

**26<sup>th</sup> February 2013**

**Agenda Item: 7**

**REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, PROMOTING INDEPENDENCE AND  
PUBLIC PROTECTION**

**UPDATE ON EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AND REGISTRATION SERVICES**

**Purpose of the Report**

1. To provide an update on recent key activities and events of the County Council's Emergency Planning Team and of Registration and Celebratory Services and to highlight forthcoming changes affecting the Coroner Service.

**Information and Advice**

**Emergency Management**

Emergency Planning support for schools

2. The Emergency Planning Team takes great pride in the high quality guidance the County Council provides to schools to help them to plan and prepare for emergencies that might affect them. This work has been commended nationally and has contributed to the achievement of prestigious awards in previous years. This year, the local guidance document, 'Coping with a School Emergency', has been reviewed, refreshed and re-released alongside the availability of practical support to schools, should this be required.
3. Updates were made to the current version of 'Coping with a School Emergency' and this was then circulated to key groups for consultations during January. Publication of the final version was scheduled for publication on Monday 28<sup>th</sup> January as this was immediately prior to two County Council 'Services for Schools' marketplace events taking place on 31<sup>st</sup> January and 1<sup>st</sup> February. Emergency Planning Officers attend these events, whenever they occur, to provide advice to school representatives and to explain the nature of further support that can be provided. The guidance document makes clear that the County Council will endeavour to provide schools with appropriate assistance at the time of an emergency, and that good preparation is vital to effective emergency management.

Winter Weather Planning and Response

4. Feedback from flooding events in November and December has been used with the outcomes of debriefing meetings to inform adjustments and improvements to local flood response plans. At the same time, emergency plans arising from the lessons of severe snowfall in recent winters have been used to assist response this year.

5. Two County Council emergency plans, in particular, were available to assist during the heavy snowfall seen in late January. The '4x4' plan provides and coordinates the use of 'off-road' capable vehicles to maintain delivery of critical services, while the 'Winter Weather Plan' provides wider support to sustain vital services. The County Council's 'Risk, Safety and Emergency Management Board' met for a routine meeting at the time when the Met Office forecasts provided detailed predictions of the likely extent of snowfall. On this occasion the Board was able to decide that normal business continuity measures and the use of the '4x4' plan was sufficient to cope with the anticipated impact of snowfall. Consequently, it was not necessary to activate the 'Winter Weather Plan' on this occasion.
6. Four-wheel drive vehicles were used as planned, and provided a suitably resilient means of transport for services such as Meals at Home and Homecare in rural areas where roads are impassable by other vehicles. The County Council has twelve 4x4 vehicles available for this work, and the plan provides access to others available from voluntary groups and other organisations. A specific training event on the 4x4 plan was provided by the emergency planning team in September 2012.

## **Registration and Celebratory Services**

### Registration Service Staff Training

7. As reported previously, the Registration Service now has a dedicated Training Officer resource to support maintenance and development of this expanding service. This is now delivering specialist training courses to registrars and initial indications are that this is proving successful and beneficial. The first course took place in December, with the theme "Sharing Positive Practise". Other courses cover topics such as Delivering Ceremonies, Registering Marriages, and Basic Notice taking. Feedback from staff attending initial courses has been highly complimentary, and has indicated that participants will be recommending the courses to their colleagues.

### Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill

8. In January, the Government published its new Bill to enable same-sex marriages to take place in England and Wales. When this is enacted it will affect the work of the County Council's Registration Service, and so necessary arrangements are now being planned.
9. Same-sex couples have been able to enter into civil partnerships since 2005. This entitling them to the same legal rights as married couples for matters such as inheritance, pensions, life assurance, child maintenance, next of kin and immigration rights. The proposed new law will enable same-sex couples the opportunity to get married in civil ceremonies at Register Offices and premises approved for civil ceremonies, as well as in religious ceremonies where a religious institution has formally consented.
10. Significantly for Registration Services, the legislation will also allow couples who have previously entered into civil partnerships to convert their relationship into a marriage. The effect of couples wishing to celebrate this with a ceremony, and other couples wishing to take the opportunity to marry, is likely to create additional demand for registration services.

## **Coroners**

### Medical Examiner Proposals

11. The purpose of this section of the report is to advise the Committee of forthcoming changes to the death certification process and the implications this has for the County Council.
12. The Department of Health is currently developing proposals to simplify and strengthen the process of death certification as part of its response to the recommendations of the Shipman Inquiry. It is expected that the changes will require the certified cause of all deaths that are not investigated by a coroner to be independently scrutinized and confirmed by a locally appointed 'Medical Examiner'. The Shipman Inquiry was an independent public inquiry into the issues surrounding the case of the GP Harold Shipman, who was convicted of murdering 15 patients during his time as General Practitioner. The inquiry subsequently established that he committed some 250 murders.
13. Reforms are expected to introduce a unified system of scrutiny of all deaths that do not need investigation by a coroner. This will replace the current system of checks and forms for cremations, and will extend scrutiny to burials. This work will be carried out by a new 'Medical Examiner' service, which will be run by local authorities. The Coroners and Justice Act 2009 sets out the legal basis for the new system while The Health and Social Care Act 2012 includes provision for responsibility for the new service to sit with local authorities following changes to the NHS which will remove primary care trusts from April 2013. It is anticipated that national implementation of the new local medical examiner service will take place in April 2014. A Government consultation on this matter is expected imminently. It is anticipated that Central Government will fund set-up costs, under the 'new burdens' doctrine. Thereafter it will be self-funding based on fees paid by the public. The likely changes will require coroners to carry out more inquests than currently, and the cost of this will fall to local authorities. It is also expected that the new arrangements will necessitate changes in the procedures registrars follow for registering a death.

## **Statutory and Policy Implications**

14. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of finance, equal opportunities, human resources, crime and disorder, human rights, the safeguarding of children, sustainability and the environment and those using the service and where such implications are material they are included in the report.

## **RECOMMENDATION/S**

- 1) It is recommended that the contents of the report be noted.

**PAUL MCKAY**

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Adult Social Care, Health and Public Protection

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**Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected**

All.

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