SERVICE PERSONNEL RECORDS – INCREASING PUBLIC ACCESS

1. Representatives from the Ministry of Defence's Record branch will attend the The National Archives User Forum on Tuesday 16 Feb 2016 at 3.15pm in the Talks Room.

2. Service personnel records for those discharged after 1920 are held by the MOD. All of those to 1963 have been selected for permanent preservation. Partly because of the volume of records involved, it has been assumed that these records will be accessioned by The National Archives in digital format.

3. In 2008 the MOD conducted a public consultation on four parts of this record set. Two of these (airman's records and Naval Ratings Cards) have been digitised and transferred from the MOD to TNA. Digitisation and transfer of the third (Home Guard records) commenced but was suspended when the age profile of individuals was found to be younger than assumed.

4. The fourth record set identified was approximately 170,000 records for soldiers with dates of birth of 1895 or earlier. Subsequent to the public consultation, the MOD and TNA have: explored the content of the records; what information on the record to digitise and when; the treatment of the hard copy; the accessioning process; the treatment of medical in confidence information within the record; and supporting commercial models. No decisions have been made or implementation action taken. The records remain accessible through the MOD's publication scheme and the MOD has released the indexed data that supports these records into the public domain on .gov.uk.   Indexed data relating to individuals with a date of birth of pre 1902 has also been released on .gov.uk.

5. The MOD is currently carrying out a study to recommend how service personnel records which have been selected for permanent preservation can be made more widely available to the public. This includes the approximately 170,000 records for soldiers with dates of birth of 1895 or earlier, and all other service records where the individual has a discharge date of pre 1963. It includes accessibility through the MOD's publication scheme (to meet Freedom of Information Act 2000 requirements) as well as transfer to The National Archives (to meet Public Record Acts requirements).   The study is due to conclude in Sept 2016 with a recommendation to the MOD's Departmental Records Officer.

6. As part of the study, the MOD is keen to capture the views of end users of the records. The particular areas the MOD wishes to explore are:

    a. **User groups**. Access is currently given on 1:1 basis; individuals request a service record and that request is met. Individuals may apply for more than 1 service record through submitting multiple requests. Views are sought on:
        i. whether multiple access is required; for example to see many records at once for unit, geographic or age analysis;

ii. whether types of access other than to the whole service record is required; for example a requirement to capture data from the record without necessarily seeing the physical record.

b. **Indexed data**. Where the format of the record relates to one individual then the index currently held by the MOD will typically include name, initials, service number, date of birth and sometimes unit. The capture of any additional data would require the retrieval and re-index of the record which would incur a cost. Views are sought on:
   i. if current indexed data will suffice in meeting user needs; or
   ii. what additional indexed data is required or desirable.

c. **Digitisation**. It is currently assumed that records would be accessioned (from the MOD to TNA) in digital format. Digitisation increases accessibility. Access to records can also be provided through retrieval and return to remote storage facilities. Views are sought on:
   i. a "mixed economy", whereby some records are accessible in digital format and others accessible on demand in hard copy;
   ii. for those accessible in hard copy, the acceptable time from customer request to availability of the document.

d. **Cost**. Neither MOD nor TNA currently has the funding to pay for the digitisation of this record set. Funding requirements are typically met by commercial providers. Views are sought on:
   i. the appetite of users to pay for digitisation of records subsequently made available to the general public;
   ii. digitisation of part of each record only, for example attestation papers;
   iii. digitisation of only parts of the record set (for example records where the individual has WW1 and/or WW2 service).

7. Statements of views can be submitted before or after the event by e-mail to DBS KI-RecordsPubEnqTeam@mod.uk . Please include "MOD SERVICE RECORD STUDY" in the subject matter heading of the e-mail.