

PRESS NOTICE

Thursday 8 November 2007



CORONERS SERVICE REPORTS ON PROGRESS DURING ITS FIRST YEAR IN OPERATION

The Coroners Service has met or exceeded almost all of its performance targets during its first year of operation despite a rise in the number of deaths reported to the service.

Mr Justice Weir, Presiding Judge for the Coroners Service, said:

“The success of the service in its first year has been remarkable. The entire CSNI team can feel justifiably proud of their hard work and significant early achievements and confident that, now having “found their feet”, they will go from strength to strength in further developing and providing the innovative and effective service that is already an example to other coroners throughout these islands”.

This is the first annual report of the Coroners Service which was established on 3 April 2006 as the single Coroners District for Northern Ireland. Prior to April 2006 the 5 Coroners’ districts in Northern Ireland were under the control of individual coroners. The new Service is headed up by Mr Justice Weir, the Presiding Judge for the Coroners Service and there are three full time coroners (Mr John Leckey, Senior Coroner, Mr Brian Sherrard and Ms Suzanne Anderson).

Mr Justice Weir highlighted the tasks faced by the Coroners Service in gathering together all the files from the former coroners’ districts and examining each file to ascertain the stage it had reached and the remaining work required in order to close the case. He also praised the pioneering work of the Coroners’ Liaison Officers whose task is to ensure that bereaved families are kept informed at every stage as the investigation proceeds. He said that the work of the Coroners Liaison Officers has been “universally and deservedly praised”.

Commenting on the performance of the new Coroners Service, Mr Justice Weir said that:

“Almost all the performance targets have been met or exceeded by our willing team despite the rise in the number of deaths reported to the service, a trend that seems to be continuing year on year”.

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. The Annual Report covers the period April 2006 to March 2007.
2. Coroners investigate the circumstances of sudden, unnatural or violent deaths in accordance with the Coroners Act (Northern Ireland) 1959. The coroner seeks to establish the cause of death by ordering medical examinations, obtaining witness statements and medical records and may hold an inquest.
3. During the year 4253 deaths were reported to the Coroners Service by medical practitioners, PSNI officers and others:
 - 1687 required a detailed investigation and the majority of cases required a post mortem. Inquests were held in 226 of these cases;
 - 1746 deaths were reported as the deceased had not seen his or her general practitioner within the 28 days prior to his or her death. The coroner was able to have these deaths registered without the need for a post mortem examination following inquiries with the general practitioner;
 - The remaining 820 deaths did not require a coroner's investigation and a medical practitioner provided the death certificate.
4. The key performance targets for the Coroners Service are:
 - **Inquests to be listed in 80% of cases within 10 weeks of the coroner directing that an inquest should be held** - during the period covered by the report, 74% of inquests were listed within the target period and 80% within 11 weeks. The majority of cases exceeding the target were delayed due non-availability of witnesses, lack of suitable court dates or the requirement to arrange juries.
 - **Issue the Form 17 to the Registrar of Deaths in 95% of cases within 5 working days of the coroner's decision** – this target relates to cases where a post mortem was carried out but no inquest deemed necessary. From April 2006 to March 2007 95% of these cases were processed within the 5 day target and 98% within 6 days;
 - **Issue the Form 14 to the Registrar of Deaths in 95% of cases within 3 working days of the coroner's decision** – this target relates to cases where the investigation concluded there was no need for a post mortem or inquest. This target was met in 99.7% of cases.
5. The Coroners Service Annual Report is available online at www.coronersni.gov.uk and www.courtsni.gov.uk.

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