Northumberland County Council

Briefing Note to Executive Team

Directorate:	Public Health, Inequalities and Stronger Communities
Subject:	Annual Report of Senior Coroner, Andrew Hetherington
Date:	8 June 2023

Purpose of Briefing Note

To provide a brief update to Executives on the Coroner Service, and to present the 2023 Annual Report of Senior Coroner, Andrew Hetherington.

Background

Office of and role of the Senior Coroner

The coroner is an independent judicial officer, appointed by but not employed by the local authority. This is an important distinction to make to maintain judicial independence. The autonomy of the office is an important safeguard for society and a key element in the investigation into a cause of death. A coroner can only be removed from office by the Lord Chancellor with the agreement of the Lord Chief Justice on grounds of incapacity or misconduct.

Coroners carry out their role with resources and administrative support from the local authority, as well as workforce and the investigative abilities of Northumbria Police. A

successful Coroner Service requires and embraces effective collaboration across coroner, local authority, and police.

It is the role of the coroner to investigate and if necessary, conduct an inquest in the following circumstances:

- if the coroner has reason to suspect that the deceased died a violent or unnatural death;
- where the cause of death is unknown;
- where the person had died in custody or state detention.

An inquest is not to determine matters of civil or criminal liability, or to look to apportion blame for a death. The purpose is simply to determine the following:

- Who is the person who has died?
- Where did they die?
- When did they die?
- How did they die?

Office of the Chief Coroner

The Chief Coroner is head of the coroner service nationally, providing leadership for coroners in England and Wales. The appointment of the Chief Coroner is made by the Lord Chief Justice in consultation with the Lord Chancellor. The current Chief Coroner is His Honour Judge Thomas Teague KC.

The Chief Coroner visited the Northumberland Coroner Service on 10 February 2023 as part of his national welfare tour. During the visit he met with the Senior Coroner and his team of Coroner's Officers and administrative staff, Northumbria Police, along with representatives from Northumberland County Council (NCC) including Cllr Glen Sanderson, Gill O'Neill, Executive Director of Public Health, Inequalities and Stronger Communities and Nigel Walsh, Director of Stronger Communities.

The Chief Coroner commended NCC for providing excellent facilities to not only support the Senior Coroner and his staff, but also bereaved families. At the Chief Coroner's national Local Authority Conference hosted at Central Hall, Westminster on 2 March 2023, Andrew Hetherington Senior Coroner for Northumberland and Karen Lounton, Interim Head of Service were invited to speak about the excellent service delivered in Northumberland during pandemic and the best way of working deployed to mitigate backlogs and ensure timely service delivery.

Northumberland Coroner Service

The Coroner Service for Northumberland is based within the Public Health, Inequalities and Stronger Communities directorate. Since October 2020, under the judicial leadership of Senior Coroner Andrew Hetherington, the service has built upon the transformation which commenced in 2019.

This has seen the new court facilities created in County Hall, Morpeth utilised to maximum effect with inquests listed on a near weekday daily basis. Technology provided as part of the court design enables witnesses and interested persons to appear in court virtually where necessary. This is of particular use when pathologists

and doctors are required to provide evidence, ensuring they themselves can experience minimum disruption to their work commitments but also secure their attendance at court. It has also enabled families who are not local and, in some cases, overseas, to still participate in an inquest hearing into the death of a loved one.

The excellent court facilities also enabled the Senior Coroner to deliver a near normal service during pandemic resulting in the service emerging from this period with no backlog of cases, somewhat of an exception when compared to many jurisdictions across both the region and England and Wales.

Deaths referred to the Senior Coroner have continued to rise, with 2,028 deaths referred during the calendar year 2022. This is the highest volume of referrals Northumberland has experienced. There are several reasons which underpin this increase in referrals. Deaths are now appropriately captured and referred, in line with the Notification of Deaths Regulations 2019. Align this with the continued grown, reach and impact of NSECH (Northumbria Specialist Emergency Care Hospital) in receiving seriously unwell people from not just Northumberland but all over the region and it is unsurprising that this increase in referrals has emerged.

Recommendations

Executives are recommended to:

- Acknowledge the 2023 Annual Report of the Senior Coroner.
- Consider the previous performance and achievements since the last report of the Senior Coroner (2021).
- Note the future ambitions of the service.

The Annual Report of the Senior Coroner will also be presented as an update with SLT on 13 June 2023, Health and Wellbeing OSC on 4 July 2023 and Health and Wellbeing Board on 10 August 2023.

Key Issues

It is established good practice that the Senior Coroner for a coroner area prepares an Annual Report for the local authority within which the judicial area sits. The Annual Report will typically include useful information on the geographical coroner area and its configuration, along with details of the previous period's performance, any cases over 12 months old, information regarding workload and referred cases, challenges, and opportunities.

The Senior Coroner Annual Report 2023 is linked below:

Senior Coroner Annual Report 2023

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