

Curzon comment on the UK government's announcement on selling the Land Registry

Fallon set to hand over the deeds to the Land Registry

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The organisation that holds the titles to most of the land in England and Wales could be sold or part-privatised in the latest move by the Government to raise billions from state assets.

Michael Fallon, the Business Minister, laid out the options for the Land Registry yesterday as he kick-started a consultation on the 150-year-old organisation, which employs 4,500 civil servants and is regarded as the "nation's property data bank".

About 82 per cent of the land in England and Wales, or 12.6 million hectares, is registered with the Land Registry and it holds more than 23.5 million titles. In an average month, it records 81,000 house sales.

Its data are used by economists, property consultancies and online agencies, such as Zoopla and Rightmove. Housebuyers can also search the online database to check who owns land or property for a fee, which at the minimum is about £4 a search.

In its most recent financial year, the Land Registry made a surplus of £98.8 million compared with £81.6 mil-

lion the previous year, on revenue that was down 3 per cent at £347 million. It paid a dividend to the Treasury of £26 million, up from £13.8 million.

As the Treasury seeks an extra £10 billion from privatisations, it is believed that organisations that sell data to the private sector, such as Ordnance Survey, Companies House and the Met Office, are ripe for privatisation.

The Land Registry is one of only a number of assets that the Government could sell or part-privatise. Others include the £12 billion student loan book, part shares in RBS and Lloyds Bank, the 40 per cent stake of Eurostar, the Royal Mint and a 70 per cent stake in the Probation Service.

Not all sell-offs are easy, and Vince Cable, the Business Secretary, has been heavily criticised for his handling of the partial sale of Royal Mail, which many believe was sold at a price that undervalued the postal group.

Mr Fallon said: "Land Registry continues to be a cornerstone of property ownership and undertakes a range of functions which are critical to the property market."

"Giving the Land Registry more flex-

Registering change

- The first land certificate was registered in 1863 and was given to Sir Fitzroy Kelly, MP, for his properties Crane Hall and The Chantry (now a Sue Ryder Home), near Ipswich, Suffolk
- The first one million titles (evidence of ownership of land or property) were registered by 1950, with the 10 million figure reached by 1990. Today, it exceeds 23 million
- In 1862, a typical property owned by the skilled working class or lower middle class cost £150 to £250
- The average house price in the UK in 1962 was £2,673 – three times the average wage. In October 2012, it was £161,605 – more than six times the average wage of £26,000

ibility to operate will enable them to become a leader in digitising land and property services and support growth in the wider economy."

He said that no decision on ownership and control of this new "service

delivery company" had been made, and several options were being considered.

The Government has proposed retaining a separate Office of the Chief Land Registrar to carry out regulatory and fee-setting functions and provide oversight of the privatised company.

Reaction in the property sector was mixed. James Moss, managing director of Cursor Investment Property, an independent agent, said that the Land Registry had the monopoly as the official provider of housing statistics and that "in private hands it'd be a licence to print money".

He added: "The fees it could generate could give a price tag in excess of £500 million. While the property industry isn't known for socialist leanings, the broad view will be that such a service should remain in public ownership as it serves such a wide purpose."

Unions said the move would lead to worse pay and conditions for Land Registry staff and would hit confidence among buyers. Mark Serwotka, general secretary of the PCS, said: "There is absolutely no evidence that this would improve services and managers have so far failed to make a coherent case."