Proposed closure of Barnard Castle Register Office Public Consultation 2 - 30 April 2026

Background

A recent survey during January and February 2026 asked people who had recently used our Registration Service to tell us about their experiences and how they would like services to be delivered in the future. Over 200 people responded with overall positive feedback about the care, professionalism and sensitivity shown by our staff during important life events, the option to speak to someone in person remains important, particularly at times of joy or loss and that The Story is an excellent venue for ceremonies of all sizes, offering high-quality rooms and a unique setting that attracts couples from both within and outside County Durham.

Mindful of the Register Services available at The Story and the improvements we will continue to make to ensure it provides is an attractive and unique offer, the Council proposes to close the Register Office which currently offers a space for ceremonies in Barnard Castle.

All registrations of births, deaths and other statutory services including statutory marriages within County Durham are carried out at The Story. The Barnard Castle office currently provides a space for celebrations only and this has been the situation for the past six years.

The Barnard Castle venue is not of the same standard as The Story, and there are several alternative and well-established venues in the area where ceremonies can take place. Due to budget constraints and the low number of ceremonies held at the office, the Council is unable to invest in improving the building or sustain its future running costs.

All ceremonies already booked at Barnard Castle during 2026 will still go ahead. However, no new bookings will be taken after the proposed closure date of December 2026 and future ceremony bookings will be offered at The Story.

Purpose of the public consultation

The Council recognises that the proposed closure may have an impact on people and communities in the west of the county and carried out a targeted public consultation between 2 – 30 April 2026 to understand:

- how local residents and businesses may be affected by this change,
- what support or adjustments could help reduce any negative impacts

The consultation was promoted by social media, through Teasdale Local Network outreach to key stakeholders and contacts, paper surveys in the library and online through our corporate consultation platform ‘Let’s Talk County Durham’.

Consultation findings

Whilst our consultation on feedback on services from The Story received 212 responses, the consultation regarding the proposed closure of Barnard Castle Office, received 10 online responses and one email response.

In addition, one of the local Councillors submitted a petition, which was signed by 200 people 'objecting to closing the Register Office in Barnard Castle and requesting to maintain an Office for face-to-face interviews for births, deaths, marriages and civil partnerships. The document did not meet the Council's criteria for petitions (it did not contain address details for all of the signatories) however, the Council has considered the representations included within the statement.

From the responses to the survey, a summary of their main concerns were:

a) the perceived impact of losing a local venue for the registration of births, deaths and marriages.

b) difficulty and inconvenience of travelling to Durham or other locations, especially for those without a car, and the lack of direct public transport.

c) disadvantage to local businesses and the town.

In terms of mitigations, the respondents asked for the maintenance of a minimum service, even if they were to be offered from alternative local locations.

The points raised in the statement submitted included:

a) all signatories to the statement were in support of maintaining service provision in Barnard Castle. Registration services could be provided from an alternative location within Barnard Castle. The library was one suggested location. A local business also offered the use of their space on a weekly basis. Officers have met and corresponded with the local Councillors to discuss the proposals and the points set out above.

The Council acknowledges the response from local residents and the desire to maintain a Register Office within Barnard Castle. However, the Council has a statutory responsibility to ensure a reliable and accessible Registration Service across the whole of County Durham.

Historically, the Council operated locality Register Offices in Consett, Seaham, Barnard Castle. These offices, which were only open on certain days of the week due to low demand, were closed during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Registration Services were offered from the Register Offices at Aykley Heads and Bishop Auckland until the opening of The Story in June 2024. Since then, all registration services have operated from the single location.

The Council has considered whether it is feasible to re-instate the registration services from Barnard Castle. The Council does not own the Register Office in Barnard Castle; it is rented from a private landlord. Based on current demands, the rental and running costs of the premises exceed the income generated. The building requires investment to bring it up to a modern standard.

Over the last three financial years, there have been a total of 41 ceremonies conducted at the Register Office. In 2019/20 (the last year registration appointments were offered at Barnard Castle) there were 66 appointments. Only 30 of those were linked to Barnard Castle. This level of demand is insufficient to justify the investment required to refurbish the Register Office.

Consideration has also been given to providing a registration service from an alternative location within Barnard Castle such as the library. Two Registrars would be required to be available for a minimum of half a day a week to cover any appointments. This would reduce the number of appointments available at The Story by between 12 (if death registrations) or 19 (if birth registrations). This has a significant impact on the number of appointments that can be offered across the County and resilience within the service in the event of annual leave and staff absence. The level of demand in Barnard Castle highlighted above is not sufficient to risk the wider continuity of the service. If a registration service were re-introduced in Barnard Castle, consideration would need to be given to introducing similar services elsewhere in the County. This would further compound the risks to service continuity.

There are also practical implications in relation to operating the service out of an alternative location. Blank certificates must be stored securely to the satisfaction of the General Register Office. It is unlikely that alternative locations, which have other uses, would meet these strict requirements. Registrars cannot travel with blank certificates for similar security reasons. In addition, the Registrars would be unable to take payment for certificates. Therefore, residents would need to order and pay for their certificates to be posted to them following their appointment.

It is notable that the Service has not received any complaints since registration services were ceased at Barnard Castle in 2019/20. Also, with effect from September 2026, residents will be able to register deaths by telephone. The introduction of birth registrations by telephone and online is expected to follow in the next few years.

Conclusions

The majority of concerns raised during this consultation focused on perceived loss of services which have not been delivered locally for the past six years. During this time, we have not received any formal complaints. The availability of appointments at the Story enables all residents of County Durham to receive a high quality service and the performance targets set by General Register Office to be met.

Taking into consideration the concerns expressed through the consultation, the implications on resources and the planned introduction of a new service enabling residents to register deaths by telephone from September 2026, which help to mitigate against the travel concerns expressed against the proposed closure.

The risk to service delivery across the Council and the financial implications of retaining a Register Office in Barnard Castle are not in the interests of residents or the Council.

In conclusion, a recommendation will be made to proceed with the proposed closure of the Register Office.

Further information

A report of consultation feedback to the survey taken directly from the Let's Talk County Durham platform is attached in Appendix 1.

Appendix 1: Responses to survey questions

How do you think you will be impacted by the proposed closure of the Barnard Castle Registration Office? Please specify any details of these impacts. (9 responses)

Respondents overwhelmingly expressed concern about the accessibility issues caused by the proposed closure of the Barnard Castle Registration Office.

The most common theme was the difficulty and inconvenience of travelling to Durham or other locations, especially for those without a car, with journeys often requiring multiple buses or trains and taking up to two hours or more.

This was highlighted as particularly problematic for vulnerable groups, such as families with newborns, people registering deaths, and those affected by the cost of living crisis.

Several respondents noted the negative impact on local businesses and the community, as marriage ceremonies and other services would no longer be available locally. There was also concern that removing local services would further disadvantage the town and surrounding rural areas, which are vast and lack direct public transport links to Durham.

A minority of respondents were either unaware of the office's existence or did not elaborate on personal impact. Overall, the closure is seen as a move that would cause significant stress and inconvenience for residents, with strong calls to retain local services.

Is there anything we can do to help reduce any negative impacts that concern you? (9 responses)

The most common concern among respondents is the potential closure or reduction of services at the Barnard Castle Registry Office.

Many emphasise the importance of keeping the office open or at least maintaining a minimum service to avoid negative impacts on the local community, particularly those living in remote areas.

Several responses highlight the need for more local options or alternative locations within easy travelling distance.

Transport issues are also raised, with suggestions for improved public transport to reach main offices, noting that Barnard Castle residents find it easier to travel to Darlington and Richmond than to County Durham's main city.

One respondent felt that nothing could be done to reduce negative impacts.

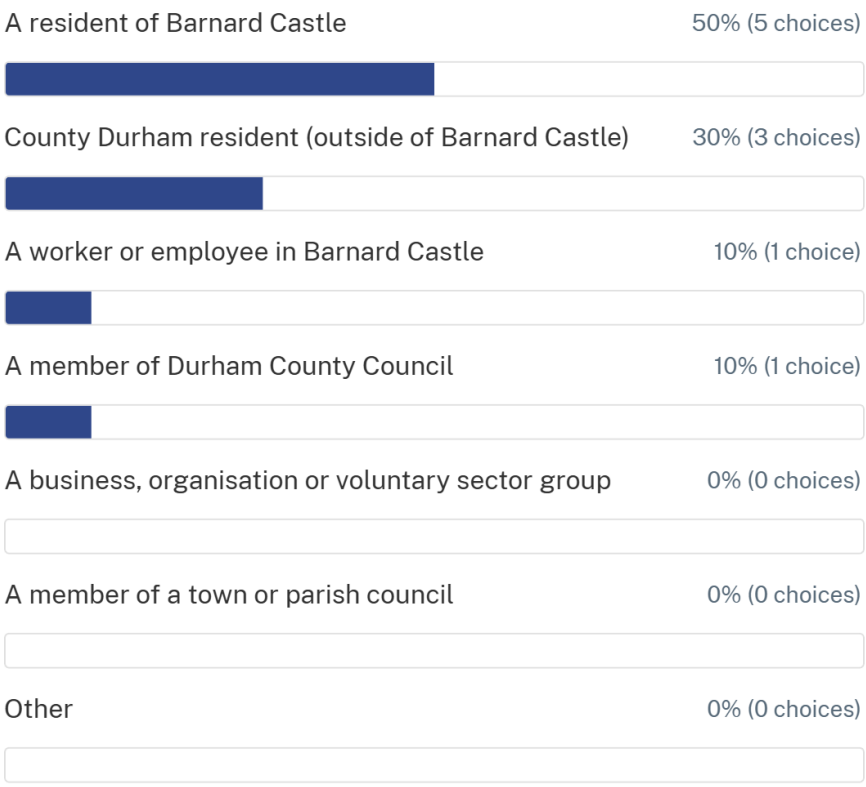
Overall, the strongest trend is a desire to retain accessible, local registry services in Barnard Castle.

Breakdown of respondents

The following images of tables show the breakdown of response types and characteristic groups.50% of respondents were residents; no responses were received from local businesses. 55% were female, 66% had a physical disability, 55% were aged 55-64.

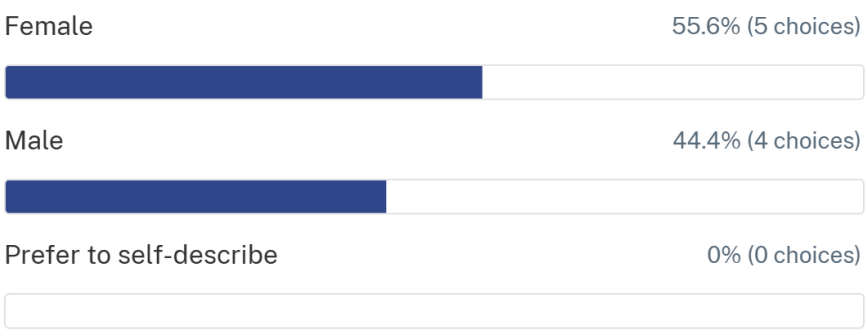
Are you mainly responding as:

10/10 - Multiple choice - choose one - optional



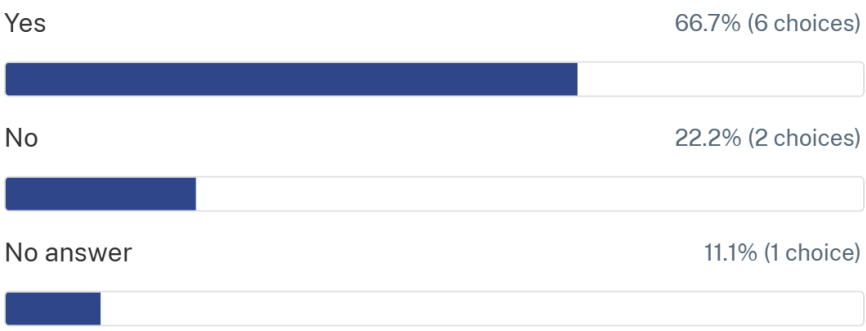
What is your gender?

9/9 - Multiple choice - choose one - optional



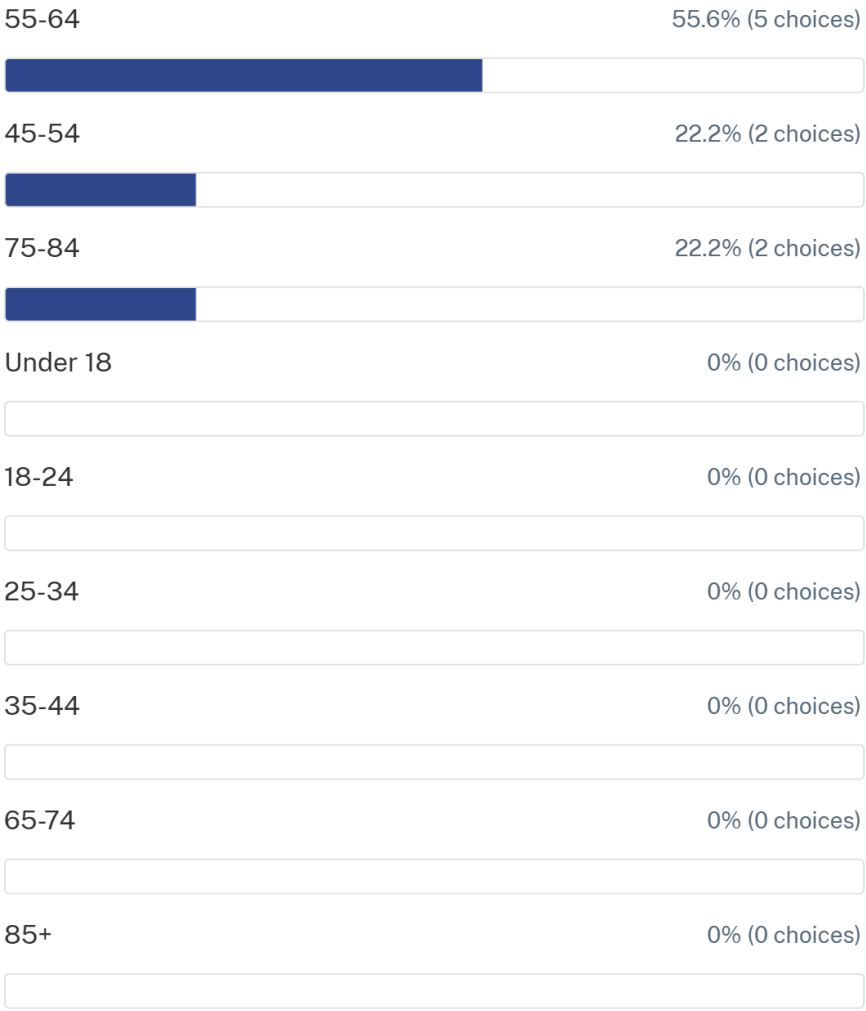
Do you have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last 12 months or more?

8/9 - Multiple choice - choose one - optional



What is your age?

9/9 - Multiple choice - choose one - optional



How would you best describe your sexual orientation?

9/9 - Multiple choice - choose one - optional

Heterosexual/straight	100% (9 choices)
Bisexual	0% (0 choices)
Gay or lesbian	0% (0 choices)
Other	0% (0 choices)

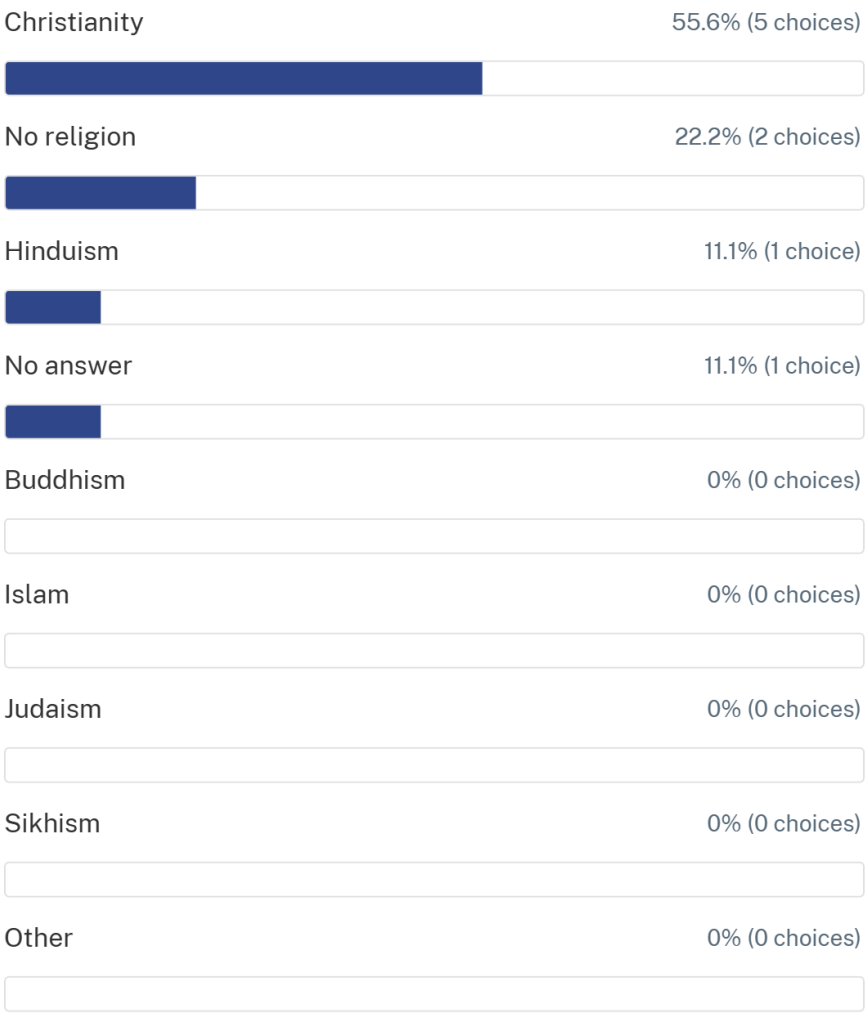
What is your ethnicity?

9/9 - Multiple choice - choose one - optional

White British	100% (9 choices)
White non-British	0% (0 choices)
Asian or Asian British	0% (0 choices)
Black or Black British	0% (0 choices)
Arab or Middle Eastern	0% (0 choices)
Mixed Race	0% (0 choices)
Travelling Community	0% (0 choices)
Other	0% (0 choices)

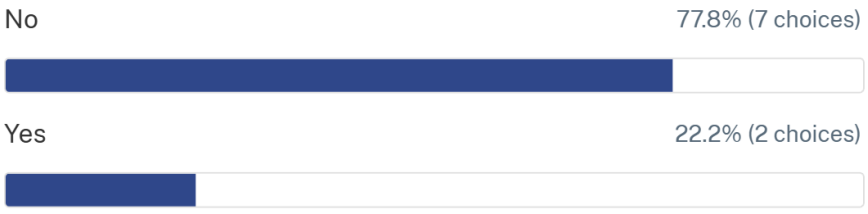
What is your religion or belief?

8/9 - Multiple choice - choose one - optional



Are you, or have you ever been, a member of the armed forces?

9/9 - Multiple choice - choose one - optional



Have you ever been in care/are you care-experienced?

9/9 - Multiple choice - choose one - optional

No	100% (9 choices)
Yes	0% (0 choices)