



SOCIETY OF GENEALOGISTS

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Review of Thirty year Rule

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The National Archives is working on the independent review of the arrangements under which Government records are made available by the National Archives when they are 30 years old. The Society of Genealogists has been consulted as an organisation whose views on the subject are likely to be significant and influential. Changes in the review may result in records in which genealogists have an interest being made available to the public earlier than is currently the case, but the Society of Genealogists considers this is unlikely.

The review asks for views on the following:

- Whether, in the Freedom of Information era, 30 years remains the point by which government records should normally be made available to the public
- Benefits and risks of change
- Options for planning and implementing a transition to any new arrangements

The Society of Genealogists supports the move to modify the 30-year rule but strongly advocates no reduction in the availability of existing services provided by the National Archives.

The reasons for our conclusions are as follows:

The records that are currently most affected by the 30 year rule are not those that are of immediate interest to genealogists. They reflect the records of government, policy and administrative decisions. The personal information that would interest genealogists, such as the records of a murder trial or census records would continue to be closed under various specific exemptions of the Freedom of Information Act. One might argue about how the FOI exemptions are interpreted and implemented but that is a separate matter from the matter of the 30 year rule. One might argue about TNA's acquisition policies and how Government Departments choose the records that they keep but that too is separate from the 30 year rule.

The assumption that records will be closed for 30 years has been abolished under the Freedom of Information Act. Given that we are told that around 80 % of FOI requests are granted, most of which are for information that is less than 30 years old, it would seem that the 30 year restriction has little relevance. There would seem to be little danger to Government in releasing most records sooner. The question is how much sooner? The Society of Genealogists suggests the period of closure be reduced but leaves it to others to decide how much shorter it should be.

Whatever time period is decided upon, the change must be implemented in a phased manner to allow The National Archives and Government Archivists to prepare for the inevitable administrative consequences.

The problem to consider, therefore are twofold:

- 1) How much administrative and cost burden will be placed on TNA if the 30 year rule is to be changed?
- 2) If resources are transferred to managing this change, how this will affect the genealogist as the core user of TNA?

Presumably the number of requests made by Government Departments not to transfer records to TNA or to keep them closed for longer periods will continue and possibly increase. This would make strains on TNA records management administration and have a knock on effect on the work of the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Council which currently considers departmental requests to retain records or keep them closed (at TNA) for periods of longer than 30 years, as FoI exemptions.

A reduction in the 30 year rule will presumably have a short term impact on resources at TNA. Its has allocated space for so many records a year but will that space be taken up more quickly or cost no more than was budgeted for? Presumably more readers, journalists and historians, will want access to these documents – either directly at Kew or online and this will need resources.

The public, contemporary historians and journalists will presumably benefit from earlier access to information about government decisions and policy. The media interest in records released each year under the 30 year rule is considerable. The understanding of why a decision was made leads to democratic accountability. Those who made decisions would be accountable for their actions sooner.

Else Churchill
Genealogist,
Society of Genealogists

This response is made on behalf of the Trustees of the Society of Genealogists, the leading national learned society concerned with family history and genealogy and their associated social science disciplines. It is the largest society of its kind in the UK, with over 12,000 members. The Society campaigns for the integrity and preservation of records relevant to current and future research and optimum access to such records. Members of the Society are all researching family history, mostly as amateur hobbyists, though a significant number are professional researchers. Hence the Society's main, but by no means exclusive, concern is for access to historic records on behalf of genealogists who are looking for information about families and individual ancestors. It is not insignificant that within the Society's archives can be found the correspondence with the Home Office reflecting the Society's success in making the 1841 and 1851 censuses available for public inspection in 1912 and since then the Society has frequently commented on issues relating to access to records. Since its foundation in 1911 the Society has continued to lobby on behalf of the genealogical community and takes an active role in rescuing documents that are of interest to family historians but which have been discarded by other larger and often public archives. It seeks to influence record holders so that the particular needs of family historians are recognised.

The Society of Genealogists seeks to promote a genealogical community in which everyone has convenient, affordable access to records, finding aids, knowledge and skills necessary to conduct authoritative research in family history.