

REPORT TO: Safer Halton Policy and Performance Board

DATE: 20 March 2007

REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director, Health and Community

SUBJECT: New governance arrangements for the delivery of the Halton Registration Service

WARDS: Boroughwide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 To seek members' support for the pursuance of new governance arrangements for the delivery of the Halton Registration Service.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That

- (1) the report be noted,**
- (2) comments and suggestions from Members be noted,**
- (3) the Executive Board be requested to agree to the pursuance of new governance arrangements for the delivery of the Halton Registration Service, and in doing so to specifically agree to the Council's commitment to the code of practice that will form part of the new scheme; and**
- (4) the Executive Board be requested to agree the Halton Registration District Service Delivery and Improvement Plan.**

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 The White Paper "Civil Registration: Vital Change" published in 2002, set out an agenda for a modern, effective and high quality registration service in keeping with the Government's wider reform agenda and four guiding principles to improve customer service:

- Setting national standards within a framework of clear accountability, designed to ensure that citizens have the right to high quality services wherever they live
- More flexibility so that public service organizations and their staff are better able to provide modern public services
- Devolution and delegation to the front line, giving local leaders responsibility and accountability for delivery, and the opportunity to design services around the needs of local people
- More customer choice and the ability, if provision is poor, to have an alternative provider.

3.2 To underpin the changes, the White Paper proposed that local authorities should be given responsibility for delivering the local

registration service, and that superintendent registrars and registrars should become local authority employees.

- 3.3 In the absence of primary legislation to take forward the changes outlined in the White Paper, the General Register Office (GRO) and the Local Authorities Coordinators of Regulatory Services (LACORS) jointly developed proposals for a more modern governance framework for the delivery of the local service. The proposals were consulted upon in the position paper 'Registration Modernisation' published in 2005 and agreed by the Government - in a written statement to Parliament by the Financial Secretary to the Treasury - on 25 May 2006.
- 3.4 The Registration Service Act 1953 requires local authorities in England and Wales to prepare a registration scheme for the management and delivery of the local registration service within its area. Under the existing governance framework, once a scheme has been approved, local authorities must operate within those arrangements, with no discretion to vary the terms of the scheme without a formal amendment being made to the scheme or a new scheme being made.
- 3.5 The new governance arrangements provide for a more flexible, less prescriptive, scheme, allowing local authorities greater discretion to deliver local services which meet both national standards and local community needs. In this respect Proper Officers acquire increased responsibility and accountability for the delivery of the local service. Other benefits include:
- the opportunity to explore more innovative ways of delivering the service;
 - the strengthening of the management of the local service;
 - the potential to make more efficient use of resources;
 - the increased flexibility to determine staff numbers to cope with peaks and troughs in service demands;
 - implementation of changes to staffing levels, location of offices etc without the need for a formal scheme change;
 - the bringing of the registration service into line with other local authority service strategies for setting, maintaining and monitoring performance (though in this respect it must be noted that the Halton service is already covered by the authority's performance management regime).
- 3.6 In order to seek approval for a scheme under the new arrangements, local authorities must agree to the terms of the Code of Practice attached to the new scheme, deliver local registration services which meet at least the national standards set out in the Good Practice Guide, prepare an annual Service Delivery Plan setting out the local authority's plans and targets for the year ahead, and have in place a reliable system for monitoring performance and annual reporting to the Registrar General.

- 3.7 Local authorities that gain approval to operate under the new governance arrangements will additionally benefit from a new compliance regime. Over time this would see a shift from the current arrangements whereby individual registration officers are inspected by GRO, to a more wide-ranging, and less frequent, assessment of operational standards. In this respect Proper Officers would satisfy themselves that the service is being delivered in accordance with statutory requirements and national standards, and ensure adequate staff training and development. Central monitoring of the delivery of the registration service will increasingly be undertaken by analysing local data from the web enabled registration on-line (RON) system, and supplemented by self-assessment and annual performance reports received from local authorities. This approach will allow a risk-based assessment of performance to be used to direct inspection activity to those authorities most likely to benefit.
- 3.8 Her Majesty's Inspectors have satisfied themselves that the Halton Registration Service is in a position to seek approval for a new Registration Scheme, in order to benefit from the new governance arrangements. A draft of the likely scheme is attached as Appendix A to this agenda item (though the actual scheme is drafted by the General Register Office). Of particular importance is the Code of Practice appended to the scheme, a copy of which is attached as Appendix B to this agenda item. By agreeing to the new scheme, the authority is committing to the terms of the code of practice.
- 3.9 There are various requirements contained in the code of practice which the authority / service must meet, prior to its application for a new scheme being agreed. None of the requirements pose any issues for Halton. Members will however note that one requirement relates to the development and publication of a Service Delivery Plan. The draft Halton Registration District Service Delivery and Improvement Plan is attached to this agenda item as Appendix C. This is based on the corporate format for Divisional (or Unit) plans, with the necessary additions to comply with the requirements of the General Register Office.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The new registration scheme will provide the framework within which future Registration Service policy decisions may be made, though such schemes are less prescriptive under the new governance arrangements (see 3.5 above). As such, the authority will have the freedom to make more policy decisions locally, without recourse to the General Register Office for the sort of scheme amendments that would previously have been necessary.

5.0 OTHER IMPLICATIONS

5.1 An advantage of pursuing these new governance arrangements is that three of the Service's five statutory officers will become local authority employees, resolving the presently unsatisfactory employment status of these officers. The employment status of the remaining two statutory officers is likely to be resolved in the next twelve months, once the necessary legislation reaches the statute book.

6.0 RISK ANALYSIS

6.1 There are no risks associated with this report.

7.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

7.1 There are no equality and diversity issues associated with this report.

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

| Document | Place of Inspection | Contact Officer |
|-----------------|----------------------------|------------------------|
| REGISTRATION | Rutland House | John Downes |
| MODERNISATION | Halton Lea | |
| Good Practice | Runcorn | |
| Guide for Local | WA7 2GW | |
| Registration | | |
| Services | | |