



The Coroners Service for Northern Ireland

Coroners Service Charter

serving
the community
through the
administration
of justice

www.coronersni.gov.uk

We can provide this booklet in a wide range of alternative formats - please contact the Information Centre at:

Northern Ireland Court Service

Information Centre
Windsor House
Bedford Street
Belfast BT2 7LT

Telephone 028 9032 8594
Facsimile 028 9041 2390
Textphone 028 9041 2920
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www.courtsni.gov.uk

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CORONERS SERVICE CHARTER FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

1. Introduction

A Coroner's duty is to investigate deaths which are reported to the Coroner and which appear to have happened in sudden or unexplained circumstances.

The role and responsibilities of the Coroners and the circumstances in which deaths are reported to them are explained in our leaflet, 'Coroners Service for Northern Ireland' which is available from our office and online at www.coronersni.gov.uk.

This Coroners Service Charter is for bereaved families who come into contact with the Coroners Service at what will be a stressful time. It sets out the standards by which they will be treated during Coroners investigations and inquests.

2. Objectives and Values

Coroners will operate independently within a legal framework, flexibly, impartially and fairly, while at the same time seeking to acknowledge the needs of individual families, including the sensitivities of individual faiths.

We shall:

- endeavour to respect individual and family privacy, feelings and expectations, traditions and religious requirements relating to mourning and funerals;
- treat you courteously, with sensitivity and with dignity;
- help you to understand the causes and circumstances of the death;
- explain the investigation process including the role and responsibilities of the Coroner;
- keep you informed and consulted during the investigation process;
- answer your questions as promptly and effectively as possible and assist you to find further help where this is necessary;
- fully investigate all complaints and respond in a timely manner.

3. The Coroner's Investigation Deaths not requiring a Postmortem:

In deaths where the Coroner decides that a postmortem examination is not required, a certificate will be issued to the Registrar of Deaths within 3 working days to enable you to register the death. This is subject to the deceased's General Practitioner (GP) having first discussed

the circumstances of the death with the Coroner and the Coroner having given approval for the death to be dealt with in this way.

Deaths in which a Postmortem is directed by the Coroner:

Our leaflet, 'Coroners Postmortem Examination Information for Relatives' explains this process and is available from our office and online at www.coronersni.gov.uk. Information will also be available from the Coroners Liaison Officer.

- When the Coroner directs that a postmortem is to be carried out, a Coroners Liaison Officer will contact you within 24 hours of the postmortem and will provide you with preliminary information on the cause of death. (Our leaflet 'the Coroners Liaison Officer' explains their role in detail and is available from our office and online at www.coronersni.gov.uk)
- Where the Coroner has decided not to hold an inquest, a certificate to that effect will be issued to the Registrar of Deaths within 5 working days to enable you to register the death.

- Where the postmortem report is received and the Coroner is satisfied that further investigations are required, a Coroners Liaison Officer will contact you within 10 working days to advise you of this and explain the position.
- A copy of the postmortem report will be provided to the deceased's GP as a matter of course so should you need medical explanations, these can be obtained from the GP. Where the deceased died in hospital, a copy will also be sent to the hospital.

Deaths in which an Inquest is to be held:

Our leaflet 'Coroners Inquest', available from our office and online at www.coronersni.gov.uk, explains the purposes and processes involved at the inquest, who else is likely to be present and what sort of evidence is likely to be given. It also provides information on the opportunities for the family to participate in the proceedings, including the right to speak and the right to be represented.

- Inquests will be listed not later than one year following the death provided

all enquiries have been completed and witnesses are available. Where there is to be a delay, you will be informed of the reasons.

- Where possible, at least four weeks before the date of the inquest you will be told the time, location and the facilities available at the court. If the date and/or location of the inquest has to be changed, you will be informed within 24 hours of the new arrangements being made.
- Where the Coroner decides to hold a preliminary hearing, you or your legal representatives will be informed of the time, date and location, the purpose of the hearing and your rights and responsibilities during it.
- Where possible, a private room will be provided to you at the inquest should you wish it.
- to have your views taken into account regarding the timing and venue for any inquest.
- to have the body of the person who has died released for burial or cremation at the earliest opportunity once the medical cause of death has been confirmed or following completion of the postmortem examination. You may request early release for personal, cultural or religious reasons and the Coroner, subject to the proper performance of all duties, will consider such requests sympathetically.
- to be kept informed where there is a criminal investigation as a result of the death. The Coroner is required to take account of the rights of an accused person to a fair trial as well as the rights of the deceased's family. This means that where a further postmortem is carried out on behalf of an accused person, the expectation is that this will be done as quickly as possible. You will be kept fully updated on the situation.
- where organs or tissue samples need to be retained, to have your wishes followed in relation to return or disposal when they are no longer required by the Coroner to assist with the investigations.

4. Your right to participate

Throughout the process you have the right to be involved. Specifically, you have the right:

- to see the postmortem report, witness statements and any other relevant documentation, unless the Coroner decides that some material needs to remain confidential in order to protect the legal rights of third parties.

- to be assisted by an interpreter if you require one.

5. Availability of Support and Bereavement Services

We shall maintain information on the main local and national voluntary bodies and support groups which offer help or support to the bereaved, including those bereaved as a result of particular types of incidents or circumstances. We shall make this information available to you unless you decide otherwise.

6. Meeting your needs

We are committed to ensuring that, so far as is reasonably possible, all your needs are met including making information and facilities accessible to you.

We shall ensure that this Charter and any other information referred to in it can be made available in a range of formats. If you or a member of your family require information produced in a format that meets particular needs, then you should contact the:

Northern Ireland Court Service
Information Centre
Windsor House,
9 – 15 Bedford Street,
Belfast BT2 7LT.
Tel: 028 9032 8594
or e-mail them at:
informationcentre@courtsni.gov.uk.

We shall, as far as practicable, provide appropriate access to the Coroners Courts and offices. Reasonable adjustments will be made, wherever possible, to meet the needs of people with sight, hearing or physical impairments.

7. General Standards of Service When you visit the Coroners Service you can expect:

- the office to be open to the public between the hours of 9.30 am and 4.30 pm.
- to be met and greeted by courteous, caring and professional staff in a suitable environment.
- staff who will respect your privacy.
- if you wish, to have your enquiry dealt with in a private area.
- to be spoken to within not more than 10 minutes of your arrival and, should this not be achieved, to be provided with an explanation.

When you telephone the Coroners Service you can expect:

- your call to be answered within not more than 30 seconds.
- to be given the name of the member of staff taking your call.
- a clear and helpful response.

When you write to the Coroners Service you can expect:

- a reply within not more than 15 working days which will include the name and contact details of the member of staff dealing with your query.

Forms and Documentation:

- Throughout the process, there are a number of forms that you will need. Full details of the processes are contained in our range of information leaflets which are available from our office and on our website.
- When you request a Burial, Cremation, Out of Country Order or Evidence of Death form from our office, you can expect to receive it no later than the first working day after the request is received.

Expenses

- If you are required to attend as a witness at an inquest and you incur expenses, you are entitled to reasonable reimbursement. Our office will provide you with information on how to make a claim. All claims for expenses will be processed within 30 days of receipt.

8. Accountability and monitoring service standards

Administrative responsibility for the Coroners Service lies with the Northern Ireland Court Service.

The Coroners Service will monitor its performance and publish its findings in relation to the time it takes to complete investigations, hold inquests and on the quality of its treatment of bereaved people as outlined in this Charter. This information will be updated quarterly on our website and published in an Annual Report in June of each year.

The Coroners Service for NI will also be subject to periodic inspection by the Courts Inspectorate. These inspection reports will also be published.

9. Making complaints about the Coroners Service

We are committed to improving the quality of our services. By making comments about our services, you enable us to improve them. By making a complaint, you enable us to put things right.

If you have a complaint or comment about the service you have received or the manner in which you were treated, it should be addressed in the first instance to the Coroner.

A separate leaflet 'Making a Complaint about the Northern Ireland Court Service' provides information on how to make a complaint and is available from any court venue, including:

The Coroners Service for Northern Ireland:
Mays Chambers
73 May Street
Belfast BT1 3JL

The Northern Ireland Court Service
Information Centre
Windsor House,
9 – 15 Bedford Street,
Belfast BT2 7LT.

It is also available on the Court Service's website (www.courtsni.gov.uk).

If however, your complaint is about the conduct of the Coroner, it should be addressed in writing to:

The Lord Chief Justice's Office,
Royal Courts of Justice,
Chichester Street,
Belfast.

Further information on making a complaint about a member of the judiciary is available from the Court Service's Information Centre, on its website or from the Lord Chief Justice's Office.

If your complaint is about a legal decision taken by the Coroner, you should seek professional legal advice.

10. Review

The standards contained in this Charter will be reviewed annually to ensure that they continue to meet the needs of people coming into contact with the Coroners Service. An important part of this process will be to seek their views and comments.



For further information on the work of the Northern Ireland Court Service please contact

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