



1. Background

The General Register Office (GRO) is looking at different ways of providing civil registration services to our customers and as part of that it tested customer demand for records in a format other than a paper copy, via a Portable Document Format [PDF]. Following successful piloting we are pleased to offer PDF's of historical birth and death records for England and Wales as part of our established service.

Portable Document Format (PDF) is a file format used to present and exchange documents reliably and in a manner that is independent of user's software, hardware, or operating system. PDF was developed by Adobe in the early 1990s and is now an open standard that is maintained by the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO).

2. Records available and turnaround time

PDF's are available for historical digitised civil registration records held by GRO (birth entries from 1837 - 1920 and death entries from 1837 - 1957). A GRO index reference is required to be provided with the application.

You can find the GRO index references by logging on to the GRO online ordering service and accessing the GRO online indexes.

Our aim is to provide the PDF within 4 working days from the date of the order, if it has been received before 4pm.

3. Making an application

An order for a PDF copy of a registration record must be made via our online ordering site. Please note that this service is not available via telephone or postal applications. The PDF product is selectable under the "service option" on the order page for an England & Wales birth event for the years 1837 - 1920 and death events for the years 1837 - 1957.

You will need to provide the full GRO index reference number for the record that you are interested in, you will be prompted to supply details of the event as you complete the online application form.

4. Viewing your PDF

You will be sent an email notification to inform you that your PDF image is ready to view and download. You will need to log on to your ordering account and you will find a link to your PDF in your order history. At this point you can view your image by clicking onto the "View PDF" button.

PDFs will remain available to view for a period of 3 months from the point of ordering, after which it will be removed. You will not receive a reminder prior to deletion.

5. What you will see on a PDF

The PDF image is an extract from the historical record of the event. It will contain the same information that is present in a certificate apart from the official crest and signature of issuing authority. The image may contain some imperfections as the records date from 1837. A PDF will have no "evidential" value, and therefore a paper certified copy [certificate] is required for official purposes, e.g. if applying for a passport, driving licence, or where required to give notice of marriage.

An example of a PDF image is shown below.

No.	When Died	Name and Residence	Sex	Age	Rank or Profession	Cause of Death	Signature, Description, and Residence of Informant	When Registered	Signature of Registrar
266	1866	William Machony	Male	15		Small pox	The mother of James W. King Resident at the time Machony Bristol	July	Edward Wellman James Poultney

6. Troubleshooting

6.1 Not able to view PDF

PDFs can be viewed using Acrobat Reader software which is available as a free download for a number of devices such as PC, Mac, tablet or smartphone. If you do not currently have this program installed on your device you should type 'adobe acrobat reader' into your search engine and then follow the instructions provided to download it.

If you have Acrobat Reader on your device and are still not able to view your PDF you should contact us by:

- Completing our Online Customer Contact Form by clicking on the link and selecting the 'other issues and feedback' option. Please ensure that you have your COL number available.
- Telephoning on 0300 123 1837 [Monday to Friday 8:00 am - 8:00 pm, Saturday 9:00 am - 4:00 pm]

6.2 PDF order not received (all or part of)

If you have not received any of your order, within 5 working days, you should contact us by:

- Completing our Online Customer Contact Form by clicking on the link and selecting the 'other issues and feedback' option. Please ensure that you have your COL number available.
- Telephoning on 0300 123 1837 [Monday to Friday 8:00 am - 8:00 pm, Saturday 9:00 am - 4:00 pm]

6.3 PDF received does not match the one ordered

If you receive a PDF that does not match to your order:

- Completing our Online Customer Contact Form by clicking on the link and selecting the 'other issues and feedback' option. Please ensure that you have your COL number available.
- Telephoning on 0300 123 1837 [Monday to Friday 8:00 am - 8:00 pm, Saturday 9:00 am - 4:00 pm]

7. Q&A

Q1. Is a PDF the same as a certificate and can I use a PDF as evidence for official purposes, such as a passport application, or if giving notice of marriage etc.?

No. A PDF is not a certificate. A PDF will have no "evidential" value, and therefore a paper certified copy [certificate] is required for official purposes, e.g. if applying for a passport, driving licence, or where required to give notice of marriage.

Q2. Do PDF's cover Forces or Overseas Records?

No. The legal powers being used to make births and deaths available in PDF format do not extend to overseas and forces registrations.

Q3. Do PDF's cover Adoption Records?

No. The legal powers being used do not extend to adoption records.

Q4. How did you arrive at the fee of £7.00 for PDFs of digitised records?

All our fees are set at levels to recover the costs of providing the service in line with Her Majesty's Treasury guidance. The cost reflects the resources required to provide this service.

Q5. Why are modern records not available as PDFs?

We are still working through the issues of making modern records available online.

Q6. Why aren't modern indexes available yet?

If GRO were to make modern indexes available, considerations would need to be given to public protection, customer service and technical capabilities. There are currently no plans to make modern indexes available.

Q7. Are the PDFs subject to any copyright?

They are covered by Crown Copyright and whilst it is an offence to make a copy of a certificate and pass it off as the original certificate you are welcome to copy, publish or use the information they contain including in the form of a PDF.

However, if they contain information relating to living individuals then the provisions of the General Data Protection Regulation Act 2018, Data Protection Act 2018 and the Human Rights Act 1998 will apply. You should bear that in mind if you were to (for example) publish or display a copy of the image you have received from us if it contained information about living individuals, as you would need their permission to do so.

Q8. Do you have any plans to make historical registration records instantly viewable online, as in Scotland and Northern Ireland?

Searchable historical indexes showing GRO references are online. However there are no current plans to make historical registration records instantly viewable online like The National Records of Scotland or GRO Northern Ireland.

Q9. Why can't I get a PDF from the registration service locally?

Any amendments to include local records would mean a change to primary legislation and there are no plans for this.

Q10. Will I receive a refund if a PDF order is despatched late?

No. Whilst we endeavour to process applications within target, this is only a service aim.

Q11. Will people still be able to order a certificate?

Yes. Certificates will continue to be available as they are now.