

**The Resources  
Directorate**

**Registration Unit**

**GWYNEDD COUNCIL**

**REVIEW OF THE REGISTRATION OF  
BIRTHS, DEATHS AND MARRIAGES  
SERVICE**

**CONSULTATION DOCUMENT**

October 2006

## **A) BACKGROUND**

1. Whilst the Registration Service in its daily tasks of registering births, deaths and marriages touches everybody at some time during their lives, there has been little change in the way the service is provided by the Council over the years and below there is an attempt to set the background to the current situation.
2. The management of the Registration Service is determined by the Registration Service Act 1953 that summarized all previous legislation. The registration process itself is controlled by the Births and Deaths Registration Acts and Marriage Acts. Under the 1953 Act, the responsibility for the service is shared between the County Council and the General Register Office (GRO). Briefly, the General Register Office is responsible for the professional side of the service and the Council is responsible for providing all the supportive services. The service is funded from the Council's budget and the Council receives some income (by selling certificates etc).
3. The nature and extent of the service is determined in a scheme agreed between the relevant local authority and the General Register Office and this cannot be varied without consulting with the General Register Office. The officers' hours of work are determined in consultation with the General Register Office. The employees are not "Council workers" but rather they "have statutory posts" and their duties are noted in the relevant registration laws. This means that they do not work for the Council, although of course they are included under the Council's policies with regard to pay and working conditions. They receive directives and advice in relation to their duties from the Registrar General. The Registrar General is the only one who has a right to dismiss them. The Council is also required to appoint a proper officer responsible for preparing a scheme and providing the service within the Council's territory. In Gwynedd the proper officer is the Head of Administration and Public Protection.
4. So there is a division in the Registration service and the duties of the registrars are determined by registration laws and the Registrar General is in charge of their professional work, whilst local authorities are responsible for the practical arrangements of providing the service within its boundaries. This division of responsibility can lead to some form of inertia in the registration world and impair any means of re-organisation.
5. There are two types of registrar, namely the Superintendent Registrar who is responsible for taking notices of marriages, conducting marriage ceremonies and taking care of the registers for their registration district and dealing with requests for copies of them. The other type of registrar is the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages who is responsible for registering all births, deaths and marriages within his/her registration district.
6. In June 2004, the Government announced its proposal to introduce legislation that would create a system where all responsibility for providing the service would be placed on local authorities. This would have given local authorities the freedom to develop and modernise the service within its boundaries. As a result of the likely advent of this legislation, the registration service was reviewed in Gwynedd and proposals were produced to change the service within the Government's plans. As

part of this process, a Senior Registrar was appointed for a period of three years to assist the Registration Manager to prepare the service for re-organisation.

7. As already mentioned, an integral part of the proposed legislation was that all responsibilities for the service would be transferred to local authorities, whilst the Registrar General would set the guidelines and registration standards that local authorities were expected to meet. A computerised system would replace the paper registers, and registration staff transferred to become local government staff and the marriage procedure changed.

8. However, the proposed legislation was defeated in due course in Parliament and this path for an attempt to modernise the service was closed. However, the Registrar General and the Government were still eager to modernise the service and other ways were sought to introduce a new computerised internet system for registration of births and deaths and also to introduce national standards. A system was created which makes it easier for local authorities to re-organise their services if they so wished, by reviewing their registration scheme.

9. Although the Government's attempts to introduce new legislation were a failure, there was a desire to modernise the registration service by attempting to change the existing system. Also, the Council's Strategic Director of Resources and the Head of Administration and Public Protection (who is also the Proper Officer for the Registration Service in Gwynedd), were anxious for attempts to review and modernise the service to proceed.

10. Therefore there is a definite desire on behalf of the Council to modernise the Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages Service in Gwynedd within the existing legal system. The main aim will be to facilitate access to the service and expand the choice by creating one registration district in Gwynedd. It would then be possible for the Council to modernise and improve the working practices that would benefit staff and service users.

11. The Resources and Corporate Scrutiny Committee has established a task group to supervise any arrangements for re-organisation of the Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages Service in Gwynedd. The group has now met several times and has considered the review undertaken of the service. They have accepted the main findings of the review and have agreed to proceed with consultation on the provision pattern of Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages Service in Gwynedd in the future. Whilst producing a new structure for the service they were also anxious to consider to what extent the service should be financially self-sufficient.

12. The results of the review of the Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages Service are examined in this document as well as proposals resulting from the review on the future provision of the service in Gwynedd.

## **B). REASONS FOR CHANGES.**

13. A review of the service was undertaken and the following reasons for changes became apparent:

- It is believed that public access to the Registration Service can be improved by moving to one registration district rather than the existing six districts. (Legally, an event must be registered in the district in which it occurs.) The public can then choose to register events in the most convenient Register Office for them. As the existing service locations will be retained to a large extent, the public will have the opportunity to use the location most convenient to them.
- By having one registration district, it will mean that the public can benefit from having one contact point for the service. Introducing an appointment system throughout the county will mean less waiting time for the public. Also, having one contact point will make it easier to make an appointment compared with trying to contacting some of the present part –time offices.
- The historical division between the Superintendent Registrars' duties (who are responsible for arrangements involving marriages and keeping historical registers) and Registrars of Births, Deaths and Marriages (who are responsible for registering those events) hinder the development of more flexible working practices. However, creating a staffing structure that would mean that officers could provide a full range of services attached to the two posts would enable the Council to promote more flexibility which would benefit the public by creating a team of trained registrars for the 2 posts.
- By the creation of one registration district, the supply of copies of certificates can be rationalised. If the location of certificates can be centralised to one or two depositories, it would be possible to ensure easy access to them at all times during office hours and thus ensuring that the public will be able to receive copies promptly.
- There is grave concern regarding the condition of the 6 ceremony rooms in the existing Register Offices where civil marriage and civil partnership ceremonies are held and any plans to develop the service should attempt to ensure that they are up-graded. If there were less of them, it is believed that it would be easier to obtain resources for their up-grading.

## **C). PROPOSALS FOR PROVISION OF SERVICE IN THE FUTURE**

14. Taking note of the above considerations, the main features that form the basis of our provision for Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages in Gwynedd after the review are noted here. It is proposed that the Gwynedd Registration Service Plan be amended to reflect the following proposed changes.

### **i) Registration Districts**

15. Gwynedd will change to become one Registration District with one main Register Office. Gwynedd residents can register an event in any register office that is convenient for them rather than as at present having to travel to an office in another registration district within Gwynedd or make a declaration where the details are taken at one register office and sent to the register office for the registration district where the event took place for registration. At present there are 6 registration districts in Gwynedd and because an event must be registered in the registration district where the event occurs, there are restrictions on the places where Gwynedd residents are allowed to go to register. As noted later on, although it is proposed to create one registration district, it will not mean that we will only be making registrations in one location within the County.

16. These developments will make it easier to contact the service and to simplify the system.

*Do you agree that we should proceed to create one registration district- if not, why not?*

### **ii) Administrative Centres**

17. In order to facilitate the provision of the Service in a county of such a large geographical area as Gwynedd, it will be administered from three administrative centres, one each in Arfon, Dwyfor and Meirionnydd. One of the administrative centres will also act as the main register office.

*Do you agree with the suggestion of having an administrative centre in each area i.e. Arfon, Dwyfor and Meirionnydd?*

### **iii) Out-stations**

18. Although we would operate out of 3 administrative centres, the service also goes out to other locations to make registrations especially those which have operated as main registration centres in the past.

*How important do you think it is for the service to have a presence outside the three proposed administrative centres?*

#### iv) Appointments System

19. To manage the above system and to facilitate contacting the service, it is proposed to have a computerised system for making appointments throughout the County. It is proposed to make appointments centrally most of the time, to ensure that there is always a contact point available for the public. This will mean that it will be easier for the public to contact the service and the service would also be available throughout the Council's usual opening hours. Consideration will be given in the long-term for expansion and to have a system that would enable the public to make appointments themselves on the internet.

*Do you agree that having a central appointments system would make it easier for the public to contact the service?*

#### v) Staffing

20. There will be one Superintendent Registrar for Gwynedd who will also act as the Chief Registration Officer. Also, legally, there has to be a registrar of births, deaths and marriages. It is proposed to have three registrars of births deaths and marriages in the amended Registration Scheme, one for each area, namely, Arfon, Dwyfor and Meirionnydd. The 3 Registrars of Births Registrars will also act as Deputy Superintendent Registrars. Also, the remainder of the staff providing the service will act as deputy superintendent registrars and deputy registrars of births and deaths, so that everyone is able to provide the full range of work for the service. It is believed that this will then ensure that the public receives a better service and will avoid confusion regarding what type of registrar is required for what. (There will be a full consultation and discussions with staff regarding this and discussions regarding employment conditions. Also appropriate training must be provided and this will receive the highest priority as the preparations for re-organisation continue.)

21. In Appendix A, the staffing structure can be examined which gives an idea of what is proposed for the service in future.

*Do you agree with the principle of the staff being able to undertake the full range of registration duties?*

#### vi) Certificates

22. Every birth, death or marriage is registered in a paper register by a registrar. After completing the register, it is then transferred to the keeping of the Superintendent Registrar for that registration district, who is responsible for keeping all the historic registers in his/her district dating back to 1837. When a member of the public wishes to have a copy of a historic certificate, an application must be made to the relevant Superintendent Registrar. The two main reasons for the demand for copies are for those people who are genealogists and for official purposes e.g. making an application for a passport. Currently, in order to receive copies, members of the public must go to the register office or send an application and a cheque by post to the relevant register office.

23. It is believed that work involving the preparation of historic certificates (i.e. all births, deaths and marriage registers that have been transferred to the care of the Superintendent Registrar) is administrative work and the process of preparing certificates should possibly be undertaken centrally and possibly separate from the other functions of the Registration Service. Also, the possibilities will be examined for making it easier for the public to receive certificates by ordering them over the phone and in the long term, on the internet. As we are referring to certificates which date back to 1837, the possibility will also be examined of working together with the record office in this respect. This already takes place in a number of counties which have use of a special room within the record office for storing registers. In Gwynedd it is considered that the storing of registers on one site would be the best solution.

24. If the registers were kept on one site, it would be possible to have one officer concentrating on this element of the work and one of the main duties would be to ensure that we process and deal with requests for copies of certificates in a timely fashion. Also, it would be far simpler for the public to be informed that all requests for certificates in respect of any occurrence that has been registered in Gwynedd should be referred to one depository rather than having to make enquiries to find out to which location the request should be directed. One disadvantage in such a large county as Gwynedd is that making a personal visit to a depository would be a considerable distance for some residents in the county, wherever the depository would be located.

25. If the depository was on two sites, it would be easier for the public to make personal enquiries in such a large county as Gwynedd. However, it would have to be clear which registers from which areas are kept in the two centres to avoid confusion for the public. If the registers had to be kept on two different sites, the likelihood would be that the work would be undertaken by the other registrars and the work would have to fall in with their other priorities.

*To keep them on one or two sites? Which do you think is the best option for storing registers?*

#### vii) Ceremony Officers

26. It is proposed to appoint ceremony officers who will be available to assist the registration staff to hold celebration ceremonies offered by the Registration Service in Gwynedd. We will be advertising for people who are willing to accept casual contracts to attend marriage ceremonies as deputy superintendent registrars and deputy registrars to register civil partnerships as civil partnership registrars and attend additional ceremonies such as ceremonies for renewing wedding vows or baby naming ceremonies as attendants. It would also place us in a position to consider offering civic funerals. It is anticipated that by appointing these officers, that we will be able to cope with the demand during busy periods, such as weddings during the summer and it will also be easier to be able to offer ceremonies at week ends and bank holidays according to the demand and wishes of the public.

*Do you agree with the idea of appointing ceremony officers?  
Are there any disadvantages to this?*

viii) Rooms for the Ceremonies

27. It is proposed to offer marriage/ civil partnership ceremonies for a statutory fee of £40 in ceremony rooms in the 3 administrative centres in Arfon, Dwyfor and Meirionnydd. In the long –term it is proposed to update these rooms.

*How much priority do you think the Council should place on upgrading its marriage rooms?*

28. It is hopeful that submitting these proposals means that we will be in a position to offer a high quality service that corresponds to customer needs.

## **CH). THE CONSULTATION PROCEDURE**

29. The Registration Task Group has agreed that consultation should take place on the above proposals for re-organisation the Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages Service in Gwynedd. There will be full consultation with the Council's registration staff and the Registration Manager will have discussions with all the staff on a one to one basis.

30. If you have any observations to offer, they can be submitted in writing for the attention of the Registration Manager, Administration and Public Protection Service, Shirehall St, Caernarfon, Gwynedd, LL55 1SH or please e-mail [ioloroberts@gwynedd.gov.uk](mailto:ioloroberts@gwynedd.gov.uk) by Friday, 24 November 2006 at the latest, using "Registration Consultation Document" as a heading .

31. There will be close co-operation with the Registrar General and his staff about what steps need to be taken to achieve the necessary changes to the Gwynedd Registration Scheme.

32. The next steps in the procedure will be to submit the report to the registration Task Group and then the proposals will be put before the Resources Scrutiny Committee, and if necessary, the Council Board, with the aim of having the new structure operational from 2008/2009 onward.

33. The following individuals/ establishments will receive a copy of the consultation document:

All staff of the Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Service

Trade Unions

All premises with a licence to hold marriage/ civil partnership ceremonies in Gwynedd.

Funeral Directors

Hospitals/ Surgeries

Members of Gwynedd Council

The Registrar General

Places of worship which have a licence to hold marriage ceremonies

Community Councils