



**The Future of Family History Services in The National Archives (TNA):
Public meeting held at the Family Records Centre (FRC) on 14 September 2006**

Chris Cooper (Head of Reader Services) opened the session and introduced Jill Allbrooke (FRC/TNA Centre Manager) and Lee Oliver (Head of Public Services Development).

The meeting was the fourth in a series of public consultations held at the Family Records Centre and The National Archives, Kew.

Chris Cooper said that the purpose of the meeting was to focus on the transfer of FRC staff and services to Kew by the end of 2008 and to seek users' views on how the Kew family history services should be delivered. He said that he was aware that the relocation was unpopular but it was an operational necessity for TNA to proceed since it faced reduced funding by Government. TNA remained committed to providing a high quality family records service.

Jill Allbrooke gave a presentation titled 'The Future of Family History Services in The National Archives'.

Questions and answers

Q. The Scots are spending a considerable sum on creating a family history centre in a central Edinburgh location. Why can't England, a much richer country, do likewise for London?

A. The Scottish plan was good but chargeable. TNA operated under different legislation and did not wish to charge for the use of its reading rooms. It was unlikely that users in England and Wales would welcome this. The Scots had the advantage that their National Archives is centrally located, whereas TNA is not.

[Post Meeting Note

The current fees to enter the GRO Scotland search room are:

- Part day GBP 10 (unbookable, and subject to availability after 13.00)
- One day GBP 17
- One week GBP 65
- Four weeks GBP 220
- One quarter GBP 500
- One year GBP 1500]

Q. What would TNA do with the £1.1 million saved? The problem of increased document production times at Kew should be addressed.

A. TNA faced reductions in funding from the Government and therefore needed to economise in a number of areas, including document productions.

Q. The distance between Kew Gardens station and TNA was a concern. Was a shuttle bus being considered?

A. The distance was no greater than that from the Angel tube to the FRC and was easier for pedestrians to use. Thought was being given to a bus service but the cost was likely to be prohibitive.

Q. How would TNA cope with an estimated additional 500 visitors each day? An extra 100 would stretch the services.

A. TNA plans to redesign and where necessary extend the reading rooms space at Kew. It was unlikely that as many as 500 additional visits a day would be made, since FRC visitor numbers were falling, with the availability of the census returns online, and since about two thirds of FRC visitors already visited Kew.

Q. Would opening hours be increased to make up for the extra journey time?

A. There were no plans to increase opening hours.

Q. Would online access be free at home?

A. Not for the services that were currently chargeable. The principle that TNA operates is that searchable indexes to the census returns are free but a charge is made to access images of the documents – except at Kew and the FRC where access to images is also free.

Q. Public consultation meetings are held during the day when many people are at work. Please hold them at other times? Advertising for the meetings is inadequate.

A. TNA will consider holding evening meetings in the next round of consultation, but its experience was that these were poorly attended. The current meetings had been advertised well in advance online and onsite at Kew and the FRC.

Q. Will the TNA provide effective support and guidance to online users?

A. A forum to discuss this is being considered for the future.

Q. Will the Probate Registry be moving into the FRC building when TNA relocates?

A. We know of no plans for this to happen.

Q. Kew is a much more intimidating place to visit than the FRC.

A. We plan to preserve the welcoming and user-friendly aspects of the FRC services in the Kew environment. We are investigating the possibility of minimising security provisions for those looking at online and microfilm records at Kew.

Q. The government is trying to discourage the use of cars. TNA are promoting the car-parking element of the Kew strategy.

A. We believe that the car parking spaces at Kew will benefit some users but we are not actively encouraging visitors to come by car. We shall consider extending the space available for disabled visitors and coaches.

Q. 30% of the population are not online. Making the records less accessible by sending them to Kew and promoting online services places many at a disadvantage.

A. Our online sources can be accessed free at public libraries and at low cost through a number of family history and other organisations.

Q. Separating the General Register Office hard copy indexes from the FRC/TNA resources is a retrograde step.

A. The GRO is digitising its indexes and may wish to change its future access arrangements too. GRO and TNA are discussing ways of making their resources jointly available online, thus continuing the existing partnership in a new form.

Q. Customers travelling to London by rail from the north will have to spend additional time getting to Kew. The relocation of the FRC does not just inconvenience the Home Counties.

A. We regret that researchers who wish to visit TNA may face longer journeys. However our strategy has been to make the records available online so that such journeys are in many cases no longer necessary.

