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GOVERNMENT STALLS ON PLANS TO REFORM INQUEST SYSTEM

The government has shelved plans to include a Coroner Reform Bill in this parliamentary session. Bereaved families have been promised reform for years. Our work focussing on deaths in custody and their investigations has highlighted a system in crisis and one that is failing bereaved families. For democratic accountability it is crucial the inquest system works as it is the only public forum in which contentious deaths are subject to scrutiny. INQUEST has today written to Bridget Prentice MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Ministry of Justice, seeking an urgent meeting to discuss our concerns.

Helen Shaw, co-director of INQUEST said:

This is bitterly disappointing to all the bereaved families and those with whom they work who have contributed their experiences so generously to proposals for reform.

INQUEST's groundbreaking publication *Unlocking the Truth: Families' Experiences of the Investigation of Deaths in Custody (2007)*, by Helen Shaw and Deborah Coles launched earlier this year argues that: "...*complacency and inaction have characterised the government response (to deaths in custody), indicating a failure or unwillingness to ensure that systems are in place to prevent further deaths and ensure accountability.*" Today's announcement only confirms this.

Notes to editors:

INQUEST is the only non-governmental organisation in England and Wales that works directly with the families of those who die in custody. It provides an independent free legal and advice service to bereaved people on inquest procedures and their rights in the coroner's courts.

INQUEST initially welcomed the government's draft Coroners' Reform Bill (2006) as a long overdue opportunity to reform one of the most ancient and archaic areas of the British legal system. The system is especially ill-equipped to deal with deaths that involve questions of state or corporate accountability. A thorough overhaul of the system is needed in order for it to have any meaning for bereaved families and for effective public scrutiny of contentious deaths. This is a wasted opportunity to establish well funded, professional coronial system with a properly extended remit and decent powers can have a crucial role in preventing contentious deaths and act as an essential hallmark of democratic accountability.

See www.inquest.org.uk for more information on coroner reform, for press releases on current inquests taking place and for an executive summary with detailed recommendations of *Unlocking the Truth: Families' Experiences of the Investigation of Deaths in Custody*.

Further Information	www.inquest.org.uk
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