



CHIEF CORONER

HOW TO BECOME A CORONER INTRODUCTORY PACK

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1. INTRODUCTION

This introductory pack 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.

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 96 coroner areas in England and Wales each with a (usually) full-time, salaried senior coroner in charge. There are a few 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 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).

The Chief Coroner has issued guidance on appointments, Guidance No.6 THE APPOINTMENT OF CORONERS (see below).

3. ADVERTISEMENTS FOR ASSISTANT CORONERS

Local authorities must advertise all assistant 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 www.coronersociety.org.uk/announcements. There may also be advertisements in legal journals.

Assistant coroner posts may not become available frequently, because senior coroners like to have a settled and stable team for their coroner area. But from time to time advertisements will appear. The CSEW website is the best place to look.

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 through this pack.

In the first instance the applicant will be required to complete a written 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.

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. At present there is no nationally agreed scale of fees or set terms and conditions.

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.

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) three day residential course which takes place about twice a year.

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. There should also be in-house training for new assistants within the coroner office.

7. BEING PART OF THE CORONER TEAM

Once appointed I expect that 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.

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 (available shortly)
- (3) [Coroners and Justice Act 2009](#)
[The Coroners \(Inquests\) Rules 2013](#)
[The Coroners \(Investigations\) Regulations 2013](#)
- (4) [The Chief Coroner's Guidance and Law sheets](#)
- (5) Judicial College e-learning materials (not yet available)

9. TEXTBOOKS

- (1) *Jervis on Coroners* (12th edn) – new edition due 2014
- (2) *Dorries on Coroners' Courts* (2nd edn..) – new edition due 2014
- (3) LAG's *Inquests* (2nd edn.) – new edition due 2014

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