

Future products and services from the General Register Office (GRO)

Informal meeting with stakeholders, December 2015

Background

The Deregulation Act 2015 made provision for regulations to be made that could change the way in which GRO is able to offer information from copies of registration records it receives from the local service.

GRO has been considering potential changes, and took the opportunity in December 2015 to meet informally with stakeholders from the family history, genealogy and probate communities to hear their views.

As yet no decisions have been made, but the informal exchange of views has been useful in helping to take this work forward.

Some attending the meetings asked whether any notes would be available from the meetings. Below is a summary of the areas covered by GRO as the basis for discussions.

Areas covered by GRO

1. Objectives of the meetings

To engage members of the family history / genealogy / probate communities/businesses regarding certificate services provided by GRO, in particular the potential for new products and services under powers introduced by the Deregulation Act 2015

2. GRO in 2015

- Principal legislation is the Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953 and the Marriage Act 1949
- Information released by means of paper certified copies
- Digitisation project has digitised approximately half GRO's records (130 out of 260 million) but has been on hold since 2010.
- Those records digitised to date are Births 1837 to 1934 and Deaths 1837 to 1957
- Digitised records used within GRO to make certificate production process more efficient
- 87% of applicants apply online, 11% by phone and 2% by post
- Forecast certificate orders for 2015-16 are 1.2 million.

3. Current working environment for GRO as a part of the Home Office

GRO is a part of the Home Office. Key Home Office priorities are:

- Cutting Crime
- Preventing terrorism
- Securing our borders and reducing immigration

Overall Government priorities include reducing public sector spend.

Any GRO case to bring forward change via the Deregulation Act therefore needs to make a strong business case to compete for available resources

4. Deregulation Act 2015

- Provisions relating to civil registration introduced by Baroness Scott of Needham Market
- The Deregulation Act itself has not changed the way registration records are accessed but it paves the way for further regulation which would potentially enable GRO to provide information in different formats.
- Potential services that might be provided under the new provisions include:
 - issue information from entries by means other than a paper certificate (e.g. email, pdf image, online image);
 - issue an extract of an entry rather than the whole entry;
 - provide a “search” service to establish whether a particular entry is held, and to charge for this service.

Important points to note:

The availability of paper certificates is unaffected by the provisions of the Deregulation Act 2015.

The provisions do not apply to the local registration service (ie records held in local register offices).

5. Views of our customers and stakeholders can help us make a case for change

These stakeholder meetings help to gather the views of our customers, as does the annual online customer survey recently sent to a random 5,000 certificate customers. There has been a good response to that survey. The survey included some questions relating to potential changes.

In the survey, views were sought on:

- GRO providing an online index for historic events (we asked about a free index and about one for which there was a charge to access);
- GRO providing information by email as well as / instead of a paper certificate
- GRO providing a premium service – supply of information within 2-3 hours – and how much a customer would expect to pay for this;

6. Next steps

Customer feedback will be reviewed;

Any changes will need an approved business case, funding from within the Home Office and Ministerial agreement;

Changes implementing the provisions of the Deregulation Act would then need the drafting of regulations and for those to successfully pass through the Parliamentary system;

GRO will look to continue to engage with stakeholders in an informal way as this process develops.

General Register Office
January 2016