

Labour Group Amendment: Fair Access and Funding for Non-Invasive (Digital) Post-Mortems

Moved by: Cllr Graham Shuttleworth

Seconded by: Cllr Umar Nasheen

Background:

Council notes that when a death is sudden, unexplained, or occurs in circumstances requiring investigation, the Coroner is legally required to establish the cause of death through a post-mortem examination.

Traditionally, this has meant an invasive surgical autopsy an intrusive procedure that can be distressing for families, delay burials for several days, and conflict with religious requirements for immediate burial.

These examinations typically cost between £400 – £800 per case, rising to several thousand pounds in forensic cases, and are funded by local authorities via the coronial service budget.

Recent advances now allow the same investigative purpose to be achieved using Post-Mortem Computed Tomography (PMCT) or MRI scanning, known as a non-invasive or digital post-mortem.

The scans are undertaken by radiographers, interpreted by radiologists, and can identify a cause of death in 85–90 % of cases. They are quicker, more dignified, and culturally sensitive.

However, funding arrangements remain inconsistent nationally.

Council Notes

- In authorities such as Lancashire, Blackburn with Darwen, Bradford, Leicester, and Sandwell, costs are fully met from the coronial budget, and families pay nothing.
- Where a local facility does not exist, or no inter-borough agreement is in place, bereaved families may currently be asked to pay £200–£650 privately to access a scan something the Chief Coroner's 2022 guidance discourages.
- Oldham, Rochdale, and Bury Councils have jointly agreed to procure a shared digital post-mortem service, due to be operational in 2026, with each authority meeting one-third of the cost.
- Oldham currently contributes a proportion of the Greater Manchester North Coroner's budget along with Rochdale and Bury.
- Digital post-mortem costs (average £300–£500) are comparable to invasive autopsy costs.
- This motion commits no additional expenditure beyond existing allocations but ensures that funding responsibility lies with the Council, not families.
- Any variations or pressures will be reviewed by the Section 151 Officer through normal budget processes.
- **As noted by Rochdale Council's Cabinet report in August 2024:**
 - **The number of pathologists available to carry out this work, locally and nationally, is reducing and potentially leading to little or no local provision.**
 - **This is an issue that is recognised nationally.**
 - **To futureproof the service alternative means of postmortem examination must be sought.**

Council Believes

- Every family should have access to a non-invasive post-mortem free at the point of need where the Coroner deems it appropriate.
- Faith sensitivity and compassion should be reflected in how post-mortems are conducted.
- Clarity is needed so that no family is ever charged privately when a non-invasive scan is ordered by the Coroner.

- Oldham ~~can~~ is in the process of adopting an approach similar to the Lancashire model, ensuring costs are contained within the coronial service budget and compliant with Financial Procedure Rules.

Council Resolves

(Renumbered resolutions)

1. Agreement with Rochdale and Bury

That Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council (OMBC) continues on the path it is already on and formally agrees to ~~Rochdale Council's request to participate in~~ the joint procurement and delivery of the Digital Post-Mortem Services, contributing a proportion of the total cost (based on population, and requests that Bury Metropolitan Borough Council likewise confirm its participation, ensuring consistent funding and governance across the Greater Manchester North Coroner's Service.

2. Free at Point of Need

That when the service goes live in 2026 all non-invasive (digital) post-mortems authorised by the Greater Manchester North Coroner for Oldham residents be funded through ~~Oldham's share of~~ the coronial service budget, and that no bereaved family will be charged directly.

3. Inter-Authority Funding Agreements

That the Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer ~~cannot instruct enter discussions with partner councils and~~ the Coroner's Office to pay for private ~~ensure clear agreements are in place for payment of~~ scans carried out before ~~outside the borough until~~ the joint facility becomes operational in 2026.

4. Financial Compliance

That any implementation of this policy be carried out within approved budget allocations for the coronial service allocations to the coronial service, and subject to the approval of the Section 151 Officer under the Council's Financial Procedure Rules.

5. Public Awareness and Faith Engagement

That the Council continues to work with local faith leaders, funeral directors, and NHS Bereavement Services to publicise the availability of non-invasive post-mortems and to support families requiring rapid burial.

6. Scrutiny and Reporting

To note that the coroner's office is a statutory service outside of the Council's control, but asks ~~t~~That the relevant Scrutiny Board consider inviting the Coroner to provide an update which may cover: ~~receive an annual report covering:~~

- the number of non-invasive vs invasive post-mortems;
- turnaround times;
- cost implications; and
- family satisfaction feedback.

Financial Implications (For noting)

- ~~Oldham currently contributes a proportion dependant on population towards the Greater Manchester North Coroner Service budget, hosted by Rochdale MBC.~~
- ~~Digital post-mortem costs (£300-£500 per case) are comparable to traditional autopsies.~~
- ~~The proposal is therefore cost neutral, committing no new expenditure beyond Oldham's existing allocation.~~
- ~~Any variance will be reviewed by the Section 151 Officer during the annual budget process.~~

Amended Motion to read:

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