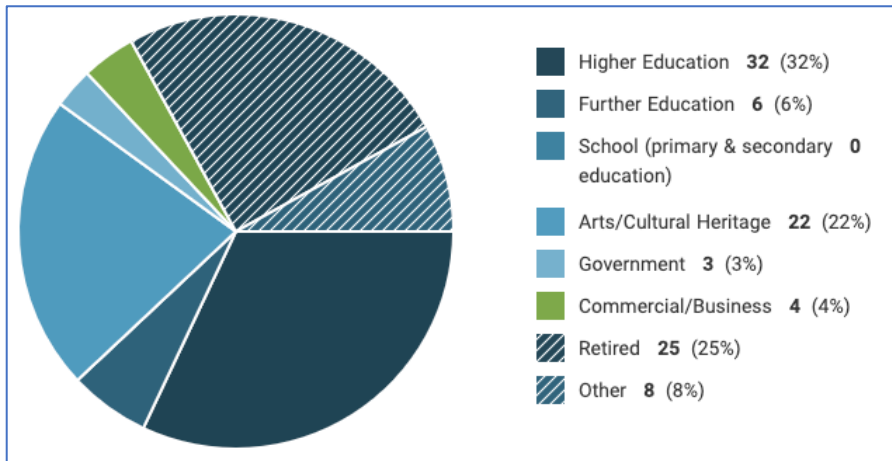● England ● Scotland ● Wales ● N Ireland ● Ireland ● Other

Information about respondents

There were 100 respondents to the Archives Hub survey, which was an online survey carried out in October and November 2020.

■ UK **72** (72%)
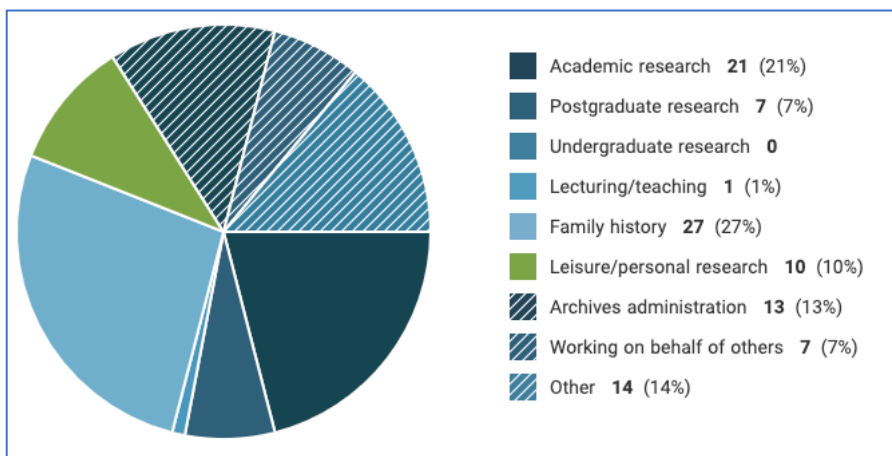
■ Europe (other than UK) **10** (10%)

■ USA or Canada **6** (6%)

■ Australia **1** (1%)

■ Other **11** (11%)

Location

72% based in the UK
10% based in Europe
Other responses included Turkey, China, India, Japan and Brazil.

![Jisc logo]

Work/study

Higher Education **32** (32%)
Further Education **6** (6%)
School (primary & secondary **0**
education)
Arts/Cultural Heritage **22** (22%)
Government **3** (3%)
Commercial/Business **4** (4%)
Retired **25** (25%)
Other **8** (8%)
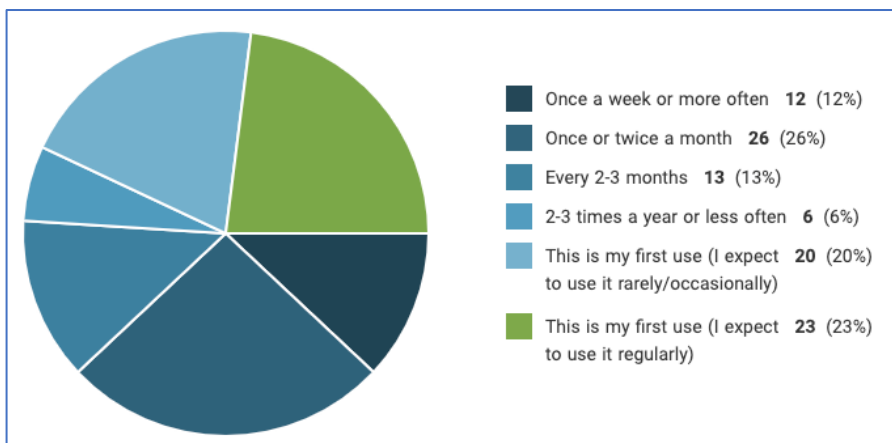
38% in HE/FE
25% retired (leisure research)
22% arts/cultural heritage
A substantial proportion are archivists, some doing their own research.

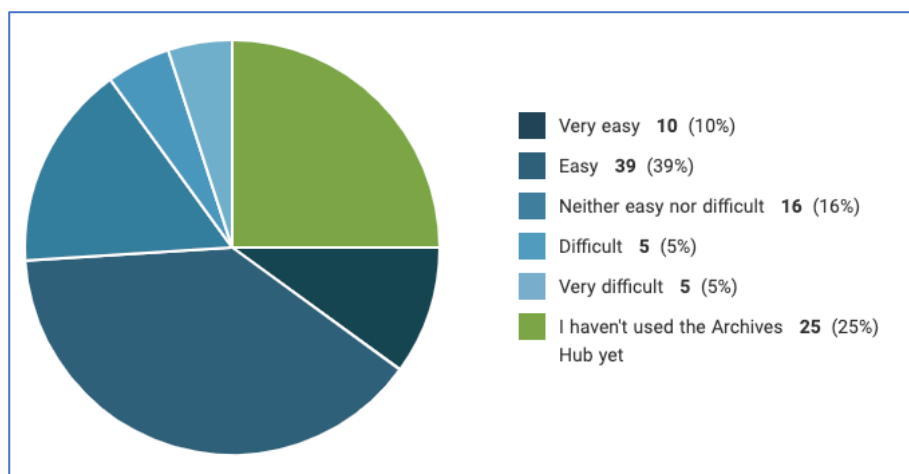**Primary reason for using the Hub**

Academic research **21** (21%)
Postgraduate research **7** (7%)
Undergraduate research **0**
Lecturing/teaching **1** (1%)
Family history **27** (27%)
Leisure/personal research **10** (10%)
Archives administration **13** (13%)
Working on behalf of others **7** (7%)
Other **14** (14%)

Academic research, family history and archives admin are the main drivers. Topics included Berthold Brecht, British Jews in the First World War and the history of whisky.

Frequency of use

Once a week or more often **12** (12%)
Once or twice a month **26** (26%)
Every 2-3 months **13** (13%)
2-3 times a year or less often **6** (6%)
This is my first use (I expect **20** (20%)
to use it rarely/occasionally)
This is my first use (I expect **23** (23%)
to use it regularly)

43% of respondents were first time users.

Over 50% use it at least every 2-3 months.

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Archives Hub Website

Very easy   **10** (10%)

Easy   **39** (39%)

Neither easy nor difficult   **16** (16%)

Difficult   **5** (5%)

Very difficult   **5** (5%)

I haven't used the Archives   **25** (25%)
Hub yet

Ease of Use

49% found the site easy to use.

10% found it difficult.

The majority of comments were positive, which raises the question of why 10 people found it difficult. It was clear that some respondents were familiar with archives and online catalogues, and others were not.

Comments and responses

'I find it difficult to filter by repository'
We have a 'holding repository' filter on the filter bar. It is hard to see how we could improve this. You just click on each repository that you want to filter by.

'sometimes I just want the link to connect me directly to the repository of the holding institution…I feel I am being bounced around'
We are modifying the display to give more emphasis to the holding repository and the link to email the repository. Another comment referred to the 'helpful links to the organisations holding the collections'.

'I have not found the information I wanted', 'not sure where to find out if you have the information I require'
This type of criticism is fairly common, but all we can do is to keep building the service to be as comprehensive as possible. There are many reasons that users cannot find a specific item. We can only help by make the search and navigation as easy to use as possible.

'No instruction how to use'
 There are many pages of instruction, so it is not easy to understand this issue. 'Help' is always there in the top right. This also links to FAQs and the Guide to Using Archives. If we put help on the main interface, that tends to clutter the screen and make it look more complicated. We are in the process of improving the help page.

'Collections listed by hits and our collections are rarely looked up so lots of scrolling involved if not using advanced search'
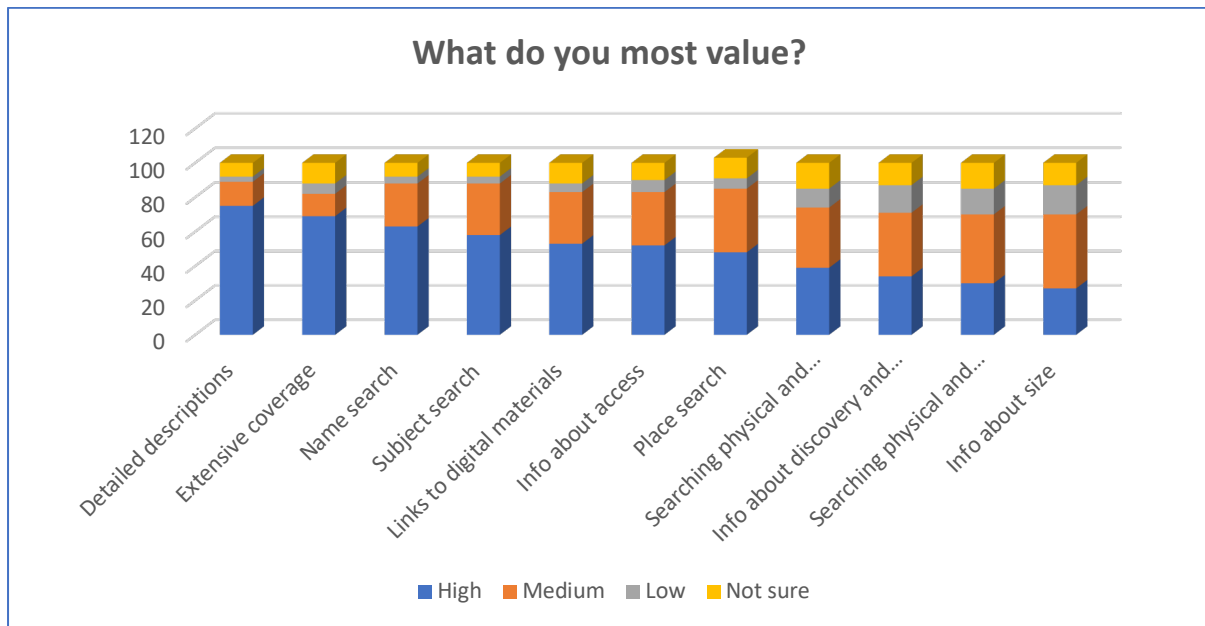This is about relevance ranking, which is a complicated issue. We want to ensure that all contributors are properly represented. Relevance tends to prioritise descriptions that have the phrase or word more often. We intend to carry out more research into relevance ranking and how we can modify it. We will involve contributors in this work.

'not find ways to open files'
This may be about digital content. We only have a relatively small amount of digital content, though it is growing. As we get more, we will aim to give it more focus. But we don't want to imply that end users can access digital materials for all archives, as the reality is that many archives are not digitised.

'the advanced search facility is unclear and confusing'
We took the decision to have the advanced search available from a drop down section that can be opened and closed. It includes the Boolean operators, which is fairly standard practice. As stated above, we will improve the help information to enable users to go quickly to the advanced help information.

What do you most value?

Categories (x-axis): Detailed descriptions, Extensive coverage, Name search, Subject search, Links to digital materials, Info about access, Place search, Searching physical and…, Info about discovery and…, Searching physical and…, Info about size

Legend: High, Medium, Low, Not sure

The answers to 'What do you most value?' reflect the requirement for comprehensiveness, convenience, and the power of aggregation. It is great to know that people find the service fast, effective and reliable.

We continue to work in these key areas:
- We always prioritise data ingest, and we continually work on our EAD Editor and on export routines.
- A name search is a high priority, and we are working on a 'Names Project' at the moment.
- We are taking steps to improve the display of subjects and places, so that will help to make cross searching more effective.
- We are working on the creation of a Digital Object Store, to encourage more uploading of digital content.
- We are making a slight change to the filter for digital content, to enable searching by images as well as searching both images and links that are provided to digital content held elsewhere.

Comments and responses

'Clear indication whether the archive is catalogued or whether the presence on the platform is just an indication of its physical existence.'
This is not a comment we have had before. It may be that brief collection level descriptions suggest the collection is not fully catalogued, but we have no way of knowing this. There isn't an obvious way for us to give this indication.

'It would be more easy and good if you directly so the digital materials instead of links'
This is down to the contributing repository. We encourage upload of digital content, but we also provide for simply giving links to the contributor's own website. In many cases they have the digital content on their own website, and it would not make sense to replicate it on the Hub.

'Discovering archives by the same creator at different repositories is useful.'
This is possible using the current interface, and should be enhanced by our Names Project work. However, the variations in names create major challenges.

'The most useful features for me are seeing the hierarchy in tree form for each collection and being able to filter by level - collection, section or item.'
Many users comment on the importance of the tree structure. We have not had any comments suggesting that this doesn't work or should be changed. We spent a long time thinking about filtering by level, so it is good to see that this is important for some users

We asked **how the service could be improved**, and had many useful comments.

Comments and responses

'the inclusion of more privately held Archives'
We are happy to welcome any contributors in the UK where the archives are available for researchers, so this is a case of continuing to promote the service and encourage new institutions. Privately held archives may not be catalogued in a way we can ingest, but we are always happy to talk to potential contributors, so the challenge is to make people aware of the option to become a contributor.

'Allowing digitised pages to be added to records'
This is exactly what we encourage, with the option to add URLs for digital objects at any level of a description. It may be that some contributors are not aware of this, though we have tried to promote it.

'To include more archives'
This is a constant aim. We are always working with new institutions to get their data. But it does require some work on the part of the contributor, although we aim to make contributing as easy as we can, we also want to ensure a base level of consistency for descriptions.

'A browse list of creators'
We do have a browse list of creators, so this is a case of the tab not being obvious. It is incorporated in the search, so you can search and then browse the resulting creators, and switch from browse back to search whenever you want to.

'a snippet of text for each entry that shows you where your keywords appear in context'
We assume this means a snippet on the hit list of results. This would be very tricky, as the term might appear many times in one entry. We do highlight the search term used within the description.

'the 'Browse' function is misleading for those who are not familiar with archives' [referring to the subject browse]
This is a perennial issue with archives, or any discovery service. Some contributors do not add subjects, but even when they do, the subject a user searches for may not match, so a user may search for 'exploration' thinking they will get all archives relating to exploring, when they will actually get all archives indexed with this term. It is extremely hard to make this caveat obvious. We do explain it in our help pages. Our default 'core search' is not a subject search – it searches across core, or key, fields. But we do want to provide the subject search, as it can help narrow down relevant archives and bring related materials together.

'The term 'creator', without qualification, is misleading'
This is certainly true for those unfamiliar with archival description. We will add help text in the browse, and also look at making this clearer in the main help. It is impossible to find ways to explain all aspects of archival description on the main interface without cluttering it.

'Browsing options not by hits' [but alphabetically].
We can consider changing this if we get more feedback indicating that an alphabetical list would be better. Our main idea was that you could do a search and then see which subjects are most frequently associated with that search. So, if you search for 'politics' then you get related terms like 'socialism' and 'elections' at the top of the browse list.

'some catalogues are very poor quality, so a UK funded project to improve the catalogues submitted would also be good'
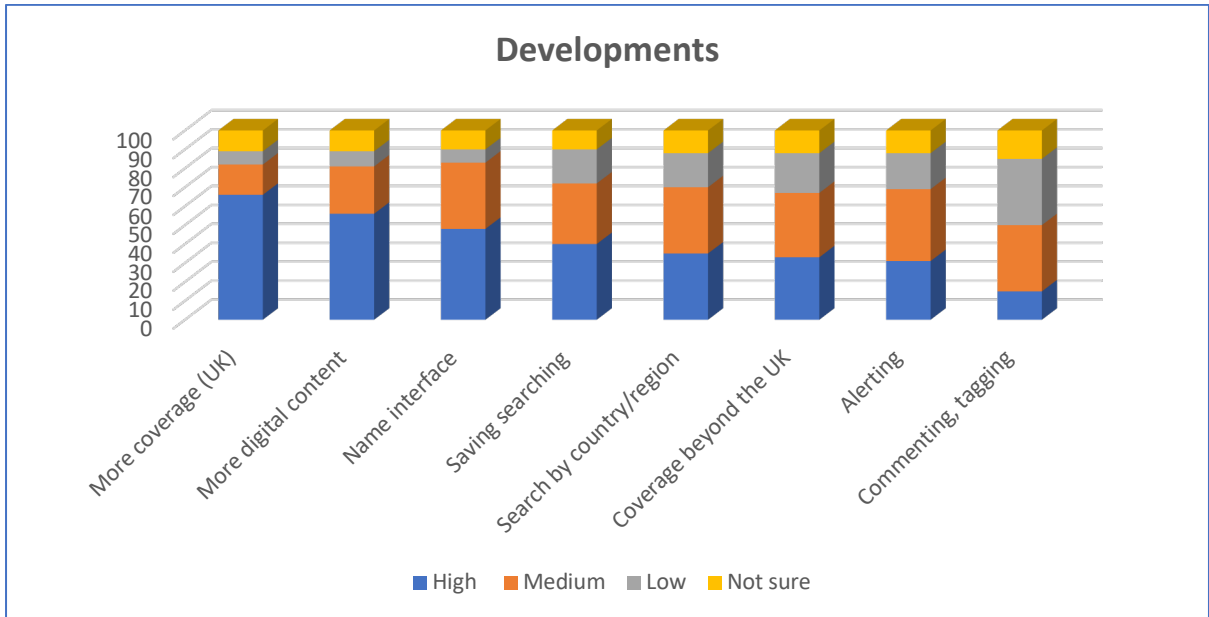This is a real challenge, one that many archivists are very aware of. We already carry out transformations to improve the catalogues where we can, but it is unlikely that money will be forthcoming to allow for mass improvement of legacy catalogues.

'Improving discoverability via Google/Wikipedia et would also be good'
We have done a great deal of work on 'search engine optimisation'. The Archives Hub is accessible by all search engines, but how they choose to index sites is entirely up to them. It is known that Google does not prioritise discovery sites like this, and pages with minimal data and repetition ('Account books, 1932-1935' type of thing) are not considered worth indexing by Google. We will continue to explore this area. We will be adding names to Wikidata at some point (this is a source for Wikipedia).

'maybe connect with the American, Archive grid to give a fuller, more worldwide coverage'
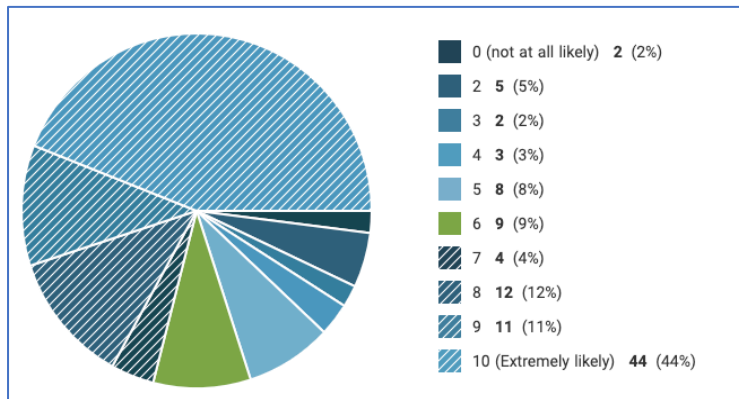This is an interesting idea, but Archive Grid is not being developed, and would not work well with the Archives Hub, as it is far more basic. However, work is going on in the States around aggregation, and we will keep an eye on this and see if there are opportunities to collaborate.

Developments

Legend: ■ High ■ Medium ■ Low ■ Not sure

(Chart categories: More coverage (UK), More digital content, Name interface, Saving searching, Search by country/region, Coverage beyond the UK, Alerting, Commenting, tagging)

What would you like to see on the Archives Hub?

We are working in many of these areas, and prioritising comprehensiveness, digital content and names this year. We have not yet looked at saving searches or alerting, which would require a login. We have not explored the option to work beyond the UK, as APE already exists, and we contribute to that.

Overall effectiveness

0 (not at all likely)	**2**	(2%)
2	**5**	(5%)
3	**2**	(2%)
4	**3**	(3%)
5	**8**	(8%)
6	**9**	(9%)
7	**4**	(4%)
8	**12**	(12%)
9	**11**	(11%)
10 (Extremely likely)	**44**	(44%)

**How likely would you be to recommend the service to others?**

71% would be likely to recommend the service (based on scores for 7-10 likelihood)

Note that some respondents had not used the service, so gave this a medium score.

It's a very useful tool for graduate and early career researchers, allowing them to scope archival possibilities before contacting individual repositories.

Every researcher should know about it!

I am at this very moment checking the current site to recommend it and give the link to our students.
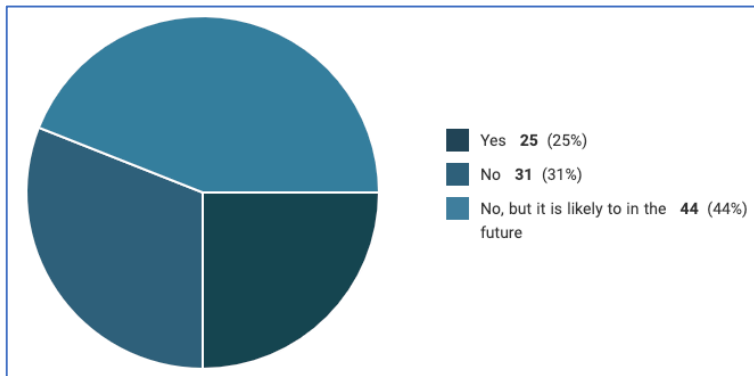
Has your use of the Hub led to a visit to an archive?

It is important that a reasonable percentage of use does lead to a visit, although sometimes the archives will be available digitally.

Visits specifically mentioned included the V&A Theatre and Performance Archive, Lloyds Bank, Bangor University, Anglesey Archives, Gloucester Record Office, London Metropolitan Archives and Durham University.
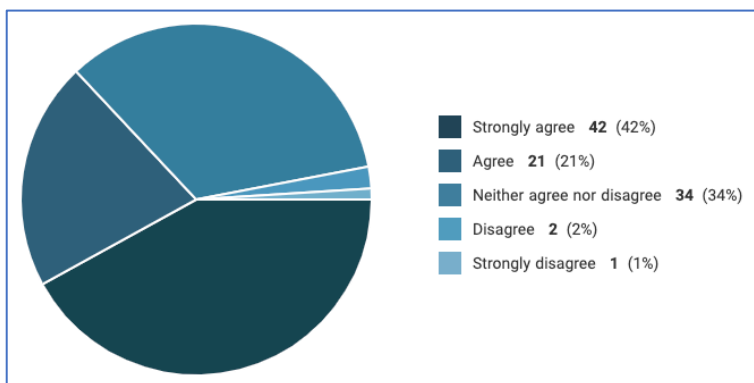
I didn't realise [London Metropolitan Archives] had something, so would not have searched their catalogue. It was only because I checked with the Hub.

Because of the level of detail Archives Hub provides, I located an important item held by Manchester University that I would otherwise probably never have found.
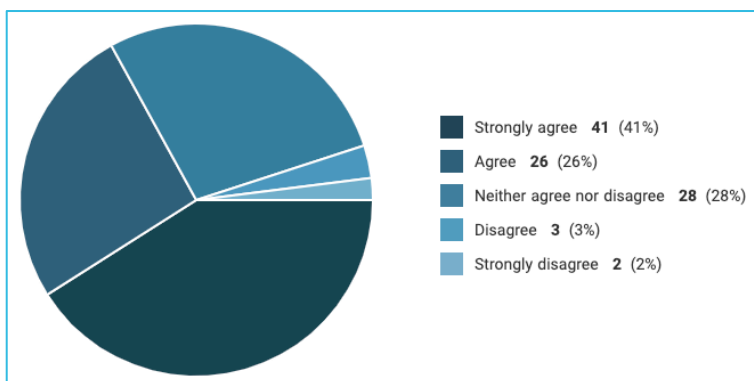
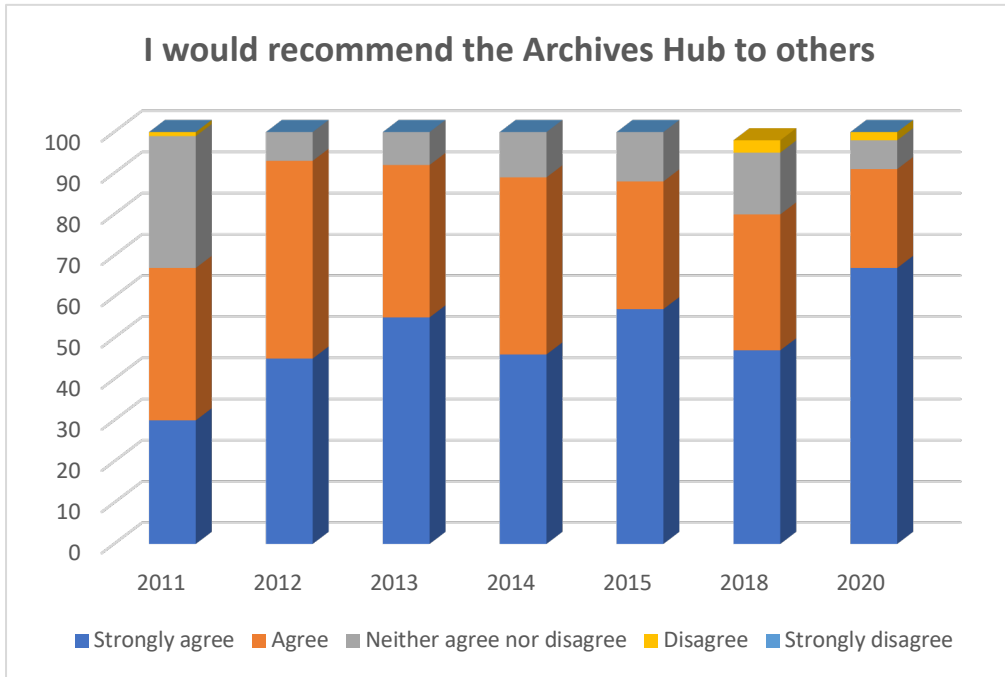**'I have found material I would not otherwise have discovered'**
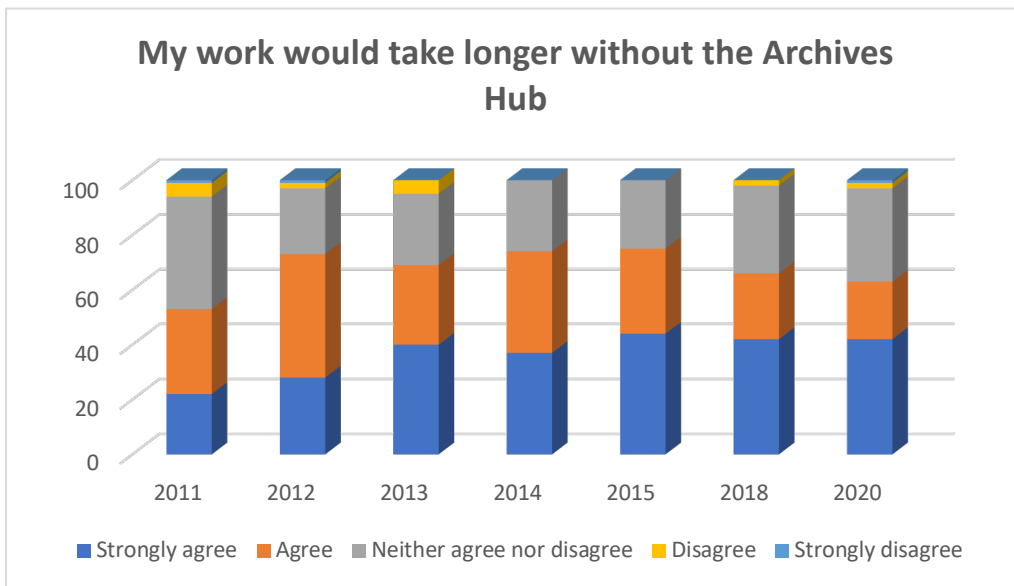
67% agree with this statement.

'My research would take longer without the Hub'

63% agree with this statement

I would recommend the Archives Hub to others

2011-2020

Strongly agree · Agree · Neither agree nor disagree · Disagree · Strongly disagree

My work would take longer without the Archives Hub

2011-2020

Strongly agree · Agree · Neither agree nor disagree · Disagree · Strongly disagree
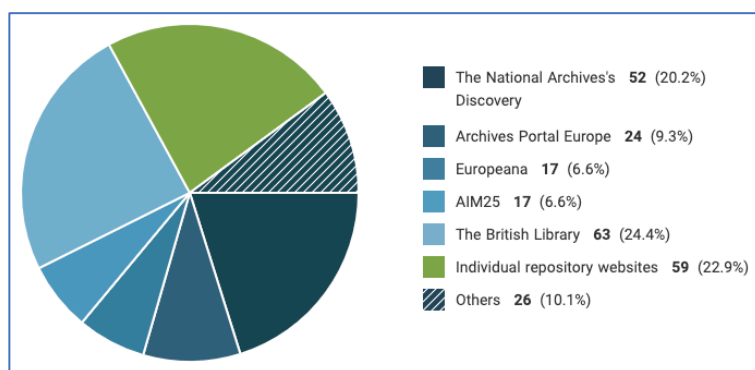
These answers show that the Archives Hub consistently saves researchers' time and that they would recommend it to others.

Other Services
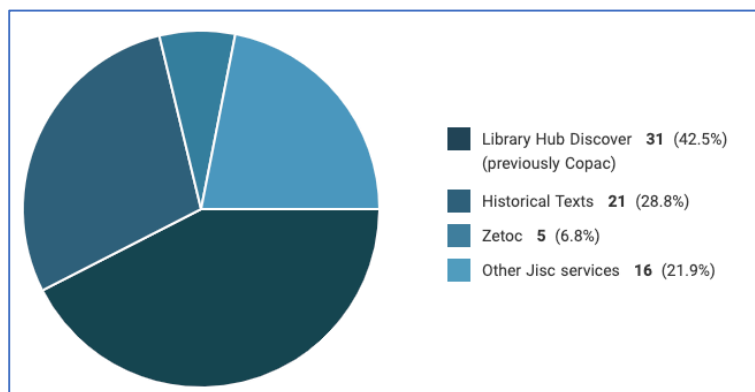
Use of other Jisc services

Users of the Archives Hub tend to use Library Hub and Historical Texts

Use of other services

Many respondents use TNA Discovery, the BL and repository websites.

Conclusions

The 2020 survey was very positive overall, with many useful suggestions, and also confirmation that we are developing the service in the right way. Obviously, a survey is a limited device, but successive surveys and other channels of communication have always tended towards the same priorities.

The highest priorities are to be comprehensive and to provide detailed descriptions. We will continue to work to get more contributors and process more data, but the level of detail is down to contributors. Detailed descriptions are time-consuming, and many archives have limited resources.

The survey endorses our work on names (our Names Project) and the development of our 'DAO Store', which should encourage more digital content.

The survey includes responses from those who have not yet used it, which influences the overall scoring (despite our advice, a number do fill it in before using the service). It seems to include more family history and leisure researchers than in previous years. These respondents often prefer something simpler, and are unhappy if they cannot find specific information, such as a family member. Family history tends to require something a little different to what the Archives Hub provides, so it is likely that some people will be frustrated in their searches.

The criticisms or suggestions for improvement tend to be quite specific. There is no sense that any one thing is causing a problem for a larger number of people. Some respondents feel that the service necessarily simplifies things; others suggest that it is too complicated. The experience that users have, and their understanding of archives, will strongly influence them. Overall, the survey is very positive, and it is clear that we are moving in the right direction.

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Quotes from the 2020 online survey

It is an excellent way of making our archival collections and reliable information about our organisation visible and accessible to a wider audience, and raises our profile on search engines. The team are extremely helpful, knowledgeable and keep contributors informed and involved in development.

As some archives or results that are seen here, if the same is googled the results are not seen.

Ability to access many different repositories I probably would not have thought to consult in my research

Simple interface; very fast results; generally reliable, detailed descriptions of archives.

Continually developing and forward looking

It's a fabulous resource that widens my knowledge of the existence of records that could be useful for my research.

It's a good place to get an overview of what's out there, and also from the other side, there's good information for archivists.

Saves so much time