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Your ref : SGG/PMN

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Dear Mr Gerrard,

**My Retirement**

Thank you for your letter of 16 December, which I have seen this morning. At our meeting last Friday afternoon, you asked me to put in writing the points which I made to you and Dorothy Anderson in connection with the proposed re-location of the Coroner's office to Devizes from Salisbury. I have not been able to deal with this before today as I have been conducting a three-day Jury Inquest at Trowbridge, which concluded yesterday evening.

Your letter indicates that the die is cast but as I did on Friday, I urge you to reconsider this decision so as to secure the smooth transition that will be so necessary for the Coroners Service on my leaving office, now at the end of March and I set out the matters, which I explained at our meeting.

There is universal concern in the Service at this proposal for relocation. You informed me that the rationale was based on the availability of Wiltshire-owned office accommodation for the future and I took it from our discussion that this was in reality the only reason for the change. There had been no consultation with me or those working in the Service on the implications of such a move, whether formal or informal, and you said that I could not be a consultee, to which I expressed surprise. After all we all want there to be the smooth transition to which Dorothy referred in her e-mail of 20 November and those who rely upon it, particularly the bereaved, are entitled to expect it. Consultation could have raised at a much earlier stage the very valid issues which I dealt with so that they could have been fully appreciated and taken into account.

Currently the existing arrangements at Salisbury are working well. There has been negotiated a very flexible position on the existing lease as you know – 6 months notice. The existing premises provide a suite of offices and an ever present and available Courtroom for regular Inquest openings and standard Salisbury division Inquests themselves – I reported to you that on the previous day I had held two Inquests there, one in particular involving medical evidence. My Deputy had sat there on the prior Monday; it is a Courtroom which is well used, as Dorothy knows from our involvement with the negotiations on the failed Wilton Road project. I do not know precisely what the proposed Courtroom arrangements are in Devizes but there needs to be the ready availability of such facilities.

On a move to Devizes there is a real risk that the existing staff will not continue in service. It is absolutely vital that there is continuity with skilled staff, who know what they are doing and can be relied upon. I am confident in saying that my successor, whoever he or she is, would be extremely anxious if that was not the case. When I was appointed, I retained the office in Salisbury for that very reason. I urge you not to underestimate this aspect. Without that continuity the Service could be in real danger of collapse. To the responsibilities of the office support staff now has to be added the increased burden of all that needs to be done in connection with the Military Inquests, and that work has to be done effectively and with urgency. Ann deals with this work. She has been with the Service for 20 years, Sandra for 8 years and Debbie engaged more recently. Knowledge and understanding of the intricacies of the Coronial system, its forms and requirements and the application of the discrete software are specialist skills and cannot be attained overnight. Ann and Sandra consistently receive well-deserved plaudits from a variety of service users, including myself, for all that they do. There is no rail link to Devizes (important for support office staff and those attending Inquests) and with an unrealistic public transport service, these staff would need

to drive themselves, when all the encouragement these days is to use public transport. Looking further ahead this may well have implications on expense claims from those required to attend Devizes-held Inquests. I believe the distance from Salisbury is 25 miles. This then is the first major consideration of any such move.

The second is that there are currently no deputies with experience in Devizes. It is important and very much part of the smooth efficiency of the Service that deputies are close at hand to sign the forms which need to be sent out daily to Registrars, Funeral Directors and other service users when the Coroner is not in the office and where they have been involved with the decisions on the death. This again works well in Salisbury as the two principal deputies have their offices in the city. Whilst I fully recognise that the appointment of Deputies is personal to the Coroner, subject to approval by the Chair of the Local Authority, a considerable amount of Government sponsored money has been invested in their Coronial education and training and were they no longer to act effectively as a deputy, this and their own personal time and commitment to date would have been wasted.

Thirdly, there are no Coroners officers based at Devizes - they are at Swindon, Melksham and of course, Salisbury. It is important again for the smooth running of the Service that an officer is available at comparatively short notice to attend openings of Inquests. A Salisbury based officer attends such openings when they are opened in Salisbury – the vast majority- for not just their own but for Swindon and Melksham division Inquests and as necessary the military Inquests. There is ready contact with the Salisbury officers, a valuable asset and one which would be detrimental to the efficiency of the Service if it were lost.

Fourthly, Devizes does not have a major Hospital – as you know the two major Hospitals within the jurisdiction are at Swindon and Salisbury; Salisbury Hospital has major burns and spinal units. There is a measurable benefit to the Service by the office being situated in Salisbury for direct communication between Coroners officers, Hospital staff and the Coroner, visits to the Mortuary and pathology departments and discussions with the pathologists and staff, availability of Medical Notes and attendance of Consultants and pathologists at Inquests. This also benefits the NHS Trust and reduces the impact of key personnel being absent from the Hospital for too long a period. These benefits would all be lost upon a move to Devizes.

Fifthly, my understanding is that the main Registrar's office was retained in Bedwin Street so as to be near to the Coroners's office; forms are sent or taken there for every natural death – Part A's and Part B's. The Coroner's jurisdiction has approximately 2300 deaths reported and up to 300 Inquests.

Lastly, and although I recognise that it does not have the same practical effect, nevertheless a move away from Salisbury would be breaking the 50 year tradition of the Coroner being based in Salisbury - myself for 16 years, John Elgar before me and his predecessor, Leo Lush. The Salisbury location has been retained for good reason.

Accordingly, on Friday I urged you and those who have the responsibility for making this decision, to consider carefully, and I sincerely hope, heed these points which I have now articulated in writing at your request in this letter. If the move is to go ahead willy-nilly, then I am sure that you will understand that for the reasons which I have explained, I have a legitimate fear for that smooth transition and for the efficiency of the Service at that time, and indeed for the impact on those bereaved whom it must help. The old adage comes to mind – “if it ain't broke, don't fix it”

Just dealing with points in your letter finally, I have noted that Dorothy Anderson and/or her Business Support manager intend to spend a day with us at Salisbury to understand how the Coronial service works and; it is a great pity that that was not done before the decision to relocate was made. You gave me authority to tell the three staff that you would be doing your best to come up with a solution which is in their interests and the Service's interests, and of course I will do so. I have noted the position on files and processing of payments, and indeed on the termination of the current lease. I am clearly going to have to spend a considerable amount of the intervening period before retirement on administrative responsibilities.

Yours sincerely

David Masters  
HM Coroner