

Press release: Teesside and Hartlepool families to benefit from coroner merger

- government acts to improve services for grieving families
- coroner services and information will be easier to access for all
- changes will make sure those grieving are at heart of the system

Senior Coroner Claire Bailey has already overseen significant improvements in Teesside, drastically reducing waiting times for families finding out the cause of death of a loved one. The average time taken to complete an inquest at Teesside has been cut from circa 50 weeks in 2013 to circa 11 weeks in 2017. The national average time to complete an inquest is 21 weeks.

The merger of Teesside and Hartlepool coroner services will build on this work, ensuring local families benefit from a more efficient inquest process and greater accessibility to services right across the region. Claire Bailey, who has also been the acting Senior Coroner for Hartlepool, will be permanently appointed the position for the combined area. No courts or inquest venues will close as a result of the merger.

Justice Minister Edward Argar said:

We are reforming the coroner system to ensure those who are grieving do not face the additional stress of poor service and lengthy inquest delays.

As a result of this merger, bereaved families across Teesside and Hartlepool will now benefit from a higher standard of service during their time of need.

I look forward to seeing Claire drive through these improvements, while ensuring the needs of grieving people are at the heart of the system.

The government is committed to raising the standards of coroner services across England and Wales. The Ministry of Justice has carried out a number of reforms to improve coroner services, including the creation of a new national code of practice, and the appointment of the first ever Chief Coroner of England and Wales to oversee the system.

Teesside has already taken steps to improve performance, including by introducing a new website to improve access to services. However, this amalgamation will ensure best practice is shared across the region.

Notes to editors

- The merger of the Teesside and Hartlepool coroner areas was first consulted on in 2015, following the retirement in April 2013 of the then Senior Coroner for Teesside, Michael Sheffield. Following the consultation, the MOJ, in agreement with the Chief Coroner, decided not to proceed until the selection of a Senior Coroner for the area had been agreed.
- All relevant local authorities agree with the proposal to appoint Clare Bailey as Senior Coroner for the combined area.
- A wide range of stakeholders have been consulted on this merger, including local MPs and councillors, coronial office holders including coroners in neighbouring coroner areas, coroner's officers and administrative staff, police, hospital trusts, prisons, funeral directors and faith communities as well as the Chief Coroner.
- Hartlepool had the lowest number of deaths in England and Wales in 2017 (246 deaths, and 12 inquests opened). Average time taken to complete an inquest at Hartlepool was 15 weeks in 2017.
- The newly merged coroner area of Teesside and Hartlepool is due to come into force on 1 August.
- MOJ has carried out considerable reforms to improve coroner services across England and Wales and increase consistency of practice between coroner areas. These include:
 - creation of a new national code of practice – setting out what service and standards bereaved people can expect from coroners
 - creation of a Chief Coroner of England and Wales to oversee the coroner system
 - requiring inquests to be completed within 6 months of the date on which the coroner is made aware of the death, unless there are good reasons not to
 - requiring coroners to notify those who are bereaved within a week of setting the date for the inquest
 - requiring coroners to notify those who are bereaved of the date of the inquest within a week of setting the date
 - providing greater access to documents and evidence, such as post-mortem reports, before the inquest takes place, to enable bereaved families to prepare for the hearing
 - permitting less invasive post-mortem examinations
 - speeding up the release of bodies after post-mortem examination, and requiring coroners to notify the deceased's next of kin or personal representative if the body cannot be released within 28 days.
- For more information contact the MOJ press office on 0203 334 2892.