



Coroner investigations

A short guide

This leaflet aims to help you if someone close to you has died and their death has been reported to the coroner. It doesn't go into detail, but explains where you can get more information.

This leaflet is a brief summary and does not cover every circumstance.

The Guide to Coroner Services is a more detailed booklet and has more information on everything in this leaflet. It is available from:

- www.gov.uk
- your local coroner's office, or
- the Ministry of Justice by emailing coroners@justice.gsi.gov.uk or calling 020 3334 3555 and asking for the coroner team.

What does a coroner do?

A coroner is an independent judicial office holder, appointed by a local council. Coroners usually have a legal background but will also be familiar with medical terminology.

Coroners investigate deaths that have been reported to them if it appears that:

- the death was violent or unnatural
- the cause of death is unknown, or
- the person died in prison, police custody, or another type of state detention.

In these cases coroners must investigate to find out, for the benefit of bereaved people and for official records, who has died and how, when, and where they died.

More information on what to expect is at:

www.gov.uk/after-a-death/when-a-death-is-reported-to-a-coroner

Post-mortem examination

If a coroner decides that an investigation is necessary, a pathologist will normally carry out a post-mortem examination of the body.

The coroner must release the body as soon as possible, after which you can arrange the funeral.

You should let the coroner know in writing if you wish to take the body abroad (including to Scotland and Northern Ireland).

If the post-mortem examination shows the cause of death, the coroner will send a form to the Registrar of Births and Deaths stating the cause of death. You can then make an appointment to register the death.

Inquest

If it was not possible to find out the cause of death from the post-mortem examination, or the death is found to be unnatural, the coroner has to hold an inquest. An inquest is a public court hearing held by the coroner in order to establish who died and how, when and where the death occurred.

The inquest will be held as soon as possible and normally within 6 months of the death if at all possible. The coroner will let you know if more time is needed and what to expect in your case.

If the death occurred in prison or custody, or if it resulted from an accident at work, there will usually be a jury at the inquest.

At the end of the inquest

The coroner (or jury where there is one) comes to a conclusion at the end of an inquest. This includes the legal 'determination', which states who died, and where, when and how they died. The coroner or jury also makes 'findings' to allow the cause of death to be registered. When recording the cause the coroner or jury may use one of the following terms:

- accident or misadventure
- alcohol/drug related
- industrial disease
- lawful killing
- unlawful killing
- natural causes

- open
- road traffic collision
- stillbirth
- suicide

The coroner or jury may also make a brief 'narrative' conclusion setting out the facts surrounding the death in more detail and explaining the reasons for the decision.

Legal advice

Instructing a solicitor to represent you at an inquest is not necessary in most cases, although you may do so if you wish. An inquest is a fact-finding process and the coroner will ensure that the process is fair and thorough, and that your questions about the facts of the death are answered.

Challenging a coroner's conclusion or making a complaint about the service

You may challenge a coroner's decision or an inquest conclusion. You should do this as soon as possible as for some challenges there is a three month limit. If you are thinking about doing this you should first seek advice from a lawyer with expertise in this area.

If you are unhappy with a coroner's personal conduct you should complain to the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office.

If you wish to complain about the standard of service you have received you should first do so to the coroner.

The Law Society website may help you find a solicitor at <http://www.lawsociety.org.uk/>

The Judicial Conduct Investigations Office can be contacted by calling 020 7073 4719 or online at: <https://ojc.judiciary.gov.uk/OJC/complaintlink.do>

Getting copies of documents

You may request copies of reports of any post mortem examination, and of documents that are relevant to the investigation. The coroner's office will not charge a fee for copies of documents provided before or during the inquest, but may charge after the inquest.

You may also request a recording of the inquest hearing, for which there will be a charge.

Getting more information and bereavement support

The Guide to Coroner Services outlines what to expect regarding particular types of deaths – for instance the death of a child, a death abroad, a service personnel death or where there may be a criminal investigation into the death.

There are many local and national bodies, support groups and faith groups which help people who have been bereaved. The coroner's office will be able to provide further information.

The NHS Choices website has details of support organisations:
www.nhs.uk/livewell/bereavement/Pages/bereavement.aspx

The Department for Work and Pensions publishes:

- general information on what to do after a death: www.gov.uk/after-a-death
- specific information on Bereavement Payment and Allowance:
www.gov.uk/bereavement-allowance

Another source of information is the pre-recorded Metropolitan Police Bereavement Information Line on 0800 032 9996 and its website:
<http://content.met.police.uk/Site/bereavementfamilyliaison>