

Report to Scrutiny

12th March 2019

Computed Tomography Post Mortems (CTPM)

Summary

To advise on progress towards the provision of Computed Tomography Post Mortems (also known as Digital Autopsies) for Birmingham residents.

Since this item was last considered by Scrutiny Committee a number of issues have materialised to help inform our planning.

1. Condition Report on the Mortuary and Coroner's Court

Any decisions about the provision of digital autopsies must have regard to the future of the mortuary and coroners court buildings which are both in poor condition and will require significant investment if we are to retain them. A recent condition report has identified urgent repairs that are required to the floor of the mortuary costing £150,000 and an additional £242,000 of repairs that are recommended in the next 12 months (including a replacement roof). In total the report identifies repairs and maintenance totalling £868,000 (worst case scenario) over the next 3 years.

2. Inspection by the Human Tissue Authority (HTA)

The HTA grants our licence to run a public mortuary. A recent audit by the HTA has identified further improvements to the mortuary, which do not form part of the condition report, but which nevertheless must be completed in order to retain our licence. We are awaiting a quotation for the cost of this work. The temporary ventilation system in use in the mortuary has been accepted by the HTA, but only until such time that we decided to move to a new purpose built building or to invest and stay in the current building.

3. Value of Building

A valuation of the building has been carried out, which estimates it to be worth less than £1.2m.

The above factors are leading towards a conclusion that it would be better to invest in a new purpose built mortuary and coroners court than to prop up a very old building that is rapidly deteriorating and much of which is not fit for purpose.

In the light of this officers have started discussions with our neighbouring Black Country local authorities about shared facilities. The Black Country Authorities

(Sandwell, Dudley, Wolverhampton and Walsall) form between them the geographical jurisdiction of the Black Country Coroner.

Officers with responsibility for coronial and bereavement services met on 8th February 2019.

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss ideas for a shared Coroners Court and Mortuary. Currently the Black Country Coroner sits in a court in Oldbury which is inside the public library. All authorities agreed that there were definite benefits and potential economies of scale to be found in a shared regional court and mortuary facility. The Black Country authorities do not have a public mortuary and rely instead on hospitals for the storage of bodies and for the conduct of post mortems.

The four Black Country Authorities are part of ABCA (Association of Black Country Authorities) and were at the point of commissioning an external consultancy to produce a report that would assess the benefits of a joint Coroners Court and Mortuary for themselves. A joint mortuary facility could also include a toxicology and histology facility. Such a facility could be marketed to other external customers. The other authorities paused that process when Birmingham expressed an interest in being involved. Birmingham has agreed to participate in the assessment and will contribute to the cost of the report. The tender for the procurement of the contract is being prepared by Wolverhampton.

Digital Autopsy

The Black Country Authorities (with the exception of Walsall) use a CTPM scanner operated by iGene London Ltd. The scanner is at Sandwell Valley Crematorium. All three authorities have agreed to use CTPM as their first line intervention (i.e. all bodies are automatically scanned). The cost is funded by each authority but with the provision that where the scan does not determine the cause of death the authority does not pay. The cost is believed to be £238 per scan which includes the transportation of the body to and from whichever mortuary it is in.

However, all agreed that it is a very inefficient procedure and the fact that the scanner is not next to the mortuary adds greatly to delays. Without a central mortuary bodies are transported by funeral directors from whichever hospital or funeral director they are in to the scanner. The facility has no storage capacity for bodies which means that funeral directors must wait until a scan is completed in order to return the body to storage immediately, however this creates logistical problems.

All Authorities agreed that the ideal solution would be to have a scanner sited next to a mortuary and coroner's court. Walsall does not send any bodies to the scanning facility because it does not have a budget to do so. The three authorities that use iGene are now finding that they are all struggling to fund the cost and are looking for alternative solutions.

It was agreed at the meeting on 8th February that iGene will be invited to present suggestions for a business model to include the three Black Country Authorities and Birmingham (if we participated in the scheme) and what this would do to the unit

price. The increased number of scans should bring down the unit costs. Although we have not been able to identify a budget, a reduced price might enable us to take a different view on how we can fund it or whether it would be possible for families to pay a contribution towards the costs. The meeting with iGene is scheduled for 8th March.

If the proposals for the shared use of the facility in Sandwell are unproductive we retain the option of discussing with iGene and the Black Country authorities whether there is an option to move the facility into our public mortuary as an interim step pending the construction of a new mortuary building, and how this would be paid for.