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Dear User,

You recently contacted me to express concern about the document production times over the last month or so. As yours was one of a number of complaints that expressed similar concerns and raised similar questions I have decided to send one response to all concerned, which I hope will go some way to explaining the proposed changes. In addition I arranged a special meeting, at which myself and Document Services management have listened to reader concerns and provided further clarity, as necessary. This meeting took place on Thursday (7th May) in the Talks Room. There is a regular user forum on the 21st May where this will also be discussed and which you are welcome to attend.

First of all let me apologise for the confusion that arose from the changes on the 20th April, which were introduced in error. I hope I have demonstrated over the last 2 years that I have always tried to be as open and honest as I can be with our Users about changes to services. This includes an appropriate period of consultation and communication on any planned changes, including Kew 2008; changes to ID requirements; changes to security procedures and the introduction of the Reader induction service. Of course, like all consultations, we don't always agree (e.g. the Library). However, it will always be my intention to only implement changes after due and appropriate consultation and I am genuinely sorry this did not occur this time.

As a Government Department we, like many others, have to deliver our public services in the most cost effective way possible, whilst maintaining a high level of service to our customers. As many of you have pointed out we have a track record of doing this and we will always endeavour to balance the needs of the organisation, the records and our customers. Our aim therefore is to deliver an informed and effective service to all our customers. Part of this is to deliver and constantly review the reading room services we provide. Whilst we previously delivered 90% of documents to the reading rooms within an average of 35 minutes we now propose to deliver 99.98% of all documents within 60 minutes.

At the moment we are averaging roughly 40 minutes and this has been entered onto the computer terminals as a minimum guideline for readers. Previously the ordering terminals were displaying the target as an average of 60 minutes, which was an unintended mistake. If the average exceeds 40 minutes at any point the ordering terminals will automatically display the current average in order to keep the reader informed. We expect to maintain the average this year at between 40 – 45 minutes.

This is not an easy proposal to make but we have to take a balanced look at the production service against a steady increase in original document productions in what are trying financial times. The number of original productions has increased from 540,000 in financial year 2001 – 2002 to nearly 640,000 in the last financial year. This has placed a large strain on the document production resource and highlighted areas that need attention. In general the following areas have to be addressed:

Preservation of documents

Some readers have expressed surprise that Document preservation has been mentioned as part of the extension of document delivery times as they believe that TNA has always been proactive in this area. Preservation however does not just include handling of documents as they are delivered to, read and returned by the readers, it also includes the production from the repository and more importantly the return of the document to its correct repository location. The sorting of returned documents has been marked as an area for improvement because although documents are produced singularly they are returned in large numbers throughout the day and stored in temporary areas in the repositories before final return. Primarily this has always been to achieve the fastest delivery times possible.

The up to 60 minute production limit would allow us to return documents in much smaller batches throughout the day to the repositories and once there to return them to their correct storage location. Documents are also routinely checked now for any evidence of mould or fragility before they are produced. As part of the preservation review, documents previously listed as “unfit” can normally now be arranged to be seen under supervision in the collection care department. The increase in the number of documents produced has also been highlighted. The significant increase in the number of original documents ordered again puts a strain on the production system. This was highlighted last summer when although we maintained document production times the returned document was frequently not replaced for some time, causing inconvenience to other readers and providing a greater likelihood for the document to be misfiled amongst other documents. The up to 60 minutes production ensures that other background work such as missing document searches can be maintained at a sustainable level.

Auxiliary services

We are aware that an increase in production times will be unpopular amongst the readership so we have implemented changes to our auxiliary ordering services in order to reduce inconvenience and encourage readers to plan their visit in advance. The changes below have already been made.

- Increase in advance orders - The number of documents that can be ordered in advance of a visit has been doubled from 3 to 6 documents. This is still under review and may increase further.

- Increase in bulk orders - The number of bulk orders that can be accommodated each day has been doubled from 4 to 8. For readers using a single series of documents this is a particular advantage as up to 50 consecutive or 30 non-consecutive documents can be ordered and made available in advance.
- There is also an 'in advance same day ordering service' for existing readers that are not sure if they will attend before the day.

Details on both of these services are available on our web site at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

Benefits of advance orders against on-demand productions

The on-demand system that TNA has traditionally used is very labour intensive and does lead to preservation issues; it is also very inefficient as it is totally reactive. Staff repeatedly return to the same area throughout the day to retrieve documents for the same reader (quite often the next 1, 2 or 3 documents in a sequence). The repeated travelling back and forth between the document despatch area and the same document storage area takes up a significant proportion of the working day.

Advance and bulk orders enable the staff to plan their route through the repositories in an organised manner without the need for repeated return to a despatch area. This is far more efficient and because the Advance documents are produced for the following day extra care can be taken when producing them.

We are actively encouraging readers to use the advance services whenever possible and ideally would like the majority of the documents ordered to be in advance so that the high number of on-demand documents is reduced.

In addition to the changes listed above we are also looking at the ordering rules that we have used for many years. The traditional 3 document orders at a time has served us well but in the light of increased productions it may be worthwhile to increase the number of documents that a reader can order at a particular time. In general readers tend to order documents from the same document series and these are located sequentially in the repositories. Enabling readers to order more than 3 documents at a time would significantly reduce the need for repeated visits to the repository racking. This would also off-set the delay in delivery times. This would probably work best on a batch ordering basis, but work is not completed on this yet.

In order to realise the benefits of a more efficient onsite service TNA are committed to increasing the numbers of records now in digital format by developing our online services. This will provide much greater access to the archives both for our UK and worldwide audiences and gives our customers the opportunity to view documents at their own convenience.

Once again I would like to emphasise that our aim is to allow those who wish to access the records held here at The National Archives to do so with convenience and ease. It is one of our core values to put our customers first and with this in mind we would not expect that the proposed changes to compromise this commitment to you.

I hope that I have answered your complaints and queries fully but if you feel that there is anything that I have missed or not addressed properly then please feel free to contact me or to come along to the user forum meeting next week, where we will be happy to listen to your concerns and discuss further.

Yours Sincerely

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