

25th JULY 2002

REGISTRATION SERVICE FOR BIRTHS, DEATHS & MARRIAGES

REPORT BY THE COUNTY SECRETARY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Committee is asked to note the registration figures for 2001/02, together with the latest situation in respect of the White Paper on Modernising the Registration Service and Citizenship Ceremonies.

RECOMMENDATION

That the report be noted.

Introduction

1. This report presents a summary of the changes set out in the Government's White Paper on the modernisation and long term future of the Registration Service together with the Council's initial response. By way of introduction the report also gives some facts and figures on the service and main changes in recent years.

Facts and Figures

2. Registration figures for births, deaths and civil marriages in West Sussex for the year 2001/02 are shown below along with those for the previous year for comparison:

	<u>2001/02</u>	<u>2000/01</u>
Births	6,567	7,968
Deaths	9,494	8,897
Marriages	2,434	2,674

The significant decline in birth registrations was due to the closure of the maternity unit at Crawley hospital in February 2001, the majority of Crawley births now taking place at East Surrey Hospital. Whilst there was a small drop in the figure for marriages, the trend over the last five years has been a steady increase in the number of civil marriages. Early indications are that this figure will increase again this year. The number of marriages taking place at approved premises has doubled in the last five years, 873 being conducted at our 55 venues last year. Eight new premises were newly approved over the course of last year, including the Dome Cinema, (Worthing) Chequer Mead Theatre and Arts Centre, (East Grinstead), two country houses and four hotels.

In total the service generates some £720,000 in income against costs of £1,041,000 based on the 2002/03 budget. The net cost of the service in West Sussex is 36p per head of the population.

Citizenship Ceremonies

3. The Nationality, Immigration & Asylum Bill introduced on 12th April provides for applicants for British Nationality to make a citizenship oath and pledge in the presence of a superintendent registrar. The General Register Office has been working closely with the Home Office to develop a policy framework for such ceremonies and we are still waiting to hear exactly what provisions regarding these ceremonies will be brought into force. It is expected that citizenship ceremonies will commence towards the end of 2003.

White Paper 'Civil Registration: Vital Change'

4. In September 1999 the Registrar General published a consultation paper '*Registration: Modernising a vital service*', which set out a vision based on the wider agenda for the modernisation of public services. This paper briefly outlines the recently published government White Paper '*Civil Registration: Vital Change*', highlights the key areas and the timetable being followed, and sets out what West Sussex County Council needs to do in response. These proposals, which provide for an improved delivery of registration services offering more choice, better access and making full use of modern technology, are detailed in Annex 1.

5. The order making powers of the Regulatory Reform Act 2001 will be used to make the legislative changes that are needed to modernise the Registration Service. Once the legislative framework is in place, the implementation is expected to be a gradual process over several years. Much will depend on the outcome of the Shipman Inquiry, the Review of Death Certification and the Review of the Coroner's Service. A possible timetable is:

- Autumn 2002 - Regulatory Reform Act Consultation document published.
- Winter 2002 - Consultation period completed.
- Early 2003 - Parliamentary Scrutiny begins.
- Winter 2003/2004 - Order process completed
- 2004 - Implementation of changes will begin.

6. Whilst no immediate action is required other than to organise an appropriate response to the White Paper, we do need to start to consider the following:

STAFF

- integration into the County Council's employment (consultation/negotiation of contract of employment)
- training and development needs (including management) in order to deliver new services
- skills required to effect the changes
- IT infrastructure tie-ins

STRUCTURE

- Changes to process and procedures
- Changes to computer systems and networking
- Changes in organisational structure, including where within the organisation the registration service is best placed

SPACE

- Changes/improvements to accommodation to meet national standards
- Improvements in access for the public
- Additional points of delivery of the service eg libraries, help points

SPENDING

- On-going computing and networking costs
- Reduction over time in income from sale of certificates
- Enhancements to services delivered that will generate income

It is important to manage the transition period in order to:

- Maintain staff morale
- Minimise cost
- Continue to provide a high quality service to the public

7. We can consider how we might prepare ourselves in order to facilitate a smoother transition when the change in legislation takes effect. For example, we might introduce baby naming ceremonies ahead of implementation (some authorities have already done so). In addition we are looking into the feasibility of unifying the whole of the County into one registration district. The latter would not only provide a better service to the public, but would also give us a greater degree of flexibility in managing the service in the interim period.

Conclusion

8. These are exciting and changing times and we welcome the challenge it poses for the Registration Service; it will enable us to provide the residents of West Sussex with a higher standard of service. The success of the Registration Service depends on the skills and professionalism of the people who deliver it and we are confident that we can equip them to deliver these new services, whilst removing many of the current constraints. Preliminary action should be taken now in order to place ourselves in a better position for the challenges ahead and the Registration Service will need to respond accordingly.

MIKE KENDALL
County Secretary

Background Paper:

White Paper: "Civil Registration: Vital Change".

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KEY AREAS

1] Births and Deaths

- Choice of ways in which to register births & deaths - via Internet, PC or kiosk, by phone or in person.
- Centralised receipt of NHS birth notifications will enable the public to register a birth anywhere in the country.
- Information will be exchanged electronically between the NHS, doctors, coroners, the registration service and other public and private sector bodies.
- Changes to death registrations will take longer as it must take into account the results of the Shipman Inquiry and the Coroner's Service Review.

2] Marriages

- Couples will have more choice of where and when to marry.
- Marriage regulations will focus on the celebrant rather than the building in which the ceremony takes place.
- Preliminaries will still be completed in person and may be extended to all marriages in England and Wales depending on the outcome of the Church of England's review of aspects of marriage law.

3] New Services

- Range of services to be extended to include baby naming ceremonies, reaffirmation of marriage vows and possibly civic funerals.
- Provision of information on services associated with births, deaths & marriages eg. on social security, marriage preparation and probate.
- Local Services to provide help and advice via telephone helplines and the internet.

(The White Paper "Secure Borders Safe Haven: Integration with Diversity in Modern Britain" proposes that Citizenship ceremonies take place in Register Offices.)

4] Records

- Central electronic database of new registrations will be created. People born up to about 70 years ago will be added.
- Over time, linking of life events for a person will create a through life record. Information on divorce and naturalisation to be added.

- Electronic notification of civil registration events to users of birth, marriage and death certificates.
- Eventually no need for certificates.
- Access to historical records (those relating to people born over 100 years ago) will be available to the public and will be computerised.
- Once records are available electronically, there will be little requirement for certificates and they will be phased out.

5] Structure of the Service

- Local authorities, as local service providers, to provide face to face local registration services.
- Registration Officers will no longer be statutory officers but local authority employees.
- Registrar General will maintain responsibility for ensuring high quality of service. National minimum standards will be underpinned by statutory code of practice.
- Public will be free to choose any local service provider or use telephone/internet services.

6] Financial Issues

- Electronic availability of registration information will result in a significant loss of income from sale of certificates.
- Preferred option for funding is for each local service provider to receive a base payment to ensure delivery of a locally based service and an additional payment per event (to encourage competition and investment.)
- Creates income possibilities - enhancements to ceremonies, commemorative certificates etc.
- Changes will require "start up" investment, primarily in information technology.