

**Open Report on behalf of Pete Moore,
Executive Director of Finance and Public Protection**

Report to:	Public Protection and Communities Scrutiny Committee
Date:	11 September 2018
Subject:	Registration, Celebratory and Coroners Service Update

Summary:

This is an update on the Registration, Celebratory and Coroners Service. Councillors are requested to note the progress and performance of the service and consider timescales for further reports and actions.

Actions Required:

Members of the Public Protection and Communities Scrutiny Committee are requested to consider and comment on the progress within the Registration, Celebratory and Coroners Service and highlight any additional comments for consideration.

1. Background

The Registration, Celebratory and Coroners Service (RCCS) continues to meet the needs of families at sensitive and key times in their lives as well as supporting individuals and families on their route to British Citizenship. The primary objective of the Service is to fulfil the statutory obligations for the registration of births, deaths, stillbirths, marriages/civil partnerships and citizenship with related ceremonies as well as to provide a support function to HM Coroners.

The RCCS provides these front line services and the service also conducts a range of discretionary ceremonies for example naming, renewal of vows, funeral and memorial services. These are all periods of immense change for families, and the care and customer service that is delivered plays an important part in these transition periods.

In 2016 we began to offer a European Passport Return Service (EPRS) which is delivered alongside the Nationality Checking Service (NCS), and in 2017 this was further extended to a Nationality Document Return Service (NDRS) and Joint Citizenship and Passport Application Service (JCAP) to support those at the beginning of their journey to citizenship. These services are offered on a full cost recovery basis and in partnership with United Kingdom Visas and Immigration (UKVI) as part of the Home Office.

We also provide the Tell Us Once Service whereby central and local government can be notified of the death of an individual. This timely notification has assisted bereaved families and supported central government departments in ensuring the right benefits are paid, prevents overpayments of benefits and reduces the risk of potential fraud e.g. inappropriate use of the Blue Badge Scheme.

The local authority has a responsibility to provide support to the Coroners Service in their administrative area. In Lincolnshire there have been two part-time Coroners covering the two jurisdictions, South Lincolnshire and Central Lincolnshire. These were formally merged on 01 August 2017 to form the 'Lincolnshire' jurisdiction. To support the appointed single Senior Coroner with the caseload a full time Area Coroner was appointed in December 2017. The current Senior Coroner retires in October 2018 and the Council have been progressing a recruitment process for a new Senior Coroner. Interviews were held on 26 July 2018. One candidate's name has been recommended to the Chief Coroner and Lord Chancellor and we await the synchronised formal announcement by the County Council, Chief Coroner and the Lord Chancellor through the Ministry of Justice as per normal protocol with the appointment of a Senior Coroner.

In April 2017, the Coroner's Officers employed by Lincolnshire Police moved over to Lincolnshire County Council under TUPE arrangements. This is working very well with improved communications and teamwork with co-location with the rest of the Coroner's teams in Lincoln and Boston. Significant work has been completed to improve timescales for families. This is evidenced by the reduction in the time period taken for the release of supporting paperwork by the Coroner to the Registration Service to facilitate the death registration. In September 2018, a new electronic software system will be introduced which will streamline work flow and again it is hoped it will support a more effective and timely case management system whilst also acting as an electronic archive, therefore reducing archive storage and the associated costs.

We have office locations based across the county including Bourne, Boston, Gainsborough, Grantham, Horncastle, Long Sutton, Lincoln, Louth, Skegness, Sleaford, Spalding and Stamford. There is a repository for archived registers and certificate production in Lincoln. The main Coroner's office is in Lincoln with an additional office and dedicated inquest room at Boston. We retain a geographical presence in localities and we are aware that families value that presence and often prefer to wait and register locally.

Activity Levels and Budget

A summary of activity and volumes can be found in Appendix A together with an overview of the budget.

The Registration and Celebratory Service generates a significant level of income, through their service delivery and celebratory events. In previous years this has supported the Coroners Service with a significant overspend. The Coroners Service is demand led, and each case needs to be investigated on its own timeline with associated costs to ensure the integrity of the investigation and avoid any criticism or legal challenge that could lead to a judicial review.

Assurance

There are a number of audit mechanisms that provide the Committee with an assurance of the standards of service. In April 2018, the Registration Service received a 'High' rating following a Stock and Security Audit by the General Register Office (GRO), part of Her Majesty's Passport Office, under the umbrella of the Home Office. In addition, a 'High' rating was given following the submission of the Annual Performance Report to the GRO. An internal audit on income collection was completed in late Spring 2018 and the result is anticipated shortly.

One difficulty for the service remains registering deaths within a five day period, where there has been no referral to the Coroner. In 2017-18 the Registration Service achieved 58% against a national average of 77.5% although the national performance target is 90%. This demonstrates the difficulties the majority of Registration Services have in meeting this historic target. Locally, significant work is being completed on this with a focus on partnership working with NHS colleagues, the Local Medical Council, General Practitioners and Funeral Directors. We have completed numerous audits, and we have noted that over the years approximately 17%-20% of Medical Certificates of Cause of Death (MCCD) are not completed until Day 3/4 and so if the family then collect the certificate and contact the Service, the five day target is unachievable. It is hoped that the partnership work will nurture an improved culture and by default an increased percentage of MCCDs will be completed as soon as possible to allow an appointment to be made to register the death within the five day requirement. We have documented evidence which also reflects the impact of customer choice in that families prefer to register an event in their own locality rather than travel to another office which may be more than 20 miles away.

We meet the requirements to register births and stillbirths, and also appointment availability. In addition, there are very good levels of customer satisfaction and it should be highlighted that in 2017-18 97% of customers rated the service as Very Good or Excellent. Customer feedback is reviewed daily with the receipt of customer comment cards with the results in 2017-18 of 99.4% rating the service as Good, Very Good or Excellent. Annually we undertake a customer satisfaction survey. In 2017-18 this provided a 100% satisfaction level and the results over the last five years are captured in Appendix B under our Key Performance Indicators and Standards of Service. The annual survey took place again in August 2018 and the results will be ready by the end of September.

The Registration Service is also subject to annual inspection in relation to its commitment to the Government's standards for Customer Service Excellence. The Service held a 100% compliance rating for 8 years, although one non-compliance was advised in 2017 due to the lack of credit/debit card payments for financial transactions. The latter has been a corporate project for a number of years and it is with regret to note that this facility is still not available for families despite intense efforts to resolve this project at a corporate level.

There is no national structure for auditing the Coroners Service. The Ministry of Justice do issue national statistics which allows for some informal benchmarking

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/coroners-and-burials-statistics>. In addition, cases which are over a year old must be reported to the Chief Coroner on an annual basis.

Informal benchmarking is completed and some comparisons to other local authorities can be found in Appendix C. Lincolnshire is not seen as an overly complex area. In 2017 the timescales for conclusion of inquests was approximately 45 weeks, much higher than the national average of 26 weeks. A manual case management system was introduced in 2016, which has allowed the tracking of cases, and in 2018 significant work has been completed to reduce these timescales and the backlog with the support of the Area Coroner. The average time to inquest has now reduced. The new electronic case management system being introduced in September 2018 will allow for standardisation and improved workflow.

2017	Number of Referrals	Post Mortems		Inquests		Reported Finds	Treasure Inquests
		Number	% of referrals	Number	% of referrals		
Central Lincolnshire	2,220	848	38.2	270	12.2	51	5
South Lincolnshire	1,168	445	38.1	77	6.6	11	0
Totals	3,388	1,293	38.2	347	10.2	62	5

The figures for 2017 are taken from the figures submitted to the MoJ

National figures for 2017
The number of referrals is 45% of the number of deaths registered for 2017

The national percentage rate of post mortems is 37% whilst in the East Midlands it is 32% and in Lincolnshire it is 38%. The percentage of inquests as a number of referrals is 14% nationally and 10% in the East Midlands and in Lincolnshire.

Key Performance timescales suggested to Coroners by the Chief Coroner are as follows:

- Referral – contact made with families and enquiries commenced the same day or next working day;
- Release of the deceased should be within three days;
- The date for inquest should be within six months, and no more than 12 months, however the complexity of the case may require additional reports, for example toxicology, or specialist medical reports, or a health and safety report which can cause delays.

The RCCS also plays an active part in the Emergency Planning Team's Mass Fatalities and Temporary Mortuary planning which considers the response to a major incident as well as flu pandemic planning.

Underpinning both services is a clear commitment to customer service.

Challenges

There are a number of potential challenges to the service. Primarily it is around providing families the service they want within a statutory framework, within a budgetary requirement and the increasing number of families who challenge decision making. That may be in relation to a Coroner's conclusion at inquest or the choices for a family on venue and content of a ceremony.

There is a range of legislative proposals that will affect the RCCS and these include the addition of mother's name to the marriage register and effecting an electronic marriage schedule system, proposals re stillbirth and whether all of these should be investigated by the Coroner, proposed changes to the services we provide to local residents on their journey to citizenship. There is the removal of some United Kingdom Visas and Immigration Office (UKVI) products in November 2018 following a national tender process.

However these challenges are balanced by opportunities. Nationally a great deal of work is being completed to ensure that the cost of delivering the Registration Service is adequately funded and there are proposals to increase statutory fees to recognise this. There are also opportunities for greater sharing of birth and death data with Public Bodies under the Digital Economy Act and these will be investigated both nationally and locally. We are keen to support the UKVI with a possible European Settlement product whereby the Registration Service could support individuals to register in line with any legislation outlined by the government. This would help to support local residents on their route to settlement and/or citizenship. We also have strong aspirations to improve the appointment booking system and introduce Chip & Pin/contactless card technology to support electronic payments, deposit and amendment fees.

Medical Examiners

The Coroners and Justice Act 2009 introduced legislation for death certification reform and the introduction of Medical Examiners with scrutiny of all deaths not reported to the Coroner. The original plan was for this service to be implemented and managed by local authorities. In June this year, the response to a national consultation document was issued by the Department for Health and Social Care and the new approach will be for this to be rolled out in hospital settings in the first instance and from April 2019. This will form part of the Learning from Deaths initiatives already in place in hospitals. This change is welcomed by local authorities however in Lincolnshire we will want to work closely with healthcare professionals to ensure there is no delay to the registration of a death or referral to the Coroner. There are no immediate plans to implement this in primary healthcare.

Stillbirths

One particular area the RCCS would value the opinion of the Public Protection and Communities Scrutiny Committee is in relation to stillbirths. There is no charge to families to register a stillbirth; however there is a statutory fee of £4.00 for copy certificates. There has also been coverage in the national press in relation to

charges for services provided to those deaths of under 18 year olds. The Registration Service does have the option to waive this fee should it be considered acceptable. In Lincolnshire this would amount to less than £150 per year based on the 31 stillbirths registered in 2017-18, which saw the highest number of stillbirths over recent years. The average over the last five years is 22. The other consideration would be should this be extended to all deaths under the age of 18 where the impact could be circa £100 based on an average 8 deaths per year with three certificates issued per family.

Promotion, Marketing and Signposting

The RCCS also provides lots of information for families. There is a 'Celebrate in Lincolnshire' brochure supporting families with their celebrations, a Bereavement Guide and also a comprehensive website. The Service will be considering social media as a mechanism to promote our services and wide range of venues in which to get married to a much wider audience and encourage couples to marry in Lincolnshire; therefore supporting local businesses with the related spend on flowers, car hire, accommodation etc. There is an annual service plan which is published alongside our Standards of Service and Achievements Documents (<https://www.lincolnshire.gov.uk/births-deaths-and-marriages/>).

Summary

The staff of all RCCS areas work hard to provide a fantastic service to people in often challenging circumstances, and in a dynamic work area due to pressures of timescales. Their commitment and the service provided to families should be recognised and applauded.

2. Conclusion

The Public Protection and Communities Scrutiny Committee may wish to consider the following:

1. Note the retirement of Stuart Fisher as Senior Coroner and thank him for his long service to the people of Lincolnshire.
2. To offer a warm welcome to the new Senior Coroner for Lincolnshire in due course.
3. The Public Protection and Communities Scrutiny Committee should note the national discussion and debate on the removal of the costs of certificates at the point of registration for stillbirths, and the possible extension to all deaths of those under the age of 18?

3. Consultation

a) Have Risks and Impact Analysis been carried out?

No

b) Risks and Impact Analysis

This is an update paper.

4. Appendices

These are listed below and attached at the back of the report	
Appendix A	Statistical Information for Registration, Celebratory and Coroners Service
Appendix B	Key Performance Indicators
Appendix C	Coroners Benchmarking and Complexity

5. Background Papers

Document title	Where the document can be viewed
Ministry of Justice - Coroner Statistics	www.gov.uk/government/collections/coroners-and-burials-statistics
Registration, Celebratory and Coroners Service - Service Plan	www.lincolnshire.gov.uk/births-deaths-and-marriages/

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