

Title: The National Archives' User Forum

Date: 24 April 2015

Location: Talks Room

Attendees (staff):

Lee Oliver (LMO) Head of Public Services Development (Chair); Julia Jones (JJo) Head of Information Management and Practice; Tom Gregan (TG) Head of Document Services; James Clark (JC) Head of Records Transfer and Accessions; Kay Oakley (KO) Customer Research Manager; David Priest (DP) Production Co-ordination Manager; Sue South (SS) Operations Manager; Foluke Abiona (FA) Customer Intelligence Manager; Joanna Robinson (JCR) Customer Intelligence Assistant (Minutes).

Attendees (users)

John Seaman; Kathryn Schmidt; David Matthew; E. Wilson; James C. Young; Bob Whitfield; Jasmine Bellone; Liviu Bordas; Sharon Hintze.

1. LMO welcomed all to the meeting.

1.1 LMO explained that today's User Forum will be an opportunity to discuss both the January User Forum minutes and the February Q and A session minutes.

2. Matters Arising – January 2015 minutes.

No matters were raised.

3. Matters arising – February 2015 Q and A session.

3.1 LMO explained that the February Q and A session had been an opportunity for users to raise complex questions about record transfer related matters, including: the Records Decision Panel and the Record Transfer Report; retention and disposal of records; and Freedom of Information (FOI) and MoD.

3.2 Q. At the Q and A session JJo mentioned a paper which was presented by Treasury to the Lord Chancellor regarding their plans for record transfers. Is it possible to see this paper, or would it be possible to make a redacted copy available? Regarding the 30 year rule; Treasury still has a backlog dating back to 1981, yet now has a 'new plan', about which there is very little information. Could we have a summary of this plan please?

A. LMO said we will take this away.

3.3 I'm grateful that TNA staff and particularly IMP staff were able to attend the February Q and A.

4. Open Discussion.

4.1 LMO advised attendees that as we are currently in the run up to the 2015 General election, Jeff James was unable to attend this User Forum.

4.2. Q. I noticed that within certain DWP files from the 1980's, names of some individuals had been redacted with Snowpake. There were similar problems with inept redaction in FCO files 20 years ago. Can departments be reminded of the [TNA Redaction toolkit](#)?

A. Documents were sometimes redacted incorrectly in the past. We will pass on your request to remind departments that there is a procedure to follow when redacting documents.

4.3. Q. I have been looking for files which are mentioned in indexes of Foreign Office Correspondence but have not been able to track them down. I understand that some FO files were destroyed; however the records I am looking for were not mentioned on lists of such records. I have seen files that have been transferred here and also understand that several have been retained by the FO for 75 years. What happened to those files that were neither transferred from the FO nor retained?

A. These particular records are unusual in that there is complete card index to all the correspondence that was received in FO, not just the records that were selected for preservation. If there is a 'dummy' slip in the file that means that particular part of the record has been retained in the department. If a record has been retained by the Foreign Office, you can submit a Freedom of Information request to them. Approximately 5% of these FO correspondence files survive, which is a higher than average rate for transferred records. The remainder of the records were not scheduled for preservation.

Q. So files not transferred or retained by the department would have been destroyed?

A. If no dummy sheet exists to explain that they have been retained, they will have been destroyed.

4.4 Q. When motorists leave the TNA car park they encounter a blind spot, due to the hoarding surrounding the building site next to TNA grounds. Is anything being done to rectify this situation?

A. Yes. We are aware that the development work being carried out on the site of the former Inland Revenue sorting office has created this blind spot. We are currently installing convex mirrors to help alleviate this. We will also be re-marking the road, to create wider lanes around the bend, and if necessary installing more speed humps. If our plans don't alleviate the problem we will discuss other possibilities. Unfortunately the building which will emerge from this development will follow the outline of the hoarding currently in place. However, we will also be moving our gate from its current position which we hope will further alleviate any difficulties caused by the changes.

4.5 Q. Over the years 2012, 2013 and 2014, 97 files at TNA have been reclosed, following consideration by the reclosure panel. This is a high figure.

A. This isn't really a fair assessment. Most transfers took place before 2006, when the Data Protection Act was extended to cover records held in archives. Sometimes people think of the re-closure of records as meaning a 'cover up', but the majority of re-closures are to protect personal data. 97 instances is actually a very small amount of re-closures.

Q. What about re-closures prior to 2011?

A. Re-closure was not possible before the Freedom of Information Act came into effect in 2005. Since then the interpretation and application of FOIA and DPA has developed leading to our current re-closure process. We give as much information out as possible about file re-closures. Occasionally records are released which should not have been. However even in those cases, there is no automatic re-closure – each case is considered on its merits.

4.6 Q. How is it estimated whether individuals mentioned in files are alive or dead?

A. A principle is followed: if the person concerned is not known to be deceased, then we assume a lifespan of 100 years. If the age of an adult data subject is not known, we assume that he was 16 at the time the record was created. If the age of a child data subject is not known, we assume he was less than 1 at the time the record was created. This is in the [DPA Code of Practice for Archivists](#), and it is not our responsibility to ascertain if the person is alive.

4.7 Q. On dummy cards a deadline of closure is indicated, but some documents have been put back in place before the deadline. How are FCO files transferred to TNA?

A. Where dummy cards are placed in files they will indicate which document has been retained, if it was closed at TNA or within the originating Department. There have been changes in the law, for example the Public Records Act changed from the 50 Year Rule to the 30 Year Rule, so some files have been opened before their original closure period of 50 years. We usually accrue 1 km of documents a year, however because of the change from the 30 Year Rule to the 20 Year Rule, we are currently accruing 2 km a year.

4.8 Q. How can one find out what the FCO currently hold, if you don't know what the file name might be?

A. You don't need a file name if you think FCO holds information you are interested in - you have the right to ask for what they hold under the Freedom of Information Act.

JJo advised attendees that Gov.uk has pages relating to FCO and details of files they hold, and transfer plans.

Foreign Office's Archive Inventory:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/foreign-offices-archive-inventory>

FCO's special collections – overview: <https://www.gov.uk/fco-special-collections>

Next meeting: Wednesday 20 May 2015, 12:30-13:45