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Registrar General's feasibility study on UK population register

The Citizen Information Project

Len Cook, Registrar General for England and Wales, today published a feasibility study into developing a UK population register, which would pave the way for more responsive and personalised public services. He also announced ministerial agreement to do more development work on this UK Government project.

A team based within the General Register Office - part of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) – will carry out the detailed development work over the next 18 months. Ministers will then decide whether or not to create a register for use by the public sector.

A joint ONS/Her Majesty's Treasury project team carried out the feasibility study, which has the working title of the 'Citizen Information Project'. The feasibility study concludes it should be possible to build a population register for use by public services across the UK. This would bring together basic information about people who are usually resident in the UK.

The population register would be of consistently higher quality than data currently available in many parts of the public sector and would include basic information, such as names and addresses, along with ongoing changes to address and other contact information. It would be drawn together in a way that is consistent with legislation covering data protection and privacy.

The resulting population register would have many statistical and administrative benefits. It would become the authoritative source of name and address information for use across the public sector. This would support joined-up delivery and more efficient and effective transaction and back office services.

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The proposal is not about creating a single database of all data held about people across the public services. The population register would simply act as the index to existing records held in different databases. These records could only be linked when specifically authorised by legislation.

All other information needed for public services would continue to be held securely by the appropriate responsible organisation. This information would continue to be subject to the protection of administrative or statistical legislation. Contact information held confidentially would not be available to users of the population register.

Len Cook said, "The feasibility study shows the population register has considerable potential for improving public services and for making it simpler for people to update their name and address details held by government."

He went on to emphasise, "The most critical attribute of such a register is that it protects privacy and makes it possible to extend ways to do this as society and commerce become more intrusive. It should enable each citizen to see the contact data that government holds on him or her, and to know which public sector organisations have access to their contact data. The further development work we are now starting will allow people to judge whether that is possible."

There will be public consultation to explore the issues around the acceptability of this proposal. Work will be undertaken to draft legislation needed to establish a register that is compliant with data protection and privacy law. In this stage the project team will also define the proposed register in greater detail.

Background notes

1. The feasibility study was first announced in the July 2002 green paper on entitlement cards and identity fraud (Cm 5557). An information note was published on the Registrar General's website earlier this year (it was also on the HMT website) and this is being replaced by today's note on the outcome of the feasibility study.
2. A summary of the feasibility study findings is at: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/registration/cip.asp>



3. The kind of basic contact information to be held on the population register is:
 - name (with alternatives, for example, women may use their maiden name and their married name in different circumstances);
 - address(es);
 - date and place of birth (to distinguish between people with the same name);
 - date of death;
 - sex;
 - a unique reference number.

4. This list will be considered further in the forthcoming detailed development work stage. One option is to add some voluntary information, such as whether information should be sent to the person in large print format.

5. The proposal is UK wide. The project team reporting to the Registrar General for England and Wales will continue to work closely with other government departments, the devolved administrations, agencies and local authorities.