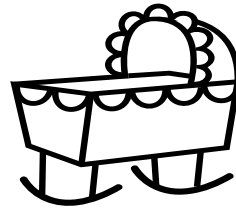




From the Cradle



to the Grave



Scrutiny Review of the Registration Service: Budget and Accommodation

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Community Safety Scrutiny Review

of the

Registration Service: Budget and Accommodation

Democratic Services

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CS006

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Scrutiny Review of the Registration Service

Report of the Community Safety Scrutiny Committee

SUMMARY

1. The Review set out to look in detail at two areas of the Registration Service: the budget, and the accommodation. The budget situation had raised concerns because of the overspend (i.e. spending over the budget) of the last few years. The accommodation was particularly interesting because of the very public nature of the service, and the county-wide provision of facilities. Throughout the Review, the Review Group heard how popular the Registration Services are, and were impressed by the dedication of staff.
2. The overspend was attributed to several factors: service expansion to meet new statutory demands; increased salary and pension payments as a result of 'job evaluation', and a perception that the service had been under-funded in the past. Staff costs make up 85-90% of the total costs to the service. The creation of a 'call centre' to handle incoming phone-calls regarding marriages and the registration of death and births, has been costly but was universally regarded as a worthwhile investment, and essential for a customer-focused service.
3. Two main factors are involved in tackling the budget deficit. The first is an increase in the budget given to the service, but the most significant is the increase in income generated by the service, which has gone up by 39% between 2003/04 and 2005/06. The service is unusual in the amount of income it is able to raise through its services, particularly the marriage 'business'. Charges for services have recently been reviewed, but more transparency around the basis for the charges would be welcomed, as would more emphasis on 'activity' statistics to demonstrate cost-effectiveness and value for money.
4. Witnesses were confident that the improved financial situation could be maintained. Focusing on income generation by, for example, promoting 'Oxfordshire as the place to marry', is the key plank of the future financial strategy. The service will have a dedicated marketing budget to support this enterprise, and the Committee endorsed this. The Committee were encouraged by the commitment shown by the Service to improve effectiveness along with financial systems. The operation of the call centre needs to improve to meet the demand. At present, too many calls are missed and customer service standards are not being attained.
5. The service is vulnerable to changes beyond its control, such as the introduction of new legislation, for example, regarding citizenship. Population growth and housing development will also influence the provision of services around Oxfordshire, and the introduction of Registration On-Line will take a

while to settle in. The Registration Service needs to be both robust and flexible in its financial arrangements to manage through periods of planned and unforeseen change. The Committee was satisfied that the Service had suitable management systems in place to take account of these risks.

6. The Committee would like to see improvements in bench-marking the Service against other local authorities, and better reporting of performance measures, linked to budget monitoring. At present, there is limited robust comparative information available. This also applies to the properties used by the Registration Service, which have varying rates of activity and costs. It is essential that the service can transparently show that it is providing good value for money, as well as a first class service.
7. The Registration Service has one Register Office in Oxford and a number of offices around the County which are used to register births, marriages and deaths, as well as carry out 'optional' ceremonies, such as civil partnerships. Several offices are located in County Council properties, but others are situated within District Councils, and pay a lease under contract. Both the location of offices and the opening hours of offices outside Oxford seem to have developed historically. The Committee is confident that there will be a more fundamental examination of how assets, both people and property are used. The service has recently undertaken its own review of property, and has recommended the closure of some sub-offices. The Committee endorses the view of the responsible Cabinet Member that the Service must keep a number of registration offices open around the County, to make sure that people have easy access to this vital service.
8. Some improvements to properties used by the Registration Service is essential. The Oxford Register Office does not currently provide adequate waiting areas, and therefore cannot deal as sensitively as it would like with the needs of different client groups. The Committee has made recommendations to improve the waiting area available, and for a longer-term increase in office space. The use of the attractive marriage room in the Register Office should be maximised and made available to the widest range of people.
9. The facility for registering a death at the John Radcliffe Hospital is a vital service, and the accommodation used needs to be improved, with the agreement of the John Radcliffe and the Patient Partnership Team who generously allow the Registration Service to use one of their rooms. Making people comfortable at such an important time must be a priority. Improvement needs at other offices around the County have been identified by the service, and the Committee hope to see action taken as soon as possible.
10. Discussions about the future of the Registration Service, as with all local authority services, will need to consider the needs of customers first and foremost. Access to services, through an improved call centre and website, and

longer or more flexible opening hours, will continue to drive improvements. As the Registration Service touches everyone's life, it is not surprising to find it at the forefront of customer focus and customer service improvements. The Committee heard with satisfaction that the staff were dedicated to this end. Now that the Service is on a more secure financial footing, it should go from strength to strength, and manage its performance effectively over the coming years. The Committee very much hopes that implementing the recommendations set out in this report will contribute to providing an excellent service to the public.

Recommendations

The Community Safety Scrutiny Committee recommend the Cabinet:

R1: That detailed monthly monitoring and financial planning be continued – both on expenditure (especially employee costs) and income. That activity statistics should be developed in parallel, in order to enhance this monitoring information, explain movements in spending/income and aim to demonstrate cost effectiveness and value for money.

R2: The base budget of the Registration Service should be maintained (in line with inflation) within the medium term financial plan.

R3: A dedicated marketing budget should be provided and maintained within the medium-term financial plan for the Registration Service.

R4: Measures of cost-effectiveness should be improved. The service should develop systems to improve coding of activity and the attribution of costs to cost centres.

R5: That every effort is made to increase the number of calls answered by the help desks. This should be monitored and reported, along with other financial and performance information.

R6: The reception area of the Register Office in Oxford should be improved as a matter of urgency. An extra waiting room for marriages and birth registration should be provided in a refurbished current ‘administration’ office, once any partitioning has been removed. Extra accommodation should be found for administrative functions of the Registration Service, and should be provided as close as possible to the current offices. These changes should be planned and carried out within this financial year.

R7: A plan to maximise the use of the marriage room should be developed, with specific reference to good practice, and the needs of a diverse community.

R8: A review of the records storage conditions should be undertaken by the service in conjunction with Property Services and Fire and Safety officers. Any work for improvement should be timetabled and carried out as soon as possible.

R9: a) The Registration Service should negotiate with the Patient Partnership Team and John Radcliffe Estates Office to enable minor refurbishment and redecoration of the office currently used to register deaths, to bring it up to an appropriate standard for a customer-facing facility.

b) The Registration Service should approach the John Radcliffe Estates Office to stress the appreciation of the space provided to date, and emphasise the importance of the facility of registering deaths at the John Radcliffe. The review of facilities used by Social & Community Services must include the provision of space for the Registration Service.

R10: When leases for properties are reviewed, priority should be given to cost, access, and the times that the offices can be opened. Wherever possible, the service should aim to be placed within a County Council property.

R11: That any office closures should be accompanied by a plan to make the service throughout the county more 'customer focused' by assessing opening hours, access and the quality of accommodation. There should be publicity around the service changes to inform local people of their alternative facilities.

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

11. The review was considered necessary because of the history of budget overspend within the Registration Service; a factor identified by the service Director in his most recent Service Plan. With the County Council's overall aims including 'value for money', and containing a long standing commitment to improving performance, it was decided that an appropriate opportunity had been reached to address the concerns. Furthermore, the Registration Service "is committed to providing friendly and efficient support for key life events," and the County Council now holds customer-focused delivery as a key objective.
12. The Community Safety Scrutiny Committee appointed Councillors John Farrow, Mohammed Altaf-Khan and Marilyn Badcock to the Lead Member Review Group, and their scoping document (see **Appendix 1**) was formally accepted by the Scrutiny Co-ordinating Group on 14th November 2005. The purpose of this review was to:
 - establish reasons for the budget overspend
 - find out whether the staff are being used effectively
 - identify whether the accommodation is appropriate and used effectively
 - assess upcoming pressures on the budget
 - Make recommendations to improve performance

This review was deemed timely as the Registration Service budget has been overspent for three consecutive years, leading to the Service Director making the financial stability of the service his number one priority for the year 2005-06.

13. The Review Group was provided essential support from finance officer, Dave Wilkins, who was seconded to provide detailed investigative budget examination. The Committee would like to thank Dave for all his work on the project.

SECTION 2: FINDINGS

A) Budget/finance issues

Why was the service so overspent?

14. This was a key issue for the Committee. Although it is looking back, rather than looking forward, the Committee thought it was important to understand what problems the service had experienced, as well as how they have been tackled. The service had been over budget for some time. In March 2005 the

Executive agreed that the Registration Service would receive an additional £82 thousand, out of the budget for Sustainable Development which was 'underspent' (i.e. the full budget had not been allocated). This was to cover the 'inherited overspend' on the Registration Service, brought-forward from 2003/04, although the expectation was that the service would still end the financial year in deficit – the final position for 2004/05 was an overspend of £63 thousand. This was attributed to higher than expected staff costs, and a lower than expected take-up of citizenship ceremonies. The proposed longer term solution was that the service would increase income to bring the budget closer to balance. As the head of service said 'It has taken us three years to get to grips with the budget'.

15. The Review Group heard from witnesses that there were several reasons for the overspend:
 - First, that the service had expanded, in part due to new statutory demands, but that the service had not adequately budgeted for the level of activity.
 - Job evaluation had led to increased salary and pension payment increases.
 - There was a perception that the service had been under-funded in the past.
16. One of the most significant service expansions was the introduction of the 'call centre', to handle incoming phone-calls regarding marriages, registration of death and births. This represents a big service improvement but was costly to set up. Recently around £30 thousand was invested in the new helpline system, which now provides much better management information. Other service expansions include the new 'civil partnerships' ceremonies introduced in November 2005 and citizenship ceremonies.
17. At present, staff costs represent 85 to 90% of the total costs. All Registrars are employed on Oxfordshire County Council contracts, and on salaries set through the Job Evaluation process. However, Registrars are 'statutory officers' and are liable to inspection by HM Inspector of Registration Services. Their appointment, and any dismissal, needs to be endorsed by the Registrar General's Office. The County Council is limited to some extent in terms of what can be charged for a standard service, e.g. a marriage service in a Registration Office. The General Register Office sets out a national price structure, to which all authorities conform. This means that the service is potentially less able to be flexible in terms of responding to changing financial circumstances, although in practice officers assured the Review that a flexible approach is pursued as much as possible.

Table A (see Annex) presents summarised budget and spending figures for the three financial years 2003/04 to 2005/06. The overall position shows overspendings (i.e. a budget deficit) of £93 thousand and £63 thousand in the first two years but an underspending (i.e. a budget surplus) in 2005/06 of £134 thousand (provisional figure).

What has been done to tackle the budget deficit ?

18. The first significant change has been the increase in budget given to the service. In “net” terms, an increase from £382 thousand to £545 thousand - **See Table A**. Much of this budget relates to employees (i.e. salaries). However, the budget for 2006/07 has remained virtually static, with extra allocations to priority areas - £40,000 for increased staffing in the Call Centre and £10,000 to set up a marketing and promotion budget - being funded from planned savings within the staffing budget, resulting from the replacement of departing senior staff by lower-graded staff and the generation of additional income over and above that required for corporate savings targets.
19. The most significant development has been the increase in income received and generated by the service – from £721,000 in 2003/04 to just over £1m in 2005/06 (an increase of 39%). The Registration Service is in a relatively unusual position within the Council as it is largely a ‘cash business’ to the extent that it has chargeable services, especially marriage services, which can increase or decrease in volume depending on how many people want, as opposed to *need*, to use the service. In 2005/06 approximately 70% of total costs were covered by income.
20. Several witnesses told the Review Group about the need to make sure that income generation was as effective as possible. Cllr Jelf talked approvingly about the new ‘commercial’ approach of Jacquie Bugeja, and all senior staff were aware that the service was now competing for business in a ‘marriage market’.
21. All the charges for services have recently been reviewed in a council-wide exercise, and as a result some changes have been made. Several fees are statutory, but the service has discretion in some areas, for example, in charges for licensing wedding venues. The Review Group thought that some of the charges appear to be arbitrary and/or based on historical factors. There could be more transparency around these fees, which should be in line with the current marketing strategy.
22. Witnesses stated that monthly financial monitoring had been introduced. As much as this reveals that there was little financial monitoring before, this will now be a chance for the service to be more in control of its finances, and to plan better. The introduction of Registration On-Line, will also allow for more frequent activity reports to be produced. The Committee would very much endorse these improvements and stress the need for regular input from the Business Manager of the Directorate, who should be responsible for monitoring a service so recently out of financial crisis.

Recommendation 1:

- **That detailed monthly monitoring and financial planning be continued – both on expenditure (especially employee costs) and income.**
 - **That activity statistics should be developed in parallel, in order to enhance this monitoring information, explain movements in spending/income and aim to demonstrate cost effectiveness and value for money.**
23. The Committee are concerned that the Registration Service is not ‘penalised’ for its success in generating income in the last year. No short term decisions should be taken to reduce the core funding of the service, or to destabilise the finances by removing any ‘underspend’.

Recommendation 2:

The base budget of the Registration Service should be maintained (in line with inflation) within the medium term financial plan.

What plans are in place to keep the budget balanced over the next few years?

24. All the managers the Review Group spoke to, and the Portfolio holder, were confident that they would be successful in staying out of deficit. There are several strands to keeping the budget balanced in the medium term. Perhaps the most important plan is to maintain or increase the income of the service through sustained activity. The service has done extremely well in promoting Oxfordshire as ‘the place to marry’, and estimate that there is the potential to contribute around £63 million to the local economy through this ‘business’. All the managers recognised that in a marketplace, they need to keep up the momentum. Although some ‘marketing’ of the services, especially marriages, is undertaken by the service, the Review Group heard that marketing costs were currently met by, for example, being sponsored by licensed hotels to attend the Olympia Wedding Fair. There are now proposals to have dedicated additional funding for marketing, found through ‘efficiency savings’. The Committee strongly endorse having a dedicated budget to make sure that marketing is an ongoing medium-term policy.

Recommendation 3:

A dedicated marketing budget should be provided and maintained within the medium-term financial plan for the Registration Service.

25. In order to keep the budget balanced, the service needs to be cost-effective. The Review has identified a need for service costs to be more accurately attributed to cost units. At the moment, this sort of information seems to be patchy. It is essential to be able to monitor the real costs of providing the service across the county, and to measure what the service actually does month by month. As a senior manager said ‘Our coding system is not sufficiently smart to efficiently record output’. This is in part because of the constraints of corporate Budget Coding protocols. The recent Service Review

has done some measuring of activity by office, but more could be done. The senior officers in the service assured the Committee that work would continue with Environment & Economy finance officers and Registration service officers to assist in this process.

Recommendation 4:

Measures of cost-effectiveness should be improved. The service should develop systems to improve coding of activity and the attribution of costs to cost centres.

26. This obviously links to having better reporting of activity, and the changes/increase in activity over time. Again, this process is underway, but the Review Group found that accurate information was not easy to get. In addition, there was no access to information which showed trends over time. This sort of analysis should be essential for service planners. Service managers asserted that the service provided was value for money, but the Committee would like to see more evidence to support this. **Table B¹** (see **Annex**) has been produced by the Finance Officer supporting the Review to show recent levels of activity.
27. Along with improved financial management, there is a renewed effort by the service to look at the efficiency of both staff and offices. The cost-effectiveness of the properties is discussed in the 'Accommodation' section below. In terms of staff, witnesses discussed some increased efficiencies. For example, historically, if a Registrar went off sick, the service would bring in a deputy. This might mean closing an office and cancelling appointments. This is detrimental in terms of the service provided, but it keeps down costs.
28. Another area of potential increased effectiveness is the call centre. This was set up in 2001 to enable customers to phone in to the service, to make an enquiry or book a service and have a direct access line. It also allowed Registrars to see customers without being interrupted to answer the telephone. All the staff agree that this has been a major improvement in terms of customer service and it is visited by other authorities as an example of good practice. At present, call centre staff are alerted by their 'call waiting' system if there are other customers trying to get through. Each customer may have a number of queries, and for some appointments, information may need to be provided in advance. However, senior managers were also considering how best to make sure that the duration of calls was appropriate to the needs of clients, without tying up staff time when other customers were waiting.
29. At present, only around 50% of calls are answered on the marriage line, and around 80% on the phone line to register births and deaths. Many of the calls that are missed will be 'repeat callers', who try until they get through, but there is still considerable concern that some people have to try and try again to make contact. Not only does this present a 'poor public front', but this may be

¹ Note this is only for 2004/05 – It is derived from forms AR6 and ARS1 – submitted to GRO.

distressing when trying to make an appointment to register a death. It may also mean that the Oxfordshire Registration Service loses 'business' if someone is deciding whether to marry in the county or not. As one witness said: 'Sometimes we try and do everything for everyone – for good customer services. We're going to have to decide what we talk about over the helpline.'

30. There is space in the call centre for more staff, but the witnesses the Review Group spoke to did not necessarily think that increasing staff numbers was the only answer. Better management information is now available and analysis has been undertaken to judge times of peak activity. Much of the marriage activity is seasonal, and can be to some extent predicted. This means that additional staff resources can be directed to the call centre at peak times, given a degree of flexibility within the staff planning. In addition, the new on-line appointment booking service being introduced will cut down on the need for phone-calls.

Recommendation 5:

That every effort is made to increase the number of calls answered by the help desks. This should be monitored and reported, along with other financial and performance information.

What are the risks for the service or upcoming pressures?

31. Senior officers told the Review Group that staff had worked very hard to bring the budget round, but that the service was still subject to changes beyond their control, such as new legislation. The service needs to be robust given the fluctuations created by national conditions, such as the changes in legislation around foreign nationals marrying in the UK. Optional services, such as the 'citizenship' ceremonies can be charged to cover the full costs. However, the service anticipates take up of this service will be affected by the new 'Life in the UK' test introduced by the Home Office. Responding to competition in the 'marriage market' will also keep a level of risk present in service planning. These factors cannot be controlled, but the service needs to make sure that it has robust financial planning in place to cope with any fluctuations.
32. Changes in technology, such as the need for the Registration Service to register births, deaths and notices of marriage on-line, will have a significant impact regarding the future of some offices where on-line facilities cannot be made available. This is discussed more fully in the section on Accommodation. But it is important to note, that if some smaller offices close, there will still be a knock-on effect on other offices and staff members, as well as on customers. In addition the introduction of a on-line appointments booking service for customers will need time to settle in, and like any change, may lead to unforeseen circumstances or pressures on service delivery.
33. As Oxfordshire has been identified for an increase in housing, the Registration Service will need to be mindful of the growth in population in certain areas,

and ensure that they are able to meet customer demand for services. This will involve substantial medium and long-term service forecasting, which one senior manager admitted was difficult with a variable service.

34. The Committee are confident that the service managers and portfolio holder are working to respond effectively to these risks.

How does the service compare?

35. Fees and charges are compared with other local authorities each year to ensure that the Registration Service remains competitive. This comparison does not yet take into account all the costs associated with running the service. Oxfordshire has participated in a benchmarking activity with authorities in the East Anglia Proper Officer Group (EAPOG). The aim was to compare Gross and Net costs per head and per assessed hours, and front line staff costs, over a two year period. Expenditure and income were broken down, to try and get to detailed measures. This exercise was considered by service managers to be very unsatisfactory. Concerns have been expressed to the benchmarking group that not all the authorities are providing the same information or using the same definitions. This means that the results are not comparable. The Review Group were told that the South East region is refusing to publish its information because of concerns about the lack of accurate comparison. Service managers here said that they are very reluctant to give any credence to the benchmarking until more has been done to clarify the basis of comparisons.
36. It is unfortunate that the benchmarking does not at present provide reliable information, as it is essential that the Registration Service is in future able to compare itself in detail with other local authorities. Managers did stress that Oxfordshire was not 'expensive', and that the service here generates more income than in several other areas, but this needs more transparent supporting evidence. The Committee would support efforts to work towards this.

What performance measures are available?

37. A guide to good practice is provided by the General Register Office. It covers: facilities and accommodation, performance management and consultation, personnel and staff development, accessibility and service standards, marriage services, and technical and equipment needs. These provide standards of 'good practice' and 'better practice' by which to compare the service. In September 2003, the latest information available, an inspection by Howard Parks of the Registration Inspectorate, found that the Registration Service scored 'favourably', with a compliance mark of 77% overall.
38. The service does not have any service-specific statutory Best Value Performance Indicators to report, but has decided upon a number of 'local'

performance indicators to measure: turnaround time for copy certificates
Percentage of citizenship ceremonies provided within 3 months of notification,
and the number of registration offices that meet, minimum, good, better
standards as set out in the Good Practice guide. Other aspects of the
Registration Service are monitored for performance. For example, the call
centre telephony system records how many phone calls are taken, and how
many missed over a day. All of this information feeds in to service
management and planning. The service is also looking at early Charter Mark
accreditation as a proof of existing high standards of customer focus.

39. In addition, the service has collected customer feedback information through the use of feedback cards, and larger surveys. The Review was told that in 2004, of the people asked, 100% were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the service provided for their wedding. If people are registering a birth, the 'pack' has a customer questionnaire, which have also recorded very high levels of satisfaction.
40. The views of staff are also important. All the witnesses who gave evidence were committed to their work, and aimed to provide the best possible service. Some staff clearly felt that working conditions were not always optimum, and that their pay did not necessarily compare favourably with other internal services. But there was an absolute dedication to the people they dealt with. This was echoed by managers and the Cabinet Member:

'What has impressed me is the feeling of team spirit. Everyone seems to be happy with what they are doing. They have turned the service around.'
41. In summary the Review found that the service provided is top class. This is achieved using best practice and there is a cost attached. The costs are now being exceeded through the increased income generated by the service.

B) Accommodation issues

42. The issues around accommodation of the service are directly linked to finance, as the costs of property are second only to employee costs. The offices are also the 'face' of the council for people coming to use essential services. The service itself has been rightly concerned with their accommodation, and have undertaken a review of all offices. But the Committee think that there could have been better co-ordination between the Registration Service management and Property Services on this matter, and property services officers might have been more effectively involved from the outset.
43. The Review wanted to find out whether the Registration Service has the right sort of offices in the right places in Oxfordshire, and whether they are open at the right times to suit people who want to use them. The Review Group heard that the service's use of accommodation was 'historical', rather than planned,

and that there has been a piecemeal expansion of the service since it's beginning 150 years ago. Under the new management arrangements, the Committee is confident that there will be a more fundamental review of how services are configured, and how assets, both people and property, are being used.

44. The Committee is very aware that the Registration Service is most visible to people at important times in their lives, for example, getting married, registering a birth, registering a death, gaining British citizenship, and forming a civil partnership. These different life moments need to be treated seriously, with sensitivity or celebration as appropriate. The Review Group was therefore concerned to find out if the offices and venues for these different events were suitable to the purpose.
45. The Review heard that there was some debate within the Registration Service about the 'best' number of offices to have around the County and the best locations. Examples were given of some local authorities which have gone for a 'one stop shop' approach to Registration Service, such as Birmingham, which has a new purpose-built building with top of the range facilities. However, in a geographically large area such as Oxfordshire, most officers agreed that there would need to be a greater spread of Registration Offices available. This is the view strongly endorsed by the Cabinet Member responsible for the Registration Service. Councillor Jelf said: 'I can see the economics of having a smaller number, but you take away the choice of local people.'
46. This fits with the commitment to 'choice' and customer focus made by the council, but it also highlights the dilemma that the best service structure for customer choice may not be the most cost effective, and therefore may not be the best 'value for money'. The Committee agrees that a balance would need to be struck here, and that pragmatic decisions will need to be made on a property by property basis, while still maintaining the spread of offices.

Is the accommodation suitable for the purpose?

47. As the central office, the Oxford Register Office was a particular interest for the Review. The most immediate concern is the lack of space in the reception area. Best practice suggests that separate waiting areas are provided for people intending to register a birth, or a death, or a marriage. This is to recognise the different needs of the public in each situation. In the Oxford office, only one small reception space is provided, so that everyone coming to the office has to sit together. At times when there is an actual wedding going on, with up to 50 guests, the reception room, hallway, and entrance can be full. All the service officers agreed that this situation was not ideal. The Committee feel very strongly that the council's commitment to customer focus should be better shown at some of the most important times in people's lives. It is inappropriate for people waiting to register the death of a loved one to be crowded out by wedding guests, or for a wedding party to have to stand out on a rainy pavement waiting for their 'slot'.

48. The layout of the Oxford Register Office rooms beyond the central hallway and reception room provides space for administration as well as for public rooms. The two corridors are joined by the Marriage Room. There are several other offices in the building which are not 'public facing', but provide space for administrative support and essential duties. This includes producing around fifteen thousand certificates a year, and storing the notices of marriage. A number of the offices have been created by partitioning larger rooms, and the smaller sub-divisions of these offices are cramped. Without the partitions the rooms would be attractive offices suitable for holding marriages, civil partnerships or otherwise dealing with the public. All public facing rooms should be of a size as to allow a small family group, with pushchair, to have easy access, and to give the staff member space to move around the room and to exit easily.
49. Property services are working with the Registration Service to develop short and longer term solutions to the accommodation difficulties in the Oxford offices. One suggestion has been that some of the administrative functions could be moved out of the Register Office on a temporary basis, until more space has been found. But the Committee would not recommend this option unless there was a medium term plan to have all the offices located together. This is firstly because of the need to have regular access to the registers which are used on a daily basis, and brought up from the strong-room on trolleys by lift. It is also important to the coherence of the service to be physically integrated on one site.

Recommendation 6:

The reception area of the Register Office in Oxford should be improved as a matter of urgency. An extra waiting room for marriages and birth registration should be provided in a refurbished current 'administration' office, once any partitioning has been removed. Extra accommodation should be found for administrative functions of the Registration Service, and should be provided as close as possible to the current offices. These changes should be planned and carried out within this financial year.

50. The Committee recognises that the upcoming Review of Property Assets may recommend changes to the use of Macclesfield House. But while the longer term plans for office accommodation are not finalised, the uncertainty should not mean that improvements to existing facilities are not made. Any additional accommodation, or change of purpose of current rooms would involve a need to refurbish offices to a good standard before staff are relocated. In addition to having more accommodation to routinely maintain, this means that this recommendation will have a cost implication. This will be addressed in the section on 'Financial Implications'.
51. The marriage room (Dexter Room) in the Oxford office is extremely attractive, and staff are rightly proud of it. It is a very popular venue for weddings, and because of the lack of an outside garden space, it is often used for photographs

by the wedding party. The charges for 2006/7 show that a marriage in a Registrar's office is charged at £43.50 as a flat rate, whereas the Dexter Room is charged at £60 Wednesday to Friday and £120 on a Saturday. The difference in rates reflects the extra accommodation available in the Dexter Room. The national Registration Service Good Practice Guide gives as a minimum standards that a decorated wedding room should be available, at 'no disadvantage to low income customers'. The Committee is concerned that at times the Dexter Room may not be used, while a couple is getting married in a side office, because they can only afford the 'basic' rate. Even small differences in charges could affect the decision of a couple, and the Committee think that the marriage room should be used as much as possible.

Recommendation 7:

A plan to maximise the use of the marriage room should be developed, with specific reference to good practice, and the needs of a diverse community.

52. There is a secure storage area for records in the basement of Macclesfield House. At present, the room has extra space, but this will be taken up at an increasing rate when the service moves from using paper registers, to on-line registration and printing out of records. Because of the lack of other storage space, the room is also used for general storage, which represents a fire hazard. The store room is also currently not flood-proof, and has suffered water leaks in the last two years. Given the large number of original historical documents stored here, this is very worrying. The Committee want to emphasize that the service is not just storing information, but *safeguarding* original records for the future.

Recommendation 8:

A review of the records storage conditions should be undertaken by the service in conjunction with Property Services and Fire and Safety officers. Any work for improvement should be timetabled and carried out as soon as possible.

53. There is an additional basement room which is directly beneath the Register Office, where certificate boxes are currently stored. Despite the lack of storage space within the offices, this basement store should not be used unless the room and access is considerably improved. The stairway to the storeroom are narrow 'cellar steps', and the storeroom itself was damp and littered with broken glass when the Review Group visited. It is not appropriate to require staff to put themselves at any risk by using this room in its current state.
54. Separated from the main building is the Registration Service 'call centre'. The accommodation here is adequate and well suited to the purpose. Other issues regarding the operation of the call centre have been covered above (see [paragraph 30](#)).

How suitable is the county-wide provision?

55. Other offices in Oxfordshire have recently been assessed by the service. Some share facilities with other County Council services, such as the Didcot office which is located in the library. Other Registration Offices are located in Town Council offices, although the Review Group heard from witnesses that this was not the ideal set-up for the service. A very few offices, such as Henley, are 'stand alone' or in that case, purpose built.
56. The Service review proposes action to ensure that where the offices are proposed to remain, that they are of a good standard. Specific problems have been identified with some offices. This includes the state of decoration and repair of marriage rooms, access for disabled people, availability of toilets and baby change facilities, and waiting areas. For example, the office in Bicester is leased from the Town Council, and has limited times when the wedding room can be used, with particular difficulties in the summer months when the service should be especially busy. In Witney, the office is housed within the West Oxfordshire District Council site on Woodgreen. There is no waiting area for registration customers and the marriage room can only be used on Fridays.
57. There are facilities at the John Radcliffe hospital to register births and deaths. The births registration takes place in the Women's Centre on Level 5, the office is open five mornings a week and no appointment is needed. This is an essential service and the recent service review stated that up to 15 births are registered each day during opening hours. It is very customer-focused, with good liaison with midwives to make sure that all new parents are aware of the facility to register the birth of their child on site.
58. The Registrar at the John Radcliffe also works in partnership with the Bereavement Team, who make appointments for bereaved people with the Registrar. The Bereavement Team has arranged for the Registration Service to share an office with the Trust's Patient Partnership Team. The Committee would like to warmly thank the Bereavement Team and Patient Partnership Team for making the facility of registering deaths a possibility at the John Radcliffe. The Bereavement office arranges appointments, and tries to 'target' people who live further away or have difficulty travelling, or for some other reason, want to use the service at the hospital. Five appointments are made per afternoon and four people are allowed with each appointment. They are always fully booked.
59. The office used to register deaths is small and poorly decorated, making it an unwelcoming environment for a public facing service. There is no waiting area, so people often crowd the corridor, even though there is an arrangement to wait in the main hospital reception area. There is no constructed wheelchair access. The office is also noisy, being located next to the 'parking' office. These conditions are far from ideal given the sensitivity of the work undertaken.

60. The service is essential to public welfare and must not be rescinded. This has been echoed by local undertakers who described it as an “excellent service”. It is acknowledged that the present accommodation must be considered as temporary. Under these circumstances the Committee recommend that the Registration service negotiates with the Patient Partnership Team and John Radcliffe Estates Office to enable minor refurbishment and redecoration to be carried out. This should include providing appropriate telecommunication facilities such as broadband. The cost of this should be met by the Registration Service. In the medium to long term a major review of the accommodation in the main hospital building currently housing the Single Point of Access to Rehabilitation and Care (SPARC) Team including staff from Social & Community Services will take place. This review must include the transfer of the Registration Service facility.

Recommendation 9:

a) The Registration Service should negotiate with the Patient Partnership Team and John Radcliffe Estates Office to enable minor refurbishment and redecoration of the office currently used to register deaths, to bring it up to an appropriate standard for a customer-facing facility, as quickly as possible.

b) The Registration Service should approach the John Radcliffe Estates Office to stress the appreciation of the space provided to date, and emphasise the importance of the facility of registering deaths at the John Radcliffe. The review of facilities used by Social & Community Services must include the provision of space for the Registration Service.

61. The Review Group were very pleased to hear from Mark Tailby that the Corporate Property Group in the County Council have initiated a ‘Strategic Asset Management Property Survey’ which will look at the suitability of property in relation to how the property is being used. This will be carried out on all council property in a rolling programme. The result will be a four ‘grade’ system for property from ‘Good’ i.e. suitable to service delivery, to ‘very poor’ i.e. not suitable for service delivery/service delivery significantly adversely affected. The aim is that the results of the surveys will be used to inform decisions about changes to the council’s property portfolio. The Committee hope that the most customer facing properties will be given priority in this process.

Is the accommodation cost-effective?

62. So far, the proposals to address the suitability of the property by Property Services do not include a measure of cost-effectiveness. The Review Group found that information about cost-effectiveness was not always easy to come by and was altogether hard to measure. The recent Service Review 2005/06 has attempted to look at the cost-effectiveness of the sub offices, by looking at the number of appointments used, compared to the time the office is open, and the costs of maintaining the office. It draws the conclusion that these offices do not represent value for money.

63. The remaining Registration Offices are not assessed by the service review in the same way. One problem in judging cost effectiveness is that because of the nature of the properties that the council is using, some costs will be inevitably higher than others, e.g. an older building may cost more to maintain. As of the 1st April the costs of buildings have transferred from the Registration Service to Property Services. This means that the service itself will not be disadvantaged because, for example, the rent of a property increases. Instead, any increase will be recharged to the service, but the recharge will be divided up between Directorates. The Committee would endorse the service's drive to make sure that they are not paying for unnecessarily expensive leases or rents.

Access to Services

64. Access to the services provided are a key to good practice. This means not just providing value for money to the tax payer, but to make sure that services are available at the times that people want to use them. The Review Group was concerned to hear from one witness that in the past several of the office opening hours had been dictated by the times that staff wanted to work when they were appointed. This may no longer be the case, but it is important that as much as possible the office opening times reflect a local need. In part the amount that the office is used will be a measure of how accessible the service is, but more thought needs to be given to how the use of the offices can be made more customer focused. One suggestion that was discussed in the witness meetings was that changing the opening hours, and the hours that the call centre was available, would mean that people had more access to making appointments and even coming in to see Registrars. The national Registration Service good practice guide states that best practice would be 'access hours to reflect user requirements and include out of hours/weekend access' (p 13). The Committee would endorse the fact that management are thinking about extended opening hours. There would very likely be a cost attached to extended or flexible working hours, and this would need to be balanced with the aims of the service.

65. Physical access to services is also important, and should be included in any decision making about accommodation. The recent service review of property identifies where properties are not compliant, or fully compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act. Because not all offices are within County Council properties, some outstanding improvements are the responsibility of the Town or District Council. For example, the Abingdon office has remaining improvements e.g. providing a door bell, and adjusting the doorway threshold to improve accessibility to people using a wheelchair. The report identifies that these should be 'actioned' by the Vale of White Horse District Council. But ultimately, the County Council needs to ensure that these improvements are made, even if the costs will be met by another authority.

Recommendation 10:

When leases for properties are reviewed, priority should be given to cost, access, and the times that the offices can be opened. Wherever possible, the service should aim to be placed within a County Council property.

What changes are planned for accommodation?

66. The recent Service Review concludes that all the sub-offices should be closed. This is because they are not judged to be cost-efficient, with a high proportion of 'down time' (i.e. time when it is not possible to have appointments, e.g. travel time), and because of the lack of internet access for on-line registration. Closing these offices would have direct implications for the access to services for several areas.
67. The Committee is concerned that if there is a retraction of services from some areas, that the accommodation and service offered at the remaining offices is of the highest standard. There should also be adequate publicity about the changes, and what alternative arrangements are being made to service local communities.

Recommendation 11:

That any office closures should be accompanied by a plan to make the service throughout the county more 'customer focused' by assessing opening hours, access and the quality of accommodation. There should be publicity around the service changes to inform local people of their alternative facilities.

68. The Committee notes that the John Radcliffe hospital 'sub-office' is not included in the proposals for closure. The Committee entirely supports keeping this facility open, and as stated above, would like to see improvements in the accommodation available for registering deaths at the hospital.

Section 3: Financial Implications

69. Every effort has been made to provide costing for any work recommended by the Committee. This has been very difficult due to the various elements of work involved. It is anticipated that the majority of the Review's recommendations could be delivered through revision of working practices and priorities and therefore be achievable within current budgetary provision.
70. The exceptions to this are the three proposals for improvements to property facilities :
- R6 – provision of an extra waiting room at the Oxford Register Office and consequent need for extra administrative accommodation.

- R8 – potential improvements to records storage facilities at Oxford.
 - R9 – minor refurbishment and redecoration of the office for registration of deaths at the John Radcliffe Hospital.
71. The potential costs of the two proposals at the Oxford Register Office have not yet been assessed in detail, although Property Services have started to look at how improvements could be made. Any proposals for capital expenditure would need to be either funded by the directorate or the subject of a bid to Capital Steering Group and subsequently approved by Cabinet.
72. As mentioned in paragraph 50, the future of Macclesfield House is being considered as part of the Review of Property Assets and it is likely that one of the central buildings will be disposed of within the next two years. If this was Macclesfield House, and a decision on this should be made by September and subject to the usual approval process, then suitable alternative accommodation would of course need to be found for the Registration Service.
73. The work and costs at the JR Hospital (recommendation R9) are judged to be relatively minimal, involving some improvements to lighting, heating, decoration and furnishings. It is suggested that these could be funded from a minor works budget.

SECTION 4: CONCLUSIONS

74. The Committee found that the Registration Service has been given the opportunity to turn around its budget overspend, and put in solid financial foundations for the future. The budget allocation, and the success of the registration service to market its services, both contribute to the potential for a longer-term financial stability. The accommodation used by the service is being reviewed, and in this report the Committee makes clear that priority should be given to improving the office space and rooms that are open to the public.
75. The service has just been recognised in the Oxfordshire Business of the Year Awards, being awarded 'Best Customer and Staff Care' (see Oxford Mail Tuesday 20th June). A commitment to excellent customer focus is right given the nature of the work undertaken. These high service standards must be matched by a high standard of financial and performance management. The Committee think that the management to ensure this is now in place, but would still like to see more reporting of performance measures, and linking this to the budget provision.
76. Value for money must be shown in the service through the optimum use of both staff and property. At present, there is some under-use of offices, and staff are not always able to use their time to best effect, but the Committee is confident that this will be addressed by the service. Greater flexibility will need to be built

in to the service, as customer demands for access to services rise. The Oxfordshire service is already recognised as a leader in the country in terms of innovating to provide on-line appointment booking and a dedicated call-centre.

77. The Committee would like to thank Dave Wilkins for providing financial expertise, and all the witnesses who provided information to help the Review to really get to grips with this issue. The Committee agrees with the widespread opinion that the Registration Service offers excellent service, and hopes that this will continue, along with a strengthened position of financial security.

Annex 1: List of Witnesses

Evidence was obtained from the following 'witnesses' during the review: -

- ❖ Jacquie Bugeja, Assistant Head of Registration Service
- ❖ Jonathan Clapton, Project Officer, Strategic Asset Management, Property Services
- ❖ Alicja Gilroy, Superintendent Registrar
- ❖ Jane Hamlet, Registrar
- ❖ Ray Jelf, Cabinet Member with Community Safety Portfolio
- ❖ Wendy Morgan-Brown, Support Services Manager, Registration Service
- ❖ Nigel Strick, Head of Registration Service
- ❖ Mark Tailby, Team Manager, Strategic Asset Management, Property Services

Additional information was obtained from the following: -

- ❖ Barbara Botley, Proper Officer Hampshire County Council
- ❖ Jan Cottle, Patient Partnership Team, John Radcliffe Hospital
- ❖ Chris Hall, Proper Officer Suffolk County Council
- ❖ Anne Wadey, Bereavement Services Manager, John Radcliffe Hospital
- ❖ Bruce Wall, Proper Officer Northamptonshire County Council

Annex 2: Sources of Evidence

The following sources of evidence were used in the report.

- EE3 Trading Standards & Registration- Revenue Budget 2005/06
- Environment & Economy- Review of Charges 2006/07
- Environment & Economy Service Plan- Registration Service Summary 2006/07
- Financial Monitoring- Report by Head of Financial Procurement 15/03/2005
- Oxfordshire Registration Service- Area Office Opening Hours
- Oxfordshire Registration Service- Draft Service Review 2005/06
- Oxfordshire Registration Service- Review of the Year 2005/06
- Registration Service- Good Practice Guide 2001: Local Government Association
- The Registration Service Oxfordshire: Registration Inspectorate General Register Office September 2003

Scoping Document

Review Topic (name of Review)	Registration Service: budget and accommodation
Review Reference Code	CS006
Lead Scrutiny Committee	Community Safety
Lead Member Review Group (Cllr's involved)	Cllrs John Farrow, Mohammed Altaf-Khan, Marilyn Badcock
Officer Support (Scrutiny Review Officer lead)	Myfanwy Lloyd
Rationale (key issues and/ or reason for doing the Review)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History of budget overspend on the service • Director raised the issue as a key concern • It is a very customer-focused service.
Purpose of Review/Objective (specify exactly what the Review should achieve)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To establish reasons for the budget overspend • To establish whether the staff are being used effectively • To establish whether the accommodation is appropriate and used effectively. • To assess upcoming pressures on the budget.
Indicators of Success (what factors would tell you what a good Review should look like)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Succeed in getting detailed financial information linked to performance information. • Make recommendations to Cabinet on budget and service improvement.
Methodology/ Approach (what types of enquiry will be used to gather evidence and why)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use seconded finance officer to do detailed investigative budget examination. • Interview service officers and appropriate external witnesses. • Visit to two 'satellite' offices.
Specify Witnesses/ Experts (who to see and when)	<p>Nigel Strick – Head of Registration Service. Jacquie Bugeja – Assistant Head of Registration Service Alicja Gilroy - Superintendent Registrar. Wendy Morgan-Brown – head of Support Services Cllr Ray Jelf – Cabinet Member for Community Safety. Registrars from 'satellite' offices (Banbury and Didcot/Abingdon) Help Desk Registrars Bereavement Team at the JR. Howard Park – external consultant (Registrar General Office)</p>

Specify Evidence Sources for Documents (which to look at)	Report of Registrar General Office Budget reports Service Plans		
Specify Site Visits (where and when)	Visit two 'satellite' offices – Banbury and Didcot/Abingdon		
Specify Evidence Sources for Views of Stakeholders (consultation/ workshops/ focus groups/ public meetings)	Not needed at present.		
Publicity requirements (What is needed – fliers, leaflets, radio broadcast, press-release, etc.)	End of Review press-release.		
Resource requirements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person-days • Expenditure 	T.B.A. £1500 (to include costs of finance staff and any external consultation)		
Barriers/ dangers/ risks (identify any weaknesses and potential pitfalls)	Keeping Review well focused. Getting useable financial information and data. Want to keep a strategic view and not get lost in details.		
Projected start date	October 2005	Draft Report Deadline	End March 2006
Meeting Frequency		Projected completion date	June 2006.

Table A

Registration Service - Budget and Spend - 2003/04 to 2005/06 (£000)

Spend Element	2003/04			2004/05			2005/06		
	Budget	Actual	Variance	Budget	Actual	Variance	Budget	Actual (latest)	Variance
Employees	646	869	223	846	1,028	182	1,019	1,117	98
Premises	101	93	-8	94	116	22	101	85	-16
Transport (mainly Car Allowances)	20	29	9	23	33	10	24	32	8
Supplies & Services	16	69	53	47	86	39	44	86	42
Internal Recharges	107	136	29	130	131	1	93	94	1
Gross Exp	890	1,196	306	1,140	1,394	254	1,281	1,414	133
Income									
<i>Fees & charges for births, deaths & marriages</i>	480	692	212	626	782	156	722	912	190
<i>Citizenship ceremonies</i>	15	29	14	14	49	35		74	74
<i>Govt grants</i>	13		-13				14	17	3
Total Income	508	721	213	640	831	191	736	1,003	267
Net Exp	382	475	93	500	563	63	545	411	-134
	Overspend		93	Overspend		63	Underspend		-134

Table B

Registration Service - Analysis of Activity and Assessed Hours
2004/05

Activity	Number	Hours @ Standard time allowance (hours)	Percent of total
<u>Births</u>			
..Total	8,217	6,300	21.3
..Stillbirths	46	35	0.1
<u>Deaths</u>	5,394	6,383	21.5
<u>Marriages</u>			
..at the Register Office	412	515	
..at former register office marriage rooms	981	981	
..at approved premises	986	5,916	
..at registered buildings & housebound/detained persons	13	39	
..Registrar General's licence	4	9	
Total marriages	1,984	7,500	25.3
Marriage notices attested	5,255	5,693	19.2
<u>Declarations attested</u>			
..Births	229	115	0.4
..Deaths	25	13	-
Notices involving persons from abroad	746	311	1.0
Other (mainly issue of additional certificates for B,D & M)		3,292	11.1
Total Assessed Time		29,641	100.0
<u>Not included above (no standard time allocation)</u>			
<u>Citizenship</u>			
..Individuals	652		
..Ceremonies	110		