



CORONER'S COURT

Jurisdiction: Birmingham & Solihull Areas

HM Senior Coroner: Mrs Louise Hunt

VIA EMAIL

10 December 2019

Our Ref: LH/RP

Mr Paul Lankester

Interim Assistant Director Regulation and Enforcement

Regulation & Enforcement, Neighbourhoods Directorate

Email: paul.lankester@birmingham.gov.uk

Dear Paul

Re: Acquisition of the Youth Court

Firstly I would like to thank BCC for the ongoing work being undertaken to find a suitable alternative premises for the Birmingham and Solihull Coroners Service.

The current situation is that BCC have put in an offer for the youth court which has been accepted and that costs are being prepared for the internal work required to make the court building suitable for our needs in accordance with S24 Coroners and Justice Act 2009.

You advised James and I at our management meeting on Thursday that there is a plan to allocate 60 BCC staff to part of the building, working open plan in one area.

The project to relocate the Coroner's Court has been ongoing for nearly 12 months and we have met and agreed with property service (Stephen Manners) what space is required for the Coroner's Court. We should also make clear that the Coroner's Court needs to be independent of BCC and any shared working areas need to be carefully scrutinised before final decisions are made.

We would like to take this opportunity to clearly set out what we require in any new court building, as discussed with Stephen Manners, to ensure there is no misunderstanding of our needs. We would also like to further discuss what other staff/services would be appropriate or suitable to be collocated in the same building.

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We hope the following will assist:

1. **Court requirements**

Court 1

- Large court with jury facilities and portable screens, video conferencing capability and document production facilities. The plan was for two courts to be knocked into one.
- Private jury corridor with separate access
- Private jury retiring room with separate access
- Private jury toilet and tea and coffee facilities with separate access
- 3 meeting rooms for interested persons – 1 family and 2 for others.

Court 2

- Medium sized court with video conferencing capability and document production facilities. The plan was for two courts to be knocked into one.
- 3 meeting rooms for interested persons – 1 family and 2 for others.

Court 3

- Small fixed court room
- Private waiting area for newly bereaved family

Office space

- Reception area with desks for 3 staff
- Open plan office area for between 15-20 Coroner's Officers and Investigators. This room needs to be of an adequate size. It is not a usual office environment given the nature of the conversations and the bereaved people the staff are speaking. There needs to be a private area for sensitive calls to families. This office needs to be secure as do all of our offices.
- Separate offices/retiring rooms for Senior Coroner and each of the Area Coroners
- Office space for the Coroner's PA
- Separate space for Assistant Coroners
- Coroner's meeting room
- Storage room for files
- Separate toilets for staff and Coroners
- Kitchen area for staff

2. **Shared facilities**

The Coroner is an independent judicial office holder with a statutory responsibility to investigate all violent or unnatural deaths, deaths where the cause is unknown and deaths in custody or state detention. The nature of our cases means they often involve other agencies and the independence of the Coroner is paramount in all we do to ensure an open and transparent service for families and interested persons. For that reason it is important that we remain separate from the local authority whilst conducting our judicial role.

The families attending our service will be recently bereaved so consideration needs to be given to supporting families and noise will need to be kept to a minimum so that court proceedings are not disrupted.

All printers and IT will need to be separate to the main BCC set up given the confidential nature of our work. The investigators also have WMP computers which need to be in a secure environment.

Given the amount of space needed for the service it seems unlikely that there will be sufficient room for shared facilities as suggested.

Were space to be available we would need to carefully discuss who could be in the building and how the building would be accessed given we are a public court. The original agreement with property services was that the other BCC staff in our current building could likely be collocated subject to assessing the court's needs.

3. Security

Given the nature of the proceedings we undertake and the recent letter from the Chief Coroner around security in Coroner's Courts, careful consideration needs to be given to what security arrangements are required to keep staff and the public safe. Specialist advice would need to be obtained.

4. The way forward

We suggest an urgent site visit and discussion to review the space required by the service to ensure all our needs are met and to further discuss what space is available for others and how that could be used.

5. Specialist input

The planning and layout of court rooms and the facilities to support them is not like other types of local authority office buildings and needs to be carefully planned. In order to ensure that the space is best used with all reasonable needs met, consideration should be given to seeking some specialist input into the project.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely



Mrs Louise Hunt

HM Senior Coroner

Birmingham & Solihull Areas