

MODERNISATION OF THE REGISTRATION SERVICE

PORTFOLIO RESPONSIBILITY: CORPORATE AND CUSTOMER SERVICES AND HUMAN RESOURCES

CABINET

11TH OCTOBER, 2007

Wards Affected

County-wide

Purpose

To approve the proposal to establish a single registration district for Herefordshire and the implementation of a new governance framework.

Key Decision

This is a Key Decision because it is likely to be significant in terms of its effect on communities living or working in Herefordshire in an area comprising one or more wards.

It was not included in the Forward Plan however inclusion in the agenda gives the required notice in accordance with Section 15 of the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Access to Information) Regulations 2000.

Recommendations

- THAT (a) the current six registration districts be amalgamated to provide a single registration district for Herefordshire, and;**
- (b) the new governance framework be implemented and the Head of Legal and Democratic Services as Proper Officer be delegated to submit a draft Scheme to the General Register Office for approval.**

Reasons

To continue the provision of the registration service to the public and to ensure the seamless transition during the new governance and legislative changes to the registration service.

Considerations

Background

1. After remaining substantively unchanged for 170 years the Registration Service in England and Wales is embarking on a significant modernisation programme, both nationally and locally. The objective is to restructure the service to meet the needs of today's society, with the emphasis on customer focus while maintaining the necessary rigour and control appropriate to this key service. The government has put in place a challenging modernisation agenda, including legislative change, providing an

Further information on the subject of this report is available from
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opportunity for service reform and improvement. Responsibility for the registration service is currently shared by the Registrar General, local government and registration officers. Registration officers are statutory post holders, appointed by the local authority but not employed by them.

2. In 2002 the White Paper 'Civil Registration: Vital Change' was published setting out an agenda for a modern, effective and high quality registration service in keeping with the Government's wider reform agenda and four guiding principles to improve customer service:
 - Setting national standards within a framework of clear accountability
 - More flexibility so that public service organisations and their staff are better able to provide modern public services
 - Devolution and delegation to the front line giving local leaders responsibility and accountability for delivery, and the opportunity to design services around the needs of local people
 - More customer choice and the ability, if provision is poor, to have an alternative provider

The White Paper also proposed that local authorities should be given responsibility for delivering the local registration service and that superintendent registrars and registrars should become local authority employees.

3. In the absence of primary legislation to take forward the changes outlined in the White Paper the General Register Office (GRO) and the Local Authority Co-ordinators of Regulatory Services (LACORS) jointly developed proposals for a more modern governance framework for the delivery of the local services. Under the current governance framework, once a scheme has been approved, local authorities must operate within those arrangements with no discretion to vary the terms of the scheme without a formal amendment or scheme change. The new governance framework provides for a more flexible, less prescriptive scheme, allowing local authorities greater discretion to deliver local services which meet both national standards and local community needs.
4. In seeking to implement a new governance framework the authority must agree to the terms of the Code of Practice (attached at Appendix 1) which will be attached to the new scheme. It must also agree to meet at least the national standards as set out in the Good Practice Guide, prepare an annual Service Delivery Plan and have in place a reliable system for monitoring performance and annual reporting to the Registrar General.

Current Provision of Service

5. Herefordshire is currently divided into six registration districts namely Bromyard, Hereford, Kington, Ledbury, Leominster and Ross-on-Wye. The current requirement is to have a Superintendent Registrar and Registrar of Births and Deaths for each registration district. These posts hold an unusual status and are known as statutory or principal officers and as such are responsible in law for their 'own acts and omissions'. They do not have any legal employer. Each district provides customers with services for births and death registrations, marriage and civil partnership ceremonies, duplicate certificates, reaffirmation of vows and naming ceremonies

6. Each district has a Register Office which also includes a secure store for registers, where all the registers from 1837 to date are retained for the district, a reception/waiting area and facilities for customers. All of the register offices apart from Kington have a ceremony room. Kington has an agreement with a local hotel to use one of its approved premise rooms.
7. Current legislation dictates that events are registered in the district in which they take place. This limits flexibility for the public in where they register an event and can make it difficult to know which district to contact. It can also create duplication, as an event can be 'declared' in one district (a process which takes nearly as long as registration) and then formally registered in another, entailing sending details and the fees from one district to another by post, then effectively repeating the process of recording the information and accounting for the fees. The customer then has to wait for any certificates to arrive back, again by post.
8. As referred to earlier in this report the current registration staff are not employees of the Council. Whilst one of the proposals in the White Paper was for all registration staff, including principal officers, to become local authority employees there was no legislation to provide for this. It was also felt that it was inappropriate for this proposal to be implemented by means of a regulatory reform order. The Statistics and Registration Service Bill was introduced into Parliament which provided for registration post-holders to become employees of the local authority which appointed them. The Bill received Royal Assent in July 2007 and is therefore now an Act. It has been indicated that the 1st December 2007 will be the implementation date for the employment transfer but this has yet to be confirmed.

Consultation

8. In accordance with the requirements of the new governance arrangements it is intended to consult with all registration staff on the proposed changes. This will commence on 4th October and end on 25th October and will take into account the principles as laid out in the authority's document 'Managing Change – Guidance on Change in Employment'.
9. Local authorities are also required to consult with the public and stakeholders of the service. A consultation exercise took place in March 2007 which included writing to all stakeholders (e.g. medical practices, nursing homes, clergy, funeral directors, town and parish councils etc), placing the consultation document on the Council's website and in libraries and placing a notice in the local papers. Out of 170 letters sent to stakeholders and public notices only thirteen responses were received. There were no objections but the main comment received was concern that the provision of registration services should be removed from any of the current market towns. It is not intended to withdraw the service from any of the market towns. In fact it is proposed that the opening hours be extended in Hereford, Ledbury, Leominster and Ross-on-Wye with Kington and Bromyard being open on an appointment only basis.

Proposed changes

10. Set out below are the proposed changes which will be included in the new scheme:
 - a. To move to a single Herefordshire Registration District amalgamating the current six districts.
 - b. The Hereford Register Office based at the Town Hall, Hereford will be designated as the Herefordshire Register Office. The offices currently based at Leominster, Ledbury and Ross-on-Wye will become Registration Offices and

each provide the full range of customer services. The offices currently based at Bromyard and Kington will become service delivery points but used on an appointment only basis.

- c. The Herefordshire Register Office will have the official register office ceremony room. It is proposed that the existing ceremony rooms in Bromyard, Leominster, Ledbury and Ross-on-Wye be re-designated as approved premises. It is proposed at this stage there will be no increase in fee and that the statutory fee will continue to be charged.
- d. Consolidation of register storage in a single location incorporating a centralised facility for the preparation and issue of copy certificates. It is proposed that this will be at the Herefordshire Register Office. However this may not be able to happen immediately as it is dependant on storage space available.
- e. To increase opening hours at Hereford, Leominster, Ledbury and Ross-on-Wye. The hours at Bromyard and Kington will be reduced but as there will be an 'appointment only' system in place it is anticipated that appointments will be consolidated to a few hours rather than spread over a few days.
- f. A central, all appointment/marriage call centre system be introduced with one telephone number located within the service to allocate work appropriately to staff by co-ordinating all service appointments. It is anticipated that in the future Info by Phone will be used to take calls for the registration service.
- g. Full use to be made of technology. Examples - electronic diary management to provide a fully flexible booking system enabling registration appointments and ceremony bookings to be made and viewed for anywhere from anywhere; computerised registration accounting to replace the manual cash books.
- h. To provide increased non-statutory services such as naming ceremonies, renewal of marriage vows, civil funerals, ceremony rehearsals, commemorative certificates.
- i. During the first year of operation of the revised scheme monitoring will take place and a review carried out to determine if there should be any further changes.

Financial Implications

Funding for the new scheme will be covered by existing budgets. Staff are currently being consulted on the proposed new staffing structure however it is not anticipated that there will be any severance costs at this stage. The cost of increasing opening hours will be minimal as hours are being consolidated in some offices which are then redistributed to the remaining offices. As it will be a single district staff will be able to work in any of the offices.

It is proposed to centralise the storage of the registers. There will be no cost for this as it is intended to utilise existing storage as much as possible, however some registers will have to remain at the market town offices until suitable central storage becomes available. This has been flagged up as part of the Archives section in the accommodation strategy.

Risk Management

The Council has a statutory duty to ensure that the service continues to be available throughout the transitional period and beyond.

Alternative Options

There are no Alternative Options.

Consultees

None

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Code of Practice

Background Papers

None identified.