



Local authority responses to COVID-19 in relation to Cemetery and Crematoria services.

This briefing is provided to all APSE member authorities but will be of particular interest to those officers responsible for cemetery and crematoria services.

Key Issues:

With the onset of ever more stringent measures to control the spread of the coronavirus, local authorities are having to implement pre-prepared business continuity plans and prioritise the level of services they provide.

This short briefing provides the most up-to-date information as to how these plans are being implemented and service priorities decided with regards to cemeteries and crematoria services.

- The key decisions in relation to which service elements will be provided with regards to cemeteries and crematoria are being decided on the ability to meet immediate needs e.g. excessive deaths and also to ensure staff are kept safe from the virus in order to maintain increases in demands for service.
- Examples of service changes and priorities as well as arrangements for the safety of staff and managing staffing needs with the likely increases in staff absence, are also contained within the briefing.
- Service continuity planning involving the redeployment and training of staff are areas which have received much attention with details contained within the briefing.

Background

APSE issued a survey which asked how local authority cemetery and crematoria services are effected by the COVID-19 outbreak. The survey asked member authorities for information as to how they plan to deliver services in light of the impact of the virus.

From the responses APSE has received to date, it is apparent that the majority are referring to pre-prepared Business Continuity Plans (BCP's) and there is a good deal of commonality across the UK with regards to the changes to delivery either implemented or ready to be implemented should the need arise.

Generally, authorities appear to be prioritising their services based on resident needs. A good example of this is below with the services that relate to cemeteries and crematoria highlighted:

Primary Services:

(Essential services – all staff redeployed to ensure service delivery)

Meals at Home (including shopping service).

Waste Collection (agreed collections priorities to focus on noxious wastes).

Cemetery – grave provision.

Transport administration, compliance and contract delivery.

Day Centre kitchen.

Secondary Services

(Medium priority – redeploy staff in phase 2 to ensure primary service delivery)

Street Cleansing -scheduled cleansing.

Playground checks.

Street Cleaning - reactive cleansing.

Accessible minibuses for elderly and disabled.

Telecare services and social prescribing.

Day Centre – non kitchen use.

Tertiary Services:

(Non-essential – redeploy staff in phase 1 to ensure primary and secondary service delivery)

Road/pavement sweeping.

Locking parks and general parks duties.

Grounds Maintenance.

Bin deliveries.

Allotments.

Abandoned cars.

Market management.

Countryside .

Sports centre and bookings

Cemetery and crematoria services are seen by all local authorities as a priority service

In light of the recognition, that cemetery and crematoria services are a priority service Business Continuity Plans and Pandemic Plans have been developed and are now being implemented. Local authorities are looking at which council services could be stopped or reduced to free up staff to ensure burials and cremation services can continue, for example, use of grounds maintenance staff, highways staff and so forth.

However, there may be some difficulties if the availability of qualified crematoria technicians is reduced as a result of the virus, for example through sickness or self-isolation measures. This briefing aims to inform officers and elected members about some of the operational changes being made across the UK to address the impacts of COVID-19 and the measures being implemented to protect staff and maintain service continuity.

Operational Changes

- Restrict all funerals to committal services only.
- Training up additional staff in the administration of burials etc. so a wider pool of staffing resource can be drawn upon on to cover COVID-19 sickness and meet higher demands. The focus will be on burials themselves.
- Checking that any contracted Funeral Directors are able to deal with any increases of Public Health Act funerals
- Requesting Cause of Death information at the time of provisional booking of interment slot, which is confirmed on Interment Forms.
- At the time of interment, Sextons will normally meet the cortege and show them to the grave. This will no longer happen as the Funeral Director will make their own way to the grave, place the coffin over the grave and then move back away from the grave. The Sexton will then move to check the name plate and leave the grave. At this stage the Funeral Director and Cortege will then be permitted to move to the grave and continue as normal. Back fill will only take place once all mourners have left the area.
- Ceasing any face to face meetings with families for reserving graves or enquiries.
- No longer providing a family soil box at the grave side to prevent cross contamination.
- Hand sanitizers or wipes for staff car after they have officiated at the grave side.
- Reductions in service times from 45 to 30 minutes to allow cleansing of the public access areas between services. In addition, asking Ministers and Celebrants to try to influence (limit) the content of funerals so that the time taken is limited to allow the cleaning to take place
- Respectfully asking minimum attendance - if possible asking the family to limit attendances to 'nearest and dearest' only.
- Ordering a Webcast as an alternative option to allow family members not wishing / not able to travel to still feel part of the proceedings, but if this is offered there needs to be an assurance from the webcast providers that they are able to meet demand.
- Reduce service attendance numbers and reduce the close proximity of mourners
- Mourners are being discouraged from touching the coffin to avoid cross infection
- Removal of all hymn books and provision of photocopied single-use hymn sheets for use in the service which can then be discarded afterwards.
- Memorial applications and other associated administration tasks such as dealing with memorial applications, ancestry searches, burial of ashes will be recorded and put on hold.

Protection of Staff

Many local authorities are placing particular emphasis on the containment of the virus from their staff in order to ensure service continuity, examples include:

- Locking Enquiries Offices and reception areas in order to minimise contact with members of the public.

- Ceasing of face to face meetings with families for reserve graves or enquiries.
- Funeral directors will be asked to post paperwork through the letter box.
- Setting up facilities for office staff to work from home and divert the phone lines to mobile numbers which staff can take home thereby reducing exposure of staff to the public and the need to leave their house.
- Splitting grave digging teams in to 2 teams and staggered break time to limit contact between teams.
- Isolating the working area of the cremator technicians as well as operating on a rota for cremating so as to minimise the chance of infection between staff.
- Closing of Curtains - again to minimise the potential spread of the virus to the cremation technicians
- Chapel attendants are now only checking the name plate outside and then leaving the area and are not staying to usher in mourners.
- Chapel Attendants to wear disposable gloves and face masks while dealing with mourners.
- Cordons have been set around organists and chapels are being aired continually except in wet weather conditions.
- Deep cleaning all public and work areas daily.
- Keeping technical and specialised skilled staff in separate groups, i.e. not all crematorium technicians working together at the same time.
- Segregating groups of grave diggers, including staggering lunch breaks to minimise contact of large groups of staff.
- Splitting office staff across more than one site.

As well as the results from APSE's survey there has been **COVID-19 Joint Guidance** from The Association of Private Cemeteries and Crematoria, The Cremation Society of Great Britain, The Federation of Burial and Cremation Authorities and the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management relating to funerals during the Covid-19 outbreak.

The joint guidance, which supplements guidance issued by representatives of the British funeral sector released on 18 March 2020 can be read [here](#).

Information and support on further COVID-19 issues for local authorities including access to the service based COVID-19 rapid response networks and APSE COVID-19 WhatsApp groups can be accessed [through this link](#).

APSE Comment

The UK and local authority services are certainly facing difficult times. Not only are local authorities dealing with austerity measures and changing public demands, but we now face the biggest challenge since the Second World War in relation to meeting public need.

From the responses received it is apparent that local authorities have been planning for an incident such as this but perhaps the sheer speed and scale of the pandemic has taken many by surprise. Nevertheless, local authorities are clearly implementing their business

continuity plans and have in place services which will continue to meet public need even in these strange times.

APSE will continue to support its members through daily monitoring and disseminating information as it becomes available.

APSE's network query service will still be operational and advice will be forthcoming as and when it is received.

Members should look out for regular updates either via the APSE website or through short briefings such as these. We are also operating a rapid network query services for COVID-19.

Undoubtedly there will be significant changes and demands being placed on local authorities but through the sharing of information and experiences we will undoubtedly rise to the challenge and meet the needs of our public and customers.

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