



Summary of meeting

Advisory Council on National Records and Archives

1 February 2007

The following is a summary of the meeting of the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Council on National Records and Archives held on 1 February 2007 at The National Archives.

Sir Anthony Clarke, Master of the Rolls, was in the chair. Members present were: Sir Rodric Braithwaite, Ms Else Churchill, Viscount De L'Isle, Dr Jeevan Deol, Professor Harry Dickinson, Sir David Durie, Dr Clive Field, Dr Jennifer Haynes, Mr Graeme Herd, Dr Dorothy Johnston, Ms Catherine Maxwell Stuart, Professor Heidi Mirza, Professor Michael Moss, Lord Roper, Ms Janet Smith and Ms Stephanie Williams. Also present were Ms Natalie Ceeney, Chief Executive, together with Dr David Thomas, Ms Meg Sweet and Mr Nick Kingsley of The National Archives, Mr Richard Thompson of the Home Office, Mr David Wray of the Ministry of Defence, Mrs Judy Anckorn, private secretary to the Master of the Rolls, and Mr Tim Padfield, Secretary.

New members

The Master of the Rolls welcomed four new members to the council, recently appointed by the Lord Chancellor. They were:

- Dr Clive Field. Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham, formerly Director of Scholarship and Collections at the British Library
- Dr Jennifer Haynes. Archivist and Records Manager at the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists
- Mr Graeme Herd. Head of Information Technology at Slough Borough Council
- Professor Michael Moss. Professor of Archival Studies at the University of Glasgow

Home Office

Mr Thompson, the Departmental Records Officer at the Home Office, attended the council in support of three applications to retain for a further five years departmental records at or approaching 30 years of age. He explained that the information management assessment carried out by The National Archives in 2006 identified a range of activities that needed further examination and action to make the department's programme of review of records for permanent preservation more effective. The council endorsed his proposal that the department carry out a comprehensive review through 2007-08 with the agreed intention of delivering a much greater volume of records for public inspection once completed. The Home Office and The National Archives were instructed to agree the details of the comprehensive review and a method for regular performance reporting.

Access to public records

Mr Wray, the Departmental Records Officer at the Ministry of Defence, spoke to the council about recent difficulties following the inadvertent release of sensitive files relating to Saudi Arabia.

Since the meeting in October, six panels of council members had, on behalf of the Lord Chancellor, considered 23 Freedom of Information cases where departments had decided that the release of information was not in the public interest. In two cases, the panel disagreed and asked the department to provide further justification of the public interest in non-disclosure. The council was pleased to learn that when a victim of a crime is seeking access to the records relating to that crime they are always informed about the Victims' Charter.

The council was pleased to learn that several applications for the designation of files as closed, which it had queried, had been withdrawn.

The council received a report on the response of The National Archives to the decision of the Information Commissioner that most of the information in the 1911 Census should be available earlier than the planned release date in 2012. A paid search service had been established which was satisfying the demand for information, and the project to digitise the records had been brought forward so that the bulk of the census could be released on-line, starting in 2009.

Local authority archive services

The council considered a report on a pilot study under a new self-assessment scheme for local authority archive services. This had shown that there was significant variation in the standards of service between authorities but that this bore no relation to the population of the area nor to the finances of the authority. It was also clear that larger services tended to perform better than smaller ones, so that cooperation between smaller authorities would often be beneficial. The study also raised concern that the staffing of local authority record offices did not reflect the range of ethnic groups in the population. It was hoped that the scheme would in future be valuable as one of the range of tools for assessing the overall performance of local authorities.

Swiss Federal Archives

The council was pleased to receive a report recording the release in the Swiss Federal Archives of the 'British Archive', containing records of Swiss activities as the Protecting Power of British interests in enemy and occupied countries during the Second World War.