

HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

COMMUNITY SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MONDAY 22 MARCH 2004 AT 10.00A.M.

Agenda Item No.

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NEW ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE CORONER SERVICE

Report of the Head of Coroners Unit

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1. Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to update members on the progress of the new arrangements for the Coroner Services as requested by the Scrutiny Committee.

2. Summary

The Best Value Review of Coroners identified a need for the service to move to accommodation where there were court facilities for inquests, when the opportunity arose. That opportunity presented itself in the winter of 2002 and in March 2003 the Coroner Service relocated to The Old Courthouse Hatfield. This report highlights the benefits and changes that have been introduced.

3. Conclusions

- 3.1 To continue the on going development of the Coroner Service at the Old Courthouse Hatfield in line with the benefits and changes detailed at section 4.
- 3.2 Members are invited to review and comment on these issues and decide if further scrutiny of this matter is required. Members are also invited to make any recommendations on this issue to the Cabinet or the County Secretary.
- 3.3 Benefits and changes for the Coroner Service arising from the move.

4.1 Location of Staff

- 4.1.1 The move has meant all Coroner Service Staff are now located in one office. As a result there has been increased flexibility between roles within the office with staff more able to cover for one another. This has reduced the need for casual staff and developed the permanent staff's understanding of all the roles within the office.

4.2 Accommodation

- 4.2.1 All inquests are now held on site, as opposed to venues across the County with staff travelling out to service them.
- 4.2.2 The accommodation is substantial enough to accommodate inquests where there are a lot of witnesses and interested parties. Different representatives can be accommodated in various rooms pre inquest. There is a large waiting area, a jury room, accommodation for legal representatives and a family room. The family room is furnished in a comfortable manner. It is used for families and friends attending inquests who would benefit from a separate area from the court setting and for families visiting the office to meet with Coroner's Officers to read the case file concerning a relative's death. They can study the case file in comfort and quiet. Finally there is a large kitchen which means for inquests lasting all day it is possible to provide drinks and a lunch in house for the jury.

4.3 Links with External Agencies

- 4.3.1 The service has provided practical support to Cruse Bereavement Care as it seeks to reintroduce a service to the bereaved in Hertfordshire. This support has included the provision of a room which they can meet the bereaved. They are currently considering leasing a room within the Courthouse. We will also provide facilities for their training sessions and annual meeting.
- 4.3.2 The substantial waiting area has given the service the room to have display stands containing an assortment of leaflets offering help and advice to the bereaved. The information acts as signposts pointing the bereaved in the direction of the most appropriate support. Currently available is information from Cruse, Samaritans, Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide, St Albans City & District Bereavement Network, The Child Death Helpline, Cardiac Risk in the Young. In addition there is practical information available from the Home Office, Registration Service, Probate and DHSS.

4.4 Coroner Service Charter

- 4.4.1 The Coroner Service Charter was introduced on 1 October 2001. The standards within it are higher than those suggested by the Home Office in the national framework. Following the move to Hatfield the Charter has been reviewed and rewritten.

5. Involvement of key stakeholders

- 5.1 Key Stakeholders such as the Hertfordshire Constabulary, General Practitioners, Undertakers and Histo-pathologists regularly attend at The Old Courthouse, as the whole service is delivered from one site. This has provided us with an excellent opportunity for informal feedback and consultation on the protocols that have been introduced. Regular formal meetings have been established with Hertfordshire Constabulary, Mortuary Services and Consultant Histo-pathologists.
- 5.2 An open evening at the Courthouse was held on 1 July 2003. This was an opportunity for partnership organisations and other interested parties to view the new facilities and meet with fellow professionals from related fields. The evening was a success with over 140 people visiting during the course of the evening.

6. Other Benefits of the Move

- 6.1 An additional marriage room has been created for Hatfield Register Office. The Courtroom is also used for weddings at a weekend. It has a capacity of 100 so is substantially bigger than any marriage room in the County, with the exception of Centenary House, Hitchin. Both rooms are also available for other celebratory services such as baby naming and re affirmations. Since the relocation there have been 38 ceremonies conducted at the Courthouse.
- 6.2 From 1 April 2004 Statutory Services will be providing Citizenship Ceremonies. Group Ceremonies will be taking place every Monday morning with up to 100 people expected to attend each ceremony day. These ceremonies will take place in the main courtroom at the Courthouse.
- 6.3 The Local Land Charges Section and the Statutory Services Support Unit are also based at The Courthouse, meaning all non-registration staff are based in one Location.

7. The Future

- 7.1 The HM Coroner for the Hertford district retires 31 March 2004. It is intended that his district will be amalgamated with the other Hertfordshire District creating one Coroner's district for the County. This will provide a further opportunity to streamline processes.
- 7.2 We believe the introduction of SHARP will streamline the financial processes. In anticipation of this we are transferring a member of staff from the Coroner's Unit to provide administrative support for Citizenship Ceremonies.
- 7.3 The Shipman Inquiry and Fundamental Review have both reported. There are key differences between the two reports. As a result Mr Tom Luce who chaired the Fundamental Review of Coroner Services has been requested to reconcile the differences. He submitted his report to the Home Secretary and other Ministers who are deciding on programme of reform. It should be noted that both reports indicate that Coroner Services will no longer be the responsibility of the County Council.

8 Access to Service Implications

- 8.1 **Social inclusion.** There is disabled access to the facilities in the Old Courthouse at the side of the building and work is in progress for a ramp to be built at the front of the building. The court and offices are on the ground floor.
- 8.2 **Transport and traffic.** The location of the Courthouse is central to the County with sufficient road and public transport links. There is adequate car parking at the site.
- 8.3 **Point of service delivery.** No effect.
- 8.4 **Community involvement.** Information is available for the bereaved from voluntary support organisations in the reception and family room. Cruse Bereavement Care meet with the bereaved within the Courthouse and are currently considering leasing a room within the Courthouse.

Background papers used by the author in compiling this report

None.