

The Vale of Glamorgan Council

Cabinet Meeting: 23 October, 2017

Report of the Cabinet Member for Regulatory and Legal Services

Register Office Ceremonies and Fees

Purpose of the Report

1. To present to Cabinet proposals to extend the range of services offered by the Council's Registration Service and a review of associated fees and charges.

Recommendations

1. That delegated authority be granted to the Operational Manager (Democratic Services), in the capacity as Proper Officer for the Vale of Glamorgan Registration Service, to decommission existing Register Office rooms (which will become Approved Premises), as set out in the report.
2. That delegated authority be granted to the Operational Manager (Democratic Services), in the capacity as Proper Officer for the Vale of Glamorgan Registration Service, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Regulatory and Legal Services of the Council and Managing Director, to explore opportunities of making additional Council Venues Approved Premises and to implement accordingly if considered feasible.
3. That Cabinet approves the revised fees and charges in respect of registration and ceremony fees, a priority certificate service and associated postage charges, as set out in [Appendix A](#).
4. That a further report be presented to Cabinet following 12 months of the implementation of the new arrangements.

Reasons for the Recommendations

- 1&2. To enable rooms to be decommissioned and designated as Approved Premises as and when required.
3. To extend and enhance the service options available to Registration Service customers and to ensure any changes to fees and charges are aligned with the principles of the Income Generation and Commercial Opportunities Strategy.

4. To allow Cabinet to consider fully the impacts of the new arrangements and the need for any further revisions to those arrangements.

Background

2. The Registration Service has two distinct income sources. Firstly, there are a number of services where a statutory fee applies, the fee itself being determined by the Registrar General. Statutory fees cover aspects such as marriages and civil partnerships, which take place in a 'statutory' Register Office venue, as well as notices relating to such ceremonies and the issuing of certain certificates.
3. The second category of income relates to services where there is no statutory fee and fees are determined by the Local Authority. An example of this would be fees set for the attendance of Registration Service staff at external commercial venues (known as "Approved Premises").
4. In addition to the above, Regulation 89 and Schedule 15 to the Immigration Act 2016 provides the Registrar General with regulation-making powers for the introduction of new and/or additional fees for certain civil registration statutory services from 1st November 2017.
5. As part of the Income Generation and Commercial Opportunities Programme, and in light of the above, a review of fees and charges within the Registration Service has been undertaken, alongside a benchmarking exercise to analyse services provided by Register Offices in neighbouring Local Authorities. This has enabled the Council to identify opportunities to expand the current service offering and this report outlines the proposals in more detail.

Relevant Issues and Options

Registration and Ceremony Provision

6. The statutory fee for the conducting of a marriage or civil partnership registration at the Register Office is £46. A number of rooms within the Civic Offices form part of the Register Office. These rooms consist of the Corporate Suite, Council Chamber, Committee Rooms 1 and 2 and the Superintendent Registrar's office. The vast majority of ceremonies take place within the Corporate Suite.
7. Unlike most other Local Authorities, the Vale of Glamorgan Registration Service currently is only able to charge the statutory fee of £46, irrespective of which room is used, the number of guests in attendance and the type of ceremony itself. This is due to the fact that all rooms are designated as being part of the Register Office. The majority of Local Authorities have changed their Registration Service arrangements relating to registrations and ceremonies, given the increasing pressures on budgets and in recognition of the very low level of the statutory fee itself.
8. In most Local Authorities, the provision offered for the statutory fee of £46 provides, typically, for a very basic service (and size of venue) accommodating the couple, the required two witnesses and a minimal number of guests. Registrations and ceremonies including other elements and a room catering for larger numbers of guests are subject to payment of a higher, non-statutory fee set by the Local Authority itself.
9. Given the Council's desire to offer more choice to our customers in line with the Income Generation and Commercial Opportunities Strategy and coupled with the

proposed increase in / changes to charges by the General Register Office, it is considered prudent to seek approval for changes to existing arrangements. In order to do so, the following actions would be required:

- It is proposed that a currently vacant room on the ground floor of the Civic Offices (adjacent to Committee Room 3) is designated as the 'statutory' Register Office venue to provide a basic ceremony and the attendance of the couple, two witnesses, two registrars and two guests for the fee of £46.
 - To ensure that the Council is able to carry out any ceremonies that have been booked prior to the introduction of the revised arrangements, Committee Rooms 1 and 2 will also remain as part of the Register Office until all ceremony bookings have been honoured, although it is proposed that no new bookings be taken in respect of these rooms from the date upon which the Approved Premises licence is granted.
 - Certain of the other rooms currently forming part of the Register Office, i.e. the Corporate Suite and Council Chamber, would be subject to a process known as "decommissioning". In essence, these rooms would then become known as "Approved Premises" and be the venue(s) for enhanced, larger ceremonies, with the associated fees set by the Local Authority. The opportunity will also be taken to include Committee Room 3 in the new Approved Premises. This would obviously provide greater flexibility and in terms of service provision. For clarification, decommissioning of a room (or rooms) means that accommodation once forming part of the Register Office approved by the General Register Office (for a statutory Register Office (RO) ceremony / Civil Partnership (CP)) registration, in fact, becomes a room only available as an 'Approved Premises'. Such rooms cannot be used for both Register Office and Approved Premises ceremonies.
 - The Proper Officer would need to apply for a licence (from the Council's own Licensing Department) in respect of the Approved Premises' rooms, as well as submitting plans to the Registrar General for the revised Register Office.
 - Once any ceremonies / registration which had been booked prior to 1st November 2017 or the date that the Approved Premise Licence has been granted have been honoured, a further decommissioning of the remainder of the rooms could then take place (subject to a further licence application being made).
10. The suggested charges, together with a full implementation timetable, including transitional arrangements for existing bookings, are set out in [Appendix A](#).
11. It is also proposed that delegated authority be granted to the Operational Manager (Democratic Services), in the capacity as Proper Officer for the Vale of Glamorgan Registration Service, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Regulatory and Legal Services and Managing Director, to explore the possibility of making additional Council Venues Approved Premises and to implement accordingly if considered feasible, as a second phase of this project. This could include buildings such as the Council's Town Hall.

Priority Certificate Service and Certificate Postage Charges

12. All certificates issued at the time of registration are charged at the statutory fee of £4:00. All certificates issued following this are for historical registration entries and are charged at the increased statutory fee of either £7:00 or £10:00. Currently, applications for the production of an historical copy certificate can be made by post, e-mail, telephone or in person at the Register Office.

13. The current process for issue of certificates is that, upon receipt of a completed copy certificate application form at the Register Office, the Registrars will search locally held records, advise the customer if the registration entry required is held and take payment. The certificate is then either posted to the customer or available to be collected in person.
14. The national standards expectation is that all copy certificates are issued within five working days from the date a completed application form, together with full payment, is received by the Registrars (whether by post, e-mail, telephone or in person). Unlike many Local Authorities, the Vale of Glamorgan Register Office does not currently provide a priority service to customers for the issue of certificates within a shorter timescale.
15. A benchmarking exercise has been undertaken and identified that 16 Welsh Local Authorities provide a priority certificate service and all of these aim to issue the certificate on the same day as an application is received (subject to receiving the application before a specified time). When averaged out, the cost of a same day priority service for all Welsh Authorities is calculated as £19.20.
16. It is proposed that the current service for providing copy certificates is extended to provide a priority service to be administered within existing resources. The proposal for a revised service would provide for the certificate being available for collection or posted before close of business on the next working day immediately following the request being made. This is subject to a completed application form and payment having been made. The fee for this priority service is suggested as being £17 to reflect the next day service.
17. When customers request certificates to be posted the Council does not currently charge any cost for postage in addition to the certificate fee.
18. In relation to the number of certificates issued in 2016/17, it is estimated that two thirds were posted to customers at no additional cost. Certificates are posted first class. A benchmarking exercise has been undertaken and, based on that information; it is proposed that the Council introduce a charge of £2 for the postage of copy certificates.
19. A full implementation timetable is contained in [Appendix A](#).

Resource Implications (Financial and Employment)

20. As alluded to above, it is proposed that all of the above changes are administered within existing resources. The level of cost recovery / fees will be assessed and included as part of the further report to be submitted to Cabinet following a period of 12 months of implementation of the new arrangements.

Sustainability and Climate Change Implications

21. There are no direct implications arising from the report.

Legal Implications (to Include Human Rights Implications)

22. Legislation requires the Council to provide a basic facility for marriages and civil partnerships at the statutory fee. This is reflected in the body of the report.

Crime and Disorder Implications

23. There are no direct implications arising from the report.

Equal Opportunities Implications (to include Welsh Language issues)

24. The impact of these proposals on any protected characteristics has been assessed and an equalities impact assessment was considered. It was determined that the proposals will have no impact on protected characteristics and therefore a full equalities impact assessment was not required.

Corporate/Service Objectives

25. The strategic objectives from the Income Generation and Commercial Opportunities Strategy that relate to these opportunities include:
- to support consistency across the Council in its approach to income generation and commercial opportunities, including setting, collecting and reviewing fees and charges
 - to aim towards achieving full cost recovery where it is appropriate to do so and to develop a standard approach to the application of concessions
 - to influence demand and use of Council services whilst promoting equity and fairness
 - to support the delivery of the Corporate Plan, the Medium Term Financial Plan and the Reshaping Services Programme as well as other corporate planning documents.
26. By implementing each of the proposals the Council will also ensure to work with the delivery of the Council's transformational change programme, Reshaping Services, which seeks to mitigate the impact of budget reductions by reshaping the way in which the Council provides services. By reporting the matter back to Cabinet following 12 months of implementation of the new arrangements, a review of how the changes meet the above strategic objectives will be possible.

Policy Framework and Budget

27. This is a matter for Executive decision.

Consultation (including Ward Member Consultation)

28. There are no implications for Ward Members arising from this report.

Relevant Scrutiny Committee

29. Corporate Performance and Resources

Background Papers

None

Contact Officer

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Officers Consulted

Operational Manager (Performance and Policy)
Superintendent Registrar

Responsible Officer:

Rob Thomas, Managing Director