



Deputy Brian Stanley TD
Chair
Committee of Public Accounts
DÁIL ÉIREANN

Ref: S0703 PAC33

14th
February, 2022

RE: Examination of Vote 38 Health – Questions with respect to the Civil Registration Service

Dear Deputy Stanley, A chara,

I wish to refer to the examination of the Health Vote conducted by the Committee on the 16th December 2021 and subsequent questions raised with the Department of Health.

The Committee sought a detailed note providing information on the following matters relating to the registration of births and deaths:

- any service level agreement or specific targets agreed by the HSE and the Department [of Health] in relation to the provision of these services.
- the extent of the delays to these service as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2021 cyberattack on the HSE, and
- any solutions identified to these issues.

I understand that Mr Watt, accounting officer for the Health Vote, has indicated to the Committee's Secretariat that he had asked the Department of Social Protection to address these matters. My response is set out in the following paragraphs.

Service Level Agreements/Service Targets

The arrangements for civil registration are provided for by the Civil Registration Act 2004, as amended. The Act provides, in essence, for two separate functions.

Section 8 of that Act provides for the functions of an tArd-Cláraitheoir (Registrar-General) specifically with respect to the establishment and maintenance of the civil registers, and other registration matters that fall to that Office to determine under the Act. To fulfil his statutory functions the Registrar General and his staff operate the General Register Office (GRO), as a unit of this Department, based in County Roscommon.

Section 17 of the CRA provides for the operation of a nationwide Civil Registration Service (CRS). This is the service which enables citizens to record life-events on the civil registers. Specifically, section 17 provides for the HSE to appoint Superintendent Registrars (SR) to manage, control and administer the Civil Registration Service on behalf of and subject to the control and direction of the HSE. This Section also sets out that the HSE is responsible for appointing and allocating such number of registrars it deems necessary for the delivery of Civil Registration Services. The HSE is responsible for all operational matters relating to registration that fall to it to deliver under the Act.

Given this framework, and the separation of responsibilities provided in law, the setting of service targets is, given its statutory obligations, a matter for the HSE with respect to each registration area and the Superintendent Registrars for each area appointed by the HSE.

Having said that, both my Department and the HSE share the view that all registrations should be facilitated and completed in a timely and efficient manner given the impacts on a person's or family's entitlements.

Towards this end this Department has previously suggested that responsibility for the operation of the Civil Registration Service could transfer to this Department. This is a suggestion we made to the HSE in early 2020 and some initial discussions were held between the two organisations at that time. However, given the pressures on both organisations due to Covid-19 we have not progressed past these initial discussions. Nevertheless, we remain of the view that there may be considerable opportunities and value to be gained in having the Department of Social Protection deliver all registration services using its organisational footprint and technical expertise in rolling out new channels by which the public would be facilitated with easier access to registration services.

Extent of the Delays.

The Committee will be aware that the HSE suffered widespread disruption from the May 2021 cyberattack on its systems. The Civil Registration Computer System (CRCS) is held and maintained by the Department of Social Protection. As part of the overall Government response to the attack, the Department of Social Protection isolated and quarantined any connection between HSE systems and the Department for several weeks with the aim of securing Departmental systems and preventing wider disruption to essential services. I can indicate to the Committee that the CRCS remained quarantined from the HSE for a period of up to five weeks from the middle of May 2021 until the end of June 2021.

From the information available to me, I understand that not all local registration systems maintained by the HSE to provide registration services could be restored by the HSE until well into July 2021 with continuing significant disruption to service to members of the public.

The Oireachtas enacted a range of temporary measures in April 2020 to facilitate the continuation of public service delivery. These temporary measures included provisions that removed the obligation for in-person attendance before a registrar to register a birth or death. The temporary measures were renewed on a number of times by the Government until finally expiring at the of September 2021 in line with the re-opening of economic and social activity. I want to note that, notwithstanding the impact of Covid-19, access to registration services was maintained throughout the whole period of the pandemic and is testament to the commitment and dedication to the staff of the service in dealing the needs of the public despite the restrictions on working practices.

My understanding is that most HSE civil registration service offices are co-located with other local health facilities and clinics across the State, and this has traditionally supported the provision of registration services to the public. However, these arrangements have also hindered the resumption of a walk-in service as Covid 19 restrictions continue in place in these health settings. Currently, the HSE has enabled a resumption of some in-person registration services by a combination of appointment-based systems and limited walk-in services where facilities allowed.

With respect to ongoing delays, the information available to me indicates that there are no significant delays in registration services where walk-in services can be safely provided, however, where this is not the case, some level of delay is being experienced. This is particularly evident in the Eastern Registration Area covering Dublin, Kildare and Wicklow which accounts for roughly one-third of registrations nationally.

The civil registration office in Dublin also deals with all online applications for certificates made via the certificates.ie platform which is provided by the HSE. I am advised that the backlog of applications received online for certificates has reduced from over 18,000 at the end of 2021 to roughly 8,000 currently. The HSE suspended the online service since before Christmas to enable the backlog to be cleared. Other HSE offices were able to provide alternatives outlets by which the public can access certificates using the existing network of local registration offices.

Potential/Planned Service Improvements

Where walk-in registration services are currently restricted, the HSE has advised that it is operating an appointment system with varying levels of delays across registration areas.

With respect to the Eastern Registration Service, I am advised that any outstanding staff vacancies are being filled and additional staff resources are being allocated to support existing staff. I am further advised that the HSE is working to roll-out an enhanced appointment service over the coming weeks.

While the HSE is working to put in place short-term solutions, the modernisation of the service requires, in our view, a number of other actions.

I have set out above our view that there may be merit in integrating the Civil Registration Service into this Department and this is a matter that, as the pressures from Covid-19 abate, we will take-up and explore further with the Department of Health and the HSE.

Separately, the Department of Social Protection is working towards providing a range of online registration options to remove the requirement for in-person registration. In effect this would, with suitable controls, provide direct access from citizens to request the recording of life events on the register and to seek copies of registration documents, so obviating the need to access the registers via the Civil Registration Service (although the service would remain in place throughout the country for clients who prefer an in-person service or who cannot access online options). These innovations will require changes to the Civil Registration Act. Subject to progress in the technical evaluation and design of such solutions the Minister for Social Protection is amenable to bringing proposals to Government during the year in respect of the enabling legislation. I believe that these innovative online services will, if implemented, offer hugely improved services to members of the public.

The Department will continue to work with the HSE and the Department of Health on these developments. All three organisations are committed to bring about longer-term improvements in how the State registers life events.

I am happy to provide the Committee with further assistance should it have further questions.

Is Mise,



John McKeon,
Secretary-General

CC: Mr Robert Watt, Secretary-General,
Department of Health