



Northumberland

County Council

Cabinet

Tuesday, 12 December 2023

Merger of North and South Northumberland Coroner Areas

Report of Councillor(s) Councillor Gordon Stewart, Cabinet Member for Looking After our Communities

Responsible Officer(s): Gill O'Neill, Executive Director for Public Health (DPH), Inequalities & Stronger Communities

1. Link to Key Priorities of the Corporate Plan

Achieving Value for Money

- 1.1 The Authority has a statutory duty to appoint a Senior Coroner and to provide sufficient resources for the coroner to undertake that role. The service has undergone a transformation programme since 2019, which has seen the county transition from operating the Coroner Service with two Senior Coroners, to operating with one. New systems and improved ways of working have been deployed to become standard operating practice and have been endorsed by the Chief Coroner for England and Wales. By merging the North and South Northumberland coroner areas, this will be the ultimate step in this programme of change which has delivered best practice and improved services to bereaved families, along with value for money.

Tackling Inequalities

- 1.2 The one coronial area for the county will ensure equity to provision of service for the whole of Northumberland.

Driving Economic Growth

- 1.3 None.

2. Purpose of report

This report seeks Cabinet approval to the proposed merger of the North and South Northumberland Coronial areas and the Business Case for the merger, detailed in the confidential appendix elsewhere on this agenda.

3. Recommendations

It is recommended that Cabinet agrees:

- 3.1 To the merger of the North Northumberland and the South Northumberland Coronial areas and to endorse the Business Case for the merger included on the agenda as a confidential appendix for submission to the Ministry of Justice,
- 3.2 That the name of the new service will be the 'Northumberland Coroner Area',
- 3.3 To authorise the Executive Director of Public Health, Inequalities and Stronger Communities in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Looking After our Communities to take all necessary steps to progress the Business Case including (but not limited to) making amendments or adjustments to the Business Case and to authorise the submission of the Business Case to the Ministry of Justice on behalf of the Authority, and
- 3.4 To authorise the Executive Director of Public Health, Inequalities and Stronger Communities in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Looking After our Environment to take any further steps necessary to facilitate the merger of North and South Northumberland Coronial areas on behalf of the Authority.

4. Forward plan date and reason for urgency if applicable

The report was added to the Forward Plan on 8 November 2023. As the merger of the North Northumberland and South Northumberland Coroner Areas impacts all wards within the county of Northumberland, then the decision to merge to become one Northumberland Coroner Area is a key decision.

5. Background

- 5.1 The previous Senior Coroner for South Northumberland, Mr Eric Armstrong, retired during September 2019. Following Mr Armstrong's retirement, the Senior Coroner for North Northumberland Mr Tony Brown became the Acting Senior Coroner for South Northumberland effective from October 2019 and plans were made to merge the North and South Northumberland areas to become one Northumberland district.
- 5.2 In February 2020, Mr Tony Brown advised Northumberland County Council of his intention to retire, effective from September 2020. Mr Brown then took a period of sickness absence effective from February 2020 and did not return prior to his formal retirement on 30 September 2020.
- 5.3 During this period (February to September 2020), Assistant Coroner for North Northumberland, Mr Andrew Hetherington, was made Mr Brown's Nominated Deputy and judicially led and delivered the Coroner Service for the North and South Northumberland areas.
- 5.4 In June 2020, a recruitment process commenced to seek a new Senior Coroner for North Northumberland and Acting Senior Coroner for South Northumberland. Mr Andrew Hetherington was appointed into this post, effective from 1 October 2020.
- 5.5 When the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 came into force in 2013, over 100 coroner areas existed across England and Wales. The small size of some of these areas prevented their effective management and cost efficiency. Consequently, the Chief Coroner and Lord Chancellor took a view that the volume of areas should reduce via a scheme of appropriate mergers, with determining factors for suitability focused on the volume of reported deaths and geographical area.

- 5.6 When a local authority wishes to merge one or more coroner areas into a new area, it must apply to the Lord Chancellor with written reasons, providing a business case for the merger. The Ministry of Justice administer this process and provide a template business case for local authorities to complete. This template has been used to produce the Northumberland merger business case.
- 5.7 A merger cannot take place unless the newly formed area will consist of a whole local authority area, more than one local authority area, or two or more old coroner areas each of which was wholly within the same local authority area.
- 5.8 When a merger takes place, the Order that merges the coroner areas will specify the name of the new area. Should the proposed merger progress, this will create a new area for the county, known as the Northumberland Coroner Area.
- 5.9 The merger which is proposed to create one Northumberland coroner area is the ultimate action to be taken following the retirements and changes outlined above and to conclude the Coroner Service transformation programme which began in 2019. Senior Coroner Hetherington supports this action.
- 5.10 Finally, this merger is proposed to follow national policy established by the Ministry of Justice and supported by the Chief Coroner to merge smaller coronial areas and to replace acting Coroners with full time equivalents with a much larger case load relevant to the area and to deliver efficient, consistent, and proportionate working practice across the service.
- 5.11 If the Ministry of Justice agrees to the merger of the North and South Northumberland Coronial areas, then, subject to the making of the Order by the Lord Chancellor, Mr. Andrew Hetherington will become the Senior Coroner for the newly merged Coronial area of Northumberland. The Ministry of Justice have indicated their full support for this merger to take place.
- 5.12 The merger will have a positive impact on service delivery; indeed, this has already happened under the judicial leadership of Mr Hetherington since he assumed his position of Senior Coroner for North Northumberland and Acting Senior Coroner for South Northumberland on 1 October 2020.
- 5.13 The attached Business Case, which Cabinet is invited to endorse, reflects the current operational arrangements and should the Ministry of Justice agree the merger it will make no noticeable difference to the way in which the Coroner Service has operated for that period.

6. Options open to the Council and reasons for the recommendations

- 6.1 Agree to support the proposed merger of the North Northumberland and South Northumberland Coroner areas, enabling the county to deliver a Coroner Service for the whole county, under the administrative framework of one single area, known as the Northumberland Coroner Area.
- 6.2 In doing so, the Coroner Service for Northumberland will align to Chief Coroner guidance which recommends that smaller coroner areas merge to create one proportionate area, where economies of scale can be achieved. Operational arrangements such as this are defined by the Chief Coroner as a model coroner area.

- 6.3 By merging and becoming one single coroner area, the Senior Coroner will be able to submit one single annual statistical return to the Ministry of Justice, therefore streamlining this process.
- 6.4 Continue to operate as North Northumberland and South Northumberland Coroner Areas, with Senior Coroner Andrew Hetherington sitting as Senior Coroner for North Northumberland and Acting Senior Coroner for South Northumberland.
- 6.5 In not merging, the two areas will continue to co-exist and deliver an excellent service to the county and its residents, but without the simplicity and clarity that a single Northumberland Coroner Area provides to all stakeholders, bereaved families included.
- 6.6 As two areas which operationally co-exist but remain as separate coroner jurisdictions, the Senior Coroner will continue to be required to complete two annual statistical returns to the Ministry of Justice.

7. Implications

Policy	National policy established by the Ministry of Justice and supported by the Chief Coroner, seeks to merge smaller coronial areas and to replace acting Senior Coroners with full time equivalents with a much larger case load relevant to the area and to deliver efficient, consistent, and proportionate working practice across the service.
Finance and value for money	Northumberland County Council provides 100% of the funding to provide a local Coroner Service for the county. There are no financial implications from the merger.
Legal	There are no legal issues that need to be resolved before a merger can go ahead (in addition to the Lord Chancellor making an order under Schedule 2 of the 2009 Act).
Procurement	None arising from this report.
Human resources	None arising from this report.
Property	None arising from this report.
The Equalities Act: is a full impact assessment required and attached?	No - no equalities issues identified The areas have effectively operated as a single area for a substantial period and no equality or diversity issues have been identified or raised during that time.
Risk assessment	None arising from this report.

Crime and disorder	None arising from this report.
Customer considerations	If Cabinet approves the Business case for submission to the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Justice then conducts a public consultation exercise in advance of any decision to merge the relevant areas.
Carbon reduction	None arising from this report.
Health and wellbeing	Steps have already been taken to improve services to bereaved families in the county, and across the two jurisdictions local people have benefited from improved systems and working practices in the Coroner Service as well having better accessibility to the service when needed, which is inevitably at one of the most challenging times in their lives.
Wards	(All Wards);

8. Background papers

Business Case – Appendix 1

[Merger of North and South Northumberland Coroner Areas MOJ Business Case.docx](#)

Note: Annex A of Appendix 1 contain information relating to an individual’s salary and are excluded from publication under paragraph 3 of Schedule 2A of the Local Government Act 1972.

Annex B contains individual email addresses of the consultees and have been excluded under Paragraph 1 of Schedule 12 A of the Local Government Act 1972.

Chief Coroner Guidance No. 14 – Mergers of Coroner Areas

<https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/GUIDANCE-No.14-MERGERS-OF-CORONER-AREAS-final.pdf>

9. Links to other key reports already published

Not applicable.

10. Author and Contact Details

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