



Ministry
of Justice

Mike Freer MP
Minister for Courts and
Legal Services

Sir Robert Neill KC (Hon) MP
Chair of the Justice Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

MoJ ref: Sub 114498

29 April 2024

Dear Sir Bob,

INQUIRY INTO THE CORONER SERVICE

I am sorry not to have written sooner to expand on some of the issues discussed with the Justice Committee when I gave evidence to the Inquiry into the Coroner Service on 19 March 2024.

First, the Committee wanted to understand more about the support which the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) provides to local authorities operating under financial pressure and, in particular, those who have issued a notice under section 114 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988.

Parliament has placed funding and operational responsibility for coroner services in the hands of local government and policing. The MoJ therefore has neither the statutory ambit, nor the general responsibility for grant provision, to provide direct financial support for the day-to-day running of local coroner services. That said, we fully recognise the challenges for local authorities in delivering their statutory functions and I can assure you that both MoJ officials and the Chief Coroner's Office work closely with a wide range of local government stakeholders to support them in complying with their duties under section 24 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009.

As an example of this, the MoJ has a key role in the cross-government programme to streamline and improve the death certification system, including putting the medical examiner system on a statutory footing in England and Wales from 9 September 2024. The new system will entail changes with a significant operational impact on coroner services in England and Wales. The MoJ has worked collaboratively with funding local authorities to ensure they are supported and prepared for implementation of the new system. This has included securing one-off Government funding to support the necessary changes to coroner IT systems.

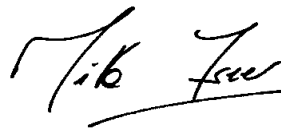
More generally, the MoJ engages regularly with local authority representatives in a number of forums. These include the MoJ-chaired Coroner Services Committee which brings together coroner and coroner services management representatives, key government departments and external delivery partners; and local authority-led coroner services panels at national and regional level. Issues around the financial challenges facing local coroner services are regularly explored in these discussions. My team also works closely with the Chief Coroner to assist him in providing appropriate and relevant guidance for local coroner services, including through the Model Coroner Area blueprint which, as you know, is currently being updated.

The Committee also asked what further steps could be taken to support bereaved families in accessing information about the coronial process. The MoJ has produced the *Guide to coroner services for bereaved people* as a comprehensive route map to support the experience of the bereaved throughout the coronial process. As you know, the Guide is currently undergoing a factual update, which will be followed by a more fundamental review to reflect the framework within which coroner services will operate following forthcoming changes including implementation of the statutory ME scheme and the Independent Public Advocate.

However, we acknowledge that, in aiming to provide a comprehensive and accessible overview of an unavoidably complex process, the Guide is necessarily lengthy and detailed. We understand that, as a consequence, the bereaved may feel that much of it is not relevant in terms of their own experience, or may simply feel unable to engage with it at what is inevitably a very difficult time for them. As part of the fundamental review, therefore, we are keen to look at ways of improving the accessibility of the support which the Guide is intended to provide. This is likely to include the creation of shorter, better targeted guides on specific parts of the coronial process and/or from particular perspectives – for example, that of the bereaved family, or of other Interested Persons, or of lawyers involved in an inquest.

In addition, we look forward to considering the findings and outputs from Birkbeck's *Voicing Loss* project which I understand will be published shortly. Both the MoJ and the Chief Coroner's Office have liaised closely with the Birkbeck team throughout the project, and it is clear that their detailed and carefully considered research will be extremely valuable in informing our future approach to support for the bereaved in the coronial process.

I hope the Committee will find this additional information helpful.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mike Freer', with a stylized flourish at the end.

MIKE FREER MP