

BRIEFING PAPER

TO:	Gold
DATE:	2 nd July, 2020
LEAD OFFICER:	Ashleigh Wilford Superintendent Registrar & Bereavement Service Manager Regeneration and Environment Services 07795542990
TITLE:	Reinstatement of ceremonies – COVID-19

1. Background

1.1. On 23rd March, 2020 as part of Covid -19 lockdown measures, the Government announced that no marriage, civil partnership or citizenship ceremonies were to be undertaken until further notice. However, Marriages and civil partnerships under the special procedure (for those who are seriously ill and not expected to recover) have been allowed to take place where it is safe to do so in line with PHE guidance. Details in relation to this decision were confirmed in the General Register Office Circular 4/2020 dated 24th March 2020.

1.2. Since this date regular reviews have been undertaken by the Government with the latest announcement on 29th June where the Government was to permit small marriages and civil partnerships to begin safely from 4th July 2020.

1.3. This briefing note sets out the current position in relation ceremonies in Rotherham following the suspension, how the Government and GRO guidance has been applied, along with a series of recommendations.

2. Key Issues

Government and General Register Office (GRO) Guidance

2.1 The UK Government's COVID-19 recovery strategy item 4.3 states as follows;

2.2 "To aid planning, the Government's current aim is that the second step will be made no earlier than Monday 1 June... the Government is also examining how to enable people to gather in slightly larger groups to better facilitate small weddings"

On 29th June the government issued guidance with regards to 'small weddings', the same day the GRO issued guidance to further supplement this.

The guidance assists people planning to get married or form a civil partnership in England , and venues that host such ceremonies, to prepare for small ceremonies to be allowed to restart with up to 30 people present, in accordance with the associated legislation which will come into effect on 4th July 2020.

2.3	<p>The guidance also sets out how this can be done in a manner that is safe and in line with social distancing guidelines, in order to minimise the risk of exposure to infection for all individuals attending the marriage or civil partnership, including those who work at the venues and officiating registrars.</p>
2.4	<p><u>Impact to customers</u></p> <p>Following the suspension of ceremonies, 276 couples have now rescheduled their ceremony and 22 couples have decided to cancel their ceremony due to the uncertainty leading up to the re-introduction of ceremonies and have chosen not to rearrange at this time.</p>
2.5	<p><u>Marriage & Civil Partnership Notices</u></p> <p>All couples wishing to marry or enter into a civil partnership are required by law to attend the register office in the district within which they reside (unless subject to immigration control) to present to the registration officer during interview various documents to prove identity, residence, current marital status and any name changes. This is a statutory requirement and carries a statutory fee of £35 per person.</p>
2.6	<p>Marriage and Civil Partnership notices are valid for a period of 12 months from the date the couple attend to office to give their notice. This means that notices already given may expire prior to the date of the re-scheduled ceremony. It is worth noting that even if the marriage notice remains valid because it has been given within 12 months, if the rescheduled ceremony is to take place at a different venue a fresh set of notices must be given by the couple and statutory fees to be re-paid. A notice of marriage or civil partnership commands a statutory 28 day waiting period which commences the day following the giving of notice. The Superintendent Registrar's Certificate for Marriage/ Civil Partnership Schedule is issued on the 29th day providing no legal objections to the intended marriage or civil partnership have been entered. This is the earliest date a person can get married at their chosen venue. A couple can apply to the General Register Office for a waiver to reduce the statutory waiting period in exceptional circumstances at an additional statutory fee of £60 per person, this fee is payable whether granted or not.</p>
2.7	<p>Due to the vast amount of ceremonies re-booked as a result of the implications of COVID-19, many couples will need to give a new notice of marriage or civil partnership as their current paperwork will have expired by their rescheduled date. The General Register Office confirmed on the 29th June that notices of marriage that have expired will not to be duly given again by the couple and local authority should make any decisions on the associated fees involved.</p>
2.8	<p>Benchmarking has been undertaken with other neighbouring districts in relation to the waiver of the notice fee; Barnsley, Doncaster and Sheffield all intend to waive the notice fee in the case that the customer has moved their ceremony to a date outside of the validity of the paperwork. Where a couple decides to book for a different venue for their rescheduled ceremony date all three districts intend to charge the customer the statutory notice fee as it is not a like for like swap and would normally incur a fee and the re-giving of the notice. Finally, where a couple choose to apply for a waiver to reduce the statutory waiting period all three districts intend to charge the statutory fee as normal.</p>
2.9	<p>Consideration should be given to a waiver being granted to any couples having to give notice of marriage again as a result of their initial paperwork running out before the rescheduled ceremony date. If a couple change the venue of their ceremony through personal choice it is proposed that the usual fee will be charged as normal. Where a</p>

	<p>customer has been forced to choose a different ceremony venue in cases where the venue has closed permanently due to suffering the economical impact of the pandemic, it is proposed that no notice fee should be charged.</p>
2.10	<p>Between 23/03/2020 and 31/08/2020 the maximum amount to waiver as it stands would be £19,320 accounting for 276 ceremonies at £35 per person for a notice. It should be noted that this would be additional income to the service which has not been accounted for as the fees have already been taken once from the couple.</p>
	<p>Marriage Ceremonies from 4th July</p>
2.11	<p>The vast majority of ceremonies taking place in July have re-arranged their ceremony. However, there are 13 ceremonies still booked from 4th July onwards. These couples are aware that there is potential for their ceremony to be affected by numbers lower than 30 and the requirement for restrictions being in place before and during their ceremony.</p>
2.12	<p>The guidance from the Government and GRO has been used in the planning by registration services to assist people planning to get married or form a civil partnership in England, and venues that host such ceremonies, to prepare for small ceremonies to be allowed to restart, in accordance with the associated legislation which will come into effect on 4 July 2020.</p>
2.13	<p>The marriages booked throughout July are scheduled to take place at Clifton Park Museum which was directed to close with immediate effect by Government on 20th March 2020. Whilst the Museum will continue to remain closed to the general public, arrangements have been put in place for the building to be open for the sole purpose of marriage ceremonies from the 4th July.</p>
2.14	<p>A thorough risk assessment has been undertaken at the Museum. This was agreed by Health and Safety on 2nd July. This will enable all ceremonies at the site to go ahead safely. Restrictions of 8 guests maximum at a two-metre distance and other practical 'on the day' requirements per the risk assessment are being communicated to the couples involved.</p>
2.15	<p>Marriages are scheduled to begin at other approved premises from 31st July, 2020. In readiness, the Superintendent Registrar is working closely with the responsible person(s) at these venues in order to produce COVID-19 risk assessments, these will be reviewed on site with the responsible person and signed off prior to any ceremony taking place.</p>
	<p>Citizenship Ceremonies</p>
2.16	<p>The service currently has 14 citizens awaiting ceremony. National Panel verbal feedback on 18th June indicated registration districts could start to consider the introduction of private citizenship ceremonies for prospective citizens in line with the necessary safety measures being adhered to. No formal correspondence has been issued from the Home Office's Visa and Immigration section or the General Register Office in respect of Citizenship. It is anticipated that this will be announced shortly.</p>
	<p>Income</p>
2.17	<p>Registrars Net Budget is £111,668 which includes a level of income from fees and charges of £370,342. A review of income levels now estimates the impact of COVID-19 has created an in-year pressure £212,439. This figure assumes that the services that are currently scheduled from July onwards will continue to be delivered.</p>

3. Key Actions and Timelines

3.1	Risk assessments and site visits at approved premises are to be completed by 31 st July to ensure ceremonies can be delivered safely in line with Government and GRO guidelines.
3.2	Communications to all couples with ceremonies scheduled for July will be completed by 3 rd July, 2020. Communications will be issued to couples with ceremonies scheduled for August will be completed by 10 th July. Update of the Council's website and any other communication stream deemed appropriate by the communications team will start from 3 rd July, 2020.
3.3	Notices of marriage will continue to be booked in, in order of date of ceremony and communicating out the decision on the associated fee where the couples fall into any of the categories at point 2.9 of this paper by no later than Tuesday 7 th July.
3.4	Appropriate plans to be drafted with regards to the effect of potential suspension of ceremonies where a local lockdown is implemented. This plan will include measures that take into account neighbouring districts being in a local lockdown state when the Rotherham district is not. This plan will be in line with public health advice and any related government guidance. GRO advise each local authority take direction from local public health department on any restrictions or measures required in the event of local lockdown. This plan is to be drafted by no later than Friday 10 th July.

4. Recommendations

4.1	<p>The following actions are recommended:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• That it be noted marriages and civil partnerships ceremonies are to take place from 4th July in line with government and GRO guidelines and associated venue risk assessments.• That Civil Partnership ceremonies are suspended until such time as UKVI and GRO issue a directive on when and how to restart safely.• That the Council waive the statutory notice fee of £35 per person for couples which have had to change their ceremony date due to COVID-19, making their initial paperwork out of date.• That the Council waive the statutory notice fee of £35 per person for couples which have had to change venue as a direct result of COVID-19 their initial venue has closed for business permanently.• That the Council charge the statutory fee of £35 per person where the couple intend on changing their marriage venue on re-scheduling through personal choice.• That Culture, Sport & Tourism management will continue to work with customers and the Council's communications team in order to ensure the latest information is provided to the public in relation to the Registration Service.• That appropriate plans are drafted in relation to potential suspension of ceremonies where a local lockdown is implemented.
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5. Cabinet Member and Leader Comments

5.1	Cllr Emma Hoddinott
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6.	Briefing Consultation and Sign Off
6.1	Has the above information been considered by:

Legal	Officer Gerry Gillen	Date:	Comments:
Finance	Officer Richard Young	Date	Comments
Human Resources	Officer John Crutchley	Date	Comments
Strategic Director	Officer Paul Woodcock	Date	Comments

Note to briefing authors:

1. Your report must include details of comments and approvals relevant officers in Legal, Finance and HR.
2. You must send your report to the relevant Cabinet Member, and copied to the Leader of the Council, to seek their comments and agreement prior to your paper being considered by Tactical or Gold Group(s). Verbatim comments from the Cabinet Member and or Leader of the Council should be included in Section 4 of the above template.
3. Where the Cabinet Member or Leader of the Council do not support the proposed action, this should be referred back to relevant Assistant Director to resolve according to the provisions of the COVID-19 Decision Making Protocol. Where a matter cannot be resolved, it will be referred to the Leader and Chief Executive for determination prior to be considered by Tactical or Gold.