



Seamless Flow Programme

Questions and Answers

Introduction

Today, 95% of all UK government records are produced electronically. These electronic records are stored and preserved at The National Archives (TNA) in increasing numbers.

The Seamless Flow Programme is a very large programme of work being undertaken to provide solutions for handling and managing electronic records.

The purpose of the Seamless Flow Programme is to bring about a seamless process for the management of electronic records, from creation in government departments, through preservation in the archives, to delivery on the Internet. The programme will do this by linking together existing components for the management of electronic records and automating some existing manual processes.

This 'Questions and Answers' document aims to provide information for the general public about the aims, progress, and solutions provided by the Seamless Flow Programme. It will be reviewed and updated every 3 months.

My question isn't answered here. Who can I contact?

The best way to contact us is to use the contact form available from The National Archives website:

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/contact/form/>

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The Big Picture

1. I don't understand what is involved, is there a simple overview of Seamless Flow?

Have a look at the Seamless Flow pages on The National Archives website:

http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/electronicrecords/seamless_flow/default.htm

2. What stage is the Seamless Flow Programme at?

The Seamless Flow Programme consists of a number of projects actively developing new processes and delivering software solutions to support the overall objectives of the programme.

Highlights of achievements to date include:

- We have developed and piloted appraisal techniques and guidelines for electronic records.
- We have developed and piloted our presentation system – Electronic Records Online – See <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ero/>
- We are nearing the end of pilots for our transfer application.
- We are nearing completion of developing and testing software for the Technology Watch and Preservation and Maintenance projects.
- We are developing new business processes, which will continue to be developed and refined as we gain further experiences of rolling out Seamless Flow to government departments.

From the summer of 2007, government departments will begin to transfer their electronic records to TNA. We are adopting a phased approach, and have a target of implementing Seamless Flow for 6 departments in the financial year 2007/08.

3. What is the overall timetable?

The Programme (as a programme) will finish at the end of the financial year 2007/08. Seamless Flow will then continue as normal work. We will continue to develop our business processes and systems as we identify possible improvements.

4. Are you consulting with government departments?

The Programme Board and all of the Seamless Flow Project Boards have external representation from one or more government departments.

We have established the Seamless Flow Advisory Group as a forum where we consult our stakeholders on the many aspects of Seamless Flow, and for us to receive feedback. The Advisory Group consists of our main transferring departments plus other strategic players in government information management.

Financial

5. How much is the Seamless Flow Programme costing?

The programme is fully funded with an estimated total cost of £3.2 million spread over 3 years. Our emphasis has been on using funds efficiently.

6. Is funding secured for the whole programme?

Yes. We have funding in place for the financial year 2007/08 which is the final year of the 3 year programme.

7. What would be the consequences of not funding the Seamless Flow Programme?

The digital revolution is causing a fundamental change to the environment in which we are operating. Government and businesses are no longer driven by paper, but by e-mail and e-documents. Future researchers will need to explore e-mail exchanges, Word documents, websites and dynamic databases. This requires new approaches to the way we capture, store, preserve, and make accessible e-records – including investment in new technology, infrastructure, and services. If we did not do this we would risk the possibility of e-records of today not being available to researchers in the future.

Only the full implementation of Seamless Flow will achieve in a coherent and cost-effective way the long-term preservation of public records, and enable government departments and TNA to cope with the forecast volume of records without major increases in staffing.

Cataloguing and Metadata

8. Will TNA be cataloguing all electronic records?

The need to ensure correct descriptions and context for electronic records is as important as it is for paper records, but TNA will not be cataloguing electronic records in quite the same way as it does paper records.

The metadata, or archival descriptions, which will accompany electronic records, will be based substantially on the metadata provided by government departments at transfer. TNA will still need to correct errors in descriptions, may need to add authority information to the metadata, will need to intervene where there are changes in, for example, the closure status of records, and where there are redactions. TNA may also provide some additional metadata through its cataloguing procedures: additional metadata may assist in resource discovery and make searching more efficient.

Viewing Electronic Records

9. What is the Delivery and Presentation Project?

Within the Seamless Flow Programme, the Delivery and Presentation project is looking at how we deliver electronic records to our customers. Our web-based product is called 'Electronic Records Online'. It has to be able to display a range of file types - everything from Word documents to video and virtual reality models. It also has to cater for a host of different customers, including members of the public accessing the Internet at home; visitors to Kew; TNA staff; and staff in government departments.

10. What is Electronic Records Online?

Electronic Records Online is The National Archives' web-based service for providing access to electronic records.

11. When did this new service appear?

Since June 2005 we have been running a pilot service of Electronic Records Online, which includes the records of a number of high-profile public inquiries, departmental websites, and the records of parliamentary committees and royal commissions. The pilot service is accessed through The National Archives website.

The second release of Electronic Records Online, went live at the end of March 2007, and more content will be added through the remainder of 2007 and beyond.

12. What are the main features of this new service?

The second release of Electronic Records Online includes a new search function, based on TNA's global web search service. This searches the text of presentational copies of electronic records in addition to the electronic records' description (metadata) pages.

13. The search on Electronic Records Online only searches text. Not all the records are plain text. How effective will the search be?

In addition to text, the search function also searches the electronic records' description (metadata) pages. However it is true that not all records are plain text -TNA also receives images of original text material, plus audio and video records. At present it is not possible to search the content of such material. TNA is investigating the use of emerging technologies with a view to implementing further functionality in future releases of Electronic Records Online.

14. Why is the service called a pilot?

Electronic Records Online is a working and authoritative service. It is an evolving model of presenting electronic records, and we fully expect that its functionality will continue to be developed as technologies emerge allowing us to further exploit and search the diverse formats of the electronic records. We also expect the service to be further developed as our collection expands when government departments begin to transfer their electronic records to us in large numbers.

15. When will the service cease to be a pilot and become fully operational?

When both TNA and our users are comfortable with the functionality of Electronic Records Online and it holds a significant number of records, probably in the spring of 2008.

16. What services on The National Archives website will be affected by the Delivery and Presentation Project?

The Delivery and Presentation Project is only concerned with Electronic Records Online. No other service on The National Archives website is affected by this project.

17. Will this service remain free to access?

We do not have any plans to charge for access in the near future.

18. Who will benefit from the changes you have made?

Anyone who wants to access government electronic records, today or in the future, will benefit from the changes we have made. The new search function will help to locate the exact records you are interested in, this will be particularly beneficial as TNA's electronic records collection continues to grow.

19. Why did you decide to design the site as it is?

The design adopts the design concepts of the overall National Archives website and therefore the general Electronic Records Online website navigation is common with that used by other applications such as the Catalogue and DocumentsOnline. The search service is based on The National Archives' Global Search service and therefore adopts its design. The browse service has to accommodate the record referencing schema which is currently based on that of the Catalogue. The browse design therefore depicts this in what is believed to be the most effective manner.

20. How can I ask questions about or comment on this new service?

Electronic Records Online is evolving, so we are always happy to hear your comments and suggestions about the service. The best way to contact us is to use the form at <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/contact/form/>

Preservation and Maintenance

21. How will TNA preserve records against deterioration?

Records will be securely stored in our Digital Object Store. The integrity of all records will be continually monitored, and they will be periodically refreshed onto new storage media to prevent physical deterioration. We will store multiple copies of all records, including one complete set at a secure offsite facility, and we have a full business continuity plan.

22. How will TNA preserve records against technological obsolescence, for example ensuring we will be able to read Word 2000 documents in 50 years time?

TNA will use a migration-based preservation strategy to safeguard against technological obsolescence by periodically converting records to new formats, which can be accessed using future technologies. The Active Preservation system will monitor the risks of technological obsolescence for all the formats we store, using PRONOM, our technical registry. When we determine that a particular record is at risk, we will identify an appropriate migration pathway to perform the conversion. The record will then be automatically migrated to the new format. We will always retain the record in its original format as well.

23. How will TNA ensure that the original record presentational authenticity is retained? For example, that important features, such as footnotes are retained during migration?

We will determine the particular characteristics of each record which are essential to its authenticity. The migration pathways which we use to migrate records to new formats over time will be fully tested to ensure that they preserve the appropriate characteristics. Each record will also be individually tested after migration to ensure that these characteristics have been preserved.