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***Developing Land Registration Customer Services
to reflect UK Government Policy***

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Developing Land Registration Customer Services to reflect UK Government Policy

This paper describes how the Land Registry seeks to achieve the highest standards of customer satisfaction for those who depend on its services. It also describes how, over the last twenty years in the United Kingdom, these initiatives form part of the wider government programme to improve the quality of public services.

Chapter 1 below describes the national context, Chapter 2 the developments in the Land Registry

1. CENTRAL GOVERNMENT POLICIES ON IMPROVING PUBLIC SERVICES

Since the early 1980s successive governments have given a high priority to improving public services in the United Kingdom. Governments have realised that citizens expect their elected representatives to develop practical policies which will improve the delivery of the essential services on which they depend.

All political parties now place the continual improvement of public services as a priority policy. The quality of service provided by government departments, municipalities, nationalised bodies and utilities have all come under rigorous scrutiny - by independent regulators, by auditors but also by consumer groups, the media and not least by citizens. Actual or perceived failure in the delivery of public services is quickly identified and newsworthy. The standing of the government will be substantially reflected in the citizen's perception of its success in improving public services.

Margaret Thatcher's Government 1979 -1990

In the early 1980s, as part of the quest for improvement, the then government introduced the most searching examination of public sector activities. It applied a series of tests to every organisation. The underlying policy was to retain in the public sector only those activities which, for reasons of policy or practicality, could only be undertaken by the public sector. Those organisations that remained in the public sector, and which delivered services directly to the citizen, would adopt the best of private sector management practices. They would be set challenging performance targets. The objective was to develop cost effective services responsive to public need.

In 1989 as part of the policy for '*Improving Public Sector Management*', all government departments, including the Land Registry, were subject to a 'Scrutiny' under the 'Next Steps' programme. These scrutinies examined the options of:

- abolition,
- full or partial privatisation,
- contracting-out specific activities, or
- the establishment of an independent but public sector 'Executive Agency'.

The government decided that the first two of these options, abolition or full or partial privatisation, were not appropriate for the Land Registry. This decision recognised the unique role of the Land Registry as a statutory body which had to operate free from any conflicts of interests dealing equally with the land and property rights of citizens, commercial enterprises, financial institutions, the Crown and government itself.

It was decided that some functions within the Registry could be contracted out to private suppliers. These were in the areas of computing support, surveying and map supply, printing, security, cleaning, catering etc: areas where, hitherto, the Land Registry employed its own staff. The Government decided that the Land Registry, whilst retaining its status as a separate Department of the Lord Chancellor (the Minister of Justice), would be established as an Executive Agency of Government.

Executive Agencies (of which there are now over 100 in government) enjoy substantial delegated powers of management and financial control. But they are required to operate to testing and improving annual targets. These relate not only to cost and productivity but, importantly, in terms of customer service. These include specific measurable targets on speed and quality of service. Importantly the targets set and the results achieved are published regularly – in the customer enquiry areas of each local office but also in the published annual report of the Agency which is submitted to the Minister and presented in Parliament.

John Major's Government 1990-97

In 1991 the new government renewed the emphasis on improving customer service. It published a 'White Paper' (a policy paper anticipating new legislation) on the '*Citizen's Charter*'. Its aim was to further promote the efficient delivery of public services. The Prime Minister declared that:

'For each public service we will select the most effective means of delivering the best. For each service the techniques will be different. But the Citizen's Charter will have one common aim - achieving the highest possible standards of performance for those who rely on public services in this country'.

Under this policy all public sector organisations produced a published '*Statement of Charter Standards*'. These set out clearly what each organisation would seek to achieve in terms of best customer service. The centrepiece of the government's policy was the introduction of the '*Chartermark*' award. Any public sector body was able to compete for the Chartermark. This was awarded only after the most rigorous and independent examination of its achievements in delivering quality public services. Such independent examination included evaluation of the opinions of users. The Land Registry has been awarded the Chartermark on each of the four occasions on which it has been possible - one of very few organisations to have achieved that result.

Tony Blair's Government 1997 -2002

The present Government has introduced a range of further initiatives directed at sustaining earlier progress and further improving public service delivery in the United Kingdom. Prominent among these initiatives is the '*Service First – the new Charter Programme*'. This identified nine '*Principles of Public Service Delivery*' for Central Government – as follows:

- Set Standards of Service
Set clear standards of service that users can expect; monitor and review performance; and publish the results, following independent validation wherever possible
- Be Open and Provide Full information
Be open and communicate easily and effectively in plain language, to help people using public services; and provide full information about services, their cost and how well they perform
- Consult and Involve
Consult and involve present and potential users of public services, as well as those who work in them; and use their views to improve the service provided
- Encourage Access and Promotion of Choice
Make services easily available to everyone who needs them, including using technology to the full and offering choice wherever possible
- Treat All Fairly
Treat all people fairly; respect their privacy and dignity; be helpful and courteous; and pay particular attention to those with special needs
- Put Things Right When They Go Wrong
Put things right quickly and effectively; learn from complaints; and have a clear well publicised and easy-to-use complaints procedures, with independent review wherever possible
- Use Resources Effectively
Use resources effectively to provide best value for taxpayers and users
- Innovate and Improve
Always look for ways to improve the services and facilities offered
- Work with Other Providers
Work with other providers to ensure that services are simple to use, effective and co-ordinated, and deliver a better service to the user.

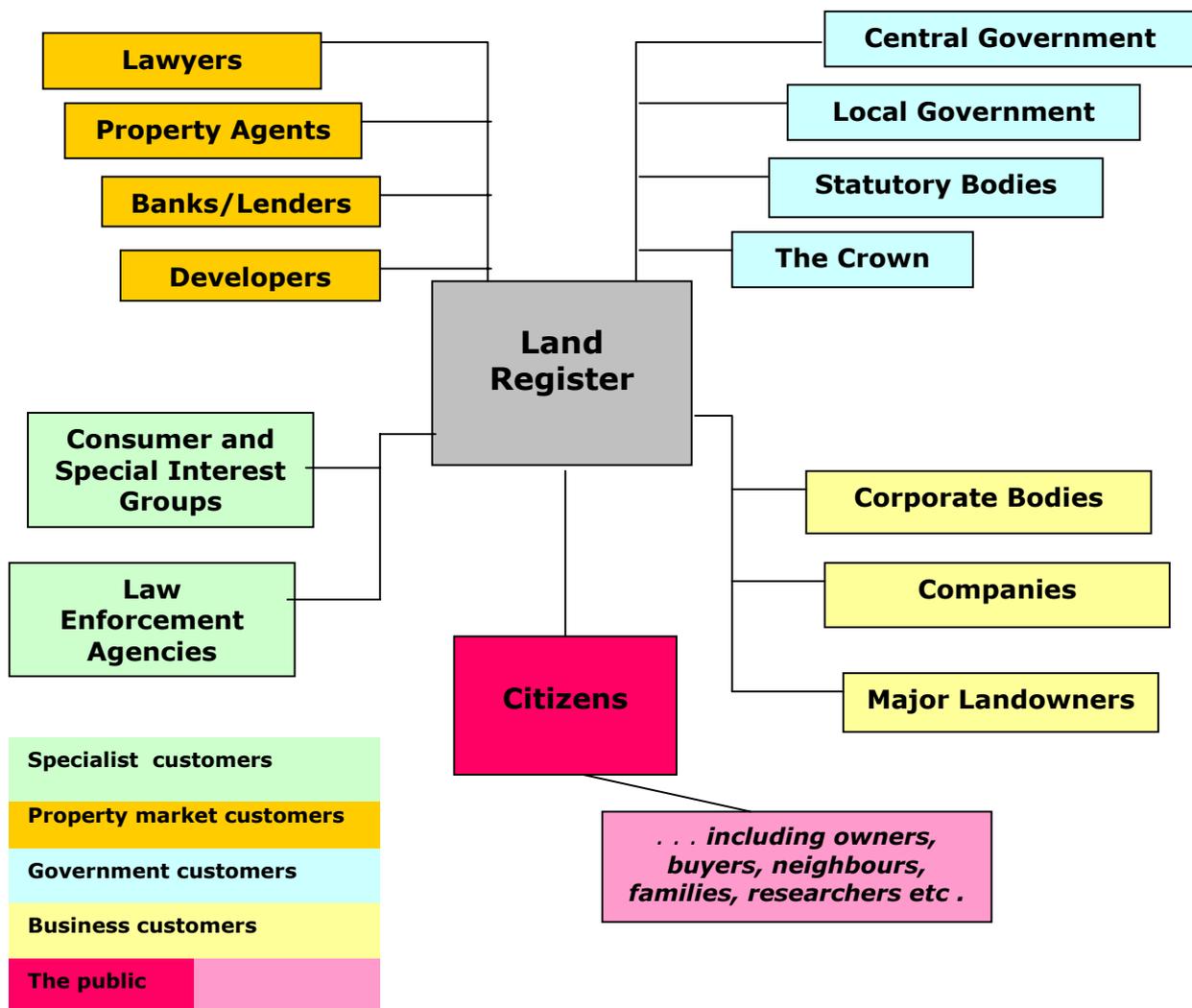
These are the principles on which public service delivery standards are based and against which performance is measured.

2. DELIVERING QUALITY LAND REGISTRATION SERVICES TO CUSTOMERS IN ENGLAND AND WALES

Who are the Land Registry's customers ?

Although the main customers of the Land Registry are those active in the property and mortgage markets a significant proportion of the enquiries and land information services provided are not associated with property transactions. Under the Land Registration Acts the land register is open to public inspection and anyone, on payment of a small fee, can obtain copies of any register and its title plan for any registered property.

The chart below illustrates the main customers of the Land Registry's services:



Like land registration systems elsewhere HM Land Registry exists to provide security of tenure and guarantees for those with rights over land. Its information and registration systems are the basis on which the land and mortgage markets can function with confidence. In a country with a population of 54 million people it is the largest land

information provider handling, in 2000-01, over 9.7 million searches, enquiries and requests for copy documents and registering over 3.4 million property transactions.

The Land Registry's management objective is to deliver improving quality of service to its customers. The challenge, as with any organisation, is to maintain high quality services at an acceptable cost. As a monopoly service this places a special obligation on the organisation to compete with its own achieved performances of previous years, but also to benchmark its performance against any other organisation which delivers information services so that constructive and informative comparisons can be made and best practice adopted.

Performance Measurement

In order to assess and understand what is actually being achieved by the organisation a range of performance measures are necessary. These include measures of productivity, cost efficiency, and the quality of service delivered to the public both in terms of accuracy and speed of service. But for these to be objective the internally measured results, for instance on the speed at which applications for registration are completed, must be coupled with feedback directly from customers through an independently managed customer consultation process.

The Nine Principles as the basis for Customer Service Policies

The '*Nine Principles of Public Service Delivery*' referred to above, which form the basis of the present Government's policy, fit very well with the Land Registry's approach, as follows:

Principle 1 Set Standards of Service

'Set clear standards of service that users can expect;

monitor and review performance; and publish the results, following independent validation wherever possible'

In the early 1970s, before the major central initiatives to introduce benchmarking in the government service, the Land Registry developed a series of performance measures to operate across its regional organisation. Productivity, Cost Effectiveness, Speed of Service and Accuracy were all measured to enable the organisation to better manage its resources, to identify its successes and any weaknesses.

These measures have been developed and now form the basis of the Registry's well-established internal performance measurement systems.

The range of performance measures, apply throughout the organisation; for the Agency as a whole, for individual regional offices and for the district teams within the regional offices.

The Land Registry (as with other Agencies of Government) is set annual targets by its Minister based on these developed performance measures. Results achieved against target are reported annually to Parliament. Targets and results are also displayed in public areas of the Land Registry offices so that customers are aware of what to expect and how the Registry is succeeding in meeting its objectives. Importantly, a component of the pay of the staff of the Registry depends on the results achieved against target.

Finding valid comparators outside the Land Registry to enable effective external assessment of the performance is not easy so three main approaches are adopted to ensure that the search for improvement is sustained and understood:

- (a) *Measurement through time* – comparing results achieved progressively year-on-year and ensuring that testing and improving targets are set for the organisation. These apply for the whole Agency, for each district office and for each team, competing with its own previous results
- (b) *Comparing results between offices* – publishing monthly and year-to-date league tables so that there is a wide understanding of performance throughout the organisation. This highlights best practice and good management so that the least successful can seek to meet the standards of the best.
- (c) *Customer surveys* – independently conducted annual surveys of customers enables the Registry to understand how and where those who depend on its services see the need for improvements.

Principle 2 'Be Open and Provide Full information'

'Be open and communicate easily and effectively in plain language, to help people using public services: and provide full information about services, their cost and how well they perform'

The Land Registry publishes a wide range of free explanatory and practice leaflets to enable users, whether professionals or citizens, to understand the procedures necessary for dealing with the Land Registry. These are written in plain language with clear illustrations. Every local office has a customer enquiry centre which can provide assistance to those who need it and at which many applications can be dealt with. Information about targets, performance achieved and fees for services are displayed in all customer enquiry centres. All offices have a telephone enquiry centre which will answer queries made by callers. All advisory publications and many Forms are available for free download on the Land Registry web site at <http://www.landreg.gov.uk/> The site also offers a 'Frequently Asked Questions' page to assist users.

Principle 3 'Consult and Involve'

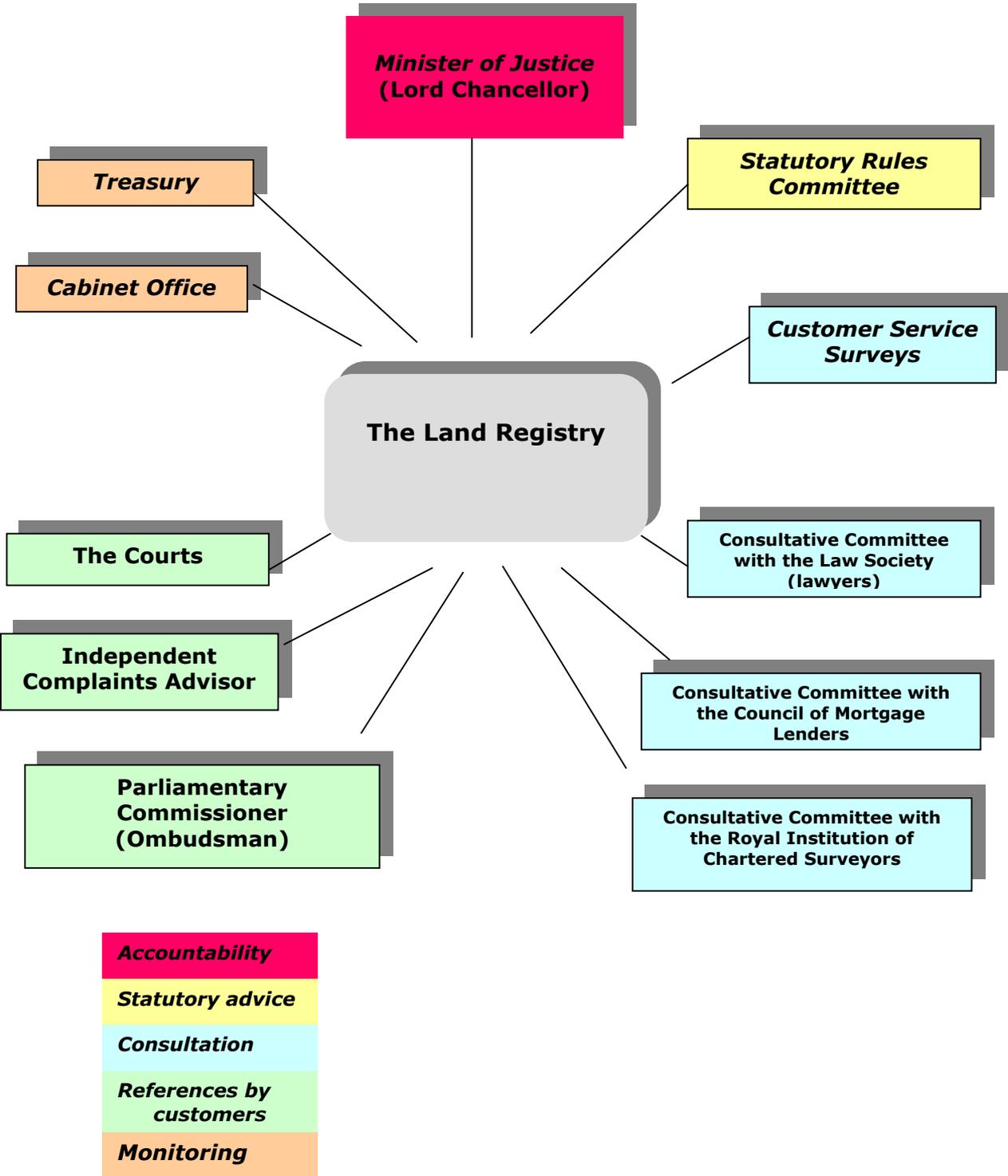
'Consult and involve present and potential users of public services, as well as those who work in them; and use their views to improve the service provided'

For over ten years the Land Registry has conducted an annual customer survey. Initially managed directly by the Registry in more recent years it has been managed independently by specialist experts. Based on questionnaires sent out with completed applications this provides a substantial sample of user assessment. The Registry achieved a 99% satisfaction rating on the last study. Feedback is further invited through monthly sample satisfaction surveys, user panels and discussion groups.

The Registry conducts periodic Staff Surveys to seek the views of its employees on all aspects of the management, organisation and procedures of the office. A staff suggestions scheme provides further opportunity for staff to make proposals as does the facility to email directly to senior management on any topic.

Three Joint Advisory Committees (with the Law Society, the Council of Mortgage Lenders and the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors) ensure that the Land Registry is able to consult on new initiatives where their contribution will assist in the design of new developments and practice. Regular tours of the Land Registry for user groups also ensure that close liaison is maintained.

The following chart indicates those bodies and stakeholders with which the Registry maintains the closest consultative and co-operative relationships and which contribute to and influence the Registry's policies and development:



Principle 4 'Encourage Access and Promotion of Choice'

'Make services easily available to everyone who needs them, including using technology to the full, and offering choice wherever possible

The Land Registry seeks to provide the widest choice in the way in which customers can conduct business and make enquiries. Services are available through the post, fax, telephone, and by personal attendance and in some cases through the Web or by email. In addition the Registry provides an on-line service 'Land Registry Direct'. Customers using this service can access on-line over 18 million computerised registers and title plans for individual properties making official searches and taking official copies. Fees are debited automatically to the customer's credit account. Account holders can also use the Registry's Telephone Services to obtain information about an individual land register and to order postal copies. In the year 2000-01 the Land Registry received and processed over 9.7 million requests for searches or copy documents and over 5.0 million telephone and enquiry services. At the Registry's Customer Service Centres in local offices facilities exist for those who customers who are disabled or are hard of hearing or for those who do not speak English.

Principle 5 'Treat All Fairly'

'Treat all people fairly; respect their privacy and dignity; be helpful and courteous; and pay particular attention to those with special needs'

There is no more important feature of any land registration system than that its management and operation is, and is seen to be, impartial and free from conflicts of interest. Confidence in the decision making of the Registry officials and trust in the land register as the authoritative and guaranteed record of land rights is vital. It is the foundation of a system of secure tenure and makes possible confident dealings in the land and mortgage markets.

The Land Registry deals with the property rights of citizens, commercial enterprises, financial and other institutions, local and central government and the Crown. Any one transaction can involve two or more of these groups. All receive the same impartial consideration. All will pay fees for the services received. The Registry will assist those who wish to obtain information or make applications for registration. Where, for whatever reason, an applicant has difficulty in understanding procedures the Registry will give every assistance. The Registry will however take great care that its assistance could not later be construed by a third party or neighbour to have given one side in a dispute a favourable advantage. Where it seems that an enquirer should seek independent professional advice the Registry would recommend such action.

Principle 6. 'Put Things Right When They Go Wrong'

'Put things right quickly and effectively; learn from complaints; and have a clear well publicised, and easy-to-use complaints procedures, with independent review wherever possible'

There are a range of mechanisms in place to ensure that customers are able to have their complaints dealt with satisfactorily.

On each completed registration application customers are invited to check that they are satisfied with the result and to complain if they are not. Whenever a complaint or query is raised concerning the work of the Registry it is acknowledged promptly and dealt with speedily. The Registry strives to

avoid mistakes, through its training, its internal checking and its validation procedures. Each local office will record the number and nature of complaints or errors so that any trend can be observed and remedial action taken. 'Error Rates' (the percentage incidence of recorded errors) are tracked for each office and for each team within each office.

Each office has a Customer Services Manager and he or she is available by Freephone. In 1997 an 'Independent Complaints Reviewer' was appointed to conduct impartial investigations for customers who are dissatisfied with the service they have received from the Land Registry or are not content with the normal complaints procedure. The Reviewer is able to make an ex gratia payment where appropriate and to recommend changes to the Registry's procedures. Each year the Reviewer publishes a Report on the outcome of the reviews conducted.

If in the exceptional case a customer believes that the Land Registry (as a Government department) is guilty of maladministration it can, through their Member of Parliament, refer a complaint to the Parliamentary Commissioner (the Ombudsman).

Provisions exist under the land registration laws for a person who believes he or she has suffered loss as a result of an error or omission in a register to seek rectification of the title and/or indemnity. The Chief Land Registrar has powers to make unlimited financial payment.

Principle 7. 'Use Resources Effectively'

'Use resources effectively to provide best value for taxpayers and users'

The Land Registry's performance measurement system, referred to above, provides the basis for allocating, managing and monitoring staff and other resources required to process the large volumes of applications received each year. Each local office and each team within an office has its own set of targets against which its performance is measured. Such a system provides a visible basis for decision making, enabling any problem areas and best practice to be identified. Staff are aware of the results they are achieving and good results are rewarded by bonuses at the year-end. The Chief Land Registrar's pay is determined in part by the results achieved by the Land Registry in meeting its targets.

Vocational and Management training are tailored to equip the staff with the skills and specialist expertise needed to perform successfully. In 2000 a new distance-learning course was launched in Land Registration Law and Practice offering staff both a one year foundation course and a two year course to degree level standard.

The Land Registry has progressively developed its use of computing. It now provides the most active on-line land information service in the country built around its computerised register and mapping records. Internal procedures for updating registers have contributed substantially to the increases in productivity, the reductions in cost and the improvements in service that have been achieved.

Under its Statute the Land Registry does not seek to make any financial profit; its aim being to cover all its running and investment costs from fees paid by its customers. Because it has met its continually improving financial targets the Registry has been able to progressively reduce fees to customers over the last ten years.

Principle 8. 'Innovate and Improve'

'Always look for ways to improve the services and facilities offered'

In its programme to further improve and develop its services the Land Registry has actively consulted with professional users through its Advisory Committees and with individual customers through its customer surveys. It has also undertaken a series of public consultation exercises on particular topics. These have include consultations on:

- Completing the Land Register for England and Wales,
- Opening the land register to public inspection.
- Recording 'Price Paid information on the land register
- Developing 'Land Registration in the 21st Century'
- The Government's Quinquennial Review of the Land Registry
- New Land Registration legislation
- The development of Electronic Conveyancing

The outcome of all these consultations has influenced the Registry's continuing programme of improvements. Most notably, in May this year, the government announced a ten-year development and investment programme for the Land Registry. Based on a new Land Registration Act the computerised land register will become the centrepiece to the future on-line land transfer system for England and Wales. The Land Registry will lead and work with other providers, including Real Estate Agents, Property Lawyers and Banks to develop a co-ordinated system which will transform and simplify the way the property and mortgage markets function.

Among a number of another initiatives of the last decade the Registry publishes quarterly the most authoritative 'Property Price Report'. This gives details by property type, of the volume of sales and the average property prices paid by buyers in England and Wales nationally, by region, by individual municipality and by postal area.

Principle 9. 'Work with Other Providers'

'Work with other providers to ensure that services are simple to use, effective and co-ordinated, and deliver a better service to the user'.

The Registry pioneered the development of the National Land Information Service (NLIS) whereby customers can access on-line the computerised land information held by a number of public agencies.

The NLIS is a practical example of inter-agency co-ordination between national public sector land agencies. Moreover the delivery of the service depends in part on the channels of access for users being provided by private sector companies. In co-operation with others, the Land Registry financed, and its Computer Division developed, the prototype system which enabled access to live information held by a number of key organisations.

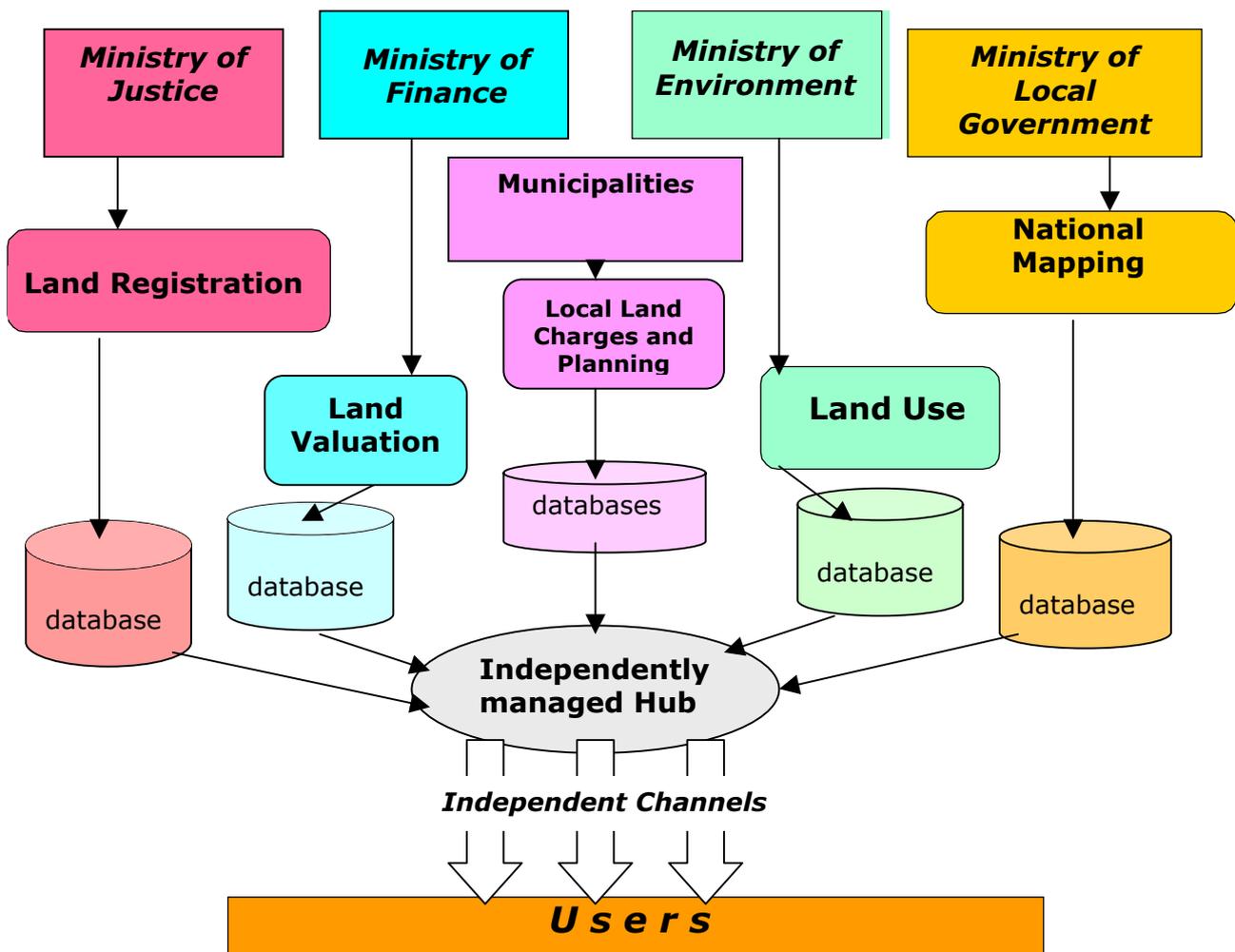
NLIS uses the new technologies to bring together online, and to make available via one portal, all information on particular land and property titles likely to be of interest to intending purchasers and to others. The information includes not just Land Registry information but also information from municipalities on planning applications and other matters, information from the Valuation Office on

taxable land values, and relevant information from other sources, cross referenced to topographical and address information held by the Ordnance Survey.

The National Land Information Service (NLIS) is now a developing operational system providing live land information to many users. As municipalities progressively apply unique property reference numbers to the properties in their areas so increasingly the coverage of the NLIS is extending.

The chart below indicates the structure. The responsible agencies have complete control over the maintenance and accuracy of their land information records. The 'Independently Managed Hub', run by a private sector partner, provides the gateway through which the three contracted independent channel companies can provide value added on-line land information services to customers.

National Land Information Service



The European Land Information Service (EULIS)

Building on its NLIS initiative the Land Registry is one of the eight countries that are founder members of a new initiative to establish a European Land Information Service.

Among the objectives of the initiative is to improve access to, and expand the use of, public sector information about land throughout Europe. The EULIS initiative will address those issues which at present may be a barrier to the free interchange of land information. By so doing the way will be cleared for developing the cross European property and mortgage markets for the benefit of the citizens.

Summary

This paper has described the range of customer initiatives by Her Majesty's Land Registry over recent years and the developments planned for the future. These customer service initiatives have reflected the high-level policies of the United Kingdom government for improving public services not least the increasing emphasis and potential of harnessing electronic processing and delivery. E commerce and e conveyancing services will enhance the quest to constantly improve access, speed, quality and accuracy. Delivering good customer service depends on understanding customer expectations and managing resources and priorities to meet those expectations.

The Registry will be pleased to provide any further information to those who wish to enquire. Much information is available on the Registry's Website:
<http://www.landreg.gov.uk/>

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