

Minutes

Title: The National Archives: Special Users Forum

Date of Meeting: Thursday 7 May, 9:30

Location: Talks Room

Attendees Staff

JJ: Jeff James, Director of Public Services (Chair)

TG: Tom Gregan, Head of Document Services

JL: James Lawson, Customer Intelligence Manager (secretary)

PS: Paul Sturm, Quality Manager

NB: Nancy Bell, Head of Collections Care

DP: Dave Priest, Production Manager

CJAM: Carole MacCormack, Public Service Development (Minutes)

Users

Sarah Minney, Else Churchill, Lawrence Woodcock, John Hailey, A Mears, AH Butler, Andy Nicholson, Peter Gallagher, Len Barnett, David List, Janet Macdonald, Ken Maxwell-Jones, Barbara Harvey, Roger Lewry, Edgar Jones, John Martin, Bob O'Hara

1 Welcome

1.1 JJ welcomed the group and introduced the panel. He assured the group that he would continue to be open and honest and would ensure that their questions would be addressed. He asked that the users allowed him to begin by setting the context behind the recent increase in production times; he reassured those present that all points would be covered.

1.2 Bob O'Hara introduced John Martin, Edgar Jones and Janet MacDonald, all of whom have researched many years at The National Archives and would like to speak.

2 Context for proposed changes – challenges facing The National Archives

2.1 The current economic climate is very tough and like many public bodies we have a responsibility to make the most effective use of public money. The National Archives has flat cash funding for the next three years with no allowance for inflationary rises, such as wages and energy, over that period (see graph entitled 'The National Archives Budget 2009/10'). As a result of this, if we do not implement savings, by year 3 we will not have enough money to cover our costs, including investments and contingencies (JJ emphasised that this is not money for 'nice to haves' but money to pay our running costs and for any essential capital investments which do not fall within the forecast annual running costs of the organisation). We have to implement savings so that we have enough funds to continue with our core activities.

Action

- 2.2 In addition to this, the government has announced £15 billion of savings across government. The Ministry of Justice (our governing body) have not indicated how this will affect The National Archives. However, it is clear that we need to anticipate and plan for potential further reductions in our budget in order to remain in a strong position.
- 2.3 The Executive Team are looking to save approximately 10% of our costs (£4 million pounds) and are currently discussing places where savings could be made. We have never faced public funding savings like this before. This issue is taken extremely seriously and currently takes up a large proportion of our time and effort.
- 2.4 JJ went on to explain that in parallel with this it has also become apparent that some of our working practices, as well as being inefficient, are also detrimental to the records. As custodians of public records we also have a responsibility to ensure that we provide access in a way which does not damage the documents. One of the necessary improvements in working practices needed to safeguard the documents was that we ceased to work towards achieving a specific average delivery time. This will allow staff to give the documents the necessary care while continuing to deliver documents as quickly as practical. This was bound to increase delivery times slightly. Unfortunately, due to poor communication, the time of 60 minutes for the remaining target was erroneously displayed as the new average. This coupled with the lack of consultation, understandably led to serious concern among users.
- 2.5 We apologise for the way the increased production times were introduced – it was a mistake for which JJ accepts full responsibility. As with all service changes it is always our intention to bring any changes to our users for discussion and consultation before implementing.
- 2.6 Nancy Bell (Head of Collections Care) gave some further context to the proposed changes, agreeing that The National Archives have realised that over the last few years some of our working practices are not in the best interests of the documents, which as responsible guardians is one of our key activities.
- 2.7 NB and DP advised that a 3-year risk assessment was completed 15 months ago and it was found that the greatest risk to the documents was physical damage. One of the results of maintaining short document delivery times over the past 4 – 5 years is that when documents are returned to the floors there isn't always time to put them away immediately. This inevitably means they are left in increasingly large piles and susceptible to damage. Files left out are also likely to get mislaid and additional staff are then required to investigate their whereabouts. There are several ways to reduce damage to documents including; increasing the production time, physically protecting the documents (new folders etc), and improving document handling advice. We do realise that document handling by

readers can also be a contributory factor and we are discussing introducing reader induction programmes; this would include document handling information.

In response to a query from a user, JJ gave some background to decision making at The National Archives:

2.8 Natalie Ceeney is the Chief Executive Officer and Full Accounting Officer, which means that she is directly accountable to parliament for the running of the National Archives

2.9 The Executive Team consists of Natalie Ceeney and six Directors. The Directors are responsible for leading and running their own directorate, and sit on the Management Board (Chaired by Natalie Ceeney). The Management Board also includes Non-Executive Directors, who are able to challenge the decisions made by the Executive Directors.

2.10 Significant decisions, such as the setting of Key Performance Indicators (our annual targets) are approved by the Ministry of Justice and Michel Wills, our minister. This happens annually as part of the business planning process.

2.11 Jeff James is Director of Public Services, which includes the following departments:

Advice & Records Knowledge: reading rooms, telephones and e-mails enquiries, FOI enquiries)

Document Services Department: document production and record copying

Security: reading rooms and building security

Education: services to schools onsite and online

Public Services Development: development, projects, user research and feedback.

2.12 The main cost for this directorate is staff. These 5 departments currently amount to approximately 250 of the 600 staff employed at The National Archives, which accounts for approximately £9 million of the overall running cost.

3 Planned consultation / communication

3.1 As a result of the financial situation detailed above, it has been recognised that a number of savings need to be made across The National Archives as a whole, including within the Public Service Directorate. It is inevitable that some of these may impact on our services to the public. The main cost in the running of the Public Services directorate is the direct cost of staff. A number of suggestions have already been made by staff throughout the

organisation, and fed up to members of the management team. However, these need to be discussed and signed off by the Management Board and Ministers, and any decisions communicated to / discussed with the staff who will be affected.

3.2 Once the above has happened, it is planned that there will be communication and consultation exercise with users, via the monthly User Forum. This process will involve The National Archives setting out the proposed changes to service and engaging in a meaningful way with users about how they can be implemented with the minimum possible impact. This consultation process is likely to begin in July. Any changes are unlikely to take place until April 2010.

3.3 JJ emphasised It was planned that a gradual increase in document production times would form part of the process described above. Unfortunately, due to internal miscommunications, this did not happen as planned (see below).

4 Actual change to document production times – made in error

4.1 JJ and TG both apologised unreservedly for the incident which occurred on Monday 20th April 2009, where an overzealous misinterpretation by document services staff resulted in a sudden and large increase in document production times. This resulted from staff actively holding documents back so as to artificially increase the document production times to 60 minutes. It was never intended by management that this should happen.

4.2 The intended change, in line with the new Public Service Standard for this financial year, is that the target be changed from an average delivery time of 35 minutes, with 100% of documents being delivered within 60 minutes, to 99.8% of documents being delivered within 60 minutes.

4.3 We cannot change published KPIs once they have been published, and if a change is necessary for any reason this has to be discussed and agreed with the minister.

4.4 In practice, once the miscommunication was cleared up, the actual delivery times reverted to being well within the 60 minutes, with 40-45 minutes being the average production time. The intended change, which has now been implemented, was to alter document retrieval working practices in order to make them more economical and better for the records, largely through the careful implementation of batching (whereby staff retrieve several documents from a particular area at the same time, rather than processing each order individually and therefore making repeated journeys to the same place). JJ and TG reiterated that it was never their intention to artificially hold back documents once they had been retrieved.

4.5 In addition to the changes detailed above, the number of advance orders permitted has been increased from 3 to 6 documents and the number of bulk orders permitted has increased from 4 to 8 per day.

(please note that with Bulk Orders you can order 50 consecutive documents or 30 non-consecutive documents). It was noted that no figures have been produced for Bulk Order productions.

- 4.6 Concern was expressed by users that 60 minutes would become the norm and that it would be the beginning of a general increase in production times. It was pointed out that The National Archives offers a very high standard of service in comparison to other archives. The projected estimate for 1st April 2010 is 38-45 minutes. While there are no plans to introduce 60-minute productions, it was pointed out that other archives have production times that are considerably longer, some as much as 2-3 days.
- 4.7 It was noted by several users (academics, family historians and independent researchers) that an increase in document production times has the potential to result in reduced usage with possible damaging results to reputation. It was felt that this has been the case for other similar organisations when such reductions in service have been implemented.
- 4.8 Some users noted that they only had to check a document briefly to realise that they did not need it, so return it – thus waiting 60 minutes for another document would not be conducive to research – would TNA consider increasing the number of documents you could order at one time? JJ agreed to take this suggestion away for consideration, but noted the potential risks re: preservation of the documents.
- 4.9 Document Production slips:
- Once a document is ordered a ticket is produced which is scanned at every point:
- 1 Document ordered
 - 2 Document produced
 - 3 Document left floor (in transit)
 - 4a Document reached first floor reading room
 - 4b Document reached second floor reading room
 - 5 Document returned
- 4.10 It was felt that 4a/b was not when the document was put into the locker, but when it arrived in the reading room. Since the implementation of lockers rather than a counter this is the closest point available to measure from. However DP agreed to remind staff to ensure that documents are placed in lockers as soon as possible once they reach the reading room.
- 4.11 Document Production time Information on DORIS:
- Could this be altered to reflect discussions in this forum. It was agreed that the 'Average production time information on Doris should be changed from '60 minutes' to reflect the actual current average on the day. DP agreed to action this with immediate effect.

4.12 Concern was expressed at the mention of losing members of staff on the production side; it was asked whether there would be any losses at management level? JJ reiterated that it is not possible to discuss all of the proposed savings until they have been communicated and considered by the management board, ministers and staff.

4.13 It was asked if a dedicated meeting similar to the 7th May meeting could be arranged to discuss the proposals in July. JJ agreed that this would be arranged

5 Complaints procedure

5.1 PS reported that 26 complaints were received regarding the increased production times. If people are not satisfied with the way a complaint is handled they can ask for an internal review which is handled by Natalie and a different directorate.

5.2 If you are still dissatisfied having followed all the stages of the internal complaints system, you may apply to the Independent Complaints Reviewer (ICR), Jodi Berg.

5.3 Should you remain dissatisfied with the outcome of the ICR's review, you can ask your Member of Parliament to put your complaint to the Parliamentary Ombudsman who is wholly independent of the government.

5.3 For more details see our leaflet 'Putting things right' which contains the contact details of Paul Sturm, our Quality Manager