



Right Honourable Robert Buckland MP
Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

By email only: robert.buckland.mp@parliament.uk

19th July 2021

Dear Secretary of State

Re: Justice Committee report on coroners court

The House of Commons Justice committee report on The Coroner Service was published on 27th May 2021 <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/6079/documents/68260/default/>. The report is welcomed by us and many other independent organisations, not just those who are signatories to this letter. The report makes some very important recommendations which signatories to this letter agree must be implemented to ensure the coroners court is operating a fair and consistent level of service and to ensure that bereaved families are put at the heart of the inquest process.

The recommendation that there should be a unified national coroner service for England and Wales is imperative to ensuring that court users experience an acceptable, minimum standard of service regardless of which local authority the coroner's inquiry falls under.

The recommendation that the Ministry of Justice should consider setting up an independent office to follow up on actions promised to coroners and to report publicly where insufficient action has been taken. The creation of a properly funded office with statutory powers to police, monitor and enforce change has real potential to prevent future deaths, protect the public and to promote learning from inquests. The existence of this body would provide the bereaved with reassurance that following the coroner's enquiry the chances of the same events happening again have been reduced or eliminated.

The existence of an independent body of the type described could really hold public bodies to account. It would go some significant way to ensuring that there are real improvements in safety and in the case of the NHS make a significant contribution to promoting and improving patient safety. With appropriate powers this body could have the potential to ensure that learning is shared nationally, not just locally.

Collectively, we urge government to adopt the committee's recommendation that non means tested legal aid or other public funding be available to families who are facing complex inquests or inquests where public bodies are represented. It is recommended that this be introduced by 1st October 2021.

Government will be familiar with numerous previous calls for legal aid to be made available to families at inquests. The former Chief Coroner, Sir Peter Thornton QC called for this in his 2016 report to the Lord Chancellor. The Right Rev James Jones echoed that call in November 2017 in his report "The patronising disposition of unaccountable power". The message is simple, unequivocal and clear for there to be equality of arms families must have access to non means tested legal aid or other public funding.

We await government's response which is due in the week commencing 26th July with cautious optimism. We take the view that given the Justice Committee's clear and sensible report there can be no doubt as to the urgent need to implement their recommendations.

The organisations signing this petition have a wealth of expertise on the coronial system and offer to work with government to help these recommendations become a reality.

Yours faithfully

Peter Walsh, Chief Executive, Action against Medical Accidents (AvMA)

Beverley Radcliffe, Director, Coroners Court Support Services

Deborah Coles, Executive Director, INQUEST

Paul Rumley, Chairman of the Society of Clinical Injury Lawyers (SCIL)

James Titcombe OBE & Joanne Hughes, Harmed Patients Alliance

Nick Simmons, CEO, Roadpeace