

## Chapter 9

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Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism

## 9.1 The Irish Genealogical Project

### Background

The Irish Genealogical Project (the Project) was established in 1988. Its objective was to facilitate

- The compilation of a comprehensive and accurate computerised database for all the major genealogical records available in Ireland
- The implementation of a system for marketing and delivery of reliable family history research.

In 1996 I carried out a value-for-money examination of the project and reported my findings to Dáil Éireann.<sup>12</sup>

In 1997 the responsibility for steering the Project was assigned to a limited company, Irish Genealogy Limited (IGL), a company limited by guarantee whose mission is to deliver on the objectives of the project. Up to that point a Committee, serviced by the Department of the Taoiseach, had responsibility for its co-ordination. IGL is currently supervised by the Department of Arts, Sports and Tourism (the Department). From establishment in 1997 to 31 December 2004, IGL received grants totalling €2.5 million from its funding Department.

The Project also benefits from State aid in the form of

- Assistance by way of FÁS trainees and staff in the inputting of records to databases in the genealogy centres around the country. FÁS has estimated that the value of its assistance since 1988 up to 31 December 2004 has been in the order of €32.2 million
- Some assistance from Local Authorities, which varies in form from area to area.

At the commencement of the Project there were 35 genealogy centres throughout the island of Ireland recording and collating records of various types.

IGL has assisted centres from 2001 onwards by providing resources to replace obsolete IT systems with modern server based systems on a common software platform. The upgrade of the IT systems is to be completed in 2005.

### Genealogical Records and Research

The original concept of a computerised database called for the recording of an estimated 28 million records drawn from Church and Civil records, the 1901 and 1911 Censuses, Griffith's Valuation and Tithe Applotment Books.

It was planned that a Central Signposting Index (the Index) would be created utilising data fields drawn from the database records. The Index would be the first point of contact for an individual seeking family

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<sup>12</sup> Report No. 14 The Irish Genealogical Project — December 1996

records through using the Internet. The Index would signal the existence of the records and guide the individual, through a hyperlink, to the genealogy centre with the required detailed records.

While the business plan of IGL for 2005 – 2007 aims to have 90% of Church records completed by the end of 2007 it is accepted by the main project stakeholders that at the current rate of progress on the inputting of Church records onto the databases in the centres it could take over 20 years to complete the recording.

In some respects the project has been overtaken by events. Non-Church records are now available directly from a variety of sources. IGL considers that the centres should focus on church records only and has opened discussions with FÁS on this matter. Table 21 sets out the position in regard to non-Church records data.

**Table 21 Non-Church Records**

<b>Record Type</b>	<b>Agent/Owner</b>	<b>Availability</b>
Tithe Applotment Books	Ulster Historical Foundation	The entire record is available to members of the public on compact disks
Griffith Valuation	National Library and an English Private Company	Access is from National Library without charge and from the company via the Internet for a fee
1901 & 1911 Census	National Archives and the National Archives of Canada	Access to the records in the National Archives is without charge. A project to digitise the records is being undertaken and access will be provided on the Internet
Civil Records of births, marriages and deaths	General Register Office	Access to the records in General Register Office. The records have been digitised but are not accessible through the Internet

## **Project Stakeholders**

### **Irish Genealogy Limited**

IGL co-ordinates the project and it has a staff of three — Chief Executive Officer, an IT Manager and a Project Administrator.

The Board consists of 15 Directors as follows

- 3 appointees of the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism
- 3 appointees of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Northern Ireland)
- 2 appointees of the Association of Professional Genealogists in Ireland
- 1 appointee of the Association of Ulster Genealogists and Record Agents
- 5 appointees of the Irish Family History Foundation.
- The Chief Executive Officer is an *ex-officio* member.

The following bodies nominate observers to the Board who attend and contribute to Board meetings

- FÁS, The National Archives Office, Fáilte Ireland, Northern Ireland Tourist Board, National Library, General Register Office (GRO), Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism.

## **Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism**

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The Department requires IGL to submit periodic business plans.

### **Irish Family History Foundation (IFHF)**

The IFHF represents 28 of the 35 genealogy centres throughout the island of Ireland.

The stated objectives of the IFHF are

- The completion of the computerisation of the Church records by the centres throughout the island.
- The provision of genealogical research services through the centres on a commercial basis.

### **Association of Professional Genealogists in Ireland**

The APGI represents individual genealogists who provide family history research services on a commission basis. The APGI functions as a regulatory body to set standards for the conduct of genealogical research by its members and to protect the interest of its clients.

### **Association of Ulster Genealogists and Record Agents**

AUGRA is a representative association of professional genealogists operating in Northern Ireland.

### **General Register Office**

The GRO has custody of all civil records of births, marriages and deaths, which were registered since registration began in 1845. The GRO facilitates genealogical research, consistent with carrying out its main function of maintaining the public records.

### **National Archives**

The primary function of the National Archives is to preserve public records and make them available to the general public.

### **Foras Áiseanna Saothair**

In the Republic of Ireland FÁS supports the centres through the provision of staff to supervise trainees inputting records and contributes to overhead costs. The centres operating in the Republic of Ireland are dependent on FÁS training programmes for their staff. FÁS have stated that continued support cannot be guaranteed in the long term.

## **Ownership of Data and Access to Records**

The position in regard to the ownership and custody of the records and databases derived from them is understood to be as follows

- The ownership of the Church records vests in their original custodians, the relevant Church authorities. The use of the information drawn from the original records for genealogical research purposes is provided for in a set of agreements between the owners and the centres affiliated to the

IFHF and a set of agreements between the owners and those centres in the Republic that are not members of the IFHF

- There is also a set of agreements in place between the owners of the centres and the IFHF whereby the records will be placed in the custody of the IFHF (subject to such legal agreements as may apply to the sources in question) in the event of a centre closing its business.
- IGL maintains the Index. A legal agreement with IFHF covers the arrangements for transfer of data from the centres for inclusion on the Index. The agreement provides that the IFHF, from June 2002, will forward Church records for a period of ten years for inclusion on the Index. It is agreed that while IGL will have exclusive access to the Index the custodian of the records on the Index will be IFHF on behalf of its members.

## Current Issues

In the course of my audits of IGL I noted a number of issues of management and co-ordination which impact on the successful completion of the Project and on the capacity of the stakeholders to maximise genealogy tourism.

- There is disagreement between the stakeholders on whether to prioritise the finalisation of the databases of Church records before the creation of the Index and a question of how data input might best be carried out in order to complete the database within a reasonable time.
- Centres closed *i.e.* Limerick, Carlow, Tipperary North (now reopened) and Kerry (now reopened) when FÁS or local authority support is withdrawn. The critical business continuity risk is the current business model which relies on this type of support to sustain the centres.

## Completion of the Databases

Up to the 31 December 2004 no funding was provided by IGL to assist in the completion of the databases or for administration of the centres. Moneys were made available to them, however, for IT systems upgrade, including equipment, staff training and changeover support and marketing supports including product development and sales.

Although 19 of the centres have fully completed the inputting of information from religious records the IFHF has expressed dissatisfaction with the rate of progress on the inputting of Church records, which they put at around 1% per annum. They are also unhappy with the IGL focus on completion of the Index before all data is input on the databases. The IFHF believes that the completion of the databases in the genealogy centres should be the primary focus of IGL.

The IFHF has pointed out in a letter of May 2005 which it sent to IGL that

- The recording of new data had virtually stagnated in the past six years
- The Index appears to be a big database due to the inclusion of records other than those on births, marriages and deaths and remains in a partially completed state and was unlikely ever to be completed.

Currently, IGL is considering assisting in the recording of the religious records through a funded programme and, for the first time in 2005, €75,000 will be made available for commercial inputting of records.

In 2000 it was estimated for IGL that the commercial completion of the inputting of Church records on the databases at that time would have cost approximately €3.43 million.

However, since February 2005 the situation has become further complicated because the IFHF has withdrawn its support of the Project and has advised its members not to forward any further records for inclusion on the Index; as a result the provision of information for the Index ceased from that time.

The IFHF directors resigned from the IGL Board in February 2005.

### Business Continuity

Currently, two of the 35 genealogical centres are closed — Carlow and Limerick. The feasibility of reopening these centres is being examined.

In February 2005 consultants reporting to IGL on the operating structure and viability of the centres, noted that the challenge for the Project is to move from the production of the databases to product development and marketing. The long-term sustainability of the Project depends on managing this change.

The report also emphasised that on the resource side one of the main sources of funding was from FÁS and that this funding was being used to support the operational viability of the centres. FÁS have indicated that its long-term support cannot be guaranteed and as a result of this there is a threat to the viability of some of the centres.

The review outlined a number of strategic options to make the centres sustainable. These included

- The negotiation of a long term relationship with FÁS
- Failing this, the sourcing of sponsorship from another body
- Delivery of a streamlined genealogy service through different business models.

The advent of the Internet and changes in tourism trends appear to have also impacted on the original objective of promoting roots tourism. A report prepared for IGL indicates a downward trend in overseas participation in genealogy tourism between 1999 and 2003. Table 22 sets out this trend.

**Table 22 Trend in Overseas Genealogy Tourism 1999-2003**

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003 <sup>13</sup>
Visitors	107,000	118,000	88,000	36,000	53,000
Holidaymakers	102,000	102,000	81,000	29,000	47,000

### Views of the Department

In view of the slow progress in completing the project, which commenced some 17 years ago I sought the Accounting Officer's views.

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<sup>13</sup> 2003 figures are provisional

**What targets had been established for the completion of the databases and the Index?**

He informed me that as regards Church Records, the present policy of IGL is to focus exclusively on the completion of indexing and inputting of Church records of baptisms (births) and marriages prior to 1900. IGL is now of the view that the construction of databases for non-church records is more appropriate to other bodies including the National Archives, National Library of Ireland and General Register Office. The network of 33 genealogy centres some 27 of which are affiliated to the IFHF, is considered by IGL to be an appropriate mechanism for processing and indexing of local church records. The project is by its nature labour-intensive and painstaking. Of the total current estimate of 13.7 million church records, some 10.5 million (76%) have been indexed and inputted to the computerised database. The bulk of the remaining 3.2 million records require to be indexed and inputted. He noted that 19 of the 33 county-based genealogy centres have inputted 100% of their church records. Work in the centres, carried out in the main by FÁS trainees, is well supervised and has been executed to an acceptable standard with an error rate of just 1.8% (against a norm of 3%).

He pointed out that in recent times, inputting of records has slowed, the prime reason for which is a reduction (from 337 to 213) in the number and profile of FÁS trainees available to carry out the inputting task. This has resulted in records being indexed/input at a rate of just 1% per annum. This would require 20-25 years to complete the inputting of the 3.2 million church records outstanding. IGL is now contemplating completing the task mainly on a commercial basis together with some inputting by volunteers. In 2004, IGL estimated that if funding of the order €150,000 per annum were available and augmented by local area funding, some 90% of records could be indexed/input by end 2007. To enable commencement of commercial inputting, IGL has allocated €75,000 for this purpose in 2005.

As regards the Index, the Accounting Officer informed me that currently some 2.8 million church records in 11 counties can be accessed through the Index. The IGL target is to have some 10 million records on the Index by the end of 2007. He stressed that unlike other genealogy websites, the IGL website encourages customers to take the next step and visit the area of their ancestors, thereby generating tourism revenue especially in rural areas.

Since its inception, there have been some 250,000 individual searches of the Index database by customers, resulting in IGL referring 1700 firm marketing leads to the genealogy centres. In addition, it can be surmised that interest in visiting Ireland will have been stimulated.

**Whether the project approach continues to be a viable mechanism for achieving those targets and delivering on the original objectives and if so how business continuity risks will be managed?**

He informed me that it is the view of the Board of IGL that the county-based genealogy centre delivery system continues to be a workable concept but that a business model for future sustainability needs to be put in place. IGL has commissioned consultants who have proposed a range of business models which are currently under consideration by the Board. These include the negotiation of a long-term linkage with FÁS or with Local Authorities.

He added that long-standing differences of opinion on the delivery of the project between IGL and the IFHF, as major stakeholders, have been a difficulty in pushing for completion. However, he felt that the business risk is minimised to the extent that, of the 3.2 million church records outstanding, some 2 million can be inputted by centres which are not affiliated to IFHF.

The Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism met with the IGL Board in June 2005 and requested them to revert to him as soon as possible with a sustainable business plan for the project and to take steps to have all matters in dispute between IGL and IFHF resolved without delay.

**Whether the project structure continues to be suitable to the management of the network of relationships both public and private involved in the delivery of the service?**

The Accounting Officer stated that IGL is a conglomerate of public and private stakeholders. While this structure brings a broad range of relevant genealogical experience to the deliberations of IGL, there is an onus on Board Members, as conveyed to them recently by the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism, to maintain a coherent focus on the objectives of the project.

At the invitation of the Chair of IGL, a meeting between IFHF and IGL was held on 14 July 2005 at Limerick to discuss existing difficulties with a view to reaching an amicable settlement on all issues currently in dispute. Both accepted the need for working in co-operation and a further meeting to establish a bilateral arrangement is scheduled for September. Following this, IGL will provide a supplementary business plan focused on completion of the project within a specified timeframe.

**How the completion of the recording of the Church records and compilation of the Central Signposting Index will be effected from this point onwards and in particular how data input will be organised, controlled and resourced?**

IGL has advised that there are three elements to the completion of indexing of the church records. The existing FÁS scheme, though depleted, together with a volunteer input will make some inroads. However, indexing and inputting on a commercial basis will be essential to clear the bulk of the outstanding records. The allocation by IGL of new computer equipment to replace the obsolete equipment at the centres affiliated to IFHF was conditional on those centres facilitating the transfer of computerised records to the Central Signposting Index. In itself, linking the computerised records to the Index is largely a technical operation which can be progressed rapidly on the basis of provision of complete data from the centres, in particular the IFHF-affiliated centres. It is expected that these issues will be addressed in more detail at the forthcoming meeting.

**What progress had been achieved in gaining access to non-church records on behalf of the network of Genealogy centres?**

The Accounting Officer informed me that IGL has advised that some 7.2 million non-church records have been indexed by the genealogy centres on an ad-hoc basis mainly from local health boards. It is current IGL policy that only church records should be indexed and IGL maintains that indexing/inputting of non-church records is a matter inter alia for the General Register Office, the National Archives and the National Library. Since publication of the Value for Money Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General in 1996, an examination of the project in 1999 was undertaken by the then Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands. That report was positive on the future viability of the project. In the main, IGL has endeavoured to implement the recommendations of the Comptroller and Auditor General's Report.

In addition, IGL itself has commissioned consultancy advice on genealogy tourism and on the business models which might be appropriate to promote a sustainable future for the county-based genealogy centres.

Notwithstanding that IGL is a private company, senior management in the Cultural Institutions Unit of the Department will continue to attend IGL Board meetings.

The Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism has asked the Board of IGL to revert to him with a sustainable business plan for completion of the project. On receipt of this plan, the Minister will then decide on whether or not to commission a separate independent consultancy evaluation of the project.

### **IGL views on Progression of the Project**

The key challenges identified by IGL are the completion of the index/input of church records; the sustainability of the local genealogy centres; the marketing of the genealogy project and the development of genealogy tourism; and to ensure that the cultural and peace and reconciliation dimensions are delivered.

The project of indexing and inputting some 10.5 million church records on a modern database and providing a Central Signposting Index access facility for some 2.8 million church and non-church records has been executed for a relatively modest financial outlay. In the period 1998 to 2004, Departmental grants amounted to €2,104,880 (Excluding FÁS funding of its trainees). In addition, some €400,000 has been provided under the PEACE I and PEACE II programmes. The evaluator on behalf of the EU in relation to the earlier expenditure commented *inter alia* that "The IGL project has proven to be an ideal project to seize opportunities arising from the peace process as well as integrating steps that can help pave the way for reconciliation..... there are no concerns in relation to the financial management of the project."

Having regard to the change in relation to the availability of FÁS trainees, IGL believes that indexing/inputting of data on a commercial basis is necessary to complete the project.

IGL foresees that the completed project with a fully implemented Central Signposting Index will be an excellent tool for assisting development of the fledgling genealogy tourism product.

### **Other Accounting Officer comments**

The Accounting Officer stated that while it is clearly a matter of concern that delivery of the Project is taking far longer than anticipated in 1988, it is reasonable to note that the project has been overtaken by events in some respects. It is also clearly the case that the resource implications of the project were significantly underestimated.

The Accounting Officer concluded by stating that the Board of IGL has now been left in no doubt that if the project is to be funded further, there must be a clear business strategy for completion in accordance with value for money principles.

### **FÁS comments**

I also asked FÁS to comment on the sustainability of the present arrangements taking account of any changes in the structure of the trainee population in recent years and the policy priorities of FÁS.

The Director General informed me that FÁS funds heritage centres on the basis of the quality of the training that they provide for the unemployed person. He pointed out that while much change has taken place in the economy and the jobs market, some communities and individuals have not progressed at the rate of their contemporaries. Therefore, FÁS continues to provide a range of supports to enable unemployed job seekers access and progress within the labour market. The partnership between FÁS, its sponsors and the community results in FÁS — with a modest outlay in training allowances that goes directly to the trainees, a supervisory grant and a small contribution to administration costs — being able to provide good quality training for unemployed persons for whom it would otherwise be very difficult to cater for.

