

Record of operational decision

Decision title:	Decision to introduce new, and increase existing Non-Statutory Registration Service fees and charges from 1 January 2025
Date of decision:	22 November 2024
Decision maker:	Director of Governance and Law
Authority for delegated decision:	Under the bespoke delegation set out in the Cabinet decision on 16 April 2012 SUBSIDIES, FEES AND CHARGES UPDATE Microsoft Word - \$5mbjgrn.doc (herefordshire.gov.uk) which allows for the implementation of any changes to fees and charges covered by the principles and policy direction, including those outlined in the report, be carried out under the overall scheme of delegation.
Ward:	Countywide
Consultation:	A review of fees charged by neighbouring authorities to compare with Herefordshire fees. This was to ensure Herefordshire remains competitive and affordable for couples and venues whilst covering increasing service costs.
Decision made:	To increase non-statutory Registration Services with effect from 1 January 2025 covering the period to end of 2027, with charges to be reviewed annually.
Reasons for decision:	<p>The Registration Service is a statutory service with responsibility for registering births, deaths and marriages within the county.</p> <p>Non-statutory fees apply to the conducting of a marriage or civil ceremony at either a Register Office or approved venue, and the licensing of approved venues. These increases do not include the statutory register office ceremonies which the General Register Office set at £56.</p> <p>Fees for conducting a ceremony were last reviewed and increased in 2024, covering the period up to the end of 2026.</p> <p><u>The fees for conducting a ceremony</u> are proposed to be increased by 5% year on year, keeping them affordable for couples and in-line with neighbouring authorities. Herefordshire has a large number of impressive wedding venues and attracts couples from across the country. It is important the service supports these local venues to remain competitive.</p> <p>The one exception to this percentage increase relates to the Oak Room at Hereford Town Hall. Use of this room was due to be suspended at the end of September 2024. The decision has since been made to retain the building and allow ceremonies to continue, however booking arrangements will change in future. The room is an approved venue but has historically been charged at a lower rate due to its proximity to the Register Office. Rather than immediately increase fees to match those of approved venues, fees will increase in steps over the next three years to bring them in line with those charged for other approved venues.</p>

	<p><u>Licence fees</u> are paid by venues to be able to hold weddings and civil ceremonies in their buildings and grounds. These were last reviewed in July 2023. We are aware of the financial challenges many small businesses are currently facing and therefore propose a smaller increase of 2% on these fees.</p> <p>There are other discretionary fees we can charge to recover administrative time of the team and other costs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Admin fee of £40 to make any changes to ceremony arrangements will be increased to £50. • Booking fee of £65 will be increased to £70. • The cost of postal passport change requests will increase from £25 to £30. • Non-statutory commemorative certificates will increase from £12 to £13; and certificate boxes from £9 to £10. • Private citizenship ceremonies of £185 will be increased to £195 (Mon to Thurs); and £205 (Fri and Sat). <p>In addition, a non-statutory service previously offered but suspended since Covid will be reintroduced. This is the production of Change of Name deeds for those wishing to change their name. Customers will attend an appointment and bring documents to receive a change of name deed document. For 2025, applications will be charged at £130; and £12.50 plus postage charged for any duplicate copies. These charges will be reviewed annually.</p> <p>The service will also look to raise awareness and market existing services which are less used e.g. naming ceremonies. These ceremonies are proposed to increase in price by 2%, including in the Oak Room where a more affordable choice compared to an approved venue will be maintained.</p> <p>The new fees are attached at appendix 1.</p> <p>Additional sources of income are being explored such as by allowing the couple to tailor their marriage and civil partnership ceremony. Any new fees will at least cover the costs of providing any new service, and consider fees charged by other authorities. The potential to offer funeral ceremonies will also be explored.</p>
<p>Equality Considerations</p>	<p>Any increase on fees can impact those in society that are less well-off. The authority is required to offer a basic ceremony for bride, groom and 2 witnesses at a statutory fee of £56.00. This is unaffected by the proposals in this report. Similarly, group citizenship ceremonies are held once a month and remain free of charge.</p> <p>Whilst fees for the Oak Room at the Town Hall will increase faster than 5% over the period, the service has introduced an additional affordable venue option at No 8 St Owen Street (The Willow Room). Fees for this new room are set out in appendix 1.</p>
<p>Highlight any associated risks/finance/legal/equality considerations:</p>	<p>The council has the power to set fees for the registration or renewal of an approved wedding premises under Regulation 12 of The Marriages (Approved Premises) Regulations 2005. There is also a power under section</p>

	<p>93 of the Local Government Act 2003 for the council to make a charge for discretionary services.</p> <p>These non-statutory fees will as a minimum cover the costs of providing the service, whilst remaining competitive against other authority fees and helping local businesses.</p> <p>Increasing the rate at which the Oak Room is charged may lead to a reduction in demand and a loss of income, however charging the full Approved Premise fee is consistent with our policy for other Approved Venues; and remains a competitive, affordable option compared with neighbouring venues.</p> <p>The previous hold on ceremonies in the Oak Room up until September 2024, and delays in licencing the new ceremony room (the Willow Room) did lead to some uncertainty for couples interested in booking their ceremony directly with the service up until September 2024. In addition, the Willow Room is also used as a waiting area for appointments at the register office. Both of these have had a negative impact on the income expected to generate from advanced bookings. The service will be undertaking a marketing campaign to raise awareness of the options now available.</p> <p>Over the last year, there has been an increasing demand for couples to choose a basic ceremony at £56 rather than choose a more expensive venue (this is a trend being reflected regionally as well as locally). If this trend continues, this may also lead to a reduction in income.</p> <p>The UK Government is still due to consider a 2022 Law Commission Report reviewing the arrangements of weddings and civil ceremonies in England and Wales. This could allow ceremonies to take place anywhere (as is the case in Scotland) and independent persons or celebrants to become officiators at ceremonies. If this becomes law, this will have a significant negative impact on the income the Council can generate. The service continues to look at introducing other ceremony packages with the aim that the council registration team is seen as offering high-quality, flexible, bespoke ceremonies and become the first point of call for couples considering their options.</p>
<p>Details of any alternative options considered and rejected:</p>	<p>Not to increase fees. Fees should reflect increasing staff and administrative costs.</p> <p>Ceremony fees for 2027 onwards need to be agreed and publicised to ensure couples know the full cost of their ceremony.</p>
<p>Details of any declarations of interest made:</p>	<p>None.</p>

Signed.....Claire Porter..... Date: 22.11.2024