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Civil Registration: Vital Change

Plans to modernise and improve the civil registration service in England and Wales are set out in a Government White Paper published today.

The framework described in the White Paper provides for new and improved registration services and enables the full use of modern technology. The proposals will give people more choice and provide a better service at important moments in their lives.

Announcing the publication of 'Civil Registration: Vital Change'^{*}, Registrar General for England and Wales, Len Cook, said:

"Civil Registration Services contribute to the integrity of Government by their guaranteed quality. With these changes the quality of service people receive from our civil registration system will no longer be locked into the tools of days past. Birth, death and marriage registration trigger many public and private processes, making these changes some of the most pervasive Government can deliver to the public with bringing contemporary IT to its internal systems".

The White Paper proposals have been drawn from a wide-ranging consultation process with interested groups and will simplify and modernise services by:

- enabling individuals to register births and deaths on-line, in person or by telephone;
- allowing individuals to use any register office for civil registration services;
- providing couples with more choice of where and when to marry;
- providing new services including ceremonies for baby-naming and reaffirmation of marriages.

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*** *Civil Registration: Vital Change***
CM 5355. The Stationery Office £12.50.

The publication is available on the National Statistics website:
www.statistics.gov.uk/registration/whitepaper

The proposals will make it easier for the public to deal with Government at key points in their, and their families, lives:

- A central database of registration will contain new registrations of births, marriages and deaths.
- Existing registration records will be computerised, over time, and added to the database.
- Increasingly, within Government, certificates will be replaced by computerised information, for example when applying for a passport or driving licence.
- Members of the public will be able to give permission for other organisations to use this electronic information for example, when dealing with financial aspects following the death of a relative.
- The more recent registration records will be able to be updated, for example with change of name, marriage and death.
- Registration records of people over 100 years old will be fully accessible, removing the frustration for family historians who currently have to buy certificates.

These proposals for reforming civil registration form part of wider Government work on modernising public services. Legislation is needed but the changes can be put in place using the order making powers in the Regulatory Reform Act 2001. However, that means it will be at least two years before the implementation starts.

The framework described in the White Paper provides for improved and new registration services and enables the full use of modern technology. It is based on the results of wide-ranging consultation with interested groups.

BACKGROUND NOTES

1. The Registrar General for England and Wales is Len Cook. He is head of the General Register Office, which is responsible for civil registration in England and Wales.
2. The registration service for England and Wales was established in 1837. It provides a national system for the registration of births, deaths and marriages.

3. The service is administered by the Registrar General in partnership with local authorities. The Registrar General is responsible for the technical standards of the service while local authorities recruit, pay and provide the accommodation for registration officers.
4. Registration officers are statutory officers whose duties are set out in the various acts and regulations relating to the registration of births, deaths and marriages. They have no legal employer, but the Registrar General has the power to remove them from office.
5. In 1990 a White Paper, '*Registration: proposals for change*' (Cm 939) recommended a number of largely technical reforms of the registration service, many of which have since been implemented (for example civil marriages in hotels and other approved premises).
6. In December 1998, the then Economic Secretary to the Treasury, Patricia Hewitt MP, announced that she had asked the then Registrar General, Dr Tim Holt, to carry out a review of the civil registration service in England and Wales with the aim of producing a public consultation document. This followed the Government's recommendation in the consultation paper '*Supporting Families*' that the Registrar General should commission a review of civil registration. '*Supporting Families*' also envisaged a wider role for registrars.
7. In September 1999, the consultation document '*Registration: Modernising a Vital Service*' was published. Over 3,500 copies of the full document were issued to central government, local authorities, registration officers and relevant health, genealogical and professional organisations, MPs, religious and family support groups. Over 25,000 summary leaflets were distributed through register offices, local authority information and library services and enclosed with correspondence to the public from GRO on registration matters. Approximately 1,000 responses were received. There was wide support for the range of proposed changes, including 83 per cent supporting more choice for marriage.
8. The Regulatory Reform Act 2001 received Royal Assent on 10 April 2001. The Act includes a power for Ministers to make Regulatory Reform Orders. The process for making such orders is an open, consultative one. It enables important reforms to regulatory regimes without taking up the amount of Parliamentary time required by a public Bill.