

CITIZENSHIP CEREMONIES

PROGRAMME AREA RESPONSIBILITY: HUMAN RESOURCES AND CORPORATE SUPPORT SERVICES

CABINET

18TH MARCH, 2004

Wards Affected

County-wide

Purpose

To note the new regulations and requirements relating to Citizenship Ceremonies and of proposed new services to be provided by the Herefordshire Registration Service.

Key Decision

This is not a Key Decision.

Recommendation

THAT the requirement to hold citizenship ceremonies be noted and that the Office of Chairman be the local political dignitary to officiate at the ceremony and welcome citizens to the County.

Reasons

New Regulations issued under the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 by the Home Office now require the Council to provide Citizenship Ceremonies with effect from 1 April 2004.

Considerations

1. The Cabinet is asked to note the new requirements and approve that the Office of Chairman be the local political dignitary to officiate at the ceremony and welcome citizens to the County, as required by the new Regulations.

Background

The Registration Service

2. The Registration Service provides a national uniform system for the registration of births and deaths and also provides the general public with a civil marriage alternative to being married by religious rites and ceremonies. Staff of the Registration Service are statutory officers of the Crown and their work is monitored and assessed by the Registrar General. They are not employees of the Council.

Further information on the subject of this report is available from
Steve Oram, Public Services Manager on (01432) 260110

3. The Council currently is statutorily required to provide: management of the service; the appointment and payment of staff; the provision of office accommodation and equipment, and provides for the licensing of buildings as approved premises for civil marriage ceremonies. The Registrar General is currently carrying out a Civil Review of the national registration service and it is likely that total responsibility for this service will be transferred to local government in 2005/2006 under the Regulatory Reform procedure. The staff will then become employees of the Council.

Citizenship Ceremonies

4. The Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 now provides for applicants for British Nationality to make a citizenship oath and pledge at a ceremony conducted by a superintendent registrar. New Regulations have now been issued which provide that attendance at a ceremony is now mandatory for all those applying for British citizenship.
5. The Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 (Commencement No. 6) Order was made on 15 December 2003 and provides that citizenship ceremonies will commence in January 2004 but that ceremonies will be piloted in a small number of areas at first. The London Borough of Brent has recently held its first ceremony as part of the pilot process. Citizenship ceremonies would then be rolled out nationally and most areas, including Herefordshire, could expect to start holding ceremonies from April 2004 but more realistically in May/June 2004.

Requirements of the new legislation

6. The Home Office and the Registrar General have now issued formal guidance on the new requirements for citizenship ceremonies and the main elements are listed below:
 - It is likely that Herefordshire will have approximately 50-70 Citizenship applications per year.
 - Initially, requests for Citizenship Ceremonies are likely to commence in April/May 2004.
 - Ceremonies must be held within 3 months of receipt of the notification and the receipt of a certificate from the Home Office. It is proposed that the Council Chamber at the Town Hall or the Marriage Room at the Bath Street Register Office be used depending on the actual number of new citizens at any ceremony.
 - The Statutory fee of a standard group ceremony will be in the region of £68 per citizen. This will be paid to the Council by the Home Office. A further charge can be made if the ceremony is carried out on a personal basis and/or if it is held at a weekend or in the evening.
 - The regulations require a local political dignitary to be at the ceremony to welcome citizens to the County and it is suggested that this should be the Chairman of the Council.
 - The legislation also suggests that the Council should supply a gift and provide refreshments for each ceremony, the cost of which is to be included in the statutory fee.
 - There will be some administrative workload in processing the applications, dealing with Certificates, liaising with prospective citizens, booking accommodation and refreshments, organising the event, signing the certificates and informing the Home Office when ceremonies take place etc. This will have staffing implications and it is calculated that these costs will be in the region of 1.5 staff days per ceremony.

Standard and Non-Standard Ceremonies/Venues

Standard Ceremonies

7. Demand for citizenship ceremonies will vary according to the numbers of people settling in an area. In keeping with the emphasis on cohesiveness and community, the Home Office is encouraging group ceremonies (between 10 to 50 applicants) and these will be classed as standard ceremonies.
8. The primary thinking behind the legislation is that new citizens should be welcomed into the community in which they have decided to become a part and it is appropriate, therefore, that standard ceremonies should be offered in civic premises. It is proposed, therefore, to use the Council Chamber, Town Hall, Hereford / Bath Street Marriage Room for the conduct of standard ceremonies.
9. The Home Office will make a payment to a local authority for a standard ceremony out of the composite fee charged for consideration of an application for British Citizenship. The local authority will receive £68 per applicant for each ceremony from the Home Office. This fee is paid for each new citizen even for group ceremonies.

Non-Standard Ceremonies

10. The regulations give applicants the opportunity to request an individual or a customised ceremony in other premises. Some new citizens may wish to celebrate the acquisition of citizenship in a personal way, for example, holding a party for family and friends. There is provision for local authorities to charge for services over and above the standard ceremony and all non-standard ceremonies will attract an additional fee on top of the £68. The proposal at this stage is not to offer a non-standard ceremony unless requested to do so. If such a request is received a decision will need to be made as to whether it should take place on Saturday afternoons and/or Sundays or weekday evenings possibly in the Hereford Register Office or at a licensed approved premise. This will include small group ceremonies or individual ceremonies with say a maximum of 25 guests. However, unlike weddings, there will be no requirement for the ceremony to be an open public event and during the summer months the ceremonies may be offered in an open-air venue as an alternative to standard ceremonies.

Number and Timing of Ceremonies

11. With a possible 70 new citizens a year in Hereford, this may result in approximately only one ceremony a month. Therefore, initially, only one ceremony appointment will be offered at a fixed time once a month on say a Wednesday afternoon. The intention is to keep this under review whilst demand is assessed for standard and non-standard ceremonies.

Other New Services

12. The Government has recently published a consultation document on partnership registration. It is likely that this will become a statutory requirement in the near future and, as such, this will be included in the provision of additional civil celebratory ceremonies to be made available to citizens, in particular civil baby naming, reaffirmation of vows, and burial ceremonies. The Herefordshire Registration Service is planning to offer these services during the forthcoming financial year on a trial basis.

Alternative Options

There are no alternative options.

Risk Management

None identified but the Council does have a statutory duty to provide citizenship ceremonies.

Consultees

None identified.

Background Papers

None identified.