



Northumberland  
County Council

The Coroner Service  
Excess Death Management

Andrew Hetherington, Senior Coroner  
Karen Lounton, Service Manager

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[www.northumberland.gov.uk](http://www.northumberland.gov.uk)

# The Role of the Senior Coroner and Coroner Service

- A Coroner is a judge who investigates unnatural or violent deaths, where the cause of death is unknown, or because the death took place in prison, police custody or another type of state detention.
- The Coroner's role is to find out who died and how, and when and where they died.
- Responsibility for treasure inquests. Northumberland 'county of treasure'.
- The Coroner is a judicial office holder, who is completely independent and appointed directly by the Crown.
- The Coroner Service is funded locally by Northumberland County Council, and this includes the provision of court and office accommodation, IT systems and administrative staff. In Northumberland, Coroner's Officers are employed by Northumbria Police.

# The Coroner Service in Northumberland

- At the retirement of the previous Senior Coroner (Tony Brown) on 30 September 2020, Andrew Hetherington was appointed as Senior Coroner for Northumberland, effective from 1 October 2020.
- The area is split into two Coroner jurisdictions, North and South Northumberland. Work is ongoing with the Chief Coroner and MoJ to formally merge the areas into one Coroner jurisdiction for Northumberland. This will conclude during 2021. A Statutory Instrument is required to complete this.
- The Coroner Service is now located in the new court and office suite (Hadrian Rooms) in County Hall, ground floor, block 2.
- Senior Coroner, Coroner's Officers and administrative support staff are located together, in County Hall.
- The Coroner Service is co-located with the Registration Service in County Hall and this supports effective management of the bereavement process which families experience when they lose a loved one. The service sits within the HR / OD Directorate.

# New Accommodation for the Coroner Service

- Historically the delivery of the Coroner Service in Northumberland and the offices the staff worked from was fragmented.
- The Senior Coroner worked from offices in Berwick and used Berwick Magistrates Court for inquests.
- Administrative staff were based in Berwick and North Tyneside.
- Coroner's Officers worked from Ashington Police Station.
- As part of the County Hall refurbishment programme, a business case was made for the Coroner Service and its staff to be centralised and located in a more accessible location to families, officers and professionals who were required to attend an inquest. County Hall, Morpeth was the agreed location.
- Approval given, work commenced on the new court and accommodation which was completed October 2020. First inquest held in the new court 3 November 2020
- Inquests are held in court daily and listed ahead until September 2021.
- Thanks to Lee Grange and Damon Barnaby for their support with the project.

# Coroner's Court - Entrance



# Coroner's Court – Waiting Room



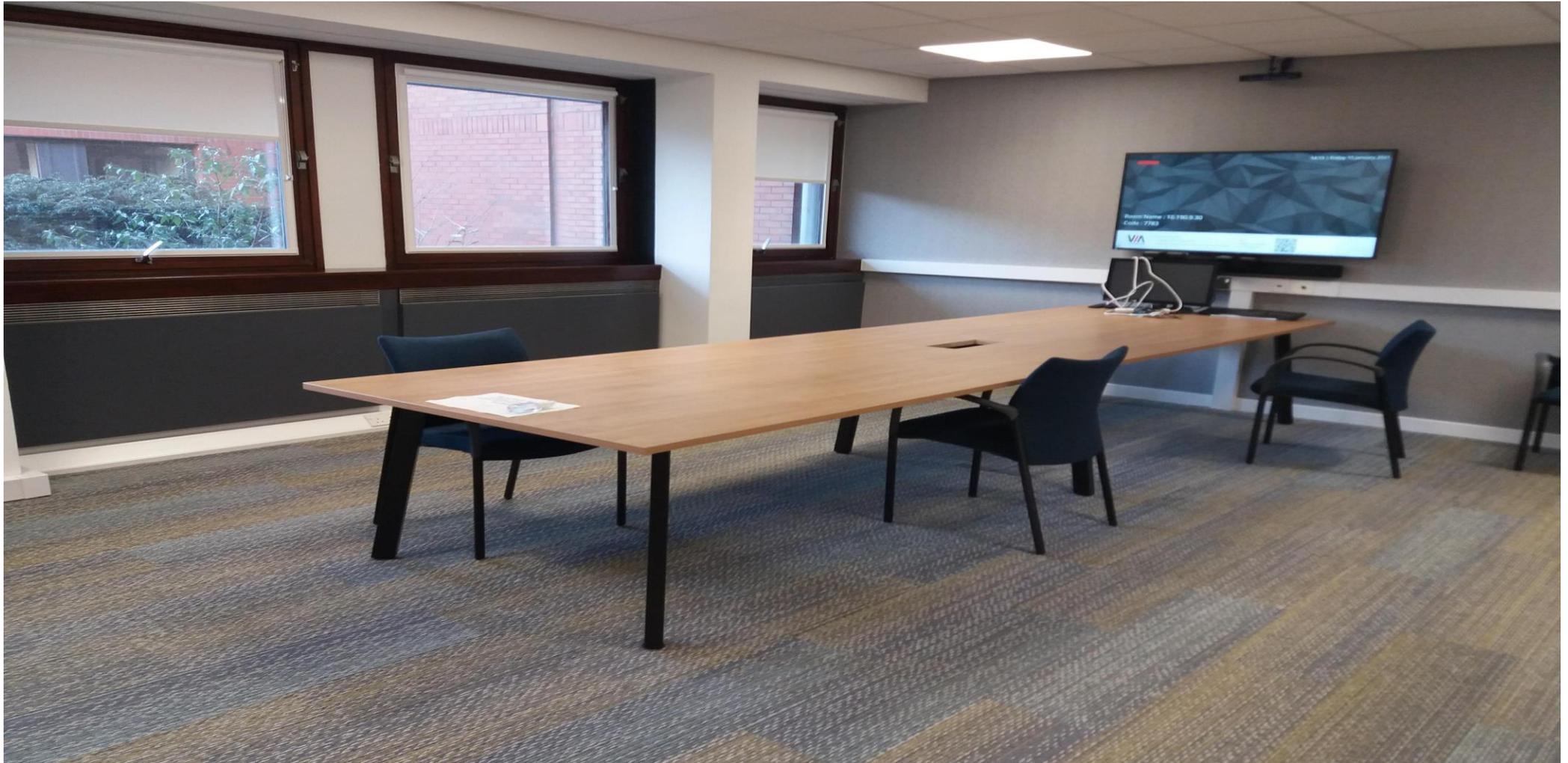
# Coroner's Court



# Coroner's Court – Family Room



# Coroner's Court – Jury Room



# Continuing Modernisation of the Coroner Service

- Use of technology available in the new court to facilitate remote hearings and safe working. Online portal reporting of deaths, 24/7.
- Paper lite court work and digitally enabled working. Website development.
- Closer working with key stakeholders such as Northumbria NHS Trust, Medical Examiner, Northumbria Police, Funeral Directors, Registration Service and Bereavement Service.
- Review of current post-mortem services, in partnership with Northumbria NHS Trust. Explore non-invasive post-mortems.
- Revised structure to introduce a First Officer post to the service.
- Assistant Coroner cross authority recruitment and resource. North of the Tyne coronial resilience.
- Embed a culture of continuing improvement, engagement and innovation in the service. Strong links between the Senior Coroner and the Executive and Members.

# Death Management Group (DMG)

- During pandemic, there is potential for a significant increase in the number of deaths over a relatively short period of time, placing pressure on local service providers with responsibility for management of the deceased.
- The Death Management Group (DMG) is formed of relevant local authority, coroner, NHS, funeral director, emergency services and military planner (when deployed) representatives from the LA6 (Northumberland, North Tyneside, Newcastle, Gateshead, South Tyneside, and Sunderland).
- For Northumberland Andrew Hetherington, Senior Coroner and Karen Lounton, Service Manager for Registration, Coroner and Archives provide representation.
- The DMG reports to TCG and SCG to co-ordinate the management of excess deaths at a multi-agency level.
- At the heart of the death management process is a commitment to ensure the deceased are always managed with dignity and respect.

# DMG Objectives

- Ensure there is effective communication flow with TCG, SCG, local authority Chief Executives, multi agencies, and the Northumbria Local Resilience Forum.
- Co-ordinate with all agencies involved in the death management process.
- Continual development and review of a Death Management Plan.
- Monitoring of capacity and operations across all areas of excess deaths.
- Provide data modelling and data management systems.
- Establish a RAG rating system in relation to death registration, burial and cremation, NHS mortuary capacity and body storage capacity across funeral directors for each local authority area.
- Develop a Pandemic Multi Agency Response Team (PMART) relating to body movement across the region.
- Communications and reporting streams.
- Provide assurance to TCG and SCG that all relevant policies, processes and resources are in place and effective.

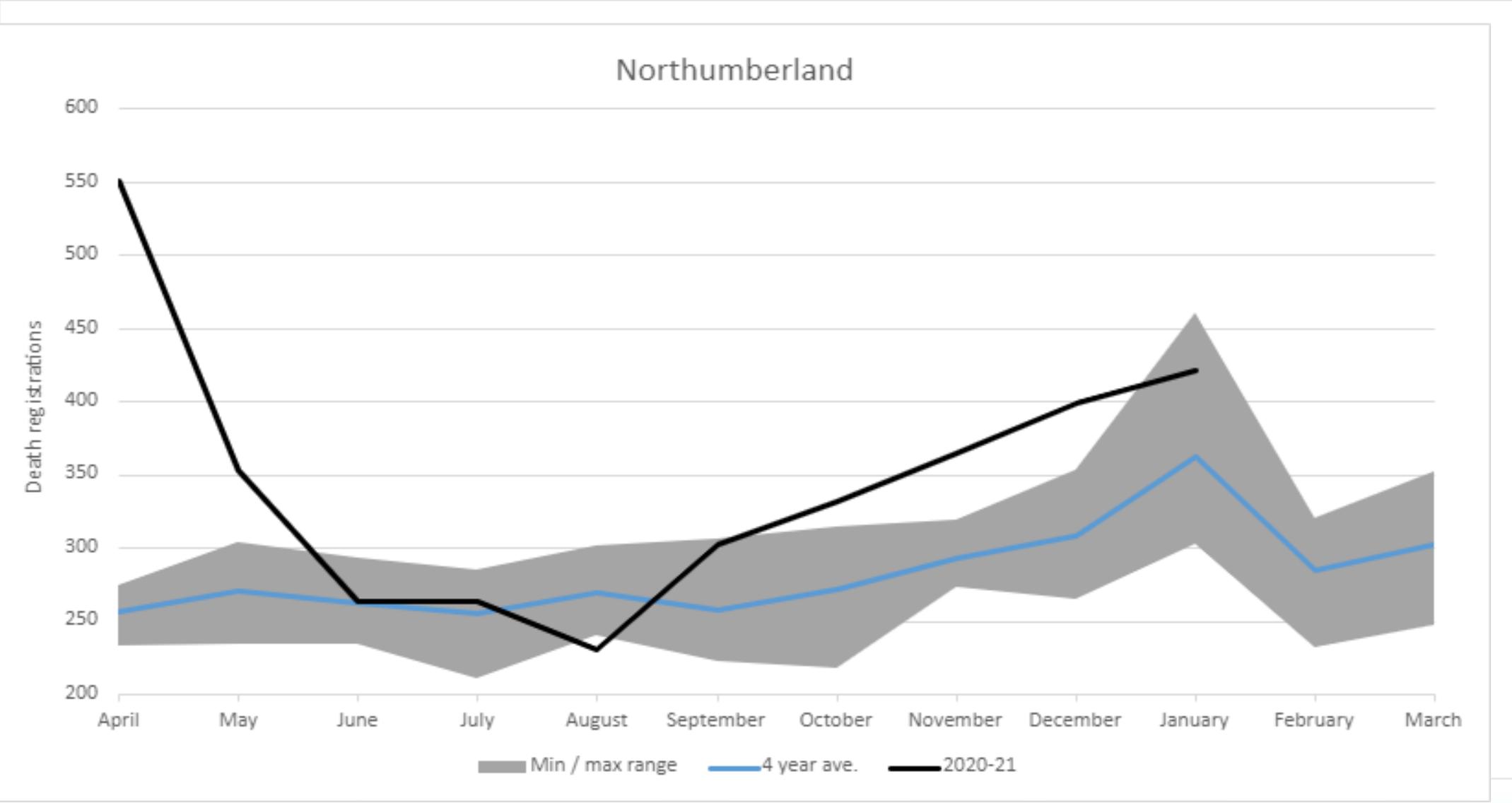
# Mortuary Capacity in Northumberland

- Across Northumbria NHS Trust sites, there are a total of 184 fridges as part of business-as-usual arrangements, plus 36 surge capacity fridges. Site capacity is summarised as follows:
  - North Tyneside General Hospital – 88 BAU fridges
  - Wansbeck General Hospital – 24 BAU fridges
  - Hexham General Hospital – 20 BAU fridges and 26 surge capacity fridges
  - NSECH – 52 BAU fridges and 10 surge capacity fridges.
- Capacity over the previous few months has been a consistent 30%-50% in use. Currently around 50% levels, with pressure beginning to ease.
- Northumbria NHS Trust mortuary capacity held well during the second covid wave peak, which was experienced at end of January 2021. Effective management saw capacity not breach DMG trigger levels.

# Northumberland Death Registration Figures

	April	May	June	July	August	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March
2016-17	265	235	235	211	240	223	218	273	265	303	232	247
2017-18	233	288	293	251	279	306	286	294	318	461	321	352
2018-19	257	255	271	285	258	252	271	288	299	324	286	310
2019-20	275	304	251	274	302	251	314	319	354	361	301	301
2020-21	551	354	264	264	231	303	332	365	399	422		

# Death Registration in Northumberland – 5-year average



# Any Questions?

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