

# ***Action 4 Archives***

Natalie Ceeney  
Chief Executive  
The National Archives  
Ruskin Avenue  
Kew  
Richmond  
TW4

Action 4 Archives  
Flat 2  
17 St James Road  
Surbiton  
Surrey  
KT6 4QH

admin@action4archives.com  
www.action4archives.com

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Dear Natalie

Following the Reader's Forum held 20 August 2009, and our separate communications which included a meeting with you and your Director of Operations and Services, Jeff James, on 11 August 2009, I am writing this open letter to you on behalf of all the individuals and representatives from organizations who have expressed their concerns via the Action 4 Archives website over your proposals to reduce The National Archive's (TNA) operating costs by £4.2m.

We would like to state that the comments and suggestions that follow are borne out of a genuine desire to maintain and extend TNA's reputation and credibility as an internationally renowned research institution that delivers the highest possible standards of public service, which we fear are threatened rather than protected by the proposals that you have put forward.

The first point that we would like to raise is the rationale behind the assumptions and calculations that have been used to justify the 10% budget savings, stated as £4.2m, to counter the lack of additional Treasury funding over the next 2-3 years. Inflation has been put forward as the biggest factor in this decision, but no statistics or figures have been provided by TNA for how inflation will impact upon the organisation. We would welcome clarification of this issue, in terms of detailed figures on the projected impact of inflationary trends on your running costs, with particular reference to staff salaries and use of agency staff, linked to public sector pay restrictions, as well as utility bills which have been put forward as a major factor.

Given that TNA is committed to making 10% cuts in its running costs to meet these anticipated inflationary trends, you have put forward a range of proposals and indicated that these are subject to consultation. You have welcomed the submission of alternative suggestions during the consultation process, though we note that you have not put forward any alternatives yourself as part of the consultation exercise when concerns and issues have been raised about your proposals; the mechanism for ensuring proper public contribution will be addressed shortly. Yet it is very difficult to make constructive suggestions when key information is withheld or not forthcoming, and

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in particular we wish to receive further specific data, and would like to question the need for the proposals you have put forward, in the following key areas.

## Public Service

### *Monday Closure*

Most important of all, your proposals have a disproportionate impact on public service. Closing TNA to the public on Mondays from March 2010 will result in a 16% decrease in public access, which you claim will achieve c. £500,000 savings. Regardless of the fact that it is not acceptable to penalize the public in this manner, serious questions need to be raised about the composition of this figure, and the likely impact on staffing levels.

**Request 1:** A complete breakdown of this figure is required if we are to suggest alternatives, and despite questioning at the Public Forum, this level of detail was either not forthcoming or not possible to produce. Please provide your calculations behind this figure.

### *Withdrawal of surrogates*

Plans to withdraw microform surrogate material from the Open Reading Room are equally open to question, particularly given genuine concerns raised about the quality of online digital copies which will become the main means of access (for example WO363, WO364).

**Request 2:** We would like to know what financial saving will be made by withdrawing microform surrogates; what costs are anticipated to be incurred in staff time to produce microform documents on request from the repository floor; what space in the repository will be taken up by these surrogates, and what equivalent number of original files could have been stored there; and how many fiche and film readers will be retained and maintained in the reading rooms so that microform materials can be used there.

**Request 3:** Furthermore, we would like clarification about the contract with Ancestry surrounding the digitization of WO363 and WO364, including a guarantee that the terms of the original Heritage Lottery Funding grant for filming the original records have not been contravened in allowing Ancestry to make commercial profit from these surrogate records; the specification for mandatory searchable data fields that formed the final contract with Ancestry, compared with the recommendations made by TNA during its internal consultation process prior to drawing up the contract; the date on which the contract was signed; and a precise figure for any attributed cost borne by TNA in retrospective amendments to the searchable data fields to bring the online means of access to an acceptable standard.

### *Redundancies*

Equally, there is a consistent vagueness about your plans for staffing redundancies, and their impact on public service. Whilst we accept union consultation is required for such a process, to date no information has been provided to the public about the proposed new structure, the

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distribution of redundancies linked to achieving the new structure, and therefore the possible impact on public service.

The only consistent figure being put forward is that the Archives and Record Knowledge (ARK) Department will lose 12 posts out of a total of 35 across the organization, or 34% of the total redundancies. Furthermore, Operations and Services will provide £1.42m out of the proposed £4.2m, or 34% of the total, with Public Service contributing £900,000 (or 21%) of the overall figure. Once again, it is the quality of public service that will be affected by these disproportionate percentages. Are there any redundancies planned in the Education, Press, Marketing Departments or at Management Board level, for example? We note that the Public Service Development team have not only suffered no reduction in number, but has increased in size. What is the justification for this?

We would also question your decision, at a time when funds are scarce, to delete the post of Grants Manager, who was instrumental in successfully securing a recent £7k cataloguing grant and could play an important future role in generating further revenue for TNA. Clearly, there are too many inconsistencies in your proposals; you have stated that there are to be no compulsory redundancies, yet the Publications Manager has been made redundant involuntarily.

**Request 4:** We require finalized comparative data that detail where redundancies will be made across the whole organization. These figures must be broken down by department showing how much the redundancies will save TNA, so that the impact of your proposals can be evaluated and constructive alternative suggestions can be made.

**Request 5:** We also ask that you provide the total sum of money that you must surely set aside for compensation and redundancy packages that will be incurred if your proposals are to be implemented.

If this is not possible because of the union consultation process, then public consultation should be suspended immediately, and no plans announced by TNA until all these 'facts' are made available for public inspection and proper informed consultation can take place.

### 'Dumbing Down'

Following on from this last point, we have grave concerns that your reorganization of staffing, and failure to make a convincing case to professionals, academics and the public at large that you recognize the importance of onsite services above and beyond online delivery of documents, leave you open to charges of 'dumbing down'. Despite your refutation in the press, the evidence is compelling.

### *Specialists*

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Despite several requests, you have not, or cannot, provide a written definition of what you consider to be an expert or specialist, and since you are unable to present a full schematic of your proposed staffing changes it is disingenuous to inform the press that 'specialist staff numbers will increase'. I refer you to the disproportionate number of redundancies to be borne by ARK, and further note that senior managers who have risen to their posts have usually spent many years acquiring detailed records knowledge that is reflected in their salaries, roles and positions.

This is why there are a large number of senior managers in this department – to reflect the wide and diverse scope of TNA's collection, and the varied research needs of its users. Reducing the number of teams and senior management posts, with redistribution or loss of staff, will inevitably affect the quality of service. This will not just affect academics, who are a growing constituency, but also 'public historians' who require assistance moving from atomized online datasets to a more considered interrogation of TNA's collections in order to contextualize and enrich their research.

**Request 6:** Please provide a definition of specialist and expert, with the total number of specialist staff within the organization, broken down by department and area of specialist knowledge, that fit these criteria before and after your proposed changes.

### *Information flow in the Open Reading Room*

You have spent £2.5m redeveloping the open reading room at Kew, with both positive and negative feedback from your users. However, your recent statistics show that complaints about the quality of advice have risen (as a percentage of all complaints) to 22% (Jan – Jun 2009) from 5% in the previous 6 months (Jul – Dec 2008). This is an alarming statistic, and is indicative that either information flow in the reading rooms is not working, or that not enough is being done to highlight specialist advice at TNA. The continued number of complaints that there are no librarians on duty is a perfect example; even though librarian numbers may have stayed the same, they are amalgamated into the main enquiry service desks, whilst non-librarians are required to give generalist advice about the library collection. This 'one size fits all' approach does not meet the needs of your users, and is symptomatic of the way in which the proposed changes will further adversely affect specialist knowledge.

### *Online versus onsite*

One of the principle charges levelled against TNA's management is that they have been perceived to be promoting a digital strategy for document delivery that gives the impression that online access is preferred to onsite. Whether this is the case or not, that is the public perception. The misleading use of statistics is one of the key drivers of this perception, in particular the much-quoted figure that for every document produced onsite, 174 are produced digitally online.

If you are serious about your commitment to onsite users, whether academic, professional or public history, then you must provide context and qualifications that reveal the true picture of onsite use. Here are a few that you might consider:

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- TNA statistics show that onsite document productions have increased from 540,000 in 2001-02 to 640,000 in 2008-09
- There are 15,000 record series at TNA, of which less than 100, or 0.67%, are digitized
- TNA statistics show that in 2004-05 there were 103,257 unique visits; in 2008-09 this had risen to 108,100. The number may be even higher, given there are no visitor statistics for the open reading room where many people access records online whilst onsite
- The 174:1 ratio of online to onsite fails to provide the historic context of *microform* production statistics for census, army service and probate material (to name but three popular series) prior to digitization, as the difference between original and surrogate delivery pre-2002 will be similar to that of onsite and digital today, if not greater.

In any case, delivery of content without context is simply the commoditization of data, a process by which TNA derives revenue through commercial partnerships. It is not the same as 'making history available to the public' which requires interpretation and linkage to onsite material, and promotes research skills rather than database interrogation skills.

### Accountability

#### *Commercial strategy*

Given the revenue TNA claims to derive from digitization, and the relatively recent creation of a Director of Customer and Business Development (i.e. post 2005), we would like to view TNA's plans to offset savings with increased revenue from commercial opportunities – which we believe should be developed alongside the proposed savings plan, not afterwards.

**Request 7:** We would like a full and comprehensive breakdown of revenue generated by TNA's licence agreements with commercial partners such as Ancestry and Bright Solid, which we are led to believe was in the region of £2m for 2008-09, and how this was used to support or fund other areas of TNA activity.

**Request 8:** We would like a full and comprehensive breakdown of TNA expenditure on new digitization projects for Documents Online during 2008-09, and projections for 2009-10 and 2010-2011, with actual revenue generated in 2008-09 and projected revenue in 2009-10 and 2010-2011.

With access to additional information – such as the strategy to turn publications from loss to profit, for example – we would be willing to suggest potential commercial avenues TNA might look to exploit, based on user knowledge of the sectors.

#### *Misinformation: car park fees*

The issue of car park fees, set at £5 per day with a sliding scale of annual tickets for regular users linked to vehicle emissions, is particularly emotive. The rationale behind the decision to charge has been explained, but our major concern revolves around the deliberate misinformation of the public by TNA management in the years prior to the announcement of charges in July 2009. At meeting

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after meeting, both the Director of Operations and Services, and the Chief Executive, went on record to say that TNA had no intention to charge its users for parking their cars onsite. The changing economic climate was blamed for the recent decision to charge, based on calculated expenses in maintaining the car park that total £89k per annum. Car park fees were therefore to be levied to cover this expense, generating a projected £97k per annum – the alternative would be staff losses.

However, the original planning application was made on 16 December 2006 and specifically states that the application was 'to facilitate visitors to be charged for parking'; a second document, published on the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames website, dated February 2007, contains a statement by Kathryn Murray, Head of Estates at TNA, that 'the proposal to levy charges has not yet been officially broadcast to our users'. Clearly, the public have been deceived about TNA's true intent about car parking, and given this deception, questions must be asked about the credibility of all TNA senior management statements.

Further doubts about the credibility of financial data prepared by TNA senior management must also be raised. The press highlighted the fact that according to TNA's 2008-09 annual report the Chief Executive's salary increased by £20,000, or 16%. This was recently refuted, with the statement made publicly that 'unfortunately, there was an error in the 2007/08 Annual Report resulting in her salary being understated last year'. TNA's inability to provide accurate figures about its own Chief Executive in the annual report undermines confidence in its ability to undertake a financial exercise of this nature – particularly when so many specific details are withheld from public scrutiny.

**Suggestion 1:** To make a saving of £89k per annum, one member of TNA's management board could be removed (given the expansion of the number of full time directors from 2 to 6 since 2005) and one additional non-executive director asked to step down.

### *Good Governance*

During this consultation process, several issues relating to the governance of TNA have come to light that also require clarification. We refer you to the 2004 Independent Commission on Good Governance in Public Services, and the paper jointly published by the Office for Public Management Ltd and the Chartered Institute for Public Finance and Accountancy entitled *Good Governance Standards for Public Services* – the document can be found via the following link [http://www.cipfa.org.uk/pt/download/governance\\_standard.pdf](http://www.cipfa.org.uk/pt/download/governance_standard.pdf)

Page 10 makes specific reference to clearly defined roles for a separate Chair of the Management Board and Chief Executive, to ensure proper accountability for (respectively) good governance of the institution, and strategic implementation and delivery of services. Having a Chief Executive who also acts as Chair suggests that TNA is operating in breach of this recommendation for good governance, and we would welcome your comments.

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The same document raises doubts about the current role of the non-executive directors currently sitting on the Board, as there is no-one whose skill set includes expertise in or knowledge of running an archive; the scope and potential of its collection; or the demands of the varied core user groups of the institution. Therefore, the ability to hold the executive to account and provide purposeful scrutiny and challenge is severely compromised, and further damages the credibility of TNA. Again, we would welcome your comments.

Finally, we assume that you have conducted an evaluation exercise on the impact that your proposals will have on TNA's varied user groups, reconciled with your statutory requirements to provide public access to the records and your own stated mission statement to make 'history' (as opposed to datasets) more accessible; and we assume that this will form the basis for any justification to the respective Minister and Secretary of State that they should accept your proposals as the best way forward for TNA. We would like to see both the impact evaluation and your justifications before these proposals turn into 'plans'.

### Moving forward

We would be grateful if you could provide the details outlined in the eight aforementioned specific requests, and respond to the one suggestion made here about savings.

We would also appreciate your reassurance that no final decision will be made or announced until all these details are provided; and that public consultation is extended for a reasonable period whilst a constructive set of counter-proposals are formulated and submitted; and that a clear and transparent mechanism to incorporate these counter-proposals are explained, so that public trust and confidence can be restored in this process.

Yours sincerely

Dr Nick Barratt  
Co-ordinator, Action 4 Archives