

## Registration Service Update

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Cabinet Member: David Hall, Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Planning and Community Infrastructure

Division and Local Member: All

### **1. Summary**

In July 2017, the Scrutiny Committee for Policies and Place considered a report on Registration Service performance during the previous year. The committee have requested an update for the 2017 – 2018 reporting period.

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

Members are asked to consider and comment on the Registration Service Performance for 2017/18.

### **3. Background**

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.

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, with operational delivery governed by a number of key service standards and a performance measures as outlined in this report.

### **4. Performance**

In order to comply 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. Performance against the key areas of measurement is summarised below, and the full report attached at appendix A.

## 5. Performance - Timeliness of birth and death registrations.

This following 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 – Timeliness of Registrations 2017 / 2018

Performance Target	Somerset Attainment	Regional Attainment	National Attainment
Timeliness of registration Births – target 98% registered within 42 days	99%	98%	97%
Timeliness of registration Stillbirths – target 98% registered within 42 days	100%	100%	98%
Timeliness of death registration ( <u>no</u> Coronial involvement) – target 90% registered within 5 days	80%	70%	77%
Timeliness of death registration ( <u>with</u> Coronial involvement) – target 90% registered within 5 days	76%	64%	71%
Timeliness of death registration following post mortem – target 90% registered within 7 days	46%	17%	26%
Timeliness of death registration target (following post mortem) – 80% registered within 7 days	47%	17%	26%

The service is currently meeting or exceeding the required performance for birth and stillbirth registrations (targets 1 & 2 above), but continues to fall short of meeting national targets for death registrations (targets 3 – 6). Over recent years Somerset has consistently performed above both regional and national averages in this area and continues to make small but steady improvements. However, the General Register Office have identified that the national trend has shown a reduction in performance against death registration targets for a number of years. As a result of this, and in conjunction with the 'Public Protection and Counter Fraud' priorities introduced in 2016, the General Register Office is placing a much greater emphasis on all Local Authorities to improve attainment levels for death registrations, with particular scrutiny on registrations where no coronial involvement is required (ie, target 3 above).

There are a wide range of factors which can determine how quickly a death can be registered. For example, seasonal fluctuations, appointment availability, whereabouts of next of kin and delays in receipt of the required paperwork from hospitals or GPs can all extend the process. When these external factors are considered in conjunction with the requirement to register within 5 days of death (including weekends or bank holidays) the target is extremely challenging.

Nevertheless, the General Register Office is focussed on improving standards across all Local Authority areas and are implementing enforced improvement notices where a commitment to increasing attainment is not currently being demonstrated. Although Somerset does not currently fall into this category of significant concern, the need for a clear strategy for continued improvement is advisable to ensure the service can continue to meet statutory obligations with ever increasing demand.

With this in mind, the service is in the process of undertaking a statutory performance review, with the resulting performance improvement action plan being incorporated into the service business plan.

## 6. Performance - Appointment Availability

Registration services across England and Wales use a range of different methods to measure this target and as a result there is no reliable comparable data.

The data below demonstrates that appointment availability has improved in Somerset over the last two years.

Performance Target	Somerset Attainment 2017 / 2018	Somerset Attainment 2016 / 2017	Somerset Attainment 2015 / 2016
Birth appointment availability – 95% of customers offered an appointment within 5 working days of request	95%	95%	96%
Stillbirth appointment availability – 95% of customers offered an appointment within 2 working days of request	100%	100%	100%
Death appointment availability – 95% of customers offered an appointment within 2 working days of request	86%	82%	80%
Notice of marriage/civil partnership appointment availability – 95% of customers offered an appointment within 2 working days of request	85%	75%	69%

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. For example, February 2018 saw an increase in demand for death registration appointments of 25% in comparison to the same period last year.

The availability of appointments has a direct impact on the timeliness of registrations (as outlined in section (a) above), and a review of office opening hours, particularly in the part time offices, will be undertaken during the year to ensure hours are aligned for optimum customer take-up and appropriate availability to facilitate registrations within 5 days of death.

## 7. Performance - Customer Engagement and Satisfaction

A high level of customer satisfaction has been sustained throughout the last reporting period.

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.

Customer Satisfaction Results 2017 - 2018

Service Area	% Satisfied Customers	Response rates
Birth/Death registration and notice of marriage/civil partnership	97%	3%
Ceremonies	97%	4%
Citizenship	97%	7%
Historical certificate production	95%	8%

In 2017 the service launched a customer engagement strategy which set out a framework for enhancing relationships with customers and stakeholders. This was launched to work in conjunction with the service's marketing strategy following the successful recruitment in July 2017 of a Marketing Officer to work on projects across the Community and Traded Services departments.

Despite unforeseen operational issues delaying the initial instigation of work on the registration service marketing strategy until late 2017, considerable progress and positive results have been achieved in a relatively short period of time:

- Service re-branding, creation and launch of bespoke website
- Website supplier directory has provided an affordable advertising opportunity for local businesses as well as created an additional income stream for the service
- Website provides the only fully comprehensive listing of all venues licensed for civil ceremonies in Somerset and North Somerset
- Creation of Facebook and Twitter social media accounts have been popular with both customers and stakeholders, as well as enabling positive news to be published instantly – our attendance at weddings during the snow in March for example
- Direct targeted marketing has encouraged a number of businesses to apply for a ceremony license, improving customer choice
- Additional income/savings identified to date (directly attributable to marketing activities) has covered the cost of the post

## 8. Performance - Public Protection and Counter Fraud

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.

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.

In August 2017, Somerset was one of the first authorities to receive an audit from the General Register Office where evidence was checked in order to provide assurance that the service was adhering to their new responsibilities.

The outcome of that audit is summarised in the table below.

Criteria	Number of elements assessed	Number of elements fully compliant
Pre-Registration	6	6
Point of Registration	8	8
Post-Registration	12	12
Certificates	4	4
Service Models (where applicable)	4	4
Sham Marriage	4	4

Data Protection	10	9
Registration Online (RON)	5	4
Stock and Security	8	8
Other	6	6

The service was able to demonstrate the highest level of compliance and was commended for developing a benchmarking and monitoring tool which was later rolled out to other registration services. The following is a quote from the General Register Office following the audit: *'The report indicated the excellent levels of attainment not just overall but within each of the 10 categories, my congratulation to the districts and the staff that have invested a significant amount of effort in developing the benchmarking database'*.

In January 2017 the General Register Officer undertook a bi-annual certificate stock and security audit across all service locations in Somerset and again in April 2018 the audit was undertaken at our offices in the North Somerset area. On both occasions 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.

## 9. Performance - Finance

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

	18/19 budget	17/18 out-turn	16/17 out-turn
<b>Gross Expenditure</b>	(£1,560,600)	(£1,558,100)	(£1,458,047)
<b>Income</b>	£1,633,600	£1,605,900	£1,522,830
<b>Net Income</b>	£73,000	£47,800	£64,784

The service operates a full cost recovery model. Legislation prevents the service from making a profit but the income received from the chargeable fees enables the service to fully cover the cost of delivering statutory services that cannot be charged for, as well as provide a small surplus toward corporate overheads.

The final out-turn for 2017/2018 includes an £18k overspend despite achieving increased income targets. As a frontline service, staff costs equate to 82% of the total expenditure for the Registration Service, and this overspend (1.4% of overall staffing budget) was predominantly a result of additional costs to cover a combination of unexpected staff resource issues during the year.

Looking forward to 2018/2019 the expected increase in income for 2018/2019 has been calculated following a review of fees both nationally and locally and additional measures have been put in place to further monitor staff costs through the year.

## 10. Service Pressures and Priorities - Increased service demand

There has been a marked increase in demand for the service over recent years. Death registrations in Somerset have increased by 16% since 2013/2014, with only a 4% decline in births over the same period and despite marriages being at an all-time low nationally, Somerset has seen an increase of 16% during the same period.

With this trend likely to continue, particularly so for ceremonies which are being actively marketed, the service needs to make further efficiencies in order to facilitate the growth. Later in the year the service plans to implement further online channels which will automate the administrative work involved with ceremonies and enable the customer to create and personalise their own ceremony online.

## **11. Service Pressures and Priorities - Financial**

As a frontline service, the highest proportion of expenditure is for staff costs and cannot be significantly reduced. Therefore the service must focus on ensuring income is maximised where possible.

Birth and death registrations must be provided free of charge and where fees can be charged these are mainly statutory fees set centrally, not necessarily reflective of the full cost of providing the service. Ceremony fees however can be set by the Local Authority on a full cost recovery basis. Continued growth in this area of the service is therefore crucial for long term sustainability.

Marketing activities for the year ahead will focus on a number of areas including:

- Increasing the number and range of licensed ceremony venues
- Challenging the somewhat negative, historical perception of a 'register office' ceremony (this perception is currently being rejuvenated by unofficial celebrants as a marketing tool)
- Encouraging couples into Somerset from other areas
- Review and re-launch of the non-statutory ceremony offer (baby naming and renewal of vows)
- Customer engagement channels

A review of fees will also be undertaken to ensure costs continue to be fully recovered.

## **12. Service Pressures and Priorities - Legislative**

Meeting the General Register Office's priority of improving the timeliness of death registrations will be a significant challenge for the service, not least because of the range of external factors that impact and delay the process.

Nevertheless, an improvement plan is currently being prepared to address issues where possible and will include the following activities:

- Review of office opening times to ensure customer demand is appropriately met
- Review public awareness, information and call centre scripts
- Liaise with key stakeholders (GP surgeries and bereavement teams), raising awareness
- Further inform GPs and roll out short e-learning package to minimise number of medical certificates incorrectly filled out resulting in failed registration appointments

Changes to the death registration process and the introduction of a Medical Examiner system outlined in the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 have been expected for a number of years. Plans for a phased roll out of this by the NHS by April 2019 were announced by the Department of Health on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2018 and at this stage it is too early to be clear on exactly how this will impact the Registration Service in Somerset.

Two Private Members Bills are currently making their way through Parliament which, if successful, will significantly change marriage and civil partnership legislation. The full impact isn't yet clear, however the introduction of civil preliminaries to marriage would mean that banns would no longer be read in church and the registration service would be required to undertake a notice of marriage

for all couples planning religious ceremonies. There is also the possibility that a 'schedule' system will be introduced for the registration of marriages, removing the use of physical marriage registers and enabling the mothers' names to be included on the marriage registration as well as fathers' details.

**Appendices:**

Appendix A: Annual Performance Report 2017-2018