

## **CORPORATE AND COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL 5 NOVEMBER 2019**

### **REGISTRATION SERVICE OVERVIEW**

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#### **Summary**

1. The Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel requested a 'deep dive' into the performance of death and still-birth registration appointments, following the Quarter 1 (April to June 2019) Performance Report which showed decline in performance in both of these areas.
2. The Report gives an overview of the current position of the Registration Service including its performance, recent changes and future developments. The plans in place to improve performance are included in this report for Members consideration.

#### **Background**

3. The Registration Service has been in existence since 1837 providing the statutory function of the registration of births, deaths and marriages. It is safe to say that little, of significance, changed for the first 150 years or so.
4. The first major change was the Approved Premises Act 1994, which allowed Marriages to take place in premises other than register offices and places of worship. This has grown in popularity with nearly 60% of the Civil Ceremonies in Worcestershire now occurring in one of the 83 venues licenced.
5. Since then there has been the introduction of Civil Partnerships, Marriage for same sex couples, abolition of time restrictions for weddings and Citizenship. A number of discretionary services have been introduced including those relating to immigration and nationality, deed poll and celebratory services such as celebrations of marriage and naming ceremonies.
6. In terms of the statutory functions, during financial year 2018/19, the Council registered:
  - 5258 births
  - 24 still births
  - 5946 deaths
  - 3956 Notices of Marriage
  - 8 Notices of Civil Partnership
  - 761 Register office ceremonies
  - 1120 Approved Premise ceremonies
  - 4 Civil Partnership Ceremonies
  - 4 Civil Partnership conversions to Marriage

- 8 Registrar Generals licence

7. The Registration Service has 45 members of staff in the team (most of which are part time) of which 17 are ceremony only staff and 10 peripatetic staff. The peripatetic staff provide cover for annual leave as well as assisting with resilience in times of demand.

8. All Registrars (with the exception of ceremony only staff) are multidisciplined. This ensures that there is a flexible workforce that can meet the change in demand for the various services. The Service endeavours to meet the needs of the community whenever it is required, whether it is a Registrar Generals licence for someone who wishes to marry urgently or a death that requires urgent registration for cultural reasons.

9. The Council has 7 registration offices within the County including an office at the Worcestershire Royal Hospital. The service is largely co-located which assists with the accessibility to the services, such as Kidderminster (co-located with the Town Council) and Bromsgrove (Parkside). The Register Office for the County of Worcestershire is at County Hall, Worcester.

10. In terms of budget, the service is self-sufficient.

11. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities receives regular updates, in terms of performance, pressures, opportunities and developments. Engagement and working with our partners in delivering the service continues to be essential as the service continues to work through a changing landscape. Only with combined efforts is the community able to be served during these significant events in their lives.

## **Performance**

12. Whilst the Council is measured in terms of performance for births, still births and deaths, the first part of this report is focussed on the availability of appointments for still births and deaths and the timeliness of death registration. The latter is an area of challenge in terms of statutory timescales (90% registered within 5 calendar days), customer preference and stakeholder engagement. NB. the death registration figures which the Council is measured against do not include those referred to the Coroner.

13. The availability of appointments as reported is a snapshot of the position at 9am each morning. This information is used to provide to the Council, as well as reporting to the General Register Office who oversee our performance in terms of agreed Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) as well as statutory requirement. However, it should be noted that this does not tell the whole story.

14. Appendix 1 provides an illustrative example of the availability of appointments at each office for registration of stillbirth and death between April and May 2019.

15. Stillbirths – The vast majority of stillbirths in Worcestershire occur at one of our major hospitals. Whilst the indicator shows the availability of appointments across the county, in reality registration takes place in either Redditch or Worcestershire Royal Hospital. It is ensured, however, that the registration in fact occurs when the

family are ready. The staff are flexible with how this is delivered and the location, either in the office or on the ward, working in liaison with the bereavement midwife.

16. Deaths – As detailed later in the report, one element of improving the statutory death registration target is ensuring enough availability. Whilst the availability listed in Appendix 1 indicates that there is always an appointment available in the County, it is not always an option that is taken for a number of reasons including the ability to travel.

17. The monthly summary of availability of still-birth and death registration appointments for this year to date is also detailed in Appendix 1.

18. Death Registration - Appendix 2 firstly provides performance on a local, regional and national level for the last 3 financial years and this year to date. It illustrates that whilst the Council is still above the national and regional level, its performance has not improved significantly and is still some way off the target of 90% within 5 days. The second graph shows the number of deaths registered each month over the same period and the percentage completed within the statutory timeframe.

19. Whilst it is acknowledged that there is still much to do, the Registration Service has been planning more successfully to ensure a more consistent service, especially where months include bank holidays and increase in numbers. This has been achieved by using the peripatetic staff and improved information from the hospitals via the bereavement office.

## **Actions**

20. The actions to date are set out below:

- Altered the booking system to only allow online booking two days in advance
- Communications to Doctors reminding them of the importance of the statutory timeframe
- Maintenance of a proforma to log on a daily basis those deaths registered outside of the statutory timeframe, including reasons. This provides the service with not only anecdotal information from the family, but the timescales with which the doctors are completing the medical cause of death certificate and when the families book their appointment. Appendix 2 indicates some of the anecdotal information recorded when speaking with families
- Examination of appointment availability to ensure that there is space for appointments, moving administrative work where required
- The introduction of a performance champion who is completing some work in terms of gathering best practice from those registration districts who are performing consistently well
- Initial planning for the festive season to maximise availability for deaths to be registered. This includes restricting some calendars to death only and having peripatetic staff on standby for any increase in appointments and to play 'catch up' following the festive period
- Working with the bereavement offices and Medical Examiners at the hospitals to understand the operational difficulties and exploring solutions.

21. In terms of next steps, a number of options have been examined, some with little financial investment required, some that are potentially more expensive. The plan is to introduce them incrementally in order that the result of the change can be measured before resorting to more expensive solutions.

22. Further actions being considered, or which may be considered:

- Contact with individual GP's and practices and Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCG's) to highlight the importance from a statutory perspective, assisting the family and understanding their difficulties
- Examination of every appointment made, contacting families to bring the appointments forward to within the timeframe (if possible) – cost implication.
- Daily examination of availability, bringing in additional staff where offices are reaching capacity – cost implication
- Consider changing the Tell Us Once enrichment. This will potentially save a small amount of time. The aim would be to still provide the service for notifying central government organisations, whilst using alternative arrangements for data sharing with local government. This would be undertaken using the new data sharing powers through the Digital Economy Act 2018
- Change how register office weddings are delivered using additional staff to keep some diary availability (April- October) – cost implication.

23. The General Register office is actively working with those Authorities that struggling to meet the statutory target. This involves compliance officers visiting and examining processes to help identify areas of improvement as well as sharing of best practice. These areas are largely in the 60-70% compliance range. Each Authority is required to complete an action plan to demonstrate how they plan to improve their performance. Worcestershire's action plan is replicated above.

## **Recent and Forthcoming Changes**

24. It is fair to say that the Registration Service has been going through a period of change in recent years which is set to continue. Some further information about recent and forthcoming changes and direction of the service over the next few years is provided below.

### **Recent changes**

25. Marriage and Opposite Sex Civil Partnership – Marriage for all has been seen by some as a huge change for the community. With this introduction came a challenge through the court that Civil Partnership should also be extended to opposite sex couples. This has completed its path through parliament and will be introduced by the end of 2019. The definite date is awaited.

26. Medical Examiners (ME's) – This is currently a non-statutory provision funded through Department of Health (DoH). Ultimately, the ME's will examine all Medical Certificate Cause of Death (MCCD) to ensure that they are accurate, as well as speaking with families to ensure they understand the cause of death and deal with any concerns. It is expected to improve the quality of MCCD's presented to the Registrar.

27. Immigration – The Council has worked with the Home Office on a number of initiatives, the most recent being the European Union (EU) Settlement Scheme where the Service assisted with the electronic ID verification process.

28. Public Protection and Counter Fraud – Registrars have now been given statutory powers to report issues of potential fraud whilst carrying out their duties. This is in addition to their statutory role of reporting a potential sham or forced marriage to Immigration as well as fraudulent activity relating to applications for certificates.

### **Forthcoming changes**

29. Marriage Schedule System – The Government made the commitment some years ago that both parents should be included in the marriage register and therefore on the certificate. Proposals were put forward to include, amongst other things, the opportunity to make the electronic database (RON) the legal register replacing the paper marriage registers we currently have. This is a huge change not just for the Registration Service but also for the Clergy who would be subject to the same change. Legislation has been put in place and training is underway. A go live date is yet to be published.

30. General Register Office (GRO) – Civil Registration Reform – GRO are working on an improvement plan to modernise further the Civil Registration Service. This will involve examining digital solutions (following central government direction of travel) as well as maintaining the Public Protection and Counter Fraud role (PPCF). Little has been published in terms of specifics or timescales as yet.

31. Ministry of Justice (MoJ) – Review of Approved Premises – Outdoor Weddings. It was announced by Government that the MoJ would be taking forward a proposal to allow for outdoor civil weddings and civil partnerships on approved premises venues following “any necessary consultation” making clear that any reform would maintain the existing requirements for the solemnity and dignity of such venues. The Registration Services of England and Wales through the National Panel for Registration are providing information to help further frame the consultation.

32. Law Commission – The Government announced in the Budget in October 2018 that it would invite the Law Commission to review the law on how and where couples may marry in England and Wales. This two-year review of marriage law will make recommendations for a simple, fair and consistent system that gives couples meaningful choice in how and where they marry. It will support the role of faith in public life while retaining necessary safeguards for individuals and the state.

### **Purpose of the Meeting**

33. The Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel is asked to:

- consider the detailed report, and
- determine whether it would wish to carry out any further scrutiny.

## **Supporting Information**

### Appendix 1:

- Illustrative example of Availability of Appointments for Stillbirth and Death – Apr and May 2019
- Availability for Still birth and Death appointments

### Appendix 2:

- Table showing the overall percentage attainment nationally, regionally and for Worcestershire against a target of 90% registered within 5 days,
- Monthly deaths registered (shown by columns) vs percentage attainment
- Death Monitoring Sheet from 02 09 2019

## **Specific Contact Points for this report**

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## **Background Papers**

In the opinion of the proper officer (in this case the Head of Legal and Democratic Services) there are no background papers relating to the subject matter of this report.