Minutes

Title: User Advisory Group
Date of Meeting: 6 March 2018
Location: Conference room B, Kew

Attendees:

Staff
Caroline Ottaway-Searle (COS) – Director, Public Engagement (Chair)
Sam Whaley (SW) – Head of CEO’s Office – (SW) (Item 2 only)
John Sheridan (JLS) – Digital Director (Item 3 only)
Rachel Hillman (RH) – Onsite Education Manager (item 4 only)
Lee Oliver (LO) – Head of Venue Management and Services
Catherine Hill (CH) – PA to Caroline Ottaway-Searle (notes)

Delegates
Kristina Bedford (KB) - Map Room Users
Anne Samson (AS) - On site Personal Interest Users
David Shiels (DS) - Early Academic Careers Researchers
Stephen Daglish (SD) - Online Users
Adam Chambers (AC) - Map Room Users
Nigel Browne-Davies (NBD) – Equality and Diversity

Apologies
Foluke Abiona (FA) - User Engagement (TNA)
Carol Beardmore (CB) - County/External Archives
Angela Graham (AG) - County/External Archives
Francis Howcutt (FH) - Family History Societies
Jacqui Kirk (JK) - Independent Researchers
Howard Llewellyn (HL) - Equality and Diversity
Camilla von Massenbach (CvM) - Online Family Historians
Geoff Monks (GM) - Academic Users
1  Minutes, matters arising and general updates

   COS introduced SW and CH. The delegates introduced themselves.

   Minutes

   1.1 The suggestions for the WW1 programme and Suffrage centenary had been picked up. The date for the next meeting clashes with Volunteers Week commencing 4th June so it is proposed to move the next meeting to 12th June.

   Action: LO will confirm date of June meeting in writing.

2  Archives Inspire mid-term review – Sam Whaley

   2.1 SW said that the current Archives Inspire strategy had reached mid-point, and it was time to think about the next phase. The previous plan, “For the Record for Good”, was organised around what we do, while “Archives Inspire” is focussed on why we do things, and who we are for – our audiences. The data shows that TNA is on track with its objectives but the key question is how it feels to our audiences.

   2.2 AS said that from conversations with onsite users, about changes to services, there was a perception that onsite readers were no longer the priority. For example, the removal of photocopiers and parking charges made it feel that the diversity of options was no longer there. Irregular users commented on empty spaces in the reading rooms. More schoolchildren coming in had changed the environment too, and made the restaurant facilities more crowded.

   2.3 AS observed that changes had also been made around security. Security staff are no longer in uniform so it was not clear who security was. The entrance felt more secure with the checking of every bag, but the lack of uniforms appeared as a subtle relaxation.

   2.4 KB said that as a regular user she knew that she could go to security to raise a problem. But she felt that there was a lack of information in the map room telling irregular users that they can ask security about document care.

   2.5 AS said that when she had to get a new readers card and had sat through the video, she felt that the video needed to be tailored to different floors.

   2.6 LO replied that is something TNA can look at.

   2.7 COS said that one of the challenges for TNA is to grow its audience and be able to engage with non-researchers, which it does through other engagement activities such as on-line content and exhibitions and events. This is an area where we are starting to build capacity.

3  The Digital Challenge – John Sheridan

   3.1 JLS spoke about the digital challenge for TNA.

   “My role is to look after the Digital Teams at TNA. The work of the digital archive is our future. We are at an inflexion point – in terms of transfer of new records, the paper records will start to run out over the next ten years. There are big issues around the appraisal and selection of digital records. For preservation, digital records are not in a form we can permanently preserve or readily present to people. We have to make a continual effort to sustain the digital archive.
It is worth stressing the point that this is fundamentally a ‘game change’ for the archive. We are effectively running two archives at the moment, the paper physical archive and the digital virtual archive. This is a big deal for us and means we have to rethink our practices and the services we are providing.

I suggest my new Head of Digital Services, Catherine Elliot, come and talk to you about her plans to improve our on line offering by automating services (moving to the cloud) and access to records. We are interested in finding ways to improve the user journey for people who start from Google and find their way on to the TNA site. For example, Google “Newlyn Light Railway” and the first link is to Discovery. A record description is quite a bewildering place to start, deep in the archival catalogue. We are exploring schema.org – an initiative by big search engines to lift information out from web pages and provide additional services to users. We want to extend this so archives can make descriptive information available to search engines much more effectively.

We have made lots of changes to the UK Government Web Archive. We have concentrated on improving the search to enable you to search within a particular website domain. We are looking at the results of the user research for this service and we are looking to make more improvements.

Most of the digital strategy concentrates on the development of the digital archive. We have started work on a new access system for Born Digital Records, addressing the challenges of emails and threaded conversations so exploring how we can provide context to the user. We are also interested in how we present spreadsheets and other datasets. We are developing a system for gradating access to manage our publishing risks. In parallel (it is early days) we are working on the digital service that government departments can use to transfer records to us.

Research into new digital archival practice reveals issues around trust and assurance of the records and we are working with the University of Surrey; researching Blockchain and machine learning.

We are also developing our skills. We recruited five Digital apprentices, who started with us in May 2017. We are taking a long term view of our skills development. It is going well and we would like to do more. We are trying to develop our own knowledge and understanding of the exciting new technology capabilities that are becoming available to us to use. I hope from all this you get a good sense of our commitment to the future”.

4. TNA’s Education Service – Rachel Hillman

4.1 RH spoke about TNA’s Education Service

“I manage the on-site education team that works with 5-18 year olds. The team designs workshops that meet the requirements of the national curriculum. The team believes that history is about active enquiry and we enable students to work with real documents by giving them tools to access original evidence. This is very inspiring and challenges them to think critically and engages them. The themes are the Tudors, the Great Fire of London, WW2, the Cold War, and child criminals in Victorian London. The team delivers sessions on site, and on-line with a very advanced document camera that brings the original document into the room. They also conduct sessions via a virtual classroom, using a webcam, microphone and live chat. Students can annotate what they see on a screen.

The TNA Education Service has won a number of awards. In 2015, in conjunction with Discovery Education we delivered a Magna Carta schools event, and we run a number of A’ level study days. We are growing our work with young people. We have worked with professional filmmakers to create award winning stop motion animation films – Somme Tales and Suffrage Tales – giving
young people the opportunity to respond creatively to our records. We employed a student writer in residence for our Suffrage Arts event, who created a short play as well as the film.

We have also created a new family programme called the Time Travel Club, primarily for the 7-11 years age group but we have recently worked with 3-6 year olds. We also have a professional development programme for teachers, which provides online resources for teachers created by teachers.

Our Education website is a resource for teachers and students, where they can access “bundles” of themed documents on a subject. It provides students with material that they wouldn’t usually have access to, as it is not in textbooks.

Our Outreach Team works with new audiences. We are currently working with Anstey Bridge theatre group on a project to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the NHS. This will involve document based workshops, an art exhibition and performance”.

4.2 KB said that she was not aware that work went on to this degree, and that is was very exciting.

4.3 DS asked if there should be a schools rep on UAG.

4.4 COS replied that was a good point. Increasingly teachers are unsure how to teach sensitive areas of history. TNA can help by giving them the tools to teach in a neutral way and equip them to confront some of the debates, letting the documents do the talking. TNA hopes to expand its programme but is constrained by resources.

4.5 AS said that she thought TNA could get a wider audience by improving the user guides and making a link between documents digitised on Discovery and Education documents.

5. Delegate Submitted Items

5.1 Protection of Staff from abusive behaviour

5.1.1 LO said that Security have a three strikes policy on abusive behaviour, all staff know that there is an escalation route, and staff are never criticised for escalating an issue. If the breach is serious it is referred to Directors if a lengthy exclusion is warranted. It is rare to ban a reader for life. The TNA Harassment Policy is in line with current legislation. Customer complaints go through the complaints process. There have been no staff concerns recently and support mechanisms are in place should there be. There are “Zero tolerance” posters in the reading rooms and at flash points, e.g. the counter.

5.1.2 AS raised the incident of an aggressive challenge at a recent User Forum meeting.

5.1.3 COS said that TNA would rather have an opportunity for people to raise issues than not, and the Forum gives users a safe space to vent their frustrations.

5.2 Staff expertise and succession planning

COS said that TNA does have progression schemes and there is a new three month secondment scheme for staff, which provides an opportunity for staff to apply to spend time on research into a specific topic.
5.3 State Papers on Line

LO said that TNA will reinstate the notices near the computer.

5.4 MDR Cornwall

LO said that there has been a delay to the Record Office moving date, which may affect the MDR schedule.

5.5 Advance orders

LO said that the last ordering hours have been standardised to 4pm. Documents will be ready at 9am the next working day. There is a limit to the information about this that can be put on the website Home page.

5.5 E179 database

LO said that the database cannot remain in its current format indefinitely. However, there is no announcement due of a formal project. When there is one, users will be involved.

6. AOB

6.1 Late night opening

LO said TNA will be trialling a late opening on Thursday during May and June. This is to test the demand from researchers and people attending events. A communication plan is being produced, involving the academic engagement team to help push the message to that audience. Other changes (e.g. opening at 10am) may be trialled later.

6.2 Car park charging

LO said that TNA will be introducing charges for parking in the public car park commencing April. Arrangements for charging will be reviewed after six months.

AS asked that this topic be put on the next UAG agenda.