Large print edition

VALOREN

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Free institutional guide
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Coroner Referral Guide

What happens when a death is referred to the coroner — and what the family should expect

B-09 · BEREAVEMENT

"The first week needs sequence, not force."

FREE INSTITUTIONAL GUIDE

For families and next of kin

England & Wales · Coroner referral process — accurate as of June 2026

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When a death is referred to the coroner

1

A death is referred to the coroner when the cause of death is unknown, unexpected, sudden, or occurred in circumstances that require independent investigation. Referral does not imply suspicion of wrongdoing. It is a statutory process that exists to confirm the cause of death and protect the public interest.

Deaths that must be referred:

The GP or attending doctor must refer to the coroner if: the cause of death is unknown; the deceased was not seen by a doctor in the **28 days** before death; death occurred during an operation or before recovery from anaesthesia; death was violent, unnatural, or occurred in suspicious circumstances; death occurred in custody or state detention; the deceased was subject to a Deprivation of Liberty order; or the death may have been caused by an accident, industrial disease, or neglect.

What referral means in practice:

Until the coroner completes their process, the Medical Certificate of Cause of Death (MCCD) cannot be issued. Without the MCCD, the death cannot be registered, and without registration, the funeral cannot legally proceed (in most circumstances). The coroner's officer will keep you informed at each stage.

The coroner's investigation — step by step 2

C-01 · INITIAL REFERRAL AND CORONER'S OFFICER CONTACT

1

The coroner's officer is your main point of contact throughout

Within hours of referral, a coroner's officer (an administrator employed by the coroner's service) will make contact. They are not police officers. They coordinate between the family, the coroner, the pathologist, and the funeral director. Their role is administrative and liaison — they are experienced in supporting bereaved families and will explain each step as it occurs.

C-02 · THE
POST-MORTEM EXAMINATION

2

Usually completed within 2–5 working days of referral

If the coroner cannot determine the cause of death from the available medical records, they will order a post-mortem examination (autopsy). This is conducted by a Home Office registered pathologist — not the GP or hospital doctor. You will be informed when it is scheduled. You have the right to be represented at the post-mortem by your own pathologist (at your own cost), but most families do not exercise this right. The body is treated with care and dignity throughout.

TIMELINE	**2–5 working days**
YOUR RIGHT	**Own pathologist (at cost)**
CONSENT	**Not required**

C-03 · AFTER THE POST-MORTEM — TWO OUTCOMES

3 Cause established → MCCD issued · Cause unclear → inquest opened

If the cause is established: The pathologist reports to the coroner. If the coroner is satisfied with the cause of death, they issue a coroner's certificate (Form 100B) which allows the registrar to register the death without the MCCD. The body is released to the funeral director. This is the most common outcome after a post-mortem — over 90% of referrals do not proceed to inquest.

If the cause remains unclear or the circumstances require further investigation: The coroner opens an inquest. The body is still released for burial or cremation (usually) while the inquest proceeds. An interim **death certificate** is issued.

C-04 · THE INTERIM
DEATH CERTIFICATE

4 Use this to begin bank notifications and probate while the inquest proceeds

If an inquest is opened, the coroner issues an Interim **Death Certificate** (sometimes called a coroner's certificate of the fact of death). This document confirms that the person has died and can be used for most purposes — bank notifications, insurance claims, and applying for the **Grant of Probate** — while the inquest is ongoing. Most financial institutions accept it. Ask for several copies.

USE FOR	**Banks, insurance, probate**
ISSUED BY	**The coroner**
COPIES	**Request several**

C-05 · THE INQUEST

5 A public hearing — usually heard without a jury unless required by law

An inquest is a fact-finding hearing, not a criminal trial. It determines who the deceased was, where and when they died, and how they came to die. It does not apportion blame. Most inquests are completed within **6–12 months**, though complex cases can take longer. The family can participate as interested persons — you may ask questions of witnesses and be represented by a solicitor. The outcome is a conclusion (formerly called a "verdict") such as natural causes, accident, misadventure, suicide, or an open conclusion.

TYPICAL TIMELINE	**6–12 months**
FAMILY ROLE	**Interested person**
LEGAL REP	**Solicitor optional**

Funeral, cremation, and body release

3

The body cannot be released for the funeral until the coroner authorises it. For burial, the coroner issues a burial order (or the registrar issues one after registration). For cremation, the coroner must issue a **Form Cremation 6** — authorising cremation — because cremation is irreversible. An inquest does not prevent the funeral from proceeding; the coroner typically releases the body once the post-mortem is complete.

What to tell the funeral director:

Tell them immediately that the death has been referred to the coroner. They will coordinate with the coroner's officer for body collection and will advise on expected timelines. Funeral directors are experienced in coroner cases — this is not unusual for them and they will manage the process professionally.

Tissue and organ retention:

If the post-mortem requires the retention of organs or tissue samples for further analysis, the pathologist is

required to inform you. You have rights under the Human Tissue Act 2004 regarding the return or disposal of retained material. The coroner's officer will advise you of your rights at the appropriate time.

Effect on registration and the estate 4

The death cannot be registered until the coroner releases it:

The registrar will wait for the coroner's certificate or the conclusion of the inquest before issuing **death certificate**s. If an inquest is opened, the interim **death certificate** allows estate administration to begin (banks, insurance, probate) in the meantime.

Practical advice for the estate:

Do not cancel direct debits or close accounts until **death certificate**s are available. You can begin gathering estate information (account balances, pension details, property details) during the coroner's process — the wait period is useful for preparation. Once the coroner releases the death, administration proceeds as normal.

Support during the coroner process:

Coroner's Court Support Service (CCSS) — free support for bereaved people attending inquests. 0300 111 2141 or coronerscourtssupportservice.org.uk. Inquest — a charity supporting bereaved people after state-related deaths. inquest.org.uk.

POWERED BY VALOREN

Coroner Referral Guide — a practical institutional guide for families. Accurate for England & Wales as of June 2026. Coroners Act 1988; Coroners and Justice Act 2009. Not a substitute for legal advice.

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