

## Appendix A

### Focus groups on consulting with users - notes

#### Section 1: Your experience of consultation with users at The National Archives

##### Group 1

###### Gone well

- Consultation on the catering facilities. When it was identified that there were issues with the new set up, an external consultant was brought in. They conducted a questionnaire and focus groups. User Forum attendees were invited to one of the focus groups. The consultants listened to the concerns of the group and came to one of the user forum meetings to communicate the findings and recommendations of their review, which directly addressed a number of concerns raised at the focus group. A marked improvement to the service was noticed as a result.
- Whenever I have raised an issue or made a suggestion (usually by email) I have received a reply which has explained the outcome and reasoning behind it. I may not always agree with the outcome, but understand the reasoning.
- It is good that there are no parameters on what can be raised at the forum, and that all comments are taken seriously.

###### Not gone well

- Library; removal of the library walls and separate enquiries desk. This was part of a larger exercise, and a number of users didn't feel that the plans for the library had been sufficiently communicated. In addition, it didn't feel like a genuine consultation – rather, users were told what was happening. It didn't feel that the opinion of users was really listened to. The decision itself and the responses to protest seemed based on dogma.
- On occasion, I have made a suggestion which has been acted upon, but there has been a breakdown in communication regarding what the process has been, and lack of acknowledgement that the change is based on (my) feedback.

##### Group 2

###### Gone well

- The user forum depends very much on the chairman. It's important to have a strong chair who has a high level of 'clout' within the organisation, such as JJ.
- Detailed minutes are very much appreciated.
- The process for requesting an agenda item works well
- The old regular readers lunch was preferable to the current format, as the limited attendance (12 to 15 experienced users) allowed for a more constructive conversation.
- The special forum called on 7<sup>th</sup> May 2009 to discuss an increase in doc production times was also productive as it had a limited attendance and was focused on a specific topic. It felt like a 2 way conversation (*the users present had a shared agenda*).

###### Not gone well

The current format of the user forum doesn't allow for a 2 way process (e.g. TNA 2010); it often feels that we are just told what is going to happen. In a proper consultation, we would be asked 'this is where we need to get to – how can we get there' rather than being presented with what feels like a fait accompli.

- Too many users attend the user forum and as a result it is too broad and not focused enough on specific issues.
- There was a lack of transparency around TNA 2010 - a lot of the relevant information had to be sought out rather than being readily available. It was also unclear to what extent there was room for genuine consultation; which bits were 'up for grabs' and which bits were essentially set in stone from the outset.

### **Group 3**

#### **Gone well**

- Re User forum: In general the format works well. Timing is good / convenient. Presentations work well. If it is requested that a particular issue is raised, or a particular topic covered, this generally happens and is productive. Receiving minutes in advance is useful and appreciated.

#### **Not gone well**

- There is a feeling that TNA is not forthcoming on certain issues, e.g. the release of Home Guard records. You only give a response when the issue is raised, and it feels as if there is information that you are holding back.
- Cynical about your approach to releasing information. E.g. car parking: planting a seed and letting users kick it about for some time before implementing – so that when it happens it doesn't seem as bad.

### **Group 4**

#### **Gone well**

Representative of Federation of Family History Societies. Was asked by a member of the FFHS to raise an issue regarding car parking at the user forum. This was taken away and I received a constructive answer at the next forum.

- Filled in YVMTU form about one of the vending machines. Received a full response and issue was dealt with effectively.
- Raised issue of lack of desk lamps at the user forum. This was dealt with and now there is a lamp per table (+ other similar examples).
- 2010 consultation was good. Honest answers. Didn't always get what we wanted but we were told this in a straightforward manner and the information was clear.

#### **Not gone well**

- Response to an emailed suggestion received a closed answer (yes, we will do this bit, but no not that bit – but no justification).
- Suggestion made at forum to have lamp per reader in the MLDRR not taken seriously and reasoning (conservation) seemed illogical and not justified. In general it sometimes feels that suggestions are not given full consideration – we are told that this isn't a suitable forum, or it is implied that the suggestion is not sensible / valid.

## **Section 2: Practical suggestions to improve current consultation methods**

### **Group 1**

- The user forum is currently not representative of users who access TNAs services online.

Suggest some way of integrating feedback from online users into the forum. This could include better access for online users to information on the topics discussed at the user forum, as well as reporting at the user forum on feedback received from online users, to promote a more balanced view. Also suggest a user forum hosted online.

- The open discussion section of the user forum is often cut short because the room is used for a talk at 2pm. Suggest the timing or location is changed.
- To save time, the minutes of the last meeting should be agreed in advance (any corrections could be emailed in) to avoid detailed analysis of minutes at the next meeting.
- TNA should be more upfront regarding what is 'on the table' – particularly concerning large changes such as TNA 2010, enabling focus on those issues where input can make a difference.

## **Group 2**

- Clearer delineation between conveying information and consulting – particularly regarding big changes such as 2010. Conveying information important but should be made clear when this is the case.
- Suggest a second (self selecting) group of 'regular users' meet separately from the 'public' user forum.
- During times of substantial change, such as TNA 2010, this could function as a working party, meeting regularly (e.g. fortnightly) to provide steering etc... from a user perspective.
- The above could also be set up for more practical matters, such as during a period of works in the reading rooms.
- This should be built in to the process when any substantial changes are planned, and the group should have input from the early planning stages through to implementation.
- Group could feed into Advisory Council as a sub-committee in a similar way to the academic group.
- The emphasis should be on consulting experienced onsite users with a strong understanding of the records and administrative histories etc...
- Forum should function more as an 'information exchange' offering users the opportunity to present information as well as TNA staff.
- User forum is very ARK orientated. Would like the opportunity to influence policy in other areas of the organisation, such as ASD and IMP. Have asked for a 'records review day' for several years to no avail.
- Suggestion to reinstate the reporting against KPIs at user forum – in form of regular charts.
- Suggest that once a year, a meeting is set aside to go through minutes of the years meetings and report on progress of any outstanding items etc...
- Send out the minutes of the user forum 2 weeks prior to the next. Finalise corrections etc prior to the meeting.

## **Group 3**

- Find a way of putting issues to rest – too much time spent on rehashing 'old' issues – e.g. library.
- There was disagreement on the above (another user said he felt it's good that these issues are allowed to be raised again).

## **Group 4**

- Timing: there are many users (even onsite users) who would never be able to attend the forum because of timing. Would be better in the early evening on a late closing day so people who work are able to attend.
- Should also be a means of consulting with online users, e.g. an online forum – which should include consultation on web specific issues (e.g. the design of the website).

- But an onsite forum is still relevant (lots of records can still only be accessed on site, so the on site experience is significant).
- Should be possible for the forum to run for longer if things don't reach a natural conclusion, although there are some benefits to having a set time frame.
- Better use could be made of the time if staff were reminded to limit the length of their talks and the chair ensured that users kept their points brief (although JJ is usually good at doing this).
- Should be made clearer what is / isn't up for consultation (e.g. TNA 2010). Better to discuss the details than spend time arguing over the principal.
- Clarity and full / upfront information on *why* decisions have been made as well as communication on the decision itself would be very helpful for the above.
- There should be better publicity of all the channels for consultation. Many users aren't aware of the opportunities available to 'have your say'. Suggest 'have your say' link as a main menu item on the website.

### **Section 3: 'Ideal world' scenarios for consulting with users**

#### **Group 1**

- A 'rolling chair' – e.g. every third meeting chaired by a different member of the exec team – and the meeting geared towards issues relating to that directorate.
- A consultation page on the website, which lists agenda items for future forum, giving online users an opportunity to give their views, which could be then fed into the meeting.

#### **Group 2**

A separate regular users forum to run in parallel to the 'open for all' forum.  
 Sub committees or working parties set up to help shape developments in particular areas, or to run in conjunction with and inform with particular projects (e.g. reading room developments).

#### **Group 3**

-The way things work now is broadly ok. No significant changes suggested.

#### **Group 4**

- Some of the forums (e.g. every third) could be geared towards a specific topic, such as 'facilities in the building', 'cataloguing' etc...
- Could also be smaller, additional meetings to discuss very specific topics in greater detail, (for example, the zoning of the reading rooms). This would enable detailed discussion of topics that are only relevant for particular users and the keep the main user forum more general. For example the changes to the MLDRR, discussed at a recent forum were only relevant to certain users.
- Do more to consult with the online user community.