

PRESIDING CORONER FOR NORTHERN IRELAND
LEGACY INQUESTS PRELIMINARY HEARINGS - 31ST JANUARY
2020

OPENING REMARKS

Good morning.

Thank you for coming.

The purpose of today's listings is to hold preliminary hearings into the three legacy inquests which concern the deaths of Neil McConville, Sean Brown and Patrick McElhone respectively. I have also listed the Stalker & Sampson series of inquests and the Loughgall inquest for mention.

Before I proceed, I would like to tell you about the progress that has been made generally since I addressed you last.

I want to begin by emphasising once again that, within the coronial system, no legacy inquest is more important or of greater priority than any other. My judicial colleagues and I remain conscious that each inquest concerns somebody's loved one and that families have to live every day with their loss no matter when or how it occurred.

On the 20th November 2019, I announced those inquests which I intended to list for hearing during Year 1 of the Lord Chief Justice's five year plan for legacy inquests. I also provided information regarding how the remaining inquests will be brought to the point where they are ready for listing.

To bring you up to date, my Case Management Protocol was activated in the first five Year 1 inquests when disclosure request letters were issued on my

behalf in November 2019. The letters set out what I expect in those inquests in terms of disclosure.

Of the first five inquests, I have allocated the inquest into the death of Patrick Friel to Coroner McCrisken. He held a preliminary hearing on the 6th of January and the inquest is due to start on the 27th of April. I have allocated the inquest into the death of Stephen Geddis to Coroner McGurgan who held a preliminary hearing on January 16th. He has listed that inquest to start in June of this year. I am holding preliminary hearings today in relation to the Neil McConville and Sean Brown inquests after which I will allocate each to a County Court judge for hearing. I am holding a preliminary hearing in the Patrick McElhone inquest today and I presently intend to deal with that inquest myself.

Looking ahead to the rest of Year 1, I have allocated the Leo Norney inquest to Coroner McGurgan and I shall allocate the Thomas Mills inquest shortly. A High Court judge will deal with the Doherty & Fleming inquest and I intend to allocate the remaining two Year 1 inquests to County Court judges. Disclosure request letters will issue in respect of these five inquests in the coming weeks.

I stated on the 20th November that there are some particularly complex inquests which would benefit from on-going active judicial case management and that a dedicated judge would be assigned to such inquests. The Stalker & Sampson and Loughgall inquests fall into this category. A dedicated High Court judge will be assigned after the beginning of Year 1 to case manage each inquest. Due to pressure on judicial resources at the High Court tier, which the Lord Chief Justice is taking steps to alleviate, it will not be possible for these assignments to be made before then. I expect that there will be a

reading-in period once the judges are assigned. They will then proceed to case-manage the inquests as they see fit. Pending these judicial assignments, I am available to deal with any preliminary case management issues that arise. I have listed these inquests today for mention for those purposes.

The remaining pending inquests will be reviewed in April 2020 in line with the approach I outlined on the 20th November.

Finally, my judicial colleagues and I, supported by the staff of the Legacy Inquest Unit, will continue to do everything we can to ensure that all pending legacy inquests are completed within the five year time frame.

This is an enormous task, however, as I stated previously, I was heartened by the positive and forward-looking approach taken by all participants in the preliminary hearings last Autumn. I strongly urge you to continue to maintain this spirit of constructive and collaborative working as we move forward so we can deliver all the pending legacy inquests within a five year time frame.

I will now proceed to deal with the matters that I have listed today.

Thank you.

The Hon. Mrs Justice Keegan

31st January 2020