

SUBJECT:	Monmouthshire Registration Service Performance Report 2023/24
MEETING:	Performance & Overview Scrutiny Committee
DATE:	18th June 2024
DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED:	All

1. PURPOSE:

1.1 To undertake scrutiny of the Registration Service and its' performance during the 2023/24 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, provided in Appendix One below, describes current performance and highlights future challenges.

2.2 An annual performance report to be presented to this Committee, to be scheduled for June or July each year. 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 2023/24:

4.1 The General Register Office (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 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 have had two meetings with our Compliance Officer this year to discuss Monmouthshire's approach to pandemic recovery and to highlight and discuss legislative changes which are in the pipeline. Neither issue caused concern to the GRO during these meetings.

4.2 The table below summarises our performance during the last financial year -

Type of appointment	Total for year 2023-2024	% within statutory time-frame	Last year's figures for comparison
Births (births registered for another district – not in KPI)	23 (626 under the partnership agreement)	98% (below target)	30
Deaths	1034 (796 within criteria for KPI)	38% (below target)	1197
Still-births	0	N/A	0
Register Office & Approved Premises Marriages, (all marriages registered in Monmouthshire)	652 (760)	N/A	685 (836)
Civil Partnerships	15	N/A	18
Notices of marriage/CP	766	N/A	720
New British citizens	38	N/A	27
Customers seen within 10 mins of appointment/arrival time	All customers	100%	100%
Appt's offered within time-frame guidelines	All types	100%	100%

- 4.3 **Marriages:** 652 registered between 37 approved premises and the register office.
Births taking place within Monmouthshire have now dropped significantly, due to the closure of the maternity unit at Nevill Hall Hospital. Consequently, the table includes a figure for birth registrations completed for other Districts across Gwent through our partnership working.
- 4.4 The table above includes the total number of marriages registered within Monmouthshire. Since the change from registers to a schedule (or marriage document) system all marriages must be registered on the national system, whether they are religious or civil, so couples no longer receive their marriage (or civil partnership) certificate on the day of their ceremony. Each schedule or marriage document must be checked and individually registered on the system before a certificate can be issued. Over the summer, due to the high number of ceremonies, we struggled to register ceremonies within the 7 day target set by the General Register Office. We will monitor this more closely going forward to ensure sufficient time is allocated to staff to manage this task.
- 4.5 The rate of **deaths** registered by 5 days is low at 38% however this is a result of the new scrutiny procedures starting to roll out before the statutory scheme begins in September 2024. The new scrutiny process takes longer than the current procedures so we are not receiving the documentation to enable us to register until day 4 or 5 at the earliest, so it is generally not possible to meet the 5 day target.
- 4.6 It is also difficult to improve the percentage of births registered within 42 days as there are now so few births taking place within Monmouthshire that each registration has a high weighting.
- 4.7.1 Customer feedback – we regularly receive feedback from couples following ceremonies however we are still developing the mechanism with the digital team for feedback to be requested following birth and death registrations. Here are a few quotes received in the year -

'We had our wedding ceremony at the Glen yr Afon House Hotel on 1st November and wanted to thank Xxx and Yyy for taking us through the ceremony and calming our nerves. We had a fabulous day and their calm and friendly attitude was greatly appreciated. Could you please pass on our heartfelt thanks to both of them.'

'I got married on Friday 21st July at Sant Ffraed house and just want to say a big thank you to the three lovely ladies from Monmouthshire registry service that attended and particularly the lady that took the service. I have already received our marriage certificate which is a lot quicker than we expected!'

'We recently got married at Sant Ffraed House on Sunday 4th June! Can I just say we had the most wonderful day and the registrars were amazing!'

{Our Registrar} is a true professional, a warm and friendly soul, and an absolute joy to work with. If you're looking for someone to infuse your wedding ceremony with love, care, and a touch of magic, she is the perfect choice. Our wedding day was made all the more special because of her, and we are forever grateful for the beautiful memories she helped us create. Thank you!'

5. CHALLENGES/FUTURE PROOFING:

- 5.1 Partnership working continues across the Gwent region for birth registrations. It has not as yet developed to the point of including death appointments.
- 5.2 The role of Medical Examiner and Medical Examiner Officers has been continuing to roll out nationally. The scheme started to scrutinise deaths in Monmouthshire in April 2023 focussing on Nevill Hall Hospital deaths and has not yet covered community deaths. We have been advised that the scheme will become statutory in September 2024 and therefore every death will then be included. This will change the way our targets are reported. Currently deaths should be registered within 5 days of death, however, the additional scrutiny means that the process has become much longer and consequently there are far fewer deaths registered within 5 days. Once the scheme becomes statutory, the 5 days will start when the medical certificate is signed so we will then have a more realistic timeframe to be able to improve our target, which is currently 38% of deaths registered within 5 days.
- 5.3 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.
- 5.4 Since the pandemic the number of ceremonies has dramatically increased. Initially this was due to couples delaying their ceremonies to avoid any national Covid restrictions, however, we also had several new venues apply for licences and couples are now travelling the length and breadth of the country to hold their ceremony in Monmouthshire. The average number of ceremonies before the pandemic was 420 whereas last year we conducted 652, representing a 55% increase. It is a balancing act to ensure that we have sufficient staff to conduct the ceremonies without too much pressure on individual availability, as most of our ceremony staff have other jobs Monday to Friday. In addition, there has to be enough work for each individual to ensure that we meet their expectations.
- 5.5 There has still, to date, been no response from the Government to the Law Commission report on marriage therefore we don't know what changes if any, might be coming down the line to marriage law. It is still the case currently that only Registration staff can conduct civil marriages so we are trying to attend as many wedding fayres at our venues as possible to explain to the venues and our couples exactly what we are able to do for them.

6. REASONS:

- 6.1 It is good practice to report on performance internally to a scrutiny committee. The Registration Service is governed nationally by the General Register Office, which should provide Members with further assurance of good governance. Internally, like all other Council services, Registration has a Business Service Plan that will be monitored regularly to ensure standards of service are maintained.

7. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

7.1 None as a consequence of this report. For Members information, Registration Services operates on a cost recovery basis, with service costs covered by income from fees and charges.

8. CONSULTEES:

Public Protection service managers
Chief Officer, Social Care, Safeguarding & Health

9. BACKGROUND PAPERS:

None

10. AUTHORS:

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APPENDIX ONE:

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. The service has taken 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 & staffing

- Registration Services are based next door to MCC's County Hall, in the Old Parlour. There is a team of 23, 14 on a casual basis for ceremonies only. The staff are made up of the Superintendent Registrar, one Registrar and 7 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.
- 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. During the pandemic the service ceased at the out-stations with all appointments being in the Register Office. This was to ensure could control our environment, ensure safe social distancing, reduce travel risk, etc. The service has now reverted to attending Monmouth and Chepstow and will hopefully soon return to Nevill Hall.
- Our Approved Premises, which are venues which have chosen to licence rooms for marriages and civil partnerships, cover the length and breadth of Monmouthshire. There are 37 in total at the present time, and there is 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.