

**Meeting:** Overview & Scrutiny Commission  
**Date:** 20 February 2018  
**Subject:** Merton Registration Services  
**Lead Member:** Councillor Mark Allison  
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## **Recommendation:**

1. To acknowledge content within the report and feedback any observations on the work outlined to enhance the service and reputation of Merton Registration Services.
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## **1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1 The Overview & Scrutiny Commission (OSC) are asked to acknowledge the work of the Registration Service and consider whether or not it wishes to consider a further mini task group review.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 The responsibility for Registration Services was transferred from Crown Officers to local authority officers in December 2007. The General Register Office is part of Her Majesty's Passport Office (a division of the Home Office) and oversees civil registration in England and Wales.

We are required to provide the GRO with an annual report and service delivery plan. The returns for 2017 are attached as Appendix 1 and 2 together with the customer engagement strategy for 2017 as Appendix 3. The GRO responded to our 2017 return with:-

“It is welcoming to report the very good level of compliance against the statutory and operational standards and especially in meeting the national standard for birth registrations. In terms of deaths, I note the issues you have with the flow of MCCD paperwork and customer choice and also with the coronial service. Moreover, I note the excellent achievements around customer service with your high attainment levels for appointment waiting times.

Thank you for submitting your self-assessment against the PPCF framework. On the basis of your reported information, GRO has a sufficient level of assurance regarding compliance with the framework...”.

We are also members of the Local Registration Services Association (LRSA) that has been established to represent and co-ordinate the interests of its members on a national level. Its objectives are to assist and support service managers, enabling them to deliver efficient and effective registration services to their local communities, whilst continuing to develop service excellence and share best practice.

2.2 Merton Register Office is based in the Grade 2 listed building Morden Park House. It is set in a beautiful park with delightful marriage rooms and enables us to perform our statutory functions of the registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages.

The building was restored with the help of the Heritage Lottery Fund. The interior has a number of contemporary features including a marble paved entrance hall, a grand imperial type staircase with wrought iron balustrades and other contemporary fittings.

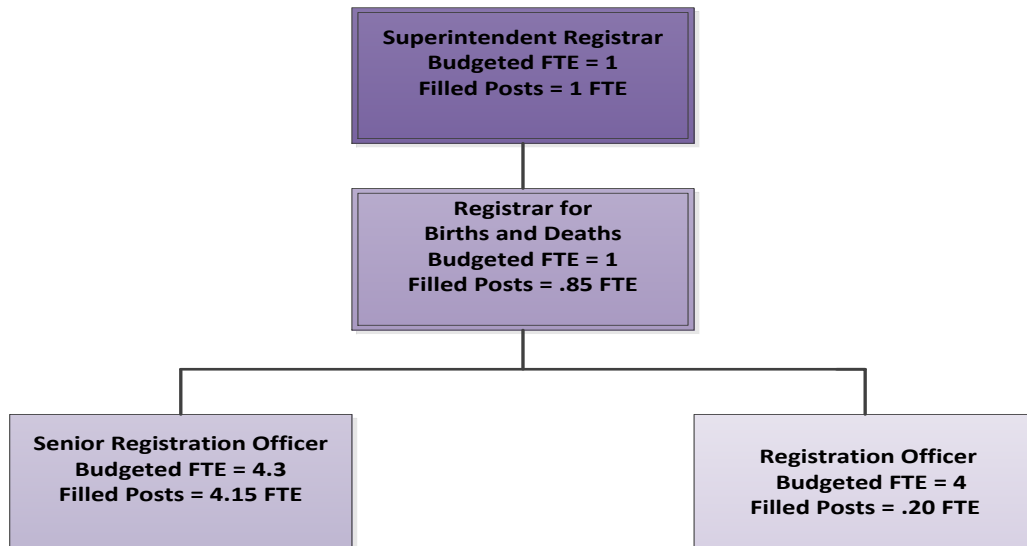
It receives regular maintenance upkeeps in order to maximise its earning potential and comply with the standards outlined by English Heritage. It regularly exceeds budgeted surplus requirements.

The building houses a walled courtyard that has fallen into a poor state and requires extensive work to become fit for purpose as a dedicated outdoor wedding venue. See Appendix 4, at the end of the report, for pictures of completed works as of 09.02.18.

2.3 The registrars service includes:

- Registration of all births, deaths and stillbirths occurring within the Merton Registration district – a statutory function.
- Custody of the registers relating to births, deaths and marriages from the Merton district since 1837 and can, on request, issue copies of the entries.
- Conducting and registering all civil marriage ceremonies and all civil partnership registrations occurring within the Merton Registration district.
- Offering support to clergy and authorised persons registering marriage throughout Merton registration district. We also monitor their marriages and offer in house training when required.
- A nationality checking service for prospective new British citizens from anywhere in the UK. We are also part of the European Passport Return Service (EPRS) for those EEA and Swiss nationals wishing to take up permanent residence.
- Arranging and conducting all citizenship ceremonies occurring within the Merton Registration district.
- Conducting Naming Ceremonies and Renewal of Vow Ceremonies.
- Inspection and licensing of other venues for the purpose of hosting civil wedding ceremonies and civil partnership registrations.
- Hosting wedding fayres every 6 months.

2.4 The permanent staffing structure is detailed below and this is supplemented by over 15 casual staff that predominantly assists during periods of peak demand and weekend ceremonies.



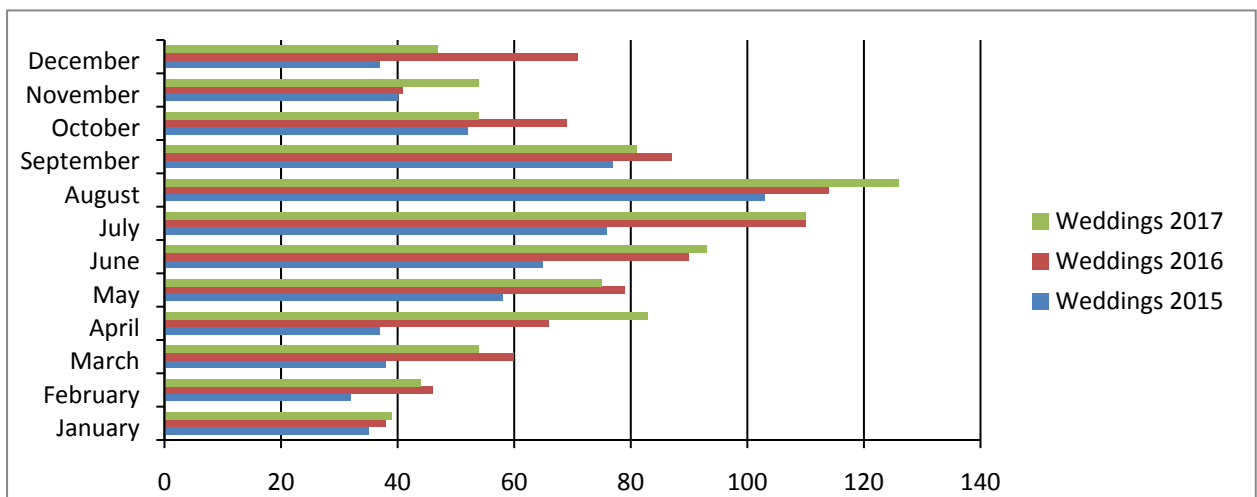
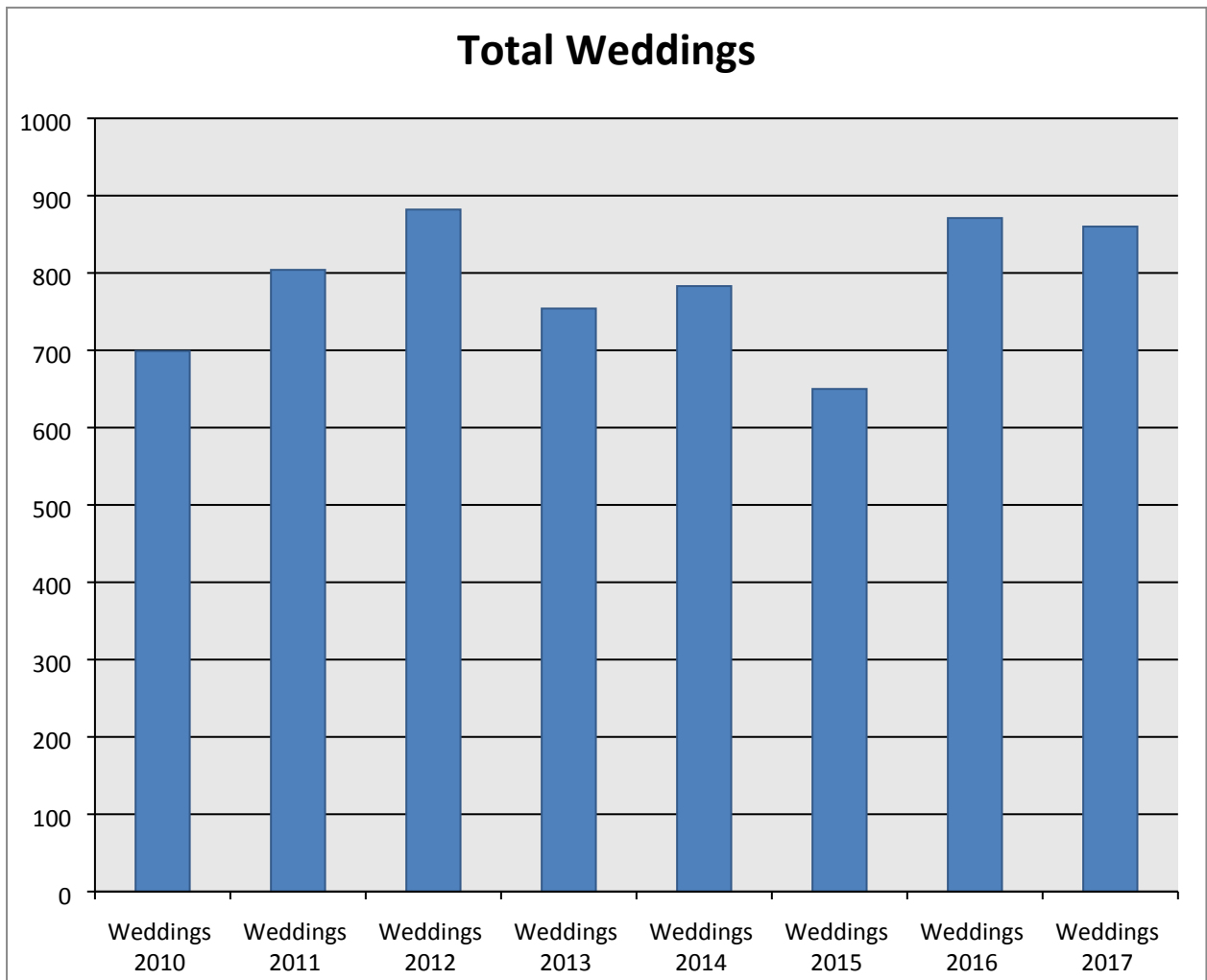
The total budget, including all staffing and associated costs, together with projected income has shown a year on year surplus, above budgeted target, since 2013 to date. This has included income targets being increased to contribute to the overall budget setting process of the Council.

YEAR	EXPECTED BUDGET	ACTUAL
2015 – 16	-96,080	-99,553
2014 - 15	-97,970	-158,625
2013 - 14	-63,410	-138,790

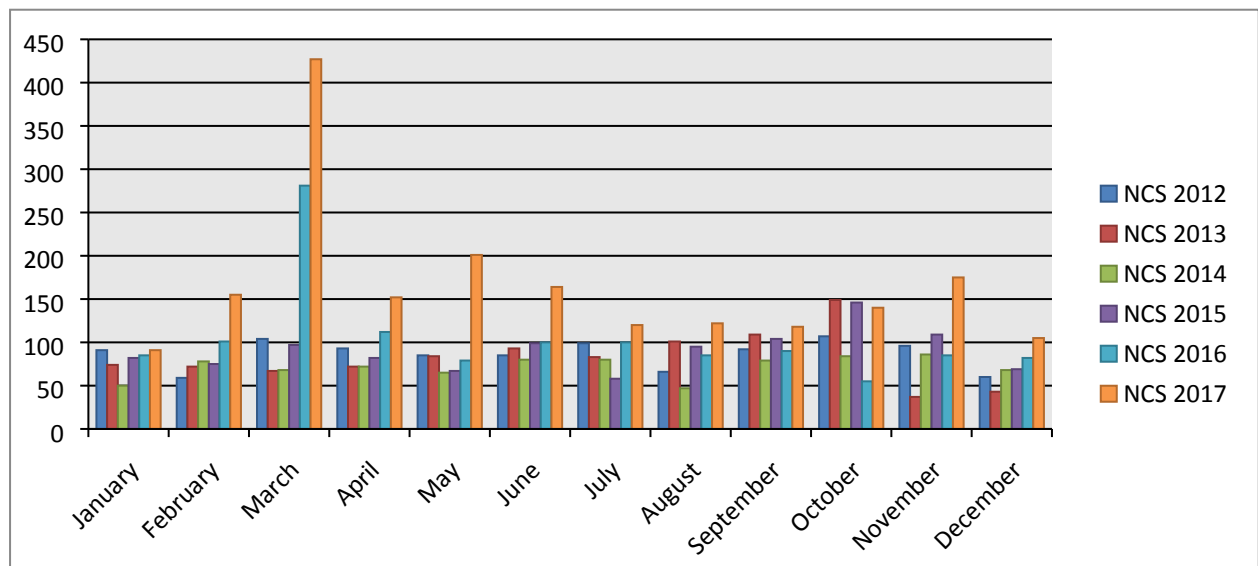
We annually review our fees and charges, some of which are governed by GRO and applied nationally. Where locally agreed we benchmark against neighbouring Boroughs and local private providers. We are also flexible in our approach and alter charges for special days if required.

The Registration Service is facing a number of key challenges to its customary income streams, following decisions of Central Government. This is covered in later in the report with details of the deletion of services and work already being undertaken to potentially fill the gap.

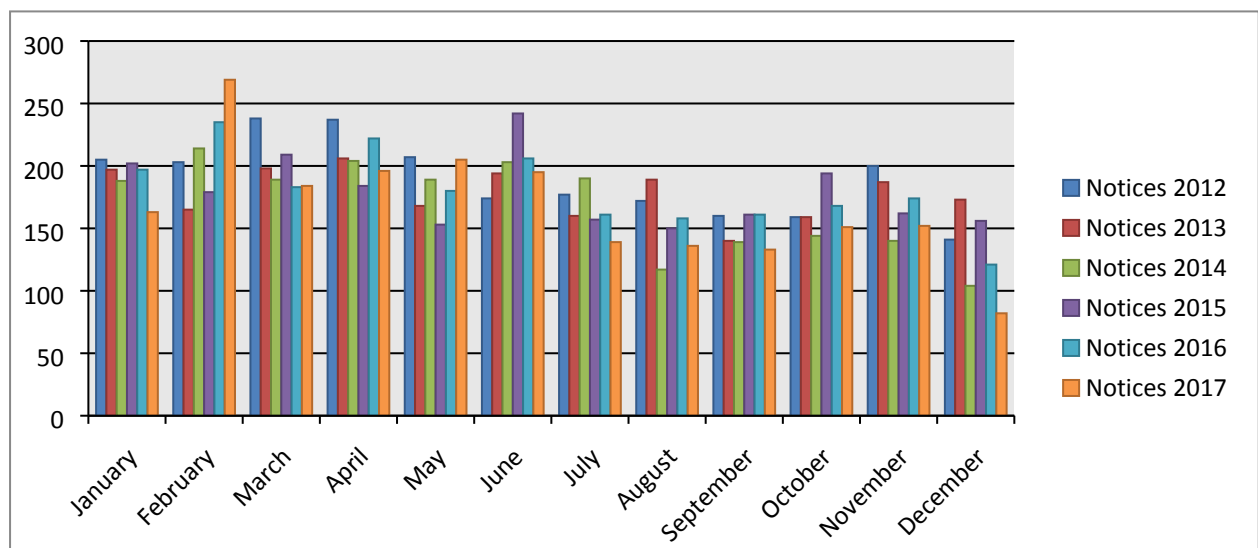
### 3. CURRENT PERFORMANCE



## Nationality Checking Service (NCS)



## Notices of marriage or civil partnership



### 4. Going Forward

- 4.1 Central Government has announced they are promoting online citizenship applications from January 2018. It is their intention to create a new document certify and sending service from this date. This is in line with their digital inclusion strategy.
- 4.2 It is expected that this new service will largely supersede the Nationality Checking Service (NCS), (at the time of this report exact details remain unclear).

- 4.3 Central Government have also announced that all services provided by Local Registration Services, in partnership with the Home Office, will cease from October 2018. This includes NCS, EPRS, Nationality Document Return Service (NDRS) and Settlement Checking Service (SCS). This will have a significant impact on one of the services key income streams.
- 4.3 In order to sustain our income potential a number of initiatives have either already commenced or are being considered. These include;
- An overhaul of the existing courtyard to create an outdoor wedding venue. This is being achieved in conjunction with nearly 60% of the total cost being borne by private donations (see pictures of works completed to date at the end of this report).
  - Recent procurement of a new on-line booking system, aligning ourselves with neighbouring Councils, providing efficiencies in manual processes and maximising appointment potential.
  - Marketing of alternate days and months for weddings by way of price promotions.
  - An increase in the number of wedding fayres being considered and aligning one each year to a specific market i.e Afro-Caribbean and Asian.
  - Consider the use of the House and Courtyard for other events such as wine & cheese tasting or beer & sausage festivals.
  - Aggressively marketing the House and the Courtyard through a dedicated website, together with a virtual tour of the facilities and surrounding area.
  - Offering exclusivity to the House and marquee/kitchen facilities.
- 4.4 In 2012, following a period of shared management, Merton and Sutton Council's embarked on a joint exercise regarding the potential for a shared service. Albeit extremely problematical it has been proved possible in other areas. Unfortunately it was felt that there were no financial benefits or efficiencies for Merton to progress at that time.
- 4.5 Further dialogue has taken place with a number of neighbouring Councils to ascertain the potential of Merton sharing a Registration Service with another district. This has included initial discussions with LB Wandsworth but they felt they needed to embed their joint venture with LB Richmond (who are leading on Registration matters) before consideration would be given to a tri-borough approach.

Discussions remain ongoing, with the latest involving the London Borough of Hackney. Our Superintendent Registrar has recently submitted his resignation and is due to join them in April 2018. It is hoped that we can negotiate a shared management function, similar to what we had with LB Sutton some years ago.

This will also apply if Central Government ever pass legislation regarding the requirement for local authorities to have a medical examiner. This was part of the recommendations following the Dr Harold Shipman case but has yet to find Commons time, despite numerous circulars stating that it was pending.





















