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Reference: FOICR 23788/12

6 September 2012

Dear xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST

Thank you for your letter of 8 August 2012 in which you ask for information on a number of civil registration-related issues. Your request has been handled as a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

I can confirm the Identity and Passport Service (IPS) holds information relevant to your request.

You asked for the following information, and we have added our responses below the relevant question:

On the Modernising Civil Registration page at the Home Office website a posting dated August 2012 states:

"Digitisation and indexing of civil registration records in England and Wales was partially completed by 2010. Completing the process would require significant investment and there are no current plans to resume this work. IPS will continue to monitor the scope for future opportunities to digitise all birth, death and marriage records."

(1) Which records have already been digitised (by year range and by event)?

Birth records 1837 to 1934
Death records 1837 to 1957

(2) Were the entries digitised from the original registers or from microfilm copies of the registers?

The records which have been digitised relate to the certified copies of register entries held on microfilm.

(3) Have the digitised records been fully transcribed and, if not, which fields have been transcribed (by year range and by event)?

As part of the Digitisation of Vital Events (DoVE) project all the Birth and Death records for the years mentioned in (1) above were scanned and a digital image created. The fields from these images which were then data captured included all except the following:

Births

Name of informant (if not mother or father);
Informant's usual address;
Name of registrar;
Marginal notes.

Deaths

Cause of death;
Name of person who certified the death;
Name of registrar;
Marginal notes.

(4) Which fields have been indexed (by year range and by event)?

There is no index for the digitised records.

(5) The statement refers to "significant investment" to complete the process. Have any quotes been solicited from internal or external contractors, and if so how many were received, what was the ranges of quotes, and precisely what work were they quoting for?

No direct quotes from internal or external contractors were sought as part of the recent strategic review of the digitisation project.

(6) If no quotes have been received what is the best estimate of the "significant investment" that would be required.

Current estimates for the completion of the digitisation project are £25-30m.

This includes the digitisation and indexing (ie the scanning and transcription) of c.133m civil registration records, and the associated non-digitisation costs relating to image storage, system interfaces, development of the online ordering site etc.

Cost estimates subject to standard Home Office accounting rules, and are based on a number of sources, including:

- The previous General Register Office (GRO) DoVE project
- GRO Scotland and GRO Northern Ireland digitisation projects
- Consultation with The National Archives & British Library, and relevant organisations within the industry.

(7) Has any form of cost-benefit analysis been carried out (eg savings that would accrue from the investment, were it to be made)? If so, please provide a copy. If not, why not?

During the recent strategic review, a high level cost-benefit analysis of the digitisation project identified the following benefits:

- (i) Operational efficiencies within GRO certificate production processes
- (ii) Improvements to the customer experience through the availability of a complete, searchable online index, and an improved online ordering process.

The benefits from the completion of the digitisation project primarily relate to operational efficiencies to the certificate production process and total £990,000 per year (following project completion).

There are also wider public / certificate customer benefits resulting from the digitisation project and the availability of a complete index online. These related to a reduced need to subscribe to third parties to access index information, and a reduced need to travel to one of the 7 UK sites to view the microfiche indexes.

(8) What was the value of the digitisation contract that was abandoned, and what was it supposed to include? How much was actually paid, and how (in general terms) was this calculated)?

The DoVE contract (Digitisation of Vital Events) covered the digitisation of some 260 million birth, marriage and death records dating from 1837 to 2006. The estimated contract value at 2005 was £16 million assuming all records within scope the contract were successfully processed. IPS was committed to paying for those records processed successfully. The company processing this work delivered approximately half of the 260 million records and £8.33 million was paid.

(9) Where are the original registers held, and how are they protected against damage from fire, floods, explosions, vermin, mould etc? (I am mindful of the tragic loss of the 1931 Census during World War 2.)

The original registers are held in the registration offices for the districts in which the events were registered, where they are stored in appropriate conditions agreed by the Registrar General.

(10) If the project to digitise and index the registers had not been put on hold, what information would have been in the online index (by year range and by event)? If the indexes would have been enhanced (compared to the indexes currently available online) what (other than cost) would prevent the GRO from making enhanced indexes available of those events that have already been digitised and indexed?

Early proposals for historic indexes included:

- Mother's maiden name on births from 1837
- Age at death on deaths from 1837
- Surname of other party to marriage on marriages from 1837

No final decisions were made on these, or concerning modern records and the indexing project (MAGPIE) did not progress. GRO does not have the necessary technical architecture to make available a digitised index. Consideration of an online index would be part of the Digitisation and Indexing project should this be recommenced in the future.

(11) Who owns the intellectual copyright in the registers held by local registrars? If there were to be a project to digitise the local registers coordinated by the GRO would this require the permission of local registrars or anyone else?

Local registrars are the holders of information held in their registers. If there were to be such a project that required use of the registers GRO would work with local authorities to agree suitable arrangements.

(12) A number of local registrars have permitted or organised indexing projects, and in some cases the indexes published online include information that is not in the corresponding GRO indexes, eg spouse's surname and mother's maiden name. Does the Registrar General consider that the local registrars are acting legally (in permitting online indexes and/or allowing them to be enhanced), and if so is there anything (other than cost considerations) to prevent the GRO enhancing the indexes which are available for public inspection and/or published online?

Whilst registration legislation does not specifically prescribe the content of registration indexes, the Registrar General has given direction on the content of local indexes based on the principle of providing sufficient information to enable a record to be identified. Any enhancement to indexes should take into account whether more information is being added to the index than is needed for that purpose, and should also consider the risk of potential fraudulent or other misuse of the content, particularly when such indexes are available online.

(13) Has the GRO at any time issued guidance to records offices or archives which hold the church copies of marriage registers (or microform copies thereof) regarding public access? If so, please provide copies of all relevant notices and/or correspondence.

GRO has not issued such guidance routinely. However, in 1988, in response to an enquiry concerning the possible issue of “uncertified” copies of religious marriage entries from bodies holding such registers (other than churches), a letter was issued to one library which held church marriage registers indicating that we assumed that other holders of statutory registers were bound by the same limitation in providing copies as we were, ie information could only be given by issuing certified copies. We acknowledged that this had never been put to legal test. We advised at that time (September 1988) that in the light of proposed legislative reform concerning access to historic registration records, the Registrar General would not seek to intervene if, perhaps after consultation with the Diocesan registrar, the library were to decide to issue “uncertified” copies of such marriage entries.

The proposed legislative reform did not take place at that time or subsequently. In at least one further instance we have written to a record office enquiring about the issue of “uncertified” copies of marriage entries confirming that the above advice was given in 1988 pending anticipated legislative change. We added that in issuing an uncertified certificate a County Archivist is not covered by any provisions made under registration law.

(14) The website statement ends "IPS will continue to monitor the scope for future opportunities to digitise all birth, death and marriage records". Who is directly responsible for this monitoring process and how is it being/will it be carried out?

The monitoring process will be the responsibility of the IPS Steering Board.

If you are dissatisfied with this response you may request an independent internal review of our handling of your request by submitting a complaint within two months to the address below, quoting reference FOICR 23788/12. If you ask for an internal review, it would be helpful if you could say why you are dissatisfied with the response.

Information Access Team
Home Office
Ground Floor, Seacole Building
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF
e-mail: FOIRequests@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk

As part of any internal review the Department’s handling of your information request will be reassessed by staff who were not involved in providing you with this response. Should you remain dissatisfied after this internal review, you would have a right of complaint to the Information Commissioner as established by section 50 of the Freedom of Information Act.

Yours sincerely

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Freedom of Information Team