



CHIEF CORONER

## **HOW TO BECOME A CORONER A SHORT GUIDE FOR LAWYERS**

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## INTRODUCTION

I am the Chief Coroner of England and Wales, an office created by the Coroners and Justice Act 2009. I am the head of the coroner system, providing national leadership for coroners in England and Wales. I am supported in my work by a team in the Judicial Office.

As Chief Coroner I have a number of roles but my main responsibilities are to:

- Provide support, leadership and guidance for coroners in England and Wales;
- Set national standards for all coroners, including new inquest rules;
- Oversee the implementation of the new provisions of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009;
- Put in place suitable training arrangements for coroners and their staff;
- Approve coroner appointments;
- Keep a register of coroner investigations lasting more than 12 months and take steps to reduce unnecessary delays;
- Monitor investigations into the deaths of service personnel;
- Oversee transfers of cases between coroners and direct coroners to conduct investigations;
- Provide an annual report on the coroner system to the Lord Chancellor, to be laid before Parliament;
- Monitor the system where recommendations from inquests are reported to the appropriate authorities in order to prevent further deaths.

This short guide is intended for qualified lawyers who are interested in becoming coroners. Coroner work is demanding but endlessly interesting. Each coroner investigation is a new story - a story about a life, a death and friends and family left behind.

Coroners have two main purposes in investigating deaths: to explain the unexplained, both for the benefit of the family and for the public at large; and to report, where appropriate, with a view to preventing future deaths.

The coroner service is a public service of great antiquity. But reforms introduced in 2013 have modernised the service, ensuring that bereaved families are at its heart. Those applying for coroner posts must be familiar with the details of the reforms and the new laws.

This pack is intended to help aspiring coroners familiarise themselves with basic knowledge about coroner work. It is also intended to steer applicants in the right direction. There is also plenty of information publicly available on my website - <https://www.judiciary.uk/related-offices-and-bodies/office-chief-coroner/>

Most coroners who are appointed already have some experience of inquest work. But if you have an interest in this area of law but no practical experience, I would encourage you to go to any coroner's court and sit in the public gallery and listen to the great variety of inquests which a coroner hears every day. There are other ways in which you can get some experience, for example work shadowing and courses.

As with all other judicial roles the work can be stressful and demanding. In many cases you are dealing with families at a time when emotions are high and having to grapple with issues that are private, but which require the public scrutiny of an investigation and inquest. Equally many coroners will tell you that the work is exciting, varied and rewarding. It goes to

the heart of public service. I hope that this brief guide gives you some information about the process of applying to be a coroner.



HHJ MARK LUCRAFT QC  
CHIEF CORONER OF ENGLAND AND WALES

## **2. LEGAL FRAMEWORK**

Coroner appointments are governed principally by the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 which came into force on 25 July 2013.

There are currently 88 coroner areas in England and Wales each with a (usually) full-time, salaried senior coroner in charge. There are just over 20 area coroners, usually full-time, in busy coroner areas. But the majority of coroners are assistant coroners.

Each area will have several assistant coroners as part of the coroner team. Assistant coroners work part-time and are fee paid. They usually sit for a minimum of 15 days a year and combine this work with their other 'day' job as a solicitor or barrister. They must satisfy the five-year judicial appointment eligibility condition (which applies for all judicial posts). Ideally, they should also have some medical knowledge and live locally to the coroner area.

All coroner appointments are made by the local authority for the coroner area and they must be approved by the Chief Coroner (and the Lord Chancellor). Please see the Chief Coroner's guidance on appointments, Guidance No.6 The Appointment of Coroners (see below).

## **3. ADVERTISEMENTS FOR ASSISTANT CORONERS**

Local authorities must advertise all coroner vacancies and hold an open competition. The Chief Coroner acts to ensure that the process for each appointment is open, fair and transparent.

When the senior coroner needs one or more new assistant coroners he/she will ask the local authority to advertise the vacancy on their local website (if there is one). In addition, the Coroners' Society of England and Wales (CSEW) will always place information about the vacancy and how to apply on the open side of their website on <https://www.coronersociety.org.uk/announcements>. There may also be advertisements in legal journals.

## **4. APPLYING FOR AN APPOINTMENT**

In applying for an assistant coroner appointment an applicant will be expected to have either some experience of inquest work or at the least have an understanding of coroner work.

In the first instance the applicant will be required to complete a written personal statement along with a CV. Some local authorities may use an application form. The local authority, usually with the involvement of the senior coroner, will then conduct a 'sift' and select candidates for interview.

If selected by the local authority for interview, applicants will be expected to have an understanding of coroner work and procedures, particularly those implemented by

the statutory changes in 2013.

Over the last few years the Chief Coroner has run a number of workshops (limited to 30 places on each course) for those seeking appointment as a coroner. These workshops have taken two main forms: a workshop for those seeking an appointment as an assistant coroner and a separate workshop for those assistant coroners seeking appointment as an area coroner or a senior coroner. These workshops have taken place in the Royal Courts of Justice in Central London. No fee is payable for attending this course and travel costs cannot be reimbursed, but the aim of the workshop is to better prepare those interested in appointment. If you are interested in attending one of these workshops you should register your interest with the Chief Coroner's office – [chiefcoronersoffice@judiciary.uk](mailto:chiefcoronersoffice@judiciary.uk)

## **5. APPOINTMENT, TERMS AND CONDITIONS**

All appointments are made by the local authority. All terms and conditions, including the level of fees, are set by the local authority.

Although there is no nationally agreed scale of fees or set terms and conditions, the local authorities and the CSEW have come to a joint national agreement about salaries. Where agreement has been struck between the local authority and the senior coroner, the fee to be paid by the local authority to an assistant coroner should be a set proportion of the salary of the senior coroner.

As the 2009 Act states, an assistant coroner is 'entitled to fees', with the amount of the fees to be paid by the local authority and 'to be whatever is agreed from time to time by the assistant coroner and the relevant authority for the area' (paragraph 16, Schedule 3).

An assistant coroner may hold office in one or more coroner areas, and, where more than one, must be appointed separately in each.

Exceptionally a suitably qualified lawyer will be appointed as an assistant coroner for a coroner area without an open competition, usually for the purpose of conducting a particularly difficult or complex inquest. In each case the consent of the Chief Coroner (and Lord Chancellor) is required for the appointment for the specified purpose.

Detailed information on the appointments process is available in Chief Coroner's Guidance No. 6.

## **6. INDUCTION TRAINING**

Newly appointed assistant coroners will undergo induction coroner training. This is organised by the Chief Coroner under the auspices of the Judicial College (which trains all judges). This training is compulsory.

The induction course is a (free of charge) two-day residential course which takes place about twice a year. The Judicial College are rolling-out a cross-jurisdictional induction course as well, and it is expected that newly appointed assistant coroners will attend this course.

Each coroner area will organise its own induction training for new assistant coroners to familiarise them with practice and procedures.

It will be a matter for the senior coroner to decide whether the new assistant coroner has to undergo induction training before being allowed to do any coroner work, but they must demonstrate that they have a number of key skills before acting alone. The key skills for

assistant coroners are listed in the Chief Coroner's Guidance No. 20 and the corresponding key skills form. There should also be in-house training for new assistants within the coroner office. A newly appointed assistant coroner would also be expected to attend the two-day residential continuation training course in their year of appointment and each year thereafter. Assistant coroners will be paid their daily fee for attending compulsory training.

## **7. BEING PART OF THE CORONER TEAM**

Once appointed an assistant coroner will normally work a minimum of 15 days a year although local circumstances (such as a jurisdiction with a part-time senior coroner or where an assistant coroner is appointed for a specific case) may warrant a variation from this standard. Senior coroners are therefore expected to provide at least 15 days paid work for assistant coroners, which may be office coroner work or inquest hearings or both, as agreed with the senior coroner.

Assistant coroners are expected to play a significant part in the local coroner team, led by the senior coroner for the area, and may be required to work out of hours. They may be called on to assist in the jurisdiction at short notice and should make every effort to make themselves available. Assistant coroners are expected to attend team meetings.

As from April 2019 all assistant coroners will be subject to a yearly appraisal. The appraisal will be conducted by the senior coroner for the area.

## **8. ESSENTIAL MATERIALS**

The following texts are essential reading for would-be coroners to have a basic understanding of coroner structures and procedures.

- (1) Chief Coroner's Guide to the Coroners and Justice Act 2009
- (2) Ministry of Justice's Guide to Coroner Services
- (3) Coroners and Justice Act 2009
- (4) The Coroners (Inquests) Rules 2013
- (5) The Coroners (Investigations) Regulations 2013
- (6) The Chief Coroner's Guidance and Law sheets
- (7) Judicial College e-learning materials

## **9. TEXTBOOKS**

- (1) *Jervis on Coroners* (13th edn) – new edition due 2019
- (2) *Dorries on Coroners' Courts* (3<sup>rd</sup>) – new edition due 2019
- (3) LAG's *Inquests* (3<sup>rd</sup> .) –

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