



PE1501/B

PUBLIC PETITION PE1501 – PUBLIC INQUIRIES INTO SELF-INFLICTED & ACCIDENTAL DEATHS FOLLOWING SUSPICIOUS DEATH INVESTIGATIONS

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Victim Support Scotland is the largest voluntary organisation in Scotland supporting people affected by crime. We provide emotional support, practical help and essential information to victims, witnesses and others affected by crime, both in the community and in every Scottish Sheriff and High Court. The service is free, confidential and is provided by volunteers. Victim Support Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Public Petitions Committee's request for our views on public inquiries into self-inflicted and accidental deaths following suspicious death investigations.

What are your views on what the petition seeks and the issues raised during the discussion at the meeting on 14 January 2014?

Victim Support Scotland understands that the petition seeks to ensure that following a suspicious death investigation a mandatory public inquiry is held in cases where the death is determined to be self-inflicted or accidental. We support the general aim of providing a vehicle for families to receive full disclosure of information and to question the findings when the death of a loved one has been officially classed as self-inflicted or accidental by the Police and COPFS. We note that improvements could be made to the current processes to ensure that families of the deceased are treated appropriately and provided with the information they need to attain closure in such difficult circumstances.

As highlighted by the petitioner, we are concerned at the comparably high suicide rates recorded in Scotland. Victim Support Scotland believes that a suitable process should be in place, regardless of the burden of proof used, to ensure that the culpability and background to each incident is accessed competently and independently, taking account of the family's views and concerns.

Regardless of the process used, Victim Support Scotland believes it is essential that support is available to families who are involved in this. Through our community-based Victim Services, we are currently able to assist anyone who has been affected by crime, and as such, would be able and willing to assist families going through an inquiry process such as an FAI. However, we do not currently have a referral mechanism in place to our Witness Services regarding

witnesses called to FAls, and as such, would not be present to provide any support services to bereaved family members and friends.

What is your view on the suggestion that inquests similar to the coroner system in England be introduced?

In considering which system should be used to conduct inquests into suspicious deaths that have been determined as self-inflicted or accidental following an investigation, Victim Support Scotland believes it is beneficial to study the processes used in other jurisdictions in order to ensure that the system in place is fit for purpose. One of the advantages of the English coroner system is that the process is centred on the family of the deceased, enabling their questions and concerns to be sufficiently addressed; we feel that this should be a priority in any system that is put in place to inquire into deaths such as these, irrespective of the exact process used.