

## **Cabinet Meeting on Wednesday 16 February 2022**

### **Potential Joint Coroners Service, Business Case**



**Cllr Victoria Wilson, Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture said,**

“It is expected that the merger will improve services for bereaved families and provide opportunities for future efficiency savings as the joint service is embedded, ensuring that the service is sustainable and fit for the future. Inquests will continue to be heard in both Stafford and Stoke-on-Trent, and there is the potential to use other sites and locations as part of the new joint service.”

#### **Report Summary:**

This Report sets out the key points for consideration to create a new joint service for Stoke and Staffordshire Coronial jurisdictions. It provides the background which has enabled the opportunity to consider a joint service; and highlights key areas of interest and importance when considering this option. A business case which is required should the new joint service be agreed, is appended to this report and contains further detail.

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 to reduce the overall number of Coronial jurisdictions in England and Wales.

#### **Recommendations**

I recommend that Cabinet:

- a. Endorses the business case for submission to the Chief Coroner and Ministry of Justice, subject to a similar resolution being passed by Stoke-on-Trent City Council.
- b. Agrees the proposed timeline for the business case to be submitted to the Chief Coroner and Ministry of Justice, subject to a similar resolution being passed by Stoke-on-Trent City Council.

- c. Agrees that the name for the new service will be 'Staffordshire and Stoke-On-Trent Coroners Service', subject to a similar resolution being passed by Stoke-on-Trent City Council
- d. Agrees that the Assistant Director, Culture, Rural and Safer Communities be delegated to take all steps necessary to progress the Business Case to completion on behalf of Staffordshire County Council.



<b>Local Members Interest</b>
N/A

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### **Potential Joint Coroners Service, Business Case**

#### **Recommendations of the Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture**

I recommend that Cabinet:

- a. Endorses the business case for submission to the Chief Coroner and Ministry of Justice, subject to a similar resolution being passed by Stoke-on-Trent City Council.
- b. Agrees the proposed timeline for the business case to be submitted to the Chief Coroner and Ministry of Justice, subject to a similar resolution being passed by Stoke-on-Trent City Council
- c. Agrees that the name for the new service will be 'Staffordshire and Stoke-On-Trent Coroners Service', subject to a similar resolution being passed by Stoke-on-Trent City Council
- d. Agrees that the Assistant Director, Culture, Rural and Safer Communities be delegated to take all steps necessary to progress the Business Case to completion on behalf of Staffordshire County Council.

#### **Report of the Deputy Chief Executive and Director for Families and Communities**

##### **Reasons for Recommendations:**

1. 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.
2. Staffordshire County Council and Stoke-on-Trent City Council are now being requested to consider this as the 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.

3. 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. The 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.
4. Staffordshire County Council are required to advise the Chief Coroner's office should they wish for the Coronial jurisdictions to be merged.
5. The required business case has been completed and is appended to this Report.
6. 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.
7. 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.
8. 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, for example mortuary facilities.
9. 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. The opportunity to enhance the local service has been identified through the use of additional sites which will provide access to the service within increased locations across the new coronial jurisdiction.

### **Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

10. The business case was presented to the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee and their comment has informed changes to the proposals.
11. Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee commented upon the proposed governance, staffing structure/ contracts, touchdown centres and the consultation process.

12. These comments have been addressed within the business case and additional NHS providers and groups which represent the bereaved will be added to the list of consultees for the Ministry of Justice consultation (see Annex B).

### **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 all aspects of this process, including 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.

### **Climate Change Implications**

16. The proposed joint service will not have any short-term impacts on climate change. The longer-term proposal to create a centre of excellence for mortuary facilities, will rationalise the amount of travel required therefore reducing costs and petrol usage. New mortuary facilities will be required to meet the latest standards and we will, therefore, ensure that they operate as efficiently as possible.

### **List of Background Documents/Appendices:**

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

Community Impact Assessment Executive Summary and Checklist

## Contact Details

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