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Mr Stephen Lloyd MP
Eastbourne and Willington Constituency
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29th November 2012

Dear Mr Lloyd,

Inquest – Gladys RICHARDS:

Thank you for your letter of 12th November which was acknowledged by my office on 19th November 2012.

You will possibly be aware of the acute resource problems faced by Coroners all over the country – we have been described as the Cinderellas of the judiciary!

Limited resources in my own district mean that I have very few options as to where I can stage Inquest hearings. I have a small courtroom here in Portsmouth Guildhall and by lengthy prior arrangement can purchase use of courtrooms in Portsmouth Magistrates and Crown Courts.

When I was trying to fix a date and venue for the Inquest into the death of Mrs McKenzie's mother, I was very mindful of Mrs McKenzie's hearing difficulties and I looked for premises with hearing loop facilities. I don't have these facilities in either my own courtroom or the courtroom I am permitted to use in the Magistrates Court.

I was unable to obtain a courtroom in the Crown Court (which would have hearing loop facilities) for the period when I intend to hold the Inquest hearing. Consequently, I decided that Mrs McKenzie's best chance of hearing and participating in what would be said at the Inquest would be if I held the Inquest in my own Guildhall courtroom. It is quite small and can hold up to about 25 people but would allow me to sit her in a position where she could, hopefully, hear the proceedings. As all the witnesses and others attending the Inquest would not have to attend on every day of the hearing, it would have been possible to accommodate them in the room, as well as media representatives and small number of the public.

Up until then, I had assumed that Mrs Richards' Inquest was not likely to generate a lot of non-participant observers – certainly, no-one had given me reason to suspect it would.

However, having fixed the hearing date and the venue, my office received a number of calls from members of the public (who did not identify themselves) enquiring about attendance. I also received an email from Mrs McKenzie intimating that large numbers of reporters and the public will attend.

Faced with this, it was obvious to me that I could not continue with my plan to hold the Inquest without possibly having to turn away a considerable number of people. Mrs McKenzie would not, I suspect, want that.

As no suitable alternative venue is available at short notice, I have postponed the Inquest to try to find somewhere else that can cater for Mrs McKenzie and the many people she believes will attend the hearing. I have arranged a "window of opportunity" between the beginning of next February and the end of April when I will be able to hold the Inquest; my deputy will step in to handle other cases if the new hearing date for Mrs Richards (when fixed) clashes with any other Inquests I have scheduled for that period. I am having a meeting with Mrs McKenzie's lawyers and those of the other interested persons on 12th December 2012 to discuss and finalise a new hearing date. I am hoping by then to have found somewhere suitable to hold the Inquest and to be able to confirm the venue then. It may be possible for me to use Portsmouth City Council Chamber or one of the City Council's Executive meeting rooms (which have hearing loop facilities) during part of the February-April period and I anticipate being able to confirm this on 12th December. The Council Chamber can hold 100+ people and the larger Executive meeting room 60 or so. Either should be more than adequate for Mrs Richards' Inquest.

I will keep you abreast of developments.

Yours sincerely,

Code A

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