

**Caroline Saunders  
Senior Coroner  
For Gwent**



Gwent Coroner Service  
The Civic Centre  
Godfrey Road  
Newport  
South Wales  
NP20 4UR

**Tel: 01633 414600**  
Email: [gwent.coroner@newport.gov.uk](mailto:gwent.coroner@newport.gov.uk)

Mike Dodd  
Legal Editor  
PA Media

**By email only.**

22 April 2020.

Dear Mr Dodd

**Re: Public Inquests**

I write in response to your letter of 21 April 2021.

You will be aware that many senior coroners in other areas have adjourned all inquests until the restrictions imposed by the coronavirus pandemic are lifted. In Gwent, for historical reasons, we have a significant backlog of cases which would only be further compounded by adjourning all hearings. When inquests are delayed it has a significant impact on family members. Not only can a family not register the death of a loved one until after the inquest has been heard, but it often provides closure and is an important part of the grieving process.

Your allegation that the reasons for changing the ways that inquests are currently being heard in Gwent is due to the "*difficulties caused to Coroner Service*" or for "*administrative convenience*" is frankly offensive. The reason was to avoid families waiting even longer and to reduce the waiting list for new inquests. It is disappointing that whilst purportedly "*acting as the eyes and ears of the public*" there is an important sector of the public; the bereaved of Gwent, who do not so much as get a mention in your letter.

I do not need a lecture about the principle of open justice. When I first embarked on the consultation with families and the press in relation to what would be acceptable, I acknowledged that this principle would be diluted but wanted to try to maintain an inquest service to avoid the problems set out above. I am affronted that you feel it necessary to detail the Coroners Rules and the Chief Coroner's Guidance. To suggest that in times of a pandemic it should still be acceptable to have a system whereby members of the public can "drop in" to court is quite extraordinary.

The Chief Coroner recognised that previous guidance could not be adhered to in these times and has issued recent guidance which included a suggestion that inquests could proceed on the basis that a member of the press be in attendance. I specifically raised the suggestion that

the combined media could identify one member to attend these inquests, but was told that would be unfair. In a time when so much of the country is pulling together for the benefit of others, it was disappointing that the various media agencies could not work together.

I have therefore, without any dissent from the media, proceeded to hold inquests where the only evidence heard was to be read under Rule 23 of the Coroner's Rules, where no witnesses would be called, where there were no contentious issues and importantly where the family agreed the inquest could be conducted in such circumstances without any family member present.

I note, and agree with your suggestion, that it would be preferable if the family and the media could dial into hearings or use one of the many conference calling arrangements. However, the Coroner's Court in Gwent is a listed victorian court which has no audio visual facilities. It is an ongoing matter for us but not one that could be resolved in time to help manage the inquests which we wanted to undertake during this period of lockdown. And again, I must reiterate that many of the bereaved are elderly and do not themselves have access to sometimes even basic IT facilities.

With regard to the specific inquests you have mentioned, you will know that I am not in a position to discuss these in any detail. I do regret that there has been some miscommunication over dates and that, despite our best intentions, our administrative processes have not been as responsive as I would have wanted resulting in a delay in material being sent to you.

You will, no doubt, be relieved to know that I have acknowledged the voracity of your argument and have therefore adjourned all of the inquests listed from today onwards until the restrictions imposed by the pandemic have been lifted. I would ask you to reflect on the consequences; one lady has been told today that her mother's inquest will now not proceed as planned tomorrow because of the concerns raised by the press. She is devastated.

Yours sincerely,

Caroline Saunders  
**Her Majesty's Senior Coroner for the Area of Gwent.**

cc. All media agencies / personnel on the current media mailing list.