

# Brighton & Hove City Council

## Policy & Resources Committee

## Agenda Item 95

**Subject:** Life Events Fees and Charges review for Registration Services and Local Land Charges 2022/23

**Date of meeting:** 27 January 2022

**Report of:** Executive Lead Officer for Governance, People & Resources

**Contact Officer:** Name: Paul Holloway

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**Ward(s) affected:** All

**For general release**

### **1. Purpose of report and policy context**

1.1 This report sets out the proposed fees and charges for the financial year 2021/2022 for Registration Services and Local and Charges within Life Events, in Governance, People & Resources (GP&R)

### **2. Recommendations:**

2.1 That the Committee approves the fees and charges set out at Appendix 1 of the report.

### **3. CONTEXT/ BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

3.1 Brighton & Hove City Council adopted a Corporate Fees & Charges Policy in 2008. The main aims of the policy were to ensure that:

- Fees and charges are reviewed at least annually including consideration of potential new sources of income;
- Fees and charges are set after comparing with 'statistical nearest neighbours' (or other relevant comparator groups) and taking into account market, legal and other contextual information;
- Unless set by a statute, fees and charges are set to recover full costs, including central overheads and capital financing, to ensure that services maximise potential for income generation from the services offered.
- Subsidies and concessions are not applied unless approved by members;
- The impact on financial inclusion is considered when setting fee levels.

#### **4. ANALYSIS & CONSIDERATION OF ANY ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

- 4.1 Due to the ongoing pandemic, for Registration Services, this year's proposals look to consolidate changes to the service offer over the last 20 months, when various government restrictions have been in place at different times affecting the numbers allowed to attend ceremonies. Changes have included suspension of all ceremonies when deemed necessary by the government, based on the local situation in relation to the pandemic. For Local Land Charges, the fluctuating property market has remained buoyant, with various government incentives available up to September 2021, helping to maintain the level of new property purchases. Thought is always given to service costs remaining competitive with near neighbour service providers in both service areas, where we have been able to obtain reliable information.
- 4.2 The Registration Service proposals aim to maximise potential of Brighton & Hove's unique reputation as a city by the sea and fully embrace the scope of a modern Registration Service. Our customers will often want to secure a ceremony booking well in advance and this frequently means a booking is not in the current financial year. With this in mind, the service proposes advanced fee settings, to charge appropriate fees reflecting a realistic charge for services at the time it is delivered. Currently, fees are taken at the time of the booking, and are charged at the rate applicable on the day of the booking, and remain in place irrespective of when the ceremony is going to take place. A number of our Local Authority Registrations Services currently set advanced fees in this way. Please see Appendix 3. All proposals acknowledge the local market in relation to business levels both prior to the pandemic, as well as projected future demand for services based on the current situation. This is heavily influenced by our Registration Service continuing to adapt, to deliver services in a safe Covid19 environment. Prior to the pandemic, there was a drop in demand for notices of marriages and civil partnerships. Demand has risen as restrictions have gradually been lifted and the service continues to recover well, having also encountered pressures on provision of the statutory elements of the service, including birth and death registrations. New legislative changes to death registration processes continue to enable death registrations by telephone. Birth Registrations have been subject to suspensions at different times, resulting in a backlog that the service has successfully managed through the difficult pandemic period. Income levels for statutory certificates continue to be lower following government increases to certificate costs 2019. This resulted in a large drop in the purchasing of birth and death certificates, at the time of a registration, and has not recovered. For the Local Land Charges service, demand for searches has been consistent, apart from an initial lockdown period. The local property market has indicated that despite the pandemic, levels of purchases have remained relatively stable with previous years in terms of no's of searches coming into the service.
- 4.3 Analysis does suggest there is an opportunity to increase certain non-statutory charges, having reviewed latest benchmarking information held

for neighbouring local authority registration service providers, whilst remaining competitive. Similarly, there are proposals to maximise income through increasing Local Land Charges property search fees.

- 4.4 All non – statutory fees and charges have been reviewed, and the proposals ensure we continue to maintain cost recovery and maximise income for the services offered. It is however, not within our power to increase statutory fees, where budget pressures have previously arisen.
- 4.5 Consultation with the General Register Office (GRO) and Local Land Charges Institute (LLCI) has previously established there is not a legal obligation to consult with members of the public about non-statutory fees, as the Local Authority should have its own policies for fee setting against services it provides. Brighton & Hove City Council adopted a Charges and Fees setting policy in 2008.
- 4.6 A further review of fees and charges may be carried out during the financial year 2022/23 for both service areas.
- 4.7 Where fees and charges increases are proposed, the additional revenue will help support any continued loss of income due to the significant drop off in the take up of additional birth and death certificates. The drop has been a national trend over the last 2 years, since the government increased the cost of a birth certificate and a death certificate, from £4.00 to £11.00 per certificate. As the service continues to recover and adapt to working differently in Covid 19 safe risk assessed environment, it is anticipated the fees and charges increases proposed, will generate an additional £14,000 for the Registration Service in 2022/23. In Local Land Charges, proposals will generate a further £24,000 if the property market continues to flow, and current business levels remain consistent.
- 4.8 Appendix 1 contains a table of the main Registration Service fees, and shows where fees are proposed to be increased over and above the standard annual inflationary uplift. Appendix 2 shows Local Land Charges fee increase proposals.

## **5 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & CONSULTATION**

- 5.1 Registration Services continues to work with customers and community groups, including multi-faith groups. Engagement with the General Register Office, alongside benchmarking information from other service providers, enables these realistic proposals to be put before members accompanied by Local Land Charges proposed increases. Our LLC service contributes to the Local Land Charges Institute discussions about business levels, including charges for services in each area.

## 6. CONCLUSION

- 6.1 A full assessment of services provided, along with unit costings for every service and product, has ensured these proposals cover costs and are set realistically, and competitively. Attention is paid to charges made by other service providers, and where possible, comparisons are made on like for like services. In the hope that customers are persuaded to choose the Brighton & Hove Registration service. In the same way, our accurate, reliable and fast turn-around times for property search information will we anticipate, see our services retained by local solicitors, when requiring property search information.

## 7. FINANCIAL

### 7.1 Financial Implications:

The fees and charges recommended in this report have been reviewed in line with the Corporate Fees & Charges Policy. A corporate inflation rate of 1.5% has been applied to income targets for fees and charges in 2022/23 and the expected income generation stated in section 4.7 of this report is over and above that level. This expected level of income supports savings proposed by the service as part of the budget setting process and will be incorporated within the revenue budget report to Policy & Resources Committee and Budget Council in January and February 2022 respectively.

*Finance Officer Consulted: Peter Francis*

*Date:*

*06/01/2022*

### 8. Legal Implications:

- 8.1 This report relates to non-statutory fees and charges. The proposed changes in discretionary fees comply with legal requirements and guidance, including where national legislation requires fees to be set on a cost recovery basis.

*Lawyer Consulted:*

*Elizabeth Culbert*

*Date: 06/01/22*

### 9. Equalities Implications:

- 9.1 An Equalities Impact Assessment screening has been undertaken. The screening has highlighted that no specific minority group is disproportionately affected by increases, with options being available for customers on low incomes.

### 10. Sustainability Implications:

None

### 11. Other Implications:

See the report template – there is Social Value, Crime and Disorder or Public Health - delete any that are not applicable

## **SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION**

### **Appendices:**

1. Fees schedule for Registration Service
2. Advanced fees setting proposals for the Registration Service
3. Fee schedule for Local Land Charges

### **Documents in Members' Rooms**

None

### **Background Documents**

None

