



FAQs on Inquests in England and Wales

Part 3: What Happens at an Inquest?

This is Part 3 of 4 fact sheets on inquests in England and Wales.

It explains what you can expect to happen at an inquest.

Other available sheets are:

Part 1: Overview

Part 2: Preparing for an Inquest

Part 4: Making a Civil Claim After an Inquest

I Where is the inquest held and how long will it take?

An inquest is held in a courtroom and although the coroner does not wear a wig and gown like a judge, it is still a formal hearing. In some circumstances there may also be a jury present. Inquest hearings can last anywhere from an hour to several weeks depending on the amount of witness evidence to be heard and the circumstances of the death. However, most inquests will last a day or two.

I Who will attend the inquest?

You can attend along with members of your family or friends to offer support.

Witnesses may be asked to attend to give oral evidence. The coroner decides who they are going to call to attend. However, you can make prior submissions to the coroner if you want to ask a certain person questions and consider that the answers will assist the coroner in their investigation. If the witness lives in England or Wales, they must attend if they are asked to. The coroner may give witnesses permission to attend remotely, perhaps by video link.

It is often the case that the interested parties are legally represented and a barrister and/or solicitor for each party may also be in Court.

The inquest is held in open court. This means that the media and any member of the public can attend. Depending on the size of the Court room the coroner may try to limited none essential attendees to ensure compliance with health and safety. In such cases it is usually for the Coroner to provide video link facilities.

I Do I have to attend?

If you have been called to give evidence you should attend. If you refuse then you may receive a summons from the court to compel your attendance. If you have not been called as a witness then it is entirely your choice whether to attend the inquest hearing. If you decide to attend, the coroner will be sympathetic towards you and will make you aware if any evidence is likely to be particularly upsetting, such as post-mortem evidence or CCTV footage. The Chief Coroners guidance makes it clear that the family are at the heart of the inquest process. Most coroners courts have a private room for the family to sit when not in court. If you do not attend then your witness statement will be read into evidence under Rule 23 of the coroners rules.

I What should I bring?

It will be a difficult day so you may wish to bring refreshments and tissues. It may also assist to bring a pen and paper in case you want to remind yourself of something to ask the coroner or legal representative. If you are called to give evidence a printed copy of your statement or pen portrait can help. You may also wish to bring a photograph of your loved one to show the coroner or to display, this helps to remind those in attendance of who your loved one was in life.

We always recommend that you attend the inquest with a supportive partner, family member or close friend.

I What should I wear?

An inquest is a formal occasion and therefore it is best to dress appropriately – comfortable but smart. The temperature can fluctuate in the court room so you may wish to bring a shawl or something to wrap around you if it gets cold.

I What should I do when I arrive?

Try to arrive early, so that you can meet the coroner's officer and your solicitor and ask any questions you may have. It is likely that you will be shown to a private room for the family.

I Where should I sit?

The family are usually invited to sit at the front of the Court room. If you are legally represented then it is likely that your solicitor will arrange to meet you in the family room so that he/she can take you into Court on the first day. If you are attending without representation then do not hesitate to ask the Coroners officer for guidance.

I What happens in the court?

- It is customary to stand when the coroner arrives and when they leave – you will be directed by the coroner's officer to do so.
- The coroner will begin the inquest, and if there is a jury its members will be required to take an oath. The coroner will then explain the purpose and rules of the inquest.
- The coroner will then call the witnesses to give evidence. If a family member is giving evidence, they will usually do so first. The coroner will usually take the witnesses through their statement and then ask any further questions. There will then be an opportunity for you or your legal representative to question the witnesses. The jury are also allowed to ask any questions. It is unlikely that any representative of another interested party will ask the family any questions.
- Some witnesses will not attend the inquest, but their statements will be read out by the coroner's officer.
- After all the witnesses have been questioned, the coroner will sum up the evidence.



- You or your legal representative will have the chance to address the coroner and/or jury before they make their final determination, but this has to be in relation to the law and conclusions available. You do not have the right to sum up the evidence or point out matters of fact. It is therefore very important that the right questions are asked during the inquest so that it is very clear what your concerns are.
- After the summing-up, the coroner or jury will give their conclusion. There are a number of findings that can be given (see FAQs Part 1).
- The coroner and jury (if there is one) sign a document giving the findings of the inquest, which records the answers to the questions the inquest sets out to answer: who the person was, where they died, when they died and the medical cause of death. This is called a record of inquest and you should be given a copy of this form. If the coroner has determined that Article 2 should be considered, then the record of inquest may be more extensive to help answer the additional consideration of 'in what circumstances'.
- The Record of Inquest will be sent to the local registry office a couple of days after the inquest. You will then be able to formally register the death and collect a copy of the death certificate.

I Can the coroner make recommendations to prevent a future death occurring in similar circumstances?

After an inquest, the coroner can write a 'Prevention of Future Death' report. This usually happens especially when the coroner has heard evidence to suggest that future avoidable deaths could occur if preventative action is not taken.

I Will the media / journalists be there?

As the inquest is a hearing in public, the press may attend and report on what has happened. Some families may want press attention, and we can actively seek this on their behalf, while others will not. However, journalists can attend without your invitation and cannot be prevented from writing about the hearing and anything mentioned in the hearing, although they do have a code of ethics and should be sensitive to grieving families. If you instruct legal representation, this is something that your solicitor can assist you with. We and our marketing team are experienced in managing the press, and we can liaise with them on your behalf. When preparing a statement or pen portrait you should consider that the media can report almost anything which is said in open court. The media can also apply for disclosure of evidence such as CCTV and photographs. The coroner will consider any such applications to ensure fair reporting.

Contact us for further advice

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Meet Your Inquest and Public Inquiry Team



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At Watson Woodhouse we understand no two experiences are the same. Our Inquest Team are trained to deal with your enquiry in a personable and highly empathetic way. To arrange an initial free confidential appointment please call our Inquest Team direct on 01642 266563 or 01642 247656.