

## **REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, PLACE AND COMMUNITIES**

### **UPDATE ON KEY REGISTRATION SERVICE MATTERS**

#### **Purpose of the Report**

1. The purpose of the report is to advise the Committee of key matters arising from the work of the County Council's Registration Service for births, deaths and marriages.

#### **Information**

##### Continuity of Registration Services during the Covid-19 Pandemic

2. The Registration Service has maintained its statutory public functions at an appropriate level, in line with government guidance, throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Death registrations continued uninterrupted, including by use of easements permitting registrations by telephone rather than necessarily being face-to-face appointments with the public. Where services have had to involve in-person contact with customers, the office lay-out, occupancy and working arrangements have been subject to rigorous Covid-safe risk assessments and adaptations. Members of the public attending offices have been given detailed advance notice of the measures in place for their safety and the safety of staff. Some services have been reduced or curtailed entirely at times, on government instruction, creating backlogs in birth and marriage registrations, and for ceremonies.
3. Registration Offices are now open for public appointments at:
  - Arnold
  - Basford
  - Eastwood
  - Mansfield
  - Newark
  - Sutton-in-Ashfield
  - West Bridgford
4. The offices that remain closed are those at Beeston, East Retford and Hucknall, and the accommodation formerly available for death registrations within the Bereavement Centre at Kings Mill is no longer available following a review by the hospital.
5. As outlined in this report, the registration service remains under significant pressure in meeting public demand for its services. Capacity to address this has been created by selective and periodic suspension of non-statutory (discretionary) services such as civil funerals, European Union Settlement Scheme and Change of Name Deeds, for example. The work of the registration service has been increased recently with the introduction of Designated Register Office arrangements (outlined at paragraphs 11 and 12 below) and the legalisation of outdoor

marriage and civil partnership ceremonies (see paragraphs 16 to 19 below). A new national 'marriage schedule' system has also increased the overall workload.

### Registration of Deaths

6. During the period from 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020 to 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2021, the Registration Service registered 9,741 deaths of which 1,570 included Covid-19 as a cause or contributory factor as recorded on the Medical Certificate of Cause of Death. A total of 835 had died in hospital, 608 had died in Care Homes and 127 had died at home or at another place.
7. Many of these deaths were registered under particularly poignant circumstances as family members had been unable to be with their loved-one at end of their life due to Covid restrictions. Our registrars have been widely complimented for their customary sensitive and compassionate support for bereaved families.

### Registration of Births

8. During the peak months of the Covid-19 pandemic last year, the government suspended birth registrations altogether. During this time, risk assessment work and office adaptations were completed to allow face-to-face appointment to resume when permitted. The restrictions in then in place meant that, initially, the backlog of birth registrations continued to grow. However, as it became possible to re-open offices and as the number of death registrations receded it became possible to make greater progress, to the extent that the backlog has now been cleared entirely.
9. An existing Service Level Agreement with Nottingham City Council has continued to enable County Council registrars to register the births of babies born within the City Council area to families who live in the County.

### Notices of Marriage, including Designated Register Office Status

10. Couples wishing to marry or form a civil partnership are legally required to give formal notice of their intension at least 28 days in advance of the ceremony. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, many planned ceremonies had to be postponed and for a period last year appointments for notices were suspended altogether under government direction.
11. A significant volume of work has been generated by couples re-arranging the date of their ceremony as Covid-restriction were gradually lifted and new notices were given for dates for this summer, next year and beyond. A further volume of work has arisen from the government decision that all registration offices will be able to take notices where one of the couple is from outside the UK.
12. Up to 30<sup>th</sup> June 2021, if one of the couple was from outside the UK their notices would have to be given at one of a relatively small number of Designated Register Offices across the UK. These included Nottingham City Council but none in Nottinghamshire. Since 1<sup>st</sup> July this year this service is available in all registration districts and these couples must give notice together at a Designated Register Office in the area where at least one of them lives.

### Civil Marriage and Partnership Ceremonies

13. In a normal calendar year the County Council Registration Service would expect to conduct approximately 3,000 marriage and civil partnership ceremonies. However, at times in the past year these could only be provided under exceptional circumstance, such as in cases of

imminent terminal illness. This year, the availability of marriage and civil partnership ceremonies has followed the government's Covid-19 roadmap. From 29<sup>th</sup> March ceremonies could take place with six guests, and the figure rose to fifteen from 12<sup>th</sup> April and to thirty from 17<sup>th</sup> May. The cap on the maximum number of guests who can attend a wedding was removed from 21<sup>st</sup> June, however social distancing rules remained. Therefore the change did not affect the numbers that could safely attend a ceremony at any County Council Registration Office.

14. All ceremonies during the pandemic have comprised the essential legal elements only. As a consequence, the registration service has been unable to offer the enhanced ceremonies that in other circumstances would have generated income to offset the cost of delivery of the whole of the registration service.
15. In the financial year 2019 / 2020 the service conducted 2,883 marriage and civil partnership ceremonies. In 2020 / 2021 the figure fell to 988. So far in 2021 / 2022 the number of ceremonies completed or booked is 3,140, and this figure is expected to increase as further Covid relaxations are confirmed.

#### Outdoor Civil Wedding and Partnership Ceremonies

16. In June this year, the government introduced temporary permission for civil ceremonies to take place outdoors from July 2021 to April 2022 and announced a consultation to consider if the changes should become permanent. This will enable a larger number of guests to attend in a covid-safe environment. Hitherto, it had been required that ceremonies at premises approved for civil ceremonies took place inside a room or within a permanent structure.
17. The changes to legalise outdoor civil marriages and civil partnerships (to take place within the grounds of approved premises) were introduced by means of amendments to the Marriages and Civil Partnerships (Approved Premises) Regulations 2005. The guidance to registrars included that venues should be encouraged to have contingency arrangements in place in case guests need to move inside due to inclement weather. However, the number of people the venue can safely accommodate inside is based on fire safety and the Covid-19 risk assessment of the venue. Consequently, the indoor ceremony room may not be able to accommodate all of the guests attending for an outdoor ceremony.
18. Guidance to venues makes clear that they must discuss any proposed outdoor proceedings with the registration service before arranging any such proceedings. The Local Registration Service is required to ensure that outdoor ceremonies take place in a location that is seemly and dignified, and that there will be public access and signage for guests.
19. The new permission applies to premises already approved for civil ceremonies, and so the decision does not affect the number of different places where ceremonies can take place. In Nottinghamshire at present there are 69 premises that have been licensed by the County Council Registration Service. The question of the types of location where civil marriage and partnership ceremonies may take place was among a set of possible changes considered by a public consultation undertaken by the Law Commission last year to inform future changes to marriage law.

#### National Registrars Day – 1<sup>st</sup> July

20. The 'National Registrars Day' took place on Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> July and offered the opportunity to mark the achievements of the registration service and to thank staff for their work during the Covid-19 pandemic. Registrars continued to provide vital public services throughout the pandemic, including the registration of more than 1,500 local Covid-19 deaths.

21. Councillor Cottee sent an email to all registration staff on the morning of 1<sup>st</sup> July offering his thanks to registration staff and an acknowledgement of the importance of their work to the people they serve. On the same day Councillor Smith visited Registration Offices in Mansfield and Newark to pass on his appreciation in person to the staff there. Managers across the service facilitated Covid-safe activities at registration offices to thank their staff.

### **Other Options Considered**

22. None.

### **Reason for Recommendation**

23. To update the Committee on this area of work, which is contained within its remit.

### **Statutory and Policy Implications**

24. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, data protection and information governance finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, smarter working, sustainability and the environment and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

### **Financial Implications**

25. There are no financial implications in so far as the costs associated with provision of the services described in this report are covered by statutory fees. However, due to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic it has not been possible to offer the enhanced services that would otherwise offset the cost of statutory services.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

It is recommended that the Committee:

- 1) Notes the update on key registration service matters and considers if further reports are required on the topics listed.

**Derek Highton**  
**Service Director, Place and Communities**

**For any enquiries about this report please contact:** Robert Fisher, Group Manager for Emergency Planning and Registration, Tel: 0115 9773681

### **Constitutional Comments [CEH 30/06/2021]**

26. The recommendation falls within the remit of Communities Committee under its terms of reference.

### **Financial Comments [RWK 01/07/2021]**

27. There are no specific financial implications arising directly from the report.

## **Background Papers and Published Documents**

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

- None

## **Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected**

- All