



Advice Guide

A Family's Guide to Inquests

What to Expect | You Rights | How to Prepare

Any questions, please contact:
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Key Facts for Families

An inquest is a public court hearing led by a Coroner to establish who has died, and how, when and where the death occurred. It is not a criminal trial and does not assign blame.

An inquest is usually held when a death is violent, unnatural, unexplained, or occurs in state detention or custody.

Families may be classed as “interested persons”, giving rights to receive information and, in many cases, take part in the hearing.

Some inquests are held under Article 2 (the Right to Life), where the State may have failed to protect life. These can examine wider circumstances and may allow access to legal aid.

Having a solicitor is not required, but it can be helpful in complex cases or where public bodies are legally represented.

A Family’s Guide to Inquests

If someone close to you has died and an inquest is required, it is completely understandable to feel overwhelmed. You may be coping with grief while being asked to engage with a formal legal process.

This guide explains, in plain English, what an inquest is, when it happens, and how families can take part. It also covers Article 2 inquests, hearings, outcomes, and support options.

Important note: *This guide provides general information, not legal advice. Every inquest is different and procedures can vary between areas.*

What Is an Inquest?

An inquest is a fact-finding hearing, not a trial.

Its purpose is to provide answers, clarify what happened, and—where appropriate—highlight concerns that could help prevent future deaths.

In simple terms, the Coroner is answering four questions:

- Who has died
- When they died
- Where they died
- How the death occurred

In some Article 2 cases, the Coroner also looks at in what circumstances the death happened.

When Is an Inquest Held?

An inquest is usually held when:

- The death was violent or unnatural
- The cause of death is unknown
- The person died in prison, police custody, or another form of state detention

An inquest may be opened early, but the final hearing usually takes place later, once evidence has been gathered.

Who Is Involved?

- The Coroner – an independent judicial office holder who controls the investigation and hearing
- Coroner’s officers – support the process and liaise with families and organisations
- Witnesses – such as medical professionals, police, or care staff
- Family members (“interested persons”) – often close relatives, with rights to receive information and participate

The Inquest Process (At a Glance)

Most inquests follow a similar pathway:

1. The death is reported to the Coroner
2. Initial enquiries are made
3. A post-mortem may be ordered
4. Evidence is gathered
5. The inquest may be opened and adjourned
6. A pre-inquest review hearing may be held (in complex cases)
7. The final inquest hearing takes place in public

Family witnesses are often heard first. If a witness cannot attend, their statement may be read instead.

Possible Outcomes

The Coroner records a conclusion (sometimes called a finding), such as:

- Natural causes
- Accident or misadventure
- Suicide
- Unlawful killing or lawful killing
- An open conclusion (where the evidence does not allow a clear determination)

An inquest does not decide blame or compensation, but evidence may be relevant to later legal action.

Article 2 (Right to Life) Inquests

An Article 2 inquest considers whether the State failed to protect a person's right to life.

These inquests may:

- Examine wider circumstances and systemic issues
- Require additional evidence and witnesses
- Allow families to apply for legal aid
- Involve legal representation for public bodies

Do Families Need a Solicitor?

You do not need a solicitor to attend an inquest.

However, legal representation can help if:

- The issues are complex
- Article 2 is engaged
- Public bodies are legally represented
- You require representation at hearings and pre-inquest reviews

A solicitor can help ensure the right evidence is requested and the right questions are asked.

Support and Next Steps

Howells Solicitors support families at inquests across England and Wales, including complex and Article 2 cases.

Our specialist Civil Liberties and Inquest team is led by Michelle Gyte, with support from Phillipa Matthews and Elizabeth Walton.

Call us today for a free, independent case review: 0114 2496 648