



Communities, Leadership & Libraries Committee 7th February 2023

Title	Registration & Nationality Service Update
Report of	Chair of Communities, Leadership & Libraries Committee
Wards	All
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Summary

This report provides an overview and update on the Registration and Nationality service, including an update on annual performance. The report updates on legislative changes that have come into force and potential further changes that will impact weddings and civil partnerships and how the service is preparing for these. The report also provides an update on how the service supports residents and communities, in providing a critical statutory service that affects everyone at some point of their life.

Please note the report contains information that some may find sensitive.

Officers Recommendations

1. The committee is asked to note service performance, and updates contained within the report on the recovery of performance since the pandemic
2. The committee is asked to note the statutory and legislative changes that have had an impact on service provision and the people engaging with the service

1. Why this report is needed

- 1.1 This report provides committee with an update on the performance of the Registration and Nationality service. It also provides an update on legislative changes and future risk and opportunities presented by potential changes in legislation to weddings and ceremonies. The performance period in section 1.17 covers performance against national KPI's for 2021 and 2022 and includes variations in performance due to processing birth registration backlogs and citizenship ceremony backlogs, due to the pandemic. A 4-year view of demand on the service is included in section 1.18, to illustrate fluctuations over this period.
- 1.2 Targets set out in this report are statutory and are set by the General Registrar's Office (GRO). The service is engaged on a regional and national level with the GRO and other Registration districts to monitor performance, share best practice and prepare for upcoming legislative changes. The service also reports annually to the GRO, in regards performance.

INTRODUCTION

- 1.3 The Registration and Nationality Service is responsible for the registration of births, deaths and still-births, the formalities for marriage and civil partnerships and for conducting citizenship ceremonies.
- 1.4 Over the year, 2022, the team has processed 5,298 birth and 2,512 death registrations, carried out 700 marriage or civil partnership ceremonies and run citizenship ceremonies for 2,419 new British citizens.
- 1.5 More than 650,000 deaths were registered in the UK in 2022, 9% more than in 2019. This represents one of the largest excess death levels outside the pandemic in 50 years. Barnet also saw higher numbers of deaths registered, in 2022, but not quite as high as the national figure. In 2019, Barnet registered 2,386 deaths in comparison with 2,972 in 2020, (24.5% increase within the first year of the pandemic), then 2798 in 2021 (17% increase) and 2512 in 2022, (5% increase). This indicates deaths have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels as at the end of 2022. It should be noted deaths are registered in the district where the death occurred, not where the person lived at the time of death.
- 1.6 The service offers an out of hours service on Saturdays, Sundays and Bank Holidays to issue the paperwork required to assist people requiring a same day burial or cremation to proceed ahead of completing the full death registration. The Registration Service is trialling another offering over the winter period to extend this service for contact with the burial services on Saturday evenings. A registrar will be available from 7pm-8pm throughout the course of the trial period, up to the end March 2023. The service will continue to work, within resources available, to provide a service to accommodate the needs of our communities.

STATUTORY AND LEGISLATIVE CHANGES IMPACTING THE SERVICE

- 1.7 The statutory Medical Examiners (MEs) scheme, currently scrutinising all non-coronial deaths in a hospital setting, will be rolled out to the community from April 2023. From this point, the Register Office will only be able to accept Medical Certificates of Cause of Death (MCCDs) that have been scrutinised by the ME. The service has not experienced

great delays in the registration of deaths from the hospital however during the community setting rollout, there may be delays in the Register Office receiving the MCCD, impacting the timeliness of death registrations. The service has a close relationship with the ME and will continue to build relationships to ensure this does not result in further difficulties attaining the national KPI for death registrations. However, Committee should be aware this is a risk as the scheme is rolled out. The service are active members of regional and national registration groups and liaise with the GRO continuously to monitor the impact of these changes. The ME has completed an extensive engagement exercise across the borough to ensure all community doctors are aware of the changes and what they will be required to do from April 2023, to ensure a smooth transition with minimal impact on registration timeliness.

- 1.8 On 4th May 2021, the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration Etc.) Act 2019 came into force. The legislation marked the introduction of the Marriage Schedule System and registration in an electronic register. The electronic register is a more secure and more efficient system for keeping marriage records and has centralised the registration of marriages in Barnet. As part of the implementation, buildings of religious worship that held their own registration stock and registers were required to return these to the Register Offices. The Register Office is now the sole point of certificate reproduction for ceremonies that have taken place in Barnet.

The Marriage Schedule System also allows for the names and occupations of parents of the couple (mother / father / parent) to be included in the marriage entry and on marriage certificates. Prior to this, only a father's details were recorded.

- 1.9 There has been changes to notices of Marriage & Civil Partnership because of the UK's exit from the European Union. Prior to the UK's departure from the European Union, if one or both parties to a marriage or civil partnership were Non-EEA, that couple could attend any 'Designated Register Office'. Since 1st July 2021, couples that are subject to immigration control must give notice in the district where at least one of them resides. Additionally, EEA nationals are now subject to immigration control unless they have Settled or Pre-Settled European Settlement Scheme status.
- 1.10 Confirmation has now been received that the Marriage & Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022, will come into effect on Monday 27 February 2023. The Act raises the age of marriage and civil partnership to 18 years in England and Wales. This means from that date a person under 18 years of age will no longer be able to marry or enter into a civil partnership under any circumstances, including with parental or judicial consent.

PERFORMANCE UPDATE

- 1.11 The data illustrated in section 1.18 shows that the number of births registered has remained relatively stable, since the pandemic, although the data shows a c5% decrease on 2019 data. There is fluctuation in the numbers due to timeliness of birth registrations following the birth. Couples have 42 days from birth to register and the delay in registering births would impact the reporting period the birth registration appears in. It should also be noted 2019 saw a slightly higher number of births than the historical average for the service year. Resources were added to the service in late 2020 and early 2021 to clear significant backlogs from the early part of 2020 when the service temporarily ceased. The service is now returning to normal timeliness to register from date of birth. It should be noted births are registered in the district of which the birth

occurred. In agreement with the GRO all registration districts will be expected to reach back to KPI target in the 2023 reporting period, which Barnet are committed to.

- 1.12 There was a decrease in the number of death registrations in 2022 compared with 2021. However, death registrations have not returned to pre-pandemic figures and remain over 2,500 per year. Notices of Marriage and Civil Partnership remain in line with expected numbers, with a rise in ceremonies in 2021 due to the pandemic backlog.
- 1.13 Citizenship ceremonies saw the largest increase in 2021 with the service addressing the backlog created by the pandemic and the Home Office processing applications. Barnet remains one of the busiest boroughs in London for welcoming new British citizens.
- 1.14 The number of Marriage and Civil Partnership ceremonies in 2021 was substantially higher due to the clearance of the pandemic backlog. There has been a drop in the number of marriage and civil partnership ceremonies in Barnet in 2022, particularly in the latter part of the year. This is not unique to Barnet and has also been seen across London and maybe attributed to the cost-of-living crisis, as people look to reduce expenditure. This will be monitored as it could impact future income for the service.

The figures should be taken in context of the impact of the pandemic and for comparison 2019 saw 737 marriage and civil partnerships conducted, so 2022 would equate to a 5% drop on pre-pandemic levels.

- 1.15 In 2022, the service operated in line with the average KPI attainment seen across London. Additionally, service capacity was added across the 2021/2022 period to focus on birth registration, and a great improvement has been made on this KPI across the two years. The service will send reminders to parents if they have not booked an appointment 3 – 4 weeks following a birth and now backlogs are cleared, has the capacity to administer birth registrars in a timely manner.
- 1.16 The attainment of the national KPI for deaths – 90% registered within 5 days – has decreased both in Barnet and across London between 2021 and 2022. The primary reason for this was the re-introduction of face-to-face registrations. Telephone registration enabled customers to register remotely and removed the need for travel to a Register Office. Barnet remain above the average KPI attainment across London, which can be partially attributed to the strong stakeholder relationship between the service, Barnet General Bereavement Service and the Medical Examiner.

1.17 The below table shows service performance against KPI's for calendar year 2021 and 2022 against national targets and London performance for comparative purposes.

	National KPI	Barnet attainment 2021	Average across London 2021	Barnet attainment 2022	Average across London 2022
Births registered within 42 days	98%	53	67	84	85
Still births registered within 42 days	98%	100	99	100	97
Deaths registered within 5 days	90%	83	69	76	59

1.18 The Below table shows demand data over the previous 4 years and fluctuations in demand due to the pandemic and recovery period.

	2019	2020	2021	2022
Births	5511	5236	5294	5298
Still Births	20	20	16	20
Deaths	2386	2972	2798	2512
Notices of Marriage & Civil Partnership	3103	2400	2811	3149
Marriage & Civil Partnership ceremonies	737	498	787	700
Citizens who have completed their Citizenship Ceremony	2448	1439	2972	2419
Number of historical/reproduction certificates issued (Approx.)	3525	2406	3019	3449

- 1.19 From 26th March 2020, the service suspended all ceremonies and registrations in line with Government pandemic guidance, except for death registrations. The Coronavirus Act 2020 introduced easements allowing for deaths to be registered over the telephone. This allowed the service to continue assisting customers with the bereavement process, though did create backlogs across all other services. Other services were restored slowly throughout the following year, ensuring social distancing measures were in place and the face-to-face environment was safe for customers and staff. The easements ceased on 24th March 2022, and after this date, death registrations returned face to face. One easement has remained; the electronic transmission of documents, which enables registrars to send burial and cremation paperwork to funeral directors by email.
- 1.20 Pandemic backlogs have been cleared on the whole, with the service now focussing on re-establishing KPI attainment achieved prior to the pandemic. Each local authority is required to provide annual assurance to the Registrar General that they are complying with their statutory requirements set out under the Registration Acts and in relation to service delivery, performance and public protection and counter-fraud.
- 1.21 Barnet submitted its annual return in June 2022 and received positive assurance of the Barnet registration service and recognition for the hard work undertaken during 2021/22. All Registration services had experienced challenging years as services moved from the pressures of operating during a pandemic towards more normal working practices, including the return of face-to-face appointments.
- 1.22 The General Register Office also noted the positive performance recovery activity levels that had been delivered, especially the increase of birth registration timeliness to 58% and progress in eliminating volumes of outstanding birth registrations during this reporting year. The GRO have indicated they will expect performance to return to statutory targets during the performance year 22/23.

WEDDING REFORM UPDATE

- 1.23 In July 2022 The Law Commission of England and Wales published its [recommendations](#) to reform weddings law, proposing a fairer system that gives couples more choice over where and how their wedding takes place. This followed a public consultation in the previous year. For more details on the scope of the review, a useful infographic can be found [here](#).
- 1.24 The reform aims to allow couples greater choice within a simple, fair and consistent legal structure, so that people can have a wedding that is more meaningful to them that reflects their values and beliefs. The current legislation, which dates back to 1837, has changed little in that time and the recommendations laid out by the Law Commission are wide ranging and recommend a comprehensive reform from the foundations up, an entirely new scheme to govern weddings. Although there is no formal timeline, the government has a year to respond and detail next steps. Legislation will subsequently need to be passed. Although exact timings are not available at this time, it is prudent the service start to prepare now due to the potential impact.
- 1.25 The proposals include changes that would:
- allow weddings to take place outdoors, for example on beaches, in parks, in private gardens and on the grounds of current wedding venues

- allow weddings to take place in a wider variety of buildings (for example in private homes), on cruise ships, community centres and village halls.
- offer couples greater flexibility over the form their wedding ceremonies will take, enabling them, if they desire, to use a variety of ceremonies (religious and non-religious) to mark their weddings
- Simplify the process and remove unnecessary red tape to make it fair to couples, more efficient, and easier to follow. For example, couples will be able to complete the initial stage of giving notice of their intended wedding online or by post, rather than having to do so in person
- provide a framework that could allow non-religious belief organisations (such as Humanists) and/or independent celebrants to conduct legally binding weddings

1.26 The Barnet Registration service has a further £0.084m income target to achieve in the 2023/24 financial year to support the Council's delivery of the Medium-term Financial Strategy (MTFS). As part of this income target, and in preparation for the changes mentioned above, the service is reviewing its wedding and ceremony offer. The aims of this review are:

- to improve the overall experience couples, have when getting married in Barnet
- increase working with partners and local businesses to increase the number of venues in Barnet that can facilitate weddings
- increase options available for couples, when getting married e.g. offer reception packages and room hire following the initial wedding ceremony, establish partnerships with local businesses such as florists, photographers, caterers etc.
- increase the number of ceremonies that can be facilitated at the Town Hall and other external venues within Barnet

1.27 The recent refurbishment of the Town Hall and the fact a dedicated wedding room has been established has provided the service with an opportunity to promote the service in a more attractive way and utilise the space to accommodate more ceremonies and offer a more complete package to couples.

1.28 On engagement with couples that had used the service, professionalism of staff had rated well but feedback on the general facilities had been highlighted as needing improvement. Couples liked the convenience of the location and priced correctly would consider a more complete package if it was offered, such as holding a reception.

1.29 The service has employed a ceremonies lead, on a 12-month fixed term basis, to implement changes required to achieve increases in service income and enhance the service offer providing a more flexible and sustainable model to maintain levels of income and prepare for the upcoming changes.

2. Reasons for recommendations

- 2.1 This report provides an overview of performance for the Registration and Nationality service for 2021/22 performance as per the constitution for this committee

3. Alternative options considered and not recommended

- 3.1 None

4. Post decision implementation

- 4.1 The service will be taking actions to improve the experience couples have when getting married and look at ways to increase income through partnership working and facilitating more weddings in the Borough.
- 4.2 The service is also working with the Council's Resident Experience team as it looks to make service improvements to enhance the experience customers have when engaging with the service. This will include implementing continuous feedback mechanisms to monitor satisfaction, as this has been ad-hoc over the last few years.

5. Implications of decision

5.1 Corporate Priorities and Performance

- 5.1.1 Performance monitoring is essential to ensure robust management of the service delivery in providing an effective service to our customers and ensuring the service meets its statutory obligations. It also ensures resources are adequately and appropriately directed to support delivery and achievement of corporate priorities

5.2 Resources (Finance & Value for Money, Procurement, Staffing, IT, Property, Sustainability)

- 5.2.1 The report does not include budget information, which is provided separately to Communities, Leadership & Libraries Committee

5.3 Legal and Constitutional References

- 5.3.1 The Council's Constitution (Article 7, Article 7 – Committees, Forums, Working Groups and Partnerships) sets out the responsibilities of all council Committees. The council's Constitution, Article 7 Committees, Forums, Working Groups and Partnerships, sets out the functions of the Community Leadership and Libraries Committee. Specifically in relation to this report as:

- (1) Responsibility for libraries, culture, civic events, the mayoralty, community safety, registration and nationality service
- (2) To receive reports on relevant performance information and risk on the services under the remit of the Committee.

5.3.2 The Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration etc) Act 2019, as well as covering the introduction of the Marriage Schedule System and registration in an electronic register, also introduced the extension of civil partnerships to couples not of the same sex, and the consideration of investigation of still-births by the Coroner's Service

5.4 **Insight**

5.4.1 The report identifies performance information in relation to the Registration and nationality service and has included a summary of feedback from exit interviews with couples when considering options to improve the experience couples have when getting married.

5.5 **Social Value**

5.5.1 None applicable to this report, however the service must take into account the requirements of the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 to try to maximise the social and local economic value it derives from its procurement spend.

5.6 **Risk Management**

5.6.1 The council has an established approach to risk management, which is set out in the Risk Management Framework. Risks are reviewed quarterly (as a minimum) and any high-level (scoring 15+) are included in this report, as well as being reported to Policy and Resources Committee as part of a wider corporate risk report. There are no risks currently being reported for the Registration and Nationality service, over this score. However, there is a risk captured on the risk register, in regards service income and upcoming changes to legislation, mitigations have been covered in this report in section 1.24.

5.7 **Equalities and Diversity**

5.7.1 The Equality Act 2010 requires organisations exercising public functions to demonstrate that due regard has been paid to equalities in:

- Elimination of unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Equality Act 2010
- Advancement of equality of opportunity between people from different groups
- Fostering of good relations between people from different groups.

5.7.2 The Equality Act 2010 identifies the following protected characteristics: age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex and sexual orientation; marriage and civil partnership.

5.7.3 To assist in meeting the duty the council will:

- Try to understand the diversity of our customers to improve our services
- Consider the impact of our decisions on different groups to ensure they are fair
- Mainstream equalities into business and financial planning and integrating equalities into everything we do
- Learn more about Barnet's diverse communities by engaging with them.

5.7.4 The Registration & Nationality service is committed to ensuring the service is accessible to all and to ensure no barriers to access exist. As the service develop improvement plans and implement changes to the wedding service a full EqIA will be carried out and engagement with our residents and communities will inform any changes.

5.8 Corporate Parenting

5.8.1 In line with Children and Social Work Act 2017, the council has a duty to consider Corporate Parenting Principles in decision-making across the council. There are no implications for Corporate Parenting in relation to this report. The Registration team will assist Children's social workers with registering births if children are in care.

5.9 Consultation and Engagement

5.9.1 Relevant consultation and engagement has been covered in the body of the report and will continue to shape any improvements to the service moving forward.

5.10 Environmental Impact

5.10.1 None in the context of this report.

6. Background papers

6.1 None