

**CORONER SERVICE REVIEW – INTERIM REPORT**

**To:** Communities and Partnership Committee

**Meeting Date:** 12 March 2020

**From:** Adrian Chapman, Service Director for Community and Safety

**Electoral division(s):** All

**Forward Plan ref:** N/A                      **Key decision:** No

**Purpose:** To provide the Committee with an interim report on the review of the Coroner Service.

**Recommendation:** The Committee is asked to:

- a) Note the progress that has been made in reviewing the Service; and
- b) Agree to suspend any further review of the Service until new national guidance on a Model Coroner Area has been issued, noting that other work, summarised in section 2.4.1, will continue regardless.

<b><i>Officer contact:</i></b>		<b><i>Member contacts:</i></b>	
Name:	Christine May	Names:	Councillor Steve Criswell
Post:	AD, Cultural & Community Services	Post:	Chairman
Email:	Christine.may@cambridgeshire.gov.uk	Email:	Steve.criswell@cambridgeshire.gov.uk
Tel:	01223 703521	Tel:	01223 706398

## **1. BACKGROUND**

- 1.1 An annual report on the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Coroner Service was presented to the August 2019 meeting of this Committee, setting out the background to the service, key achievements and challenges. In that report it was stated: 'the transfer of the service to a new directorate will also enable the Service Director for Communities and Partnerships to review the issues in depth, and agree necessary mitigations. It is also the intention of the service to present to this Committee at regular intervals to ensure Members are kept fully informed of progress.'
- 1.2 The minutes of the November 2019 meeting of this Committee reported that: 'Members were informed that the forecast pressure on the Coroners Service, as well as the forecast over-recovery of income in the Registration Service, had led to reviews being carried out on both services in order to reduce or remove the pressures. The Committee would receive reports on the reviews at its meeting on 13th February 2020' (now deferred to March).
- 1.3 This interim report is a summary of progress made so far.
- 1.4 At an initial meeting to discuss the Review, the Senior Coroner explained that there is national work ongoing by the Chief Coroner's office which, when completed, will form part of a new 'Model Coroner Area' document to be produced by the Chief Coroner.

## **2. MAIN ISSUES**

### **2.1 Service Structure**

- 2.1.1 Following a senior management restructure in the Communities and Partnerships service directorate, the Coroner Service will be positioned within the Regulatory Services department of the Communities and Partnerships service directorate from April 2020. The newly-appointed Assistant Director for Regulatory Services, Peter Gell, will also lead the Cambridgeshire Registration Service, and various Regulatory functions (including Trading Standards, Environmental Health and Licensing), some or all of which are delivered for Cambridgeshire County, Peterborough City and/or Rutland County Councils.
- 2.1.2 Any change in structural arrangements provides opportunities to review practice and to ensure that services have sufficient capacity and resources to deliver effectively. This is clearly even more important in services such as Coroners, where families and friends are directly affected and where a timely and sensitive response is vital. In addition, the Coroner service must meet statutory minimum obligations in terms of service standards and timescales.
- 2.1.3 As previously reported, demand for Coroner services has increased significantly in recent months, leading to significant financial pressures across the service. A significant uplift was agreed as part of the 2020/21 Business Planning process, in order to address the increasing workload and a backlog of cases requiring investigation. This was to cover the cost of an additional 3.5 full time equivalent (fte)

Coroners Officers (increasing from 13.5 fte to 17 fte), ensuring more manageable workloads, as well as the costs of additional Assistant Coroner time to investigate cases, and the rising costs from hospital mortuaries and pathologists, specialist reports etc. Most of this staffing has now been appointed; however it should be noted that the impact on the backlog will not be immediate, as new staff take time to become fully competent in the role. Of importance, this additional resource has now been made permanent.

- 2.1.4 In order to ensure sufficient management capacity to manage this larger team, a new team structure has been put in place with the internal appointment to three Senior Coroners Officer roles to manage smaller teams of Coroners Officers. This has served to provide more individual support to, and supervision of, Officers.
- 2.1.5 In addition, we have worked with the Senior Coroner to establish a business case to appoint a permanent Area Coroner rather than making use of often ad hoc Assistant Coroner support. The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough jurisdiction is undoubtedly one of the most complex in the country with multiple prisons, mental health facilities and hospitals (including two that are world-leading), together with A-roads and motorways. The Area Coroner will assist with the workload which is impacted by this complexity, provide continuity in approach for Coroners Officers, and also provide much needed cover and support for the Senior Coroner. This key change is achieved with a net zero impact on the budget, although the benefits to the service and to bereaved families will be significant.
- 2.1.6 Although this additional capacity will clearly significantly help the pressures the service has been facing, there is other work we can and must do to support the Senior Coroner and his team. For example, over the next few months, and alongside the separate review of the Registration service, we will bring together the Coroner and Registration staff teams to develop an even closer working relationship than at present. The effectiveness of the links and workflows between these two services is an integral part of the way both services run, and we will take the opportunity to review this and introduce improvements if necessary.

## **2.2 Accommodation**

- 2.2.1 Following the relocation of Huntingdon Registration Office into the adjacent Huntington Library building, and the relocation of all Registration records into the new Archives building in Ely in late 2019, much-needed space has become available in Lawrence Court for the Coroner Service to move into.
- 2.2.2 Redecorations and improvements to the electrics, IT and security in the building have also taken place recently, in order to make the building a more fit for purpose space for the Service.
- 2.2.3 Despite this, and with a growing service and current backlogs, we will need continue to closely monitor the accommodation available to the service to ensure it meets requirements and does not hinder the effective and timely delivery of the service.

## **2.3 Model Coroner Area**

- 2.3.1 As described above, the Chief Coroner is currently committed to reviewing the 'Model Coroner Area'. The original Model Coroner Area framework was produced to *“assist senior coroners, local authorities and police authorities as to the nature, scope and organisation of a model coroner area”*. It goes on to state that *“all should work together to try and achieve, wherever possible, the aspirations of this model”*.
- 2.3.2 This national review is an important piece of work, and it is hoped that it will recognise the significant increases in demand and workload being faced by Coroner services across the UK, and in particular the unique features of areas such as Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, which lead to a disproportionate increase in demand.
- 2.3.3 Our own Senior Coroner is closely monitoring the progress of this national work, although there is no clear indication yet of the timescale for its completion.

## **2.4 Summary**

- 2.4.1 The Coroner service is delivering high quality and responsive services in challenging, demand-driven circumstances. Some of the changes we have made in recent weeks – notably, an increase in staff resources, the addition of a new Area Coroner role, and the service restructure – are already having a positive impact, and there is further work we will do, including ensuring relationships and protocols between key service areas are robust and effective, and that the premises from which the service operates meet the needs of a growing service.

Alongside this, the critical review, by the Chief Coroner, of the Model Coroner Area will, we hope, lead to a rebalancing of resources at a national level in order to better equip areas such as ours with the resource levels we need to meet demand.

For all of these reasons, it is recommended that the formal review be suspended, and revisited as and when the Model Coroner Area review is concluded.

Formal liaison meetings are being established between the Senior Coroner and his key team and the key leadership staff, including the Service Director, within the service directorate, and these will ensure progress continues to be made on day-to-day improvements and enhancements where necessary. The Committee Chairman will also be invited to attend these meetings.

## **ALIGNMENT WITH CORPORATE PRIORITIES**

### **3.1 A good quality of life for everyone**

The following bullet points set out details of implications identified:

- Delivery of an efficient and professional Coronial Service directly impacts on the well-being and quality of life of bereaved families.
- The work that HMC undertakes to prevent future deaths, either through Section 28 notices following an Inquest or working with partners to identify trends, contributes to the wider quality of life of others.

### **3.2 Thriving places for people to live**

No specific alignment, although learning from cases can and should be used to prevent recurrences of avoidable circumstances.

### **3.3 The best start for Cambridgeshire's Children**

No specific alignment, although learning from cases can and should be used to prevent recurrences of avoidable circumstances.

### **3.4 Net zero carbon emissions for Cambridgeshire by 2050**

Growing the capacity of our own in-house team will reduce the reliance on agency and locum staff, in turn reducing unnecessary travel to and from the county.

## **4. SIGNIFICANT IMPLICATIONS**

### **4.1 Resource Implications**

This report sets out significant implications in section 2.1

### **4.2 Procurement/Contractual/Council Contract Procedure Rules Implications**

As noted in the previous report, the cost of third party contracts for body removal and storage, pathology and mortuary services has increased and is adding to the uplift of costs for the service. There is very little or no choice of suppliers in these markets, however new contracts have recently been entered into, making the costs more predictable for future years.

### **4.3 Statutory, Legal and Risk Implications**

The Local Authority has a statutory duty to provide the necessary resources to support the work of HM Coroner. This is also a high profile service and therefore carries reputational risk implications.

### **4.4 Equality and Diversity Implications**

There are no significant implications.

### **4.5 Engagement and Communications Implications**

There are no significant implications.

### **4.6 Localism and Local Member Involvement**

There are no significant implications.

## 4.7 Public Health Implications

The Coroner Service works closely in partnership with both primary and secondary care health services, and would benefit from even closer working with Public Health.

Implications	Officer Clearance
Have the resource implications been cleared by Finance?	Yes Name of Financial Officer: Martin Wade
Have the procurement/contractual/ Council Contract Procedure Rules implications been cleared by the LGSS Head of Procurement?	Yes Name of Officer: Gus de Silva
Has the impact on statutory, legal and risk implications been cleared by the Monitoring Officer?	Yes Name of Monitoring Officer: Fiona McMillan
Have the equality and diversity implications been cleared by your Service Contact?	Yes Name of Officer: Adrian Chapman
Have any engagement and communication implications been cleared by Communications?	Yes Name of Officer: Eleanor Bell
Have any localism and Local Member involvement issues been cleared by your Service Contact?	Yes Name of Officer: Adrian Chapman
Have any Public Health implications been cleared by Public Health	Yes Name of Officer: Liz Robin

Source Documents	Location
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Coroner Service Annual Report to Communities and Partnership Committee, 8 August 2019	<a href="https://tinyurl.com/vmdk69p">https://tinyurl.com/vmdk69p</a>