

REPORT on IHR/RHS FORUM ON PROPOSED CHANGES AT TNA

A meeting was held at the IHR, under the joint auspices of the Institute of Historical Research and the Royal Historical Society, to discuss proposed changes at TNA. TNA had announced the proposals on 1 July, and there a brief account of them at a meeting held at the IHR, again under IHR/RHS sponsorship, on the same day. Since then, both RHS President Colin Jones and IHR Director Miles Taylor had been made aware of widespread concern among the historical community. TNA staff had accepted an invitation from the IHR and RHS to present the reforms and answer questions at this forum, which was attended by around 50-60 individuals.

The session, chaired by Miles Taylor, was attended by David Thomas and Oliver Morley from TNA. Colin Jones made a brief introduction and some concluding remarks. This report will not cover all questions asked and answers give, but offer an abbreviated account of the main points of discussion, with an indication of the issues outstanding at the end.

THE CONTEXT OF THE CHANGES: (A) TNA

TNA colleagues pointed out that the proposed changes needed to be seen in the context of TNA's international reputation for excellence. TNA performed well in regard to international comparators, such as delivery time, opening hours, scholarly citation, commercial income and digitisation. The state of public finance had, however, made cost-saving changes essential: TNA was directly under the aegis of the Ministry of Justice, and was facing a static budget at a time of increased cost pressures. TNA had taken care, however, to implement change which, while producing a 10% reduction in costs, preserved high quality performance.

A number of speakers spoke warmly of the high quality of the services provided by TNA. It was a concern that this high quality might be affected which had stimulated concern among scholars.

THE CONTEXT OF THE CHANGES: (B) THE HISTORICAL COMMUNITY

The changes came in the context of similar problems of access and availability in record offices throughout Britain. Given the present economic climate, it was crucial to bring to wider public attention the effect that the proposed changes would have on the quality and the quantity of archival provision.

THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

TNA had not consulted the scholarly community in the course of strategising about changes. IHR and RHS had only received notice of the changes on 1 July, the day the changes were publicly announced. For TNA, such consultation was ruled out by the fact that job losses were involved, and changes had thus to be referred first to the trade unions involved. TNA had consulted users through its website and through user forums at Kew.

It was noted that the absence of input at the strategising stage from learned societies and from practising professional historians was regrettable. The way that consultation had been handled meant that options and alternatives had not been presented to the scholarly community. There was scepticism that ex post facto email consultation was appropriate or would produce an effective exchange of views.

THE TIMING OF THE CHANGES

Concern was expressed that the changes had been announced over the summer when the academic community was at its most dispersed. The need for the consultation process to end in September was dictated by the exigencies of the financial year: cost-cutting measures would only have effect if they observed this timetable. TNA staff agreed that the period of consultation could be slightly extended, but September remained the cut-off date.

MONDAY CLOSURE

Monday is the least used day, so TNA argued that Monday closure will affect the fewest number of people. It was pointed out, however, that a significant number of scholars made concentrated use of the archives on research visits to London: this included overseas scholars and students, MA dissertation writers, and researchers from outside London on research leave or in vacations. It was also pointed out that the 16% reduction in opening hours was higher than the overall 10% level of the cuts overall. It was asked whether TNA had considered keeping open on Monday but making savings on staff costs through e.g. reduced delivery times; or in modifying opening hours seasonally. TNA had considered these options, but took the view that it was preferable to maintain quality at the price of reducing opening hours.

COLLABORATION WITH ACADEMICS

Because of the need to control costs, TNA would have to look more critically at joint research projects with academics to ensure that it was not in a position where it was making an excessive contribution. Concern was expressed about this and the lack of clarity about the extent of the reduction in such collaborations.

EXPERT ADVICE

There was concern that the staff reductions would have the effect of reducing the provision of expert advice to users. Although TNA guaranteed that the total number of experts would not fall, the consultation about reductions was still on-going, so that the full picture was not yet clear. Changes to job specifications might also affect the quality of service.

SPACE and AVAILABILITY

Broader concerns were expressed about storage of archival materials away from Kew. This was a regrettable necessity – and would probably increase in future.

CONSULTATION in the PAST

A number of years ago TNA had 4 academic advisory panels which allowed consultation with scholars. It was apparent that these were viewed as low priority by TNA, and had been discontinued (albeit without informing the members of the panels).

FUTURE CHANGE

Economic and political circumstances suggested that this was not the last round of changes: between 5 and 10 years of public spending cuts seemed a plausible scenario. It was strongly suggested that it would be in the interests of both TNA and the wider scholarly community to devise systems and structures to allow much fuller consultation with academics and researchers. David Thomas and Oliver Morley indicated a willingness to engage with the scholarly community in the future.

FINAL COMMENTS

An audience consensus appeared to be forming by the end of the meeting:

- there was widespread regret at the 10% cuts proposed
- though many accepted that a 10% cut was inevitable, the nature of the consultation deserved criticism
- it was not clear that sufficient care had been taken to consider alternatives: e.g. as regards Monday closures and issues of seasonality and opening with reduced reader services
- the full extent of the effect of changes proposed (e.g. expert advice, collaboration, space issues) would only become apparent as the changes were rolled out
- it was desirable that TNA consider establishing structures which allowed academic input in monitoring the implementation of changes and in policy formation in future, especially should further cost-saving changes be necessary.

David Thomas agreed to take the points made back to TNA. Miles Taylor and Colin Jones expressed willingness to be involved in consultations with TNA about issues emerging from the forum.

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