

Code of Practice

1. Preface

1.1 Civil registration is a vital service that affects everyone at some point in their lives. It provides a name and identity within society; a facility for marriage and civil partnership; evidence of parentage; and evidence of entitlement to inheritance.

1.2 The organisation of the registration service in England and Wales is based on the Registration Service Act 1953. It establishes the post of Registrar General, whose role is to oversee the standard of the service, including the making of regulations and, in practice, the issuing of guidance on performance of registration functions.

1.3 The Registration Service Act 1953 places a duty on each council to prepare a local "scheme" for the approval of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and to appoint a "Proper Officer". The Proper Officer provides the Registrar General with details of organisation and coverage of registration services within the authority. The Proper Officer also manages the local service.

1.4 Under the revised governance arrangements the Scheme commits the local authority to comply with the service delivery standards contained in this Code of Practice. Taken together, the Scheme and the Code provide a formal governance agreement between the Registrar General and local authorities, the framework of which enables the local authority to plan, develop and deliver a registration service which meets the needs of the local community.

1.5 The Code of Practice is supplemented by a Good Practice Guide which contains guidance on both the application of the Code, and more generally on national standards as well as good and better practice service delivery. In this respect the Code has a strategic focus whereas the Good Practice Guide advises on application and operational delivery.

1.6 The Code of Practice also reflects the need for a customer focused, output driven local registration service, one which is delivered sensitively, economically and efficiently to the satisfaction of users.

1.7 The principal outputs from the service are accurate and timely:

- registrations of births deaths and marriages
- marriage notices and ceremonies
- certificates.

In relation to records and registers the principal outputs are:

- safe and secure custody of records and registers.

1.8 The Code of Practice does not extend to other statutory duties such as civil partnerships, citizenship ceremonies, or to discretionary / non-statutory registration services. However, authorities are recommended to adopt and apply common standards for all statutory, partnership, discretionary and non-statutory services, and to include all such services in the Service Delivery Plan. The Good Practice Guide contains guidance in this respect.

2. Application

2.1. Each authority is required to consult locally and commit to the delivery of a registration service which meets both local needs and national standards, and to publish a Service Delivery Plan. The Registrar General will expect to be satisfied in this respect before she recommends approval of a Scheme to the Chancellor of the Exchequer (or approves a Scheme with the Chancellor's agreement where there are no unresolved representations).

2.2. The Code of Practice is complemented by a Good Practice Guide that provides further information on:

- specific national standards that authorities must meet
- good performance standards that authorities should aim to meet
- better performance standards representing the highest levels of registration service that an authority could meet
- guidance and advice on applying the requirements of the Code of Practice.

2.3. The Good Practice Guide has been developed jointly by the General Register Office and the Local Authorities Coordinating Office on Regulatory Services (LACORS). Both parties have agreed to periodically review the guide, initially after twelve months and then every two years; amendments to be agreed by the Registrar General. The national standards which an authority must achieve will contain both national and local elements. The national elements ensure that users of the registration service across England and Wales are able to discharge their statutory responsibilities within the timescales set out in the Marriage and Registration Acts, and have reasonable access to all statutory registration services.

2.4. A formal commitment to the Code of Practice will result in the adoption of a 'lighter touch' inspection regime by the Registrar General, with greater reliance on central monitoring, self assessment and annual reporting. This approach will allow risk based assessments of performance to be used to direct inspection effort to those authorities that would most likely benefit.

3. Service Responsibility

3.1. The Proper Officer is the person appointed by the local authority to manage the service, and is the link between the Registrar General and the registration authority, especially in relation to governance issues and the Scheme.

3.2. The Proper Officer has the following key responsibilities:

- developing a Service Delivery Plan for the authority
- consulting, assessing and periodically reviewing the effectiveness of the service
- assessing and managing the resources needed to deliver a registration service which meets customer needs
- stakeholder management of related services (e.g. Coroner services)
- staff discipline (other than dismissal of statutory post holders), seeking advice from the Registrar General on technical matters
- ensuring records are stored safely and securely
- liaising with the Registrar General on service delivery and issues related to the Code of Practice and the authority's Service Delivery Plan
- applying the Good Practice Guide - as appropriate - to improve customer service standards.

4. Service Delivery

4.1. Service delivery includes all the aspects of the registration service that deliver registration services to customers, including structure, location, service availability and accommodation.

4.2. Structure

A registration authority will determine, taking into account the Good Practice Guide, the number and boundaries of registration districts and sub-districts that best meet local requirements.

4.3. Location of Offices

The registration authority will determine, taking into account the Good Practice Guide, the number and location of service outlets within each district and sub-district that best meet local requirements.

4.4. Access and Service Availability

The registration authority will:

- establish customer demand and preferences
- develop and publish a Service Delivery Plan that reflects customers requirements and reasonable expectations and the council's access to services/customer strategy, where appropriate
- publish service delivery targets and results
- assess accommodation requirements that reflect customer needs and delivery standards
- provide registration services that are accessible and available to the public at reasonable times
- ensure safe and secure custody of registers and other records in accordance with the Good Practice Guide.

The service commitments contained in the authority's Service Delivery Plan must be such that the public are able to provide information for the registration of births and deaths within the statutory time limits. Furthermore, that the public's reasonable expectations are met in respect to the giving of marriage notices, marriage ceremonies, and the issue of certificates.

4.5. *Good Practice Guide – Service Delivery*

The Good Practice Guide sets out specific targets and standards that a registration authority must meet together with preferred 'good' and 'better' service standards. It also provides advice and guidance on how to meet each of the headings above, and in respect to the development and content of a Service Delivery Plan.

5. Quality

5.1. Quality refers to the standards of registration service that the customer expects and receives and how satisfied they are with them. Also, quality management should include consideration of compliance, accuracy, customer service and complaints.

5.2. *Quality - Compliance*

Delivery of the local registration service shall be undertaken in accordance with the Marriage and Registration Acts and regulations, and in line with the Good Practice Guide.

5.3. *Quality – Accuracy*

A registration authority will ensure that accurate registration records are made and maintained.

5.4. *Quality - Service Delivery Plan*

A registration authority shall include in its Service Delivery Plan:

- registration office opening times (including emergency and out of hours arrangements)
- consultation procedures
- service delivery monitoring and reporting procedures
- complaints procedures.

5.5. *Quality – Complaints*

A registration authority shall record and monitor complaints and other responses received and be prepared to show how it has taken account taken of customer feedback, where appropriate.

6. Staffing

6.1. A sufficient number of staff, trained appropriately in registration service matters is essential to meeting statutory requirements and customer aspirations.

6.2. Staff numbers

A registration authority must ensure that sufficient staff are appointed to deliver the local registration service to the standards set out in the authority's Service Delivery Plan.

6.3. Staff salaries

A registration authority shall determine the salaries of its registration staff having regard to

- existing NJC arrangements and
- any local conditions and agreements that apply.

Registration staff holding office in a registration district or sub-district existing immediately before the commencement of any new scheme, and continues to hold office following the commencement of the scheme, may elect to have his salary paid according to either the National Joint Council's Scheme of Conditions of Service or the Council's salary and allowance scales. Such an election may be made at such intervals as determined by the local authority.

6.4. Miscellaneous Service Provisions

The Council shall put in place such service provisions regarding security, ordinary, sick and maternity leave and travelling and removal expenses in accordance with either the National Joint Council's Scheme of Conditions of Service or the Council's Conditions of Service.

6.5. Training and Development

Registration staff shall be trained so that they can demonstrate an appropriate level in the knowledge and conduct of registration matters and the law applying to them.

6.6. Staff - Disqualification

A registration authority should enforce appropriate disqualifications to ensure registration service staff conflicts of interest are avoided. The Proper Officer's Manual contains guidance on this.

7. Information Technology

7.1. A registration authority must provide appropriate hardware, software and internet links to allow reliable access to the central national database and an appropriate level of technical support to ensure a high standard of systems availability locally.

7.2. A registration authority shall exercise reasonable measures to protect the integrity of the national database and access to it. The Registrar General will issue specific guidance in this respect.