

**HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**

**COMMUNITY INFORMATION AND PROTECTION  
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**TUESDAY 11 MARCH 2003 at 10.30 A.M.**

Agenda Item No.

**4**

**BEST VALUE REVIEW OF CORONERS IMPLEMENTATION MONITORING**

*Report of the Head of Statutory Services*

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**1. Purpose of Report**

Following a monitoring report to members of the Community Information and Protection Scrutiny Committee on 12 March 2002, the committee requested that a report be provided a year later, on how the current arrangements had bedded in and whether any issues had arisen.

**2. Summary**

The implementation of the Coroners Service Best Value Review was on time and within budget. On-going monitoring indicates that the Service continues to move forward when measured against the Best Value targets. Appendix I details the actions and the position the Service had reached in March 2002.

**3. Conclusions**

In light of the ongoing development of the Coroners Service in line with the recommendations of the Best Value Review, Members are invited to review the progress made to date and to decide whether any further scrutiny of this issue is required.

## **1. Introduction**

Detailed below is the current position on each of the actions arising from the review.

## **2. Transfer of Staff**

The Police staff have been successfully integrated into the new Coroner Unit. The next stage is to site the Coroner's Officers and Clerks in the same office and increase the flexibility between the two roles. This will commence when the Service moves to the courthouse in Old Hatfield (27 March 2003) and we have the accommodation that will allow us to base all the staff in one room.

## **3. Revise Working Protocols**

- 3.1 Procedures have been developed with the involvement of all staff. For example protocols have been developed with Hertfordshire Constabulary and GPs regarding the response to sudden deaths. In some respects this is a never ending process, under constant review. We are currently developing a protocol with Hertfordshire Constabulary regarding the attendance of Coroner's Officers at the scene of major incidents and multiple fatalities.

## **4. Communicate Revised Protocols**

- 4.1 There is regular communication with key stakeholders such as GPs, hospitals and undertakers. These have proved very beneficial to all parties through the sharing of ideas, the development of joint working and new initiatives.

## **5. Initiate Staff Development**

- 5.1 Staff development has been introduced in line with the County Secretary's Staff Development Scheme and has proved effective in identifying training and development needs for staff. Hertfordshire staff are amongst the first group of staff nationally being supported as they study for the Certificate of Professional Development (Coroner's Law and Practice).
- 5.2 Coroners Officers and Clerks do a job that can be distressing. It involves frequent liaison with the bereaved. As a result a model of on-going supervision has been introduced, using as its basis the model used for Social Workers. This includes formal debriefing sessions after serious and distressing incidents and regular one-to-one supervision meetings with all staff. The model was introduced in November 2002 for consultation and will be launched in March 2003

## **6. Develop Formal Complaints and Monitoring System**

- 6.1 A formal complaints and monitoring system has been introduced in accordance with the Corporate Services complaints procedure.

6.2 To date there has been one complaint in the last 12 months and this was resolved at stage 1. There has been 24 written compliments in the last 12 months.

## **7. Introduce Coroners' Charter**

7.1 The Coroners' Charter was introduced in July 2001. The standards set within it for the work of the Service are higher than those suggested by the Home Office in the national framework.

7.2 The Charter is reviewed annually. To date it has not required a rewrite. One is likely to be required when the Shipman Inquiry and the Fundamental Review of Death Certification and the Coroner Services of England, Wales and Northern Ireland are published and relocation to Hatfield.

## **8. Review Mortuary Services Contract and Coroners' Removal Contract**

8.1 The Mortuary Services Contract was renewed in July 2003.

8.2 The Coroner's Body Removal Contract is due to be renewed in November 2003. The Coroner's Unit Manager and CSCS are exploring a range of options for the new contract.

## **9. Write to Home Office to Highlight Anomalies and Concerns**

9.1 There is on-going dialogue with the Home Office who are well aware of the limitations placed on the Service by certain statutory requirements, such as the lack of flexibility caused by rigid boundaries for jurisdictions.

9.2 The Coroner's Manager is an advisor to the LGA and is a representative on the Coroner Service Consultative Committee and Coroner's Officer Working Party.

9.3 The Fundamental Review team have visited and spent time with the Hertfordshire Coroner Service looking at how the Service operates. They were particularly interested in the Hertfordshire Coroner Service because the way the Service is organised and managed. We believe it is perceived as highly innovative.

## **10. The Future**

10.1 The Coroner Service in Hertfordshire is following a process of continuous development with an exciting future.

10.2 At the end of March the Service is due to relocate from Leahoe House to Hatfield Courthouse. This will give the Service its own courthouse. It will mean Hertfordshire can offer a fully integrated service on one site. Few other local authorities in England and Wales offer such a service.

10.3 The Shipman Inquiry and Fundamental Review are both due to report in Spring 2003. Early indications are that both reports will recommend major changes, in particular, to the role of the Coroners. It appears that there will be fewer judicial Coroners and they will be full time and cover larger geographical areas. In addition there will be a new tier introduced, that of Medical Coroner/Auditor.

## **11 Financial Implications**

11.1 There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

**BEST VALUE REVIEW OF CORONERS  
IMPLEMENTATION MONITORING SHEET**

<u>Best Value action/target</u>	<u>Responsible officer</u>	<b>Savings to date/ projected</b>	<b>Progress</b>	<u>By when</u>	
				<b>Original Date</b>	<b>Current Estimate</b>
<b>Transfer of staff</b> currently based in police stations supporting the coroner to Leahoe House.	Tom Hawkyard Steve Charteris		Transfer agreement was signed and effective from April 2001. Bringing all the Coroners support staff together has reduced average turnaround time. Current estimates are 1 to 2 days' reduction.	April 2001	<u>Completed</u> April 2001
<u>Revise working protocols</u> Procedures for how staff will work together with new arrangements	Tom Hawkyard Steve Charteris		Unit procedures have been developed regarding working together. Coroner's Unit meetings are now scheduled to address specific procedural issues. There is on-going review of procedures.		<u>Completed</u> On-going
<b>Communicate revised protocols</b> to all stakeholders. Hospitals, undertakers etc. need to understand the new system	Tom Hawkyard Steve Charteris		Introduction of new protocols: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hertfordshire Constabulary have a clear process map of response to sudden death. (Current Force review underway).</li> <li>Referral protocol has been published to all GPs in Hertfordshire.</li> <li>Referral protocol has been published to all hospitals in Hertfordshire.</li> <li>Coroner's Unit has a training role for probationary Police Officers and Police Family Liaison Officers.</li> <li>Coroners are considering a draft protocol with Trust Pathology departments.</li> </ul>		<u>Completed</u> Jan 2001  August 2001 August 2001 Monthly  Current

<u>Best Value action/target</u>	<u>Responsible officer</u>	<b>Savings to date/ projected</b>	<b>Progress</b>	<u>By when</u>	
				<b>Original Date</b>	<b>Current Estimate</b>
<b>Initiate staff development</b> with regular training. This action is to address concerns about previous lack of staff development and training.	Tom Hawkyard Steve Charteris		Regular training and staff development has been introduced. All staff incorporated into County Secretary's Staff Development Scheme.		<u>Completed</u> Annual meetings October 2001

<u>Best Value action/target</u>	<u>Responsible officer</u>	<b>Savings to date/ projected</b>	<b>Progress</b>	<u>By when</u>	
				<b>Original Date</b>	<b>Current Estimate</b>
<b>Develop formal complaints and monitoring system</b>	Tom Hawkyard Steve Charteris		Since April 1 <sup>st</sup> complaints come through to HCC. The Coroner Service Charter sets out the process for complainants. Those complaints that are concerned with the administration of the Coroner's unit or the conduct of staff will be dealt with in accordance with 'Corporate Services complaints procedure'.	April 2001	<u>Completed</u> October 2001
<b>Introduce Coroners Charter</b> and review in two years.	Tom Hawkyard Steve Charteris		Local officer is part of national group devising standards. Our local charter has higher standards than those in the national framework.	Charter launch originally July 2001	<u>Completed</u> October 2001 (Reviewed annually)

<u>Best Value action/target</u>	<u>Responsible officer</u>	<b>Savings to date/ projected</b>	<b>Progress</b>	<u>By when</u>	
				<b>Original Date</b>	<b>Current Estimate</b>
<b>Renew Mortuary Services Contract &amp; Coroners Removal Contract</b>	Tom Hawkyard Steve Charteris		Saving of £143,000 over 3 years due to new mortuary contract. (NB: This assumes the contract is extended for an additional year after year 2). Cost per case has reduced from £96 to £75 for West Hertfordshire NHS Trust and from £100 and £108 to £59.93 for East and North Hertfordshire NHS Trust. Although increased demand means cost overall continues to rise.	Contract commenced July 00	<u>Completed</u> July 2000
<b>Write to Home Office to highlight anomalies and concerns</b>	Tom Hawkyard Steve Charteris		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is ongoing dialogue with the Home Office regarding all aspects of provision of a Coroner's service.</li> <li>• There is representation from Hertfordshire on the Home Office Coroners Consultative Committee and Coroner's Officer Working Party.</li> <li>• We have met with the committee of the fundamental review of Coroner's system and had input into the review</li> </ul>		<u>On-going</u>  <b>On-going</b> quarterly meetings  November 2001

Thursday, 27 February 2003