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***Executive Member for Corporate Services  
and Advisory Panel***

***11 December 2007***

Report of the James Drury – Assistant Director , Public Services

Register Office

Approved Premise Marriage and Register Office Fees for 2008/9. Proper Officer and Employment status. Update on service and projects.

**Summary**

1. This paper seeks Executive Member approval for the suggested increase in fees for marriage ceremonies conducted at the Register Office and at Approved Premises in the City Of York from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2008 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2009, and the process involved.
2. To adopt a change to charges for certificate supply, based on service quality, and fees charged by competing authorities.
3. To update Members on the change in employment status of some members of the Registration Service
4. To update members on the current services and projects that York Registration and Celebratory Services offer and are embarked upon (contained in Appendix 1)
5. To request that the decision to transfer the Proper Office responsibility from the Head of Public Services post to the Director of Resources post be passed for consideration and approval to Full Council

**Background**

6. The Register Office in York is successful which is due to a combination of reasons including the location and attractive facilities offered. Due to the high levels of demand for the services offered and the ongoing budgetary pressures on the Council, it is planned to make the service the first in the country to be break even financially and become financially self sufficient. This needs to be achieved to reduce the reliance on other Council funds or

the council tax payer's subsidising the service. Currently the service is operating at a net cost of about £25,000 per year.

The proposed changes to fees and the intended expansion of the business activities (see appendix 1) will secure additional income and thus achieve a financial break even ie net cost of nil, whilst ideally generating a small amount of income to ensure that any additional costs are covered. However the fees have been reviewed with a view to customer choice too and therefore ceremonies remain available at nationally set levels and also some charges are not increasing at all.

## **Consultation**

7. All couples who have given notice for ceremonies after 31<sup>st</sup> March 2008, have been briefed that the fees will probably be higher than they are currently. Many customers purchasing certificates from York Register Office have commented that they would be willing to pay more than the £7 statutory fee, for a superior quality service.

We have discussed the levels of charges with North Yorkshire County Council, East Riding of Yorkshire and Leeds City Council and can confirm that our charges are similar and that they will be increasing their charges across the board for 2008/9.

Consultation has taken place with all affected staff regarding the change in employment status.

## **Increase in fees for marriage ceremonies**

8. The fees currently are:

Register Office (Bootham Suite) £150 (Mon – Sat)

Approved Premises £375 (Mon – Sat) £425 (Sun/Bank Holiday)

Register Office (small room) £43.50 (Mon- Sat, fee set nationally)

The Bootham Suite is the main marriage room available at the Register Office, and hosts the majority of civil ceremonies in York since it opened in April 2004.

The smaller room is currently “The Register Office” and the proposal is to incorporate this room into the Bootham Suite and therefore enable City of York Council to set the fee for this room at a more realistic price than the current national fee. In addition people choice is not being restricted at all, as they can still decide to use another room (a registrars office) and pay the national rate of £43.50.

Nationally the figures for marriage and partnership ceremonies dropped by between 10 and 20 % in 2006/2007. However in York the figures have remained constant, although the larger Bootham Suite has seen a slight reduction, whilst the smaller room has seen an increase.

We need to develop a charging structure that is competitive with other areas, offers customer choice and generates income to help the service become self-funding.

### **Proposed Fee Structure**

9. It is recommended that the fees are restructured to charge higher rates for weekends and Bank holidays when the cost of providing the service is higher, and not increasing fees during the week, whilst maintaining the availability of ceremonies at the national fee. The revised fees have taken into account the increased fees in the surrounding areas, and therefore the proposed fee structure for 2008/09 is:

- Bootham Suite Large Room Mon/Thurs £150 (currently £150) No change
- Bootham Suite Large Room Fri / Sat £200 (currently £150)
- Bootham Suite small room Mon/Thurs £75 (currently £43.50 national fee)
- Bootham Suite small room Fri/Sat £100 (currently £43.50 – national fee)
- Approved Premises Mon/ Thurs £375 (currently £375)
- Approved Premises Fri and Sat £425 (currently £375)
- Sunday / Bank Holidays £475 (currently £425)
- Fee for approving a venue for marriages £2000 for 3 year licence (currently £1,750)
- Statutory Register Office Ceremony – Registrar's office (national fee - £43.50 – no change)

### **Analysis**

10. The fees for the Bootham Suite rooms would achieve an increased income of £20,000 based on 200 ceremonies large room (fri/sat) and 150 ceremonies small room (fri/sat) 50 (mon/thurs)

The fees for Approved Premises to be set at £400 and £450 would achieve an increase of £6,250 based on 250 ceremonies

The fees for approving a venue for marriages and partnerships would achieve £1,500 based on 6 renewals per annum

In the context of the overall cost of getting married to be able to use the superior facilities at Bootham, for £200 at peak times is not considered excessive.

The same applies to the Approved Premises. Having been set initially in 1995 in line with an average church ceremony. The fee is still on a similar level and is similar to those of our competitors in neighbouring authorities.

## **Fees for certificate supply**

11. The fees for a certificate supplied from the City of York Register Office archive is set nationally at £7.00 per certificate.

The fee incorporates the cost of the certificate supplied by HMSO, the staff time used in producing it, the postage cost of stamps and envelopes.

The make up of the fee does not account for method of payment (credit/debit cards were not available when the statute came into force). The fee does not account for staff time taking the application over the phone and recording credit/debit details and the confidential disposal of those details. The fee does not account for the speed of supply (the same fee applies for a certificate supplied within 1 hour of application, as within 10 days of receipt of that application).

To make an additional charge for a superior service is legally “ultra vires” according to guidelines issued by the Registrar Generals Office. However many Local Authorities including Leeds, East Riding of Yorkshire, Manchester and Kent, have decided to challenge that statement and set fees for the supply of the service in accordance with the amount of work involved and the speed of production.

## **Proposed Fee structure**

12. It is recommended that a fee structure be developed reflecting the speed of service, the method of payment, and special requests for pre-ordering and alternative postal services. This is considered appropriate due to the business practice in surrounding, competing council areas. The fact that the fees can be charged separately as a council service and not as part of the statutory certificate production, satisfies the “ultra vires” aspect of the issue, and would be accounted for separately. The proposed fee structure for 2008/9 is:

- Certificate provided while you wait (within 1 hour) £8 – total charge £15.00
- Certificate provided after 1 hour, but on same day, or posted same day first class £5 – total charge £12.00
- Certificate provided from phone/electronic information £5 – total charge £12.00
- Certificate requiring same/next day delivery postal service £15 –total charge £22.00

- Certificate sent out within 10 days - £7.00

## **Analysis**

13. The fees would achieve an increased income of approximately £25,000 based on 6,000 certificates supplied in 2006/7. This is a prudent estimate due to the expected slight fall in demand after new passport rules were introduced in 2005 requiring full birth certificates which resulted in a peak in production which is expected to level out.

## **Registration Officers - change in employment status**

14. The Government intends to change the employment status of Registration Officers throughout the country. Under Section 69(1) of the Statistics and Registration Services Act 2007 those holding office under the Registration Service Act 1953 (including deputies) will become employees of the relevant local authority, whereas they are currently statutory officers employed at Her Majesty's pleasure. Under Section 69(3) the terms and conditions of appointment of the office holder shall become his or her terms and conditions of employment with the relevant local authority.

In York this will mean that five staff will become employees of the City of York Council. This is expected to take place on the 1<sup>st</sup> December 2007.

All staff affected are fully aware of this change and HR and Legal Services have been advising to ensure the transfer is managed correctly and they will then be subject to job evaluation.

15. The Register Office in York has always been forward thinking and examples such as the outstation at Asda, have been at the forefront of national service delivery. To ensure members are aware of the current services and projects that York Registration and Celebratory Services offer and are embarked upon we have compiled a list and this is detailed in Appendix 1.

## **Proper Officer designation**

16. Proper Officers for Registration were introduced by the Local Government Act 1972. They have statutory functions detailed in various Registration Service Acts.

In the City of York Council the Proper Officer for Registration is part of the responsibility of the Head of Public Services. James Drury is the current post holder, although as he is leaving the Council at the end of December, the Council needs to ensure that this duty is covered by another officer. A new Head of Public Services will not be in post by the of December and therefore the duty and title should be assigned to the Director of Resources to ensure the duty is discharged.

## **Corporate Priorities**

17. The changes recommended in the report support our corporate values of delivering what our customer wants and encouraging improvement in everything we do.

## **Implications**

- 18.
- **Financial** – have been involved in advising on the budget setting and charging structures
  - **Human Resources (HR)** – HR have been involved throughout the process of change in employment status
  - **Equalities** – None
  - **Legal** - *All legal requirements will be met*
  - **Crime and Disorder** - None
  - **Information Technology (IT)** - None
  - **Property** - None
  - **Other**- None

## **Risk Management**

19. In compliance with the Council's risk management strategy the main risks that have been identified in this report are those which could lead to the inability to meet business objectives (Strategic) and to deliver services (Operational), leading to financial loss (Financial), non-compliance with legislation (Legal & Regulatory), damage to the Council's image and reputation and failure to meet stakeholders' expectations (Governance). Measured in terms of impact and likelihood, the risk score all risks has been assessed at less than 16, This means that at this point the risks need only to be monitored as they do not provide a real threat to the achievement of the objectives of this report.

## **Recommendations**

20. That the Advisory Panel advise the Executive Member to :

approve the proposed fees (see paragraph 8 and 11 ) are charged in order to maintain the drive to make the service cost effective, still offering value for

money and choice to the citizens of York for a superior service, whilst remaining competitive compared to neighbouring Register Offices. National charges will also still apply.

Note the change in employment status of five members of staff.

Recommend the transfer of Proper Officer responsibility from the Head of Public Services to the Director of Finance to Full Council in accordance with the Council's constitution.

Reason: To increase income, whilst retaining customer choice, to achieve a self financing service.

### Contact Details

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**Chief Officer Responsible for the report:**

*James Drury  
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Report Approved

Date 29/11/07

**Specialist Implications Officer(s)** *None*

**Wards Affected:** *List wards or tick box to indicate all*

All

**For further information please contact the author of the report**

**Background Papers:** *None*

**Annexes:**

Appendix 1 – Projects and Service Update – City of York Registration and Celebratory Services