

Cabinet	CAB/007/11
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FEE RATES IN THE REGISTRATION SERVICE

Report by Cabinet Member for Major Projects and Commercial Services

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Purpose of report

The purpose of this report is to detail the outcome of the review of the existing fee rates in the Registration Service as part of the Revenue Income Optimisation (RIO) project and to approve the recommended changes.

Recommendations

The proposed fee increases will bring the service in line with the benchmark fees of neighbouring and other authorities. The fee increases will also ensure that charges remain competitive and support the Registration Service moving towards financial self-sufficiency.

It is recommended that the new pricing regime begins from 1 April 2011.

Decision Areas

This report seeks Cabinet approval for a fee increase in the service effective from 1 April 2011.

Background, context, and area of the County affected

Fee increases in the Registration Service

Each year local authorities review the level of fees charged for the attendance of staff at weddings/civil partnerships in approved premises, the celebratory services offered and for the provision of the nationality checking service. Couples booking weddings or civil partnerships at approved premises often do so more than one year in advance of the date of the ceremony so the early announcement of new fee rates helps them with their ceremony planning.

The Registration Service provides the following services to customers.

1. Wedding and civil partnership ceremonies

These are offered at approved premises and decommissioned ceremony rooms.

Approved premises

3281 weddings and 102 civil partnership ceremonies took place in approved premises in 2009/10. In order to attract ceremonies in a very competitive ceremony market it has been practice to set approved premise fee levels below the main competitors in Hertfordshire and Kent.

Decommissioned Ceremony Rooms

When the Registration Service moved to a One Essex structure on 1st February 2010, seven of the existing eight Register Offices were decommissioned to become approved premises. The Essex Register Office in Brentwood offers a wedding or civil partnership for the statutory fee of £40. The fee for all decommissioned rooms (Mon-Thurs) is also £40.

2. Nationality Checking Service (NCS)

The NCS is a partnership between the Home Office Immigration and Nationality Directorate and Local Authorities in England and Wales. It is a check and send service for British nationality applications. Registration Services across the country use the NCS, resulting in 50% of applications for British Citizenship coming via NCS. The Registration Service is expanding this successful service in Essex.

3. Celebratory Services

These are non-statutory services consisting of naming ceremonies, renewal of marriage vows ceremonies and civil funerals. The services receive relatively modest customers and account for a small portion of provision in the service.

4. Civic Funerals

For a civic funeral, the celebrant works closely with the funeral director and maintains personal involvement with the bereaved family throughout, from the initial meeting, through to creating and then leading the ceremony.

5. Individual Citizenship Ceremonies

Whilst some 1700 people attend group citizenship ceremonies each year a number request an individual ceremony and an additional fee of £112.50 is charged for the service. Ceremonies take place in the local Registration Office which may be more convenient to the customer. In 2009/10 there were 46 individual ceremonies held.

Options/Proposals

A small working group has considered a number of options in relation to the fees that are proposed in this paper.

The fees of surrounding authorities were ascertained as part of a benchmarking exercise and compared with those charged in Essex. Benchmarking was conducted alongside an exercise to make a broad comparison with the facilities offered by other authorities.

The benchmarking exercise enabled the group to consider possible fee increases with factors such as competitiveness, value for money, and supporting the financial self-sufficiency of the service as key considerations. The proposed fee increases are derived from consideration of these factors.

The recommended fee increases are detailed in the background papers attached. The following points are prescient:

- Specific consideration was given to providing low cost wedding and civil partnership ceremonies in the county. It is recommended that the charge for all decommissioned ceremony rooms on a Monday is £45. The statutory fee for Essex Register Office is £40.
- In order to ensure the fee increases are not abrupt, consideration was given to a 'special offer' for customers who book their ceremony and pay in full before the end of March 2011. These customers will be charged 2010/11 prices.
- The fee increases for the decommissioned rooms are relatively higher than fee increases for approved premises and the Essex Register Office. The fees for decommissioned rooms were shown to be significantly lower than benchmarked during the benchmarking exercise.
- The proposed fee increases for celebratory services, civic funerals and individual citizenship ceremonies are brought in line with benchmarked authorities.
- It is proposed that the successful NCS is expanded. In a competitive market of increasing providers, and the freedom of NCS on choosing services from numerous authorities, it is recommended that the fees are increased on a full cost recovery basis and are brought in line with benchmarked neighbouring authorities.

Area of the county affected

This decision is countywide.

Conclusions

The benchmarking exercise demonstrated the need to bring fees in line with similar authorities.

The fee changes will move the Registration Service towards financial self-sufficiency, ensure it remains competitive and offers value for money.

The Registration Service offers a combination of statutory and non-statutory services. There is a separate and regulated fee regime for the other services over which the Registration Service has no control because they are set by central government. In arriving at the current proposal the review has balanced the interests of all the users of the service and the need to move the service towards offering the best value to the citizens of Essex.

Relevance to ECC's corporate plan and other Strategic Plans

This proposal is relevant to those parts of the corporate plan that relate to ensuring that the authority achieves value for money for council tax payers. It proposes a fee regime that strikes an appropriate balance between the needs of the Service to generate fee income within a competitive environment and offering services to citizens for a cost that reflects the service provided. They also move the service towards self-sufficiency and allow the Council to divert resources to other priorities.

Consultation

Other portfolio members have been consulted.

Legal Implications (Monitoring Officer)

There is a statutory fee for the registration of a marriage or civil partnership in the designated register office. Provided that this is observed the fee tariff is a matter for the local authority in respect of the services mentioned above. The decision does not have any other governance implications.

Finance and Resources Implications (Section 151 Officer)

This decision falls within existing financial and asset resources. Its effect will be to move the service towards financial self sufficiency.

Human Resources Implications

There are no human resource implications in this decision.

Equality Impact Assessment

The primary impact of this proposal is economic. A preliminary assessment using the authority's Equality Impact Assessment tool has been conducted. The level of increase is broadly similar across the board.

Background papers

Summary of fee increases (attached).

Background Paper to Cabinet report *Fee Increases in the Registration Service* presented by Cabinet Member for Major Projects and Commercial Services to Cabinet, 8th February 2011

The table below summarises the existing fee rates and those recommended to be effective from 1st April 2011.

Customers who book and pay in full by 31st March 2011 will pay 2010/11 prices.

1. Wedding and Civil Partnerships		
	2010/2011	2011/2012
Essex Register Office, Brentwood	£40.00	£40.00
Approved Premises Attendance Fees		
Mon – Fri	£295.00	£340.00
Saturday	£335.00	£385.00
Sun, Bank/Public Holidays	£375.00	£430.00
Decommissioned Ceremony Rooms Fees		
Mon	£40.00	£45.00
Tues-Thurs	£40.00	£115.00
Fri	£100.00	£175.00
Saturday am	£150.00	£230.00

2. Nationality Checking Service		
Type of Application	Current fee to customer inclusive of VAT [where applicable] for 2010/11	Proposed fee to customer inclusive of VAT [where applicable] for 2011/12
Adult who submits single application pays one fee.	£50.00	£60.00
Husband and wife living together who apply at the same time pay one fee.	£75.00	£90.00
Husband and wife (and up to 2 children)	£90.00	£110.00

Single parent (and up to 2 children)	£70.00	£85.00
Additional children on parents application	£20.00 per child	£25.00 per child
One or more children under the age of 18 who apply separately from their parents.	£20.00 per child	£25.00 per child

3. Celebratory Services Fees	2010/2011	2011/2012
Registration Office Weekday	£160.00	£185.00
Registration Office Saturday	£175.00	£205.00
Approved Premises Weekday	£210.00	£245.00
Approved Premises Saturday	£240.00	£275.00
Approved Premises Sunday/BH	£265.00	£305.00

4. Civil Funerals	2010/2011	2011/2012
Fee	£190.00	£220.00

5. Individual Citizenship Ceremonies	2010/2011	2011/2012
Fee	£112.50	£130.00