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Event: Birmingham Bombings -- Pre-Inquest Review Hearing

Date: 28 November 2016

Before: HH Judge Peter Thornton QC - The Coroner

Also Present: Mr Peter Skelton QC  
Mr Matthew Hill  
Ms Henrietta Hill QC  
Mr Jeremy Johnson QC  
Ms Clair Dobbin  
Mr Jason Beer QC  
Mr Stanley



THE CORONER: Good Morning, to you all. My name is Peter Thornton; I am the nominated Judge, the Coroner, appointed to conduct the inquests into the 21 people who died following the explosions at the two public houses in the centre of Birmingham on 21 November 1974.

This is the first pre-inquest review hearing. It is a hearing of a preliminary nature. It is in public and it is being recorded.

I first of all wish to identify those who are present and I will do that through Counsel to the Inquests. That is Mr Peter Skelton QC and sitting next to him, Mr Matthew Hill.

Mr Skelton?

PETER SKELTON: Sir, the families of ten people who died, are presently legally represented, although I am not aware we have counsel in court today.

First of all there are those represented by KRW Law LLP. They are nine relatives of eight people who died. Those relatives are:

Julie Hambleton.

William Craig.

Paul Thrupp.

Paul Rowland.

Paul Bodman.

Paul Bridgewater.

Michelle Sealey.

Clair Luckman; and

George Jones.

Represented by Jackson Canter Solicitors, is Michael John Reilly who appears with Ms Henrietta Hill QC, who is on my far-left.

West Midlands Police are represented today, by

Mr Jeremy Johnson QC, who sits immediately next to me.

Police Federation are represented by Ms Clair Dobbin, instructed by Slater and Gordon.

And Devon & Cornwall Police by, Jason Beer QC, who sits one along from me.

There are various other potentially interested organisations and persons who are in court, but do not have formal representation today. And I won't list them, sir.

THE CORONER: Yes. Can I just before we start, make an appeal perhaps through the press? This is a public hearing. There are eight families of eight persons who died following the explosions, for whom we have no contact details or there has been no response.

And those who died were:

Anne Hayes;

Marilyn Paula Nash;

Charles Harper Gray;

Neil Robert Marsh;

Stephen John Whalley;

James Frederick Caddick;

Michael William Beasley; and

Thomas Frederick Chaytor.

I would invite any of them should they wish to do so and it's entirely for them (Inaudible) no obligation, to make contact with the Coroner's Office in Birmingham. So at the very least I can inform them of the progress of the proceedings. As I say there is no obligation, some families may wish for good reason to have no contact. But I would invite contact if possible, through the Coroner's Office.

So, Mr Skelton, may we follow the agenda please?

Firstly, Item 1: Funding for lawyers update:

PETER SKELTON: Yes, sir. You will be aware from reports and indeed from correspondence which the court has received that the funding is a major issue for the families of those who died. Ms Hill, has a limited amount of funding and appears without a junior in this court. But those families who are represented with KRW Law, do not presently have public funding which they can use to instruct a counsel. And Mr Stanley is here on their behalf, he is not counsel, but he is a solicitor from the firm and he will address you briefly, with your leave, on the present funding position, which is limited.

THE CORONER: Yes. Thank you. Mr Stanley, thank you for coming. What would you like to say?

MR STANLEY: Thank you.

THE CORONER: Bearing in mind that I have no authority to provide funding, although I will say perhaps when I have heard some submissions that I support funding.

MR STANLEY: Thank you. First of all I am limited to making submissions only on the point of funding --

THE CORONER: I understand.

MR STANLEY: -- that's a (Inaudible) point. (a) In the absence of instructed counsel. (b) I'm not a solicitor, I'm a non-practising barrister in England and Wales. I work for a firm of solicitors registered in Northern Ireland in Belfast. So I've real no standing here apart from as a McKenzie friend of ... Some very brief notes.

You have and you acknowledged receipt of our most recent submissions or our letter to you from Thursday, on the funding position, and also some very brief submissions from our counsel, Mr Underwood, Mr McCowan and (Inaudible), on some of the substantive points. And they apologise for not being able to appear, but I think I don't need to explain why. And they mean no disrespect to the court.

THE CORONER: Thank you. I am grateful for the correspondence and for those pre-submissions.

MR STANLEY: Thank you. I've got two pieces of paper to hand up, which I will do in a minute, which are the most recent pieces of correspondence which

is indicative of this is a situation developing day-by-day, almost hour-by-hour, in relation to funding. And we will try and keep you and our colleagues informed as to those developments.

First of all, KRW represent eight of the families in this matter and my colleague, Ms Hill, (Inaudible) represent one family. As I said as it's been noted my colleague only has limited legal aid funding in this matter.

KRW has represented our clients for almost two years. We have, and I think it's important to stress, very clear instruction from our clients on the matter of our continued representation. As I said we appear today in the absence of counsel, they've apologised, but we're here to assist you on the matter of funding.

We've written to you and we maintain, KRW maintain, that our representation in this matter satisfies both the tests, best interest of our clients and the effective administration of justice test. And it will be detrimental at this point, after two years in getting this far in this matter, to those who have to have to seek alternative legal representation at this stage.

At this juncture, in addition to the content of our letter to you of the 24th, we offer the following update on the issue of public funding for continuity (Several inaudible words) of those we represent. In order for them to engage, effectively participate and engage in this resumed inquest, in order for them to be able to have their legitimate interest protected, to express their right to truth after so many years and to

contribute to serving the wider public interest. Which in this particular matter, is the matter of the community of Birmingham. And they want to assist you in this process.

As you are aware KRW Law LLP does not have a contract for legal aid services in England and Wales. Therefore, a grant of legal aid cannot be made to our clients in the work KRW is required to undertake except limited to advocacy.

The Legal Aid Agency of England and Wales has suggested that KRW Law and Jackson Canter Broudie enter an agency agreement to which we act as agents for them.

We contend and I hope that our -- my colleague contends that this arrangement is being imposed upon both of us, it's unprecedented in a matter as exceptional as this. It's unreasonable, impractical and unnecessary and would not work if only on the matter of compliance alone, under regulation of such a contract.

We have remained open to negotiations with the Legal Aid Agency since January, which is when we first made three applications. We respect the constraints of the agency and the restrictions in which they work in terms of legislation, rules and guidance, as a statutory agency. Although we might contest aspects of the interpretation of the legislation rules and guidance, but that's an entirely separate matter and that would get into a different arena of legal engagement with the agency.

We've also maintained open negotiation with any other government department specifically The Home Office and The Ministry of Justice in following our clients instructions (Several inaudible words) funding for legal representation with the other state agencies that are present. And also the equality of arms, not an equality of arms, but the equality of arms.

My final point, to-date it is clear that both The Home Office and The Ministry of Justice contend that the matter of public funding for legal representation of our clients is a matter for the LAA. And the decisions of the LAA are independent of government and that no bespoke funding mechanism can be provided to our clients direct from Central Government, as to what we might describe, or they have described as the Hillsborough model of funding.

And they also suggest that the Hillsborough model cannot provide a precedent, although again, we would contest that Hillsborough isn't a precedent. There are precedents and one of the precedents is in Northern Ireland (Inaudible) a civil litigation in which London solicitors appeared in Belfast to represent the people of Omagh in a very complex long and civil, unique civil action.

So the most recent developments over the weekend are by way of two letters to our client, Julie Hambleton, who is sitting there, and I'll hand these up. It's a letter from The Home Secretary regarding a (Inaudible) matter which was asking for correspondence between her and her colleague -- The Ministry of Justice, but which are linked to legal aid exceptional funding at the inquests, as well as my personal

consideration of a wider policy relating to the funding of inquests.

That is dated 25 November.

And a letter from the West Midlands Police (Inaudible) suggesting that the English LAA reaches an agreement with the Northern Ireland Legal Services Agency, to ensure that the agreed funding can be supplied -- quote, "This approach would remove from you and your legal representatives the burden of negotiation in agreement." Also 25 November.

And we've ensured that this morning that letter will be sent to the Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland LAA.

That's all I have the scope to address you on, on the matter of funding.

Unless I can be of further assistance --

THE CORONER: Yes, I'll like to see the letters.

MR STANLEY: Thank you.

(1 minute of silence)

THE CORONER: Yes, thank you very much, Mr Stanley. Ms Hill?

HENRIETTA HILL: Good morning, sir. As you know I represent Michael John Reilly, brother of Eugene Desmond Reilly. I see that you have the short submissions that were prepared for this hearing.

THE CORONER: Yes, I have and I'm very grateful for them, thank you.

HENRIETTA HILL: Thank you, sir. They make clear at the beginning of their submissions that we are in a slightly different position, in that very limited public funding has been made available to Jackson Canter solely for the purposes of this hearing and on a very limited basis.

And, sir, again we mean no disrespect by the (Inaudible) of those submissions. But they are by definition prepared to hide under generality, because the funding that has been made available permits only that. So there has been no ability to read any of the underlying evidence and effectively as at the end of today, we are in the same position as my learned friend, because there is no funding at all for any future work.

The correspondence from the LAA makes clear that if any ruling were made by you today, sir, in relation to scope then there is a further dialogue that can be had. But at the moment our funding is very limited indeed.

And, sir, as we made clear in the submissions for the funding proposals that are on a legal held basis, are plainly in our submission inadequate to deal with an inquest of this complexity. Sir, even if that

is extended, if you like, in our submission that scheme is unworkable for a case of this nature.

The understanding that we have is that The Home Secretary made a commitment that funding comparable to that given to the families of the 7/7 bombings would be made available, and that is not what has yet been honoured by the Legal Aid Agency. Indeed we understand that that cannot now be made available due to change in the law, with the passage of (Inaudible)

Sir, at the moment we are in a position where we have as I've indicated very limited funding. We hope to provide some assistance to the court today, but beyond that we are in a similar position to my learned friend.

Sir, while I'm addressing the court, it does strike me, having read all of the submissions from my learned friends to my right, that it may be, sir, that there is some measure of agreement around some of the issues. And if for example, you were to conclude, having heard submissions on all of the issues, that there is a measure of agreement around Article 2, that there is a measure of agreement around preventability being within scope and there is a measure of agreement around a jury. Then any indications that you can give today, sir, are likely to assist us in our negotiations around funding.

Like my learned friend to my right, we have tried to maintain an open dialogue with The Home Office and the Legal Aid Agency. Our last letter to The Home Secretary was 28 October, that has yet to be

replied to. We have nevertheless, at the end of last week sought to arrange a meeting with the Legal Aid Agency and we hope to continue a dialogue in that respect.

But our primary position, sir, is that as my learned friend, Mr Stanley, has said, given the constraints of the legal aid regulations, our primary position is that a bespoke scheme is what is necessary, of the nature that was organised for the Hillsborough families. Simply because we understand that the Legal Aid Agency has to operate within its regulatory framework.

It may be that there is slightly more discretion around that than we currently understand, but at the moment we have real concerns about the proposals that have been made.

We also are of the view that an agency agreement is unworkable and inappropriate for a range of reasons. The Legal Aid Agency have yet to fully explain to us how they think that would work. How they think that would comply with the regulatory obligations, how that -- they think that might manage any conflict between the groups and families who we duly represent, for example, it simply seems unworkable as far as we're concerned for a range of reasons. Sir, that appears to have been suggested as a solution but we don't believe it is a viable one.

So, sir, in short, any indication that you could give today that would assist us with funding, would be very gratefully received. But that is the position we are in.

THE CORONER: Yes, thank you both very much.

I just want to say this about funding. I have no power, no authority to award funding in any shape or form. The Section 51 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009, provided for public funding for advocacy at certain inquests, mostly deaths in custody, although that was repealed very early. As was the provision for representation at inquests in the Legal Aid Act 1974, that was repealed early too.

So that leaves us with Section 10 of the Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, which Ms Hill has referred to (Inaudible) which concerns exceptional case funding. And I understand the limitations upon the grant of exceptional case funding under that scheme.

I am not going to go into the technical detail of funding, but I do wish to say that I support the applications of those families who wish to participate fully in these inquests by way of legal representation.

The events of 21 November 1974 brought about the tragic deaths of 21 people. These were calamitous events. They require full and fair investigation and hearings at least as far as inquest proceedings may permit under the law.

On any basis these must, in my preliminary view, be Article 2 compliant investigations. I say that is my preliminary view, I do not need to rule on that today. It is enough to say that the

Senior Coroner thought so in her ruling in June of this year, and nobody involved in this process has so far said otherwise. Anyone who wishes to object to that approach can do so in due course.

So I therefore, commend the applications for funding to those who are considering them. Not all families of those who died will wish to be legally represented. But for those that do, there is a compelling case for proper legal representation.

I have in mind the gravity of these events, the scale of the number of deaths. The extent of the investigations to-date. The complexity of the investigations and the proceedings. And the need for family participation, which is very important. For these reasons I support the applications for funding. I will come back to it when we consider the timescale for the next hearing and beyond.

Yes, thank you very much.

Item 2: Identity of Interested Persons:

PETER SKELTON: Sir, scope obviously is a -- in fact a preliminary step to working out who might be an interested person for the purpose of the statutory test.

THE CORONER: Yes.

PETER SKELTON: There are a number of persons here, or organisations who are highly likely to be at the centre of the investigation no matter what the scope, but there are others who may not. And I'm looking particularly

to the Police Federation for example, whose position at present is reserved and likewise the Devon & Cornwall Police.

THE CORONER: Yes. The Senior Coroner produced a provisional list of interested persons, that is a matter for me to reconsider, but essentially scope should be considered first.

PETER SKELTON: Yes, sir.

THE CORONER: Considered first, fully. Although, those who perhaps do not have formal interested persons status may be invited to take part in those submissions, on scope.

PETER SKELTON: Indeed, sir. And there maybe those who may have a significant role in the form of providing disclosure or providing witness statements. But who nevertheless do not need to be, or want to be interested persons for the purposes of the full investigation.

THE CORONER: Mr Beer, you're here today on behalf of the Devon & Cornwall Police.

JASON BEER: Yes, I am, sir.

THE CORONER: You've made a written application for interested person status. You wish to -- I, for the moment, have put that application on hold.

JASON BEER: Yes.

THE CORONER: Do you wish today to renew that application or do you wish to hold back until scope is considered.

JASON BEER: The latter please, and the discussion you just had with Mr Skelton accords exactly with the position that we were to adopt. I hope that's communicated to you and scope should come first. It may be that you make the decision on scope, which means that the Chief Constable of Devon & Cornwall Police is not an interested person in the inquest or doesn't need to be.

THE CORONER: Yes.

JASON BEER: Albeit, we thank you for reserving, to people who are potentially interested persons, the ability to contribute and if necessary to -- your decision on scope.

THE CORONER: Is anybody else -- thank you. Does anybody else want to say anything further about interested person status, for now? No. Thank you very much.

Item 3: Is Scope of the Inquests:

I have had a number of preliminary submissions and I have taken only as preliminary submissions. It is very helpful, it sets out early views, gives a bit of a guide to what's coming in the future from KRW Law, from Jackson Canter, from the West Midlands Police, from the Police Federation and from one family member, who has written in. I think that's the extent of it so far, Mr Skelton?

PETER SKELTON: I think that's right, sir. And I think it is right to say that those, the KRW submissions were light on analysis for the reason for funding, as Mr Stanley has identified.

THE CORONER: Yes. Well, it is obviously important that the consideration of scope, that is the scope of the inquests, bit of a technical term, but it means in essence, the topics, the areas, which will be considered through the evidence at the inquests. So that is scope and what that scope should be and those who wish to make their submissions about it, obviously need in the first place to have legal representation to deal with it. But in the second place to receive the disclosed material and any further material to be disclosed before those submissions are made.

So, we are at a preliminary stage, we are perhaps a little delayed by the funding issues at this stage. I'll come back again to timing in a moment, but it seems to me that these are issues. The scope issues should be considered fully at the next pre-inquest review hearing. Does anybody disagree with that? No. Right.

PETER SKELTON: Sir, may I just address briefly, it may be helpful for those who are here. The potential options on scope, because scope is such a fundamental issue in any investigation. The options that are on -- the possibilities are that the issues that the Senior Coroner considered warranted the reopening of the inquests, should (Inaudible) scope and be the limits of scope.

A second option is those issues that she considered to be -- to justify the inquest but also those that she rejected. And it may be that those here will want to address you on that, in due course.

The final option would be issues that the Senior Coroner considered, but also a broader investigation into how the attacks were carried out and who perpetrated them.

As you say, sir, no view has been taken as yet on that, and indeed Mr Hill and I have not addressed you either in writing or orally and don't propose to do so today. But it strikes us that it's helpful for us to identify at least the three broad possibilities at this stage, others may have a different view, so that next time you hear submissions directed at least to those issues.

THE CORONER: Yes. Well I think the preliminary submissions give fairly strong clues to what the nature of the issues are likely to be, but Mr Skelton has set them out in broad terms. Does anybody wish to say anything else at this stage? Ms Hill?

HENRIETTA HILL: Sir, the only point I would make is that we are potentially in the slightly chicken and egg situation with the Legal Aid Agency and that their last communications with us have indicated that they will not revisit the issue of funding unless a decision on scope is made.

THE CORONER: Yes.

HENRIETTA HILL: And clearly we need legal aid to make representations on scope. So we are to some degree the chicken and egg and I'd be a little concerned, if you like, to leave the hearing today without any steer at all, because I fear that that will result in no progress with the Legal Aid Agency.

My (Inaudible) learned friend's submissions had been largely to the effect that in light of the Senior Coroner's conclusions on the advance notice issue, if you like, that there was a measure of agreement that that would have to fall within scope.

I don't know if it would be helpful to have a discussion about whether that's correct, and if so whether you are able to make at least some indication whether that would fall within scope.

But I simply raise that because I'm concerned not to have another PIR in a few months time that doesn't move on, because the Legal Aid Agency are saying to us that there's been no decision on scope yet.

THE CORONER: I don't want to give too many preliminary indications because I don't think that is appropriate. But I think what you have for the purposes of your funding applications is as Mr Skelton said, three areas to be considered. You have the Senior Coroner's letter, I can't remember the precise date, but where she set out the issues which should be considered.

The three issues set out by Mr Skelton are quite broad, whether that's -- which way the scope goes, one way or the other on certain issues will have to be decided later following submissions. But I think there is sufficient for you to put a strong case at least till the next hearing if not beyond, about the scope of the inquests.

HENRIETTA HILL: And we can certainly refer to the indications you've given that we need legal representation to make proper submissions on scope.

THE CORONER: Yes.

HENRIETTA HILL: For which I'm grateful.

THE CORONER: I think that is important.

HENRIETTA HILL: Yes.

THE CORONER: It is important for those who are considering funding to know that the scope issue is going to be a big issue and will decide very much the framework of the inquests and the evidence that will be considered. And that to pre-judge that issue at this stage would not be appropriate.

HENRIETTA HILL: But that is an issue that requires legal representation in itself, it is a difficult issue that requires consideration of the evidence.

THE CORONER: Indeed.

HENRIETTA HILL: Thank you, sir.

THE CORONER: Right. (4) Whether Article 2 is engaged:

I have already indicated as a preliminary view that Article 2 arguably is engaged. In relation to exceptional case funding, I have advised Senior Coroners in the past in writing, where they felt it appropriate particularly if it was arguable that Article 2 would be engaged that they should support if they felt it right to do so, applications for funding. That fact is mentioned in the Lord Chancellor's guidance on exceptional case funding that the view of the Coroner is not determinative but important how [sic] to be considered. And I have given my preliminary view on Article 2, subject to any later submissions to the contrary.

Item 5: Whether a jury is required:

I think the authorities particularly *Paul*, would suggest that scope has to come first. Two aspects to possibility of a jury, one is the mandatory provisions of Section 7, the other is the discretionary provisions of Section 7 if the mandatory ones do not apply, and *Paul* suggests at least in relation to the discretionary provisions that scope should be considered first.

So although there may be strong indications for a jury, I would say no more than that at this stage, subject to submissions following scope.

Mr Skelton, Items 6 and 7 --

PETER SKELTON: Yes, sir.

THE CORONER: -- Further disclosure and matters for further investigation at this stage.

PETER SKELTON: A preliminary point, sir, is the appointment of Solicitors to the Inquest.

THE CORONER: Yes.

PETER SKELTON: At present there are no such solicitors, but it is hoped that they will be appointed in the near future and their role will include liaising and corresponding with interested persons, witnesses and others. Managing the disclosure of documents to the Coroner, and onwards to interested persons. And managing the process of proofing witnesses.

And may I just say something more about the disclosure process?

THE CORONER: Yes.

PETER SKELTON: During the application process before the Senior Coroner the disclosure of documents, some taken directly by West Midland Police at the Coroner's behest. And the police assistance in this regard, it is right to recognise, was invaluable and they were the primary document holders for the purpose of the application process.

However, going forward, disclosure will be managed by the Solicitors to the Inquest. And this will ensure that the court has control of the process and has oversight of precisely what documents have been disclosed to interested persons and witnesses.

It will also ensure that proper processes are in place in the event that applications are required for documents to be withheld. For example on the grounds of public interest immunity, because they give rise to some issue of sensitivity which needs protection.

So far as West Midlands Police are concerned it is understood that they have potentially further relevant documents that have been produced since the application process took place. And we have been liaising with them in respect of those, but those documents have not as yet been disclosed onwards. That is a process that will be managed shortly as soon as solicitors are in place.

The process generally will be the usual one adopted in a Coroner's Court which ... all relevant documents or potentially relevant documents will be reviewed by the inquests legal team, and disclosed to interested persons if relevant and subject to any applications in respect of sensitivity.

So that, sir, I hope is a helpful introduction to the disclosure process going forward. And I should say that that position is endorsed by Mr Johnson, on behalf of West Midlands Police, as being the appropriate and independent way to manage evidence in an inquest of this gravity.

THE CORONER: I think the key word there was independence.

PETER SKELTON: Indeed.

THE CORONER: So that there is independence from the West Midlands Police which can be managed by the Coroner and the Coroner's team.

PETER SKELTON: Yes, sir. A linked issue is of course witness evidence. During the application process, again, various statements were provided to the Coroner by those representing the family applicants and again by West Midlands Police.

And going forward, again to ensure independence of the investigation and to ensure that there is -- there are no allegations that people had produced self-serving statements and the like. It is anticipated that witnesses will be proofed by solicitors to the inquiry or their agents, to ensure that the statements are neutrally produced and independent. And this will ensure that the court also has control over the evidence gathering process.

THE CORONER: Yes. So new statements can be taken by Solicitor to the Inquest, if and when there is one.

PETER SKELTON: Indeed.

THE CORONER: And old statements can be reviewed by the Solicitor to the Inquest and if necessary the witnesses can be re-interviewed, if they're still alive.

PETER SKELTON: Yes, sir. Sir, that was all I was proposing to say and I think that is in accordance with Mr Johnson's submission in any event on those issues.

THE CORONER: Yes. Mr Johnson, you've raised the question on behalf of the West Midlands Police, about the appearance of independence.

MR JOHNSON: Yes. Sir, yes, that's absolutely right. I agree with everything Mr Skelton has said. For practical and pragmatic reasons it was obviously right that West Midlands Police assisted the Senior Coroner in respect of her decision to resume. And very much under her direction we provided material to the Senior Coroner which was then provided at her direction, by us, to interested persons.

THE CORONER: Yes.

MR JOHNSON: I argue, as we expressed in our submissions and it accords with what Mr Skelton has just said, is that now is an appropriate time, or at least once you have the necessary administrative and legal assistance, now is an appropriate time to adjust that arrangement so that everything is done more directly by the Coroner and (Inaudible)

THE CORONER: Yes. We are in a separate phase.

MR JOHNSON: Yes, exactly.

THE CORONER: Before, you were providing information through statements and documents and so on, to the Senior Coroner, for the purpose of the

applications made by families to resume the inquests. Now that those inquests are resumed, we are in a separate phase.

MR JOHNSON: Sir, that's exactly right. That's our view, it's Mr Skelton's view, and we respectfully submit that must be right.

THE CORONER: Yes. Thank you. Does anybody want to say anything else about these topics?

HENRIETTA HILL: Sir, no, just that we fully support the proposals; we are very keen to ensure that there is not only independence but the appearance of it. Sir, we fully support those proposals.

THE CORONER: Yes. Venue for the future hearings:  
Subject to what anybody wishes to say or not necessarily now, but later. Court 18 in this building is a jury court. It has flexible seating and flexible arrangements with benches for counsel. There are facilities in this building for there to be an overflow room with screens, which is already available. There are conference rooms, advocates rooms, rooms which could be specially designated for families. It's a good building, there are four lifts, there are coffee and water machines, there are quiet little corners here and there. It's in Central Birmingham.

The Council Chambers at Solihull will not be available anyway next year, because of refurbishment. But this is in Birmingham, its five-minutes walk from the stations, centrally located and there is security at the front door.

So at the moment that is what I propose for future hearings, obviously for pre-inquest review hearings, and there will certainly be one more if not at least two or three, this room appears to be big enough. And as I say court 18 on the 6th floor is a jury court with a specially designed section for the jury and a specially separate retiring room for the jury.

Anybody want to say anything about the venue, at the moment?

Item 9: The date for the next PIR Hearing:

That is really subject to funding. I am going to suggest a provisional date, which is not too far ahead. Not quite three months but nearly three months, which is Thursday, 23 February.

I bear in mind what was said in the case of

**Brecknell v The United Kingdom**, that even in inquests inquiring into events a long time ago, many years ago, reasonable expedition is still required as opposed to the promptness which might be available for more recent deaths. So reasonable expedition remains a requirement for the state and for the state through the Coroner to make the investigations and conclude the hearings.

So, I have suggested that date on the basis and in the hope that there will be sufficient time between the grant of funding and that date, at least six weeks to consider and make submissions -- consider materials and make submissions on scope.

I am also going to float the possibility of inquest hearings, final hearing in the autumn, late September and onwards. We shall decide the length of those hearings when we know what the scope is likely to be and what sort of evidence would be required.

Does anybody want to say anything about timetable that I have proposed? No. Thank you very much.

Item 10: Any other matters:

PETER SKELTON: Sir, just one matter from my expected stand(?). At the moment as I mentioned earlier, we don't have Solicitors to the Inquiry and we are using a Coroner's Officer from the Senior Coroner's office. Mr Hill and I are available today to speak to people who in the room, who don't have legal representation and who have had little contact so far with either Senior Coroner or yourself, sir.

THE CORONER: Yes.

PETER SKELTON: And we will be around for a while after this hearing, to speak to -- if anyone would like to speak to us.

THE CORONER: Yes, that would very helpful. I know it is difficult for those who are not represented or even those who are represented, who wish to speak to their solicitor, counsel, or even to the Counsel to the Inquests, Mr Skelton or Mr Hill. They are -- they will be always available to answer your questions.

I know it is not always easy to understand the -- some of the intricacies of the proceedings but counsel are here; solicitors are here to explain those things. And if anybody wishes to speak to Counsel to the Inquest, today, before you leave, have any questions that you would like to ask, they will be available.

Thank you all very much for coming, very grateful for that. All right.

COURT OFFICER: All rise.