



COMMITTEE TITLE: Finance, Assets, Investment and Recovery Committee

DATE: 13 September 2023

REPORT TITLE:	Wedding Options out of the Town Hall
REPORT OF:	Phoebe Barnes, Director of Assets and Investments

REPORT SUMMARY

Currently Brentwood Borough Council has a wedding offer at the Town Hall on Thursday and Fridays and utilises Committee Room and 2 and on occasions the Council Chamber to undertake weddings. It is proposed that officers look at Merrymeade House as an alternative venue for weddings out of the Town Hall.

RECOMMENDATION

R1: Delegate authority for the Director of Assets and Investment to negotiate an agreement with Brentwood Council for Voluntary Services to manage weddings/civil ceremonies at Merrymeade House.

R2: Ensure that the change to the Wedding /Civil Ceremonies is clearly communicated to the public via the Council's website.

SUPPORT ING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION

- 1.1 Currently the Weddings at the Town Hall utilise the two Committee Rooms and the Council Chamber on Thursdays and Fridays and can accommodate up to 3 weddings a day. There is a staff resource to manage these bookings, meet and greet the registrar and the couples undertaking the wedding/civil service as well as caretaker support to reconfiguring the committee room furniture. The income that is generated is split between Essex County Council and Brentwood Borough Council.
- 1.2 The ceremonies have been reduced to just two days a week due to the ongoing staff resource requirements, so by moving them out of the Town Hall a much better offer could be provided. Merrymeade House can accommodate a similar number of guests plus the wedding party. It is a Grade II listed building so is an attractive addition for the photographs and has a tearoom which could offer a wedding breakfast option as well.
- 1.3 It also offers Brentwood Council for Voluntary Services (CVS) an opportunity for an additional income stream which could reduce the core funding requirements from the Council going forward.

2.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 Brentwood Borough Council Chamber at the Town Hall allows for up to 30 guests plus the brides, grooms and officials.
- 2.2 The wedding party are allocated a time and vacate the building directly after the wedding ceremony has been completed. Parties are asked not to congregate around the green door entrance doors either before or after a ceremony.
- 2.3 The current process is to call the Council during office hours to check availability. Once the provisional availability has been confirmed with the Council, then individuals need to call Essex registration Service to book a registrar to attend and perform the ceremony.
- 2.4 A non-refundable deposit is taken at the time of booking the registrar. The remaining balance must be made at least 12 weeks before the date of ceremony. If a booking is made less than 8 weeks before the ceremony, full payment is required at the time of booking. Essex Registration Service will take receipt of all fees for ceremonies held at The Community Venue, Town Hall, Brentwood.
- 2.5 Persons must give notice of your marriage or civil partnership at least 28 days before the ceremony and this is through Essex County Council to book an appointment. The fee for giving notice is £35 each.
- 2.6 The current fees are set out in the following table.

Day	1 April 23- 31 March 2024	1 April 2024- 31 March 2025
Thursday	£235	£245
Friday	£320	£330

These fees do not include the certificate which is £11.

- 2.7 Cancellation of a booking before giving notice of marriage or civil partnership, will mean that the £50 deposit will not be refunded.
- 2.8 Ceremonies cancelled 56 days or more before the date of ceremony will incur a cancellation fee equivalent to 50% of the ceremony fee. If a person cancels fewer than 56 days before the ceremony date or fail to cancel in writing to the Essex Registration Service, no refund will be paid.
- 2.9 Currently 2 parking spaces are set aside in the Town Hall Car Park if there is space available.
- 2.10 Officers also manage the invoicing for the ceremonies. The Council has also invested in silk flowers, chair covers and screens and troughs to hide wires etc. in the chamber. A sound system to play music via Bluetooth is also required.
- 2.11 Photographs of the rooms on the Council's website are also available for couples to see.
- 2.12 It is proposed to look at alternative venues to hold the wedding and civil partnership ceremonies out of the Town Hall.

3.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 3.1 **Option 1: No change, weddings remain at the Town Hall.** The resource requirements include staff to take the bookings and liaise with the registrar at Essex Registration Office prior to the ceremony. On the day of the ceremony a staff member is required to meet and greet the registrar and the individuals concerned. It is a decision of the couple whether they are interviewed together or separately. If the couple want to remain separated, there needs to be somewhere for one half of the couple, usually the bride, to be hidden. There is a requirement for a separate room for the interviews to take place. A staff member also needs to make sure that the appropriate music is in place. Two parking spaces are reserved in the North Car Park which can impact on staff parking arrangements.
- 3.2 Following the ceremony, the staff member needs to ensure the wedding party exit the building promptly especially if another wedding is taking place thereafter. The Council normally allows at least an hour between ceremonies. Water and tissues are required both in the interview and ceremony rooms. A notice announcing the weddings should also be displayed.
- 3.3 Since April Brentwood Borough Council has withdrawn bookings on a Saturday and now offer Thursday and Friday bookings only between 1000 and 1600 and due to available resources, only allow a maximum of 3 ceremonies on each day.
- 3.4 Based on figures from 2022-2023 the income received by the Council for weddings was £24,230 per year, based on an offer on Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Resource was met by staff from the Democratic Services team and/or caretakers for the Saturdays or through additional casual staff costs of around £6,000 per year.
- With the reduction of the offer in 2023/24 to just Thursdays and Fridays the current income is £12,485, plus casual staff costs of c.£1300.
- 3.5 The cost of the 3year licence of £2040 is met by Brentwood Borough Council.
- 3.6 **Option 2: Do not provide a wedding offer in Brentwood.** The Council could decide not to provide a community wedding offer in the Borough. Brentwood Borough Council would not receive any income, the Chamber and Committee Rooms could be utilised as meeting rooms without the requirement for furniture to be moved around on a regular basis by the caretakers. However, it also means that any residents would need to go outside the Borough for their ceremonies.
- 3.7 **Option 3: Relocate to an alternative venue.** There are limited alternative options of venues within the Council's ownership that could be utilised at a potential wedding venue. It is proposed that weddings could be relocated to Merrymeade House. While this would free up the two Committee Rooms and the Council Chamber, the resource required to take the bookings and meet and greet the couple could be delivered by the Council's CVS service as they are currently located at Merrymeade House. The CVS already have two rooms allocated on the ground floor that could be utilised for

any bookings. There is also a Tea Room on the site that could provide a separate wedding breakfast package. The house itself is Grade II listed building so would be ideal for wedding photos within the house and the gardens at the rear of the house. This option could not only generate some additional income for the CVS to build their capacity and it might also reduce the core funding requirements from the Council as a result.

4.0 RELEVANT RISKS

4.1 Any proposed venue will need to comply with the requirements of the Essex Registration Office as part of the relevant licence. If members agree to moving the weddings out of the Town Hall, then a transition plan will need to be put in place so that couples are made aware of the changes to the location and that the proposed venue meets all the required requirements.

4.2 Loss of wedding/civil ceremony income to the Council.

5.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

5.1 Initial talks have been had with both the CVS and also with the tearoom to understand their appetite to host weddings at Merrymeade House and the response has been very positive.

6.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Name & Title: Tim Willis, Director – Resources & Section 151 Officer
Tel & Email: 01277 312500 / tim.willis@brentwood.rochford.gov.uk

The cost for the first licence is £2040.00 which will last for 3 years. Since April 2023, and due to resource, the income has significantly reduced from weddings and civil ceremonies. The maximum number on each day is three and the fee is split with ECC. The booking of the ceremonies and day to day admin is covered by the Democratic Services team as part of their day-to-day tasks. However, additional help is bought in from casual staff to manage the ceremonies on a Friday. Further financial detail is set out in 3.4 of the report.

If the ceremonies are to be relocated out of the Tow Hall to Merrymeade House then the costs for the licence, staff resource and income derived from them will need to be determined as part of the agreement with CVS.

7.0 LEGAL/GOVERNANCE IMPLICATIONS

Name & Title: Claire Mayhew, Acting Joint Director – People & Governance & Monitoring Officer
Tel & Email 01277 312500 /claire.mayhew@brentwood.rochford.gov.uk

If the weddings are to be relocated out of the Town Hall, then an application for Premises to be approved for marriages in pursuance of section 26(1) (bb) of the Marriage Act 1949, or for Civil Partnerships in Pursuance of Section 6 (3A) (a) of the Civil Partnership Act 2004 will need to go to the Registration Service at Essex County Council for approval. premises will need to be inspected for suitability before any approval is granted and if successful may be subject to subsequent public inspection. A period of 21 days must be allowed for any objections.

Approval, if granted will be for a period of three years, subject to revocation and the premises must satisfy the local authority on the fire precautions and health and safety provisions.

The Planning Authority (Brentwood Borough Borough) must be consulted, and evidence of their consent is required as part of the application for licence.

Subject to approval the venue must be regularly available for public use as a marriage or civil partnership venue and comply with any standard and local conditions to the grant of approval.

The application is made by the proprietor of the premises and if successful the applicant will be the holder of the approval.

The current licence for the Town Hall weddings and civil ceremonies will expire 1 October 2025.

8.0 EQUALITY & HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

Name & Title: Kim Anderson, Corporate Manager - Communities, Leisure and Health

Tel & Email 01277 312500 kim.anderson@brentwood.gov.uk

The Public Sector Equality Duty applies to the Council when it makes decisions. The duty requires us to have regard to the need to:

- a. Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other behaviour prohibited by the Act. In summary, the Act makes discrimination etc. on the grounds of a protected characteristic unlawful.
- b. Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- c. Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not, including tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.

The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, gender, and sexual orientation. The Act states that 'marriage and civil partnership' is not a relevant protected characteristic for (b) or (c) although it is relevant for (a).

The proposals in this report will not have a disproportionate adverse impact on anybody with a protected characteristic.

9.0 ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

Name & Title: Phil Drane, Director - Place

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TBC

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Requirements for Wedding venue

BACKGROUND PAPERS

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date