

Report to Cabinet

13 September 2023

Subject:	Contract award for the provision of Digital Autopsy services on behalf of the Black Country Coroner.
Cabinet Member:	Cabinet Member for Public Health & Communities Councillor Syeda Khatun.
Director:	Director – Law and Governance, Monitoring Officer. Surjit Tour
Key Decision:	Yes
Contact Officer:	Assistant Director – Law and Governance Mark Satchwell

1 Recommendations

- 1.1 That, approval be given to the Director of Law and Governance, Monitoring Officer to award a contract for the provision of Digital Autopsy services on behalf of the Black Country Coroner commencing 1 October 2023 for a 5-year period to Advanced Visualisation Technologies Ltd, 30 Watery Street, Sheffield, England, S3 7ES.
- 1.2 That the Director of Law and Governance – Monitoring Officer be authorised to execute any documentation necessary to enable the action referred to in 1.1 above to proceed.

2 Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 For the purposes of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009, Sandwell acts as “the relevant authority” for coronial services in the Black Country. It is therefore incumbent for Sandwell to provide the necessary resources to enable the Coroner to discharge his or her judicial responsibilities which includes the provision of post-mortem type services.



- 2.2 In order for the Coroner to ascertain the cause of sudden or unexplained deaths it is often necessary for post-mortem examinations to be undertaken.
- 2.3 As a result of advances in medical related technology it is possible to carry out a digital autopsy as an alternative to post-mortem. Using a medical scanner and advanced software to produce detailed three-dimensional images, it is now increasingly possible to determine the cause of death. This technology has now been used by the coroner in Sandwell and now the wider Black Country for many years.
- 2.4 In support of this, the Council has an on-going requirement for the provision of Digital Autopsy services, therefore, the Council as the relevant authority for the coroners service through the award of this contract will be able to continue to support the coroner in the discharge of their judicial responsibilities.
- 2.5 In accordance with the Council's Contract Procedures Rules, a tendering exercise has been undertaken to establish a five-year contract from 1 October 2023 until 30 September 2028 for the provision of services.
- 2.6 Tenders were invited using public advertisement to cover the requirements as outlined in 1.1 above and a total of three compliant bids were returned by the tender closing date.
- 2.7 Following analysis of the returned tenders, it is recommended Advanced Visualisation Technologies Ltd, 30 Watery Street, Sheffield, England, S3 7ES that Gem be awarded the contract.
- 2.8 Whilst the value of any contract of this type is dependent on the volume of cases referred to the coroner, it is estimated that this new contract will see annual expenditure of circa £413,000. Over the course of a five-year contract ,Sandwell's expenditure will be circa £2,065,000.
- 2.9 In accordance with the existing collaborative agreement for the shared coroners service with the other Black Country Councils, Sandwell will



recover 75% of all expenditure for the provision of Digital Autopsy services as outlined in 2.8 above.

3 How does this deliver objectives of the Corporate Plan?

	The proposals as outlined in this report will ensure key bereavement related services can continue to be delivered at very important moments in people's lives.
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4 Context and Key Issues

4.1 A death will be referred to the coroner if it is:

- Unexpected, violent, unnatural or suspicious,
- The result of an accident or injury, in custody,
- Occurred during or soon after a hospital procedure or the cause of death is unknown.

4.2 Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council is the relevant authority for the Black Country Coroners jurisdiction.

4.3 In order for the Coroner to ascertain the cause of sudden or unexplained deaths it is often necessary for post-mortem examinations to be undertaken.

4.4 As a result of advances in medical related technology it has become possible to carry out a digital autopsy as an alternative. Using a medical scanner and advanced software to produce detailed three-dimensional images, it is now increasingly possible to determine the cause of death.

4.5 The Digital Autopsy provides a number of benefits, including:

- Easing the emotional burden on families at a time of intense stress with a dignified, compassionate and minimally-invasive investigation;
- Improved speed of examination and investigation.
- Some findings that are difficult to spot during a conventional post mortem can be more easily identified and examined in line with the needs of forensic pathologists, improving the accuracy of results in some instances.



- 4.6 The development of this new technique was welcomed by the then Chief Coroner, His Honour Judge Peter Thornton, who said "...where a scan can, properly and in the right case, be used as a viable alternative to an autopsy, the preservation of the body intact is often greatly valued by the family." and "As science and technology develop, digital scanning is undoubtedly one of the ways forward for the coroner service."
- 4.7 The Council was notified that a cessation of trading of the existing supplier to the Council for Digital Autopsy Services, would take effect on 12 December 2022, and they were now unable to honour their contractual obligations with Sandwell and other partner organisations.
- 4.8 They granted a licence to Advanced Visualisation Technologies Limited ("AVT") to use its assets and premises pending their permanent transfer to enable the continuation of these services in Black Country coronial jurisdiction.
- 4.9 Given there were no reasonable alternative options available to the Council for the provision of this type of service to the Coroner to enable him or her to discharge their judicial responsibilities, a short-term contract to 30 September 2023 was awarded to Advanced Visualisation Technologies Limited.

5 Alternative Options

- 5.1 The Council in consultation with the coroner and its residents could revert to the more traditional approach to post-mortem investigations and no longer provide Digital Autopsy to support the coroner in the discharge of their judicial responsibilities. In doing so this may adversely impact the Council's reputation particularly with some community groups whose cultural preference is for a minimally invasive approach.



6 Implications

<p>Resources:</p>	<p>The value of any contract of this type is dependant of the volume of cases referred to the Coroner. It is estimated that this new contract will see annual expenditure of circa £413,000. Over the course of a five-year contract Sandwell’s expenditure will be circa £2,065,000.</p> <p>In accordance with the existing collaborative agreement for the shared coroners service with the other Black Country Councils, Sandwell will recover 75% of all expenditure for the provision of Digital Autopsy services.</p>
<p>Legal and Governance:</p>	<p>In accordance with the Coroners and Justice Act 2009, a coroner who is made aware that the body of a deceased person is within that coroner's area as duty as soon as practicable to conduct an investigation into the person's death if the coroner has reason to suspect that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) the deceased died a violent or unnatural death, (b) the cause of death is unknown, or (c) the deceased died while in custody or otherwise in state detention. <p>For the purpose of this act, Sandwell is the lead authority for the Black Country Coronial Jurisdiction, known as the “relevant authority”.</p> <p>The Council has to comply with the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 and the Council’s own Procurement and Contract Procedure Rules 2022 and confirms that this tender exercise has been conducted in accordance with the required procedures.</p>
<p>Risk:</p>	<p>The Coroners Service in the Black Country is a shared service between the four local authority areas. Governance arrangements to include risk and insurance are accounted for by a formal collaborative agreement between the participating authorities.</p>
<p>Equality:</p>	<p>Equality impact screening has been undertaken and the recommendations in this report do not seek changes to existing service delivery.</p>



Health and Wellbeing:	The provision of Digital Autopsy services as outlined within this report will ensure key bereavement related services can continue to be delivered at very important moments in people's lives
Social Value:	The provision of these services will be undertaken locally within the Black Country Jurisdiction. Wherever possible AVT will employ local people. They will also provide work placements for students studying for radiography qualifications
Climate Change:	There are no climate change implications associated with the recommendations within this report.
Corporate Parenting:	There are no corporate parenting implications associated with the recommendations within this report.

7. Appendices

None

8. Background Papers

None

