



Transferring The National Archives' Family Records services to Kew in 2008: Extracts from the minutes of the Kew Readers Forum, 7 September 2006

Jill Allbrooke, Manager of The National Archives (TNA) section of the Family Records Centre (FRC), gave a presentation, as follows:

TNA's digitisation strategy

Although, in the nine years since its opening, the FRC has been successful and popular, the context in which it operates is changing markedly. Visitor numbers are down by a third since the 2002-03 peak. Most of the FRC's sources are now online and over 40 percent of UK households now have broadband connections (70 percent have access to the internet), with this figure rising all the time. The Office for National Statistics/General Register Office (ONS/GRO) are currently digitising the birth, marriage and death indexes which will make these available online for the first time and TNA will pursue an online partnership with ONS/GRO.

Relocation by 2008

Meanwhile TNA, faced with reduced government funding, can no longer justify the cost - £1.1 million a year in accommodation alone – of maintaining separate family records services at the FRC. It plans to consolidate them with its services at Kew by the end of 2008. All FRC staff will be offered positions at Kew. TNA has pledged that there will be a dedicated family records service at Kew, preserving the high level of expertise and customer service provided at the FRC.

Re-thinking the reading rooms at Kew

The relocation gives TNA and its stakeholders the chance to examine the way the reading rooms at Kew work and Jill Allbrooke urged those present to state their views on this.

Benefits of the move to Kew

TNA believes that the relocation will improve overall services by providing readers with access to a greater range of records and a wider range of expert staff under one roof.

Issues of most concern to users

During previous public consultation meetings, the following issues had emerged:

- Transport to Kew
- Restrictions in connection with security levels at Kew
- Keeping special aspects of FRC (customer care, openness, value-added activities)
- Need to recognise online services not a total substitute for onsite help
- Possibilities for maintaining free online access in central London
- Continuing availability of microfilm
- Future of ONS/GRO services

Question and answer session: summary of exchanges

Q: Will FRC staff be discussing problems/issues of relocation and integration with former HMC staff?

A: We haven't yet done so, but will follow the suggestion up.

Q: The Microfilm Reading Room at Kew (MRR) gets very busy even now and machines and printers often break down. There will be need for more space.

A: It will be possible to expand the MRR. We intend to redesign the reading rooms at Kew to meet demand.

Q: Will microfilm still be available for consultation if digitised form not sufficient?

A: Yes. Once a digital copy is available, we assess the microfilms before deciding whether to keep them in the reading room or make them orderable from the storage areas. The master films are always retained. We understand that there will sometimes be good reason to request access to an original or microfilm where a digital copy exists, and we will enable access if this is so.

Q: What is happening to the birth, marriage and death indexes at the FRC?

A: These belong to ONS/GRO. The original indexes are currently being digitised by ONS/GRO.

Q: Will you preserve the open and supportive atmosphere of the FRC alongside the different working environment at Kew?

A: TNA is looking at ways to meet the needs of different types of users within the redesigned reading rooms.

Q: Will TNA consider the popularity, and therefore lack of space at the moment, of the laptop area in the Document Reading Room?

A: Yes, this issue is already under consideration.

Q: Will the Kew site be able to cope with the extra numbers?

A: TNA will be running a survey of FRC users in the near future to gauge the potential rise in visitor numbers. There is already a significant overlap in users. The reorganisation of the reading rooms is intended to accommodate the extra users and will comply with forthcoming changes in statutory emergency and disability provisions.

Q: What are the plans for the Map and Large Document Room?

A: This room is unlikely to be affected, as the maps and large documents are stored on the same floor as the reading room and there are not the facilities to safely transport them between floors.

Q: Will opening hours be extended?

A: We have no plans to do this but the matter will be considered.