

Public Briefing Paper

Background

ONS announced in January its intention to provide facilities to search indexes of births, marriages and deaths on the internet from early 2008. Due to a longer-than-expected development period for the index, and some delays in the digitisation project which will deliver the index data in searchable electronic form, it will not now be possible to deliver the new index in the short term.

The continuing fall in visitor numbers at the Family Records Centre and the need for ONS to rationalise its London accommodation in the light of its relocation programme mean that both ONS and TNA will be keeping to their intention of vacating the existing FRC facility at Myddelton Street by the end of March 2008.

ONS acknowledges its obligation to provide a publicly-available, searchable index and is taking steps to ensure that this can be discharged during the period between closure of the FRC and the availability of the web-based index. The main features of the arrangements to be put in place are summarised below and will be in place from April 2008 until March 2009. During this period GRO will consider how to sustain the obligation to make indexes publicly available for the future.

ONS Headquarters staff will begin to use the Myddelton Street building from April 2008, and some refitting and refurbishment is planned to take place from the Autumn of this year. Some transitional arrangements will therefore be put in place from November this year. These are described in Annex A

Summary

As the new GRO electronic index will not now be available by April 2008 there are some changes to the previously announced arrangements. The need to start refurbishment on the Myddelton Street building before it is released for use by the Statistics Board means that there will be some transitional arrangements prior to full closure of the FRC and those are set out in the attached annex.

The public will of course continue to be able to access the GRO indexes as now through local libraries, record offices and family history societies as well as through the third party websites who provide this information in electronic format.

The National Archives at Kew already have copies of the indexes on microfiche, including overseas indexes, for public search purposes.

The National Archives will aim to provide public access to electronic indexes to births, marriages and deaths from 1984 onwards, adoptions from 1970 onwards and civil partnerships from 2006 onwards and are currently examining how this can be achieved technically. TNA will also provide temporary access to the bound volumes of indexes to adoptions prior to 1970.

Some microfiche records, in particular for the earlier events, are not easy to read. In recognition of this and to ensure that an acceptable level of customer service is maintained, ONS will be providing support to identify the correct GRO references. This provides the opportunity to request scrutiny by GRO staff of the paper master copies which will be held at a remote site. However, it is not considered practicable to make the paper copies available for direct public scrutiny.

Customers who search the microfiche indexes held in libraries, record offices or online will also be able to benefit from additional information to help clarify GRO references where the fiche is illegible.

As previously announced, over-the-counter ordering services and the collection service will not be available after FRC closes.

Next Steps

ONS and TNA are working very closely together to ensure the smoothest possible transition to the new arrangements.

ONS will be maintaining regular communication with customers to ensure they are aware of progress.

ONS plan to provide information bulletins to both key stakeholders and the public generally via the GRO website and other electronic media.

General Register Office

July 2007

Annex A

Transitional Arrangements applicable from Nov 2007 – March 2008

To facilitate the refitting and refurbishment of the ground floor at Myddelton St, the existing search room will close from November 2007.

During October 2007 the 6550 or so bound volumes of the paper indexes for Births, Deaths, Marriages and Overseas will start to be removed from the search room and relocated at Christchurch.

Copies of the microfiche indexes will be provided on the first floor (co-locating with TNA). Similar arrangements will be in place, as described above, to check references for customers where the microfiche proves inadequate.

There will be an increase in the number of terminals holding index data electronically for the more recent events.

Access to the Adoption index will also be available on the first floor.

The Tills Area and Cash Office

The need to vacate the ground floor of Myddelton Street will necessitate the closure of the present tills area and the cash office used to bank receipts from customer certificate applications. The limited availability of space on the first floor of the FRC means that these services cannot be relocated and as a consequence they will need to be withdrawn.

From November 2007 FRC customers who wish to order and pay for certificates at the FRC may do so via the on line ordering facility. This service is currently available via the GRO website and will be the future means of GRO receiving the majority of certificate applications.

Customers wishing to order certificates using the Priority Service can use this method of application but will have the certificate/s posted to the address provided.

Members of the public will also continue to have the alternative options of completing certificate applications and subsequently posting them to Southport or by making a telephone application to the Certificate Services Call Centre.

Customer Service Desk

The refurbishment of the ground floor at Myddelton Street will also require the closure of the current customer service desk. Some of the services provided will be transferred to the first floor but the full range of services cannot be provided. The principal change here will be the removal of the certificate collect service for both priority and standard applications.

GRO staff will be available on the first floor to provide customers with information on and assistance with GRO services.

Summary

The transitional period will allow the change in services provided to the public to be monitored and will help GRO and TNA maintain the best possible service to the public during this period of transition.

The TNA bookshop will remain open throughout this transitional period.