

# Impact Assessment



and Plymouth, Torbay and

Assessment of: Merger of Exeter and Greater Devon  
South Devon Coroners Services into Devon Coroners Service

Service: Legal and Democratic Services

Head of Service: Maria Price

Version / date of sign off by Head of Service: Draft V1

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## 1. Brief Description of service under review

A coroner is a special 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, such as a mental health hospital. The investigation may include an inquest hearing. The coroner's role is to find out who died and how, when, and where they died. [Guide to coroner services - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

Currently the county of Devon is covered by two Coroners Services: (1) Plymouth, Torbay and South Devon – administered by Plymouth City Council, and (2) the rest of Devon ('Exeter and Greater Devon') - administered by Devon County Council.

The following map shows the administrative areas of the current arrangement. The Plymouth, Torbay and South Devon area covers Kanton, Starcross and Devon to the east, Buckfastleigh, Ashburton and the south of Dartmoor to the north, Torquay, Paignton, Brixham and the South Hams district (Salcombe, Kingsbridge etc.) to the south, and the city of Plymouth to the west:

# Current Coroner Areas 2022



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## 2. Proposal, aims and objectives, and reason for change or review

The Senior Coroner for Plymouth, Torbay and South Devon retired on 31 March 2023. As a result, it is proposed that Devon County Council take the lead administrative role and work in liaison with Plymouth and Torbay Councils, re-charging costs via a Service Level Agreement for work within Torbay and Plymouth. The Ministry of Justice and Chief Coroners Office policy is to reduce the number of coronial areas in England and Wales. The review of areas is carried out on the retirement of a senior coroner as in this case. .

<b>Coroner area</b>	<b>Current: Exeter and Greater Devon</b>	<b>Current: Plymouth, Torbay and South Devon</b>	<b>Proposed: County of Devon Coroner's Service</b>
Local authority that funds coroner area	Devon County Council	Devon County Council Plymouth City Council Torbay Council	Devon County Council Plymouth City Council Torbay Council
Lead authority (administered by)	Devon County Council	Plymouth City Council	Devon County Council
Police Force(s)	Devon and Cornwall Police	Devon and Cornwall Police	Devon and Cornwall Police
Major hospitals	Royal Devon University Healthcare Trust (formerly RD&E) North Devon District Hospital	Derriford Torbay	RDUHT, NDDH, Derriford and Torbay
Acute Mental Health Facilities	The Junipers Psychiatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU) <a href="#">Rehabilitation and Recovery</a> wards ( <a href="#">Ocean View</a> and <a href="#">Russell Clinic</a> ).		The Junipers Psychiatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU) <a href="#">Rehabilitation and Recovery</a> wards ( <a href="#">Ocean View</a> and <a href="#">Russell Clinic</a> ).
Prisons in area	Exeter Dartmoor (Princetown)	Channings Wood (Newton Abbot)	Exeter, Dartmoor and Channings Wood prisons
Other state detention facilities	Atkinson Secure Children's Home, Exeter.		Atkinson Secure Children's Home, Exeter. Langdon Secure Hospital, Dawlish.

<b>Coroner area</b>	<b>Current: Exeter and Greater Devon</b>	<b>Current: Plymouth, Torbay and South Devon</b>	<b>Proposed: County of Devon Coroner's Service</b>
	Langdon Secure Hospital, Dawlish.		
Courtrooms/ inquest venues	County Hall, Exeter: 2 small courts and 1 large court for Juries.	Plymouth Coroners Court	Exeter: 3 small courts and 1 large court. Plymouth: 1 small court.  All courts are accessible for wheelchairs being on ground level, loop system in the council chamber which acts as the jury inquest court at DCC. Courts are able to offer hybrid hearings with virtual attendance offered via MS Teams.
Office/staff accommodation – location and capacity	County Hall Exeter: Designated wing with large admin/officers room, 2 offices for senior coroner and area coroner, 2 court rooms, larger chamber for jury cases, and a family room.	Plymouth Coroners Court is in a building shared with Plymouth City Council Registration Service. It includes a court room, board/ jury room and other rooms for officers and admin staff.	As per County Hall Exeter, plus one extra court to be added.  A court only would remain in Plymouth.
Employer of coroner's officers'	Devon and Cornwall Police	Devon and Cornwall Police	Devon and Cornwall Police
Name of senior coroner	Philip Spinney	Philip Spinney (Acting senior coroner)	Philip Spinney
Number of area coroners	1	0	2
Number of assistant coroners	3	6	8 (1 cross appointed)
Number of coroner's officers	7	8	15

<b>Coroner area</b>	<b>Current: Exeter and Greater Devon</b>	<b>Current: Plymouth, Torbay and South Devon</b>	<b>Proposed: County of Devon Coroner's Service</b>
Number of administrative support staff	5.5	2	5.5
Number of deaths reported in the previous calendar year (2022)	1,967	2,685	
Inquests held in the previous calendar year (2022)	401	527	
Including: Jury Inquests (2022)	12	4	
Post-mortem rate as % of reported deaths in the previous calendar year	42%	43%	

### 3. Risk assessment, limitations and options explored (summary)

There are four options to consider.

Option 1 – chosen option - To merge the two jurisdictions but keep a Coroner's court venue in Plymouth; This would support Plymouth Council's equality impact duty in keeping the court easily accessible for the population of Plymouth

Option 2 - To merge the two jurisdictions and move all resource centrally to Exeter including having a single Coroner's Court venue. This is not preferred by Plymouth City Council as this would require significant travel for the attendance of inquests, reducing accessibility to this service, particularly considering deprivation of the city.

Option 3 – to merge but to retain both the Corner’s Courts and the back office functions across the two sites. This provides very little benefit to the current position.

Option 4 – as is - Not to merge the two jurisdictions and remain as is with the appointment of a Senior Coroner for Plymouth Torbay and South Devon. Whilst this option is easy to implement, it would run counter to the wishes of the Chief Coroner and policy to reduce the number of coroner areas in England and Wales. Retaining the existing structure also gives no opportunity to review and modernise service delivery, create uniformity or seek any efficiencies. There are also potential issues of resilience which are overcome with a larger team.

Option 1 is the preferred option for all authorities involved.

Robust working arrangements and processes will be in place, therefore there will be no impact on the public other than the stakeholders in the Plymouth Torbay and South Devon area having different contact information. This will be communicated fully to those currently using the service by letter and by websites for those needing to gain information about the service.

The central administration function is proposed to be located at the offices in Exeter. This service area of the building has recently been refurbished and has additional capacity to accommodate any additional resources that would be needed to manage the combined caseload of the existing areas. It has 2 dedicated inquest courts equipped with hybrid hearing facilities and family space, with plans to create another day-to-day court in the same corridor.

At present contact between the coroner’s office and the next of kin/families is via telephone, post or email, and in general face-to face contact only takes place at inquest hearings. Therefore, a change to the physical location of the central support or administrative function will not have an impact on members of the public in the Plymouth, Torbay and South Devon area.

The centralisation of the support function would provide robust and appropriate support for the work of the coroner’s office and offer economies of scale of operations and seek to introduce standard working practices and levels of service throughout Devon. Coroner practices would then be uniform throughout the county. In terms of the admin function staff would not relocate to the Exeter office from Plymouth as those staff are also trained in the Registration Office and would continue to work in that area. However Devon and Cornwall police staff working as Coroners Officers in Plymouth would in consultation change working practices to attend the offices in Exeter on an agile basis after consultation to take into consideration their personal situations.

Additional administrative resources will be required at this office to support the increased caseload, especially to manage any transition period and the ongoing increased telephone traffic that would occur. However, in the longer term it is seen that there could be some efficiencies achieved with a restructuring of the work between standard and complex casework.

In terms of ICT, both areas are using the civica cloud data management system which would be transferred onto one system for all to use. When this was implemented, we worked together to create a similar system and workflow, so that it would create resilience for the two jurisdictions.

We will work with all the mortuaries to look at catchment areas to improve efficiencies and options for families. Currently deceased from areas near Exeter such as Kenton, Starcross and Dawlish, and some of those on the A38 corridor, are being taken to Torbay or even Plymouth mortuaries when Exeter is much nearer and would be the main hospital for relatives. This would result in economic and environmental improvements through reduced travel and also reduce distress for families who may feel more comfortable in knowing their loved one is not being moved far for post-mortem. In addition, the body transportation between Plymouth and Torbay is increasingly expensive and could be more economically dealt with from other funeral directors in and around the Exeter jurisdiction.

The impact on other key stakeholders (such as police, undertakers, hospital trusts, etc.) is also slight and, with the exception of new contact information, which will be communicated early in the process, there should be little change.

The Police use telephone and email as the primary method of contacting the coroner's office, and there is little requirement for face-to-face contact except in very complex and difficult cases, and there will be no change to that.

In summary, it is seen that the external impact of the move to one area is small. With good timely communication prior to, during and after any merger takes place there should be no change in the way the public use the service.

A single Coronial area in Devon would mean one Senior Coroner, one Police force, co-terminus with the boundaries of the County.

### **Staffing:**

One Area Coroner will be required to take the team up to 1 Senior and 2 Area Coroners to manage the increased caseloads, inquests and out of hours calls. Between the two merged jurisdictions there would be 8 Assistant Coroners to provide resilience and who could all work in each court location.

The Senior Coroner for the merged area would remain, Philip Spinney who is currently the Senior Coroner for Exeter and Greater Devon and is also currently appointed as the Acting Senior Coroner for the Plymouth, Torbay and South Devon jurisdiction. There is one Area Coroner in Exeter and we would look to appoint another given the large number of reported deaths for the merged area to cover caseloads, inquests and out of hours calls. We have 8 Assistant Coroners between the two jurisdictions and therefore with each carrying out their minimum 15 sitting days per year, there would be good resilience.

Coroners' Officers in both areas are stretched to capacity at present. Working as one team, from one base, under one Senior Coroner, would bring benefits of resilience. There are currently two Senior Coroners Officers managing the two jurisdictions. Greater stability would come with all officers working in the same way to the same Senior Coroner.

#### 4. People affected and diversity profile

Population data for Devon County Council area: [Census 2021 - Facts and Figures \(devon.gov.uk\)](#)

Population data for Torbay: [Torbay population change, Census 2021 – ONS](#)

Population data for Plymouth: [Plymouth population change, Census 2021 – ONS](#)

Currently people in the Exeter and Greater Devon jurisdiction travel to Exeter for inquests and those in the Plymouth Torbay and South Devon jurisdiction have to travel to Plymouth to attend their inquest. In the merged area there will be an option to travel to Exeter or Plymouth for their inquest as there will no longer be boundaries within the county. Those on the A38 corridor and from Torbay are likely to choose to attend Exeter, or indeed use the hybrid facility and attend virtually.

Parking at Plymouth Coroners Court is free whereas at County Hall Exeter there is a pay and display car park.

Getting from Plymouth to Exeter by coach can be as fast as 1 hour 6 minutes. 46 miles around £4.

Train travel from Plymouth to Exeter is around £10 and takes one hour to St Davids station. From Torbay to Exeter rail tickets are around £7 and takes 45 minutes. From Torbay to Plymouth is just over 1 hour and cost around £10.

Both courts are out of town and therefore car or bus travel is the easiest.

#### 5. Stakeholders, their interest and potential impacts

There will be no impact to the mortuary and pathology services as all 4 hospitals, Exeter, Derriford, Torbay and North Devon would continue to carry out the same service as now.

#### 6. Additional relevant research used to inform this assessment

#### 7. Description of consultation process and outcomes



Views of the police have been sought in terms of the coroners' officers only. The Chief Coroner's Office and MoJ have been contacted about the process leading to merger. They will carry out a consultation of all interested parties to the merger in Devon including hospitals, emergency services, funeral services, registration services.

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## Background information

### 8. Equality analysis

Under the Equality Act 2010, the local authority must consider how people will be affected by a service, policy or practice. In so doing we must give due regard to the need to: eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation; advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations across protected characteristics of age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership (for work), sex, sexual orientation, race, and religion and belief. The Equality Act 2010 and other relevant legislation does not prevent the Council from taking difficult decisions which result in service reductions or closures for example, it does however require the Council to ensure that such decisions are: informed and properly considered with a rigorous, conscious approach and open mind, taking due regard of the effects on the protected characteristics and the general duty to eliminate discrimination, advance equality and foster good relations; proportionate (negative impacts are proportionate to the aims of the policy decision); fair, necessary, reasonable, and those affected have been adequately consulted.

Cost of travel and accessibility will need to be considered in relation to the option of retaining a Coroner Court in Plymouth. Not retaining the court will result in increased travel costs and time for people normally accessing services in this area. However, for those based in Torbay and south of Exeter, the ability to access the court in Exeter rather than Plymouth will be an improvement.

The cost of living is impacting lower earners across all age groups but may be heightened for people with protected characteristics due to difficulties in accessing support or information. This includes older women affected by the unexpected rise in State Pension Age, people whose first language isn't English, and disabled people.

Much of Devon's bus network is not commercially viable and relies on subsidy. Limited public transport options particularly effects young people, older women and disabled people. Those in deep rural areas can face long travel times or lack of access to public transport. The cost of living and transport is also impacting younger people who do not have access to free transport or income.

Service delivery will come under Devon County Council's Equality Policy which aims to ensure fair and equitable access to services. In addition, all staff are required to undertake Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training. A merger of the service will ensure consistent application of policy and practice across all areas for all protected characteristic groups.

Devon County Council offers access to British Sign Language live interpreting for Deaf customers who need to contact the service, and Language Line telephone interpreting service for people whose first language is not English. The site at Exeter also offers prayer and contemplation facilities which members of the public with religious needs can access.

All courts are wheelchair accessible and on the ground floor. Hearing loop is available in the Council Chamber.

There will be no relocation of staff on the whole but those needing to attend Exeter to work from Plymouth will do so on an agile working basis after discussion with line managers to look at personal situations.

No issues or opportunities identified for protected characteristics of gender reassignment, sex or sexual orientation.

## 9. Human rights considerations:

We need to ensure that human rights are protected. In particular, that people have:

- A reasonable level of choice in where and how they live their life and interact with others (this is an aspect of the human right to 'private and family life').
- An appropriate level of care which results in dignity and respect (the protection to a private and family life, protection from torture and the freedom of thought, belief and religion within the Human Rights Act and elimination of discrimination and the promotion of good relations under the Equality Act 2010).
- A right to life (ensuring that nothing we do results in unlawful or unnecessary/avoidable death).

Bereaved families are at the heart of the service and having coroners' courts support service volunteers on hand to support and assist families ensures that the time they spend at an inquest is the least traumatic that we can make it. Our staff are empathetic and professional and communicate with families to show respect and dignity in this difficult time for them. We expect this level of care from any of the services we contract to work with the deceased and their families.

## 10. Environmental analysis

An impact assessment should give due regard to the following activities in order to ensure we meet a range of environmental legal duties. The policy or practice does not require the identification of environmental impacts using this Impact Assessment process because it is subject to (please mark X in the relevant box below and proceed to the 11, otherwise complete the environmental analysis information below):

<b>Devon County Council's Environmental Review Process</b>	
<b>Planning Permission</b>	
<b>Environmental Impact Assessment</b>	
<b>Strategic Environmental Assessment</b>	

- a) Description of any actual or potential negative consequences and consider how to mitigate against these.
- b) Description of any actual or potential neutral or positive outcomes and consider how to improve as far as possible.

[If carrying out an options appraisal, explore the pros and cons of each option for each area]

### **Reduce, reuse, recycle and compost**

Not applicable

### **Conserve and enhance wildlife**

Not applicable

### **Safeguard the distinctive characteristics, features and special qualities of Devon's landscape**

Not applicable

### **Conserve and enhance Devon's cultural and historic heritage**

Not applicable

### **Minimise greenhouse gas emissions**

With the ability to travel to their nearest court this will reduce emissions where possible. We will also offer the option of virtual attendance at inquest to reduce travelling and therefore emissions further.

**Minimise pollution (including air, land, water, light and noise)**

Not applicable

**Contribute to reducing water consumption**

Not applicable

**Ensure resilience to the future effects of climate change (warmer, wetter winters; drier, hotter summers; more intense storms; and rising sea level)**

Not applicable

**Other (please state below)**

none

## 11. Economic analysis

- a) Description of any actual or potential negative consequences and consider how to mitigate against these.
- b) Description of any actual or potential neutral or positive outcomes and consider how to improve as far as possible.

**Impact on knowledge and skills**

All skills and knowledge will remain with the administrative hub only moving to a centralised office. All aspects of care of the deceased will still take place in the current locations.

**Impact on employment levels**

This will not cause impact on employment levels as the caseload size will remain the same, but the administration function will be carried out from one County hub.

### **Impact on local business**

Most of the contact is by telephone and email and there will therefore be minimal impact to others. The building housing the coronial service in Plymouth will remain with Registration Services continuing to be based there.