

SUBMISSIONS TO THE COMMISSION ON JUSTICE IN WALES FROM HM CORONERS

Background:

I am the senior coroner for Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire. I have been invited by to make written submissions to the Commission on behalf of the Coroners in Wales. These submissions represent the collective view of the senior/acting senior coroners in Wales whose names appear below.

As matters currently stand there are 7 coroner areas in Wales. There are 5 senior coroners in post and two acting senior coroners. They are supported by a number of area/assistant coroners.

It is anticipated that within the next few years the number of coroner areas will reduce to either 3 or 4 in keeping with the objectives of the Ministry of Justice to create larger coroner areas. The service is seen as a local service and is funded by the relevant local authority.

I have set out below the main issues faced by coroners in Wales in fulfilling their statutory duty to investigate violent, unnatural, unexplained deaths and deaths in custody or state detention.

Compliance with Welsh Language Act:

When a coroner receives a report of a death, the coroner has to determine whether or not the death is a natural one. This may/may not require a post mortem examination. The coroner may be required to open an investigation. Certain deaths will proceed to an inquest. These various processes generate a considerable number of forms and coroners are able to generate these forms from the software they use within their office. There are several different software providers. However, the software is unable to generate the forms bilingually. The software developers have indicated that the cost of so doing is prohibitive. As a result, coroners in Wales are unable to send out forms, documents and letters in Welsh.

Coroner support:

There is a considerable variance in the facilities available to coroners in Wales. For example, a purpose built courtroom in Pontypridd was recently opened to serve the new area of South Wales Central, which covers the previous areas of Powys, Bridgend and Glamorgan Valleys and Cardiff and Vale of Glamorgan but for other areas a courtroom is not always readily available.

Some coroners have the benefit of a number of assistant coroners but others do not. That makes it difficult for those coroners with fewer assistants in taking leave. It

appears that few, if any, of the senior coroners in Wales manage to take their full leave entitlement.

The role requires a coroner to be available for 24 hours per day, 365 days per year to receive reports of deaths, requests for organ donation and dealing with those deaths whose faith requires immediate action meaning that a coroner will need to keep a mobile phone with him/her at all times. That does place enormous pressures on coroners and can be disruptive at times. For example, a coroner will need to take a mobile telephone to any social event outside working hours and is expected to be available to receive a call.

Media:

The nature of the role has changed enormously since the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 came into force in July 2013. There is great media interest in inquests and coroners' rulings are scrutinised by the local and national press.

Salaries:

There is inconsistency between the salaries individual coroners receive. Despite an agreement between the Coroners Society of England and Wales and the Local Government Association reached on 2 November 2017, the changes brought about by this agreement have not yet been implemented by all local authority areas.

Coroner areas in Wales/Senior Coroners:

North Wales East & Central – John Gittins

North Wales West – Dewi Pritchard-Jones

Ceredigion – Peter Brunton

Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire – Mark Layton

Swansea Neath Port Talbot – Colin Phillips (acting)

South Wales Central – Andrew Barkley

Gwent – Wendy James (acting)

Dated: 10 December 2018

Signed: Mark Layton