

SUBJECT:	MONMOUTHSHIRE REGISTRATION SERVICE PERFORMANCE REPORT 2018/19
MEETING:	Strong Communities Select Committee
DATE:	18th April 2019
DIVISIONS/WARDS AFFECTED:	All

1. PURPOSE:

- 1.1 Scrutiny of the Registration Service and its' performance during the 2018/19 year.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 To consider and comment on the content of this report. The report serves to outline the services provided by the Registration Service, describes current performance and highlights future challenges.
- 2.2 An annual performance report, to be scheduled for late April or May each year, be presented to this Committee in future years. In this way, Members can assess performance over time for this crucial element of the Authority's work.

3. KEY ISSUES:

- 3.1 Civil registration has been mandatory in the UK since 1837. Initially Registration Officers were employed by the General Register Office (GRO) but that changed in 2007, and we are now employed by the Local Authority. Monmouthshire became the District that it is now for the purposes of registration in 1996, as part of the Local Government restructure. Prior to that it was Abergavenny, Monmouth and Chepstow and was occasionally partly in England. Boundaries historically have changed regularly which has often resulted in registers moving around between Offices, and Churches and Hospitals suddenly reporting to a different area. We are the custodians of the records of all Births, Deaths and Marriages which have taken place in Monmouthshire since 1837. They are all stored and safeguarded within our strong room.
- 3.2 The Registration Service sits in Public Protection, within the Social Care and Health Directorate. This fits well with our remit, which has expanded over the years to become more customer focussed, and to take on additional duties on behalf of the Home Office. For example the section reports on possible sham marriages, vulnerable persons within the community, fraudulent applications for the issue of certificates, and sends statistical information to the Office for National Statistics about births and mortality. All of this information allows the Council to make informed decisions about priorities for the future. These will include future school provision, or targeting specific health issues in specific areas, which in turn allows the Council to contribute directly to the well-being goals in Wales.
- 3.3 Each year we prepare an annual report to GRO and a Seasonal Variance Plan. Internally we are guided by our annual Business Improvement and Business Continuity Plans.

- 3.4 The purpose of the Registration Service is as follows:
- The registration of all births, deaths and stillbirths occurring within the County
 - Taking notices of intended marriages and civil partnerships from persons resident within the County
 - Conducting and registering all civil marriages and civil partnerships, (including conversions from civil partnership to marriage), taking place in any venue registered or licensed for the purpose. This includes prisons and hospitals or private residences in certain circumstances
 - Registering religious marriages where required
 - Conducting citizenship ceremonies for Monmouthshire residents who make successful applications for British nationality
 - Safe custody of all historic records of births, deaths, civil partnerships and marriages dating back to 1837, and issue of certified copies of these records on demand
 - Inspection and registration of new venues for marriage and civil partnership
 - Giving assistance and advice to all customers on all aspects of registration, citizenship and nationality
 - Providing data for vital work on population statistics and medical research
 - Management of data, including protection of both physical and electronic data. This assists with public protection and counter fraud by reporting suspicious applications and sham marriages, as well as suspicions about immigration abuse and other crimes
 - Safeguarding secure stock and accounting for fees
 - Promote and contribute to the Home Office priorities
- 3.5 The Registration Service is based in the Old Parlour, Usk, alongside County Hall. There are 8 staff, 10 on a casual basis for ceremonies only. The staff are made up of the Superintendent Registrar, one Registrar and 6 Deputies who can all register births, deaths and marriages and also take notices of marriage. Most also conduct ceremonies. The staff are all deliberately trained to the highest level to provide the maximum flexibility and resilience to the service.
- 3.6 We have just benefitted from an investment in new chairs and flowers within the ceremony room, and increased our maximum guest numbers to 45. We are hoping soon to improve the outside area with the re-surfacing of the car park and improved signage from the Highway. This will improve our service to the public. This will improve our offer compared to other local Register Offices in Newport, Blaenau Gwent, Torfaen and Caerphilly. The market targeted is different to services provided at Approved Premises across the county.
- 3.7 As well as the Old Parlour there are 3 out-stations, at Nevill Hall and at the Hubs in Chepstow and Monmouth. This enables us to provide the best possible service to residents. Nevill Hall is staffed every day, Chepstow and Monmouth are on a rota basis but further appointments can be arranged there depending on demand.
- 3.8 Approved Premises, meaning venues which have chosen to licence rooms for marriages and civil partnerships, cover the length and breadth of Monmouthshire. There are currently 36 and a very good relationship exists with them all. Covering such a large area and striving to provide the chosen days and times for each couple can be a challenge, but it is vital that we all work together to give each couple the best service possible and promote Monmouthshire at every opportunity.

4. PERFORMANCE:

4.1 The GRO sets targets and key performance indicators on statutory time frames and customer service priorities. Each month GRO publishes the performance data for each District on our system. Performance can be monitored and compared to similar districts and nationally. Any District that is perceived to be failing to meet the standards will have meetings with their GRO Compliance Officer to look at ways to improve performance. We have just had our bi-annual audit from our Compliance Officer which was very positive.

4.2 The performance of the Registration team in 2018/19 can be summarised as follows –

	Total for year	% within statutory time-frame
Births	1937	98% (on target)
Deaths	1335	90% (on target)
Still-births	6	100% (on target)
Marriages	432	N/A
Civil Partnerships*	1	N/A
Notices of marriage/CP	549	N/A
New British citizens	32	N/A
Customers seen within 10 mins of appointment time		100%
Appts offered within guidelines	All types	100%

Marriages: 432 registered between 36 approved premises and the Register Office, marginally down on 2017/18 which was 457.

*Civil Partnerships - just one this year but expect this to increase next year when civil partnerships are expanded to include opposite sex couples.

Births have decreased slightly since last year, 2049 in 2017/2018. Still-births have decreased, 9 last year. Deaths have also decreased, there were at 1491 in 2017/2018.

4.3 Part of our remit is to report any applications for certificates which we do not believe to be genuine. Birth certificates, whilst not a form of identification in themselves, can be the starting point for criminals to set up a new identity and are very valuable on the black market. The information provided to GRO can be shared with other investigatory authorities to assist in larger investigations into people trafficking, immigration frauds and organised crime. For example, in March 2019 a fraudulent application was received for a birth certificate which came via the post. All staff members are trained to look out for certain indicators within every application. The application purported to be from the person named in the birth entry. However, a matching death entry was tracked down showing that the child had died in early infancy.

- 4.5 Customer feedback is sought regularly by way of surveys, as well as spontaneous feedback and a comments book. This is used to help maintain and improve the service we offer. Some comments are reproduced below:

“Thank you for making the planning and day of our wedding so memorable and happy – so friendly and helpful, smart and professional”

“would like to say how helpful the lady on the phone was, she gave me all the info I needed and explained everything well, so it was easy to get the copy I needed”

“The two ladies who conducted the service (before, after and during), so sorry I forgot your names, were lovely and friendly. Thank you so much for making our day so special.”

“I found the process very hard and upsetting as I was registering the death of my dad. The lady at Abergavenny was very understanding and professional, and the fact the lady could inform lots of places that need to know was a great help.”

5. CHALLENGES/FUTURE PROOFING:

- 5.1 There is a new NHS hospital being built in Torfaen, the Grange University Hospital. A brand new birth centre is being built there and it will also be for acute care. This will have an impact on the number of births and deaths taking place in Nevill Hall. The current study suggests that possibly as many as one quarter of births may move to the new hospital, along with a sixth of deaths. We will not really know until the hospital is open how people use it, however it may have a big impact on our registrations. To try to offset such a big change, a partnership model with the other Gwent districts is being developed. This would mean that a customer would have the option of registering their child’s birth either in the District where it took place or in the District where the customer lives, an entirely new way of working. It is hoped that this will begin in September 2019 and initially will only include births. However, the plan is to include death registrations in due course, once it is assessed how it improves the service across the Gwent region.
- 5.2 The role of Medical Examiner is being brought in nationally. There is no statutory date as yet for this to begin but some areas are looking at rolling out a voluntary scheme. The aim of this scheme is for every medical Certificate of Cause of Death to be scrutinised before being passed to the Registrar. It should reduce the need for us to refer to the Coroner and enable us to register more deaths at the first appointment which provides a better customer service. Aneurin Bevan are looking at a soft launch of the scheme very soon, initially at two hospitals which are to be determined.
- 5.3 There is a need to be competitive, to look at the market and try to offer choices that customers want. This improves both our internal service and our venues, many of whom are small businesses, so we have to work together for success. One new option started this year is outdoor ceremonies. We are bound by legislation in what we can do but there are often ways to make things work for people. For example, having an outdoor ceremony followed by repeating the legal vows within a licensed room to be legally compliant.
- 5.4 Flexibility is essential to meet the demand for registration appointments, which spikes and dips on an almost daily basis. The staff being trained to carry out all kinds of appointments means that we can adjust very quickly to those demands, and keep the appointment availability very high. Equally the seasonal demands for ceremonies means that we need a large pool of highly trained professionals ready to attend our beautiful venues, to maintain and develop our relationships with approved venues to help support their businesses.
- 5.5 The biggest challenge within Registration is to keep on top of the constant developments. Looking at the changes in behaviours and attitudes within society is almost the best barometer for anticipating changes that are likely to follow. We have to be ready to adapt to new

legislation and technology, often quite quickly, and learn the new procedures. The latest development is the The Marriages, Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration Etc.) Bill which is due to receive Royal assent soon. This piece of legislation will have a huge impact on the Registration Service. Firstly Civil Partnerships, which are currently only available to same-sex couples, will become available to opposite sex couples by the end of this year. Secondly, marriage registrations will be by schedule, in a similar way to CP schedules, meaning that we will no longer create registers of entries. This will apply to religious and civil marriages which will be a very different system, but as yet there is no date for this to be implemented and no guidance as to how it will look.

6. REASONS:

- 6.1 Strong Communities Select committee are familiar with regular performance reports concerning Environmental Health, Trading Standards and Licensing services. Officers deem it appropriate and helpful to introduce a similar reporting mechanism for the Registration service.
- 6.2 Annual reports on Registration service performance will aid governance arrangements, and provide assurance to the Authority.

7. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

- 7.1 None as a consequence of this report.
- 7.2 The net 2018/19 spend for the Registration service was £26,074, noting most costs are offset by licence and certificate fees.

8. WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 No evaluation of the specific impacts required as this is a performance report, no 'pre-decision scrutiny' is requested.
- 8.2 Noting the above, Members will recognise the valuable and positive contribution to many of the criteria in the evaluation assessment. For example, the Registration team contribute to a prosperous Wales by supporting wedding venues, and collaborates with partners – NHS, Funeral Directors, etc – to deliver a highly regarded service.

9. CONSULTEES:

Head of Public Protection
Chief Officer, Social Care & Health

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS:

None

11. AUTHOR:

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