

2ID Public Information: Passports

Advice for British citizens living abroad

The UK government has chosen to link the introduction of ID cards and a National Identity Register to the renewal of passports. This could raise particular issues for British citizens living abroad. Some options are set out below. They are intended to assist you in reaching an individual decision. To the best of our knowledge, all the information is correct at the time of writing. However, the situation may change, and circumstances may vary from one consulate to another. We advise you to contact the nearest British consulate before deciding whether and when to renew your passport.

Passports linked to new identity register

The Identity Cards Act 2006 in the UK permits the Home Office to turn passports into a “designated document” for the ID scheme. Interrogation and fingerprinting centres are now being opened across the UK and will soon start processing first-time passport applicants. In the near future, the new United Kingdom Identity & Passport Service (UKIPS) will also refuse to renew existing passports inside the UK unless applicants attend an official interview and agree to be fingerprinted and give a wide range of personal information for a new database, the National Identity Register (NIR). At the same time, they will be offered a national ID card. Whether applicants accept the card or not, their biometrics (including fingerprints) and other details will go on to the NIR and will remain there for as long as it exists.

For those living abroad, it is worth recalling that the biometric ID cards and the register to be introduced in the UK are considerably more intrusive than those used so far in other countries. Records of card use will rapidly build up an “audit trail” on each individual within the NIR. The police, immigration services, security services and other public officials will have full or partial access to the database. Citizens will have no right to information about when their file is consulted, and by whom. The Home Secretary will have the right to cancel an ID card without notice or explanation. There is also serious concern that the concentration of biometrics and other personal data in one place will increase the risk of identity theft.

Opting out

One of the most controversial government claims about the ID scheme is that enrolment will be “voluntary” in the initial stages, even though passport renewal will soon automatically mean inclusion in the NIR for those inside the UK. While some people within the UK could get by without a passport for a few years, that is obviously not an option for those living abroad.

Responding to these criticisms, the Home Secretary said on 21 March 2006 that “anyone who feels strongly enough about the linkage not to want to be issued with an ID card in the initial phase will be free to surrender their existing passport and apply for a new passport before the designation order takes effect”.

That is indeed the situation – British passports can be renewed at any time, even if there are more than 9 months to run before their expiry date.

Hence the [Renew for Freedom](#) campaign, which is suggesting that people in the UK renew their passports *before* the “designated document” provisions start to take effect. This is a perfectly legal option. A group of Liberal Democrat MPs [did precisely that in May 2006](#).

Passport issues for expats

An enquiry to the consular section in Brussels brought the reply that “we are issuing biometric passports now and photograph requirements are therefore very strict”.

This use of the word “biometric” is confusing. Anyone renewing their passport **now** will not be fingerprinted, nor will their iris be scanned, nor will they be enrolled on the NIR.

But the “renewed” passport will in fact be a completely new one, a so-called ePassport with a chip containing the photo, facial measurements and other data. The old passport will be cancelled and returned.

The current fee in Brussels is 142 Euro (+ 6 Euro if you apply by post) and the consular service says the process will take 10 working days. Early renewal does, of course, imply some financial cost if it is assumed that the price of a passport will remain constant in future. But in fact, the price has already risen substantially in the UK, in preparation for linkage to ID cards and the NIR. It is likely that charges to expats will increase at some point too. In November 2006, the Porvoo Group of experts on European eID was told that the British ID scheme will be "self-financing with no subsidy by society". This implies that it will be financed by high charges and/or by the onward sale of data to the private sector. The UK government has already floated both ideas.

When to renew

2010 could be the make or break year for the ID scheme, as it is the latest possible date for the next general election in the UK. Labour, under its current leadership, is committed to making the cards and the register compulsory if it wins a further term. All other significant political parties have pledged to abolish the scheme.

Meanwhile, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which issues British passports abroad, already has a so far uncoded budget line for the introduction of "secondary biometrics" (fingerprinting and possibly iris scans). This was revealed in a recent [parliamentary reply](#).

Bearing all this in mind, here is **NO2ID's advice to UK citizens living abroad**:

- **If you have less than 5 years left on your passport - renew now.**
- **If you need to visit the United States - renew now and get an ePassport (required from October 2006).**
- **If you don't need to visit the US and your passport has 8+ years to run, and you don't want an ePassport – it's probably not worth renewing now.**
- **If you have 5+ years on your passport and you do not want an ePassport - then there is an argument for not renewing now.**
- **If you have 5+ years on your passport and you don't mind getting an ePassport - renew now.**

For those who may be entitled to an Irish passport, it is worth noting that the Irish government has decided not to issue ID cards.

More information

For more on passports, ID cards and the NIR:

- [NO2ID](#)
- [Passports page, British Embassy, Brussels](#)
- [Full text of the Identity Cards Act 2006 \(PDF\)](#)
- [United Kingdom Identity and Passport Service](#)

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What is NO2ID?

NO2ID is the UK national campaign against ID cards and the National Identity Register. It is not affiliated to any political party and is funded almost entirely by voluntary donations.

Founded in 2004, we aim to bring together people and organisations from all sections of the community in opposition to the Government's plan for compulsory registration, fingerprinting and lifelong tracking of all UK residents by means of a centralised 'identity' database.

We want the public to be properly informed about a scheme that has kept invisible by spin, but that aims to transform all our lives.

NO2ID has around 100 local groups across the UK, and our Expats' Group has supporters worldwide.

www.no2id.net

<http://no2id-expats.chown.ch>