

6 October 2011

To Email: PBB.Consultation@justice.gsi.gov.uk

Re: Consultation on the Public Bodies Bill: reforming the public bodies of the Ministry of Justice

I am writing to you on behalf of the Criminal Justice Alliance (CJA) in response to the current consultation on the Public Bodies Bill. The CJA welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation. The CJA is a coalition of 64 organisations - including campaigning charities, voluntary sector service providers, staff associations and trade unions - involved in policy and practice across the criminal justice system.¹ We work for a fairer, more effective and efficient criminal justice system.

I am writing to express our serious concerns regarding the Government's intention to dismantle the Chief Coroner's Office through Schedule 5 of the Public Bodies Bill (and transfer a limited number of functions to either the Lord Chief Justice or the Lord Chancellor).

The CJA strongly supports the establishment of the Chief Coroner and believes that this role can provide a powerful voice in the inquest system, essential to improving standards and reducing the risk of future deaths of those in contact with the criminal justice system. As the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody has stated, the role provides a crucial mechanism to ensure that learning lessons from and preventing deaths in state custody is given a higher priority. The CJA therefore believes the Government's proposal as contained in the Public Bodies Bill will not only have a damaging impact on those individual bereaved families who find themselves seeking justice after the tragedy of a death in custody, but also on public health and safety.

As INQUEST, a member of the CJA, has argued, the Chief Coroner was intended to bring transparency and accountability to the coronial service by providing judicial

¹ Although the Criminal Justice Alliance works closely with its members, this response should not be seen to represent the views of each individual member organisation. A full list of our members is available at: <http://www.criminaljusticealliance.org/organisations.htm>

oversight and national leadership. We do not believe the powers should be transferred to other figures; clear leadership and accountability are needed, and these can best be provided by a single Office of the Chief Coroner.

In addition, the CJA does not accept the argument that the Chief Coroner is unaffordable in the present economic climate. Again, as INQUEST has highlighted, dismantling the Chief Coroner's Office is a false economy. The existing system results in huge financial costs to the public purse and human costs to bereaved families and others engaged in the system through delayed or postponed hearings and judicial reviews of coroners' decisions. There is also an important cost saving by preventing future deaths through the appointment. The costings used by the Secretary of State for Justice do not take these fully into account.

Finally, the levels of deaths in custody are unacceptably high and the system is in urgent need of reform. This is best taken forward with a Chief Coroner at the helm. Along with many of our members, we support the joint proposal by INQUEST and Royal British Legion to leave the Chief Coroner out of the Public Bodies Bill completely and commit to full implementation of the reforms in the Coroners and Justice Act over an elongated timetable between 2012 and April 2016. The CJA believes this addresses many of the Government's objections as the costs would be spread out over a longer time frame and the appeals process would be fully piloted before implementation.

I am writing to you to express concern about this particular issue. This should not be taken as an endorsement or otherwise of the remainder of the contents of the Public Bodies Bill.

If you require any further information about this response, please do not hesitate to contact me at vicki.helyar-cardwell@criminaljusticealliance.org or on 0207 091 1298.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "V Helyar-Cardwell". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'V'.

Director
Criminal Justice Alliance