



Home Office

The Home Office response to the Independent Chief Inspector's report:

'An Inspection of the General Register Office for England & Wales, with particular emphasis on Birth Records'

March – June 2016

The Home Office thanks the Independent Chief Inspector (ICI) for the recommendations in his report on Civil Registration. We welcome the conclusions drawn and accept the recommendations. Our responses are below.

We were pleased to note that the inspection “found GRO management and staff to have a strong customer focus (GRO holds the Customer Service Excellence award) and to be highly engaged with the work” and that “GRO deals effectively with high volumes of applications for copies of registration records, casework and despatches”. We were also pleased to note that a culture of continuous improvement has been embedded within the organisation in line with the wider HMPO drive to achieve the Operational Excellence model.

It is helpful that the report is clear in its appreciation of the need to ensure that a more robust funding model is introduced with the intention of reducing the cost of services to the public purse whilst recognising that there are potential sensitivities in charging for some registration services.

Recognition of the stronger emphasis placed by GRO on countering fraud and safeguarding individuals since 2014 is welcomed. Activity and focus in line with the wider HMPO vision ‘Uncompromising in our approach to public protection’ is continuing to develop and, as part of this, dedicated statistics and specific case examples to highlight the value of such work are being developed and maintained.

The Home Office fully accepts all four of the recommendations.

1. Recommendation 1: The Home Office should ensure that the General Register Office (GRO) has the necessary legislation to enable it to deliver its business in line with government policy for public services to be ‘digital by default’, and is resourced to complete the digitisation of its records.

1.1 Accepted.

1.2 The need to update legislation, which is still largely reflective of 19th century society, is agreed. As identified by the ICI, civil registration works well within the parameters of the current legislative framework. However, the need for reform is fully recognised, but competing priorities and demands on parliamentary time all have an impact on what is achievable.

1.3 A dedicated Civil Registration Reform team has been established within GRO to explore opportunities for reform. Some recent successes have included an enabling provision in the Deregulation Act 2015 to allow for information to be shared other than in the form of a certificate; the Immigration Act 2016 contains provisions that will allow for the introduction of a revised fee structure for the registration service.

1.4 Work continues on seeking legislative change for a number of key reform objectives, including:

- Removing the need for paper registers and introducing an electronic register for the registration of births and deaths;
- At the same time amending marriage legislation to introduce an electronic system for the registration of marriages, which will facilitate the updating of the marriage entry to include the details of both parents of the couple.

1.5 Since 2009 all birth, death and marriage records have been digitally captured. In addition, a previous exercise back-captured all death records from 1837-1957 and birth records from 1837-1934. Subject to a suitable funding model being identified, it is proposed that the remaining records (about half of all records held) are also digitised. Capturing the remainder would be beneficial in terms of data sharing and countering fraud, but the wider business case for central investment has so far not been compelling. Alternative funding models and opportunities to digitise will continue to be explored.

2. **Recommendation 2: The Home Office should support the General Register Office (GRO) in ensuring that its fees reflect the true cost of the products and services it provides, except where there is an overriding public interest for these to be provided at a lower cost or free.**

2.1 **Accepted.**

2.2 Provisions contained in the Immigration Act 2016 allow for the wider recovery of costs in relation to products and services provided by GRO. A business plan to implement revised arrangements, striking an appropriate balance between full cost recovery and the wider public need to access products and services, is currently being developed. Subject to necessary approvals a revised fees structure is planned for introduction in 2017.

3. **Recommendation 3: The Home Office should ensure that any future role identified for the General Register Office (GRO) and its services in relation to controlling illegal immigration (e.g. within the 'hostile environment' programme) does not interfere with the contribution of birth registration to infrastructure planning for UK plc and to the safeguarding of children.**

3.1 **Accepted.**

3.2 The report acknowledges that a fundamental aim of the registration service is to ensure that all events are registered. The information, when received and processed by the Office for National Statistics, is vital for infrastructure planning. A comprehensive registration system ensures that all children are visible for safeguarding reasons. This core function has been recognised in discussions and engagement across Home Office teams as has the importance of accurate registrations. Opportunities to support wider Home Office initiatives such as 'hostile environment' are therefore being considered for progression in an appropriate and proportionate way.

4. **Recommendation 4: The Home Office should ensure that where any Home Office directorate encounters any forged or fraudulently obtained genuine civil registration certificates, or the misuse of such certificates in connection with immigration or other offences, this is recorded and shared with the General Register Office (GRO) in order to enable analysis of trends and patterns.**

4.1 **Accepted.**

4.2 We agree that there are benefits to sharing information and intelligence across the Home Office. Such sharing will help us to better understand how birth certificates are being fraudulently used and the benefits that can be derived. The subsequent analysis will also be invaluable in helping to put further preventative measures into place as needed. The Public Protection and Counter Fraud team established within GRO will take forward this recommendation.