

**ALTERATION OF CORONER AREAS UNDER SCHEDULE 2 OF THE CORONERS
AND JUSTICE ACT 2009
MINISTRY OF JUSTICE BUSINESS CASE TEMPLATE FOR MERGERS**

NAMES OF CORONER AREAS THAT ARE PROPOSING TO MERGE

- Newcastle upon Tyne; and
- North Tyneside.

PROPOSED NAME OF NEW AREA

- Newcastle and North Tyneside.

INFORMATION ON AREAS THAT PROPOSE TO MERGE

- Please provide key details in the table as follows:

Coroner area	Newcastle	North Tyneside	Newcastle and North Tyneside
Geographical area covered	Newcastle upon Tyne. <i>See Appendix A</i>	North Tyneside. <i>See Appendix A</i>	Newcastle and North Tyneside <i>See Appendix A</i>
Local authority/ authorities that fund(s) coroner area and %	Newcastle City Council 100%	North Tyneside Council 100%	Newcastle City Council and North Tyneside Council (“the Councils”) will jointly fund 100% of the cost of the new jurisdiction.
Relevant authority (formerly lead authority)	Newcastle City Council	North Tyneside Council	Newcastle City Council
Police Force(s)	Northumbria Police	Northumbria Police	Northumbria Police
Transport links	A1(M); A19; A69 Port of Tyne Newcastle Airport East Coast Mainline train route from London to Scotland.	A19; Port of Tyne	A1(M); A19; A69 Port of Tyne Newcastle Airport East Coast Mainline train route from London to Scotland
Major hospitals	Royal Victoria Infirmary and Freeman Hospital	North Tyneside General Hospital -	Royal Victoria Infirmary and Freeman Hospital

Coroner area	Newcastle	North Tyneside	Newcastle and North Tyneside
	(both Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust). St Nicholas Hospital - Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust	Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust.	(both Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust). North Tyneside General Hospital - Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust. St Nicholas Hospital - Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust
Prisons in area	None	None	None
Other state detention facilities	Care homes for EMI and nursing care where Deprivation of Liberty Safeguarding authorisations (DoLS) are regularly granted.	Care homes for EMI and nursing care where Deprivation of Liberty Safeguarding authorisations (DoLS) are regularly granted.	Care homes for EMI and nursing care where Deprivation of Liberty Safeguarding authorisations (DoLS) are regularly granted.
Courtrooms/ inquest venues	Civic Centre, Newcastle.	Civic Centre, Newcastle.	Civic Centre, Newcastle.
Office/staff accommodation – location and capacity	Civic Centre, Newcastle. <i>See Table B of Annex A</i>	Civic Centre, Newcastle. <i>See Table B in Annex A</i>	Civic Centre, Newcastle. <i>See Table B in Annex A</i>
Employer of coroner's officers	Northumbria Police	Northumbria Police	Northumbria Police
Name of senior coroner	Currently Karen Dilks but she retires at the end of January 2023 and Georgina Nolan is to be the new senior coroner	Currently Karen Dilks (Acting) but she retires at the end of January 2023 and Georgina Nolan is to be the new senior coroner	Currently the SC would be Karen Dilks but she retires at the end of January 2023 and Georgina Nolan is to be the new senior coroner
Number of area coroners	Nil	Nil	Nil
Number of assistant coroners	8	8 (NB: same individuals as in Newcastle)	8

Coroner area	Newcastle	North Tyneside	Newcastle and North Tyneside
Number of coroner's officers	8 (1 part time)	8 (1 part time) (NB: same individuals as in Newcastle)	8 (1 part time)
Number of administrative support staff	1 Admin Officer employed by Northumbria Police 4 Admin Officers employed by Newcastle City Council	1 Admin Officer employed by Northumbria Police 4 Admin Officers employed by Newcastle City Council (NB: same individuals as in Newcastle)	1 Admin Officer employed by Northumbria Police 4 Admin Officers employed by Newcastle City Council
Number of deaths reported in the previous calendar year	2021 2,112	2021 963	2021 3,075
Inquests held in the previous calendar year	2021 443	2021 153	2021 596
Post mortem rate as % of reported deaths in the previous calendar year	2021 39.53	2021 35.82	2021 38.37

- It would be helpful if you would also attach maps of the area showing the current position and the position in the event of a merger. Both maps should show details of for instance inquest venues, hospitals, prisons and transport links.

SENIOR CORONER APPOINTMENT

- *Why are you seeking a merger now (i.e. which area's senior coroner is stepping down, when and why)?*

The potential merger of the coroner areas of Newcastle and North Tyneside has been considered for a number of years on the basis of the population sizes of both jurisdictions, the geographical size of the jurisdictions and the connections between the two areas (both being highly urbanised areas).

Therefore, when the then Senior Coroner for North Tyneside (Eric Armstrong) retired on 30 September 2019, the current Senior Coroner for Newcastle (Mrs Karen Dilks), was appointed Acting Senior Coroner for North Tyneside in anticipation of a future merger.

The proposed merger is considered to be in accordance with the Chief Coroner's Guidance as set out in

- Chief Coroner's Draft Guidance 'A Model Coroner Area';
- Chief Coroner's Guidance No. 14 'Mergers of Coroner Areas'; and
- Chief Coroner's Guidance No. 6 'The Appointment of Coroners'

The merger is consistent with the plans of the Ministry of Justice to reduce the number of Coroner Areas in England and Wales to approximately 75 (specifically, upon the retirement of a Senior Coroner).

How do you propose to appoint the senior coroner for the new merged area – (i.e. does the relevant authority propose to appoint one of the senior coroners from the affected areas or to hold an open competition)?

Mrs Dilks is currently the Senior Coroner for Newcastle and the Acting Senior Coroner for North Tyneside and, since her appointment to the latter role, has effected changes to the operating processes in the North Tyneside jurisdiction to ensure that those processes are aligned with those of the Newcastle jurisdiction. Mrs Dilks is due to retire as senior coroner at the end of January 2023. The Councils undertook a joint recruitment exercise to appoint a new senior coroner and Georgina Nolan has been appointed as Senior Coroner for both jurisdictions with effect from the end of January 2023

- *Are all affected senior coroners aware of and content with this approach?*

Mrs Dilks is supportive of the approach and has been instrumental in ensuring that the operating procedures of the two jurisdictions are closely aligned. This will ensure that the transition to a merged jurisdiction is as seamless as possible. Ms Nolan is currently an assistant coroner in both jurisdictions and is fully aware of the intention to merge the jurisdictions.

IMPACT OF PROPOSED MERGER ON SERVICE DELIVERY

- *What will be the impact of the proposed merger on service delivery?*

The two existing jurisdictions have had the same Senior Coroner since October 2019 and she has undertaken significant work to ensure that the operating processes of the two jurisdictions are closely aligned. It is therefore anticipated that there will be no operational disbenefits or disruption from the proposed formal merger. This is supported by the fact that the current arrangements have worked extremely well for over 3 years, with no concerns or complaints being received from any stakeholder or member of the public in that period. Indeed, it is anticipated that there will be some operational efficiencies from a formal merger in terms of a reduction in the administrative work associated with operating two jurisdictions as opposed to one.

- *Will additional coronial or administrative support be provided in the new area? (e.g. will additional coroners need to be recruited or will workloads be increased/redistributed etc? How will additional caseloads be managed?)*

Based on the combined numbers of reported deaths from the two existing areas, it is presently anticipated that the service will be provided by the Senior

Coroner with support from the eight Assistant Coroners who are already appointed across the two jurisdictions. Future support for the Senior Coroner will be kept under regular review (including consideration of whether there is a business case for additional Assistant Coroners and/or an Area Coroner).

Based on the current numbers of reported deaths from the two existing areas (3,075), it is presently anticipated that the service will be adequately staffed without the need for additional recruitment. The Senior Coroner will receive support from eight Assistant Coroners and the Councils will continue to review this capacity to ensure that the Senior Coroner remains supported (or whether, in the future, there is a business case for additional Assistant Coroners and/or an Area Coroner).

- *What will be the impact of the merger on associated services – such as post-mortem examinations, and mortuary provision?*

As set out above, the operating processes relating to the existing jurisdictions have been harmonised since October 2019. This also applies to the supporting services.

The immediate benefits of such harmonisation were that it improved the quality and consistency of the coronial service provided to North Tyneside so that it matched that already provided to Newcastle residents, for example:

- the average time taken for a post mortem examination in North Tyneside reduced from 3 weeks to the Newcastle average of 2.2 days;
- communications and case management in North Tyneside improved as a result of moving from the existing paper-based systems to the electronic case management system used in Newcastle; and
- the listing of inquests was more timely and the inquest experience of bereaved families was improved by the use of the dedicated court room at Newcastle Civic Centre with Coroner's Court Support Services in attendance.

In 2021, Newcastle City Council, North Tyneside Council and Durham County Council undertook a joint procurement exercise to secure post-mortem pathology services (including body storage). Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust was appointed as the regional provider. This means that all post-mortem examinations (and associated body storage) and limited PMCT scanning have at all times been conducted at the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle and this will remain unchanged.

- *How will the relevant local authority administer the new coroner area?*

It has been agreed with North Tyneside Council that Newcastle City Council will be the lead authority in supporting the merged jurisdiction. The Senior Coroner, coroner's officers and administrative support staff are already accommodated at Newcastle City Council's Civic Centre and a court room for inquests is located there. Newcastle City Council employs the administrative support staff (other than the Northumbria Police employee) and will be responsible for the procurement of all goods and services to support the coronial jurisdiction, as well as the remuneration of the Senior Coroner and Assistant Coroners.

- *How will administrative governance be achieved between the relevant local authority and other funding local authorities?*

The two local authorities will enter into an agreement relating to the funding and monitoring of the merged jurisdiction.

- *How will the affected local authorities manage budgets?*

Newcastle City Council, as lead authority, will be primarily responsible for managing all costs arising from the merged jurisdiction but will be reimbursed by North Tyneside Council (under the agreement mentioned above) a proportion of those costs.

IMPACT OF MERGER ON THOSE WORKING IN / WITH THE SERVICE

- *What will be the impact of the merger on:*
 - *Coroners (eg. will the workloads of the Senior Coroner, Area Coroner (if applicable) and assistant coroners be affected? Will all existing assistant coroners transfer to the new area? Are the current assistant coroners all currently working and being trained? Do they or will they all have the Chief Coroner's recommended 15 days a year of work?)*

As set out above, Ms Dilks has been acting as the Senior Coroner for North Tyneside as well as being the Senior Coroner for Newcastle since September 2019. The eight Assistant Coroners for the merged jurisdiction are already appointed to act in both the Newcastle and North Tyneside jurisdictions. Assistant Coroners must sit for a minimum of 20 days. They currently do and will continue to do so in the merged jurisdiction. Therefore, there will be no impact on the Senior Coroner and Assistant Coroners from the merger.

- *Coroners' officers*

The Coroner's Officers are employed by Northumbria Police and are all located at Newcastle Civic Centre already so there will be no impact on those officers from the merger. The number of Coroner's Officers was increased in anticipation of the merger which assisted in terms of caseloads and as noted above, the extension of the electronic case management system used in Newcastle to North Tyneside has also assisted in this regard. Therefore, there will be no impact on the coroner's officers from the merger.

- *Other staff in the coroner's offices*

All administrative support staff for the two existing jurisdictions are already employed by Newcastle City Council (save for one person employed by Northumbria Police) and based at Newcastle Civic Centre so there will be no impact on these staff from the merger.

- *Pathologists*

Since September 2019, all body storage has taken place at the Newcastle hospitals which has meant the pathologists do not need to

travel to mortuary facilities in North Tyneside. As set out above, both jurisdictions have appointed Newcastle upon Tyne Hospital NHS Foundation Trust for the provision of post mortem pathology services (including body storage) and limited PMCT scanning so there will be no impact from the merger.

- *Others?*

Newcastle and North Tyneside Councils have recently carried out a procurement exercise to appoint funeral directors to undertake body removal and transportation in the existing jurisdictions and these arrangements will continue in the merged jurisdiction so no impact is anticipated.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS OF MERGER

- What will be the impact of the merger on resources in terms of: -
 - *Costs of delivering the service – existing costs and predicted costs for amalgamated area (see tables in **Annex A** which may assist with this).*

As set out above, the two jurisdictions have effectively operated as a single jurisdiction since September 2019. As a consequence, various service improvements have been implemented to the North Tyneside jurisdiction (see above) so that it is consistent with the level of service in the Newcastle jurisdiction. The fact that both jurisdictions are operated from a single site with the same group of staff using the same operating procedures and case management system is considered to be more cost-effective than two separate jurisdictions having to employ their own staff and maintain separate accommodation and supporting facilities. An outline agreement has been reached between the councils on how costs will be shared, reflecting the respective case loads and taking into account the professional advice of the current Senior Coroner.

- *Accommodation for staff*

As set out above, the Senior Coroner and all supporting staff for both of the existing jurisdictions are already accommodated at Newcastle Civic Centre. The cost of the accommodation and any future accommodation needs will be taken into account in the funding arrangements between the two local authorities.

- *Inquest accommodation*

As above.

- *IT*

The Civica case management system is already used for both jurisdictions. Whilst it is one system, it is configured to separate the two jurisdictions to meet legal and statistical requirements for individual jurisdictions. A facility to combine the jurisdictions upon merger is in place with IT support provided by Newcastle City Council. Again, the

costs will be taken into account in the funding arrangements between the two local authorities.

- *Post-mortem examination costs (including transport and storage) for each area*

As set out above, these services are already aligned across the existing jurisdictions and the costs will be taken into account in the funding arrangements between the two local authorities

- *Any other costs / savings?*

For the reasons set out above, no additional costs or savings [NB: SC salaries ??] are envisaged from the merger as the 2 jurisdictions have effectively operated as a single jurisdiction for over 3 years. North Tyneside Council is currently experiencing an overspend against the base budget for the coronial service, which will be addressed through the Council's medium term financial plan once the proposed merger is confirmed.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- *Are you aware of any 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)? If so, please give details.*

As reflected above, the two jurisdictions are already closely aligned in all material respects. No legal issues need to be resolved before a merger can go ahead.

VIEWS OF THOSE AFFECTED BY MERGER

- *Do all affected local authorities support the merger? Please provide details.*

Both Newcastle City Council and North Tyneside Council are fully supportive of the merger and, as set out above, the jurisdictions are in practice already being operated as a single jurisdiction to a large extent.

- *Have the local authority councillors / cabinets approved the merger? Please provide details.*

Both Councils' Cabinets have been in support of the merger for some time. North Tyneside Council's Cabinet confirmed their approval the merger at its meeting on __ November 2022 and Newcastle City Council's approval was confirmed by a decision on the relevant Cabinet portfolio member on __ November 2022.

- *What is the view of affected coroners and their staff?*

Karen Dilks, the current Senior Coroner for Newcastle and Acting Senior Coroner for North Tyneside, is supportive of the formal merger as are Georgina Nolan (her successor as Senior Coroner for both jurisdictions), the other Assistant Coroners and supporting staff.

- *How will bereaved people be affected by the merger – eg travelling to inquests, being able to contact coroners' offices?*

The centres of Newcastle City and North Tyneside are 8 miles apart with substantial transport facilities (road, rail, metro, public transport) between the two jurisdictions. As set out above, the North Tyneside jurisdiction has been operating from Newcastle Civic Centre for more than 3 years without any issues raised from any bereaved families in terms of travel and/or contact with the Coroner's Office.

- *Have you sought the views of other affected stakeholders - such as police authority and constabulary, hospitals, prisons, GPs, faith groups and funeral directors? Please provide details.*

Prior to the start of operating the North Tyneside jurisdiction from Newcastle Civic Centre, the Senior Coroner undertook consultation with Northumbria Police, Newcastle and North Tyneside Hospitals, GP practices, faith groups and funeral directors. No concerns or issues have been raised since that consultation.

- *What are the views of other stakeholders?*

Please see above.

- *What impact will the merger have in terms of disability, gender and racial equality?*

In line with the comments above, these arrangements have been in place for more than 3 years without issue and so it is considered that there will be no material impacts.

RISKS AND MITIGATING ACTIONS

- Please provide details of any risks identified and mitigating action (to be) taken.

The fact that the two jurisdictions have effectively been operated as a single jurisdiction for more than 3 years means that there has been a substantial period to identify and address any practical issues and so no substantive risks arising from the formal merger are anticipated.

ALTERNATIVE OPTION(S)

There are currently 4 coronial jurisdictions in the North of Tyne area:

- Newcastle
- North Tyneside
- North Northumberland
- South Northumberland

Consideration was previously given to the possibility of creating one single jurisdiction to cover the area of the 4 current jurisdictions, but this was discounted on the basis of the geographical size of such a jurisdiction, and it was decided that it would be more appropriate for Newcastle and North Tyneside to merge and the two Northumberland areas to merge (as they will align with the local authority area of Northumberland County Council).

In theory, it would be possible for the Newcastle and North Tyneside jurisdictions to remain as separate jurisdictions, each with its own Senior Coroner. However, if that option were followed, there would appear to be no benefit in undoing the work to date in harmonising the operational arrangements for both jurisdictions which are outlined above, ie with both coronial services operating from one site, with the same staff and support systems. Undoing this would simply entail additional expense and bureaucracy. Given the practical benefits of retaining the operational arrangements of what is effectively a combined jurisdiction, it is submitted that it would be entirely appropriate to formalise this through the merger of the 2 jurisdictions.

CONTACT WITH THE CHIEF CORONER'S OFFICE / MINISTRY OF JUSTICE / CONSULTEES

- Have you had previous discussions with the Chief Coroner on the proposed merger? (This is a requirement before MoJ can formally consult on the merger.) Please provide details of the discussion.

The Councils liaised with the Chief Coroner throughout the recent joint recruitment exercise to appoint a new senior coroner for both jurisdictions. The Chief Coroner is supportive of the proposed merger.

- Have you had previous contact with MoJ on the proposed merger? Please provide details.

The Councils have liaised with the MoJ on the preparation of this business case for a number of months.

- Are you happy for this business case in its entirety to be sent to all consultees? If not please provide details.

The Councils are content for this business case to be disclosed save for the financial information contained herein and will therefore provide at Appendix A.

- Please list consultees for the consultation on the proposed merger – the organisation's name and the most appropriate email address - at **Annex B**. MoJ will remove email addresses from **Annex B** before sending the business case to consultees.
- Further information on the merger process is available in the form of Chief Coroner guidance at: <http://www.judiciary.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/guidance-14-mergers-of-coroner-areas.pdf>.

The Chief Coroner for England and Wales and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) must be consulted and approve any changes to Coroners' areas.

The Chief Coroner and MoJ are seeking fewer Coroner areas with more whole time Coroners covering larger geographical areas. This policy was embedded in the Coroners and Justice Act 2009.

The Chief Coroner's Guidance No 14 – Merger of Coroner's Areas states: -

'12. There are presently 95 coroner areas in England and Wales (with 87 senior coroners). It is the view of the Chief Coroner, following upon the recommendations of

the Luce Review in 2003, that the number of coroner areas should be reduced in order to create sensibly sized coroner areas, taking into account the numbers of reported deaths, geographical size and types of coroner work in the area. In many cases 3,000-5,000 reported deaths would be an appropriate number, although smaller or larger areas may in places be appropriate. There are many part-time coroner jurisdictions which are too small for effective management and cost-efficiency.

13. In the short term mergers of coroner areas are only likely to take place with the agreement of all local authorities concerned. The Lord Chancellor must in any event consult with local authorities (amongst others) before ordering a merger. There is, however, no reason in principle why the Lord Chancellor should not in due course combine areas after consultation but without agreement where there is a clear case for merger.

Resource implications of the merger

Table A: Details of current Senior Coroners and Area Coroner/s (if applicable) in each existing coroner area

* This information is exempt under Paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972

Position (eg Senior Coroner, Area Coroner)	First name	Surname	Current salary (including National Insurance and pension contributions)	Long Inquest Payments (if applicable) or other additional payments	Proposed salary in amalgamated area (if applicable) (including National Insurance and pension contributions)
Senior Coroner (North Tyneside)	Karen	Dilks	* See above	N/A	*See above
Senior Coroner (Newcastle City Council)	Karen	Dilks	* See above	N/A	

Table B: Office costs

Category	Newcastle City Council	North Tyneside Council	Newcastle and North Tyneside
Fees for Assistant Coroner(s)	£48,767	£24,704	£73,471
Salary costs of Coroner's officer(s) <i>(including National Insurance and pension contributions)</i>	* See above	* See above	* See above
Salary costs of administrative staff <i>(including National Insurance and pension contributions)</i>	£76,047	£35,183	£111,230
Staff accommodation	£96,099	£49,943	£142,902
Inquest accommodation	£0	£0	£0
IT costs	£7,736	£407,114	£190,287
Post mortem/ Pathologist costs etc	£749,385	£407,114	£190,287
Other costs?	£45,969 (premises, equipment, parking passes, supplies and services)	£144,329	£190,298

