

Cabinet – 18 January 2017

Recommendation from the People and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 11 January 2017

9. The Committee considered the minutes of the final meeting of the Policy Development Panel on Registration held on 2 December 2016 and its report on future Registration Service proposals.

A question had been submitted under the Council's Public Participation arrangements by Councillor Jon Andrews, Sherborne Town Councillor, which related to changes to the Registration Service provided in Sherborne. This, and the response provided, is attached to the minutes as an annexure.

Comments had also been received from the County Councillor for Rodwell, who supported the retention of a service in Weymouth. Her comments are included in the annexure to the minutes.

The Chairman of the Policy Development Panel presented the Panel's report and drew attention to an amendment to it in that Option 5C(h) should be italicised, not Option 5C(e) as shown in the report. He explained that the review had taken nearly a year and had proven more complex than originally anticipated. The review had been detailed, the need to make financial savings accepted, and had led to the recommendations put forward which would cause least disruption. He confirmed that Town Councils had agreed to financially support outreach services in Gillingham, Sherborne and Swanage. Officers were thanked for their work in supporting the Panel. The Assistant Director – Early Help and Community Services highlighted the success of the Service which was self-funding and reminded members that the Panel had been established to address potential forthcoming legislative changes to marriage ceremonies and budget pressures arising.

Recommended

That the Cabinet approve:

1. That the service provided be developed into a more customer focussed service, through six office locations across Dorset (at Blandford, Bridport, Dorchester, Ferndown, Wareham and Weymouth) and for outreach services to be provided at (Gillingham, Sherborne and Swanage), subject to Town Council support being secured for the outreach services.
2. That the service be based on seven ceremony rooms across the County. (At Blandford, Bridport, Ferndown, Gillingham, Sherborne, Swanage and Weymouth this reflects the present circumstances, however, as property matters emerge in the future it might be appropriate to make changes to these arrangements).
3. That Officers be encouraged to develop a schedule of fees and charges based on a full cost recovery model in relation to ceremonies, and to authorise the Assistant Director - Early Help and Community Services, after consultation with the Cabinet Member for Health, Care and Independence, to set the schedule.
4. That the Tell Us Once service for deaths be retained, and the service for births be withdrawn.

People and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 11 January 2017

Questions

Question from Councillor Jon Andrews, Sherborne Town Council

Please can the committee explain how the decision on the towns that will continue to be supported by the registrar services was taken? Could the committee also explain how they came to the conclusion that all people would be able to access their nearest registrar service with a 20 minute drive and will the people in the towns and villages that will not be affected have their council tax raised, as they will in Sherborne, to pay to keep the service if agreed and do you believe this to be fair?

Answer

No decision has been made at this point – the People and Communities Committee will make recommendations for the Cabinet to make a decision in due course.

The report to committee makes recommendations from the work of the Policy Development Panel. The Panel considered options for future registration offices and agreed that one proposal should be consulted on. This public consultation ran for eight weeks opening on Thursday 16 June and closing on Thursday 11 August. The on-line survey was kept open until Wednesday 17 August, allowing an additional week for late respondents and to allow for a two working days delay in public consultation notification to Dorset Parish and Town Councils.

Dorset Registration Service continued to accept paper survey responses until 23 August, allowing for postal delays etc.

The question asked in the consultation was:

Number and Location of Registration Offices:

On average a customer will attend a registration office four times in their lifetime. Customers usually attend to:

- Register a birth
- Register a death
- In the case of non-Anglican marriages to give notice of their intention to marry or,
- To give notice of their intention to form a civil partnership.

Currently registration offices are based at the following eleven locations:

- Blandford
- Bridport
- Christchurch
- Dorchester
- Ferndown
- Gillingham
- Shaftesbury
- Sherborne
- Swanage
- Wareham
- Weymouth

Our preferred view is to reduce the number of registration offices from eleven to five. A reduction in the number of offices will reduce the amount of central support required for each office. The proposal is for the offices to be based at the following locations:

- Blandford
- Bridport
- Dorchester
- Ferndown
- Wareham

This will mean that 91% of Dorset residents will live within a 20 minute car journey of an office.

The Panel considered the results of this public consultation, representations received from Councillors and directed that officers undertook further work with Sherborne, Gillingham and Swanage Town Councils. As a result of this consideration the Panel has made recommendations to the People and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

There has never been any conclusion that all people would be able to access the registration within 20 minutes' drive time. In looking at accessibility of the service consideration was given to indicative journey times which found that 44% of the population were within an estimated 10 minute car journey of an office, 91% within an estimated 20 minutes and 100% within an estimated 30 minutes.

In respect of council tax the report describes the position reached through discussions with Gillingham, Sherborne, and Swanage Town Councils. The gist of this is that the County Council continues to pay for the registrars' time in providing public service at these three locations and that the Town Council assists with paying for travel time and mileage. It is estimated that on average a person will use the Registration Service four times during their lifetime. This balances the pressures on the County Council budget with the local Town Council view that local access in the towns is important. The question of fairness is one for the Committee and Cabinet to consider as the County Council makes a decision on this matter.

Comment from Councillor Clare Sutton, Elected Member for Rodwell

I would like to express my very strong support for the retention of the Weymouth office, for the following reasons:

The registry office serves, in effect, around 17% of DCC residents (in Weymouth, Portland and Chickerell). It is currently the only Registry Office other than Dorchester open full-time, and it is booked out.

This office serves the least well off part of Dorset (lowest wages), with the lowest level of car ownership (24% of households do not have a car, compared to 15% for DCC as a whole), and with unemployment almost double the DCC average. I therefore believe that the residents of Weymouth and Portland, particularly the elderly and frail, when needing to register the death of a loved one, would be least able to carry the cost burden should their local office close.