

Report to: Lead Cabinet Member for Community Services

Date of meeting: 15 December 2015

By: Director of Communities, Economy and Transport

Title: Changes to fees for the usage of Register Office ceremony rooms and other related charges.

Purpose: To enable the Registration Service to charge more appropriate fees for the use of the various Register Office ceremony rooms around the county, dependent upon their quality, size, decoration, situation and location.

RECOMMENDATIONS: The Lead Member is recommended to:

- (1) Approve the revised fees for marriage ceremonies taking place in Register Office ceremony rooms, as set out in Appendix 1, for the 2016/17 financial year;**
 - (2) Approve the fees charged for marriages taking place at the new Hastings Register Office in Hastings Town Hall, as set out in Appendix 1, to be effective from February 2016 and for the 2016/17 financial year; and**
 - (3) Approve the charges for related peripheral items, as set out in Appendix 1, for the 2016/17 financial year.**
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1. Background Information

1.1. For the purposes of this report, all references to 'marriage' should be interpreted as referring interchangeably to opposite sex marriages, same sex marriages and civil partnerships.

1.2. The Registration Service has experienced significantly increased surplus targets over the last few years as part of the council-wide Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) savings. Operating from the newly refurbished Southover Grange and Hastings Town Hall will bring with it increased staffing and revenue costs in the future. The service must therefore take every opportunity to maximise its income streams and the proposed fee changes detailed within this report are seen as instrumental in helping the service achieve its stretching 2016/17 surplus targets.

1.3. The Registration Service has a statutory obligation to provide couples, from in and out of county, with a statutory marriage room within one of the county's Register Offices. This is provisioned in East Sussex in the Superintendent Registrars' Office at the Town Hall in Eastbourne. It is a small, very basic working office, which couples can choose to marry in at a statutorily set fee of £46. This room accommodates just the couple plus two witnesses and two registrars. Current demand is met through this venue being available for use by customers twice a week on a Tuesday morning at 9.30am and 10am.

1.4. In East Sussex, in addition to the above statutory marriage room, couples wishing to have a secular/civil marriage ceremony have two other sets of options, namely they can choose to marry in one of the non-statutory Register Office ceremony rooms, or alternatively they can choose to marry at one of the approximately 100 Approved Marriage Premises (AMPs) situated right across the county.

2. Supporting Information

2.1. The Registration Service has historically charged a substantially lower fee for conducting and solemnising marriages in the Register Office ceremony rooms than for the registrar's attendance at AMP marriages. In addition to the higher price paid for registrar's attendance, the

AMPs themselves also generally charge the couples a fee for the room hire; the result being that a marriage at an AMP is usually a substantially more expensive endeavour than a marriage taking place in a Register Office ceremony room.

2.2. Over recent years, all fees charged by the Registration Service for marriages have been approved two years ahead, due to the tradition that most couples book their marriages well in advance, and thus desire price certainty at the time of their booking. The fees for the financial year 2016/17 were therefore set by Cabinet in February 2015.

2.3. The existing fees for 2016/17 were based upon the notional presumption that Hastings Register Office would continue to be located in its historical prefabricated office building, Summerfields, on the outskirts of the town. Likewise, in Lewes the existing fees for 2016/17 were set on the basis of ceremonies continuing to be provided temporarily at the less popular Lewes Town Hall, because the un-refurbished Southover Grange has been deemed unsuitable for ceremonies since 2013, due to severe inaccessibility issues.

2.4. Clearly, these two building projects have now progressed apace, and as such the marriage fees need to be reset for marriages in Southover Grange for some point in 2016/17 yet to be agreed upon, and in the case of Hastings Town Hall from February 2016 (which falls within the 2015/16 financial year).

2.5. Historically, the Registration Service has charged one single set of fees for marriages in the various Register Office ceremony rooms regardless of which building they were taking place in. The exception to this rule has been that an extra £80 surcharge has been added to the marriage fees for those ceremonies taking place specifically in the Council Chamber and the Court Room at Eastbourne Town Hall.

2.6. Some other South East authorities' Registration Services long ago started charging wholly different rates for their different Register Office ceremony rooms, based on the quality of the offering in each individual room, including numerous aspects such as appearance, size, facilities, seating levels, location, accessibility and peripheral offerings. (Appendix 2 outlines these different rates for other authorities). Accordingly, establishing wholly different fees for different ceremony rooms would not be out of place in East Sussex compared to our neighbours.

2.7. Hastings Register Office, whilst located at Summerfields, has only ever had one marriage room, and despite the best efforts of the staff of the Registration Service, it is clearly very difficult to make a room in a temporary pre-fabricated building look very conducive to marriage ceremonies. As a result the demand levels at Hastings for Register Office ceremonies have always been artificially subdued. In the future, the expectation is that there will be an increased demand for ceremonies within the newly refurbished Hastings Town Hall, where the Hastings office will be able to offer customers a choice of two stunning ceremony rooms for the first time. It is worth noting that Hastings Register Office serves the entire Rother District as well as the towns of Hastings and St Leonards.

2.8. Due to the imminent delivery of the Hastings Town Hall scheme, and the desire already being experienced from couples to make bookings in February and March 2016, as well as into the 2016/17 financial year, it was thought pertinent for these fee changes to be determined and agreed now so that bookings can begin being taken. (The fee proposals for Hastings Town Hall can be found in Appendix 1).

2.9. Prior to 2013, when Southover Grange was last hosting ceremonies, it was by far the most popular Register Office ceremony room in the county, and this was despite the fact that the room was located on the first floor with a tortuous route up narrow steep stairs, no disabled access at all, a maximum number of 28 guests with no circulation or adequate waiting space for guests; such was the popularity of the building as a marriage venue there were 388 marriages conducted there during the 2012/13 financial year. Clearly the anticipation of the level of demand for Southover Grange once fully refurbished is that this will far surpass the demand levels seen pre-closure.

2.10. It is anticipated that the new Southover Grange will become one of the premier wedding venues in East Sussex. There will be a suite of grand rooms on the ground floor which include two very plush ceremony rooms. There will be a stunning entrance hall and state-of-the-art facilities.

2.11. Due to the delivery of Southover Grange at some point during the 2016/17 financial year there is already a demand being experienced from couples to make marriage bookings. It was felt sensible for the fees and charges there to be determined and agreed as early as possible to enable bookings to be made for the venue as soon as the delivery date can be confirmed for the building project.

2.12. Within Southover Grange there will also be a hireable VIP suite on the first floor, where brides and/or grooms will be able to relax prior to their ceremony and have photographs taken if they wish. This room, if hired by the couple, will also enable the compulsory pre-marriage interview to happen in a quality and relaxing environment. The hire of this suite will also encompass the opportunity for couples to have professional photographs taken as they descend the stunning listed staircase at the rear of the building overlooking the beautiful Gardens on their way to 'tie the knot'.

2.13. The ground floor will also house a community room which will be available for hire to the general public outside of core marriage times. The hire of this facility will require supervision from a caretaker/supervisor whose wages will need to be fully met from the cost of the hire so it is self-funding. There is also a kitchen which will be hired along with the room, but no 'cooking' will be allowed to take place, as the use of refreshments must remain 'incidental to the purpose of the hire' so as to avoid VAT complications.

3. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

3.1. The Lead Member is recommended to approve the marriage fee proposals as set out in Appendix 1. They will provide the Registration Service with a sensible and sustainable fee structure which will enable the service to immediately begin taking bookings for ceremonies at Hastings Town Hall, and in due course to begin taking bookings for Southover Grange once there is certainty of the delivery date of the refurbishment project.

3.2. The other peripheral fee proposals will enable to Registration Service to apply sensible and sustainable fees to these other related services and offerings. The Lead Member is therefore also recommended to approve the proposed fees as set out in Appendix 1 for these peripheral items.

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COUNCILLORS

All

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None