

Cambridgeshire Registration Service Annual Report

To: Communities, Social Mobility and Inclusion Committee

Meeting Date: 8 December 2022

From: Assistant Director of Regulatory Services, Peter Gell

Electoral division(s): All

Key decision: No

Outcome: To provide the Committee with an annual report on the work of the Registration service, highlighting service performance and developments over the past year.

Recommendation: The Committee is asked to:

Note the updates from the Registration service.

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1. Background

- 1.1 The Cambridgeshire Registration service provides core statutory services for the official recording of key events (birth, death and still-birth registrations; marriage and civil partnership ceremonies), legal preliminaries for marriages and civil partnerships and the provision of copy certificates – as well as the delivery of marriage, civil partnership and citizenship ceremonies. In addition, it delivers non-statutory, income generating services such as naming and renewal of vows ceremonies.
- 1.2 The local authority delivers the service in accordance with legislation founded in the Births and Deaths Registration Act of 1836, and with guidelines primarily issued by the General Register Office (GRO), which is part of the Home Office (within HM Passport Office). The GRO has to approve core changes, such as office relocations, to ensure they meet the legal and service standard requirements for the delivery of statutory functions. The service is inspected to ensure compliance with over 70 measures relating to public protection and counter fraud. In addition, ongoing monitoring takes place against national key performance indicators and the service submits an annual report to GRO for scrutiny.
- 1.3 The Cambridgeshire Register Office is in Cambridge, with further full-time registration offices in Ely and Huntingdon. There are part-time registration offices in March and Wisbech. In addition, there are 78 Approved Venues (this does not include Council Ceremony Rooms), details of which can be found on the Cambridgeshire Ceremonies website.

2. Main Issues

2.1 Accommodation

- 2.1.1 CO2 monitoring has been installed in all spaces used by the service. Currently, the capacity of all ceremony rooms remain limited to 80% of capacity before the Covid-19 pandemic, but customer expectations are managed accordingly. This is kept under review, and links in part to mechanical ventilation works.
- 2.1.2 The Cambridgeshire Register Office has been relocated from Castle Lodge (on the old Shire Hall site) to the new site on Ascham Road in Cambridge. This saw the culmination of years of work come to fruition, and was accomplished with minimal impact on customers.
- 2.1.3 Phase 1 of the move took place on 9 and 10 September 2022, with the Customer Appointment and Support Team members moving on site. Phase 2 of the move saw the transfer of marriage / civil partnership / naming / renewal of vow ceremonies to the new site, as of 1 October 2022, with anything prior to that still taking place at Castle Lodge.
- 2.1.4 Further details of the changes to the site, service delivery and community engagement are attached at Appendix 1.
- 2.1.5 Wisbech Registration Office was successfully re-opened following the pandemic, as approved by the Committee last year.
- 2.1.6 Larger Group Citizenship ceremonies have taken place at New Shire Hall since 24 October 2022. This follows several years of interim arrangements due to the pandemic, and this meant that most of those involved were doing so for the first time. As ever when starting something afresh, and despite the planning and preparation undertaken, some initial

refining was required to ensure the event fully reflected the previous high standard.

2.2 Staffing

2.2.1 The service restructure implemented in April 2020 has continued to enhance service delivery, and with the return to near normal operations following the pandemic, even more of the perceived benefits continue to be realised:

- By remaining in offices during the pandemic, and with the benefit of the still relatively new structure, the service continues to be much better placed in terms of staff recruitment and retention compared to similar Registration services. All roles advertised have been filled successfully. Staff absence from work-related stress and / or mental health issues in general is also minimal by comparison.
- Staff training, development and succession planning continues to improve further. This was evidenced in the summer, when the previous Ceremony Operations Manager took a long-planned retirement, and the successful applicant was an existing Appointments Team Leader.
- The first staff are nearing completion of the National Registration City and Guilds qualification, and the service is looking to work with one to then take on the role of verifier or assessor (at present these are from other Registration Services). Another person commenced the course in November 2022.
- The commitment to undertake job evaluations for both the Ceremony Officer and Ceremony Officer Team Leader roles, following the implementation of the Marriage Schedule Scheme in 2021, has been completed. Both roles increased by one grade, reflecting the changes to the roles.

2.2.2 A “Join our Team” function was added to the ceremony website. This has provided a steady stream of potential applicants on a more regular basis, some of which have already been appointed.

2.2.3 To encourage applications from more local candidates, and those seeking to work around family commitments, the hours for the Wisbech role are within the school day.

2.2.4 The service are currently working with local and national colleagues to deliver a range of additional training. An example is around a topic that will be useful for supporting those who may indicate or raise predatory, safeguarding forced or sham marriage / civil partnership concerns.

2.2.5 Throughout this report, there are examples of changes to processes and procedures that have driven efficiencies. These have not created savings, but have enabled the service to keep pace with growing demand without the need for staff increases that would otherwise have been required. The growing demand is partly generated by the high growth in population reflected in the 2021 census results.

2.3 Performance and Analysis

2.3.1 Service data for 2021/22 has been compared with 2020/21 data in Table 1 below, although it should be noted both were impacted by the pandemic.

	2021/22	2020/21
Births registered	7,760	7,135
Deaths registered	5,779	6,115
Notices of marriage / civil partnership	5,417	2,737
Marriage / Civil Partnership Ceremonies	1,925	608
New British Citizens	2,322	874

Table 1 – Registration service performance data

- 2.3.2 Each year, Registration services are required to submit a return to the GRO, reporting performance against a range of national key performance indicators (KPIs) relating to the timeliness of birth and death registrations, the availability of appointments, customer engagement, public protection and counter fraud measures, statutory and operational service delivery standards, and progress against service plans. The latest report for 2021-22 is attached at Appendix 2.
- 2.3.3 In almost all areas, the service consistently performs at, or above, the national target level, and at, or above, regional and national averages. Highlights include performance for appointment availability being 100%, and timelines for birth registrations being 97%. Non-coronial death registrations attainment (to register in five calendar days) was 73%.
- 2.3.4 Cambridgeshire Registration service continues to be well-regarded by the GRO and peers across the country, and this was again reflected in communications from the GRO Compliance Manager in response to the latest Annual Report.
- 2.3.5 The Head of Service was also recognised for her role and contribution on the East of England Regional Registration forum and the National Panel, the latter of which continues to help inform national policies and processes.
- 2.3.6 The sunset clause on the Covid-19 Emergency Bill in March 2022 saw the cessation of most easements. This included the ability for deaths to be registered by telephone. There is a proposal, however, to reinstate registration by telephone, and further information is provided in paragraph 2.6.2 of this report.

2.4 Partnerships

- 2.4.1 Seven Members were appointed to a Registration Service Focus Group. The first meeting took place on 29 September 2022, during which the Terms of Reference were discussed and agreed. All Members have been invited to spend time with the Registration Service, to provide additional context and background for the work ahead. The Group also agreed on the first two priority topics (including representatives of other Council services, partners, associated suppliers, voluntary groups and customers, as appropriate):
- Marketing – to place Cambridgeshire as a choice destination for ceremonies, and the service as “provider of choice” for conducting them.
 - Signposting – to expand the role of the service as a “front door” to access other services and support in terms of the customers it sees, both as informants and as ceremony guests.
- 2.4.2 Focus Group meetings are due to take place in January 2023, although some survey work will be undertaken before then.

- 2.4.3 The service continues to engage in active partnership work with both the Medical Examiner and Coroner service, as these services are essential to the death registration process. This includes proactive meetings, ad-hoc discussions and on-going dialogue as situations arise.
- 2.4.4 With business returning to near normal, the previous arrangements around shadowing and training for relevant staff in both Registration and Coroner services is being re-instated.
- 2.4.5 Locally, the Medical Examiner service is up and running in all acute settings in Cambridgeshire, with minimal impact on the timeliness of documentation. This has seen the number of deaths registered without Coroner involvement already rise to 70% for 2021-22.
- 2.4.6 Whilst nationally 88% of all deaths in acute trusts go through the Medical Examiner process, the 7% attainment for community deaths reflects the fact the system is still not statutory. The Chief Medical Examiner has stated that community death activity will commence more widely from 1 April 2023.
- 2.4.7 Ongoing communication with Approved Venues takes place as a matter of course, and the service has welcomed a number of new venues during the last year. In addition to representatives being sought for the Marketing Focus Group, the service has carried out some ad-hoc consultations. To date, these have covered areas that will help the service work better and provide operational feedback about their normal times and days, which is being used to help review and re-align resources. The question of animals being present during the actual ceremony has recently arisen, and this is something for which a commitment has been given to consult on with all relevant partners, and again benchmark with similar registration districts.
- 2.4.8 The service continues to actively engage in partnership work with Hospital Trusts and Hospices as key organisations. Whilst primarily around birth and death registrations, an area covered in recent months is that of urgent ceremonies, with proactive meetings being held to review and refine the processes involved to ensure that these can be handled effectively when such situations arise.

2.5 Technology

- 2.5.1 The service continues to review, refine and expand the use of technology across all aspects of service delivery, whilst at the same time being mindful of those customers who may need other routes to access services. In the past year this has included:
- Since October 2022, new citizens have been able to select which group ceremony they wish to attend, completing the booking process for themselves and any others in their families online. This generates relevant reports for operational use, and has removed the requirement for a more manual process and the need for the majority of customers to call the Contact Centre to make bookings.
 - A different platform has been used for the system that allows customers to check the documentation required for giving notices. This has enhanced the previous format, streamlining for the customer, and enabling them to print off or email the summary to aid with documents they need to provide. Related changes have also improved the ceremonies website. These have contributed to the reduction in the number of notice appointments that could not be completed from 10.5% to just 3.5%.
 - On 5 December 2022, a series of improvements will be made to the online booking

system, benefiting customers and creating efficiencies.

- The Customer Service team completed a survey of customer calls, to help identify further opportunities to encourage customers to self-service online where possible. This was combined with a snapshot of customer self-service activity in related areas. In summary this identified that customers already book online as follows:
 - 75% of birth appointments
 - 10% of death appointments
 - 62% of ceremonies (excludes citizenship)
 - 65% of notice appointments

2.5.2 The low volume for death self-service booking is directly related to the need to ensure the service has the correct paperwork (from a medical doctor and / or the Coroner Service) before a death can be registered. Whilst changes will be made locally, the impact of these on the volume is minimal, but there are major opportunities ahead with the extension of the Medical Examiner service, national electronic death information and the work of the Coroner service with partners to reduce delays in non-inquest cases where possible.

2.5.3 Changes to the ceremony website and booking system, combined with reminders to partners involved in ceremonies or births, are in hand as a result, with the aim of further increasing the self-service volumes.

2.5.4 Plans are in place for the year ahead to maximise the opportunities and benefits presented from further embracing Office 365, the Teams elements, and new technology. Work is already underway to:

- Replace the current staff rotas by using the booking system for ceremony work and Teams for all other service staffing.
- Move all shared documents and folders, whilst archiving or deleting those no longer required.
- Aid with document version control, easy access and communication for staff across this large and widespread team.
- Provide suitable hardware for Ceremony Officers, which will help with the above but also be used for ceremony delivery and to enable them to better access some Council systems (including training modules).

2.6 Legislative Changes

2.6.1 Temporary legislation introduced during the pandemic for fully outdoor ceremonies at Approved Venues was made permanent in spring 2022. Currently 10 of the 78 Approved Venues across Cambridgeshire offer this option.

2.6.2 The Data Protection and Digital Information Bill will amend primary legislation (the Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953 and the Registration Service Act 1953), and will allow telephone registrations to be re-introduced (this facility was only available for deaths under the temporary Coronavirus Act 2020). It will also enable the introduction of 'online' registration for births and deaths in the future. While there are no guarantees, it is anticipated that the Bill will complete its passage and receive Royal Assent sometime in spring 2023, following which secondary legislation would then be required before the

provisions could be implemented.

- 2.6.3 In June 2022, the Government announced its intention to work towards the statutory medical examiner system commencing from April 2023, recognising the need for all relevant government departments to be ready and aligned to enable successful implementation. When the statutory medical examiner system commences, the intended requirement is for medical examiners to provide independent scrutiny of all deaths not taken for investigation by a Coroner. In July 2022, NHS England wrote to NHS healthcare providers and Integrated Care Boards, setting out what local health systems need to do to prepare for the statutory medical examiner system.
- 2.6.4 The Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022 raises the age of marriage and civil partnership to 18 in England and Wales to protect children from forced marriage. This means that 16 to 17-year-olds will no longer be able to marry or enter a civil partnership under any circumstances, including with parental or judicial consent from 26 February 2023. It will not be possible for anyone under 18 to marry or enter a civil partnership after this date.
- 2.6.5 The Government Equalities Office (GEO) have stated they are not currently in a position to lay regulations or provide a commencement date in relation to the conversion of opposite sex marriages to civil partnerships. This project has therefore been paused by GRO until such time as the GEO can provide an update.
- 2.6.6 The Law Commission report on weddings has been published, the next step on the Law Commission website states “It is now for the Government to review and consider the recommendations in our final report. We await an interim response.” Until the Government responds and indicates which aspects it proposes to take forward, and goes through due process to change the legislation, there are no changes the service can make at a local level. Managing expectations in terms of timescales is key, as it is unlikely to be a quick process. Approved Venue partners have been made aware of the consultation and a link to the report was shared when it was published.

2.7 Finance

- 2.7.1 There are ongoing discussions at a national level regarding the urgent need to update all statutory fees, but ultimately the decision to do so rests with the Treasury. National Panel and GRO have also flagged the need for a complete review of the current funding model, as the current one is not sustainable, with fees having not increased for many years.
- 2.7.2 Locally set fees are reviewed on an annual basis and benchmarked to ensure they deliver full cost recovery.
- 2.7.3 The largest element of the service budget, which does not include buildings or other associated costs, for 2022/23 is staffing (£1.23m), with an income budget of £2.17m.
- 2.7.4 The service does take action to mitigate against rising costs where it can, and relief staff are only used when necessary.
- 2.7.5 Spring 2023 will see the planned new services, whose introductions were delayed due to the pandemic, being offered to customers, both with relevant fees attached. There will be the opportunity to have a ceremony planning discussion with a Ceremony Officer, and it will be possible to have a naming or renewal of vow ceremony in additional locations beyond Council ceremony rooms and Approved Venues.

2.7.6 At present, the service is participating in two corporate finance projects – the income management solution project and the payment card industry compliance project.

3. Alignment with corporate priorities

3.1 Environment and Sustainability

The report above sets out the implications for this priority under 2.5

3.2 Health and Care

The above report sets out the implications for this priority under 2.2.4, 2.4.2 – 2.4.5, 2.4.8 and 2.6.3

3.3 Places and Communities

The above report sets out the implications for this priority under 2.4.6

3.4 Children and Young People

The above report sets out the implications for this priority under 2.6.4

3.5 Transport

There are no significant implications for this priority.

5. Source Documents

5.1 [Law Commission Report - Weddings](#)

5.2 [Data Protection and Digital Communications Bill](#)

5.3 [Marriage and Civil Partnership \(Minimum Age\) Bill](#)

5.4 [Statutory Medical Examiner System](#)