

AGENDA ITEM 5	
ES/11/13	
Committee:	Executive Scrutiny Committee
Date:	26 March 2013
<u>Coroner's Service</u>	

1. Introduction

The Coroner's Service continues to support two jurisdictions.

- Essex and Thurrock (Mrs Caroline Beasley-Murray is the Coroner) comprising the Braintree District Council, Uttlesford, Tendring, Colchester Borough Council, Harlow Council, Epping Forest District Council, Chelmsford City Council, Maldon District Council, Brentwood Borough Council and Basildon District Council areas.
- Southend and South East Essex (Ms Yvonne Blake is the Acting Coroner) comprising the Southend on Sea Borough Council, Rochford District Council and Castlepoint Borough Council areas.

A Coroner is an independent judicial officer and not a local government officer although the relevant council will appoint them, pay them and be responsible for providing them with suitable premises from which their duties are conducted and with the necessary support personnel and financial resources.

A Coroner is responsible for investigating deaths and in some circumstances holding inquests in the following situations:

- Death was violent or unnatural or occurred in suspicious circumstances
- The cause of death is unknown or uncertain
- The death was caused by an industrial disease
- The death occurred in prison or Police custody
- A doctor did not attend the deceased during the last illness or the doctor treating the deceased had not seen him or her either after death or within 14 days before the death
- The death occurred while the patient was undergoing surgery or did not recover from the anaesthetic

Coroners Officers are employees of the local authority. During 2012 the structure of the Service has changed; there are now two team leaders who also deputise for the service manager, and the Service is organised on a geographical basis rather than a functional basis. Incoming work either on day to day death referrals or inquest work is handled within the teams who take responsibility for all work in their area. Each Coroners officer

has a spread of work spending one month working in each geographical area and will rotate between areas. The Officer takes on all new cases from that area and retains these cases through to their completion, whether that is a certificate published by the Coroner or an Inquest. This ensures that resilience is achieved across the service whilst ensuring that, wherever possible, bereaved families have the same key contact throughout their dealings with the Coroner Service.

2012 has seen the departure of the previous Coroner's Service Manager and after a period of interim management the appointment of a permanent replacement. The Coroner for Southend and South East Essex resigned in May 2012 and his former deputy is now the Acting Coroner for Southend and South East Essex pending the resolution of issues around the single jurisdiction referred to later in this report.

2. Progress in the Service 2012.

2.1 Service Standards.

The Chief Coroner was appointed in 2012 and his appointment took effect in September 2012. The Service has adopted the standards for the Charter for the Bereaved and progress against these targets is as follows.

2.1.1 All inquests to be completed within one year of the death being reported to HM Coroner.

As indicated above, officers retain cases from the beginning to the end of the process. This creates ownership and improves communication. There is still a significant backlog of cases but the service is making significant progress in addressing this. More recently all officers have developed detailed work schedules allowing all outstanding cases to be scheduled to an inquest date. In addition all new inquest cases are now scheduled for an inquest date as they are opened and adjourned. Team Leaders review work schedules with officers on a weekly basis.

In the Essex and Thurrock Jurisdiction there are fewer than 12 cases that are older than 2011 still remaining for completion. Of these 4 are still the subject of on going inquiries and 4 have been scheduled already.

The position in the Southend jurisdiction is that there are 43 cases older than 2011, of those 12 are currently scheduled.

2.1.2 Bereaved to be contacted within 24 hours of referral.

All bereaved families are now contacted within 24 hours of referral. Since November 2012 day to day work has been bought up to date with investigations being commenced within 24 hours of referral. Dependent on complexity and the level of investigation required cases are concluded by issuing a certificate or opening an inquest. Either of these events means that the deceased can be released to their

families for burial or cremation. The time taken to do this has reduced and this has achieved a significant service improvement for bereaved families.

2.2 Telephone system

The telephone system provided by and to the Coroners Service has been the subject of complaints principally by service users and stakeholders who have found it difficult to contact the Service. Improvements in the time taken to complete day to day cases has significantly contributed to a reduction in the number of telephone calls that are placed to the Coroner's Service as has a redeployment of staff and amendments in the way that the telephones are structured and answered. Stakeholders such as GPs, hospitals, mortuaries and funeral directors have all commented that the telephone service is much improved and there are no longer any difficulties in contacting the Service. Calls lost prior to being answered have reduced from 30% to between 1-1.5%.

2.3 Staff engagement

The recent Your Voice Survey has revealed that the Coroners Service is significantly more engaged than was previously the case. The overall engagement measure has risen by some 30% to 53%. Other encouraging signs evidenced in the survey indicate that the service is making good progress in the engagement of its staff.

2.4 Involvement with Stakeholders

Stakeholders in the Service have been kept advised of changes as they have taken place and consulted where appropriate about those changes. Close links have always existed between the Service and funeral directors and these have been continued and enhanced. Relationships with mortuaries and hospitals have improved in particular because the reduction in backlogs on day to day work has reduced frustration for all involved in the system. A relationship has been established with the representative body of local GPs and two meetings have taken place which have improved mutual understanding of roles and created a conduit for the resolution of problems.

3. Future Progress

3.1 Service move

The Service will move to County Hall as soon as the refurbishment of A block is sufficiently well advanced. The accommodation formerly occupied by the Service will be refurbished and remodelled to provide a permanent Coroner's Court. This will marginally reduce the cost of accommodation for inquests which is currently rented from other providers as well as being provided in the Council Chamber. More significantly the new accommodation will provide a discrete home for the Coroners Court which will obviate the need to book accommodation elsewhere. It will also provide private meeting rooms for families, accommodation for a jury and advocates meeting rooms. It is expected to be a significant improvement for the bereaved families in Essex as well as enabling inquests to be booked without reference to whether or not other services are

using accommodation. A plan of the new accommodation is attached as Appendix 1. It is anticipated that the work will commence as soon as the Coroner officers move to County Hall. The Coroners will continue to have their offices in New Bridge House but will also be provided with some accommodation in County Hall so that they can undertake business with the officers. Reception services will continue to be provided at New Bridge House for the bereaved attending inquests.

3.2 Single Jurisdiction

During the summer of 2012 the Ministry of Justice requested expressions of interest in the amalgamation of Coroners jurisdictions nationally. A decision was taken that Essex would be included in this consultation and this was notified to the Ministry of Justice in discussion with Southend Borough Council. The Ministry of Justice commenced a consultation with those affected for 6 weeks on 1st March. The effect of amalgamating the two jurisdictions in Essex namely Essex and Thurrock and Southend and South East Essex would be to create a single Coroner post with a subsidiary full time post to assist with the work. A number of marginal benefits would flow from this namely: -

- A jointly agreed approach to all work.
- A single style of communication for the jurisdiction.
- Use of the new court accommodation by both former jurisdictions.
- The service will be more resilient both in terms of its workforce and availability of coroners.

3.3 Facts and figures

The annual report for the service that is required for submission to the Ministry of Justice has been prepared and submitted at the end of February. This is published by the Ministry of Justice once all figures have been checked and collated in or about June of each year. The unconfirmed figures are set out below together with the figures from previous years.

Timescale for bringing cases to inquest

	Essex and Thurrock	Southend
2009	44 weeks	27 weeks
2010	40 weeks	33 weeks
2011	36 weeks	36 weeks

Continued overleaf...

Inquests still open or in progress – Essex and Thurrock (as at 31st December 2012)

	2011	2012
Inquests outstanding	280	238
Less than 6 months	50%	64%
Over 6 months but less than 12 months	14%	20%
Over 12 months but less than 2 years	18%	11%
Over 2 years	18%	5%
Date of oldest case	July 2005	November 2008

Inquests still open or in progress – Southend and South East Essex (as at 31st December 2012)

	2011	2012
Inquests outstanding	205	271
Less than 6 months	36%	32%
Over 6 months but less than 12 months	23%	20%
Over 12 months but less than 2 years	28%	30%
Over 2 years	13%	19%
Date of oldest case	November 2005	March 2006

Completed inquests for each jurisdiction

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Southend and South East Essex	115	112	80	140	104	102	102
Essex and Thurrock	480	478	422	372	601	617	556

The figures show that there has been steady progress in reducing the inquests outstanding in the Essex and Thurrock jurisdiction.

The number of inquests held in the Southend and South East Essex jurisdiction has been exceeded annually by the number that are opened which has created a backlog of inquests for this jurisdiction. These cases are now allocated to Coroners Officers. Planned inquest dates are being scheduled and the scheduling will be completed by 5th April. The Acting Coroner for the jurisdiction has embarked on a programme of review for all cases in the jurisdiction and is working closely with the service to progress cases.

The target for the whole service is that by the end of 2013 there will be no inquests for Essex and Thurrock jurisdiction that will be older than three months and none in

Southend that will be older than six months. In both jurisdictions this target excludes those cases where other investigations are pending from other agencies.