

## **Registration Service Update**

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Division and Local Member: All

### **1. Summary**

- 1.1 In October 2016, the Scrutiny Committee for Policies and Place considered a presentation on the progress and performance made during the previous year. The committee commended the work that had been undertaken and requested an update on performance. This report updates the Committee on the continued positive progress since then.
- 1.2 The report highlights the successful delivery of agreed activities specified within the shared working agreement with North Somerset.

### **2. Issues for consideration / Recommendations**

- 2.1 Members are asked to consider and comment on the report.

### **3 Background**

- 3.1 The Registration Service fulfils the Council's statutory duty to undertake the registration and solemnisation of Births, Deaths, Marriages, Civil Partnerships and Citizenship Ceremonies. All of these events mark key moments in an individual's life and the service is used by the vast majority of residents at some point in their lives.
- 3.2 Registration Services are provided wholly in-house by the Local Authority in partnership with the General Register Office (GRO), a section of the Home Office. This partnership is underpinned by a formal governance agreement and tightly regulated. Operational delivery is governed by a number of key service standards and a performance management regime is in place to monitor progress. Results are reported annually and the service consistently achieves good levels of performance in all areas, receiving highly commendable feedback from the GRO.
- 3.3 Over 25,000 face to face customer 'transactions' are undertaken each year across 12 locations – there around 6,000 birth registrations, 8,000 death registrations, 2,750 ceremonies and 250 new British citizens welcomed. Although the number of birth registrations remains relatively consistent, death registrations have increased 13% over the last 3 years and ceremonies have seen a 10% increase.
- 3.4 The service has undergone a significant programme of modernisation over recent years. The success of this transformation led the way for a partnership contract to be agreed with North Somerset Council and since April 2016 Somerset has been successfully delivering the full range of registration services on their behalf. The agreement was only the second of its type in the country.

- 3.5 The service operates a full cost recovery model. Legislation prevents the service from making a 'profit' but the income received from the fees enables the service to fully cover the revenue budget and provide a small surplus toward corporate costs.
- 3.6 With close links to the Home Office, security, public protection and counter fraud are all a high priority for the service. The Home Office agenda continues to place increasing responsibilities for registration officers to identify and/or protect against crime and fraud. For example, across the UK sham marriages, benefit fraud, identity fraud, forged documents, human trafficking and slavery have all been identified as a result of registration officers reporting suspicions.

#### 4 Performance and Achievements

- 4.1 In compliance with the governance agreement between the Local Authority and the General Register Office, the service submits an annual report on performance against nationally set targets. The three key areas of measurement are:

- **Timeliness of birth and death registrations.**

A wide range of factors determine how quickly an event can be registered. Informant availability, receipt of paperwork from hospitals or GPs and Coroner investigations as examples, can all delay the process making it very challenging to meet the 5 day target for death registrations (the five days include weekends and bank holidays).

This data is taken directly from the national database and is provided by the General Register Office, as such it is the only reliable information available for performance benchmarking against other areas. Somerset consistently performs above regional and national averages.

Somerset – Timeliness of Registrations 2016 / 2017

Target	Somerset Attainment	Regional Percentage	National Percentage
Timeliness of registration target for Births - 98% registered within 42 days	99%	98%	96%
Timeliness of registration target for Stillbirths - 98% registered within 42 days	100%	99%	99%
Timeliness of death registration target (no coronial involvement) - 90% registered within 5 days	78%	68%	78%
Timeliness of death registrations (with coronial involvement) - 90% registered within 5 days	68%	49%	53%
Timeliness of death registrations (following post mortem) - 80% registered within 7 days	53%	19%	30%

- **Appointment Availability**

Registration services across England and Wales measure this target in numerous different ways and as a result there is no reliable comparable data. For example, Somerset Registration Service currently reports on the availability of appointments at the office requested by the informant, rather than the ability to offer an appointment somewhere in the County, as many authorities do.

Appointment demand fluctuates significantly throughout the year and although there are some seasonal peaks and troughs that can be planned for, variations in workload can often happen

unexpectedly and without any obvious reason. As a result, local managers actively monitor diaries on a weekly basis and ensure that staffing levels provided by the flexible workforce are appropriate for demand.

The figures below demonstrate that appointment availability has slightly improved in Somerset over the last financial year. There is no existing comparable data for North Somerset for previous years and the significant change and challenges faced during the first half of the year after taking on the operational responsibility for the service would not provide an accurate representation of the level of achievement. For the purposes of this report the data below has been reported separately.

GRO KPI's - Appointment Availability	Somerset 2016/2017	Somerset 2015/2016	Somerset & North Somerset Combined
Births (or declaration) – within 5 working days of request	95%	96%	92%
Deaths (or declaration) – within 2 working days of request	82%	80%	76%
Marriage/Civil Partnership notice – within 10 working days of request	75%	69%	70%
Still birth (or declaration) – within 2 working days of request	100%	100%	100%

## • Customer Satisfaction

A customer focussed culture is at the core of the service, and feedback from service users is constantly reviewed and monitored. Every customer is invited to complete a short satisfaction survey and performance results in each of the key service areas are measured against more than 10 key indicators, ranging from office location and ease of access to how helpful and comprehensive the customer found the service.

There are no nationally set parameters for the measurement of customer satisfaction across registration services and therefore no reliable comparable data for regional or national averages.

A high level of customer satisfaction has been sustained in Somerset & North Somerset during the last reporting period.

Somerset and North Somerset Registration Customer Satisfaction Results 2016 - 2017

Service Area	% Satisfied Customers	Response rates
Births/Death registrations & Notice of marriage	96%	4%
Ceremonies	95%	15%
Citizenships	96%	17%
Historical certificate production	96%	37%

In addition to the formal results above, the service receives a large number of positive comments, letters and thank you cards

Last year (2016/2017) the service launched a new customer engagement strategy, setting out a framework to further understand and enhance relationships with customers as well as stakeholders, offering them all an opportunity to engage with and shape the service for the future. Over the coming year the service will be undertaking a range of activities that will gather feedback in alternative formats from a wider range of interested parties, significantly improving on existing customer insight.

- 4.2 In April 2016 the General Register Office launched the Public Protection and Counter Fraud Assurance Framework which all registration districts are expected to adhere to. The framework identifies in the region of 70 different activities across all aspects of the service which require monitoring and checking systems to be in place and evidenced. A self-assessment activity undertaken during the year identified that over 50 of these requirements had been implemented, 17 were in progress and only 6 outstanding. The General Register Office's Compliance and Performance Unit will undertake an inspection of the service during the year to verify the self-assessment outcomes.
- 4.3 In January 2017 the General Register Officer undertook a bi-annual certificate stock and security audit across all service locations. The service was awarded the highest possible rating of security in relation to the arrangements around the receipt, storage and use of the secure certificate stock and registration records held.
- 4.4 The shared working agreement with North Somerset included a number of contractual obligations for Somerset to improve facilities for North Somerset residents and staff during the first year of operation. All of these have now been successfully delivered.
- Implementation of an electronic diary system to staff delivering the service was completed within 2 months of the start of the agreement – 8 months ahead of the agreed deadline.
  - Provision to the public of a telephone contact centre for making appointments was implemented in August 2016 - 5 months ahead of the deadline.
  - Provision to the public of an online booking system for making appointments was also implemented alongside the contact centre facility.
  - The transfer of all historical registers from Weston-super-Mare to the Heritage Centre at Norton Fitzwarren and subsequent provision of a shared copy certificate service to the general public was completed in Nov 2016 – 5 months ahead of schedule.
- 4.5 While much of the focus for the service has been to implement and consolidate the North Somerset project, work has continued and key developments have been made across the wider service.
- The recent successful recruitment of a marketing officer to work on projects across Community and Traded Services functions will enable the service to push forward the aim to develop a marketing strategy for ceremonies and venues. An estimated 30 % of civil ceremonies solemnised in Somerset are for couples that live outside of the area, a successful marketing campaign will have a positive impact for the local economy as well as the registration service.
  - The service has been part of a successful pilot of a new national qualification for Registration professionals, with one member of staff receiving full accreditation earlier this year.
  - An upgrade to telephony equipment and software for the centralised booking function has enabled the service to access much improved data around call volumes, response rates and call length. This data is in the process of being analysed and will inform staffing levels, benchmarking protocols, service delivery targets and staff development.
  - The facility for Somerset customers to book birth and death registration appointments online was introduced in 2015. This has now been enhanced with the facility to book

appointments to give notice of marriage, which necessitates a much more complicated set of procedures at the time of booking. The facility has been extremely popular with 45% of birth registration appointments, 23% of death registration appointments and 10 % of notice appointments being made in this way. Now that there is confidence that the notice appointment facility is working accurately, the service will undergo an 'official' launch to increase online take-up.

- Since 2013 the service has been working toward the re-location of all of its 'stand-alone' service delivery points to shared accommodation, improving the customer journey and staff working conditions. The Wells office has been the 6<sup>th</sup> office to move, taking up residency in the Glastonbury hub last summer. Customer feedback has improved significantly following the move to Glastonbury, especially in respect of the location of the building – 95% of customers find the Glastonbury location satisfactory, in comparison to 78% for the Wells office.
- Despite the wide range of changes seen by the service recently, it is a credit to the managers and teams on the frontline that service delivery, customer satisfaction and staff morale continues to be sustained at high levels. This is a view that has been supported by outcomes from the 'Working Well' staff survey.

## 5. Financial/Income Update

5.1 The table below provides information on final outturn figures for the last three years, and initial forecast budget for the coming year.

5.2 Figures for 2016/2017 onwards are inclusive of North Somerset.

5.3 The additional expenditure for 2016/2017 was incurred predominantly as a result of one-off costs associated with the north Somerset transfer.

5.4 At this stage of the year it is too early to accurately predict income and figures below are currently estimated based on last year's outturn.

	17/18 budget	16/17 outturn	15/16 outturn	14/15 outturn
<b>Gross Expenditure</b>	£1,310,800	£1,458,047	£1,071,309	£1,087,654
<b>Income</b>	-£1,520,700	-£1,522,830	-£1,193,012	-£1,033,940
<b>Net Expenditure</b>	-£209,900	-£64,784	-£121,703	£53,714

## 6. Service Pressures

6.1 The service faces significant challenges in maintaining or increasing income levels. In particular, registration services across England and Wales have seen an increase in demand for private celebrants to conduct wedding celebrations and subsequent decrease in demand for civil wedding ceremonies in licensed venues. Although this trend hasn't yet had any significant impact in Somerset, the service is considering ways to ensure it continues to meet customer needs and remain competitive.

6.2 Income from copy certificate production has been reducing steadily over recent years and a further decline is expected following the introduction by the General Register Office of a new electronic certificate service at the end of 2016.

6.3 Legislative changes are expected to be a significant pressure for the service in coming months and years. Although a ministerial decision on implementation dates for reforms to the death certification process outlined in the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 is still awaited,

these reforms will fundamentally change the death registrations process when implemented.

- 6.4 Further significant impacts are also expected as a result of a recent review of marriage legislation. Changes to the way in which marriages are registered to include details of the mother as well as the father of the couple and moving from a paper based system to registration in an electronic register both have wide support.

## **7. Future Service Developments**

- 7.1 The service is committed to ensuring that wherever possible, customers can access the service digitally. In the coming year, an online payment facility will be launched, enabling ceremony customers to pay online if they wish. Alongside this the service will be looking at providing an online service for the customer to track progress, create their own ceremony and personalise their big day as they wish. This system would also enable significant efficiencies to be realised within the service. A business case for this software will be undertaken in the Autumn.
- 7.2 In addition to the shared working model currently in operation with North Somerset, there are a number of different ways in which Registration Services could work more collaboratively together. Somerset Registration Service is keen to explore those opportunities with neighbouring districts over coming months.
- 7.3 It is planned that the last stand-alone offices in Williton, Bridgwater and Clevedon will all be moved into co-located buildings by winter 2017. Further options for collaborative working with other services sharing the buildings will also be explored.

## **8. Background Papers**

- 8.1 Annual Performance Report  
Customer engagement strategy  
Service Delivery Plan  
Staff survey data

**Note:** For sight of individual background papers please contact the report author.