

## Cambridgeshire Registration Service Annual Report

To: Communities, Social Mobility, and Inclusion Committee

Meeting Date: 16 January 2025

From: Executive Director of Place and Sustainability

Electoral division(s): All

Key decision: No

Executive Summary: This report provides the Committee with an update on Registration service delivery over the last twelve months, focusing on ceremonies, appointments, performance, and technology.

In addition, the report provides assurance around the delivery of the statutory duties and responsibilities of the service.

Recommendation: The committee is recommended to:

Note the contents of the report.

Officer contact:

Name: Peter Gell

Post: Service Director Regulatory Services

Email: [peter.gell@cambridgeshire.gov.uk](mailto:peter.gell@cambridgeshire.gov.uk)

# 1. Creating a greener, fairer, and more caring Cambridgeshire

1.1 This report details proposals that would impact on the following ambitions of the Council.

Ambition 1 - Net zero emissions for Cambridgeshire by 2045, and our communities and natural environment are supported to adapt and thrive as the climate changes.

1.2 The service operates from multiple venues across Cambridgeshire, reducing the need for staff, and customers attending offices to travel unnecessary distances.

Ambition 4 – People enjoy healthy, safe, and independent lives through timely support that is most suited to their needs.

1.3 The service contributes to this Ambition in several ways. Registration statistical data provides a valuable public health insight in terms of numbers, trends, and trajectories, and is shared with a range of partners. The service is well placed due to its community-based settings and the high volume of interactions with the public to provide and/or signpost those in need to support groups and services, helping to keep people safe and health.

Ambition 6 – Places and communities prosper because they have a resilient and inclusive economy, access to good quality public services, and social justice is prioritised.

1.4 The importance of being an accessible service is reflected in the placement of Registration offices around Cambridgeshire. Many of the functions provided by the service are legally required to be delivered in person. Registration services also undertake ceremonies at private venues across the county and offer electronic and telephone services.

## 2. Background

2.1 This report is the annual update on registration service delivery for Cambridgeshire and provides assurance around the delivery of the statutory duties and responsibilities of the service.

2.2 The Cambridgeshire Registration service provides statutory services for the official recording of key events, including births, deaths, marriages, civil partnership ceremonies, and citizenship ceremonies. In addition, the service undertakes several non-statutory, income generating services, such as naming and renewal of vows ceremonies.

2.3 There are detailed legislative requirements in respect of the statutory functions delivered by Registration services, 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). Proper Officers (designated post holders within the local authority) are required to provide annual assurance to the Registrar General at the GRO in relation to service delivery, performance, public protection, and counter fraud and with regards to the requirements set out in the Registration Acts.

- 2.4 The GRO provides governance and scrutiny of local authority Registration services through assessment of annual performance submissions and undertaking local authority audits, and field checks. The service is assessed to ensure compliance with over seventy measures relating to public protection and counter fraud.
- 2.5 The service maintains regular contact with the Regional GRO Compliance Officer to ensure the GRO remains assured as to service delivery arrangements in Cambridgeshire while also benefiting from the officer's experience and knowledge. The Compliance Officer has attended team workshops and provided partner feedback during key interviews.
- 2.6 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 82 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](#).

### 3. Main Issues

#### 3.1 Ceremonies Update

- 3.1.1 Throughout the ceremonies update, there are examples where service provision has evolved to become more inclusive, providing greater variety for residents in line with the Council's Ambition 6.
- 3.1.2 Seven new ceremony venues have been licensed this year, giving couples more choice across the county. The service has welcomed back Minstrel Court after a change of ownership and extensive refurbishment, and the Gonville Hotel in the centre of Cambridge. Brampton Golf Club became an approved ceremony venue following a wedding fair on their premises and discussions with officers and couples on the day. All ceremony venues are assessed to ensure they meet specified criteria before they can become an Approved Venue, including accessibility considerations, such as parking provision, toilets, as well as movement in and around the venue.
- 3.1.3 Twenty-three venues now include the wholly outside option, which allows couples to have a ceremony anywhere in the grounds of the venue. This includes lake areas, two islands and the stunning Fellows Gardens in several colleges.
- 3.1.4 A new room has been added to the Roger Ascham office in Cambridge to give couples more choice in how and where they are married. The new room will be known as the Orchard Room and will suit couples seeking an intimate, no fuss ceremony.
- 3.1.5 Animals and pets have proved to be very popular with some couples; 22 ceremonies have been performed with dogs present, as demonstrated in the testimonials attached at Appendix 1, and one with an owl delivering the rings.
- 3.1.6 The service has begun giving couples a 'Congratulations Letter' at the end of the ceremony. Since the introduction of schedules in 2021, following legislative changes, marriage certificates are no longer issued on the day of the ceremony, and this has resulted in some couples commenting that they felt they were missing out on complimentary upgrades and gifts when travelling on their honeymoon. Having listened to the feedback, the service now

presents a letter that confirms the marriage or civil partnership took place and gives details of how to order more certificates and give customer feedback.

- 3.1.7 Bespoke ceremonies were introduced in January 2024 and are aimed at people wanting to have a ceremony in a venue that is not licensed, such as a garden or community centre. The couple have a short legal ceremony in one of the service's offices and then a completely bespoke ceremony written and delivered for them either later in the day or the following day. The bespoke ceremony was launched as a trial, and as of November 2024, 23 bookings have taken place to date generating £19,550. It is not common for local authorities to venture into the market of unlicensed ceremonies, this being an area where celebrants operate. This does, however, add competition to the market, it offers couples more choice, as the Council can provide a legal ceremony as well as part of the package, and it provides an alternative revenue stream for the Council.

## Performance

- 3.1.8 In the last twelve months, the service has performed 1,011 ceremonies in Council rooms and 1,006 ceremonies in Approved Venues, which have been offering discounts and booking incentives to couples as the take up has been reduced.
- 3.1.9 The Cambridgeshire Quality of Life Survey findings for 2024 rated the satisfaction level for the Registration service as 85%, this being the joint highest rated Council service and 1% higher than 2023.
- 3.1.10 Customer surveys are sent to all couples following their ceremony to help inform service improvement and development. The service was rated 5 (out of 5) in response to "how were your registrars on the day" and 4.8 for overall experience with Cambridgeshire Ceremonies. The experience on the day of a ceremony for a couple is heavily influenced by the registrars attending. It is pleasing, therefore, to see the positive contribution they make, as evidenced by the examples of feedback received attached at Appendix 1.
- 3.1.11 Whereas customer feedback regarding staff has consistently been positive, feedback regarding venue outside areas, has occasionally been less favourable, with one customer commenting as follows:
- "The service itself and the room were absolutely fine, lovely setting inside and very cosy. But the photo opportunities were just awful... The only space currently is an extremely sad looking and fading area in the car park, which is also in full public view. It was very disappointing to say the least."
- 3.1.12 During October 2024, it became necessary to close off the decking photographic area at the Ely Register Office until it could be replaced, as it had become unsafe. The upkeep and presentation of outside areas for couples can affect the overall experience for couples at council venues. Though there are location limitations which will impact on the presentation of some sites more than others, a better experience could be provided subject to financial investment being possible. Discussions have taken place in respect of a forward plan for maintenance in future.
- 3.1.13 Group citizenship ceremonies have continued to take place in New Shire Hall since October 2022. Between that date and 8 November 2024, the service has welcomed 2,022 new citizens. Private citizenship ceremonies have also been successful, with 131 new citizens welcomed in this way.

## Marketing

- 3.1.14 The team has attended wedding fairs and venue open days throughout Cambridgeshire, attracting significant interest from those attending. This provided couples with an opportunity to ask questions and receive guidance regarding the booking process. The service's presence also enabled bookings to be secured, as dates and times could be checked and confirmed, ensuring venue and Registration Officer availability align. Attendance has further 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.
- 3.1.15 Open days in the Council's ceremony rooms also provide an opportunity for couples to look at the rooms and ask ceremony officers questions before deciding on their ceremony.
- 3.1.16 The use of social media is increasingly becoming important in promoting services on offer, and the service's social media posts continue to grow in popularity. The team now hands out business cards with contact details to photographers, so that they tag the service on social media to build engagement and awareness. This has resulted in increased collaboration with local suppliers and increased awareness of the flexible and modern approach to ceremonies that the team is taking.
- 3.1.17 The team has also produced leaflets that can be included in birth and death appointments to promote non-statutory services.

## 3.2 Appointments Update

- 3.2.1 The GRO has been undertaking significant improvements to its civil registration system, focusing on modernising its IT infrastructure, digitising records, and enhancing customer services. These works are ongoing.
- 3.2.2 In 2023, the GRO initiated a trial of a new information technology registration system for death registrations, known as the Digital Registration Service (DRS). This pilot aimed to streamline the process for deaths occurring at residential addresses and took place in North Lincolnshire and Westminster. In 2024, the DRS was expanded to additional locations, including Leicester, Surrey, Cardiff, Hertfordshire, Lancaster, Solihull, Sunderland, Bath and North East Somerset. However, there has been no update regarding the full rollout of this system.
- 3.2.3 It remains the Government's intention to enable remote death registration appointments through legislative change, as was the case due to temporary arrangements during the Covid-19 pandemic. This added flexibility for customers and is expected to decrease the number of appointments required at offices in the future, and will likely more than counter increased demand due to population growth.
- 3.2.4 The service continues to display and provide a variety of information resources and leaflets including those for Little Miracles, SANDS (Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Charity), Mind, Cruse Bereavement Support, Cambridgeshire Child and Family Centres and Me, to help people access support when needed, and is open to helping signpost to other support networks. This contributes towards the Council's Ambition 4 in helping people to enjoy healthy, safe, and independent lives.

- 3.2.5 The service works 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 in a timely manner when the request is made outside of office hours, demonstrating a commitment to the councils Ambition 6 in terms of inclusivity.
- 3.2.6 On September 9 2024, the GRO implemented legislative changes in the form of Death Certification Reforms. These revised the timeline for registering a death by a qualified informant, extending the period from five days after the date of death to five days after the necessary documentation is completed. The reform also mandates that all related paperwork from medical facilities such as surgeries, hospitals, and hospices undergo scrutiny by a Medical Examiner before being submitted to registration services. The service has worked closely during the changes with the medical examiners and bereavement teams at the local hospitals and doctors to adapt a unified approach to ensure as smooth a transition as possible to provide good quality public services (Council Ambition 6).

## Performance

- 3.2.7 Meeting the demand for registration appointments has been challenging this year, with software issues and staffing shortages. The software issue was resolved, and recruitment took place to address this, and though there was no quick solution, performance in terms of appointment availability improved month by month. As the Council's performance level in these areas is normally at the top end of local authority Registration service performance, the GRO remained assured through engagement that arrangements were in place to improve performance, and the trajectory was in the right direction. Currently 81% of deaths are registered within 5 days, 100% of still birth are registered with 42 days, and 83% of birth registrations are registered with 42 days, these being the national measures. The service is committed to improving performance further and is exploring whether, through workforce development, additional capacity can be obtained through better utilisation of staff across teams. Achieving this would provide best value by reducing the need to add to the staffing establishment, while also providing development opportunities for staff, and adding greater resilience.
- 3.2.8 Table 1 details the volume of registrations and notices since 2021/22. The data for 2023/24 is up to November 2024.

|   | 2021-22 | 2022-23 | 2023-24 |
|---|---------|---------|---------|
| Births registered                       | 7,760   | 7,454   | 7,331   |
| Deaths registered                       | 5,779   | 6,517   | 6,249   |
| Stillbirths registered                  | 41      | 32      | 16      |
| Notices of marriage / civil partnership | 5,417   | 5,288   | 5,148   |

Table 1: Service delivery 2021-2024

## Accommodation

- 3.2.9 During August 2024, there was an outbreak of mould at Cambridgeshire Archives, the location of one of the Registration Offices but also where historical records for the service are held. The air conditioning was not working properly, and relative humidity had risen to a

point where visible mould had started to spread to some volumes. Owing to Health and Safety restrictions, staff were not permitted to access the archive until an inspection was carried out. This meant suspending the copy certificate process for any orders requiring access to a physical register until an investigation was completed. Access to archive material was subsequently resumed, subject to wearing the appropriate personal protective equipment, and there was minimal interruption to customers.

3.2.10 With the use of de-humidifiers provided by the Property service, the relative humidity is under control and mould spores will be dormant and not spread. The Archives service is undertaking work to remove mould from those records affected and working with the Property services to improve the efficiency of the air conditioning system.

### 3.3 Technology

3.3.1 The service has been using new corporate technologies such as Teams, AI Builder, Power Automate, OneDrive and MS Forms to improve workflow and efficiency. Among other things, it has:

- Enabled the service to deal with all ceremony enquiries in-house and reduce reliance on the Contact Centre as the first point of contact.
- Provided a means of enabling team leaders to share feedback with staff regarding the quality of their registrations.
- Enabled the service to track outstanding fee payments.
- Enabled the capturing of scanned supporting documents relating to registrations in SharePoint, along with metadata relating to those documents.
- Enabled the population of spreadsheets with citizen information from scanned cover sheets. These sheets are used to provide necessary upload information for the service's Zipporah software system.

3.3.2 The Camdex index of registrations from 1837-present day has been increasingly unreliable on the Heycentric payment solution. Consequently, the service is working to retire Camdex and migrate 2,000,000 index entries to Structured Query Language (SQL) and use the Granicus Platform.

3.3.3 The law requires notices of marriages and civil partnerships to be displayed in the Cambridgeshire Register Office for 29 days while the building is open to the public. The service has moved the display to a cloud-based solution called 'OptiSigns'. Using software to deliver this provides long-term benefits in terms of reliability and hardware maintenance / overheads, but since the hosting company is based in the United States, information governance arrangements were complex and took some time to secure.

3.3.4 Medical Examiners are now supplying death certificates to the service using Zipporah's upload method. This is a more secure way of supplying documentation and provides a better workflow than using Microsoft Outlook.

3.3.5 File Transfer Protocol (FTP) is now used to upload records to the Zipporah citizenship module, which saves significant staff time. Further, now that the Home Office supplies email addresses, Microsoft's Power Automate flow, which automates process flows, is used to

send each citizen an invitation asking them to book their ceremony, rather than passively waiting for them to book after receiving their notification from the Home Office.

### 3.4 Finance

3.4.1 The Registration service costs approximately £1.3m to deliver and brings in approximately £2m in revenue. Revenue from ceremonies at Approved Venues has, however, dropped during 2023/24 due to couples either deferring ceremonies or looking for more affordable alternatives, reflecting the challenging economic climate. Demand for Council venues has remained high, and the new bespoke ceremonies have provided a means to offset reduced Approved Venue revenue.

3.4.2 In order to provide added certainty to couples when booking ceremonies, fees have been set for three years. As couples often book a year or more before their ceremony, knowing what the cost is at the time is preferable. Should inflation exceed predictions then the terms and conditions do allow for the recovery of the shortfall.

3.4.3 Statutory fees were revised on 28 May 2024 for the first time for several years. The most significant and high-volume changes included:

- Certificates increasing from £11 to £12.50.
- Notice appointments increasing from £35 to £42.

3.4.4 In the 2024/25 financial year, the increases should accrue an additional £94k and the service expects to receive an additional £113k pro rata annually.

## 4. Significant Implications

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

## 5. Source Documents

5.1 None