

		AGENDA ITEM 5
		CS/08/10
Committee:	Central Services Policy & Scrutiny Committee	
Date:	15 March 2010	
<u>Scrutiny Report of the review into the Essex Registration Service Modernisation</u>		
Enquiries to:	Hannah Cleary, Governance Officer 01245 430526 hannah.cleary@essex.gov.uk	

The Committee are invited to consider and approve the following report; the result of the scrutiny review into the Essex Registration Service that took place late last year.

Central Services Policy and Scrutiny Committee

Scrutiny Review into the modernisation of the Essex Registration Service

Introduction

National Registration Services are inspected and regulated by the General Register Office (GRO), which forms part of the Home Office.

During 2009, the GRO encouraged registration authorities to move to single district arrangements, and as a result, the Essex Registration Service carried out a consultation with stakeholders to obtain views on the service moving from an eight district to a single district with effect from 1 February 2010. The new Headquarters of the single district would be in Brentwood.

Members had expressed concern that the relocation of the Registration Service Headquarters could impact on the continuity of service and accessibility for members of the public.

Consequently it was agreed that the Central Services Policy and Scrutiny Committee (the Committee) would undertake a scrutiny review into the single district proposal, with the review intended to deliver a 'critical friend' challenge to the proposed new arrangements.

This scrutiny review was conducted over two meetings; 21 September and 19 October. The Committee took evidence from Alex Hallam, Deputy County Solicitor.

Essex Registration Service

The Essex Registration Service administers registration services for births, deaths, marriages and civil partnerships through eight district offices based in Braintree, Brentwood, Castle Point & Rochford, Chelmsford, Colchester, Epping, Harlow and Uttlesford.

A six week consultation on the proposed new arrangements took place over the summer of 2009 to which 54 responses were received.

As part of the proposed move to a single district the Service would take on responsibility for its own inspections. This would involve collecting statistics for the GRO, to satisfy that the inspection criteria are being met. It is proposed that a new post is established to ensure that all offices are compliant with the good practice guidance, which would operate at arms length to ensure independence.

Under the eight district arrangements, service users are obliged to conduct their registration business at the office appropriate to their home address. Under the single district proposal, the home address of service users will no longer be relevant. Essex residents may register births, deaths and marriages at any of the registration offices located within the County, instead of being obliged to use the one nearest their home address. Ms Hallam emphasised that the change was to the administration arrangements for the Service, rather than a change to the service provided to the public. The increased flexibility allows for greater modernisation of the service, and improved access for the public. Staff can be 'shared' between offices, meaning a more effective use of resources. An electronic diary system will be administered across all offices, allowing service users to visit one office and make an appointment with another. It is envisaged that this service will be made available to service users directly, although for technical reasons this will not be possible in the short term. Service users will also be able to book appointments through the County Councils Contact Centre.

The Headquarters of the single district service will be based in Brentwood. It is anticipated that some refurbishment of these premises may be required, although these costs will be assimilated as part of the overall progress of the service. It was explained that the service had been searching for suitable office accommodation that met their minimum requirements in the Chelmsford area but nothing suitable was available. The existing Brentwood office was finally chosen as it had the capacity necessary to accommodate the extra staff.

Whilst there were eight main registration offices, there were a number of sub-district offices, all of which would be retained and kept operational. Members

expressed concern about the two following aspects of relocating to the Brentwood office:

1. That the Council had asked the existing occupiers who were charities on short term licences to vacate the accommodation in Brentwood to make room for the extra Registration Service staff.
2. That the car parking availability at the new office did not have sufficient capacity.

Ms Hallam was able to advise that the Council was attempting to locate alternative accommodation for the charities, and agreed that there had been difficulties with parking, but ways to overcome this were being actively explored.

Although it was not anticipated that there would be radical changes to existing staffing structures, there may be some expenditure incurred related to changes to staff working hours.

The single district arrangements may also afford opportunities to amend the way that records are stored. At present, each registration office has a strong room that holds the records of every birth, death, marriage and civil partnership since 1837. These records are in demand, in relation to the issue of duplicate certificates as well as requests from genealogists. The strong rooms are relatively small in size, and many of them are under severe space pressure. Once the move to a single district had been completed, the GRO would encourage the establishment of a single repository. Whilst there are logistical difficulties in uniting such large bodies of records so that they remain accessible to staff and the public, the service is exploring the creation of a central repository. This could take the form of a virtual repository, where records are stored electronically, and thus freeing up space in the strong rooms. Discussions have been started with the Essex Records Office, although this work is in the early stages.

Other areas of the country have already moved to a single district, such as Hertfordshire, Kent and Cambridgeshire.

The Registration Service is 72% self-funded, and the creation of the extra post, to oversee compliance, would be funded through current resources. More than half of the staff employed within the Registration Service are on rolling contracts to accommodate weekend opening hours.

Ms Hallam explained that as part of the move to a single jurisdiction, it would be possible to 'de-commission' the ceremony rooms. This meant that instead of a flat fee covering use of the ceremony room at any time or date, more could be charged for use of the rooms at popular and peak times, thus generating more income for the Council. Members asked about the fee structure and if this increased year-on-year. It was explained that the fee structure for the statutory

services was set by the Government and the amount had not changed since 2003.

Conclusions

Members agreed the following finding and recommendation:

Finding	Recommendation
That the fee structure for the Registration Service had not increased for over five years.	<p>That the Cabinet Member for Legal Services write to Central Government to request an increase to the fee structure for the Registration Service.</p> <p>Owner: Cabinet Member of Major Projects and Commercial Services</p> <p>Implementation Date: June 2010</p> <p>Impact Review Date: September 2010</p>

On 1 March 2010 the General Register Office published a new increased fee structure that would be implemented from 6 April 2010. A copy of the fee changes can be found attached.

General Register Office introduces new charges

01 March 2010

New charges for people ordering birth, marriage and death certificates were announced today by Registrar General James Hall.

From Tuesday 6 April 2010 the eight separate fees currently charged by the General Register Office (GRO) for ordering a certificate will be reduced to two - one for standard orders and one for the priority service.

The changes - the first for the GRO since 2003 - will ensure that the costs of providing the service are recovered from fees and not subsidised by the taxpayer.

Mr Hall said:

"The General Register Office receives more than two million certificate orders every year, the vast majority of which, over 90 per cent, are ordered online.

"This is our first change to fees since 2003 and we believe that the new fee structure will be simpler to use for our customers.

GRO certificate services are self-financing and costs must be recovered to ensure taxpayers do not subsidise them. This is a responsibility we take extremely seriously.

"We will continue to play our part in keeping costs as low as possible by bringing in technological efficiencies and improvements."

The cost of ordering certificates online with a GRO reference number, using the standard service, will rise from £7.00 to £9.25. A number of other charges, however, will fall to this new standard fee, including those for certificates where customers do not know the reference number.

Three of the four priority overnight service charges will also fall to a flat fee of £23.40.

The Registrar General has also announced new fees to be charged by the Local Registration Service throughout England and Wales for issuing copies of certificates, and officiating at weddings and civil partnerships for those who are housebound or detained.

The charge for registering marriages at registered buildings - those buildings that are registered for the solemnization of religious marriages other than Anglican churches - has also been changed.

These new fees, which also come into effect on 6 April, reflect the actual cost of providing the services and follows a review undertaken by local authorities together with the GRO.

For more information on GRO services and to order certificates online go to www.direct.gov.uk/gro

Notes to Editors

1. The changes were made in consultation with HM Treasury and laid before parliament today (1 March).
2. From 6 April, fees charged by GRO for birth, marriage and death certificates ordered online, by telephone, or by post will be as follows:

Current Service		Existing Fee	New Service	Fee
Standard	Online - reference quoted	£7.00	Standard	£9.25
	Online - no reference	£10.00		
	Offline - correct reference	£8.50		
	Offline - no reference	£11.50		
Priority	Online - reference quoted	£23.00	Priority	£23.40
	Online - no reference	£26.00		
	Offline - reference quoted	£24.50		
	Offline - no reference	£27.50		

Standard - despatch on the fourth working day from receipt of order, or the fifteenth working day when no reference number is quoted.

Priority - despatch on the next working day from receipt of order, if received before 4pm.

3. From 6 April, fees charged by the Local Registration Service for various services will be as follows:

Statutory Service / Product	Existing Fee from 1/4/2005	Fee from 6/4/2010
<i>Main fees</i>		
Certificate issued by Superintendent Registrar (SR)	£7	£9
Short certificate issued by a SR	£5.50	£9
'Special' certificate issued by a SR	£7	£9
Certificate issued by a registrar at the time of registration	£3.50	£3.50 no change
Certificate issued by a registrar otherwise than at the time of registration	£3.50	£7 (new fee)
Marriage notice	£30	£33.50
Registrar's fee for a Register Office marriage	£40 (1/12/2005)	£40 no change
<i>Other fees</i>		
Registrar's fee for attending a marriage at a registered building or for the housebound and detained	£47	£80
SR's fee for attesting a notice of marriage away from his office for housebound or detained	£47	£49
SR's fee for attending a marriage of the housebound or detained.	£47	£85

Registration Authorities, England and Wales - Fees from 6 April 2010 (Civil Partnerships)

Statutory Service / Product	Existing Fee from 1/12/2005	Fee from 6/4/2010
<i>Main fees</i>		
Certified copy / extract issued by registration authority at	£3.50	£3.50 no change

time of registration		
Certified copy / extract issued after the time of registration	£7	£9
Civil partnership notice	£30	£33.50
Signing by the civil partnership registrar of the civil partnership schedule	£40	£40 no change
<i>Other fees</i>		
Attendance of authorised person for civil partnership notice for the housebound or detained	£47	£49
Attendance of civil partnership registrar for purpose of signing schedule at housebound or detained	£47	£80
Giving notice to registration authority under Civil Partnership (Registration Abroad and Certificates) Order 2005	£30	£33.50

4. For all media enquiries call the Home Office Press Office on 020 7035 3535.

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