



29 March 2004

Next step for plans to modernise civil registration

Government plans to modernise the way in which people in England and Wales can register a birth and death and access birth and death information, took a major step forward with the announcement today by Financial Secretary, Ruth Kelly, that an Order under the Regulatory Reform Act 2001 will be introduced in this Session of Parliament.

The Regulatory Reform Order will amend current legislation on birth and death registration to:

- Enable citizens to register births and deaths on-line, in person and by telephone.
- Allow people to use any register office to register births and deaths.
- Give responsibility for the delivery of face-to-face services to local authorities.
- Provide new arrangements for access to births and deaths registration information.

In a written statement to the House of Commons, Ruth Kelly said:

"On 10 July 2003 the Government published the consultation paper 'Civil Registration: Delivering Vital Change'. This set out our proposals to reform civil registration in England and Wales using powers in the Regulatory Reform Act 2001. The proposed changes will make it easier both for citizens to deal with Government at key points in their lives and in the lives of their families and for the Government to modernise this public service by exploiting improved information and communication technology.

"I am pleased to be able to tell the House that there were almost 3400 responses to the consultation document. This indicates the very real interest amongst a wide range of stakeholders - registration practitioners and managers, the public and other interested organisations - in this area of reform".

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Ruth Kelly also added:

"I am delighted that so many people took the time and trouble to respond to this very important consultation exercise. These changes will result in a major improvement in the quality of service we are able to provide to people who need to register a birth or death".

In her statement to the House Ruth Kelly also announced that she had decided to postpone the presentation of proposals relating to the modernisation of marriage law so that she could take account of Parliament's wishes on Civil Partnership legislation. However, making progress with the births and deaths aspects in this session and bringing forward legislation on marriages early in the next session will maintain the momentum for civil registration reform.

A copy of Ruth Kelly's statement is attached.

BACKGROUND NOTES

1. Ruth Kelly is Financial Secretary to HM Treasury and is the Minister responsible for the civil registration service in England and Wales.
2. The registration service for England and Wales was established in 1837, and provides a national system for the registration of births, deaths and marriages. It is headed by Len Cook, the Registrar General for England and Wales, who is also the National Statistician and Director of the Office for National Statistics.
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 conditions of service 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, 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 recommendations in the consultation paper 'Supporting Families' that the Registrar General should commission a review of civil registration.



7. In September 1999, the consultation document 'Registration: Modernising a Vital Service' was published. Approximately 1000 responses were received. These have been used in developing a framework for the registration service in the future. This framework was outlined in a White Paper '**Civil Registration: Vital Change**' published on 22 January 2002.
8. The order-making powers in the Regulatory Reform Act 2001 require the responsible Minister to consult on the legal changes necessary for reform before presenting proposals, including a draft Regulatory Reform Order, to Parliament. Scrutiny of the proposals takes place in both Houses of Parliament by the House of Commons Regulatory Reform Committee and the House of Lords Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee. Regulatory Reform Orders are finally subject to affirmative resolution by both Houses.
9. The proposed changes will make it easier for citizens to deal with government at key points in their, and their families', lives. A central database will contain new records of births, marriages and deaths. Over time, existing registration records can be computerised and added to the database. The use of certificates within government and more widely will reduce as more computerised information is available. Members of the public will find it easier to apply for a passport or driving licence or deal with a relative's estate after death using this electronic information as they will not have to provide certificates in support of their applications.
10. According to The Women and Equality Unit publication *Responses to Civil Partnership: a framework for the legal recognition of same-sex couples*, published in November 2003, some of the legal requirements for civil partnership registration are likely to be similar to those for marriage though the Government has made it clear that it has no plans to introduce same-sex marriage. It was announced in the Queen's Speech to Parliament on 26 November 2003 that the Government intended to introduce Civil Partnership legislation in this session. The postponement of the presentation of the provisions relating to marriage will allow the provisions in the second Regulatory Reform Order to develop in the full knowledge of Parliament's wishes on Civil Partnership legislation and enable the harmonisation of the two sets of arrangements. Any issues that emerge during the Bill's passage through Parliament will be reviewed in the context of the Government's proposals for marriage law reform.

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

CIVIL REGISTRATION REVIEW

The Financial Secretary (Ruth Kelly): The House will wish to be aware of developments on the Government's plans for modernising civil registration.

On 10 July 2003 the Government published the consultation paper "Civil Registration: Delivering Vital Change ". This set out our proposals to reform civil registration in England and Wales using powers in the Regulatory Reform Act 2001. The proposed changes will make it easier both for citizens to deal with Government at key points in their lives and in the lives of their families and for the Government to modernise this public service by exploiting improved information and communication technology. I am pleased to be able to tell the House that there were almost 3400 responses to the consultation document. This indicates the very real interest amongst a wide range of stakeholders - registration practitioners and managers, the public and other interested organisations - in this area of reform.

Our intention was to introduce a Regulatory Reform Order in this Session of Parliament. This remains the case in respect of provisions relating to registration of births and deaths and access to birth and death records. I have however decided to postpone the presentation of provisions relating to marriage till early in the next Session. The splitting of the proposals in this way will ensure that the momentum for reform is sustained whilst, at the same time, providing an opportunity for the second Regulatory Reform Order to take account of Parliament's wishes on the civil partnership legislation.

This strategy will not hinder the Government's plans for implementation that will begin in 2005 with improved information technology to forward registration information to the Registrar General and the structural reform of the local registration service.

29 March 2004
HM Treasury