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Public Consultation on the redesign of the Registration Service in Shropshire

Why are we consulting?

In line with the general need across public service to make savings, and Shropshire Council's commitment to service redesign, Shropshire's Registration Service has examined the way in which the service operates and the changes which could be made in order to make savings.

With changes being introduced over the years, such as certificate ordering on line and over the phone, a reduction in staff resources, as well as the ability to register at any office in Shropshire, together with future plans to use technology to enable ceremonies to be booked and managed on line, the opportunity has presented itself to further redesign the service and further reduce costs in line with the austerity measures being experienced across public services.

In order to help us determine our way forward to ensure Registrars Services continue to meet the needs of local people, we would like very much to get your views on the options available to us as we see them, and to better understand any issues which we may have overlooked.

This consultation is only about the future of the Registration Service and has no bearing on the future of any other services or the buildings in which the Registration Service sits in any locality.

In order that the nature of the work which we do and the content of our proposals can be better understood please read the full briefing below.

Background:

What we do

We register all births, deaths, marriages, civil partnerships, and still births occurring in the County of Shropshire.

Our services are provided from 11 different locations across the County in 9 towns: Shrewsbury, Oswestry, Bridgnorth, Whitchurch, Market Drayton, Ludlow, Wem, Bishops Castle, and Church Stretton.

Members of the public can come to register a life event at ten of these locations, and the eleventh location is our central register repository, where all of the completed births, deaths and marriage registers containing events which have happened in Shropshire since 1st July 1837 are kept and where our historical certificates are produced, and to where there is no public access.

The main maternity unit at Royal Shrewsbury Hospital has ceased to operate and will drastically reduce the numbers of births being registered within the county which in turn will affect the workload and income of the service. The impact of this change will not be fully understood for at least 12 months, however it is important that we look at this change and reorganise our services where possible to reflect customer need and usage.

Alongside the statutory services which have to be provided, the service also provides a range of complimentary services including: Nationality Checking Services, Civil Naming Ceremonies, Civil Renewal of Vows Ceremonies and Civil Funerals.

Statutory responsibilities (The duties we have to do by law)

- Register all births,
- Register all deaths,
- Register all still births
- Register all marriages,
- Register all civil partnerships

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- To report marriages or civil partnerships which they suspect are being entered into for the purpose of evading UK Immigration Law.
- To collect marriage returns from all of the churches across Shropshire four times per year.
- Responsibility for the administration of the certification and registration of places for worship and religious marriages.
- To administer the Local Authority's approval process for licensing venues for civil marriage and civil partnerships.
- The service is required to meet or exceed national standards which are laid down by the Government, and a report has to be made to the General Register Office on an annual basis reporting on performance against these standards.
- The storage and issue of books of medical cause of death certificates to medical practitioners across the county in hospitals and medical practices.
- The service also retains a stock of marriage registers for issue to the clerics in churches of all denominations in emergency situations
- To provide advice to clerics across the county
- To provide advice and information to a range of other organisations.
- Provision of statistical information to the Government in order that it can plan its social and economic policies based on quantified evidence.

Registrations have to be carried out in person, this is a legal requirement. Although much of the work of the service is prescribed in regulation, and there are accommodation guidelines applied by the General Register Office, there is no specific duty placed on a Local Authority to deliver services in specific locations, nor is there any stipulation relating to the number of registration officers or locations per capita. Indeed in many large cities registration services are delivered from a single site.

Table 1 – Services delivered over the past five years:

Statutory Services	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
Birth registrations	4798	4734	4887	4789	4793
Death registrations	2807	2903	2835	3252	3184
Still birth registrations	32	35	19	25	27
Marriage registrations	1088	1222	1271	1410	1217
Civil Partnership Registrations	23	23	29	41	30
Notices of Marriage	1837	1993	2398	2136	2029
Notices of Civil Partnership	39	51	64	48	47
Historical certificates	6976	6385	5818	5456	5530
Non Statutory Services	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
Funeral, naming and reaffirmation of vows ceremonies	4	26	26	43	120
Naming Ceremonies	15	12	5	5	5
Reaffirmation of Vows Ceremonies	8	10	20	11	10
British Citizenship	107	116	104	115	162
Nationality Checking	187	154	227	87	161

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Challenges and opportunities for Registration Services

Along with all Council services the Registration Service is being asked to make savings to their base budget in the financial year 2015/2016.

In order to make the necessary savings it is important that the service considers how it does things and where it offers its services.

All of our statutory registration functions are required to be conducted in person so cannot be carried out via other technical solutions, such as online or via telephone. However, where possible, some services are provided remotely for the convenience of the customer, for example, approximately 90% of our certificate applications are received either online or by telephone. Customers can now book their own appointments to register births, deaths, notices of marriage and notices of civil partnerships through the Councils web site as well as over the telephone.

For more information on Registration Services visit www.shropshire.gov.uk/births.-deaths-and-marriages

Current Initiatives - Looking at how things are done:

We are working on providing greater accessibility via software solutions which will ultimately allow customers wishing to arrange/pay for a ceremony to do so 24 hours per day 7 days per week.

It is important that registrars are spending the majority of their time with customers and not on avoidable administrative duties and for this reason the service will continue to move towards the centralisation and/or automation of these duties where possible. By doing this, the service should continue to be able to cope with the seasonal peaks and troughs of demand at the very front line, the registrars who are there to register life events.

The reduction of the administrative burden on registrars to ensure that they maximise their availability for customers and can provide greater flexibility in the service for the future is a key part of our strategy.

How we then reconfigure the service to future proof it for new challenges is a key issue.

An initial Equality Impact Needs Assessment for each location has been carried out, and forms part of this document, it will be updated following the outcome of the consultation (Appendix A)

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Options available:

There are three options available to Shropshire Council when considering how best to structure the registration service:

Option 1: Leave the provision exactly as it is.

There are no savings available and it would be necessary to fill a number of vacant posts in order to continue to provide service in all of the existing locations. Retirements and redundancies have left insufficient staff to maintain the current structure. The locality in which a registration office is available would remain the same, and the opening hours would remain unchanged, see Table 2.

Table 2

Offices	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Registration Staff hours
Bishops Castle	Closed	10:00 - 12:00	Closed	Closed	10:00 - 12:00	4
Bridgnorth	10:00 - 16:00	10:00 - 16:00	10:00 - 16:00	Closed	10:00 - 16:00	25
Church Stretton	Closed	14:00 - 16:00	Closed	Closed	14:00 - 16:00	4
Ludlow	10:00 - 14:00	20				
Market Drayton	10:00 - 14:00	Closed	10:00 - 14:00	Closed	10:00 - 14:00	12
Oswestry	09:30 - 16:00	09:30 - 16:00	09:30 - 13:00	09:30 - 16:00	09:30 - 16:00	33.3
Shrewsbury	09:15 - 17:00	111				
Wem	10:00 - 14:00	10:00 - 14:00		10:00 - 14:00		12
Whitchurch	10:00 - 14:00		10:00 - 14:00		10:00 - 14:00	12

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Option 2:
Close under used offices and concentrate on providing service where there is greatest demand

Under this proposal the offices based in Wem, and Church Stretton would close (summary of travel distances to alternative locations are shown in Table 7).

Table 3 All other offices would remain open with opening hours varied

Location	Current Hours	New Hours	Weekly Opening hours	Comments Why
Bishops Castle	4	By appointment max 2 hours	Reduced	Under utilisation and excessive costs
Bridgnorth	25	25	Unchanged	Not applicable
Ludlow	20	12	Reduced	Staff redundancy
Market Drayton	12	13.5	Increased	To provide additional resource for customers from Wem office
Whitchurch	12	13.5	Increased	
Oswestry	33.3	38	Increased	Protecting staff hours affected by closures. Also to provide additional resource for the Oswestry/North area
Shrewsbury	111	111	Unchanged	Not Applicable

We have calculated that it is possible to reduce our staffing, buildings and associated costs by reducing the numbers of registration service offices across the county whilst still meeting the expected needs of our customers.

Across Shropshire every week we have 526, 30 minute appointments available. Looking at our annual numbers of registrations which remain reasonably static, the very minimum number of appointments which would be required to meet the demand would be 320 appointments per week.

Adjusting for peaks and troughs of demand and by closing the offices in Bishops Castle, Church Stretton, and Wem, we can still provide 430, 30 minute appointments per week which we calculate is sufficient to cope with peaks and troughs of demand and allow enough time for the completion of the administrative duties of the registrars based in each of the remaining offices. Our aim is that our registrars will spend 70% of their time engaged in Face to Face contact with customers and that all admin which can be done centrally will be done centrally in order to achieve this.

The reason that the offices in Bishops Castle, Church Stretton and Wem have been singled out for closure under this proposal is because, statistics shown in Table 4, demonstrate that they are underused, expensive to run (see Table 5), and that the vast majority of registrations are conducted in the offices which are to be retained. This point is demonstrated by the fact that in 2013/14 95% of birth registrations and 89% of death registrations occurred within the 6 main market towns – Shrewsbury, Oswestry, Ludlow, Bridgnorth, Market Drayton and Whitchurch. We feel that situating our service in these main localities is the best way to utilise our resources

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Table 4

Public utilisation only - without administrative duties	Shrewsbury	Bridgnorth	Ludlow	Bishops Castle	Church Stretton	Wem	Oswestry	Market Drayton	Whitchurch
2012/13	44%	36%	42%	20%	16%	33%	36%	36%	28%
2013/14	49%	43%	49%	21%	29%	35%	39%	41%	36%

The figures are based on the percentage of appointment time available in each office which has actually been used for the purposes of carrying out a registration.

It is clear to see that the offices at Bishops Castle, Church Stretton and Wem are underused and hence become subject to scrutiny in terms of viability, hence why under Option 2 they are singled out for closure.

As well as considering how well used the offices at Church Stretton, Bishops Castle and Wem are, we have also examined the costs associated with providing appointments in these locations,

The gross cost of providing a 30 minute appointment in a registration office in Shropshire during 2012/2013 and 2013/14 are as follows.

Table 5

Gross cost per 30 minute appointment based on actual number of appointments excluding income and below the line costs	Shrewsbury	Bridgnorth	Ludlow	Bishops Castle	Church Stretton	Wem	Oswestry	Market Drayton	Whitchurch
2012/2013	£69	£77	£65	£132	£119	£98	£81	£69	£98
2013/2014	£70	£80	£67	£178	£140	£106	£88	£73	£95

In calculating the appointment costs, the full costs of service delivery including recharges and non-controllable items have been apportioned proportionally across each office, calculated per hour open to the public. Where specific costs are attracted by an individual office these costs have been attributed in full, for example, rental or rates.

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Table 6- the new opening times and locations of offices are shown below

Offices	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Registration Staff hours
Bridgnorth	10:00 - 16:00	10:00 - 16:00	10:00 - 16:00	Closed	10:00 - 16:00	25
Ludlow	10:00 - 14:00	Closed	Closed	10:00 - 14:00	10:00 - 14:00	12
Market Drayton	10:00 - 14:30	Closed	10:00 - 14:30	Closed	10:00 - 14:30	13.5
Oswestry	09:30 - 16:30	09:30 - 16:30	09:15 - 16:30	09:30 - 16:30	09:30 - 16:30	38
Shrewsbury	09:15 - 17:00	09:15 - 17:00	09:15 - 17:00	09:15 - 17:00	09:15 - 17:00	111
Whitchurch	10:00 - 14:30	closed	10:00 - 14:30	closed	10:00 - 14:30	13.5

This proposed concentration of our resources in fewer locations - but with a reasonable geographical spread across the county - still provides the opportunity for people to register conveniently closer to home, than option 3.

Further data support for closures of the specified offices is lent by the fact that in 2013/14 95% of birth registrations and 89% of death registrations took place in the registration service offices in Shrewsbury, Oswestry, Ludlow, Bridgnorth, Market Drayton and Whitchurch.

The proposals for closure and variance of opening hours across the service recognise the specific difficulties related to the rurality of some areas of the county. As previously mentioned an Equality Impact Needs Assessment has been carried out and will be updated following the outcome of the consultation.

Option 3:
Close all local registration offices and centralise all registration services in Shrewsbury.

All registration services would be available in Shrewsbury only, centralising our services and closing all other offices although this could create additional savings, it would undoubtedly cause great inconvenience to customers from anywhere other area of the county, which does not, we feel, reflect the needs of a rural county such as Shropshire.

In order to accommodate appointments centrally in Shrewsbury Opening Hours would have to alter and a shift system would be required.

Appointments in Shrewsbury would be available between 09:00 – 19:00, Monday to Friday

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Equality Impact Needs Assessment

Conclusion from our Equality Impact Needs Assessment highlighted the fact that the rurality of the county of Shropshire does need to be considered when redesigning services and also that some provision does need to be available in areas such as the Bishops Castle Area where the population is sparse and not conducive to having an officer based there permanently. We have also tried to minimise additional travel distance for residents in those areas which may lose their permanent Registration office. Following this consultation we hope to be able to further update our Equality Impact Needs Assessment with further information gleaned from respondents.

Under Option 1 travel distances would be unaffected,

Under Option 2 those residents of Church Stretton, and Wem whose local registration offices are earmarked for closure would have to travel an additional distance to an alternative office and these distances are shown below-

Table 7

Current nearest Office	Nearest office under option 2	Additional distance of travel for customers
Wem Registrars Office	Whitchurch Registrars Office	9 miles
	Shrewsbury Registrars Office	11 miles
	Market Drayton Registrars Office	14 miles
	Oswestry Registrars Office	19 miles
Church Stretton Registrars Office	Bishops Castle	13 miles
	Shrewsbury Registrars Office	13 miles
	Ludlow Registrars Office	16 miles

Under Option 3 which would see all registration services centralised in Shrewsbury and all other registration offices closed, the additional distances of travel would be:

Table 8

Current nearest Office	Nearest office under option 3	Approximate distance of travel for customers	Additional travel for customers
Bishops Castle Registrars Office	Shrewsbury Registrars Office	24 miles	
Bridgnorth Registrars Office	Shrewsbury Registrars Office	22 miles	

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Church Stretton Registrars Office	Shrewsbury Registrars Office	13 miles
Ludlow Registrars Office	Shrewsbury Registrars Office	30 miles
Market Drayton Registrars Office	Shrewsbury Registrars Office	22 miles
Oswestry Registrars Office	Shrewsbury Registrars Office	18 miles
Wem Registrars Office	Shrewsbury Registrars Office	11 miles
Whitchurch Registrars Office	Shrewsbury Registrars Office	21 miles

As part of this consultation, we would like very much to hear your views on the options available and also we would like to hear of any other ideas which you may have which would influence our thinking.

If there are specific issues such as travel or transport issues which would cause any of these plans to be unworkable or problematic, please make sure that we are aware of these as we consider this to be central to our understanding of the impact which any changes would have on the residents of any particular locality or the wider Shropshire Council area.

Please note that these proposals only relate to Registration Services and are not in any way related to any proposals for any other area of the Council.

If you would like any further information about the service or the proposals please contact

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