

THE ROLE OF THE CORONER

In Ireland, it is a legal requirement that deaths from unnatural causes, including suicide, are reported to the local coroner. A coroner is an independent official with legal responsibility for the investigation of sudden and unexplained deaths. The coroner investigates the circumstances of a sudden, unexplained, violent or unnatural death so that a death certificate can be issued. Essentially, they establish the “who, when, where and how” of an unexplained death, but are not permitted to consider civil or criminal liability

and must simply establish the facts. To do so, a coroner may require a medical post-mortem examination of the person who has died to be undertaken by a pathologist. The post-mortem typically takes place within 24 hours of the arrival of the deceased’s body at the hospital. Coroners appreciate that the procedures involved in their inquiries, though necessary, may cause upset or stress for the next-of-kin, family, and friends, and endeavour to carry out all their work sensitively.

The role of An Garda Síochána

Unnatural deaths, including those by suicide, are reported, usually by the Gardaí, to the coroner. An Garda Síochána act as agents on behalf of the coroner to inquire into the circumstances of a death in order to establish the facts. In the course of these duties, it may be necessary for the Gardaí to take statements for their report. In most cases, a particular Garda or a Garda Family Liaison Office is assigned to a family, and

they will act as a key point of contact for them. It is important to establish who this nominated or investigating Garda is, and to keep their contact details for future reference. This office can liaise with the family on key details relating to the inquest. In the course of these duties, it will be necessary for the Gardaí to take statements and send a completed report to the Coroner.

Death certificate

A death certificate can only be issued by the Registrar of Deaths after the coroner has issued a Coroner's Certificate. There may be a delay in registering a death where a post-mortem examination is carried out. In this case, you may be able to receive an interim death certificate which is acceptable to the Department of Social and Family Affairs for bereavement entitlements and other benefit claims.

The inquest

An inquest is an official, public enquiry, presided over by the coroner, and in some cases involving a jury, into the cause of a sudden, unexplained, or violent death. If a death cannot be explained, an inquest may be held to establish the facts of the death, such as where and how death occurred. It is held in a courthouse or other local venue arranged by the coroner, and is typically scheduled within a year following the death. The inquest will be held in the jurisdiction where the deceased was pronounced dead. The coroner will decide which witnesses should attend, and in what order they will be required to give evidence. The pathologist and Gardaí will give evidence at the inquest together with any other person whose evidence is relevant to the purpose of the inquest. It may be difficult for some family members to listen to all the details within the reports presented to the coroner, so the coroner

often indicates when this report is going to be taken so that those who wish to do so may withdraw and return at a later stage. Anyone who is called as a witness at an inquest is required to attend. Witnesses may ask the Gardaí to read their statement on their behalf. If this is too difficult for them, the coroner will read out a formal verdict in which they give answers to the identification of the deceased, and where, when and how the death occurred. A verdict will be returned in relation to the means by which death occurred. The range of verdicts open to a coroner or jury includes accidental death, misadventure, suicide, open verdict, natural causes, and in certain circumstances, unlawful killing. This verdict is recorded, and copies of the postmortem report and depositions taken at the inquest are available from the Coroner's Office, on payment of a statutory fee, once the inquest has concluded.

Minding Yourself at the Time of Inquest

For those who have been bereaved, the period of time around an inquest into the death of their loved one can be one of mixed feelings. For some, it may be very stressful. Others hope that the inquest will answer questions they still have about their loved one's death. There are some points to remember:

- All inquests are held in public and reporters may be present. In practice, only a minority of inquests are reported on. The coroner is aware of the sometimes tragic circumstances and will endeavour to treat each case sympathetically, and every attempt is made to ensure that inquest proceedings are not unduly intrusive on those concerned. If you are concerned about the public nature of an upcoming inquest, talk with the coroner or investigating Gardaí beforehand to see what provisions can be put in place to address your concerns in a sensitive way.
- While an inquest aims to establish key facts and circumstances about a death, it may never answer all of the questions the bereaved have about why their loved one died. Due to the complex and personal nature of a suicide loss, families and friends may not get the answers they expect at an inquest. The bereaved may come away from an inquest with new facts and knowledge about the circumstances of their loved one's death, but this is not always the case.

- Communication with the Coroner's Office or investigating Gardaí is important in the run-up to the inquest. It is advisable to ask questions in advance about what will be expected of you at the inquest, and the setting you will be in, particularly if called as a witness, and enlisting the support of a family member or friend to do this may be helpful.
- Bear in mind that on the day of the inquest, you may hear distressing details relating to your loved one's death. These things may be difficult to hear, so it is important to have a friend or family member accompany you for support, and stay with you later that day. Try to take some time out around the day of the inquest and spend some time with those who can support you most.
- For more detailed information about the role of the coroner, death certificates, and the inquest, contact Citizens Information on 0761 07 4000, or visit www.citizensinformation.ie. For contact information for all regional and local Coroner's Offices, visit www.coroners.ie.

Coroner contact information

Carlow	059 9131127
Cavan	042 9746557
Clare	065 6828405
Cork City	021 4806645
Cork North	022 23036
Cork South	021 4278088
Cork West	021 4278089
Donegal	074 9131023
Dublin	01 8746684
Galway ER	091 632311
Galway North	093 35740
Galway WR	095 21141
Kerry North	068 21228
Kerry South East	085 7084205
Kerry West	068 21228
Kildare	01 7165588
Kilkenny	056 7721063
Laois	057 8621329
Leitrim	071 9146800
Limerick	061 312933
Longford	043 6686584
Louth	042 9321250
Mayo	094 9251333
Mayo North	096 31313
Meath	046 9280710
Monaghan North	047 87204
Monaghan South	042 9746557
Offaly	057 9321105
Roscommon	094 9860025
Sligo	071 9146800
Tipperary North	0504 31278
Tipperary South	052 6121700
Waterford City	051 859999
Waterford East	051 381390
Waterford West	058 56441
Westmeath	057 9321105
Wexford	053 9421336
Wicklow East	0402 32809
Wicklow West	045 865527

Pieta House Head Office
First Floor,
Greenhills Retail Park,
Greenhills Road,
Dublin 24 D24 RH59
01-4585490

Helpline: 1800 247 247
www.pieta.ie