

Title: The National Archives User Forum
Date of Meeting: Thursday 19 June 2008, 12:30pm
Location: Talks Room

Attendees Staff:
JA: Jill Allbrooke, Head of Enquiry Services (chair)
JL: James Lawson, Customer Intelligence Manager (secretary)
PS: Paul Sturm, Quality Manager
TG: Tom Gregan, Head of Document Services
AB: Amanda Bevan, Principal Records Specialist
HPS: Helen Pye-Smith, Head of Resource Centre and Library
JS: Jessamy Sykes, Map and Large Document Reading Room Manager
DP: Dave Priest, Production Co-ordination Manager
DM: David Magee, Research Adviser
II: Ian Ireland, Advice and Records Knowledge
RG: Rufus Green, Website Sub Editor
CJAM: Carole MacCormack (minutes)

Readers:

John King, Richard Bateson, Joyce Hoad, Pauline Eismark, Kay Priestley, Scott Reeve, Ken Maxwell-Jones, Janet MacDonald, Peter Gallagher, Austin H Butler, Celia Heritage, Virginia Silvester, B A Thompson, Martin Kane, Else Churchill, Michael Armstrong, J Fowells, Clive Gardener

1 Welcome from JA

JA welcomed all, including new comers to the Talks Room: used to give 'Welcome to Kew' talks and specialist lectures and the new home of The National Archives User Forum.

Action

2. Minutes of the last meeting and matters arising

2.1 (2.4) Concern had been expressed that members of TNA staff were not being invited to the meetings as requested. This was not the case and a list of staff due to attend future meetings was shown (see *separate slide*).

2.2 (2.5) The Navy Board Project: continues to be dealt with as a separate issue: JL is discussing the matter with Bruno Pappalardo.

It was that TNA, in addition to the work being done with this project bare in mind the values of paper documentation being kept for future reference.

2.3 (2.7) Locker doors: Larger and bolder stickers will be attached to the glass locker doors, especially those on the higher levels.

2.4 (2.8) Suitability of the tables in the Document Reading Room:
The square tables were a temporary measure when extra tables were needed after the refurbishment. The way of researching at The National Archives has changed over the years and the unsuitability of the octagonal tables has caused concern for some time. Lee Oliver is setting up a project to look at the possible re-design of the tables: he will be at the next user forum to discuss this project and ask for ideas.

2.5 Proposed Records Review Day
To clarify, the forum would like to see a one-day conference hosted by The National Archives at Kew, bringing together senior representatives from government departments, staff from the Records Management and Cataloguing Department, National Advisory Service and Research & Collections Development Department with a wide spectrum of TNA readers and other interested members of the public. The Government Departments to include representation from the Historical Divisions of the Air, Army and Navy and GCHQ.

3 **Complaints, suggestions and compliments received by The National Archives**

Statistics, including the accumulative total from January to April were shown – (*see separate document*).

The focus of complaints has been from the refurbishment, the new methods of working, signage and labelling, which was the last phase of the refurbishment.

In May there were 13 complaints and 15 suggestions and compliments. Compliments were received regarding staff and layout.

Complaints included:

- one involving lack of weights in the Map and Large Document Room
- one involving the new copy card system
- one regarding the new design for ELSA (electronic seating)

There were complaints about the restaurant and the queues in particular: this is an area of concern within TNA and yesterday Jeff James had a meeting to discuss this problem.

(Post meeting note: Jane Ardizzone, who is responsible for managing the contract with Yes dining is attending the next meeting to discuss these issues).

The new water cooler was ordered yesterday (18th June) and should be installed within 10-14 days.

(Post meeting note: the water cooler has now been installed)

There had been a complaint about the layout of the library, which led to a lively discussion in the forum. Although no written or formal complaints had been received about the library in the past month, a number of issues were raised:

Many thought that the Library was: claustrophobic (particularly the space between aisles) and a lot smaller with less books.

The 'Book of the Month' stand had disappeared, as had many of the academic publications.

There were not enough chairs or tables in the area and existing furniture was insufficient considering a number of our visitors were unable to stand for long periods.

The lighting was thought to be inadequate.

Concern was expressed about the lack of availability of Library staff and a dedicated library desk, where once library enquiries could be answered quickly, visitors had to queue for answers that could originally be answered in the library area by library staff a lot quicker. When users wanted to take books away from the library area into the Map and Large Document Room it was often difficult to find staff to assist.

JA stated that TNA were aware of a number of problems with the Library and these were being looked into. Members of the forum wanted to know which items were being addressed and whether there was a timescale involved.

HPS answered a number of the queries (although she stated that some of the problems will be easier to resolve than others):

- book of the month will be reinstated, probably in the Learning Zone area
- academic periodicals were going to be on show, but we are waiting for display panels to arrive and be put in place
- there was an appointed group looking into the problems including the lighting and furniture issues

We only have three licences for The Times Online costing £6,000 a year: this meant that only three users could consult it at one time. To purchase another licence would cost another £2,000 a year. HPS is looking into a contract, which might give us unlimited users. There were no plans to purchase licences for any other newspapers online.

TNA's public service performance against our targets (standing item)

(see separate document)

There was some discussion as to whether this should remain a regular agenda item, although it would still be published with the minutes. JA is to discuss this with Jeff James whether it would remain discussed at the meeting, be produced in paper form or just be published on the website.

(Post meeting note: It has been decided that we will distribute paper copies of the report rather than displaying the graphs on screen, and

JL /
HPS /
JJ

only discuss if there are particular issues raised by users. The report will continue to be published on the website)

Open discussion

Production times and document preservation

There was a problem with production times from the end of March until May, although documents were being made available within 24-26 minutes.

TG reminded users that although production times are a KPI, it is important to maintain a balanced view of the various considerations involved, including preservation of the documents. Several possible solutions for providing access to documents while minimising potential damage to them were discussed. These included digitisation, providing surrogate copies, extended opening hours and allowing for an increase in the number of documents that can be ordered in advance.

It was noted that digitising the records and making them available online has the added positive effect of hugely increasing access to users around the world.

Car Park

The barriers have now been installed to help us monitor usage of the car park and with the use of tokens help us to discourage non-TNA users from parking in it. It was noted that there has been a considerable reduction in use of the car park even though the barriers are not yet fully operational.

Fountains

Could these be turned off on windy days?

JL

Lighting on the first floor

Was too bright – this is already being looked into.

British Library and The National Archives

Q. Is there any co-operation between the two and is a merger likely?

A. The two organisations work closely together, but there has been no talk of a merger.

Genealogy Help Desk

Q. Could there be a “Help Desk” open for several hours to help users with quick questions on genealogy?

A. The Information Desk near the microfilm/fiche readers covers most of the questions answered, and is fully manned at all times.

The next meeting will be on Thursday 17th July in the Talks Room – all are welcome