



OPERATIONAL SELECTION POLICY OSP6

RECORDS CREATED BY AND RELATING TO

CORONERS 1970 - 2000

Revised November 2005  
Amended May 2007

## **1 Authority**

- 1.1 In 1998 The National Archives published its Acquisition Policy. This set out the principles, which guide the selection of records for permanent preservation in The National Archives. The following year the Archives produced a complementary Disposition Policy, which deals with the selection of public records to be held in places of deposit other than The National Archives.
- 1.2 Both Policies are being implemented through the production of Operational Selection Policies. These are detailed statements of appraisal plans as they apply to categories of records found in one or more departments. They are developed by The National Archives in partnership with other government departments and in consultation with other repositories appointed by the Lord Chancellor as places of deposit. They are subject to public consultation.
- 1.3 Operational Selection Policies are intended to be working tools for those involved in the selection of public records for permanent preservation. They may be reviewed and revised at any time in the light of comments from record producers, reviewers or users of the records or as a result of newly discovered information. The extent of any review or revision exercise will be determined according to the nature of the comments received.

If you have any comments upon this policy, please e-mail [records-management@nationalarchives.gov.uk](mailto:records-management@nationalarchives.gov.uk) or write to:

Acquisition and Disposition Policy Project Manager  
Records Management Department  
The National Archives  
Kew  
Richmond  
Surrey  
TW9 4DU

- 1.4 Operational Selection Policies do not provide guidance on public access to selected records.

## **2 Scope**

- 2.1 This policy concerns all public records relating to coroners and their duties which are created and held by:
- Coroners, coroners' offices and coroners' courts in England and Wales
  - The Home Office, the Lord Chancellor's Department, the Office for National Statistics, the Department of Health and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport

It does not cover records created by local authorities as these are not

public records within the terms of the Public Records Act 1958.

- 2.2 This policy is not an exhaustive statement of all the records that should be selected for permanent preservation. It is intended to provide clear direction to coroners, archivists and the records staff of central government departments in determining which records should be permanently preserved either at The National Archives or a local authority record office.
- 2.3 The timescale of this Operational Selection Policy reflects the fact that central government departments have already reviewed files opened before 1970. Coroners' offices also appear to have passed to local record offices inquest papers created before 1960 and most inquest papers created between 1960 and 1970.

### **Postscript**

The Operational Selection Policy concerns records created from 1970 – 2000 only. On 1 April 2006 the departmental lead on Coroners issues was transferred from Home Office to the Department for Constitutional Affairs. On 9 May 2007 the Ministry of Justice replaced this department and continues to lead on Coroners issues.

## **3 Responsibilities**

### **Coroners**

- 3.1 The functions of coroners and their relationship to local authorities have evolved over eight centuries. The medieval coroner performed a number of duties connected with the fiscal rights of the Crown but gradually the holding of inquests into cases of sudden or suspicious death became and remains the primary function. A residual fiscal duty is determining whether finds of valuable objects qualify as 'treasure' and consequently belong to the Crown.
- 3.2 Deaths are reported to the local coroner by the registrar of births, marriages and deaths who has a duty to do so (and voluntarily by others, e.g. doctors or the police) if there is reason to believe the death may have been due to anaesthetic, abortion, industrial injury or disease, neglect, poisoning, accident or violence, or was otherwise sudden, unexplained or attended by suspicious circumstances, or occurred in prison. Where further enquiries indicate that the death was natural, the coroner will inform the registrar and disposal of the remains may proceed. In other cases a public inquest will be held, with or more usually without a jury, to establish whether the death was natural. Where homicide is suspected, the inquest will be adjourned and the proceedings subsumed within the trial. There is no right of appeal against coroners' decisions but they are subject to judicial review in the Divisional Court of the High Court of Justice; this may be instituted by any properly interested person.

- 3.3 Coroners are independent judicial officers holding office under the Crown and operating in accordance with the Coroners Act 1988 and the Coroners Rules 1984. Since 1926 coroners and deputy coroners have been required to have either medical or legal qualifications; the majority of today's coroners have trained in law.
- 3.4 Coroners' interests are represented by the Coroners' Society of England and Wales, a voluntary society formed in 1846. It also provides guidance and advice to coroners and joins with the Home Office in providing training courses.
- 3.5 Since the Local Government Act 1888 coroners have been appointed to salaried posts by local authorities. There are currently 137 coroners' districts in England and Wales, plus one for the Royal Household. Coroners' districts do not necessarily correspond to local authority or police authority boundaries, so many local authorities and police authorities have more than one coroner's district and some coroners' districts straddle other boundaries. Each district is locally managed and support arrangements differ according to local circumstances. In general coroners' officers are police civilians from the local police service which may also provide accommodation. Coroners' court accommodation may be shared with the magistrates court which is jointly funded by the local authority and The Department for Constitutional Affairs<sup>1</sup>. Management of non-current coroners' records may be handled by the local authority records management unit or record office.

## **Central Government**

### ***Home Office***

- 3.6 During the period under review the General Division of the Home Office was responsible for coroners. From 1996 the Constitutional and Community Police Directorate of the Home Office was responsible. The present coroners section is part of the Animals, Byelaws and Coroners Unit of the directorate and deals with matters relating to coroners, burial law, exhumation, cremation and war memorials. In relation to coroners, the section is responsible for:
- Development of policy and practice
  - Support to the Coroner Service Consultative Committee
  - Liaison with the Coroners' Advisory Group
  - Approval of appointment of coroners in the London and the metropolitan counties
  - Directions to coroners in respect of holding an inquest in certain circumstances
  - Changes to the boundaries of coroners districts
  - Setting of certain fees and allowances
  - Facilitating training for coroners
  - Issuing a newsletter to coroners

---

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Justice, with effect from 9 May 2007

- Responding to public correspondence about coroners and their inquests

### ***The Department for Constitutional Affairs<sup>2</sup>***

- 3.7 During the period from 1970 to 2000, The Lord Chancellor has oversight of the conduct of coroners as judicial officers and may remove a coroner from office for inability or misconduct. The Department for Constitutional Affairs<sup>3</sup> takes the lead in drawing up the Rules under which coroners operate and has an interest in coroners' courts arising from Crown Court involvement in the appointment of coroners' juries, and the provision of legal aid for inquests. However in practice the Department has no day-to-day contact with coroners and complaints against coroners are normally considered by the Home Secretary before reference to the Lord Chancellor.

### ***The Department of Health***

- 3.8 The Department of Health, in so far as it is responsible for medical practices, is responsible for death certification. Its records are not covered by this Operational Selection Policy.

### ***Office for National Statistics***

- 3.9 The Registration Service of the Office for National Statistics is responsible for the registration of death. Its records are not covered by this OSP.

### ***The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)***

- 3.10 When it was established in 1992 DCMS inherited responsibility for treasure trove from the Department of the Environment. The Treasure Act 1996 redefined treasure as anything found which was of value and was over a certain age. The Department established a Treasure Committee to consider finds. The Coroners Act was amended to take account of the new definition of treasure but the authority to hold inquests into finds remained with the coroners. The finder of treasure has a duty to notify the local coroner who conducts an inquest and notifies the British Museum or National Museum of Wales of the result.

## **4 The National Archives' Acquisition and Disposition Policies**

- 4.1 The Acquisition Policy identifies the type of record which will be preserved at The National Archives itself. The Disposition Policy identifies the type of records which, although judged worthy of permanent preservation, would be more appropriately preserved by a local authority record office or specialist archive.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Justice, with effect from 9 May 2007

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Justice, with effect from 9 May 2007

4.2 The Public Records Act 1958 distinguishes between records which may be “deposited” (s. 4.1) and records which may be “presented” (s. 3.6) to an archive other than The National Archives. “Deposited” records are those which are worthy of preservation at The National Archives as being of national significance but which are more appropriately held locally in one of the approved places of deposit. If no place of deposit were able or willing to preserve records of this type, The National Archives would preserve them. “Presented” records are those, which The National Archives does not regard as of national significance and would not be prepared to take into its own custody. They may be transferred to any suitable archive. They cease to be subject to the Public Records Acts as soon as they have been presented. If the receiving institution is subsequently unable to preserve them, The National Archives will assist in locating another suitable institution but, failing this, the records will be destroyed.

## **5 Selection of records for preservation at The National Archives: collection themes**

5.1 The Acquisition Policy Statement outlines certain themes which form the basis of The National Archives’ appraisal and selection decisions. Of these themes, the following are of potential relevance in considering records relating to or created by coroners:

2.2.1.4 Policy and Administrative Processes of the State:  
Administration of justice and maintenance of security

2.2.2.1 Interaction of the State with its Citizens and its Impact on the Physical Environment: the economic, social and demographic condition of the UK, as documented by the state’s dealings with individuals, communities and organisations outside its own formal boundaries.

5.2 The Acquisition Policy also affirms that in addition to the acquisition themes, The National Archives will continue to document the Crown’s rights and obligations; this is relevant to the issue of ‘treasure’.

## **6 Themes for selection of coroners records 1970-2000**

6.1 Three themes have been identified: policy, management of the coroner service, and casework. The first two fall within section 2.2.1.4 (Administration of justice) of the Acquisition Policy, the third mainly within section 2.2.2.1 (Social and demographic condition of the UK).

### **Theme 1: Policy**

6.2 This theme relates to the review of existing policy, procedures and legislation, the formulation of new policies and procedures, the passing of primary legislation and the issue of consequent orders and regulations. A list of legislation and events with significance for policy on coroners is at annex A.

- 6.3 In 1971 the Departmental Committee on Death Certification and Coroners (Brodrick Committee) published its report. Set up by the Home Office in 1965 to review law and practice relating to (a) death certification and (b) coroners and coroners' courts, the committee's main recommendation was the establishment of a national coroners service managed by the Home Office with appointments made by the Lord Chancellor. The government's response to the recommendations was not announced to Parliament until 1975 when it rejected the main recommendation. Although some recommendations were adopted, subsequent legislation and rules, notably the Coroners Rules 1984 and the Coroners Act 1988, made no fundamental change to the coroners service.
- 6.4 The Working Party on Coroners Rules 1976-1980 drew up the principal rules (Coroners Rules 1984) under which coroners operated during the period under review. The Rules were amended in 1999 by the Coroners (Amendment) Rules to bring references in line with the Coroners Act 1988 and other legislation, in particular the Access to Justice Act 1999.
- 6.5 The Coroners Act 1988 consolidated previous Coroners Acts and related enactments in line with recommendations of the Law Commission. It was subsequently amended in response to legislation sponsored by other government departments, such as the 1996 Treasure Act sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport which abolished 'treasure trove', re-defined treasure and required the introduction of a code of practice.
- 6.6 Coroners were also affected by repeated reorganisations of local government. Changes in boundaries required a large number of Coroners District (Amendment) Orders while the Local Government Act 1992 sponsored by the Department of the Environment affected the appointment of coroners.
- 6.7 It was not until the late 1990s that further in-depth consideration was given to the coroners' service and to the possibility of major changes. Between November 1996 and March 1997 the Home Office Research and Statistics Directorate carried out a detailed examination of the service. The aim was to establish current practice and consider how the several public bodies responsible for the service could identify and promote best practice. The survey results were published in 1998 (Research Study 181). As a result of the number and importance of the issues raised, the Home Office established the Coroner Service Consultative Committee to bring together representatives of coroners, local authorities, police services and central government departments.
- 6.8 In 1999 the Home Secretary set up an Interdepartmental Working Party to Review Death Certification following the murder by Dr Harold Shipman of fifteen of his patients. The working party was to report to the Home Secretary and to the Laming Inquiry instituted by the Department

of Health to look into more general issues arising from the case. The working party reported in September 2001. The report and the government's response to it fall outside the scope of this selection policy, as does the fundamental review of the coroner system under the chairmanship of Tom Luce which was announced in July 2001. These major developments will be covered in future selection policies.

### **Theme 1: Selection criteria**

- 6.9 The records of the Brodrick Committee are already held by The National Archives in series HO 375. Coroners section records on the setting up of the Committee and early post-report consultations are in series HO 299.
- 6.10 Home Office files relating to this theme should be selected for preservation if they contain:
1. Agendas, minutes and circulated papers of internal Home Office meetings and meetings of interdepartmental working parties chaired by the Home Office
  2. Drafts of reports, Bills and Statutory Instruments only where these differ significantly in form or substance from the final, published version
  3. 'Notes on clauses', explanatory papers and briefing notes for senior staff and ministers sponsoring primary legislation
  4. Comments on other departments' legislation which were clearly not conveyed to the other department and which add significantly to understanding of the Home Office's position *or* reveal a significant difference of opinion, interpretation or approach between the departments
  5. Submissions from other government departments or bodies or individuals in response to a specific request for comment or information
  6. Unsolicited submissions from other government departments, professional bodies or individuals with relevant professional knowledge only where these prompt officials to propose further consideration of or action on the issue
- 6.11 In general, the Home Office was the lead department on coroner policy and its files as the primary record from 1970 to 2000. Lord Chancellor's Department files relating to these policy issues, should therefore only be selected for preservation if they contain minutes and papers of internal meetings and discussions where these contain information which was not conveyed to the Home Office. This is particularly likely to be the case in relation to the preparation of the Coroners Rules 1984 and to discussions of the possible transfer of responsibilities from Home Office to the Lord Chancellor's Department.

### **Theme 2: Management of the Coroner Service**

- 6.12 This theme relates to the appointment, training and removal of coroners, organisation and financing of the coroners service including



remuneration and fees, practice and procedures for coroners, communications between the Home Office and coroners, and the collection and reporting of statistics.

- 6.13 During the period under review there were no fundamental changes in the organisation, financing or management of the coroner service. The production of the Coroners Rules, the comprehensive survey of the service (see above) and the establishment of the Coroner Service Consultative Committee have been mentioned above.
- 6.14 Communication between the Home Office and coroners took several routes: the issue of Home Office circulars for substantive changes in procedure, a newsletter for matters of more general interest, liaison with the Coroner's Society and the Consultative Committee, and occasional training courses and seminars.
- 6.15 Statistical information on the number of deaths reported to coroners and the number of inquests held was collected and published annually in accordance with the requirements of s. 28(2) of the Coroners Act 1988.

## **Theme 2: Selection criteria**

- 6.16 Records which relate to routine administration of personnel, finance and accommodation whether held by central government departments or coroners fall outside the Acquisition Policy and should not be selected for preservation at The National Archives or deposit at local authority record offices.
- 6.17 A complete set of Home Office circulars to coroners should be preserved by the Home Office. The files relating to the production of the circulars should be kept only where early drafts differ significantly from the final version.
- 6.18 In addition, files relating to the following should be selected for preservation at The National Archives:
1. Appointments and disciplinary cases which were controversial or resulted in changes of rules
  2. Co-operation with the Coroners Society on its production of *Practice Notes for Coroners*
  3. Introduction of centrally organised training
  4. Setting up of the first annual statistical survey
  5. Statistical data where the data differs from the published version and the differences are both significant and explained
  6. Development of and response to the 1999 model charter for coroner services

## **Theme 3: Coroners' casework**

### ***Deaths***

- 6.19 This theme relates to section 2.2.2.1 (social and demographic condition of the UK) of the Acquisition Policy. Records within this theme, which are selected for preservation, will be held by local authority record offices.
- 6.20 Coroners' registers of reported deaths should be preserved permanently in local record offices.
- 6.21 All files relating to reported deaths which do not proceed to inquest may be destroyed when they are 15 years old or may be sampled by the local record office.
- 6.22 Ideally all inquest files should be preserved permanently. Where local record offices cannot readily accommodate the volume of these files, the bulk should be reduced by preserving only the key documents for each case. If further reduction is necessary, archivists may preserve a sample of cases in line with The National Archives' published guidance on sampling (OSP 0).
- 6.23 When sampling is used, files should be selected in addition to the sample if they are potentially of national interest because they
- Set a precedent in law or practice
  - Relate to an individual, accident or crime subject to prolonged or repeated interest from the national media

### ***Treasure***

- 6.22 The National Archives' obligation to record the rights and responsibilities of the Crown is relevant to this theme.
- 6.23 There are about 50 treasure inquests each year. Finds are documented in coroners' offices locally and in the DCMS where they are considered by the Treasure Committee. The annual reports of the Committee are preserved by the British Museum and contain more detail about each find than the minutes of the Committee.
- 6.24 The National Archives will therefore not preserve the minutes of the Committee or any DCMS case files relating to finds. Coroners' files relating to treasure inquests may be destroyed or preserved by local authority record offices under presentation terms.

## **7 Organisation of records**

### ***Home Office and The Department for Constitutional Affairs<sup>4</sup>***

- 7.1 In both departments files are registered according to centrally controlled subject-based schemes. In the Home Office the CRN series is the primary series for all coroners' issues. Files referring to coroners may also be found in the CRI (criminal justice) and POL (police) series. Files

---

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Justice, with effect from 9 May 2007

on coroners in Lord Chancellor's Department may be found on DL, L, HL and P schemes.

- 7.2 Although some initial weeding is possible on the basis of the registry scheme and file title, most review will need to be carried out file-by-file as the schemes encourage filing by subject without reference to the material's level of importance.

### ***Coroners' Offices***

- 7.3 In the absence of any central directive, coroners and coroner's offices have devised their own method of filing papers. However the logic of the process has to some extent determined the filing structure. This can be summarised as a division into domestic arrangements and casework, the former organised within topics (accommodation, staff expenses) and the latter in alphabetical order by surname (with date of birth or year of case added where there is more than one occurrence of the name). Similarly the contents of the files vary in detail but contain the same types of document, often with critical and ephemeral items mixed.
- 7.4 Selection will need to be carried out by a combination of disposal schedule (for all domestic files) and review or sampling, with or without weeding (for case files). See annex B.

## **8 Implementation**

- 8.1 Implementation of this policy will fall on
- Central government departments
  - Coroners (to indicate files of potential historical interest)
  - Local archivists (to select, catalogue and maintain files of historical interest received from coroners' offices and courts)
- 8.2 The National Archives and the Home Office will issue revised circulars to archivists and coroners in line with the agreed selection policy. These circulars will include a model disposal schedule if required and will also cover the respective rights and responsibilities of coroners and archivists in relation to access and charging.

### ***Departmental policy files***

- 8.3 The Home Office has completed review of Coroners Unit files opened before 1970 and an initial sift for all files opened before 1990. During 2001-2 Home Office Record Management Services will carry out file-by-file historical review on all CRN files opened 1970-1980, with later years to be reviewed as part of the review programme. The Department for Constitutional Affairs<sup>5</sup>, the Office for National Statistics, Department of Health and Department for Culture, Media and Sport will be asked to include in their plans for 2001-2002 a review of disposal schedules and

---

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Justice, with effect from 9 May 2007

appraisal guidance in the light of this policy.

- 8.4 Central government files, which do not meet the selection criteria for preservation at The National Archives, will be destroyed.

### ***Coroners records held locally***

- 8.5 This policy should be applied to all records created from 1970 to 2000 which have not already been accessioned into the archive by local record offices. Completed registers should be transferred to the record office. Files over 15 years old should now be reviewed and either destroyed or accessioned. Files created within the last 15 years should be reviewed as they reach their 15th year. It should be assumed that this policy will continue to apply and files now being created should be handled in accordance with this policy until it is revised.
- 8.6 The National Archives appreciates that implementing this policy will have varying, and sometimes considerable, resource implications for record offices and coroners' offices. Consequently no general timetable has been set for completion of review and transfer. The work should be carried out as resources permit.
- 8.7 Coroners should liaise with their administrative support provider (local authority or police service) to agree a disposal schedule for administrative records, or should dispose of records they themselves hold in the light of this policy and according to any model schedule issued by The National Archives and Home Office.
- 8.6 Local authority archivists should liaise with coroners to agree an approach and programme for the review or sampling of all case files already more than 15 years old with a view to identifying those worthy of permanent preservation and destroying the rest.
- 8.8 Precisely how files are appraised will necessarily vary according to the volume of records and local circumstances, but the following principles apply:
- The choice of records to be preserved beyond the 15 year point should be agreed between the coroner and the archivist but the final decision will rest with the archivist
  - Files which are not selected should be destroyed as soon as possible
  - The procedure and decisions should be documented
- 8.9 To simplify administration, all coroners records selected for preservation at a local authority record office will be treated as deposited under s.4.1 of the Public Records Act 1958. However, in the event that the local record office can no longer maintain the collection and no alternative archive can be found for it, The National Archives will take into its own custody only those files which fall into the national interest categories described above (section 6.23) and a sample of inquest files.

- 8.10 The selection guidelines suggested in Annex B are to be used in the appraisal of files which have not yet been formally accessioned into an archive. The National Archives does not intend to apply Operational Selection Policies retrospectively to records already accessioned into The National Archives; however The National Archives would be willing to discuss retrospective application of the selection guidelines to locally held records if this appears necessary to record offices with large existing collections.

Revised November 2005  
Amended May 2007

## Annex A

### Legislation and events with implications for coroners 1970-2000

The legislation and events listed in this annex will all have been considered by coroners and the government departments responsible for them. However only those asterisked below and referred to in sections above should be considered for preservation under this Policy. Others will be adequately documented by parliamentary publications or will be appraised under other Operational Selection Policies.

- 1971 \* *Report of the Departmental Committee on Death Certification and Coroners* (Brodrick Committee)
- 1975 \* Government's response to the Brodrick report recommendations announced to parliament
- 1982 Coroners records (fees for copies) rules
- 1984 \* Introduction of weekend residential courses
- 1984 \* Coroners Rules
- 1988 \* Coroners Act
- 1989 \* Introduction of annual statistical returns as required by s.28(2) of the Coroners Act 1988
- 1992 Local Government Act
- 1995 Reporting of injuries, diseases and dangerous occurrences regulations
- 1996 Coroner service survey begins
- 1996 \* Treasure Act and Code of Practice
- 1997 Registration of Births and Deaths (Amendment) Regulations
- 1997 Coroner's records (fees for copies) rules
- 1997 Railway Safety (Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations
- 1998 \* Issue of first *Practice Notes for Coroners* by the Coroners Society
- 1998 \* Setting up of the Coroners' Officers' Association
- 1998 Decision by Lord Chancellor on legal executives' rights before coroners' courts, resulting in change to Coroners Rules 1984
- 1998 \* Coroner service survey report (Research Study 181)
- 1998 \* Setting up of Coroners Service Consultative Committee
- 1998 Human Rights Act
- 1998 Local Government Reorganisation (Amendment of Coroners Act 1988) Regulations
- 1999 Report of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry
- 1999 Report by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons *Suicide is everyone's concern*
- 1999 \* Interdepartmental Working Party to Review Death Certification

- 1999 Model "Coroners Charter" issued by HO circular 46/1999
- 1999 Access to Justice Act amends Coroners Act 1988
- 1999 \* Coroners (Amendment) Rules
- 1999 ONS consultation on reform of the registration system
- 1999 Merchant Shipping (Accident reporting and Investigation) Regulations
- 2000 \* In response to the report of the Alder Hay inquiry the Secretary of State for Health announced the government's intention to carry out a fundamental review of coroner system in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This was confirmed by the Home Office in March 2001.

## **Annex B**

### **Appraisal of coroners' case files**

#### **Reappraisal of court records and case files**

1. The reappraisal of coroners' case records is part of a wider reappraisal of court and criminal case records. The National Archives has traditionally taken a large number of such records, partly because its own origins lie in the preservation of legal documents and court records. For the medieval and early modern period the absence of other records has made historians heavily dependent on legal records. As alternative sources of information have increased, the overall value of legal records has decreased and, for the twentieth century, they are no longer necessary as an oblique source of social data although they may continue to be of some value in that respect. In addition, large amounts of statistical data are now collected and published by government, making it unnecessary to preserve individual case files as a statistical source.

#### **Current research use of coroners' case records**

2. During 2000 The National Archives conducted a survey among local authority record offices holding coroners' records. In response to the question what use was made of the records and by whom, archivists indicated that use could be broadly divided between those with an interest related to the original purpose of the files, e.g. lawyers and medical researchers, and those using them as a historical source. The former tend to use the records during the first 15 years after their creation, the latter generally have access to them only after 75 years.
3. Precise statistics on use are not available and the purpose for which files were recalled by coroners was not always known by the archivist, so the picture is impressionistic but it seems to show the following interests:
  - Files over 75 years (available to the public) –
    - i. Predominantly genealogists and family historians
    - ii. Occasionally academic research
  - Files under 75 years (available only to the coroner and those to whom s/he permits access) –
    - i. Coroners, who may in most cases be recalling files to enable others to view them, as below:
    - ii. Families seeking additional information about the death of a relative
    - iii. Solicitors, doctors and police consulting papers in relation to a subsequent compensation claim, hereditary illness, or possible related crime. Industrial disease is the main concern
    - iv. Academic researchers into particular causes of death. Most epidemiological research appears to be undertaken within the 15 year compulsory retention



period specified by the Coroners Rules 1988. Suicide is the topic most frequently quoted

4. During the consultation period for this Operational Selection Policy a strong case was made by a significant number of coroners, archivists and researchers for preservation of inquest files on the grounds that:
  - There is no equivalent of law reports to provide a summary of significant cases
  - The files constitute a rich source of data for social, local and family historians much of which would not be readily available from other sources
  - Detailed records relating to deaths have potential for future medical research into diseases not currently recognised
  - Preservation of the case files will enable future historians and social scientists to check the validity of contemporary statistics
5. The Coroners Society proposed that the permission in the current Coroners Rules to destroy case files after 15 years should be amended in the light of the increasing use being made of them beyond that point. Other commentators proposed varying periods of retention from 30 years to permanent preservation. However the arguments advanced for preserving files for periods of 30, 50 or 100 years seemed also to justify permanent retention.

### **Selection, weeding and sampling**

6. In meeting researchers' requirements, archives must operate within available resources (see Acquisition Policy section 2.3.4). The cost of selection and of storage must be an explicit element in appraisal decisions and both The National Archives and local authority record offices need to control the rate at which they acquire records. The larger the number of records created, the smaller will be the proportion the archive is likely to be able to preserve.
7. Holdings of coroners' records by individual local authority record offices currently range from 0.5 metres to 900 metres. In view of this wide variation, The National Archives believes that the interests of researchers will be best served by allowing archivists to employ the approach most suited to their own circumstances. The National Archives will approve the preservation as deposited records of any coroners' records selected by the local archivist on the understanding that, if an alternative archive had to be found for these coroners' records, The National Archives would be prepared to take into its own custody only the 'special interest' cases indicated at section 6.21 of the Operational Selection Policy and a sample of weeded inquest files.
8. Archivists who need to reduce the volume of coroners' records to be preserved may consider progressively reducing the bulk by:
  - Destroying all non-inquest cases at 15 years

- Keeping only the inquest form and police report for all inquest cases
  - Sampling inquest cases, in line with The National Archives' published guidance (OSP 0)
9. Taking a sample would reduce the bulk but would not meet the needs of family history research. Apart from certain nationally or locally famous individuals, there is no way of knowing which individuals will be of interest to their descendants and other researchers. To meet the needs of family historians would require preservation of all cases. But if all the records were to be preserved, only a small minority would ever actually be required for this purpose. Consequently archivists who are unable to preserve all inquest files in full should seek to preserve the key documents (the inquest form and police report) of all inquest files in preference to a sample of entire files. Preservation of key documents for all files should also meet the needs of social, medical and legal historians.
10. Weeding files is however a time-consuming and costly process which should only be undertaken where it is necessary and by those who will readily recognise key documents. Consequently, where weeding of inquest files is judged to be necessary, it would be preferable for it to be carried out by coroners' offices before files are sent to the record office.

#### **Disposal of other coroners' records**

11. The National Archives' policy on selection of coroners' records proposes that all public records relating to or created by coroners which are not judged worthy of permanent preservation should be destroyed according to disposal schedules agreed with interested parties. These will generally be the local authority and the local police service who are providing the administrative support, accommodation and finance. Where coroners work from home or from professional premises, they should also operate disposal procedures to ensure that papers are not kept for longer than necessary and that those, which are to be preserved permanently, are passed to the appropriate record office when they are 15 years old.
12. The Home Office and The National Archives will draw up a model disposal schedule for coroners and coroners' offices following the current review of the Coroners' Service.