

This is Part 3 of 3 TCF factsheets on inquests in England and Wales. It explains what you can expect to happen at the actual inquest. See Part 1 for an overview of the inquest process, and Part 2 for advice on preparation.

To lose a child is the most difficult bereavement of all. Now we are facing an inquest. We most likely want to know as much as possible about our loved one's last movements. In the months or years since his or her death, we may have discovered all sorts of information, and at the inquest itself, we will hopefully find more answers. We do, however, need to be realistic about the limits of what an inquest can achieve, as explained in the other factsheets.

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

- An inquest is held in a courtroom. It is a formal setting, although the coroner does not wear a wig and gown.
- The coroner will lead the proceedings. There may be other staff from the coroner's office present, as well as witnesses who have been called to attend.
- In certain circumstances there will also be a jury.
- Inquest hearings can last anything from 30 minutes to several weeks. It depends what has happened and what issues need to be explored. Most inquests take half a day or less.

See more: <https://www.rethink.org/carers-family-friends/what-you-need-to-know/inquests/at-the-inquest>

Who will attend the inquest?

- The inquest is held in open court, which means that any member of the public may attend, as well as the media.
- Witnesses (for example a doctor, police officer or eyewitnesses) may be asked to attend to give evidence. The coroner decides who to call.
- If the witness lives in England or Wales they must attend if they are asked to.

Do I have to attend?

- If you have been called as a witness, then you do have to attend.
- If you have not been called, then it is entirely your personal choice whether to attend or not. Whilst many parents take the opportunity, for others it is too distressing.
- If you decide to attend, you can leave whenever you want (apart from when you are giving evidence) and come back whenever you like. If you choose to do so, you should leave quietly. Some coroners will mention in open court when post-mortem evidence or other distressing evidence is going to be heard to allow you the opportunity to leave if you want to.

What should I bring?

- As this is a formal occasion, it is best to dress appropriately – comfortable but smart.
- You may wish to bring a large photograph of your child to show the coroner or display, although not all coroners will permit this.
- Having a supportive partner, family member or close friend at your side is recommended.

What should I do when I arrive?

- Try to arrive early, so that you can meet the court usher and your solicitor (if you have one) and ask any questions.
- Some coroner's courts have a private waiting room.

What happens in the court?

- It is customary to stand when the coroner arrives and when they leave.

- The coroner will begin the inquest and if there is a jury its members will be required to take an oath. The coroner will explain the purpose and rules of the inquest.
- He or she will then call the witnesses. If a family member is giving evidence they will usually do so first. The coroner will normally begin by questioning the witnesses and talking them through the statement they have made.
- There will then be the opportunity for you or your legal representative to question the witnesses. If you do not have a legal representative the coroner may decide to ask any questions you have on your behalf. The jury are also allowed to ask questions.
- Sometimes witnesses will not actually attend the inquest, but their statements, in full or part, will be read out by the coroner.
- After all the witnesses have been questioned, the coroner sums up the evidence.
- Your legal representative will have the chance to address the coroner and/or jury before they make their final determination, but does not have the right to sum up the evidence. This is why it is important to ask the right questions during the inquest so that the jury (if there is one) understands what your concerns are.
- After the summing up, the coroner or jury will give their conclusion – this used to be called a verdict. There are a number of conclusions that can be given. Read more about conclusions here: <http://info.inquest.org.uk/handbook/conclusions/>
- The coroner and jury (if there is one) sign a document (Form 22, known as the inquisition) giving the findings of the inquest, which records the answers to the questions: who the person was, where they died, when they died, and how – that is, the medical cause of death. You should be given a copy of this form.

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

- Following an inquest the Coroner can make recommendations to prevent future deaths from occurring, previously known as a 'Rule 43 Report' but now known as a 'Preventing Future Deaths Report' or 'PFD Report', as set out in paragraphs 28 and 29 of the Coroners (Investigations) Regulations 2013. After the conclusion the coroner may announce that they will write to any person or authority that has the power to take action to prevent future deaths.
- Some coroners will allow lawyers to suggest things they think should be considered under the PFD Report.

What can I do about the press?

- Because an inquest is a hearing in public, the press may attend and report on what has happened.
- Some families want there to be press attention, but some do not. You cannot stop the press from writing about the hearing, but they do have a code of ethics and should be sensitive to grieving families. See: <https://www.ipso.co.uk/editors-code-of-practice/#IntrusionIntoGriefOrShock>

What if I am not happy with how the coroner has dealt with us?

- Some bereaved parents have had experiences with kind, considerate coroners who helped them along this difficult path, whilst others have not. If you are upset about the way you have been treated, before or during an inquest, you should write to the coroner. If you are not satisfied with the reply, you can write to the Coroners Unit at the Ministry of Justice, 102 Petty France, London SW1H 9AJ.

Going forward

Most parents find that the process of the inquest is incredibly painful. Much like the funeral, we may busy ourselves in preparation, but once it is over, there is a terrible silence; a realisation that our child is gone, never to return; that others move on from the conversation, but we never do. Yet the raw agony of grief that has been revived through the inquest eventually dissipates, and memories of happier times will return. We love our sons and daughters, and always will.

This page of Frequently Asked Questions was produced by The Compassionate Friends, a nationwide organisation of bereaved parents and their families offering support after a child dies.

TCF publishes a range of leaflets on a variety of topics. Find out more by contacting us:

- General Enquiries (for local contacts and groups): **0345 120 3785**
- Website and online forum: www.tcf.org.uk ■ TCF UK Helpline: **0345 123 2304**

