

**Title: The National Archives' User Forum**

**Date: 16 October 2014**

**Location: Talks Room**

**Attendees (staff):**

Lee Oliver (LMO) Head of Public Services Development (Chair); Caroline Ottaway-Searle (COS) Director of Public Services and Human Resources; Tom Gregan (TG) Head of Document Services; Julia Jones (JJo) Head of Information Management and Practice; Roger Kershaw (RK) Head of Military, Maritime, Transport and Family; Poppy Groves (PG) FOI Manager; Jonathan Cole (JC) FOI Researcher; Sue South (SS) Records Specialist – Military; Ralph Otto (RO) Duty Security Manager; James Hillery (JH) Duty Security Supervisor; Michael Brien (MB) Security Officer; Foluke Abiona (FA) Customer Intelligence Officer; Joanna Robinson (JCR) Customer Intelligence Assistant (Minutes)

**Attendees (users)**

Ron Platt; Graham Woolgar; Tom Adams; Richard P. Bateson; Bob Whitfield; Steven Kippax; Ivor Cole; Linden Cole; David Matthew; Anthony Daly; John Seaman.

**1. LMO welcomed all to the meeting.**

**2. Minutes and Matters arising.**

2.1 Q. Why was there no list of user attendees in the 20.08.14 User Forum minutes?

A. LMO apologised and explained that this was an oversight.

2.2 (3.1 20/08) GW said that this was minuted incorrectly. He said he had been told that 900 pieces relating to ships would be transferred in the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of 2014 The post meeting note refers to what had been advertised as being transferred this year.

A. The post meeting note confirms the information that we have.

Q. Is there an agreement between TNA and the MoD about how targets should be met? If not, should targets be set?

A. JJo said that we do have targets.

Q. It is now October. Can we still expect a transfer into ADM 358 this year?

A. JJo said as far as we know it is still being transferred this year. She will find out if there is any change and inform GW.

2.3 (5.11 20/08) The difficulty of searching The London Gazette was part of this question, and it was hoped this point would be addressed.

A. We have been in touch with TSO, who have advised us that a representative can attend a User Forum in January or February 2015 in order to hear attendees' feedback.

2.4 (5.7 20/08) *[Post meeting note: GW said this item did not accurately reflect what he had said at the meeting. He would like this correction to be noted: He believed that the last sentence of the second paragraph should have been omitted and the third paragraph thus: GW had put in an FoI request to the MoD. They had responded saying that they were currently thinking of transferring army service records for those with dates of birth up to 1904. GW said that these records would generate considerable revenue for TNA, as well as being of widespread public interest. He hoped TNA would be able to persuade MoD to consider a later cut off date, e.g. 1916, as it was implausible that these records would be published before 2017.*

### **3. The HS 9 Project: Opening up the stories of the Special Operations Executive (SOE)**

3.1 JC said there is often a negative view around Freedom of Information practice, with a perception that many trivial requests are made, while at the same time there is a perception that many requests are refused arbitrarily by FOI officers. He said he wanted to share with attendees some information about FOI projects, and also some results of these projects.

JC explained that the SOE was a British organisation which conducted clandestine warfare in enemy territory in WWII, including sabotage and operational warfare. 3,300 secret service files from the KV series have been digitised and are now online; however most of the files are still closed to the public. HS 9 contains approximately 12,000 individual personnel files of people employed by SOE. The HS 9 project to open up the files began in February 2014. The 12 month project involves assessing and opening files which have research and public interest potential. JC explained that there have been 550+ requests from the public to open HS 9 files, and that FOI receives more requests for HS 9 documents than for any other document series. As of 13 October 2014, 960 documents, more than half of the project's opening quota, have been assessed and opened independently of these requests and in addition to the day-to-day work of the FOI centre.

JC then spoke about the subjects of some of the opened files, including the 'agente provocatrice' Agent Fifi (Marie Christine Chilver), whose file has revealed the important role she played in vetting the reliability of secret service trainees. JC explained that many of the personnel files also contain information on the policy of provocation used in such operations. He told attendees that he has written several blogs on topics relating to SOE files. *[JC's presentation which includes links to these blogs can be found here:*

[http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/User\\_Forum\\_HS\\_9\\_Project.pdf/](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/User_Forum_HS_9_Project.pdf/)

JC then took questions from attendees.

3.2 Q. When SOE files first arrived at TNA, TNA was given advice by the FCO. Are any of the papers relating to this advice available?

A. JC said he did not believe such papers are available.

3.3 Q. Is it correct that files are not released until TNA knows the subject of a file is dead?

A. The Lord Chancellor gives us a framework to work from, which is that death can be assumed 100 years after date of birth. The latest date of birth assumed for the personnel in these files is 1930. Individual's actual birth dates are usually noted in their files; those with no date of birth noted will be opened in 2031.

3.4 Q. Why are there extra numbers in addition to the piece number in file descriptions in Discovery?

A. The reason why it's an item instead of a piece is due to the physical act of splitting the piece into its constituent individual personnel files, so that those which are being opened can be ordered by the public under the given item number. It thus keeps files closed that need to remain so, while opening up as much as we possibly can and maintaining our cataloguing infrastructure.

3.5 Q. Who decides which files are opened and which stay closed?

A. In the first instance, the TNA FOI assessor decides. In the case of an FOI request, if a member of the public is not satisfied with the decision made by TNA's assessment, they can request an internal review. If this is unsuccessful, the matter goes to the Information Commissioner's Office for review.

3.6 Q. Do you think there is a possibility that these recently opened files may be considered of commercial interest and digitised?

A. It is a possibility, and we considered this in the initial investment bid, though there are currently no plans to do so. We digitised Agent Fifi's file due to its historical interest.

3.7 Q. Could you tell us which files you have referred to in this talk?

A. They are all accessible in the blogs. [See 3.1]

3.8 Q. You said that there were 550+ requests from the public to open SOE files. However, you seem to be cherry picking interesting files to open. You provoke people's interest in SOE files, but then when requests are made to open certain files the answer comes back that there is no reason to open them.

A. JJo said that when files are open they are available for anyone to see. It is in everyone's interest to open those files which will be of the widest interest, instead of waiting for a specific request.

Q. You are misrepresenting the contents of this series by opening those of high interest. You should also open the less interesting ones. Why does TNA feel the need to publicise the series? You have changed the meaning of TNA as a historical institution. The press will pick up on certain items which have been opened and will create a public interest. If you only opened up dull files there would be no press interest. People would not know this resource was open.

A. JJo said it is not only historians who have an interest in these files but the general public as well.

3.9 Q. Some SOE personnel files which have been opened contain rather skimpy information. Is this because some personnel files contain the names of others within them?

A. JC said this is variable. Some files are day to day staff files, containing details of employees' sick days and so on. Some have details of agents who didn't make the grade and therefore contain no further information. Some files were previously redacted by the security services. In a few instances, files contain the names of people who helped in clandestine activities, and we have no way of knowing their dates of birth. These files therefore need to be redacted until they have definitely passed 100 years of age. JC explained that there is no material redacted by TNA that is not explicitly marked as such by the insertion of 'dummy cards'. He explained that only a small minority of the files that the HS 9 project has released needed any redaction at all; over 90% of the 960 files opened have released all the information contained in them when accessioned by TNA.

#### **4. Red Lists Update**

4.1 RK said he had previously spoken about the Red List project at User Forum in 2013 and 2012. He explained that the Red Lists are a set of binders containing 16,000 series level paper catalogue descriptions of items at TNA. The Red Lists also contain finding aids, which we are working on putting into Discovery. RK explained that the Red Lists were superseded by the online catalogue, and that the Red Lists have not been updated since 2011. Some information is therefore not part of the Red Lists, but is online, for example the FWW service records.

RK said that in 2012 a survey was carried out on Red List usage, which was based on surrogacy, complexity of information, and usage. From the results a policy for removal was developed. RK said that lists relevant to the MLDRR were moved up to that room and are not part of the reduction project.

The criteria for removal were:

- Catalogue descriptions had been enriched by a fuller online catalogue description
- The total number of piece descriptions was less than 100 and
- There had been less than 20 productions in one calendar year

Since January 2013, 6000 series lists contained within 300 red binders have been removed from the reading rooms. No paper list is destroyed, and they are still available for retrieval on request. RK said that since this first phase of the project, we have seen users making better use of Discovery.

RK said that from the results of the survey, we found that the majority of the Red List users had been using TNA for over 5 years. He said that they were 'trackers' in their research habits, using the same few series regularly in their research. RK mentioned some series indexes, including ADM 1 and ADM 12, for which the paper copies are still available in the Research and Enquiries Room as they did not come within the criteria for removal.

RK said a second survey was undertaken in January 2014. The Phase 2 criteria for removal were:

- Catalogue descriptions had been enriched by a fuller online catalogue description
- The total number of piece descriptions was less than 1000 and
- There had been less than 20 productions in one calendar year

RK said the exception to the criteria of less than 20 productions in one calendar year is digital microfilm and microfilm. The limit of 1000 has been chosen because this is the maximum number of descriptions that can be exported into a spreadsheet. RK then demonstrated how to export results to an Excel spreadsheet, including limiting the search to records held at TNA. RK said that once you have downloaded a series to Excel the information can be manipulated, and that exporting results is better than browsing for reference. The Discovery team has put an option for 'Export results' onto the description page. RK said that the Phase 2 removal will commence in January 2015. RK explained that dummy sheets, informing researchers that details can be found in Discovery, are inserted in the files where paper lists have been removed. RK said we will continue to work with specialists about appropriate times to remove further lists, and said he would like to return to give User Forum a further update in June or August next year.

4.2 Q. Can the limit of 1,000 pieces be increased?

A. We have asked Discovery team if we can extend this, and we will keep this as an ongoing part of the Red List project.

434 Q. Why has so much effort been put into the removal of the Red Lists, just to save 20 feet of open shelving space?

A. RK said that the purpose of the Red List project is not to save space in the reading rooms, but is concerned with promoting the authoritative and more accurate

online catalogue. The online catalogue is more reliable than the paper lists which have been removed, and we want to encourage and educate our users on how best to use it.

4.5 Q. I used to use the paper lists and found them very useful.

A. RK said the paper lists do not provide updated information.

4.6 Q. Are microfilms of service records available to view at TNA?

A. WO 363 and WO 364 can still be produced if there is a problem viewing the digitised version.

4.7 Q. Commercial partners Find My Past didn't provide the TNA reference number when they published records from WO 97.

A. This may be because the TNA reference is of no use when searching the FMP site.

4.8 Q. Discovery is a disaster. As an example, I was trying to locate an officer's service record. I found no details in Discovery but I was able to locate it quickly using the paper lists. It would have been impossible to find the record if I had been using Discovery, as it would not be possible to browse Discovery in a way that would reveal the existence of the files I was searching for, as recently the facility to search by Officer's long number in WO 339 has been removed. I feel like I'm banging my head against a wall when I point out the drawbacks of Discovery. I also feel that being able to export spreadsheets only under 1000 pages is not good enough.

A. RK assured the questioner that we will not be removing WO 95 paper lists. He said that we have removed WO 339 Red List following re-cataloguing. He then explained that you can use the Officer's long number to search in the main search bar on Discovery, adding 'AND WO 339'.

4.9 Q. It needs to be made clear that people want the export limit raised from 1000 pieces.

A. LMO said he is Chair of the Discovery Enhancement Board, and will take this away. He said it is possible to generate bigger downloads off line.

4.10 Q. RB asked if the agenda item regarding the Extraordinary User Forum can be put back to next month.

A. LMO agreed.

## **5. Open Discussion.**

5.1 Q. The October TNA newsletter stated that it is now possible to search for ancestors from around the UK in the school logs recently made available online via Find My Past. However it is only possible to search for ancestors from England and

Wales. Describing something as 'around the UK' suggests that it might include school logs from Scotland, but this is unlikely to be the case. Therefore only England and Wales should be mentioned.

A. We note the comment.

5.2 Q. Over the last three months I have had two spam emails via the TNA Online User Community. I have forwarded these to Martin Willis but am unhappy that I have received these through the community. How do these people get our emails to send us spam?

A. LMO apologised for these incidents, and explained that we have suffered some spamming attacks. He explained that these scammers join the Online User Community and then send these emails via 'Private messages', to all members.

5.3 Q. Two years ago I raised a point about how unsatisfactory it was that Ancestry members are unable to access their account whilst at TNA. Why can there not be two log in options – one with free access and one to access an Ancestry account?

A. LMO said that currently we only have the one IP address for Ancestry, which enables the free access. This has a fixed log-in, and therefore it is not possible to sign in to your own account from here. We are however looking into this matter.

5.4 Q. I ordered a PRO file relating to Treasury accessions but was unable to obtain it. I was informed by IMP that it had been sent to 'a government department'. Treasury has its own accessioning files, so I find it strange that this file was lent to Treasury. I also ordered some GRS files, for which I have been waiting years. If Treasury have their own copy of a file, why do they need to borrow from TNA? Can TNA please keep an eye on this issue?

A. We closely monitor all records that are temporarily returned to departments.

5.5 Q. Ancestry and Find My Past have passenger lists of people on transatlantic journeys. Are these TNA records, and are the originals available?

A. If digitised documents do not meet your needs, you can make a request to see the original.

Q. Why are these passenger lists at TNA?

A. Because they were transferred to us by the Board of Trade.

5.6 Q. At the Executive Team meeting, Government Property & Estates Clustering were discussed. Was there any outcome from this?

A. This relates to proposals to share expertise regarding estates management within government.

A. COS said that in any consideration, our statutory role in protecting the records would be primary. JJ's point at Executive Team was that we have specific requirements for our estates specialists.

5.7 Q. It sometimes seems that some government departments can be unreliable when taking custody of documents. We were told a surrogate was sent back to them to prevent the possibility of loss. If Treasury has prior form care should be taken with documents which are sent to them.

5.8 Q. The link to the digitisation page on the User Forum agenda has disappeared.

A. We update this quarterly for UAG purposes. The digitisation link will appear again on the User Forum agenda next month.

5.9 LMO said that the Extraordinary User Forum was last held 18 months ago. We had previously had lots of questions about processes at TNA, and the impact of FOI and Data protection. He said a panel of staff attend the EUF and that it provided a lively discussion. RB has requested another EUF, and will be on the agenda for next month's User Forum.

Q. I won't be able to attend the November User Forum. Would it be possible to audio record User Forums in future?

A. This will not be possible due to the technical challenges of audio recording all those in the room who speak, and also due to data protection reasons.

**Next meeting Tuesday 18 November 2014, 12:30-13:45** [*Please note this meeting has been changed to 12:30 from a previous time slot*]