

Local Members Interest
N/A

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Thursday 20 January 2022

Proposed New Joint Coroners Service

Recommendation

I recommend that the Committee:

- a. Reviews and comments upon the draft business case for submission to the Chief Coroner and Ministry of Justice, subject to a similar discussion/resolution by Stoke-on-Trent City Council.

Report of Cllr Victoria Wilson, Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture

Summary

What is the Overview and Scrutiny Committee being asked to do and why?

1. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is being asked to scrutinise and comment upon the draft Cabinet report and draft business case attached at Appendix x which proposes a Joint Coroners service for Staffordshire, joining the South Staffordshire jurisdiction with that of Stoke on Trent and North Staffordshire.
2. The proposed new joint service would follow national policy established by the Ministry of Justice and supported by the Chief Coroner to merge smaller coronial areas and reduce the overall number of Coronial jurisdictions in England and Wales. The retirement of the South Staffordshire Coroner has provided the opportunity to consider consolidating the Coroners service into a single service, which would enable a more consistent, resilient service for Staffordshire residents and over time deliver efficiencies through economies of scale.
3. Comments of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be incorporated into the Cabinet report which is due to be presented to Cabinet on 16 February 2022.

Report

4. Since 2014 The Chief Coroner and the Ministry of Justice have had a long-term plan to reduce the number of Coroner areas in England and Wales. As a result, area mergers are always considered whenever the opportunity arises, invariably when a senior coroner retires.
5. Staffordshire County Council and Stoke-on-Trent City Council are now being requested to consider this as Andrew Haigh, Senior Coroner, Staffordshire South retired on 31 October 2021. The Chief Coroner encourages Local Authorities to consider a merger as it his belief that merging two or more areas leads to a more consistent service for bereaved families, and results in more coroner's areas being of a similar size and population.
6. The process and timescale to create a joint service is lengthy and interim arrangements have been put in place to ensure that Staffordshire County Council maintains a Coroner in post. Mr Andrew Barkley, North Staffs Coroner has agreed to provide the interim Coronial cover for the Staffordshire South jurisdiction whilst a business case is progressed and pending a decision regarding the joint service.
7. Staffordshire County Council is required to advise the Chief Coroner's office should they wish for the Coronial jurisdictions to be merged.
8. The required business case has been completed and is appended to this Report.
9. On acceptance of the business case by the Ministry of Justice, preparation for the required laying of the statutory instrument for the legal process will commence. A period of at least 4 months is required to provide sufficient time for this to take place. The Ministry of Justice will also complete the required 4-week targeted consultation.
10. The proposed merger will have a positive impact on service delivery. It will provide an opportunity to focus upon improving services to bereaved families, whilst retaining high quality and consistent services for local people across both jurisdictions. It will also ensure that the service is sustainable and fit for the future.
11. The alignment and improvement of working practices to deliver a single simplified process will enable efficiencies to be made together with potential economies of scale from the combination of contractual arrangements.

12. Whilst it is proposed to have a single back-office Coroners support team, the current arrangements for the location of inquests will continue. This means that a Coronial presence will be maintained in both Stafford and Stoke-on-Trent. There will be an opportunity to enhance the local service with the use of additional sites to provide access to the service within increased locations across the new coronial jurisdiction.

Legal Implications

13. As highlighted at paragraph 1.5 the Ministry of Justice will prepare the laying of the statutory instrument for the legal process once the business case has been agreed and submitted. Coroner jurisdiction areas may be amended under schedule 2 of the Coroners and Justice act 2009.

14. Legal representatives from Staffordshire County Council and Stoke on Trent City Council will support the preparation of a joint legally binding agreement which will clearly set out the provision of the service, accountabilities, responsibilities, monitoring and financial arrangements.

Resource and Value for Money Implications

15. The proposed joint service will operate within the current budget envelope of Staffordshire County Council and Stoke on Trent City Council. The joint service will enable processes and procedures to be standardised across the merged jurisdiction which will then enable efficiencies to be delivered.

Link to Strategic Plan

Please refer to the relevant strategic priority.

Link to Other Overview and Scrutiny Activity

N/A

List of Background Documents/Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Business Case for a joint Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Coroners Service

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