



Home Office

**Identity &
Passport Service**

**BATH NORTH EAST SOMERSET
MARRIAGE AND CIVIL PARTNERSHIP
STATUTORY COMPLIANCE AND
TECHNICAL PROFICIENCY REVIEW**

**Local Government Delivery Partnership Unit
General Register Office
November 2012
INTRODUCTION**

Background

1. The administration of civil registration is a partnership between local government and the General Register Office (GRO) (part of the Identity and Passport Service). The GRO Delivery Partnership Unit (DPU) works with local authorities to review and improve service standards and to encourage wider dissemination of good practice. Accordingly, the unit conducts a range of reviews, the scope of which is agreed with individual local authorities. Whilst conducting reviews, the unit uses the national registration Code of Practice and Good Practice Guide (GPG).
2. Bath and North East Somerset adopted new governance arrangements in April 2011 and submitted its first annual report, for 2011/12, earlier this year. This highlighted good attainment against the GPG standards. To further assist the local authority in assessing progress it was agreed that the DPU would undertake a review which focused on the legal preliminaries to and operational delivery of marriages and civil partnerships. This would provide the Proper Officer with an external assessment of local systems and processes, together with a measure of staff performance against statutory duties; which in turn would also provide a level of technical reassurance to the Registrar General of England and Wales. The review was conducted between the 15th-17th October 2012.

Scope of Review

3. It was agreed that the following elements would be included in the review:
 - Service performance against the related Key Performance Indicators (KPI) and GPG statutory standards
 - The technical proficiency of staff in relation to superintendent registrar (SR) duties, together with customer care practices
 - Associated office security and individual security awareness and practice
 - Arrangements around staff training and development

Methodology

4. The following methods were used during the course of the review:
 - Examination of reports from the Registration Online (RON) system, registration records and associated documents
 - Observation of ceremonies at the register office and notices of marriage and civil partnership interviews
 - General observation of administrative procedures
 - Meetings with registration managers and other officers

Acknowledgement

5. The DPU would like to extend its thanks to all those who contributed to this review.

MANAGEMENT SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Management Summary

6. Technical delivery and statutory compliance was found to be consistent and of a high standard with all statutory standards met. Staff observed were professional, competent and very customer focused.
7. Systems and processes that underpin ceremony business are well established and fit for purpose. Associated tasks were completed in a timely fashion. RON certification of register entries and Clergy/ AP returns to GRO are completed within statutory deadlines. Some minor issues at notice attestations and pre-ceremony interviews were identified.
8. Customer service standards were exemplary and underpinned by a range of information available both at the register office and on related pages of the website. Customer opportunities to providing feedback on the service are extensive with opportunities through customer charter/ complaints, satisfaction surveys and suggestion cards.
9. Good security protocols were observed at the register office. Customers were escorted throughout the building and rooms were locked when not in use. Certificate stock was appropriately held in the central repository or fire proof cabinets and safes within individual offices.
10. The district training officer is responsible for the delivery and co-ordination of staff training. Training and developmental needs are identified via the staff appraisal and superintendent registrar checking processes; training records are maintained corporately.
11. An administration fee of £30 is charged for any changes made to ceremony arrangements following notice attestation (rescheduled date and time). Although the fee is made clear to customers when they initially book appointments, it is not clear on what legal basis the fee is levied.

Key Actions

12. The key actions arising from the review are summarised below:
 - Technical issues relating to notice attestations and pre-ceremony interviews (as summarised at the end of the report) should be addressed
 - Revised procedures should be considered to ensure the continued supervision and security of displayed marriage and civil partnership notices when changes to reception arrangements are introduced
 - The local authority should revisit the basis for charging a ceremony rescheduling fee; in order to be satisfied it has such powers to charge

STATUTORY COMPLIANCE

Statutory Compliance – GPG National Standards

13. The district is achieving statutory compliance in all areas. The Stopford Management Information System is used to produce monthly performance reports on its key outputs. Pre-ceremony checks observed were in order (see also technical proficiency section below). Marriage ceremonies were conducted in accordance with GRO handbook instructions in all cases.
14. A £30 administration fee is charged for any changes made to ceremony arrangements (rescheduled date and time) following notice attestation. Although this is made clear to customers at the time of booking appointments and on the registration pages of the website, it is not clear on what legal basis the fee is able to be charged. Where a local authority provides an additional discretionary service (not provided for in statute), it is through the powers of the Local Government Act 2003 able to charge a supplementary fee to recover cost. Whilst we are advised that legal advice has been taken in this instance, it is not clear how this fits with being an additional discretionary service and some further clarification is needed.
15. Table 1 below highlights attainment against the statutory standards.

Table 1 - Statutory Compliance -GPG National Standards	Met / Not Met	Comments
Taking notices of marriage or Civil Partnership to allow event to take place as planned.	Met	For KPI reporting purposes via Stopford (notice availability and waiting times) performance attainment is 100% for the period April-October 2012. Observations demonstrated that couples were able to obtain appointments within the standard both at the register office and outstation in Midsummer Norton. The service also offers late evening appointments one day per week at the register office. Some scope for improvement was identified at pre-questioning see comments via the technical assessment category.
Accurate completion and processing of notices in accordance with legal requirements.	Met	
For ceremonies, the provision of a room within the register office to accommodate the couple and two guests for statutory fee.	Met	SR's office provides for register office ceremonies at the statutory fee to GPG national standards. Two well appointed approved venues also at the Guild Hall accommodating 14 and 120 people at enhanced fees.
Marriages registered immediately following the event. (Register entry commenced after D&C words and properly checked by parties before signing)	Met	Observation of ceremonies confirmed statutory compliance.
Civil Partnerships recorded onto RON within 2 working days of formation.	Met	Examination of RON reports for a twelve month period established GPG standard met.
Approved premises applications processed in accordance with Marriages and Civil Partnerships (AP) Regulations 2005	Met	Records of Approved Premises are maintained via Stopford and administered by the LA Licensing Department. The SR also holds hard copy records. Renewal reminders are issued at six months. There are appropriate measures in place to ensure the Approved Premise Register is maintained up to date.
Local Authority maintains the Approved Premises Register	Met	
Citizenship ceremonies: Ceremony to take place within 3 months of the applicant being informed that the application has been successful. Citizenship certificates accurately completed and Home Office informed within 14 days of ceremony	Met	Group ceremonies held monthly, private ceremonies on request. Robust processes in place to ensure ceremonies proceed within timescale; citizenship notifications sent to Home Office same day.

TECHNICAL DELIVERY

Technical Proficiency

16. Registration staff were found to be proficient across the range of registration duties associated with marriage and civil partnership. There is though some scope to improve the depth of preliminary checks at the outset of interviews; to ensure that notices can proceed and that paperwork is in order at ceremonies. Observations at notice interviews found that open questioning elicited full information; occupations were elaborated upon where necessary. The importance and implications of the legal declarations was expanded as part of a thorough checking process coupled to a full explanation of post notice procedures and display arrangements.
17. Table 2 below grade technical performance against the key activities within the registration processes at an office wide level. Where appropriate, development needs have been recorded.

Marking scale: 4 = *Fully compliant*; 3 = *Mostly compliant*; 2 = *Partly compliant*; 1 = *Non-compliant*

Table 2 - Marriage & Civil Partnership Technical Assessment		Comments
Pre notice checks		
Details of marriage/civil partnership ascertained (provisional booking in diary)	4	Initial questioning to establish date, venue and booking carried out. Good checking processes in place to establish if venue approved. Full explanation around validity given. An assessment of legal capacity to marry should be extended to include "relationship- adoption, blood civil partnership, marriage or surrogacy" and any "impediment to marry" at outset of proceedings. The ability to pay notice fees should also be explored.
Validity of notice explained – period and place of event	4	
Checks made to establish legal capacity to marry / form civil partnership before starting to take notice (nationality, residency, relationships, free to marry, age, sex, fee & documents to hand)	2	
Notice taking		
Questioning full and open throughout	4	Couples were interviewed separately in all cases and information obtained through open questioning. Status of couples explored with specific reference made to ensure "no intervening marriage or civil partnership" had occurred. Detailed probing of occupational descriptions followed where necessary. Comprehensive notes of personal documentation seen were recorded on notice forms. All officers drew customer's attention to the legal declarations and perjury; the first notice was routinely attested before the second notice taken.
Questioning directed only to the individual giving notice	4	
Names and aliases properly sought and recorded	4	
Current condition explored and established as necessary (divorce docs, death certificates etc sought and recorded)	4	
Places and addresses properly collected and recorded	4	
Detailed recording of occupations (expanded where required)	4	
Supporting documentation to give notice sought checked and properly recorded (names, age, address, nationality, U18)	4	
Notice fully checked for accuracy by party before signing off	4	
Declarations and offences made clear to party before signing off	4	
First notice completed before second notice commenced.	4	
Post notice actions		
Post notice explanation given – display of notice and issue / collection of authority for marriage / schedule for civil partnership	4	A comprehensive overview and post notice process including the validity of marriage authorities were provided to all couples. All officers are aware of the requirements around reporting suspected sham marriages.
Procedures for ceremony in district / outside district	4	
Suspected sham marriages reported to Home office	4	

TECHNICAL DELIVERY (continued)

Checks on the day of Marriage / Civil Partnership		
SR's Certificate for Marriage and CP Schedules checked for validity	4	Good questioning of couples and checking of authorities were provided although registration officers should expand introductions by means of an overview as to the purpose of the pre-questioning and of events to follow. In addition, ascertain if there has been no "intervening marriage or CP" since last dissolution/ divorce. The requirement to re-register births should also be explored. Amendments to marriage authorities were routinely recorded on the reverse of the appropriate authority. Couples were guided through the D&C words and enhancements with marriage entries accurately recorded in registers at the appropriate juncture of ceremonies. Established procedures in place to ensure marriage entries are entered onto the RON system directly following ceremonies. All ceremonies were delivered professionally and individually personalised. Officers demonstrated good interpersonal skills to ensure events were conducted appropriately and to a high standard.
Venue/ room meets prescribed requirements	4	
Couples clearly established at outset of pre marriage / CP interview, Questioning full and direct throughout	2	
Amendments to couples details recorded on reverse of authority / schedule	4	
Established procedure between interviews and ceremony	3	
Ceremony conducted in line with statutory requirements	4	
Corrections		
Paperwork in order and correct procedures followed for all types of correction	4	Good systems in place to ensure corrections are completed in line with GRO handbook instructions with robust audit trails established via individual correction cover sheets.

Other Registration Tasks (see detailed findings table 3 below)

18. There is good management control of notices following attestations. Systems and processes are fit for purpose and all tasks are completed in a timely fashion (e.g. daily checks to identify any unfinished or unlocked entries and that the correct notice form has been used). Some security issues identified for the display of notices were identified. We also note that administrative checks are initiated following the issue of marriage authorities to safeguard the integrity of paperwork ahead of ceremony dates. Notice of marriage or civil partnership can also be given at Midsummer Norton, with notices posted to the register office daily by internal courier. Staff are clear as to responsibilities regarding potential sham marriages/ civil partnerships and raise reports as necessary.
19. RON certification of register entries and Clergy/ AP returns to GRO are completed within statutory deadlines and were up-to-date at the time of this review. Priority certificate applications are processed on the same day with standard applications within national guidelines; associated performance monitoring systems are robust.

Table 3 - Other Registration Tasks		Comments
Notice Board: Process for correctly displaying / removing notices	3	Publicity reports of notices printed and displayed via a folder on a lectern at reception for requisite period. Issue around the security of notices retained in the displayed folder. Robust processes in place for the administration of paperwork (6 and 4 week final checks). MA's issued on the due date and filed in date order.
Marriage Authorities: process for issuing and control	4	
Arrangements in place and delivered to ensure follow up activity around ancillary tasks is completed	4	
District supported by reliable paperwork filing systems	4	

TECHNICAL DELIVERY (continued)

Marriage QCCs keyed to RON and certification to date	4	District on time with all returns.
Clergy returns sought and submitted to GRO to timetable	4	Clergy/ AP returns allocated across 6 RBD's. Chasing procedures established; returns submitted timely.
Marriage indexing is up to date	4	Indexes up-to-date and available for general searching on-line or by appointment.
Birth, Death and Still-Birth QCCs checking & certification to date	4	Checking of births, deaths and still birth returns distributed between SR and DSR usually on a daily basis except at the outstation which is processed monthly. Returns certified in a timely manner.
Certificates from entries in deposited registers issued	4	Receipt and progress of certificate applications recorded via a post book. Priority applications processed same day. Post book examination establishes standard certificates processed within 7 days.

Customer Focus (see detailed findings table 4 below)

20. The Registration Service delivers a professional front line service to customers through its team of committed and well organised staff. Customers at the register office are seen quickly and have access to a range of information including the customer charter/ complaints, satisfaction surveys, suggestion cards and related services as well as the registration pages on the Local Authority website. Evening appointments (17.00-18.30) are also available each Wednesday of the week. There is a service point at Mid Summer Norton but this was not visited as part of the review.

Table 4 - Customer Focus		Comments
Arrangements in place to appropriately 'meet, greet and book in' customers on arrival	4	Meet and greet arrangements in place with currently a dedicated registration reception point in the lobby of the Guild Hall; customers attended to promptly. A comprehensive overview of the notice attestation process was provided to all customers who in turn were interviewed separately. Wide range of information available at the register office and on registration pages of the website.
Customers seen on time	4	
Registrar clearly introduced self (name & designation)	4	
Clear introduction and overview of process provided at outset of notice taking and ceremonies.	4	
Customers informed as interviews progress	3	
Polite and courteous delivery	4	Officers provided overviews of proceedings (could be expanded at pre-ceremony interviews); kept customers informed and provided opportunities to ask questions. Staff were consistently professional and courteous to customers.
Further advice and literature provided as appropriate	4	
Working space neat, tidy and fit for customer interviews	4	

Security and Storage (see detailed findings table 5 below)

21. Good security protocols were observed at the register office. Customers were escorted throughout the building and rooms were locked when not in use. Unused certificate stock is centrally held in the repository on shelving that is individually labelled. Current stock and registers are retained in fire proof cabinets and safes within individual offices. Marriage registers and stock are returned routinely to the register office following approved premises attendance. Registrar D located at the service point in Midsummer Norton is autonomous with regard to the administration and security of certificate stock and register pages.

TECHNICAL DELIVERY (continued)

22. We are informed that the independent registration reception desk in the main lobby of the Guild Hall is scheduled for closure with duties transferring to the main reception desk (which is also located in the lobby area). When the change occurs, it is important that measures are put in place to ensure the continued supervision and security of marriage and civil partnership notices, which are displayed in a folder fixed to a lectern. Alternatively, the service could consider the electronic display of notices (permissible by virtue of an Order under the Electronic Communications Act).

Table 5 - Security & Storage		Comments
Customers appropriately escorted within office	4	Customers were escorted at all times throughout the building and not left unattended in offices. Offices and other restricted areas are accessed via electronic swipe cards or combination key locks.
Customers not left unattended (in non open access areas)	4	
Rooms appropriately secured when unoccupied	4	
Registers securely controlled by day	4	Registers appropriately secured at all times. Marriage registers are returned to the RO following approved premises ceremonies. Robust procedures in place to reconcile register pages and certificate stock usage on a daily basis.
Deposited registers appropriately stored and accessed	4	Deposited registers are securely held within the basement area of the Guild Hall. The strong room is understood to meet BS5454 standards. Access is restricted at all times with two sets of keys retained within the general office key safe.
RON access locally managed in line with staff structure to prevent any unauthorised access.	4	SR and one DSR are designated as RON system administrators; RON user list reflects staffing profile and is up to date.

Training and Development (see detailed findings table 6 below)

23. The district training officer is responsible for the delivery and co-ordination of staff training. Training and developmental needs are identified via the staff appraisal and superintendent registrar checking processes; training records are maintained corporately. The district is also a participative member of the South West Regional Training Group.

Table 6 - Training and Development		Comments
Induction training in place and evaluated	4	District training officer appointed with induction training established. Training requirements are assessed as part of the LA performance appraisal system with training records logged.
Statutory and professional competency and other essential training needs identified for all staff - and training provided	4	
Corporate training record and plans maintained	4	
Staff aware of their statutory roles and responsibilities	4	Staff aware of roles and responsibilities; have access to GRO circulars both individually and via monthly staff meetings with action points recorded/ circulated to all staff. Registration officers have access to and are encouraged to use the GRO registrars' website. The district actively participate in the South West Regional Training Group.
District participation in regional training group	4	
All staff aware of latest GRO instructions and directives	4	
Staff competent in use of RON and locally used IT systems	4	

STATUTORY COMPLIANCE & TECHNICAL PROFICIENCY REVIEW: ACTION POINTS & GOOD PRACTICE

Action Point Summary

24. The following action points were identified in relation to the statutory compliance and technical proficiency elements of the review.

ACTION POINTS
<i>Technical Assessment</i>
1. With regard to the legal capacity to marry, ensure that questioning pertaining to “relationship” and any “impediment to marriage” is ascertained before commencing with the notice of marriage. The ability to pay fees should also be explored.
2. Registration officers should expand introductions by means of an overview as to the purpose of the pre-ceremony questioning and events that will subsequently follow. In addition, ascertain if there has been no “intervening marriage or CP” since last dissolution/ divorce. The requirement to re-register births should also be explored.
<i>Security & Storage</i>
3. Revised procedures should be considered to ensure the continued supervision and security of displayed marriage and civil partnership notices when changes to reception arrangements are introduced. The service could consider the electronic display of notices permissible by virtue of an Order under the Electronic Communications Act

25. The review also highlighted areas of noteworthy good practice, which included;

- Individual cover sheets with summary details for all correction files
- Systematic checks of marriage and civil partnership paperwork ahead of ceremony dates
- Robust procedures around the administration and renewal of the licensing of approved premises
- Daily checks to assess the integrity of notices put on RON
- Robust procedures for the collection of Clergy and AP returns to statutory timescales