

## Cambridgeshire Registration Service Annual Report

To: Communities, Social Mobility and Inclusion Committee

Meeting Date: 11 January 2024

From: Executive Director of Place and Sustainability

Electoral division(s): All

Key decision: No

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

Recommendation: The Committee is asked to:

Note the contents of the report.

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# 1. Background

- 1.1 The Cambridgeshire Registration Service provides 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. In addition, it delivers marriage, civil partnership, and citizenship ceremonies as well as non-statutory, income generating services such as naming and renewal of vows ceremonies.
- 1.2 There are detailed legislative requirements in respect of the statutory functions delivered by Registration Service, and these are supplemented with guidelines primarily issued by the General Register Office (GRO), which is part of the Home Office (within HM Passport Office). The GRO provides governance and scrutiny of local authority registration services through assessment of annual performance submissions and undertaking local authority audits. The service is assessed to ensure compliance with over seventy measures relating to public protection and counter fraud.
- 1.3 The service operates from full time registration offices in Cambridge, Ely, and Huntingdon. There are part-time registration offices in March and Wisbech. In addition, there are 79 approved venues across Cambridgeshire, these being independent venues licenced to hold ceremonies. The service provides the officers to conduct ceremonies at these venues. Details of the venues themselves can be found on the [Cambridgeshire Ceremonies website](#).
- 1.4 A recent engagement exercise undertaken with managers and staff across the service has been used to formulate a development plan to ensure service development and improvement opportunities are captured and explored. An important part of this exercise was to focus on workforce development and support. The Council-wide staff survey will also provide a helpful steer.

# 2. Main Issues

## 2.1 Ceremonies Update

- 2.1.1 Six new ceremony venues have been licensed this year, giving couples more choice across the county, including a brewery in Wisbech and a stunning country estate at the other end of the county near Sandy. This brings the total venues in Cambridgeshire to 79.
- 2.1.2 16 venues now include the wholly outside option, which allows couples to have a ceremony anywhere in the grounds of the venue. One venue offers a waterside option that allows couples to marry on a beach in Cambridgeshire.
- 2.1.3 Animals and pets are now allowed at ceremonies and 11 of the venues have registered for this option.
- 2.1.4 Customer surveys are sent to all couples following their ceremony. The service was rated 4.9 (out of 5) in response to “How were your registrars on the day?” and 4.6 for overall experience with Cambridgeshire Ceremonies.

- 2.1.5 In the last year, the service has performed 175 ceremonies in Council rooms and 1,965 ceremonies in approved venues.
- 2.1.6 Ceremonies for couples have been reviewed following customer feedback and couples now have a greater range of options. This includes what to say on the day associated with the 'I do' wording, acknowledgment of the 'escort' when entering the room, as well as a much wider range of ring exchange wording and personal vows. The service is also able to tailor make specific requests for couples.
- 2.1.7 For example, a couple wanted to include a ring-warming ceremony and a gin-blending ceremony on their wedding day at the South Farm venue. Alcohol is not allowed in a ceremony room, so the service contacted the GRO to gain clarification on what was allowed. Permission was granted to perform a ceremony if no alcohol was consumed. The service worked with the couple to produce wording for the ceremony that everyone was happy with. On the day, Ceremony Officers incorporated the gin-blending ceremony into the wedding, and the couple and guests were delighted.
- 2.1.8 Further examples of customer feedback is attached at Appendix 1.
- 2.1.9 Group citizenship ceremonies began in New Shire Hall in October 2023, and the Service has since welcomed 1,628 new citizens. Private citizenship ceremonies have been introduced in Cambridge, and the service has welcomed 78 citizens in this way.

## 2.2 Marketing

- 2.2.1 One of the themes Members previously identified as an area of focus for the Service was the business sector associated with the ceremony industry in Cambridgeshire, promoting Cambridgeshire as a destination of choice and thereby supporting the local economy.
- 2.2.2 The approach regarding engagement with the sector has evolved having taken feedback from businesses. Initially, it was envisaged that working groups with local businesses would meet several times a year to discuss and explore opportunities, however it quickly became apparent that this space is already saturated with business groups and organisations. The feedback received was that businesses in general could not commit the time to further groups, although several were happy to engage in other ways.
- 2.2.3 The service has, however, increased the level of engagement with the county's approved venues, over and above that already taking place in relation to ceremonies. Ceremony staff are now regularly supporting wedding fayres and open days, which has provided opportunities for engagement with a wide range of businesses linked to the ceremony industry. Supporting these events is not only helping attract business for approved venues but also Council ceremonies. This collaborative approach is something that the service is keen to build upon.
- 2.2.4 Further insight has been obtained following an online survey of all approved venues in addition to ten key suppliers that were identified. Interesting points to note were:
- The respondents identified the main challenges they face as local competition, the cost of living crisis / economic uncertainty, post-pandemic recovery.

- All respondents were aware of the differences between a ceremony conducted by local authority registrars as opposed to an independent celebrant.
- A mixed response regarding whether venues would consider paid-for promotion, such as sponsorship on the ceremony website, with some saying they would, while others would like a free listing.
- New Cambridgeshire Ceremonies social media is offering the service a new means of engaging with venues and associated local businesses.

2.2.5 The service has set up a Facebook page and an Instagram account, on which testimonials, news, case studies and photos are shared. This is proving valuable for engaging with local businesses, helping to promote them as well as connecting with customers.

2.2.6 The team has also produced leaflets that can be included in birth and death appointments to promote non-statutory services.

## 2.3 Supporting Communities

2.3.1 Recognising the challenging financial climate and the hardship being felt across communities in the county, the service reached out to 23 local charities and organisations to invite collaboration in relation to helping people access support. With office locations in the heart of communities, the service is well placed through daily customer interactions to provide details of support groups and/or assist in a referral if someone is in crisis.

2.3.2 At the Cambridge Registration Office, a variety of information resources and leaflets are now displayed on a dedicated stand in the waiting room, including Little Miracles, Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Charity (SANDS), Mind, Cruse Bereavement Support, Cambridgeshire Child and Family Centres, and Me, and You and Baby Too – Reducing Parental Conflict.

## 2.4 Appointments Update

2.4.1 The GRO is currently looking to transform the civil registration system, which will include upgrading the IT systems used, digitising the full set of records held and offering customers new digital products and services that meet their needs in a modern society.

2.4.2 The GRO is also trialling a new IT registration system, Digital Registration Service (DRS), to replace the current system in North Lincolnshire and Westminster, with a view to it being available to all by the spring of 2024. This will be in line with the introduction of all death paperwork from surgeries, hospitals and hospices being examined by a medical examiner, therefore eliminating the requirement for it to be checked by the registration staff before the appointment, creating more time for additional customer appointments.

2.4.3 The GRO performance data for 2022/23 shows that, on average, the Cambridgeshire Registration service completed 98% of birth registrations and 100% of stillbirth registrations within the required 42 days, while 60% of deaths were registered within the required 5 days, an improvement in all areas from the 2021/22 data. Within the region, Cambridgeshire Registration Service is grouped with 10 other counties and has maintained its place in the top three performers of that region.

2.4.4 Following a visit from the new GRO Compliance Officer, the service was commended on its management of the appointment system that ensured the availability of appointments at

short notice, enabling the service to achieve its death registration figures and to accommodate other appointments within 48 hours.

- 2.4.5 With the current population growth across the county, it is expected that more appointments will be required in the future.
- 2.4.6 As of 27 February 2023, the minimum age to enter a marriage or civil partnership was raised from 16 years old to 18 years old. Within Cambridgeshire, this mostly affected the Traveller community, which was kept informed through the Council's Traveller Liaison Officer. Due to this communication, the service received minimum enquires and there was no impact to the service.
- 2.4.7 As of 1 August 2023, it is now a requirement to give Notice of Marriage (NOM) and Notice of Civil Partnership (CP) for British Overseas Territories such as Anguilla, Bermuda, British Antarctic Territory, British Indian Ocean Territory, Cayman Islands and Falkland Islands etc. This may result in a requirement to provide additional Notice of Marriage, and Civil Partnership appointments.
- 2.4.8 The service liaises with the bereavement teams at the local hospitals to ensure that everyone is aware of changes or alerted to any potential problems related to doctors' strikes. The service speaks with them regularly when there are upcoming NHS strikes, to ensure the service is aware of the timescales. This allows the service to plan appointment times to ensure death registrations can take place where and when needed, and the bereaved families can be informed of any impact on the death registration process.

## 2.5 Faith Deaths

- 2.5.1 The service has worked closely with the Coroners Service to ensure, as far as possible, that the paperwork required to enable a faith death burial to take place according to the wishes of the family is available in a timely manner, even when the request is made outside of office hours. An example of this working in practice occurred when the service was alerted to the fact that a terminally ill child was being moved from Essex to a hospice in Cambridgeshire on the Friday of a bank holiday weekend. Sadly, it was expected that she would die sometime over the weekend and the family were very anxious that her burial could take place according to their faith. Following liaison with the Coroner, it was possible to ensure that everyone concerned had all the relevant information and telephone numbers, so that the appropriate arrangements were in hand when required.

## 2.6 Accommodation

- 2.6.1 The team has settled into the repurposed Roger Ascham building, the facilities within it being significantly better than those within the previous Castle Lodge building. The Roger Ascham building has been designed internally with the needs of the service in mind.
- 2.6.2 Initial concerns prior to relocation regarding parking issues have not materialised, and the service has integrated well in the local community.
- 2.6.3 The space provides a platform for local artists to display their artwork inside the building, which has been well received and has helped create a community feel.

- 2.6.4 The associated planning use consent for the site does limit the ability of the service to better utilise the outside area for customers, as well as limiting the ability to extend operating hours to meet demand. It is being explored whether it is possible to seek changes to some of the current conditions.
- 2.6.5 As a result of the significant pollution growth across Cambridgeshire, which is expected to increase, there is a need as part of the corporate asset review to consider the future needs of the service in the coming years, otherwise there will be insufficient capacity in terms of facilities at current venues outside of Cambridge to handle customer numbers. In addition, it is important for ceremony locations that the visual offer is considered.

## 2.7 Technology

- 2.7.1 The service uses the Zipporah operating system to assist in the management of ceremony bookings. Developments have enabled:
- new citizens to book a public ceremony using their computer or phone;
  - relief staff to share their availability to work and to allocate them to forthcoming ceremonies; and
  - couples to personalise their ceremonies from within their account.
- 2.7.2 Since October 2021, the corporate payment portal has dropped some payments, which has affected the reliability of booking and certificate ordering systems. The service has worked with the Council's IT team to replace the old portal to better meet payment card industry data security standards.
- 2.7.3 The service has been working with the IT team to develop a new build of laptop to better meet Registration Service needs, and the Council has been rolling out the new InTune machines since January 2023. Early adopters of the new laptops had a variable experience, although following the delivery of 'shared' surface laptops to staff, early indications are that they are a more suitable choice of machine.

## 2.8 Performance

- 2.8.1 Following scrutiny of the Council's annual performance return for 2022/23, the GRO has acknowledged the hard work of the service during challenging times as it and others recover from the pandemic and normalise practices once again. The Council was commended for maintaining its performance in respect of birth registrations, and meeting appointment waiting times across all statutory services.
- 2.8.2 Since the temporary national provision introduced during the pandemic to allow telephone death registrations to take place has been removed, these must be in person. The performance in respect of time taken to register deaths has increased, as it has nationally. The service does not, however, add to this delay, due to excellent appointment availability.
- 2.8.3 A high level of assurance was noted in respect of the Public Protection and Counter Fraud Framework assessment exercise which the Service undertook, and the full report is attached at Appendix 2.
- 2.8.5 Table 1 shows the level of service delivery over the last three financial years.

	2022/23	2021/22	2020/21
Births registered	7,454	7,760	7,135
Deaths registered	6,517	5,779	6,115
Stillbirths registered	32	41	25
Notices of marriage / civil partnership	5,288	5,417	2,737
Marriage / Civil Partnership Ceremonies	2,207	1,925	608
New British Citizens	1,424	2,322	874

Table 1: Service delivery 2020 – 2023

2.8.6 As part of the GRO's local authority audit programme, the authority received a stock audit with three auditors on site for several days. The purpose and scope of the audit included:

- A check of secure certificate stock issued to all principal officers for reconciliation against records held by the Registrar General.
- A review of procedures in relation to receipt, control and issue of certificate stock and associated record keeping.
- A review of wider security arrangements over locality and storage of certificate stock.
- A review of security and access to registration records and information.
- A review of data storage arrangements.

2.8.7 The audit concluded the ordering and receipt of certificate stock, including subsequent control and security of the stock, provided high assurance. Security of registration records and individual responsibility and accountability also provided high assurance.

2.8.8 In respect of the use of certificate stock, though audit trails were in place to account for certificate stock, the service has been advised to implement a process to ensure stock can only be used in sequential order.

2.8.9 It was also noted that a privacy statement was not on display in one of the offices.

2.8.10 The GRO asked for more frequent changes to building access codes and the development of a protocol outlining access arrangements for the building and the Registration-On-line database.

2.8.11 Opportunities for improvement during the audit have been actioned.

## 2.9 Finance

2.9.1 The net annual position, after service costs have been taken from the revenue generated through fees and charges, is a favourable position of approximately £750k, with some fluctuation depending on market conditions from year to year. The overall revenue generated is approximately £1.9m.

2.9.2 Having come through the pandemic, registration services continue to be impacted by global events. The high cost of living has been reflected in the number of ceremonies cancelled, with couples deciding to defer their ceremony while finances remain challenging or wait before booking. Though in general terms bookings remain healthy, they are below what otherwise would have been expected.

- 2.9.3 In order to provide added certainty to couples when booking ceremonies, fees have recently been set for three years. As couples often book a year or more before their ceremony, it is preferable to know what the cost is at the time of booking. Should inflation exceed predictions, then the terms and conditions do allow for the recovery of the shortfall.
- 2.9.4 Statutory fees for registration of births, marriages, deaths, and notice taking for ceremonies have not been increased since 2017, and consequently the revenue generated from these fees has not kept pace with service delivery cost rises. The GRO has recently advised that it is expecting fees to be increased in 2024/25, but is currently unable to advise when and by how much.
- 2.9.5 In order to meet demand in the locality and raise additional revenue, the service is progressing a proposal to add additional ceremony capacity in Ely through the Council's budget setting process. It is known that the service is increasingly losing customers and valuable income to neighbouring local authorities due to a combination of lack of capacity and ceremony rooms that are less appealing than those in neighbouring Norfolk. The right location would provide an opportunity to increase revenue into the service, that generated exceeding the costs associated with implementation. The proposal is to undertake a 12-month trial, which would then inform more permanent arrangements, subject to its success.
- 2.9.6 In line with the Council's approach to the use of property assets and the need for careful consideration before any new leases are considered, the Strategic Asset Property Board will be part of the scrutiny and approval process. This proposal does not meet the key decision criteria.

## 2.10 New Services Opportunities

- 2.10.1 Bespoke two stage ceremonies are launching in January 2024, offering couples the opportunity to use Ceremony Officer's skills and knowledge to develop a ceremony in a location other than an approved venue, when previously the only option would be to employ the services of an independent celebrant.
- 2.10.2 Naming and renewal of vows ceremonies are now being offered in locations other than approved venues and Council rooms. After completing a risk assessment, the service can perform these ceremonies in gardens, community centres and other locations.
- 2.10.3 Celebration of life ceremonies have been inspired by the rise in direct cremation that families are opting for. The service has introduced a new ceremony to allow families to celebrate the life of a loved one, including readings, music and individual memories and anecdotes. The hope is that this type of ceremony will be popular, particularly in winter months when the demand for weddings is lower.

## 3. Alignment with ambitions

- 3.1 Net zero carbon emissions for Cambridgeshire by 2045, and our communities and natural environment are supported to adapt and thrive as the climate changes

There are no significant implications for this ambition.



3.2 Travel across the county is safer and more environmentally sustainable

There are no significant implications for this ambition.

3.3 Health inequalities are reduced

There are no significant implications for this ambition.

3.4 People enjoy healthy, safe, and independent lives through timely support that is most suited to their needs

The report above sets out the implications for this ambition in 2.3 and 2.5

3.5 Helping people out of poverty and income inequality

The report above sets out the implications for this ambition in 2.3

3.6 Places and communities prosper because they have a resilient and inclusive economy, access to good quality public services and social justice is prioritised

The report above sets out the implications for this ambition in 1.3, 2.1, 2.4 and 2.5

3.7 Children and young people have opportunities to thrive

There are no significant implications for this ambition.

## 4. Significant Implications

There are no significant implications, as this report is for information purposes only.

## 5. Source Documents

5.1 None.