

Agenda item:

**Cabinet      16 June 2009**

Report Title	<b>Improving marriage and civil partnership services through the decommissioning of register office rooms and to review fees of the Registration and Citizenship Service</b>
Report of:	John Suddaby – Head of Legal Services.
Signed :	
Contact Officer:	Paula Hall – Superintendent Registrar
Report for:	Non key decision
Wards(s) affected:	All
<b>1. Purpose of the report</b>  1.1 To propose changing the status of the current “register office” to become an approved premises for the conduct of marriage and civil partnership services providing by this means a superior and more customer focused service.  1.2 To propose alternative arrangements for the provision of the statutory “register office”.  1.3 To propose an increase of fee from £750 to £1,375 for the designation of a private premises as an approved premise.  1.4 To propose other increases in fees for services provided by the Registrars Service as detailed in the report.	
<b>2. Introduction by Cabinet Member</b>  2.1 It will be important to ensure that the changes outlined in this report are delivered and that following the changes there is an enhanced level of customer service offered by the Council’s marriage and civil partnership registry services. Not only should the report	

provide this it should also enable improved value for money on the part of the Council and ensure that the offer is better than current arrangements. It will also be important to ensure that these arrangements are kept under review so that the twin aims of improved customer satisfaction and value for money are delivered.

### **3. State link(s) with Council Plan Priorities and actions and /or other Strategies:**

- 3.1 To deliver an excellent service to customers that is focussed on meeting individuals' current and future needs.
- 3.2 To monitor customer satisfaction levels by consultation with customers through feedback.
- 3.3 To provide a value for money service.

### **4. Report**

- 4.1 Statutory marriage and civil partnership services are held in a number of rooms at the Civic Centre collectively known as the "register office" for a set statutory fee of £43.50. There are also a number of "approved premises" (approved by the Council) able to offer such services in the borough. These premises are in the main privately owned premises but also include Alexandra Palace. Approved premises are free to charge more than the statutory fee and consequently able to provide a superior service.
- 4.2 This report principally sets out to provide an improved, more flexible and customer led service. This is to be achieved by changing the status of specific rooms forming part of the "register office" to a combined "approved premises" known as the "Civic Suite" which would operate separately from the "register office". This will also move the Registration Service closer towards a position of a self funding service and to set its own fees.
- 4.3 The statutory service would still be provided by the "register office" at the same set fee of £43.50 in two rooms which are already part of the "register office" (the superintendent and additional superintendent registrars offices which are considered appropriate for such use).
- 4.4 The proposed changes would enable the registration service to fall more in line with services provided by the majority of register offices in England & Wales following a benchmarking exercise illustrated in **Appendix 1**. Ceremony times could be extended thereby allowing a more personalised service e.g. by including readings, allowing musicians to sing/play music and allowing more time for photographs etc. The Registration Service offers a high quality service; however, it is doing so in an increasingly competitive environment with many alternatives on offer to couples.

Officers consider that by expanding the service on offer, and by increasing flexibility and income, the outcome will be an improved service offered to the public. Enhanced publicity could be funded by the increased fees, ensuring that all groups within the community are informed of the services available e.g. taking into account the number of languages spoken in borough.

4.5 This report also sets out to increase the fee charged to applicants wishing to have their private premises approved for wedding and civil partnership ceremonies from £750 to £1,375 to cover increased advertising costs incurred by required public consultation and the costs of officer time taken to process these applications. No profit is intended nor permitted by the legislation in this aspect.

4.6 This report also sets out to increase fees for related matters as detailed in the recommendation sections including those of the Nationality Checking Service (unchanged since its introduction in 2005) to fall more in line with other authorities following the above mentioned benchmarking exercise. The service helps reduce unnecessary delays in the process of application for British Citizenship to the Home Office by ensuring that applications are accurate and complete. The fees for the service are intended to be cost covering. Projected income from the revised fees is illustrated in **Appendix 3**.

## **5. Recommendations**

5.1 That members agree to the decommissioning of the ceremony room, council chamber and committee rooms 1 & 2 from the “register office”.

5.2 To note that the statutory service of £43.50 would be provided in the superintendent and additional superintendent rooms.

5.3 That an internal application be made by the Director of Corporate Resources on behalf of Council as the property owner to make the decommissioned rooms into “approved premises” known as “The Civic Suite” (or such other name deemed appropriate). The decision to approve to be made by the Registration Service in the ordinary way.

5.4 That members agree the following scale of charges for the marriage/civil partnership service in the “Civic Suite” (this includes the conduct of the service):

Ceremony Room:	
Monday, Wednesday, Thursday:	£70
Tuesday:	£43.50
Friday:	£100
Saturday:	£130
Council Chamber (all times)	£250
Committee Rooms 1&2 (all times)	£150

5.5 To note that the above fees will be reviewed annually.

5.6 That members agree the following revised fees (inclusive of VAT) charged for the Nationality Checking Service:

Single applicant:	Current:	£34.50	Proposed:	£46.00
Couple		£57.50		£69.00
Child		£23.00		£23.00
Additional child after 2 children		£23.00		£17.25

5.7 That members agree to the following charge for Birth, Death and Marriage certificates not currently charged:

Issue of certificate on day of request (new proposal)	£3.00	administration charge
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5.8 That members agree to the fee charged to applicants wishing to have their premises approved for wedding & civil partnership ceremonies increased from £750 to £1,375.

5.9 That members agree to all changes being effective from 1 September 2009.

## **6. Reason for recommendation(s)**

6.1 Please see the section 4 of the Report.

## **7. Other options considered**

None

## **8. Summary**

8.1 That members agree to the decommissioning of the above specified rooms of the current register office.

8.2 That Property Services makes an application to the Registration Service to approve the decommissioned rooms as approved premises known as the Civic Suite.

8.3 That members approve the new/revised fees for:

- Marriages and civil partnership ceremonies;
- Applications for approved premises
- Nationality checking service
- Administrative charge for certificates issued

## **9. Chief Financial Officer Comments**

9.1 The Chief Financial Officer has been consulted over the contents of this report and has discussed the proposals and implications with the Service head. The recommended changes should support the service to deliver an improved service offer and brings charges in line with other boroughs and should reduce the net cost of the service from £131k (2009/10 original budget) to £75k assuming current volumes are maintained.

## **10. Head of Legal Services Comments**

10.1 Under the Marriages and Civil Partnerships (Approved Premises) Regulations 2005 the Council has a power to set fees reasonably representing the cost of providing a registrar and superintendent to attend ceremonies at approved premises. Different fees may be set for different cases or circumstances. In contrast there is a separate fee for the statutory service at a Register Office. These fees for officiating over a service are distinct from the fee charged by an approved premises owner for the use of the building which is at the discretion of the owner, including the Council in the case of the Civic Centre.

10.2 In order for part of the Civic Centre to become “approved premises” instead of a Register Office, there must be an application on behalf of the Council as the property owner and this must be subject to public notice and consultation. Approval may be granted if the premises meet statutory requirements which should not be a problem given the past use of the Civic Centre for such ceremonies. It is recommended that the decision to approve be made by the Registration Service.

10.3 A Member-level decision will be required to fix the fees recommended in this report.

## **11. Head of Procurement Comments**

N/A

## **12. Equalities & Community Cohesion Comments**

12.1 The Registration Service continues to address all ethnic and cultural requirements within the secular requirements of marriage and civil partnership legislation. The availability of translations of ceremonies in the community languages totalling over 30 will continue with the addition of further languages as the need arises. Diversity will continue with choices for everyone to have either a simple ceremony or an individual personalised one, with music, readings, additional vows, flower arrangements and facilities for photographs indoors and out.

### 13. Consultation

13.1 Public consultation is required in respect of the internal application to create the "Civic Suite". This is detailed in the Marriages and Civil Partnerships (Approved Premises) Regulations 2005. In essence, the application and plan must be made available to the public and notice of the application must be advertised in a newspaper allowing 21 days for objections.

### 14. Service Financial Comments

14.1 The Register Office is an income generating service, which has a duty to provide a statutory service to members of the public. These statutory duties do not generate sufficient income to cover the cost of running the service. Financial support is currently required from the Council to effectively run the Registration Service.

14.2 The table below sets out the budget, actual & variance for the BM&D service for the last 2 years.

BM&D Budget History	2007/08			2008/09		
	Budget	Actual	Variance	Budget	Actual	Variance
	£	£	£	£	£	£
Expenditure	532,700	492,018	40,682	538,000	522,463	15,537
Citizenship	185,100	165,346	19,754	189,700	135,984	53,716
BMD receipts	197,800	194,821	2,979	205,800	206,857	(1,057)
Income	382,900	360,167	22,733	395,500	342,841	52,659
Net Council Support	149,800	131,851	17,949	142,500	179,622	(37,122)

This clearly shows that the income from Citizenship activity has fallen short of the income target for the last 2 years. It also shows that even if current income targets were met, the Council would still be providing a budgeted net contribution to the service of over £100k.

14.3 As shown in **Appendices 2 and 3**, the action recommended in this report should result in an increase in income. Based on 2007/08 volumes the potential annual income would increase by £42,670 for marriages/civil partnerships, and £10,600 for the nationality checking service. It should be noted that this may be optimistic in the current economic climate however; even a more modest increase in income should allow the service to move closer to a position of covering its costs. If volumes do hold up, the proposed fees could reduce the Council's net contribution to the service

from £131k (2009/10 original budget) to circa £75k assuming current volumes are maintained.

14.4 The proposed increase for the approval of private premises will not make any significant contribution to the overall income as the annual volumes are small (4/5 pa) however, this higher amount will ensure that all costs are recovered, including officer time.

14.5 Should members agree to change the name and status of the register office the service will incur some one-off costs as the Council would be liable to refund couples the notice fee of £30.00 each paid in advance for their marriage or civil partnership to take place at the "Register Office". A fresh notice would be required stating the revised name of the "Civic Suite". For the period covering Sep - Dec 09 only 8 couples have given notice to date which would require a refund of £240.

## **15. Use of appendices /Tables and photographs**

Appendix 1 – Table of fees charged by Register Offices

Appendix 2 – Table of fees for marriages with projected income

Appendix 3 – Income and Projection of fees for the Nationality checking service (NCS)