Storage, Destruction and Retention of Documents

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Summary

This guidance sets out the processes that should be followed when dealing with any type of document that cannot be re-united with the rightful owner. This will include how to destroy and/or return documents to the relevant organisation responsible for issuing them, and how to maintain a documents data base and destruction log sheet for the destruction of such documents.

Foreign passports will be returned to the relevant Embassy or Consulate in the UK once efforts to return them to the holder have been completed rather than wait 12 months.

Background

A review was conducted by the Central Policy Team and the Security Team to understand how regional offices manage documents that cannot be re-united with the rightful owner. The review identified differing practices of holding, storing and recording of documents at IPS offices. This guidance seeks to establish an approach to, improve security when recording, storing & destroying these documents, reduce the potential for fraud, enhance the protection of these documents, minimise the impact on storage, and to provide an audit trail.

The United Kingdom Border Agency (UKBA), General Register Office England & Wales, Scotland & Northern Ireland have been consulted and a number of recommendations have been adopted as a result of the review. They are as follows:

a. A record of all such documents should be recorded on a database. This should be updated and maintained in line with current security and operational policy.
b. A manual record of any documents returned or destroyed should be recorded, witnessed and retained securely in the destruction & returns log sheet.

c. All documents should be retained for a period of 1 year and destroyed thereafter or returned to the relevant issuing authority (if appropriate). This includes withdrawn applications where documentation cannot be returned due to lack of contact or no response from the applicant.

d. An electronic documents database has been set up by the Security Team for all regional offices, to record all documents that have been retained in IPS (with the exception of foreign passports) when they cannot be re-united with the rightful owners.

e. Instructions will be given to ensure that all regional offices deal with the destruction of these documents in a consistent manner.

The process

It should be noted that every effort should be made to re-unite these documents with the rightful holders before any documents are destroyed or returned to the relevant issuing authority.

Each regional office should ensure that these documents are stored in secure locations and access is restricted to those authorised to do so.

Any documents that cannot be re-united with the rightful owner should be added to the documents database. Documents should be held for a maximum of 1 year, with the exception of foreign passports) then either destroyed or returned to the issuing authority concerned.

Each office should carry out a minimum of an annual check of stored documents and any that have been retained for 1 year or more should be either destroyed or returned to the issuing authority in line with the instructions below.

Please note that this will not include lost or stolen British passports that have been recovered (see Withdrawal of Applications and Lost, Stolen and Recovered Passports).

Where documents are to be retained after an application has been withdrawn, the documents should be sent along with the application form for storage. Please see Withdrawal of Applications for further information.

Documents that cannot be re-united with the rightful owner and have been held for a year or more should be dealt with as follows:

**Birth certificates issued in Scotland**

These documents should be destroyed.

**Birth certificates issued in England, Northern Ireland and Wales**
These documents should be destroyed.

**Birth certificates issued in a Consular or High Commission**

These documents should be destroyed.

**Birth certificates issued outside the UK**

These documents should be returned to the Embassy or Consulate of the country of origin in the UK (these addresses can be found by accessing the shortcut menu and clicking on ‘foreign embassies in the UK’ at www.fco.gov.uk).

**Marriage certificates issued in Scotland**

These documents should be destroyed.

**Marriage certificates issued in England, Northern Ireland and Wales**

These documents should be destroyed.

**Marriage certificates issued outside the UK**

These documents should be returned to the Embassy or Consulate of the country of origin in the UK (these addresses can be found by accessing the shortcut menu and clicking on ‘foreign embassies in the UK’ at www.fco.gov.uk).

**United Kingdom passports**

Any such passports should be dealt with under the LSR policy and treated as recovered passports (this applies to expired or unexpired UK passports).

**Foreign passports**

Foreign Passports should be returned to the Embassy or Consulate of the country of origin in the UK once it has been established that the passport cannot be re-united with the rightful owner (i.e. checking system, etc). Please note that these passports do not need to be retained for up to 1 year before being returned. The Embassy or Consulate addresses can be found by accessing the shortcut menu and clicking on ‘foreign embassies in the UK’ at www.fco.gov.uk). See also Lost, Stolen and Recovered Passports - Dealing with Found Passports.

**Naturalisation and Registration certificates**

These documents should be destroyed.

**Driving Licences issued in the UK**
These documents should be returned to the DVLA.

**Licences issued outside the UK**

These documents should be returned to the Embassy or Consulate of the country of origin in the UK (these addresses can be found by accessing the shortcut menu and clicking on ‘foreign embassies in the UK’ at www.fco.gov.uk).

**Adoption certificates issued in Scotland**

These documents should be destroyed.

**Adoption certificates issued in England, Northern Ireland and Wales**

These documents should be destroyed.

**Adoption certificates issued outside the UK**

These documents should be returned to the Embassy or Consulate of the country of origin in the UK (these addresses can be found by accessing the shortcut menu and clicking on ‘foreign embassies in the UK’ at www.fco.gov.uk).

**Care Orders issued in the UK**

These documents should be returned to the court authority responsible for issuing the certificate.

**Care Orders outside the UK**

These documents should be returned to the Embassy or Consulate of the country of origin in the UK (these addresses can be found by accessing the shortcut menu and clicking on ‘foreign embassies in the UK’ at www.fco.gov.uk).

**Student matriculation cards**

These should be returned to the university or college responsible for issuing the card.

**Change of name deeds**

These documents should be returned to the solicitor responsible for notarising the deed. If not named or unclear, then the deed should be destroyed.

**Home Office Travel Documents**

Instruction for these can be found in Home Office Travel Documents. These should **not** be added to the database.
Home Office Status Letters

Instruction for these can be found on the Home Office Status Letters page.

Bank cards, statements and bank books

These should be returned to the issuing bank.

Travel tickets

These should be returned to the issuing authority if current, and should be destroyed if not current.

Procedures for using and maintaining the document database

A documents database has been established for the electronic control and maintenance of all documents that cannot be re-united to the rightful owner.

Each regional office has a blank spreadsheet set up which can only be accessed with given permission. Authority for access to this database can only be given, in writing, by the SEO responsible for that area. This manager will be responsible for the maintenance of the database including updating documents that have been destroyed or returned, and updating the list of staff who have access to the database.

The SEO will also be responsible for ensuring that spot checks of the database and the destruction & returns log sheet is undertaken on an ad hoc basis. These spot checks must be documented and signed and kept as an auditable trail which will be subject to audit as part of the Security Team assurance programme.

Each page needs to be populated with the documents currently being held in each office. Each document must only be held for a maximum period of 1 year and thereafter should be destroyed or sent to the relevant issuing authority. The database must always be updated to reflect this.

The database should be checked periodically to ensure that documents have been retained for a maximum period of 1 year only.

Completing and maintaining the return and destruction log sheet

This information should be taken from the documents data base once the document in question has been retained in IPS for a maximum of 1 year (with the exception of foreign passports).

The destruction & returns log sheet must always be completed when documents have been destroyed or returned to the appropriate issuing authority.
The destruction log sheet must also record and bear the signature of the person witnessing the destruction.

The log sheets must be retained securely for the current and previous financial year, and will be subject to audit as part of the Security Team assurance programme.

If the document is to be destroyed then simply placing it in a ‘Confidential Waste’ bin will not suffice. The document must be either be:

- Shredded (ideally); or
- Torn into four pieces before placing it into ‘confidential waste’.

Spot checks of currently held documents must also be undertaken on an ad hoc basis. These spot checks must be documented, signed and retained to auditable trail which will also be subject to audit by the Security Team. This is the responsibility of the SEO responsible for that area.

**Customer enquiries**

Staff should ensure that stock letter named 'Customer Return Letter' is sent to any customer who requests the return of a document that has been subsequently destroyed or forwarded to the issuing authority. The Complaints Handling and Compensation Policy should be followed if the customer makes a complaint thereafter.