

**SUBJECT: Monmouthshire Registration Service Performance Report
2019/2020**

MEETING: STRONG COMMUNITIES SELECT COMMITTEE

DATE: 12th November 2020

DIVISIONS/WARDS AFFECTED: All

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 Scrutiny of the Registration Service and its' performance during the 2019/20 year, together with consideration of the response to the Covid – 19 pandemic so far this 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 at Appendix 1, describes current performance and highlights future challenges.
- 2.2 The work in response to the current pandemic is recognised, as highlighted in Appendix 2.
- 2.3 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 To maintain a high level of customer satisfaction for our residents whilst managing and responding to public demand and providing an excellent, value-for-money service.

4. PERFORMANCE DURING 2019/2020

- 4.1 The General Register Office 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 so we can monitor our own performance and compare it to similar districts and nationally. Any District that is perceived to be failing to meet the standards will have meetings with their Compliance Officer to look at ways to improve performance. We had our bi-annual audit from our Compliance Officer last year which was very positive and did not raise any concerns.

Type of appointment	Total for year 2019-2020	% within statutory time-frame
Births	1817	99% (above target)
Deaths	1344	87% (3% below target)
Still-births	6	100% (on target)
Marriages	407	N/A
Civil Partnerships*	15	N/A
Notices of marriage/CP	669	N/A
New British citizens	26	N/A
Customers seen within 10 mins of appointment/arrival time	All customers	100%
Appts offered within time-frame guidelines	All types	100%

Marriages: 407 registered between 36 approved premises and the register office.

* Civil Partnerships – from the 31st December 2019 opposite sex couples had the opportunity to enter into civil partnerships which is why the number of CPs has jumped from 1 last year. Over the past year we have taken 52 CP notices which were all for opposite sex couples.

Births have decreased slightly over the past 2 years although we were still on target. Still-births have remained the same as last year. Deaths have also continued to decrease by a small percentage over the past few years.

- 4.2 Customer feedback is sought regularly by way of surveys for all types of appointments (as well as spontaneous feedback and a comment book). Over 2019/20 we received 171 completed surveys, 165 of them were positive (96%). This is used to help maintain and improve the service we offer. For example, we made arrangements to change rooms at the Hub in Chepstow and made improvements to signage on County Hall site as a result of comments. Some comments are reproduced below:

“The Registrar was a very lovely lady who dealt with all our issues comprehensively and compassionately”

“Excellent, compassionate staff”

“Have dedicated parking spaces for Registration Services”

“Very happy with Registrar-Polite and helpful and patient too as brought the baby as well”

“You cannot improve on perfection”

“Thank you for making a difficult time less stressful”

“The Registrar was very efficient, clear and concise but a warm friendly manner. Facility to have a tea/coffee would be nice for those travelling from afar”

“At a difficult time the staff member was efficient, professional, kind and empathetic. I am grateful for the time taken out to explain things properly”

“They were wonderful-couldn’t have asked for better”

“ I want to thank you all for the thoughtful, memorable and happy occasion which you managed so professionally. We were such a diverse group, all cultures, religions, shapes sizes, age groups and you conducted it beautifully.”

“Signage not good-having not been there before” (Register Office Usk)

“Usually with public services I feel staff are quite cold (just doing a job) but my experience here was the opposite. Everyone was lovely!”

5. CHALLENGES/FUTURE PROOFING

- 5.1 The new NHS hospital in Torfaen, the Grange University Hospital is due to open in the autumn of 2020, earlier than planned. Facilities include a brand new birth and acute care centre so will have an impact on the number of births and deaths taking place in Nevill Hall, and consequently on the number of registrations in Monmouthshire. To try to off-set such a big change we have started collaborative working with the other ‘Gwent’ districts. It is a ground-breaking agreement within registration, as there is no other partnership of this size within England and Wales. We had hoped to begin in May 2020 however birth registrations were suspended along with all other face to face appointments in March so in fact we started the partnership when we re-started births at the end of June 2020. It means that a customer whose child was born within the ‘Gwent’ area now has the option of registering their child’s birth in any of the ‘Gwent’ Districts. The hope is that we will include death registrations in due course once we are satisfied with the procedure.
- 5.2 The role of Medical Examiner and Medical Examiner Officers is starting nationally. Along with everything else this has been delayed but recruitments have now been made and the staff are beginning to be trained up into their roles. The role will initially scrutinise all hospital deaths, which should result in

fewer referrals to Coroner which will enable us to use our time more efficiently once we all become familiar with procedures.

5.3 In respect of ceremonies at the Register Office and Licensed Premises we have to be competitive, to look at the market and try to offer choices that customers want, to help ourselves and our venues, many of whom are small businesses so we have to work together for success. One new option we started this year is to combine an outdoor element to ceremonies. We are bound by legislation in what we can do but there are often ways to make things work for our couples. For example having an outdoor ceremony where one part of the ceremony then moves to a licensed room to repeat the vows and complete the legalities. Lots of our venues are very keen to try this option although it is entirely weather dependent, we managed 2 outdoor ceremonies in the summer of 2019 but had lots more booked in for summer 2020 so hopefully next year this may again be a popular option.

5.4 The Law Commission consultation is now open, looking at proposals for changing and simplifying marriage law and procedure. The proposals are very wide-ranging and may dramatically change marriage ceremonies in England and Wales within the next few years.

5.5 We have to be very flexible, to meet the demand for registration appointments, which can change on an almost daily basis. The biggest challenge within Registration is to keep on top of the constant developments in legislation and changes in the local environment.

6. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

6.1 The significant drop in income in 2020/21 year is being met in part by Welsh Government, being a national issue. No financial consequence as a result of this report.

7. AUTHOR

Jennifer Walton, Superintendent Registrar

8. CONTACT DETAILS

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Appendix 1:

1. Register office remit and purpose

- 1.1 Civil registration has been mandatory in the UK since 1837. Initially Registration Officers were employed by our Head Office, the General Register Office 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.
- 1.2 The Registration Service currently sits within Public Protection, under Social Care and Health and 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 reporting possible sham marriages, vulnerable persons within the community, fraudulent applications for the issue of certificates, and sending 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, be it 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
- 1.3 Each year we prepare an annual report to GRO and a Seasonal Variance Plan as well as our Monmouthshire Service Improvement Plan and Business Continuity Report.

2. 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, including 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 and assisting 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. Premises:

- 3.1 We are based next door in the Old Parlour, we employ 17 staff, 9 on a casual basis for ceremonies only. The staff are made up of me, the Superintendent Registrar, one Registrar, Jenny Luciani, 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.
- 3.2 We have just benefitted from an improvement to the outside area with the re-surfacing of the Register Office car park and improved signage from the main car park so that the public can find us more easily and know that they can park nearby.
- 3.3 As well as the Old Parlour we have 3 out-stations, at Nevill Hall and at the Hubs in Chepstow and Monmouth, to help us provide the best possible service to residents. Nevill Hall is staffed every day, Chepstow and Monmouth are on a rota but we can arrange appointments more frequently there depending on need.
- 3.4 Our Approved Premises, by which I mean venues which have chosen to licence rooms for marriages and civil partnerships, cover the length and breadth of Monmouthshire, there are 32 in total at the present time, and we are very fortunate to enjoy a very good relationship 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.

Appendix 2: Pandemic impact and recovery 2020

February 2020

- Reminders to all staff to use good hygiene practices and to try to limit direct contact with the public.

March 2020

- Registration appointments were still taking place face to face and ceremonies continued up to Saturday 21st March, some ceremonies brought forward at very short notice as concerns rose that lock down was coming.
- 23rd March Westminster announced a moratorium on ceremonies however face to face appointments continued at that time.
- Reviewed and changed the layout of the register office, stopped attending out-stations to better keep control of our environment, working stations and practices.
- Confirmation received from GRO that the emergency legislation being drafted would include provision for death registrations by telephone and electronic transmission of documents as well as certain other easements.
- Jenny Luciani, the Registrar, began contacting Doctor's surgeries and funeral directors, explaining to them the legislation which we were expecting. Jenny created a spreadsheet of contact names, numbers and email addresses for the whole of Monmouthshire and other local areas. This was a huge piece of work which took many hours as most of the surgeries and funeral directors were unaware of the impact of the new legislation.
- A direct result of this work meant that when permission was given to move to telephone registrations on Friday 27th March we were able to transition almost seamlessly to the new system, beginning Monday 30th March.
- GRO advice to suspend all face-to-face appointments unless exceptional circumstances.

April 2020: We registered 40% more deaths in April this year than last year

May 2020: Death registrations began to drop and were less than last year

June 2020

- On the 19th June Welsh Government announced the re-start of ceremonies in Register Offices and approved rooms in Register Offices. There was a great deal of confusion as we had received no guidance about this or clarification from GRO so initially we did not start ceremonies and waited for guidance to be sent through either from Welsh Government or GRO.
- On the 29th June face-to-face appointments re-commenced, with collaborative working for birth appointments across 'Gwent'.
- At this time we had nearly 500 birth registrations outstanding for Monmouthshire.

July 2020

- As guidance regarding ceremonies had not been received but Welsh Government and GRO were both advising that ceremonies could re-start we made the decision to start ceremonies, following all Public Health recommendations to protect ourselves and the public. Initially this was in the Register Office and approved room only, but as restrictions lifted Approved Premises also began to open for ceremonies.

August 2020

- Death registrations continued by telephone.
- Ceremonies, births and notice appointments continued face to face.

September 2020: To the end of September 919 birth registrations have taken place. That is in a time-frame of 3 months thanks to collaborative working and the dedication of Monmouthshire's registration officers, alongside notice, re-registration and correction appointments and attending ceremonies. There are now less than 16 births outstanding to the end of June and we are actively contacting them to arrange appointments.

October and onwards

- We are still registering deaths by telephone, with electronic transmission of documents and we hope that this will continue into the long term.
- We are trying to balance the demands for face to face appointments and ceremonies (and supporting our approved premises) which places registration officers under greater risk of exposure, whilst protecting the service to ensure that we are able to meet our statutory duties to register deaths throughout the winter period.
- There are a large number of ceremonies which have re-booked for next year which will put pressure on the service, particularly if we are still operating under any restrictions, and we may need to look at recruiting additional ceremony staff in 2021.