

REPORT TO: Executive Board Sub Committee
DATE: 25 July 2008
REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director, Health and Community
SUBJECT: Introduction of Civil Funeral Ceremonies
WARDS: Boroughwide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 To seek Members' support for the Registration Service to introduce civil funeral ceremonies.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That

(1) the Board agrees to the Registration Service extending its offer of discretionary services to include civil funeral ceremonies, as outlined in this report.

(2) the Board agrees to the fee that is proposed for such a ceremony in paragraph 3.8 of this report.

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 3.1 A civil funeral ceremony is a ceremony reflecting the wishes of the family who want to mark the passing of a family member, or friend, who did not have any religious belief. Based on information provided by family and friends of the deceased, a trained celebrant, who may also be a Registrar, will prepare and deliver a eulogy, usually at a local crematorium or at the graveside in a non-denominational cemetery.
- 3.2 The Government White Paper "Civil Registration: Vital Change" set out an agenda for a modern, effective and high quality Registration Service. To underpin this, local authorities were to be given more responsibility for local service delivery that would meet both national standards and local community needs.
- 3.3 As part of this modernisation agenda, the Registration Service pursued new governance arrangements and the new "Halton Registration Scheme 2007" came into effect on 4 July 2007. This provides for a more flexible, less prescriptive framework and commits Halton to the terms of the Code of Practice (which determines service delivery standards) and to meeting the national standards contained in the Good Practice Guide for local Registration Services.

- 3.4 In relation to Civil Funerals, the White Paper reads “As society changes and develops, there may be other celebratory services that local authorities would wish to provide such as civil funerals.” The availability of celebratory services will be included as an element of national standards of service provision. Local authorities will be required to deliver these services locally or direct enquiries to other neighbouring authorities where such services are provided.
- 3.5 Since 2006 the Service has conducted naming ceremonies and ceremonies for the re-affirmation of marriage vows. These have proved to be, and continue to be popular with the residents of Halton. The Service would now like to extend the range of its discretionary services by offering a civil funeral ceremony. There have been a number of enquiries for civil funerals in recent years, and given the “signposting” requirements outlined in the above paragraph, the enquirers have had to be directed to the Liverpool and Cheshire Registration Services.
- 3.6 As part of the monitoring procedure for the Registration Service, customers were surveyed on their views on the possibility of offering a non-religious funeral service. Some 70% of those responding either strongly agreed/agreed, 28% had no views, and only 2% strongly disagreed. Surveys on this specific issue were also sent to local ministers and funeral directors. Out of 17 clergy responses, 53% strongly agreed/ agreed and out of three funeral director responses, two strongly agreed/agreed whilst the third contracted a humanist to provide civil funerals and was therefore not interested in a local service provision.
- 3.7 The Registration Service has been working in partnership with the Council’s Bereavement Services to develop a civil funeral offer. Members of staff from both Services have been trained and are keen to offer this additional service. They feel they have the empathy required, plus a wide and practical knowledge and are experienced and professional celebrants.
- 3.8 The Council will be able to set and levy fees for the ceremonies. Following benchmarking with neighbouring authorities it is suggested that initial fee for a civil funeral on a weekday should be set at £165.
- 3.9 The Safer Halton Policy and Performance Board considered this matter when it met on 17 June 2008 and was supportive of extending discretionary Registration services in this way.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 This proposal, if agreed, will extend the range of discretionary services offered by the Council’s Registration Service. This is in-line with the ongoing modernisation of this service nationally.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 As the service has not yet been publicised, it is difficult to gauge the number of requests by the public for ceremonies. However, it is not expected that demand for the service will be high. All services will be self-financing and should provide additional income to the Council.
- 5.2 In the short-term, officers may work additional hours at plain time to prepare and deliver the service. However, the cost of their time will be more than offset by the fees charged. Longer-term, officers will undertake these duties in place of other duties (which will reduce as service modernisation progresses nationally).

6.0 OTHER IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The service is optional for Councils and applicants. The Council would be using its authority under the well-being powers conferred by Section 2 of the Local Government Act 2000 to offer the service and make an administrative charge to recover its costs.

7.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

7.1 Children and Young People in Halton

None directly.

7.2 Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton

None directly.

7.3 A Healthy Halton

None directly.

7.4 A Safer Halton

None directly.

7.5 Halton's Urban Renewal

None directly.

8.0 RISK ANALYSIS

- 8.1 The main risk associated with offering a civil funeral ceremony is that staff could find it difficult at times to refuse the service, but it could also be difficult to commit at short notice. Funeral directors would require an immediate answer. The provision of staff to quickly fulfil the request of meeting with the family, drafting the eulogy and delivering the service usually all within a few days, will have to be monitored.

The proposal is not so significant as to require a full risk assessment.

9.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

- 9.1 The recommendations have a positive impact on diversity, as the result of pursuing them will be to give the people of Halton freedom of choice to access such a secular service locally. The report is neutral in terms of equality.

10.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

- 10.1 There are no background papers within the meaning of the Act.