

Title of Meeting: Cabinet

Date of Meeting: 6 November 2014

Subject: Management and location of Coroners Service to within Portsmouth City Council

Report from: Michael Lawther, City Solicitor & Strategic Director and Louise Wilders: Head of CCDS

Wards Affected: All

Key Decision: No (>£250K)

Full Council Decision: No

1. Purpose of this report

The purpose of the report is to seek agreement to host the Coroners service within PCC.

At present the Portsmouth and SE Hampshire Coroners service is managed jointly by Hampshire Constabulary and Hampshire County Council with Portsmouth City Council contributing the main funding. HCC take the lead responsibility.

In order to protect PCC from unexpected costs and to ensure that a viable service continues at economic cost it is recommended that the service is hosted by PCC on behalf of Hampshire Constabulary and Hampshire County Council and that it moves from its' current location in the Guildhall to within the Civic Offices.

Staff would be transferred from their respective organisations to PCC.

Joint funding arrangements with HCC would continue at their present agreed level of 70/30 PCC/HCC.

2. Recommendations

It is recommended that Cabinet:

- (i) Note the contents of this report;
- (ii) Agree the hosting of the Coroners Service within PCC;
- (iii) Agree to the movement of staff from their respective organisations to PCC employment directly;
- (iv) Note the ring-fencing of budget with regard to the coroner's service.

3. The Service

The service is an extremely busy one. In 2013 there were 3062 deaths reported to the coroner which resulted in 1227 post mortems and 351 inquests. This has increased in recent years and is now about 20% higher than it was historically. This trend is expected to continue. The total cost of the service in 2013/14 was £1,066,677.

It should be noted that the Coroners Service is demand led. 80% of the costs arise from tests and examinations which are ordered by the coroner to properly determine the cause of a death. When deaths occur these are reported to the coroner and a decision is made if there is the need for an investigation and / or inquest.

The cost of services received from the QA hospital with regard to post mortem charges and storage costs has been subject to some pressure and has recently increased by 15 to 20% (depending on the service required). However the fees remain competitive with charges made by other local and regional facilities. A new payment schedule has been agreed with QA and this will protect PCC (and HCC) to a degree.

The vast majority of the post mortem examinations are made at the QA and are made by Consultants who invoice the coroner's service for their charges. The QA invoice the service for the use of their facilities with regard to storage, tests, facilities used and administration.

The main cost of the service is accounted for by these charges.

The service is staffed by 3.5 Coroners Officers and 2 (1 in post currently) Administrative Officers.

Some staff are employed by the Constabulary and some by HCC. None are employed directly by PCC at present. However the funding for the service is split as follows; PCC 70%: HCC 30%

Within this 2.5 Coroners Officers are paid for 50% by Hampshire Constabulary and 50% by the other parties.

Hampshire Constabulary have indicated that they will cut their funding to 25% in 2015/16 and to nil in 2016/17. Whilst this will be challenged it is unlikely that the police will continue to fund and have already withdrawn funding in other areas of England

Staff costs account for approximately 20% of the total cost of the service.

The Coroner himself is appointed by the Lord Chancellor in consultation with the Chief Coroner and the relevant Local Authority, however coroners are not directly employed by local authorities and are akin to judicial appointments, neither are they employed by Ministry of Justice. For the purposes of this paper the coroner would not be employed by PCC directly.

In addition the Coroner does not line-manage the staff in the Coroner's Office. At present this role is undertaken in part by the police and by HCC - neither of which have a physical presence in the Coroner's Office.

4. Justification for the move to PCC

The service at present is jointly managed by HCC and Hampshire Constabulary together with the Coroner himself. However the main burden of financing this service falls on PCC. In order to better manage the costs and administration of the service it would be more logical (and would put PCC in a position to better influence decisions) that PCC become the host employer as well as the principal cost bearer.

There is also the administrative benefit that would arise if the administration of the service were managed from within the Registration Service (CCDS).

There is a dependency and inter-relationship between the Registration Service and Coroners which in the past has been difficult. There would be benefits to the main customers (bereaved families and individuals) if this could be made to work better.

Additionally the costs arising from the service could be managed better if these are moved from HCC financial systems to within PCC.

Because PCC bear the main financial cost of the service we would always be in a better position to manage the costs if these were easily available and better understood on a day to day basis. Hosting the service locally would enable this.

As the coroners service is a statutory requirement it should be noted that local authorities bear the costs of the service ultimately and are required to do so. In this respect the costs of the service should be budgeted for in a distinct ring-fenced budget.

In terms of current facilities the coroner's office within the Guildhall is not suitable for their needs and there is a degree of concern over the security of their current facilities with regard to public access and to proper storage of confidential material. This would be addressed if the service moved to the Civic Offices.

5. Summary

In summary, the Coroner's Office for Portsmouth and South-East Hants which is a statutory service, is predominately funded by Portsmouth City Council, but currently managed by HCC and Hampshire Constabulary.

The total cost of the service in 2013/14 was £1,066,677.

Hampshire Constabulary reduced the funding of 'their' staff (2.5 Coroners Officers) to 50% in the 2014/15 Financial Year and are further reducing it to 25% in 2015/16 and nil in 2016/17.

The main costs of the service (80%) arise from tests and examinations which are ordered by the coroner to properly determine the cause of a death. These costs are subject to a 15% - 20% increase by QA this year.

In order to be in a better position to manage the costs, which would include a review of the service provision, moving the office from the Guildhall to Civic Offices and the introduction of robust financial and contract management it is proposed to transfer the service to PCC from 1st April 2015.

HCC have confirmed they are happy with this proposal and would implement an additional management charge should the service not be transferred.

If the transfer is approved, the budget would need to be ring-fenced as a demand led service.

6. Equality impact assessment (EIA)

This report does not require an Equality Assessment as the proposal does not have any impact on a particular equalities group.

7. City Solicitors

The Council is obliged to provide funding for the coroner's service. The proposed arrangements will however give the Council greater day to day control of the administration of the service and management of the costs.

8. Head of Finance's comments

The 2014/15 budget provision for PCC's contribution to the Coroner's service is £720,200. There is no additional cost to the City Council as a direct result of the transfer of the service. Future increases in cost arising from the reductions in funding support from Hampshire Constabulary are already planned and would have happened regardless of the proposed management change. The transfer to PCC

does however, offer the potential to better manage the future service costs and any emerging budget pressures.

Signed:

Louise Wilders

Head of Customer, Community & Democratic Services

The recommendation(s) set out above were approved/ approved as amended/
deferred/ rejected by Cabinet on 6 November 2014

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Signed by: