

Andrew Stott  
E Government Unit  
Cabinet Office  
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16 November 2005.

Dear Andrew,

### **The Strategy for Transformational Government**

The National Archives welcomes the publication of this important strategy paper which brings together a lot of fresh thinking on how Government and the wider public sector can use the latest technology for the benefit of citizens and staff alike, and addresses some of the implications of accelerating technological change.

We endorse the vision without reservation and with enthusiasm and look forward to working closely with the e-Government Unit in helping to take it forward. The National Archives is uniquely placed to make a valuable and significant contribution towards helping to achieve these aims.

The transformational government plans are ambitious but focus very heavily on the importance of IT infrastructure. Although we recognise that this is critical; content running through that infrastructure is key. Essentially, for this strategy to be most successful it will require underpinning with a raised awareness of information management initiatives as well as technological issues. In relation to information content, we are faced with a number of key challenges: -

Firstly, information management and ICT management are too often seen as distinct entities and in a paper world they were. In an electronic environment, in order to be truly successful, they need to combine forces. This strategy is an important vehicle for not only managing ICT infrastructure, but also influencing information best practice.

Secondly, e-content is increasingly ephemeral – the average life of a web page is only 6 weeks and word documents written 5 years ago are now barely readable. While this may not present problems for a lot of business content, it significantly falls short in meeting the needs of future researchers, and does not support the business needs of Government in areas where historical research records are important. In December 2004, the publication of Cabinet Office guidelines on the destruction of emails was followed by severe criticism in the media and Parliament.

Thirdly, huge sums are being spent on information management across government but there needs to be a more co-ordinated approach to spending in this area, with the cost of ERM systems within government departments ranging from £10m up to £5bn. The US National Archives was recently given \$300m to invest in digital preservation, which recognises the scale of the research challenge. Best practice sharing and leadership in this area could therefore not only improve government effectiveness but also make better use of financial resources.

To reflect the importance of these particular information management challenges, we would propose the insertion of the following text within the strategy paper: -

*Information created and compiled in the course of government business often represents valuable and irreplaceable assets to Government and the wider community and needs to be managed accordingly. The reliability and integrity of eGovernment data and the contextual, evidential and long term value of these record assets, must be maintained for as long as they are required. This requires attention to descriptive standards, the information as well as the system architecture and archiving requirements. In some cases this will mean permanent preservation by an archival institution such as The National Archives.*

The National Archives would wish to play a key role in helping to deliver the transformational government strategy. We have a wealth of expertise, knowledge and experience, which are directly relevant to the three key transformations and a proven track record in creating innovative ICT solutions and information management systems. To highlight some key elements:-

- We have successfully created a 'Seamless Flow Programme', which involves the creation of a seamless flow of digital records from creation in Government departments, to preservation in the archives, through to delivery on the web. This innovative and ambitious programme, groundbreaking globally in both ICT and information management terms, will provide a single cross-government solution to the requirement for departments to ensure preservation of electronic records over the long term. Without such a programme, huge swathes of content would have been lost to the nation forever. As part of this programme, our "global search" facility will help to provide the user with a seamless portal experience, presenting the results in a single web page.
- Our "Electronic Records Online" system now allows users to access most of the "born digital" records stored in our award winning Digital Archive. For the first time a digital repository, successfully storing and making available electronic records of government held at the National Archives is available to users. In addition, we are currently piloting a "digitisation on demand" service for users who want online access to records, which are not already digitised.

- The combination of these initiatives means that, within the next 12 months, the National Archives will be able to provide digital access to virtually all of its collection, either through pre-digitised content or through digitisation on demand. This would make us the first archive or library in the world to offer such a large degree of online access to information, and sets an international standard for e-government.

I have attached an early draft of our comments on the strategy paper, how we are already responding to it and how we can contribute further in helping to deliver it, although we will submit our final response by 3 February 06.

In the meantime, should you have any questions regarding these comments, please don't hesitate to contact Irene Griffin at The National Archives on 020 8392 5330 ext 2640, or email: [Irene.griffin@nationalarchives.gov.uk](mailto:Irene.griffin@nationalarchives.gov.uk)

Yours sincerely,

Natalie Ceeney

Chief Executive  
The National Archives

## **Response from The National Archives to the e Government Strategy Transformational Government, enabled by Technology**

### **General Comments**

The National Archives welcomes the publication of this important strategy paper, which brings together a lot of fresh thinking on how Government and the wider public sector can use the latest technology for the benefit of citizens and staff alike. It also addresses some of the implications of accelerating technological change. We endorse the vision without reservation and with enthusiasm and look forward to working closely with the e-Government Unit to share expertise in helping to take it forward

We have made specific comments about the strategy paper and how we are already responding to it, which are detailed below.

### **Response from The National Archives, on specific paragraphs.**

- Para 10 – The section referring to modern government omits a reference to accountability. Accurate and reliable information underpin service delivery and policy making but also accountability, which has been such a theme of this government, FOI etc.
- Para 19 – In relation to the challenges mentioned, we would wish to add, “*responding to new information legislation*”, which gives rights to citizens and places demands on public servants.
- Paras 22-25 - The view that there should be a culture across government of measuring customer response is strongly endorsed by The National Archives. However we would not wish to be required to measure customer satisfaction of a kind that is not relevant to us and would trust that this did not result in an additional requirement to submit regular returns to a central unit.
- Para 25(b) – There is scope for the appointment of a Customer Group Director for users of culture, heritage and information facilities/services, which would include archives. It is suggested that the National Archives could lead on the archives side.
- Paras 31 – 32 - One increasingly important development of The National Archives’ archival role is the requirement to acquire, preserve and make available, electronic records, which have been created in government departments. We will need to ensure that such records are selected and preserved until they are ready to be transferred to the archives. There needs to be a mechanism in place to transfer such records, to ensure their survival and to deliver the open parts of them to users.

In response to this need, we have developed a 'Seamless Flow Programme', which involves the creation of a seamless flow of digital records from creation in Government departments, to preservation in the archives, through to delivery on the web.

The National Archives requests that Government strongly endorses this and seeks its support for the initiatives being taken forward in relation to its "Seamless Flow Programme".

- Para 33(3) - In relation to the proposal for single online entry points for government websites, the National Archives would not be in favour of any proposals which may involve the loss of its URL, as this would undoubtedly weaken our branding and positioning.

Additionally, there is a concern that a website such as Direct Gov would need to significantly improve its process of acquiring up to date information about the National Archives for customers. It is vital that such an online entry point provides up to date information about government services. This could be achieved either manually by regularly visiting our websites to check on latest news or by subscribing to our newsletter. Automatically this could be achieved via RSS feeds from our site.

- Para 39 - The Government's plans for transformational government are ambitious and will require underpinning with a raised awareness of information management as well as technological issues. We feel that there is not a strong enough focus within the strategy paper on these particular information management challenges. We note that, like the Professional Skills for Government framework, information management skills (as opposed to information *technology* skills), are not highlighted as core to the delivery of transformational government.

The information management challenges of multi agency projects are significant. We would strongly endorse the need for all Government departments to work together in terms of information sharing and examining lessons learned throughout the rest of the world. The recent privacy fears sparked by the introduction of the Australian 'smart card' reinforce the need for robust information systems, which protect the rights of citizens.

- From the points of view of evidence-based policy, preserving the information rights of individuals, the reliability and evidential value of eGovernment data and ultimately its preservability, hangs on the contextualisation and business rules used to handle information. This is particularly critical across organisational boundaries and within interactive transactional systems.
- Within the last year, other jurisdictions have experienced severe difficulties with implementation of systems similar to those proposed, precisely owing to immaturity in this area. There are also considerable

digital preservation challenges relating to long-term retention, that may have a purely business driver, e.g. superannuation data in common HR systems may be required for 72 years.

- This relates to what we see as a weakness in current perceptions of the eGovernment Interoperability Framework, which we are pleased to see the eGovernment Unit is now attempting to address. The popular perception in the industry – and some quarters in Government – is that beyond browser accessibility, resource discovery metadata, XML and open web standards, eGIF has little practical meaning. The current wording of the strategy document does little to help with this.
- We propose more focussed handling of information management in a prominent position within the strategy. To this end, we would recommend the insertion of the following text: -

*Information created and compiled in the course of government business often represents valuable and irreplaceable assets to Government and the wider community and needs to be managed accordingly. The reliability and integrity of eGovernment data and the contextual, evidential and long term value of these record assets, must be maintained for as long as they are required. This requires attention to descriptive standards, the information as well as the system architecture and archiving requirements. In some cases this will mean permanent preservation by an archival institution such as The National Archives.*

Para 39(3) – The National Archives would wish to be involved in the Common Infrastructure Board as this is likely to have a major impact on The National Archives core work. We could make a positive contribution to this Board by helping to ensure appropriate standard setting in the infrastructure, particularly in terms of descriptive (contextualised) information. We are also recognised experts in assuring “interoperability across time”, which is a key digital preservation aim.

Para 41 – This should include Information management professionals as well as IT professionals.

Paras 46-47 - The National Archives warmly welcomes and supports the IT professional skills initiatives but suggest that there should also be an equivalent for Information Management professionals.

The National Archives is uniquely placed to provide a positive contribution in this area - we have a wealth of expertise, knowledge and experience within the area of information management.

## **How the National Archives is already responding to the Transformational Government Strategy.**

Paras 22 – 25 The National Archives continually strives to use technology innovatively to improve our services to the public. We have introduced a number of new services, including digital cameras within our reading rooms, an express digital copy service and a wireless Internet service. In response to feedback via our surveys and tracking onsite user behaviour, our long-term digitisation strategy is designed to make available a significant mass of our most popular public records available via our website.

Our Electronic Records Online system now allows users to access most of the “born digital” records stored in our award winning Digital Archive. For the first time, a digital repository, successfully storing and making available electronic records of government held at The National Archives is available to users. In addition, we are piloting a digitisation-on-demand service for users who want online access to records, which are not already digitised.

The combination of all of these initiatives means that, within the next 12 months, The National Archives will be able to provide digital access to virtually all of its collection, either through pre-digitised content or through digitisation on demand. This would make TNA the first archive or library in the world to offer such a large degree of online access to information, and sets an international standard for e-government.

Paras 31-32 - In response to the need to acquire, preserve and make available electronic records, which have been created in government departments, we have developed a ‘Seamless Flow Programme’. This involves the creation of a seamless flow of digital records from creation in Government departments, to preservation in the archives, through to delivery on the web.

This groundbreaking programme, globally in both ICT and information management terms, will provide a single cross-government solution to the requirement for departments to ensure preservation of electronic records over the long term, so avoiding the cost and redundancy of individual departmental initiatives. It will enable The National Archives to safeguard vital records to support government businesses and historical research.

Without such a programme, huge swathes of content would be lost to the nation forever. The average life of a web page is just 6 weeks, and word documents created just 5 years ago are now virtually unreadable. Our programme aims to ensure that records created today are accessible in 1000 years, just as the Domesday book has survived. Also, we are managing to achieve all this on a very limited budget (less than £10m) when the US National Archives has been granted \$300m for a similar programme, and yet has not progressed any further within this area.

Para 33(3) - The National Archives has already made a significant contribution to streamlining and rationalising its websites, with a reduction in the overall number of website domains in recent years.

Given the level of public interest in family history, and the development in the National Archives of the capability to search across several databases, and plans to offer efficient and flexible charging across the National Archives' applications, we are already making plans to present a range of family history information for public use through a unified set of searching, presentation and charging services. Clearly, this would have the benefit of significant cost savings through shared services.

Para 33(5) - In the area of search, we have upgraded our website search facility making it easier for our online users to find the information they need. The National Archives is currently liaising with major search providers (Google, Yahoo and Microsoft) regarding possible co branded solutions.

Our global search facility, which will be launched in January 06, will help to provide the user with a seamless portal experience by searching across all applications/websites and presenting the results in a single web page.

Para 39(2) - The National Archives has already standardised systems and processes in a number of corporate services, namely payroll and pensions. Other corporate services currently being explored as part of the shared services agenda include finance and audit.

The A2A website, which contains catalogues describing archives held throughout England, is an example of a successful collaborative approach to joined up working. More recently, the National Archives has launched an historic joint web archiving project with the British Library, Wellcome Institute and other players.

Paras 42-43 - The National Archives has recently adopted a balanced scorecard approach to corporate planning in order to bring us into line with trends elsewhere across government. This will help us to make very clear our vision, values and targets, as they evolve, and diminish the public expression of our departmental boundaries.

Para 50 - The National Archives already adopts a standardised approach to contracts and service management. Over the next few months, we will be implementing an e procurement system, which will facilitate speedier payments and provide suppliers with a quicker, more efficient way of liaising with us. Our supplier management strategy will also have a more prominent position on our website, demonstrating our commitment to developing and maintaining a good supplier management relationship.

The National Archives  
16 December 2005