

Cambridgeshire Registration Service Annual Report

To: Communities, Social Mobility and Inclusion Committee

Meeting Date: Thursday 2 December 2021

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:

- a) Note and comment on the overall performance of the service; and
- b) Comment on the suggested future service development set out in section 2.7.3 of the report, and identify further opportunities for service development, diversification or improvements.

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1. Background

- 1.1 The Cambridgeshire Registration Service provides core statutory services for the official recording of key events (birth and death registrations, marriage ceremonies, civil partnerships, citizenship ceremonies) and provision of copy certificates, in addition to 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 on 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 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 Castle Lodge at Shire Hall in Cambridge is currently the Register Office for the county with full-time registration offices also in Ely and Huntingdon. There are part-time offices in March and Wisbech. In addition, there are currently 74 Approved Venues (this does not include Council Ceremony Rooms), details of which can be on the Cambridgeshire Ceremonies website: <https://www.cambridgeshireceremonies.co.uk/venues>

2. Main Report

2.1 Accommodation

- 2.1.1 Some registration buildings remain closed to the public, with customers waiting outside to be collected by staff for their appointments and ceremonies. This situation is primarily due to the Council's social distancing requirements to facilitate service delivery within the building (in terms of flow, volumes, CO2 levels, additional sanitising and space) and is expected to remain the case for some time. In shared buildings the Service has worked closely with other services throughout the pandemic.

2.1.2 Cambridge

A planning application was submitted in February 2020 for the conversion of the council's Roger Ascham site to become the new Cambridgeshire Register Office, the existing site needing to be vacated as part of the 'Cambs 2020' project.

Delays in the planning process, listed building consents, and shortage of some construction materials, all of which are outside of the council's control, have collectively resulted in a significant slippage to the initial relocation date of June 2021.

Phase 1 (for customer facing appointments and back-office functions) will relocate to Roger Ascham at the end of January 2022. Dates where ceremonies are already booked (plus any slots still available on those dates) in February and March 2022 will take place in the current location. Currently no further bookings can be made in April 2022, but from May 2022 onwards bookings are open for ceremonies in the new location following completion of Phase 2 of the project.

2.1.3 Addenbrookes

Prior to March 2020 the Registration Service offered appointments on site 2-3 days per week, in partnership with the hospital's Bereavement Care team, covering deaths at Cambridge University Hospitals Trust and Royal Papworth Hospital. Due to the impact of the pandemic on hospital services and pressure on space the room previously used has been reallocated for other hospital service provision. The telephone death registration process has negated the Services need for this space.

2.1.4 New Shire Hall, Alconbury

Larger Group Citizenship ceremonies are expected to take place at the New Shire Hall from Spring 2022, assuming that current pandemic related restrictions will be lifted. In the interim period small group Citizenship ceremonies will continue to take place.

2.2 Staffing

2.2.1 The Service restructure implemented in April 2020 has continued to enhance service delivery through better service design. Benefits include:

- Increased service resilience and succession planning.
- Ability to support members of staff towards obtaining the National Registration City and Guilds qualification for the first time.
- Higher staff retention than most similar Registration Services.
- Increased training and development of staff has improved service resilience and has enabled a duty officer arrangement in the Appointments Team to be implemented.
- The capacity to increase engagement with partners, customers, and other stakeholders. This has been particularly important in helping assist Approved Venues during the pandemic. The Service has been proactive in encouraging feedback and has backed up written and verbal communications with site visits. Feedback received following communications has been positive, welcoming what has been described several times as the services helpful approach. Five new Approved Venue locations are now available, with one existing venue temporarily closed (for refurbishment) and three venues no longer operating as such.

2.2.2 Throughout the pandemic the Service has continued to work hard to ensure that the increased workload did not overwhelm staff, and that working hours were kept to as near normal as possible with additional hours being on a purely voluntary basis. Mental health and well-being have been a key consideration during this period.

2.3 Performance and Analysis

2.3.1 Service data for 2020/21 has been compared with 2019/20 pre-pandemic data in brackets. The Service registered 7,135 (7,189) births and 6,115 (5,567) deaths, took 2,737 (4,504) notices of marriage / civil partnership, carried out 608 (1,968) marriage / civil partnership ceremonies, and welcomed 846 (1,376) new British citizens.

2.3.2 Annual General Register Office Report

Each year Registration Services are required to submit a return to the GRO (see Appendix 1 for the full report), 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.

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 99%. Whilst non-coronial death registrations increased by 36% the Service increased KPI attainment (to register in 5 days) from 77% to 78%.

Cambridgeshire Registration Service continues to be well regarded by the GRO and peers across the country, and this was reflected in communications from the GRO Compliance Manager in response to the latest Annual Report, and during a visit to the Service in October.

The Service was also recognised for its support to other districts, the East of England Regional Registration forum and the National Panel, the latter of which has assisted in informing national policy during the pandemic.

- 2.3.3 With 100,000 email enquiries alone to the Service between April and July 2021, compared with approximately 14,000 in a typical year, there will inevitably be some rare occasions when service provision is not to the level the Service would normally provide, and customers expect. The Service welcomes all feedback and uses it as an opportunity to learn, improve and develop services where necessary. Regular training and team briefings take place across the various teams and offices and have proven to be an effective vehicle to disseminate key messages.

2.4 Finance

- 2.4.1 Throughout the pandemic a range of agreed measures were applied to offer support to customers and partners including moving a ceremony free of charge, refunds, fees waived for new notices taken, and extensions to Approved Venue approvals. These factors, alongside the Service being unable to conduct ceremonies due to COVID-19 restrictions, resulted in an under recovery of income for 2020/21 with the end of year position reported as £530k adverse. Savings on staffing costs due to low ceremony volumes helped offset some of the lost income.

In the previous financial year, the service reported the final outturn was a surplus of £435k. An increase in the statutory charge for birth, marriage and death certificates resulted in an over-recovery of income in the service. The current in-year forecast for 2021/22 is a balanced budget.

2.5 Legislative Changes and Service Development

2.5.1 Legislative Changes

In the last year there have been a number of legislative changes to note:

- Legislation was implemented to close all marriage registers and replace them with marriage schedules (for all civil and religious ceremonies) and change the process for certificates after a ceremony has taken place. This resulted in frequent failure of the national software used across the UK for the following 12 weeks. The Cambridgeshire Registration Manager acted as the national Registration Service lead, working to assist the GRO to identify and test solutions to fix the problem.
- In July temporary legislation was implemented to permit fully outdoor ceremonies at Approved Venues, and as part of the EU Exit arrangements, changes were made to the legal civil preliminaries process for European Economic Area nationals.

2.5.2 Service Developments

The Service has continued to develop and improve service delivery over and above that required to meet the demands of the pandemic and legislative changes, examples include:

- Changes to the ceremony website:
 - A “question and answer” approach to documentation required for notice appointments
 - An expanded and updated range of “Frequently Asked Questions”
- Use of software to facilitate the co-ordinated return of all closed registers from over 394 religious buildings following the legislative changes described above.

2.5.3 Following a formal scheme change in March 2021, Suffolk Registration Service are now able to register births and issue certificates for births in Cambridgeshire. Previously, customers would have to wait for a declaration to be posted and processed by the Service. Since the implementation, 79 such births have been registered.

2.6 COVID-19 impact and recovery

2.6.1 The pandemic has continued to have a major and unprecedented impact, particularly in terms of ceremony bookings. Continued detailed planning in response to the frequent, and often short notice, COVID-19 restriction changes has ensured that Cambridgeshire has been at the forefront of Registration Services in terms of recovery. The Contact Centre has been invaluable in helping the Service recover so quickly following restrictions.

2.6.2 Death registrations

The use of telephone death registrations has improved performance against KPI's and had huge benefits for all involved, especially bereaved families, and is something that all parties are keen to see continue. To extend beyond March 2022 will require legislative changes, as current provisions were made under emergency powers during the pandemic.

The Service worked closely with Public Health colleagues to provide timely data each week during the peak period of COVID-19 related deaths.

2.6.3 Birth registrations

The Service locally has ensured that births could be registered in a timely manner, nationally there are still over 17,500 births that have not been registered in the statutory 42-day period. In Cambridgeshire the number is 3 and that is as a result of the parents currently unable to register the birth due to being hospitalised.

2.6.4 Notices

The Service remains one of the few in the region with very good availability for notice appointments, with many elsewhere only able to offer an appointment a few months before a ceremony, rather than the week the request is received.

2.6.5 Marriages / Civil Partnerships

Throughout the pandemic there have been multiple changes in restrictions, leading to higher customer demand. The Service has moved bookings wherever possible, to avoid cancellations and to reduce the negative impact on the Approved Venues and other businesses.

The Service has worked hard to support Approved Premises across the county, such as sharing COVID-19 risk assessments to assist them in producing their own, updating them on changing guidance as soon as information is received, helping interpret the guidance and offering practical solutions where possible.

For ceremonies taking place there is still good use being made of technology so that friends and family unable to attend in person can still be included.

2.6.6 Citizenship Ceremonies

The Service has continued to deliver 6 small group ceremonies per day in the Keats Room in Huntingdon, with the appropriate frequency maintained to welcome all new citizens. Whilst numbers were low in 2020/21, in 2021/22 the Service has already welcomed 1,374 (up to end of September).

2.6.7 Regional Group and National Panel

The role of Chair on the Regional Group (14 local registration services) and member of the National Panel (174 registrations services) enabled the Registration Service Manager to help shape national decisions and processes, as well as support local colleagues throughout the pandemic. Advice on how the COVID-19 recovery has been achieved successfully has been sought from Cambridgeshire by at least half of the authorities in the regional group.

2.7 Looking Ahead

2.7.1 The Service continues to work with partners, including the Coroner Service, to minimise the impact of the formal implementation of the National Medical Examiner Scheme. Locally NHS Trusts already have these in place, but the statutory requirement also includes provision for all community deaths to be subject to the same level of scrutiny. This is due to be in place during Summer 2022.

2.7.2 National Panel continues to work with GRO on a 5-year transformation plan, which will change the way in which some elements of the service are delivered to better reflect society

today. This includes projects around improved processes, electronic data sharing and elements of service delivery online for some key life events.

2.7.3 Future Service Developments

In addition to those covered elsewhere in the report the Service plans to:

- Enable customers to book citizenship ceremonies through online booking, as well as reviewing the current delivery model to ensure the council is maximising opportunities to provide and link participants to services and support available across the county.
- Complete a business specification and re-tender for a booking / stock control / tills system
- Continue to develop new and alternative ways of engaging with customers and recording/measuring satisfaction.
- Review, and if required re-evaluate, any role not included in the previous restructure.
- To support the proposed increased income target for 2022/23 and beyond, explore expansion of services, such as renewal of vows, promoting the service to those couples that were not able to have their preferred ceremony due to national COVID-19 restrictions, and exploration of other service provision and delivery opportunities.
- Consider increasing ceremony capacity, both within council ceremony rooms and at Approved Venues. The service will work with Approved Venues to explore at what times of the year, days of the week etc, there is further demand for ceremonies to help inform when more availability will be offered.

Committee members are asked to comment on these suggestions, and identify further opportunities for service development, diversification or improvements.

2.7.4 Legislative Changes

There continue to be frequent changes to legislation relating to civil registration, below is an outline of changes on the horizon:

- The Ministry of Justice has confirmed a consultation on whether the temporary outdoor ceremony easements (which solely relate to Approved Venues) should be made permanent.
- Implementation of legislation to facilitate the conversion of marriages to civil partnerships.
- Electronic Communications Bill relating to electronic transmission of some elements of paperwork related to the death registration process.
- Register of Births and Deaths Bill includes proposals to make the electronic record for births and deaths the legal record.

- Marriage Act 1949 (Amendment Bill). This seeks to introduce an additional offence relating to marriage solemnization.
- Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Bill. This seeks to revoke parental or judicial consent that permits the marriage or civil partnership of a child and to criminalise child marriage or civil partnership under the age of 18.
- Law Commission Review of Weddings – the consultation took place but as yet no date for publication of the report.

3. Alignment with corporate priorities

3.1 Communities at the heart of everything we do

There are no significant implications for this priority, other than reference to the fact the Service interacts with most people at some point during their lifetime, and as such with its various community locations, it is well placed to support and promote initiatives and arrangements to enhance the lives of people across the county.

3.2 A good quality of life for everyone

The Service impacts on the well-being and quality of life of customers and their families, the majority of whom are Cambridgeshire residents, by ensuring appointments are available and carried out in accordance with legislation:

- the recently bereaved are able to complete the death registration process thereby facilitating funerals and signposting to relevant services - an important part of the grieving process
- babies are registered, giving them a legal identity and families access to a range of services e.g., childcare, tax benefits, healthcare
- completion of the legal preliminaries, and ceremonies where relevant, for marriages and civil partnership as well as ceremonies for citizenship – with legal changes and financial benefits as a direct result
- reporting safeguarding concerns, relating to both children and adults
- working with the Forced Marriages Unit to protect and support relevant adults
- reporting concerns around sham marriages and civil partnerships

3.3 Helping our children learn, develop and live life to the full

There are no significant implications for this priority.

3.4 Cambridgeshire: a well-connected, safe, clean, green environment

With legislative changes to the way in which deaths are registered, removing the need for this to be carried out face to face, there has been a reduction in the number of members of the public travelling for this purpose since March 2020.

3.5 Protecting and caring for those who need us

In addition to relevant aspects in 3.2 the Registration Service plays a vital role in supporting families and friends, and the efficiency of the service coupled with sensitivity of

communication and approach are all key to this. The provision of timely registration services has a positive impact on suppliers of goods and services across Cambridgeshire e.g., Funeral Directors (where delays in issuing paperwork would create capacity issues for body storage and delays to funerals), and wedding suppliers (from Approved Venues to florists, caterers and bridal shops)

4. Significant Implications

4.1 Resource Implications

As a result of COVID-19 there is a loss of revenue during 2020/21 as detailed in 2.4

4.2 Procurement/Contractual/Council Contract Procedure Rules Implications

There are no significant implications within this category.

4.3 Statutory, Legal and Risk Implications

The Local Authority has a statutory duty to provide the necessary resources to deliver the Registration Service. This is also a high-profile service and therefore carries reputational risk implications.

4.4 Equality and Diversity Implications

There are no significant implications within this category.

4.5 Engagement and Communications Implications

There are no significant implications within this category.

4.6 Localism and Local Member Involvement

There are no significant implications within this category.

4.7 Public Health Implications

The Registration Service plays an important role in collecting information that contributes to public health epidemiology, understanding demographic trends and the identification of potential issues that require investigation. It has adapted where possible to the COVID-19 pandemic situation to maintain services in a safe environment.

4.8 Environment and Climate Change Implications on Priority Areas

There are no significant implications within this category.

Have the resource implications been cleared by Finance? Yes

Name of Financial Officer: Martin Wade

Have the procurement/contractual/ Council Contract Procedure Rules implications been cleared by the Head of Procurement? Yes

Name of Officer: Henry Swan

Has the impact on statutory, legal and risk implications been cleared by the Council's Monitoring Officer or LGSS Law? Yes

Name of Legal Officer: Fiona McMillan

Have the equality and diversity implications been cleared by your Service Contact? Yes

Name of Officer: Adrian Chapman

Have any engagement and communication implications been cleared by Communications? Yes

Name of Officer: Amanda Rose

Have any localism and Local Member involvement issues been cleared by your Service Contact? Yes

Name of Officer: Adrian Chapman

Have any Public Health implications been cleared by Public Health? Yes

Name of Officer: Val Thomas

If a Key decision, have any Environment and Climate Change implications been cleared by the Climate Change Officer? N/A

5. Source Documents

- 5.1 The Marriage of Same Sex Couples (Conversion of Civil Partnership) Regulations 2014 - <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2014/9780111117545/contents>
- 5.2 Electronic Communications Bill - <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199900/cmbills/004/2000004.htm>
- 5.3 Register of Births and Deaths Bill – [Registers of Births and Deaths Bill - Parliamentary Bills - UK Parliament](#)
- 5.4 Marriage Act 1949 (Amendment Bill) - <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2608>
- 5.5 Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Bill - <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2900>