

**Speech by Mr Micheál Martin T.D., Minister for  
Health and Children, at the launch of the  
Modernisation of the Civil Registration Service, 7  
October 2003, at the Government Press Centre**

I am delighted to be with you here today at the launch the Civil Registration Service modernisation and to confirm my Department's close involvement with the introduction of eGovernment, commencing with the enhancement of the child benefit payments service being delivered by Minister Coughlan's Department.

Civil Registration touches on each and every one of us at numerous stages in our lives. It commences when our births are registered and ends with the registration of our deaths. In the intervening years, civil registration affects us both directly, as in the case of getting married, or indirectly when certificates are required for many of the services that are available in our society. The importance of civil registration becomes evident at several times in a person's life e.g. enrolling a child in school, applying for a passport, taking up employment, or claiming social welfare benefits.

Civil registration was introduced in Ireland in 1845 – initially for the registration of non-Roman Catholic marriages. From 1864 a comprehensive registration system, covering in addition the registration of births, deaths and Roman Catholic marriages, was established.

The General Register Office is responsible for the administration of the Civil Registration Service and operates under the aegis of my Department. The day-to-day service is primarily delivered by health boards.

Currently, the Civil Registration Service registers all births, stillbirths, deaths, marriages and adoptions, which occur in the State. There are in excess of 110,000 events registered, some 500,000 certificates produced and 1.2 million searches/enquiries carried out each year.

Civil registration forms a basic, continuous source of information about the population. It provides a record of vital events relating to people in the State and satisfies the need for evidence, which has a bearing on rights, entitlements, liabilities, status and nationality. Information provided by the Civil Registration Service is used with other data sources for many purposes, including the planning of schools, hospitals and housing and for medical research mortality and prevention of disease. With the growing interest in family research in recent times, the records held by the Civil Registration Service provide a rich source of information for people involved in tracing their family history and in compiling 'family trees'.

As mentioned, the present system for civil registration was set down some 150 years ago. While there has been little change to the basic registration procedures since that time, there have been many

changes in our society, major developments in technology and increased expectations by citizens on how public services should be delivered.

Because of the importance of civil registration in our lives and recognising that there were shortcomings in the present service, Government approved the modernisation of the Civil Registration Service - a joint project between my Department and the Department of Social and Family Affairs.

The modernisation programme has four distinct elements:

- Design and development of new business processes and procedures,
- Introduction of modern technology,
- Capture and storage in electronic format of all historical paper based records from 1845 to date,
- Reform of the legislation to underpin the delivery of a modernised service, meet the needs of modern society and facilitate the wider eGovernment agenda.

The introduction of the new information technology system, together with new processes and procedures, will standardise, simplify and enhance the registration of life events throughout the country. New electronic registers will replace the existing paper-based registers. In addition, all existing historic data is being captured electronically. This will greatly reduce the effort involved in tracing registration details and will enable the delivery of services where most suitable to customers – an important feature of the modernised service which would not have been possible under the existing paper-based system.

New secure certificate stationery has been introduced to coincide with the implementation of the new system. All certificates produced by the new I.T. system are on the new stationery. The stationery incorporates a range of security features, including, three-colour rainbow print and four harp watermarks which are visible when held up to the light.

The technical solution underpinning the new system is both innovative and creative. Key features include:

- The creation of the national event database which facilitates the on-line seamless searching and retrieval of historic and new registration records using one application,.
- The capture and storage in electronic format of historic records, allowing users to produce certificates electronically for all events. This is, as far as is known, the first implementation of its kind world-wide.
- On-line registration of life events – the first in Europe.
- Use of electronic pads to capture and store the customer's signature as part of the registration record.
- An interoperability framework for inter-agency transfer of the data captured through civil registration, thus enabling enhanced delivery of other public services to the benefit of our customers.

As an integral part of the modernisation programme, a project is currently ongoing in Roscommon to capture and store in electronic format all registration records created since the establishment of the Civil Registration Service. I wish to compliment the staff in Roscommon for their diligent work in the electronic capture and quality assurance of these records. I also wish to acknowledge the support provided by

their colleagues in the Department of Social and Family Affairs in making the electronic retrieval of historic data a reality.

Modern society demands choice in accessing and availing of public services. Customers have rising expectations - they want quality services supplied at a place and time of their choosing.

The Government has signalled through its Quality Customer Service Initiative its commitment to the delivery of quality customer services to citizens.

Central to the implementation of a modern Civil Registration Service will be a comprehensive customer action plan based on the principles of quality customer service.

The key objectives underpinning this plan are to:

- Develop and promote a strong customer service culture throughout the Civil Registration Service.
- Promote an integrated approach to the delivery of services while providing reasonable choice in the methods of service delivery.
- Equip staff with the skills, information and supports to fulfil customer service objectives.
- Develop measurable customer service quality standards.
- Develop participative structures where customers can express opinions and give feedback on the services delivered.
- Take a proactive approach to the provision of quality information and advice and ensure ease of access to services.

Getting the views of customers and the introduction of customer consultation and feedback mechanisms, which will involve day-to-day contacts, surveys, panels and comment cards will be an integral part of the new Civil Registration Service.

The future Civil Registration Service must meet the citizen's expectations on availability of information, service access options, quality of service and privacy. The launch of the modernised Civil Registration Service provides the foundation to enable the introduction of a range of measures to meet these objectives.

In addition, the introduction of electronic registration will bring added benefits to our customers. Minister Coughlan will tell you more about this later.

The modernised Civil Registration Service is being introduced on a phased basis. The first phase kicked off with the introduction of the new I.T. system in the General Register Office here in Dublin on 1st July 2003. Since then the system has been introduced at a number of health board civil registration offices. The first phase caters for the electronic production of birth, death and marriage certificates on new certificate paper and the electronic registration of births and deaths. The initial benefits to both customers and staff are immediately obvious e.g. I am reliably informed that a request for a marriage certificate typically now takes less than 5 minutes to process as opposed to about 20 minutes using the old way.

As mentioned, the rollout of the system to registration offices countrywide is underway. I am pleased that the Cork office was to the forefront in implementing the new computer system through their participation in the pilot project since the end of last year and more recently with electronic production of certificates and electronic registration of life events. I would like to compliment the management and staff in the Southern Health Board and throughout the country for their effort and commitment.

It is planned that the certificate production aspects of the system will be implemented in all registration offices nationwide by the end of the year. Electronic registration, which has already commenced in Cork, will also be implemented throughout the country over the coming months.

Further phases of the modernisation programme will include the introduction of new procedures governing the registration of marriages, once the revised legislation is in place. Minister Coughlan will elaborate on developments in this regard. It is also planned to introduce a range of services to be provided over the Internet, in line with eGovernment services generally.

I mentioned earlier the importance of registration records in relation to genealogy and family research. I am glad to be able to confirm that priority will now be given to the introduction of an electronic research facility that will greatly improve services for genealogists and family researchers.

Finally, I wish to refer to the work being carried out by the Inter-Departmental Committee on Reform of Marriage Law which was established last year under the chairmanship of my Department. The Committee's mandate is to review current marriage procedures and formalities and to recommend a framework for reform. The priority issues identified by the Committee as requiring examination include the need for a universally applicable framework of clear and simple procedures to underpin the solemnity of the marriage contract. The Committee has to-date, published interim proposals on reform in relation to:

- Procedural Preliminaries for Marriage
- Solemnisation of Marriage and
- Marriage Venues.

These proposals will standardise and simplify regulations in relation to marriage and remove many of the by now outdated provisions which currently apply. I am hopeful that they can be incorporated into the Civil Registration Bill, which Minister Coughlan will update you on.

The Committee will shortly publish additional proposals on a range of further issues in advance of the publication of their final report.

In conclusion, the launch of the Civil Registration modernisation programme today will, I believe, enable the Civil Registration Service to fulfil and develop its role within the overall provision of public services.

I wish to thank the management and staff of my own Department, both in Dublin and Roscommon for their commitment and hard work on the day-to-day running of the General Register Office and for their efforts to bring the modernisation programme to fruition.

I also wish to thank Minister Coughlan and the staff of the Department of Social and Family Affairs for their very significant commitment to the modernisation programme generally as well as the reform of civil registration legislation.

I would also like acknowledge the support and encouragement of Minister Hanafin and her staff who have been enormously supportive of our efforts in the context of realising the benefits of the overall eGovernment programme.

The contribution of REACH in providing the necessary “behind the scenes” developments to enable the sharing of civil registration data for the enhancement of other services has also been vitally important to our overall endeavours.

Finally, I wish to express our sincere gratitude to all those from outside our Departments who have assisted with bringing about our achievements to-date. In particular, I wish to acknowledge the input of Accenture for the provision of specialist skills and support in the design and development of the new Civil Registration System I.T. system.

I look forward to a range of further developments coming on stream in the months and years ahead, that will bring about the full realisation of the modernisation programme objectives.

Thank you for your attention.