

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by the Executive Director of Corporate Services

Corporate and Efficient Governance Committee: 16 February 2011

Subject: Review of Registration Service 2011

1. Purpose

- 1.1** To report to Committee on the steps required to implement the Council's decision in October 2010 to make savings of £95,000 through the closure of two registration offices.

2. Background

- 2.1** At a Special Meeting of the Council on 14 October 2010, it was agreed that a review of the registration service should be undertaken resulting in savings of £95,000. This level of saving was based on a single office model which had been presented as a savings option within the report prepared by the Executive Director of Corporate Services. This report makes recommendations in respect of the proposed single office model.
- 2.2** There are currently three registration offices in West Dunbartonshire: 77 Bank Street, Alexandria; Municipal Buildings, Dumbarton and Rosebery Place, Clydebank. These offices are staffed by 10 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) registration posts; 3 in Alexandria, 3 in Dumbarton and 4 in Clydebank. At least two staff are required in each office at any one time, restricting the ability of the service to make savings and to deploy staff where most needed. In 2009, the registration service carried out a total of 3124 registrations of births, deaths and marriages, which included 170 civil marriages and 5 civil partnerships together with a large volume of requests for certificates, change of name applications, re-registration of births, genealogy searches and advice on a wide range of registration related matters. In addition to this, the registration staff process applications for footwear and clothing grants and free school meals on behalf of the Educational Services Department and conduct Citizenship Ceremonies on behalf of the Home Office.
- 2.3** Traditionally the volume of business at a Registration Office reflected the population served by that office. On average, a person would use the services at their local office on four occasions in their lifetime. Two changes have effected this traditional model. Firstly, a large number of marriage ceremonies are conducted by the registrars in outside venues, such as local hotels. This means that the service needs to be flexible to deploy staff where they are required. Secondly, it is now possible to register events at any registration office in Scotland. Due to the fact that Glasgow have only one city centre registration office, with parking issues, the number of Glasgow residents' registrations undertaken by the Clydebank Registration Office has increased the volume of registrations at that office by approximately 50%.

- 2.4** The fees for Registrars are set nationally and are not intended to be self-financing. As the fees only fund approximately 50% of such registrations, West Dunbartonshire is effectively subsidising Glasgow City's registrations.

3. Main Issues

- 3.1** In order to achieve a saving of £95,000 per annum based on a single office model, the Committee will need to close two registration offices by 1 April 2011. When deciding which offices should close two main factors should be taken into consideration: (i) the impact on the general public and in particular equality groups; and (ii) the availability of suitable accommodation in which to base the single registration office.

Impact on the general public and in particular equality groups

- 3.2** On average a person will only need to visit a registration office four times in his/her lifetime to register a birth, death or marriage. The proposed closure of two registration offices could have a negative impact on the public but the impact may be greater on those members of public who have disabilities and/or the elderly who might rely on public transport or taxis to travel to the registration office.
- 3.3** In terms of the financial impact, the need to travel further distances to a single registration office could mean additional travel costs for those affected by the proposal. A single office with a reduced staff could also mean that during busy periods there could be longer waiting times for members of the public, which again could have a greater impact on the elderly and/or disabled persons.
- 3.4** In order to reduce the amount of distance people will need to travel to a registration office it would appear to be logical to retain the most central office which is the Dumbarton Registration Office, Municipal Buildings, College Street (off Station Road), Dumbarton. The furthest distance that residents would have to travel by road to the Municipal Buildings, Dumbarton would be 9 miles regardless of whether they reside in Gartocharn or Faifley. If the office was based in Clydebank the residents in Gartocharn would need to travel up to 16 miles and if the office was based in Alexandria then residents of Faifley would need to travel approximately 13 miles. In terms of accessibility, Dumbarton is also best placed with ground floor accommodation and fully automatic doors on its main entrances. However, if the decision is taken to retain the Dumbarton Office then the number of parking places for persons with disabilities would need to be increased from the present two.
- 3.5** In terms of public transport, Dumbarton Central Train Station is only a few hundred yards away from the entrance to the Municipal Buildings, Dumbarton and there are bus stops nearby in Townend Road, Strathleven Place and Church Street.

Suitable accommodation

- 3.6** The single model office, wherever it is located, will need to have a sufficient number of interview rooms (on the ground level) to reduce waiting times and ensure accessibility. The Registration Offices in Alexandria and Clydebank are not large enough to cope with the additional staff and would not have sufficient space to accommodate the required number of interview rooms in a single office. The Dumbarton Registration Office has sufficient space and could be remodelled to accommodate 8 members of staff and 4 interview rooms. In addition, Dumbarton has the advantage of having a large fireproof strong room which could easily house all the historic and current registers for West Dunbartonshire; this would not be possible in Rosebery Place or Alexandria.
- 3.7** It is also important that the Registration office is an attractive venue for civil marriages and partnerships. The Dumbarton Municipal Buildings and the Clydebank Town Hall are the most attractive venues.
- 3.8** It should also be noted that the proposed office space for the registration staff in the newly refurbished Town Hall in Clydebank would not be large enough to accommodate the single registration office for West Dunbartonshire. However, it would still be the intention to hold civil ceremonies in the Clydebank Town Hall once the refurbishment has been completed.

Footwear and Clothing Grants

- 3.9** Members will be aware that applications for Footwear and Clothing Grants and Free School Meals are currently processed by the Registration Service on behalf of the Educational Services Department. Registration staff undertake this work for historical reasons, reflecting the fact that registration offices were often the only local office of Strathclyde Regional Council. This rationale stopped in 1996 and once registrations are centralised into one office, alternative delivery models will need to be found. Work is currently underway to review the entire application process to identify the best way to deliver this service to the public in the future, whether through Educational services or the Contact Centre.

Tell Us Once

- 3.10** Tell us once is a new cross-government initiative involving the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), HM Revenue & Customs, Local Authorities, Driving and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) and the Identity and Passport Service (IPS) which, when introduced, will mean that people will only have to tell Government once about a birth or death. This new service will clearly be of benefit to the public who will have reduced paperwork to complete and will receive any benefits to which they are entitled more quickly. It will also enable other Council departments like Housing, Finance, Community Health and Care, etc. to keep their records more up to date resulting in more efficient use of resources.

- 3.11** It is planned that the West Dunbartonshire Registration Service will introduce this new service in the summer/autumn of 2011 and Registration staff will need to ask additional questions of the public when registering births and deaths; this extra workload has been quantified as at 0.5 fte. The efficiencies resulting from the single office model will need to allow the service to cope with the additional workload.

Other Benefits of a Single Registration Office

- 3.12** At present each registration office is open 31 hours per week to the public which includes a closure between 1p.m. and 2 p.m. to allow staff to have a lunch break. It is proposed that these hours be increased to 36 hours per week by opening during lunchtime which, together with the introduction of an appointment system, will help to mitigate the issues raised in respect of waiting times in paragraph 3.3 above.

4. People Implications

- 4.1** The number of FTE registration posts will be reduced from 10 to 8 in accordance with the Council's Policy on Organisational Change and accordingly Unison has been informed of the proposals.
- 4.2** Only two of the staff currently based in those offices which are to be closed will need to travel further distances from home to the new single office and will therefore receive a travel allowance in accordance with the Council's Travel and Subsistence Policy. All remaining staff will not be affected as the distance from home to the new office location will be less than before.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1** It is estimated that the Council will save approximately £95,000 per annum if the Alexandria and Clydebank Registration Offices were to close. This figure is based on a reduction of two full-time posts; a reduction in property costs associated with the Alexandria Office plus income gained from the lease of the premises. Similar savings on property costs cannot be achieved by closing the Dumbarton and Clydebank Registration Offices. It is estimated that the remodelling of the Dumbarton Office will cost approximately £42,000 which will be met from monies set aside for spend to save projects. Members are asked to note that it will be necessary to close the Dumbarton Office while the works are being completed. This work is scheduled to commence on 21 February 2011 and will be completed by 31 March 2011, subject to the Committee approving the recommendations of this report.
- 5.2** The closure of the Clydebank Registration Office will result in a reduction of income from Glasgow City registrations. However, as the statutory fees only fund approximately 50% of the costs of such registrations, this means that West Dunbartonshire is effectively subsidising Glasgow registrations. While in the short term there will be a reduction in fees, in the medium term this will be more than compensated through efficiencies from the reduced workload.

6. Risk Analysis

- 6.1** It is clear that the closure of two local registration offices may have a negative impact on the public as detailed above and this could damage the reputation of the Council. However, given the current financial climate, the Council's reputation could also be damaged by refusing to take action to reduce its costs by creating efficiencies.
- 6.2** The choice of which office should remain open is critical to reducing the reputational risk to the Council. Failure to take into account the findings of the Equality Impact Assessment in terms of the both the location and accessibility of the single registration office could leave the Council open to criticism.
- 6.3** The proposals to improve the service by increasing the opening hours, introducing an appointment system and offering an additional service to members of the public (Tell Us Once) should help to reduce the impact on the public and improve the reputation of the Council. In addition, it is essential that the closure of the two registration offices should be widely advertised in order to ensure that the public and key stakeholders are aware of the new arrangements.
- 6.4** As West Dunbartonshire is a single registration district it is not necessary to get the formal agreement of the Registrar General for Scotland to the proposed changes. The Registrar General has been informally consulted and he views the changes as logical in the present financial climate. This is particularly so for an authority such as West Dunbartonshire which has a small land area with limited travelling distances compared to most other Scottish local authorities.

7. Equalities Impact

- 7.1** An Equalities Impact Assessment has been carried out on the proposal and its findings are summarised in paragraphs 3.2 to 3.5 of this report. As stated above, failure to take into account the findings of the Equality Impact Assessment in terms of the both the location and accessibility of the single registration office could leave the Council open to criticism.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

- 8.1** Given that the Dumbarton office is the only Registration Office which is big enough to accommodate a single registration unit and is the most central and accessible of the three existing locations, it is recommended that the Clydebank and Alexandria Registration Offices should close and works should proceed to remodel the Dumbarton Registration Office to accommodate the new arrangements as soon as possible in the new financial year to maximise the savings to the Council.

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18 January 2011

Wards Affected: All Wards

Background Papers: Report to West Dunbartonshire Council on 14 October 2010 – General Services Revenue Estimates – Mid Year Spending Review.

Equality Impact Assessment on Single Office Model

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