

REPORT TO: Safer Halton Policy and Performance Board
DATE: 17 June 2008
REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director, Health and Community
SUBJECT: Nationality Checking Service
WARDS: Boroughwide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 To seek Members' support for the Registration Service to enter into partnership with the Home Office to offer the Nationality Checking Service (NCS).

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That

- (1) comments and suggestions from Members be noted, and**
- (2) the Executive Board be requested to agree to the Registration Service extending its offer of discretionary services to include the Nationality Checking Service, as outlined in this report.**

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 3.1 The Nationality Checking Service (NCS) is a checking and advice service that helps those seeking citizenship make a good quality and complete application which the Home Office's Nationality Group will be able to determine more quickly.
- 3.2 A number of Registration Services already offer the NCS and the arrangement has proved to be a success for all concerned, but demand for the service still exceeds supply and the Home Office are keen to recruit more Council partners. The aim is to create a more cohesive service for citizenship from application, through processing and on to the citizenship ceremony, involving local authorities across the UK and the Nationality Group of the Home Office.
- 3.3 The NCS was introduced due to the large number of flawed applications received by the Home Office, one consequence of which was that the applicant lost the statutory fee for that application. Such fees are presently £655 for a single person, £735 for a couple and £400 for one or more children - hence, from a financial point of view alone, the importance to the applicant of ensuring their application is "right first time" via this checking service is clear.

- 3.4 Further, the service provides the applicant with the confidence that their “checked” application will pass smoothly through the Home Office process and significantly, it enables the applicant to retain all their important documents (such as their passport) rather than post them to the Home Office.
- 3.5 The Border and Immigration Agency of the Home Office benefit as the number of flawed applications is greatly reduced and this raises the efficiency of their operation. This is a further positive for applicants as it reduces the processing time for all applications in the system.
- 3.6 Councils offering NCS are considered to be immigration advisers by the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC), an independent body established by Parliament to regulate immigration advisers. The process to be followed to become an NCS partner is therefore:
- Registration Service Manager to undergo a short initial assessment on the role and function of the OISC
 - Application for the Council’s registration as a Level 1 adviser submitted along with annual fee of £555
 - Council’s NCS marketing plan submitted to the Border and Immigration Agency
 - Registration Officers who will be providing the service attend a one day (free) training session and then pass an on-line Level 1 adviser assessment
- 3.7 The service is aimed at anyone seeking British Nationality and not merely those who are resident in the Borough of Halton. The experience of those Councils already offering the service is that applicants will phone around to secure the earliest NCS appointment that is available, and that applicants are prepared to travel some distance to secure an appointment that suits.
- 3.8 The Council will be able to set and levy fees upon applicants for the provision of the NCS and it is suggested that initial fees should be set as follows:

<u>Type of Application</u>	<u>Fee</u>
An adult submitting a single application	£45
A husband and wife, or civil partners, living together and applying at the same time	£65
A husband and wife, or civil partners, living together and up to two children, all applying at the same time	£75

Additional children on a parent's application, applying at the same time as the rest of the family (see above) each pay an additional fee	£15
Children under the age of 18 who apply separately from their parents each pay an additional fee	£25

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 This proposal, if agreed, will extend the range of discretionary services offered by the Council's Registration Service. This is in-line with the ongoing modernisation of this service nationally.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 In the 2007/2008 financial year, the income target for the Registration Service was almost £97,000. In the coming years, certain of the income streams that make-up this target will reduce or disappear. For example, income from copy certificates will reduce as banks, insurance companies and government departments & agencies are able to access the relevant information electronically. Further, the consolidated payment received from the government for issuing medical cards (for the Department for Health) or for issuing death certificates (for the Department for Work and Pensions) is likely to disappear.
- 5.2 Given the above, if the Registration Service fails to take advantage of alternative sources of income it will have a negative impact on budgets in the coming years.
- 5.3 In the short-term, officers may work additional hours at plain time to cover additional (NCS) appointments. However, the cost of their time will be more than offset by the fees charged. Longer-term, officers will undertake these duties in place of other duties and levy NCS fees in place of other income.

6.0 OTHER IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The service is optional for Councils and applicants. The Council would be using its authority under the well-being powers conferred by Section 2 of the Local Government Act 2000 to offer the service and make an administrative charge to recover its costs.

7.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

- 7.1 **Children and Young People in Halton**
None directly.

7.2 Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton

None directly.

7.3 A Healthy Halton

None directly.

7.4 A Safer Halton

None directly.

7.5 Halton's Urban Renewal

None directly.

8.0 RISK ANALYSIS

- 8.1 The main risk associated with offering the NCS is that if officers make mistakes, resulting in nationality application fees being lost, individuals / families will look to the Council to reimburse them for their loss. The key control measures in place to minimise such a risk are that Registration Officers, for whom accuracy and attention to detail is a key competence, will be delivering the Service and in addition, they will receive training and have to pass an on-line assessment before qualifying as an adviser.

The proposal is not so significant as to require a full risk assessment.

9.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

- 9.1 The recommendations have a positive impact on diversity, as the result of pursuing them will be to support the creation of a more cohesive service for citizenship from application, through processing and on to the citizenship ceremony. It will result in the provision of much needed technical support for individuals and families to streamline their nationality applications. The report is neutral in terms of equality.

10.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

- 10.1 There are no background papers within the meaning of the Act.