

PRESS RELEASE

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CORONERS REFORM MUST GO AHEAD

INQUEST, the leading independent organisation working to reform the investigation of contentious deaths, today called on the Justice Secretary, Kenneth Clarke QC MP, to confirm that reform of the coronial system will go ahead as planned. As the Ministry of Justice consultation on implementing the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 closed, the organisation expressed concern about any possible delay to the new system's scheduled start date of April 2012.

Helen Shaw, Co-Director of INQUEST, said:

The Act gives the government a blueprint for updating our coronial system so that it is fit for the 21st century.

The current system is in urgent need of reform. Each year tens of thousands of bereaved families grappling with the inquest process are forced to endure lengthy delays and an archaic, unaccountable system. These failures also leave the coronial service unable to fulfil its vital function of preventing unnecessary deaths.

The reform process needs to continue as planned if the government is serious about delivering a better service for bereaved people.

On 21 May 2010 stakeholders who have worked with the Ministry of Justice on coronial reform were told that the Justice Secretary had asked civil servants to review the "scope and timing of the plans to implement the coroner measures contained in Part One of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009."

The Coroners and Justice Act 2009 received Royal Assent in November 2009. INQUEST worked hard to improve the legislation during the ten months of its parliamentary passage and the new Act has created a framework that could address many of the problems of the current system.

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Notes to editors:

1. The Coroners and Justice Act 2009 contains measures to: introduce national leadership through the appointment of a Chief Coroner and Medical Adviser to the Chief Coroner; deliver an improved service for bereaved people, including the introduction of a Charter for Bereaved People, and a system of appeals against coroners' decisions; introduce national standards that coroners should meet, supported by training and guidance for all coroners, their officers and staff; and make investigations and inquests more effective.
2. The Ministry of Justice published "Reform of the Coroner System Next Stage: Preparing for Implementation" on 11 March 2010. The consultation, which closed on 1 July 2010, asked for views on issues such as conduct of inquests, a new appeals system and training for coroners (www.justice.gov.uk/consultations/reform-coroner-system.htm)
3. INQUEST and the INQUEST Lawyers Group responded to the consultation (www.inquest.org.uk/pdf/INQUEST_response_CJA_consultation.pdf)
4. On 21 May 2010 stakeholders who have worked with the Ministry of Justice on coronial reform were told by the Deputy Director responsible for Coroners, Burials and Legal Services Regulation and Redress:

We know that many of you are awaiting, with keen interest, the announcement of the appointment of the first Chief Coroner for England and Wales. The new Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice has considered this and in the light of the financial challenges facing Government as a whole, has asked that no announcement be made at this time. He has also asked that my team review the scope and timing of the plans to implement the coroner measures contained in Part One of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009, and to provide further advice to him and to the Minister responsible for coroner reform, Jonathan Djanogly MP.

5. Since 2003 numerous reviews, parliamentary reports and inquiries have called for an overhaul of the system including:
 - the Independent Review of Coroner Services commissioned by the Home Office and chaired by Tom Luce *Death Certification and Investigation in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, 2003;
 - the Joint Committee on Human Rights *Deaths in Custody: Third Report of Session 2004-05*;
 - the Select Committee on Constitutional Affairs *Reform of the coroners' system and death certification: Eighth Report of Session 2005-06*.
6. Statistics published by the Ministry of Justice in May 2010 record that 31,000 inquests were opened into deaths in 2009 (www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/coroners-deaths-reported-2010.pdf)
7. INQUEST is the only organisation in England and Wales that provides a specialist, comprehensive advice service on contentious deaths and their investigation to bereaved people, lawyers, other advice and support agencies, the media, parliamentarians and the wider public. Its casework priorities are deaths in prison and in police custody, in immigration detention and in secure training centres. INQUEST develops policy proposals and undertakes research to campaign for changes to the inquest and investigation process, reduce the number of custodial deaths, and improve the treatment and care of those within the institutions where the deaths occur.
8. INQUEST is represented on the Ministerial Council on Deaths in Custody and the Ministry of Justice Coroner Service Stakeholder Forum.
9. *Unlocking the Truth: Families' Experiences of the Investigation of Deaths in Custody* by Helen Shaw and Deborah Coles, Co-Directors of INQUEST, describes the experiences of families bereaved by deaths in custody from the time of death to the conclusion of the investigation and inquest and situates them within the political, recent historical and legal context.



Inquest

Thoroughly researched and extensively referenced, the report describes the issues that have emerged since the early 1980s which have shaped public, family and state perceptions about deaths in custody. It argues that the current investigation and inquest system is still insufficiently resourced and is failing to perform its preventative function to reduce deaths in custody. Making 80 recommendations and two key proposals, Shaw and Coles argue for changes to improve accountability and learning

An executive summary is available [here](#). *Unlocking the Truth* can be ordered securely online from [the INQUEST website](#) for £10 + £2 postage and packing in the UK. The report was made possible by a grant from the Nuffield Foundation.