



Report for Leader Decision (Housing, Homelessness and Regulatory Services portfolio)

Date:	11 March 2022
Reference number:	HR01.22
Title:	Registration Service Fees for 2023/24 & 2024/25
Cabinet Member(s):	Nick Naylor, Cabinet Member for Housing, Homelessness and Regulatory Services
Contact officer:	Wendy Morgan-Brown
Ward(s) affected:	All
Recommendations:	To approve an inflationary uplift of 3% to the non-statutory fees chargeable for ceremonies and associated activities for 2023/24 and 2024/25 financial years
Reason for decision:	To allow couples to know and be able to pay the fee when booking ceremonies three years ahead in venues in Buckinghamshire and the Council's ceremony rooms

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 To review and approve a 3% inflationary uplift on the non-statutory fees chargeable for ceremonies and associated activities for 2023/24 and 2024/25 for the Registration Service.

2. Content of report

- 2.1 The Registration Service is funded through statutory and non-statutory fee income. The non-statutory fees are set locally by the Council and increased in line with inflation or MTFP requirements.

- 2.2 **Statutory Fees:** The service delivery is predominately statutory. Birth and death registrations are a statutory requirement and are free to those using these services with a charge for any certificates required by the customer. There is a statutory ceremony fee of £46 for a wedding and a civil partnership formation which is greatly below cost recovery. Certificate fees were increased in 2018, but the other statutory fees for notices (£35) have not increased for the last over six years.
- 2.3 The Service is reliant on a steady number of non-statutory income generating activities each year which generates a level of income to cover costs. A reduction in activities affects the Service's ability to cover its costs and deliver the budget.
- 2.4 The Service is expected to recover its costs so receives no budget from the Council. Prior to Covid, income is usually in the region of £1.488m per annum. COVID resulted in a reduction in activity, which resulted in income dropping to around £1.223m per annum, but we are now starting to see this recover. The income loss from this reduced activity was initially met from the Government's income loss reclaim scheme, and has subsequently been built into the MTFP, to be fully recovered to pre-COVID level of £1.488m by 23/24.
- 2.5 The main non-statutory income for the Service is from weddings and civil partnership ceremonies with around 1800 ceremonies undertaken each year. Bookings are made up to three years in advance and couples pay the full amount for their ceremony at point of booking.
- 2.6 The three year fee structure was brought in to allow customers to pay at point of booking and provide for improved efficiency both for the Service and couples by reducing the number of contacts and created a clearer pricing structure.
- 2.7 The fees for 2022/23 were increased above inflationary rates during this year's MTFP process – by between £10-£30 – to generate an additional £50k of income per year. For background reference, the absolute and % fee increases seen between 21/22 fees and the uplifted 2022/23 fees can be found in **Annex 1**. These are due to be approved as part of the Budget at Full Council in February.
- 2.8 To maintain the 3-year fee plan, fees for 2023/24 and 2024/25 also need to be agreed. It is particularly important as the Service is seeing increased levels of bookings for 2023 onwards following the covid restrictions and impact on the ceremony market generally.
- 2.9 Attached at Appendix 1 are the fees for 2022/23 – which are due to be agreed by Council in February - and the proposed fees for 2023/24 and 2024/25. Inflation has been applied at 3% (as per RPI at Sept 21). Whilst inflation levels are currently high, we are expecting levels to reduce again by 23/24, and therefore we are proposing to retain a 3% level (3% is the level applied in 2020 and 2021 to most fees across the Council).

- 2.10 In Appendix 1, highlighted in yellow, is a fee which has been omitted from the MTFP fees (Ceremony Cancellation Admin Charge) and a correction to the current fee being charged for Completion of a PD2 form. Both require agreement as part of the wider fee increases proposed.
- 2.11 Few authorities have set their fees for 2023/24 and 2024/45 so there is little to compare against. Generally, Buckinghamshire ceremony fees sit in the upper quartile of the fees benchmarked across the South East authorities and are comparable with similar authorities who tend to have a high number of ceremony venues in a rural county. Customers are inclined to book a wedding venue on the venue itself, rather than the price charged by the Registration Service.

3. Other options considered

- 3.1 To not increase the fees for 23/24 by 3% inflation, given the recent 22/23 above-inflation price rise. This is not recommended because these fees have always had inflationary increases historically, and the additional £50k income from above-inflation increase in 22/23 fees has been built into the budget. If we did not increase 23/24 and 24/25 fees by inflation, then the budgets would fall behind inflationary increases which would result in expenditure pressures.

4. Legal and financial implications

- 4.1 There are no legal implications.
- 4.2 The inflationary increase of 3% will generate additional income of around £40k per year, which will offset expected inflationary increases in prices for the non-staffing costs of running the service (such as mileage, minor repairs and maintenance, clergy fees, IT equipment, etc). The income and expenditure budgets in the service will be realigned during next year's budget setting process to reflect this change. All fee changes set out in Annex 1 are in line with MTFP budgets.

5. Corporate implications

- 5.1 Around 1800 civil weddings and other ceremonies take place in Buckinghamshire each year. This business is worth around £36m to the local economy and across the ceremony businesses with the national average cost of a wedding reported to be over £20,000.
- 5.2 Weddings and other ceremonies bring people into the County which further supports the culture and leisure spend too.
- 5.3 Buckinghamshire has a wide variety of ceremony venues providing couples with choice to suit their budget, type of venue and location.

- 5.4 The fees have been benchmarked alongside the other South East authorities (where they have fees available for comparable years).
- 5.5 By setting fees three years ahead it benefits the venues in being able to secure bookings into the future, as well as providing couples with a fixed price which is not subject to any further increase (unless they change their request to a higher priced offer). This is particularly important to allow for post-covid recovery, but also should there be further restrictions in the future in being able to secure or move business easily.
- 5.6 As the fees do not affect specific groups no EIA is required. There is no personal data involved with the proposal so a DPA is not required either.

6. Local councillors & community boards consultation & views

- 6.1 The proposal covers all Members and Community Boards.

7. Communication, engagement & further consultation

- 7.1 Once agreed the relevant websites will be updated to show the new fees. The fees will increase from 1 April 2022, as per the MTFP budget proposals.
- 7.2 As couples pay at point of booking, there is no requirement to contact existing or new couples.

8. Next steps and review

- 8.1 The new fees will be introduced on 1 April 2022 and charged to customers booking ceremonies between then and 31 March 2025.

9. Background papers

- 9.1 Please see below.

10. Your questions and views (for key decisions)

- 10.1 If you have any questions about the matters contained in this report please get in touch with the author of this report. If you have any views that you would like the cabinet member to consider please inform the democratic services team. This can be done by telephone 01296 382343 or email democracy@buckinghamshire.gov.uk