

Title: The National Archives' User Forum

Date: 17 May 2014

Location: Talks Room

Attendees (staff):

Tom Gregan (TG) Head of Document Services (Chair); Sue South (SS) Records Specialist –Military; Debbie French (DB) Government and Remote Services Manager; Joanna Robinson (JCR) Customer Intelligence Assistant (Minutes).

Attendees (users):

Michael Hill; Helen Piper; Keith Andrews; John Seaman; Graham Woolgar; Jacqui Kirk; David Matthew; Richard Travell.

1. TG welcomed all to the meeting.

2. Matters arising.

2.1 (2.8 04/14) GW said that the main point he had made on this matter wasn't minuted. LMO had said at the meeting that the MoD had carried out an extraordinary consultation in 2008. GW said he had disagreed with this statement and had said that the 2008 consultation was not described by the MoD as an 'extraordinary consultation'. GW said that the MoD has not consulted the public about WWII service records, and that TNA should be making a concerted effort on the public's behalf to ensure a public consultation is carried out on this very important matter. GW also said that records of service personnel born up to 1916 should be considered for release.

A. TG said this collection is vast, and that its volume corresponds to approximately 20% of what we currently hold. There are also legislative matters to consider. He said he will take the matter up with Mary Gledhill and Carol Tullo.

2.2 Can you confirm that the digitisation of AIR 79, records of WWI RAF servicemen who enlisted between 1911 and 1928, is now complete? Information on Discovery states that some records are noted as 'Record not available', and that records of men whose service continued in to the 1930s and 1940s will be transferred at a later date. Why will they be transferred at a later date?

A. AIR 79 digitisation is complete; some information has been redacted. The digitised files will be available sometime in June.

2.3 Q. The latest date that the people whose records are contained in AIR 79 could have been born is 1912. Why do they refuse to release them?

A. Parts have been redacted because of sensitive data.

2.4 Q. When will the Merchant Navy crew lists be complete?

A. 10% of the crew lists are held here at TNA, and 10% are held at the National Maritime museum. The remainder are at the Maritime History Archive at the Memorial University, Newfoundland, Canada <http://www.mun.ca/mha/holdings/searchcombinedcrews.php>. The records are being indexed across the collections.

2.4 Q. Julia Stocken was asked if she would be willing to hold another Extraordinary User Forum on Management and Practices. Will this be taking place?

A. I have no information on this at the moment, though I am sure it is something Julia Jones, as she is now, is willing to consider.

2.5 Q. Can we have some information on redaction in newspaper articles?

A. We may be able to get back to you with some information on this matter.

3. A personal update of the March User Advisory Group UAG meeting - Graham Woolgar (GW).

3.1 (1.5 03/14 UAG) GW said that LMO had said that using commercial partners to digitise records gives a better return to the public purse. GW is unsure as to why this is thought to save TNA money, as TNA has paid upfront to have the digitisation carried out.

TG said that TNA does not have the resources to carry out such work internally, but said that he will seek clarification from LMO on this specific comment.

3.2 JK introduced herself to the User Forum and informed attendees that she and her colleagues have been involved in discussions with Findmypast about their site.

3.3. Some criticism was expressed from the floor towards the services Ancestry provides in respect of TNA content. The 1911 census was the primary source of reference. FMP has said that it will only upgrade mistakes contained in its website if it is financially viable. The viewpoint was expressed that TNA should not accept this and should not excuse poor standards by saying it cannot push private companies for accuracy.

3.4 GW said that there was a very good presentation on digitisation at UAG. He told attendees that it was requested that a similar session was held for User Forum, but that there are no plans to do so.

[Please see link

http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/Transcription_presentation_-_web_version.pdf for the 03/13 UAG Transcription presentation]

3.6 JK said that some of the problem with transcription on Ancestry is that in some cases it is the public who are doing the transcriptions. She added that Ancestry customers can benefit from a reduced subscription fee in return for transcribing records, but that unfortunately this doesn't necessarily ensure that the transcription is accurate.

3.7 GW pointed out that many of the commercially employed transcribers are based in different countries with different cultural backgrounds.

3.8 Ancestry sends transcription projects to China. Transcribers who are likely to have an awareness of the similarities and differences of geographical place names are vital, which the different cultural background means they may miss. For example I saw a reference to St. Helena which turned out to mean St. Helens.

3.9 (6.4 03/14 UAG) GW said that MG had said TNA need to be careful about putting conditions on commercial companies, as if they do not wish, or are unable to comply, they may choose not to invest in digitising the records.

3.10 Q. Who is in charge; TNA or its commercial partners?

GW said he supposed TNA can't afford to make demands. However, he suggested that TNA could try to push for a better level of accuracy.

3.11 GW spoke about UAG recruitment. He explained that the original idea was to have delegates complete a four year term in UAG. UAG has now been in existence for three years, and new delegates are being sought for October/November. There is a vacancy available for County/External archives, and two Diversity and Inclusion vacancies.

3.12 (6.1 03/14 UAG) Digitisation being carried out by S & N is targeted to the genealogical market. Does that fulfil the role of TNA, which is surely to support the needs of more than one specific market? Was this part of the agreement with S & N, or 'shipped in' by the provider?

TG said he will take this away.

3.13 I suggest that when a contract is put out to tender, TNA assesses whether the fields covered are too narrow for all users. Many researchers and users at TNA need to be able to search by different criteria, for example by tariffs, owners of land, tithe apportions to be registered and so on. S & N are too fixed on genealogy.

3.15 I saw an article recently about a woman who found an image of her ancestor in a stained glass window. She did not make any mention of TNA when she explained her further research into this ancestor. This could indicate that people are unaware of what records TNA holds. Could TNA find better ways to promote what it holds and what it can provide?

TG agreed it was a shame that some people are seemingly unaware of what TNA can provide.

3.16 Q. Could there be something included in Discovery tagging about dimensions and weights of documents?

A. TG said this was a good point, and he will speak to LMO about what could be achieved.

3.17 Q. While details are provided on physical document delivery, there is nothing online about online production statistics. Many people would be interested in the response times of online processes and services, for example.

A. TG said management information regarding online usage is monitored from a performance perspective and suggested some of this detail could be added to the document production analysis already provided to the forum.

3.18 JK said the recruitment process of UAG needs tightening up. She said that the notification that she was a delegate gave her a week's notice for the UAG meeting. She also suggested that as a quarter of delegates will be new every year, there should be a 'Welcome to UAG' process for new delegates.

4 Open Discussion.

4.1 TG informed the meeting that Jeff James will return to TNA on 29 July 2014 as the new Chief Executive Officer, and said that we look forward to welcoming him back.

4.2 Q. Some Treasury documents have been re-captured and re-inserted into their files. I have noticed that some files containing newspaper cuttings have dissimilar dates. Is this being done at Iron Mountain? The TNA reference has been put into the back of the documents in the plastic folder. A photocopy of the original is also inserted there alongside the originals – this distorts the historical records. You could be led to think these are part of the historical records when they are not.

A. TG suggested that it may be the case that in certain situations, the print or paper quality is considered sufficiently unstable to merit a copy being created in order to preserve the content. In respect of the former matter relating to Iron Mountain he would raise this with Julia Jones.

Next meeting Thursday 17 July 2014, 15:15-16:30