



APSE resilience survey on how local authorities are dealing with the impacts of COVID-19 in relation to cemeteries and crematoria services

This briefing provides the most up-to-date information via a survey carried out by APSE, at the end of April 2020, as to how bereavement services managers are dealing with the on-going impacts of COVID-19 in relation to the provision of cemetery and crematoria services.

The briefing will be of particular interest to those officers and elected members responsible for cemeteries 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 constantly adapt to shifting government and other agencies advice, regarding the provision of services in light of the current Coronavirus pandemic.
- Within the cemeteries and crematoria service areas there are conflicting demands of still providing cremation and burial services and at the same time ensuring mourners are kept safe by strict social distancing guidelines
- A key issue has been that throughout the lockdown period, due to the increasing death rates, staff from other services have had to be trained and redeployed to support bereavements services particularly in relation to grave digging.
- Bereavement service managers as well as managing their own services have also had to manage the demands of faith leaders and funeral directors which on occasion has caused operational problems in relation to social distancing.
- The findings from this survey look at the on-going levels of service provision still being maintained, as well looking at how bereavement services managers are having to adapt their services to meet the changing needs forced by the Coronavirus pandemic.

Background

The provision of cremation and burial services continues to be seen by governments and health practitioners as an important part of the response to COVID-19, by both protecting public health but also providing an empathetic and necessary service to those families who have lost loved ones as a result of both the pandemic and also natural causes.

Due to the nature of the Coronavirus and its ability to infect others at a rapid rate, social distancing has been a key response to preventing the spread of the virus. This has meant that chapels and crematoria have had to be closed to prevent public gatherings at funerals and the number of mourners allowed to attend committals has been greatly reduced to often 10 or less. Obviously, this has had a significant impact on families who may not have been able to be with loved ones in hospitals, but now may also be precluded from attending funeral services. Bereavement services managers have therefore not only had to deal with normal day to day issues but there has been increased pressure on them to impose and follow government guidance which has on occasion come into conflict with the demands of funeral directors, faith leaders and the families of the deceased. There has also been differences in approach across UK administrative areas.

However, in spite of these challenging demands local authorities have ensured bereavement services are still being provided in a sympathetic and caring manner.

Findings of the survey

The survey was issued to APSE members during the last week of April 2020 and received 79 responses. What follows is the main findings of the survey.

How has the impact of COVID-19 affected service delivery?

Respondents replied that the majority of services are continuing, including grave digging, the operation and maintenance of cremators and the continuation of chapel services. However, regarding the point on the provision of chapel services, although 48% reported they have continued services, a further 30% have closed chapel services for burials, with 2.6% currently reviewing their operational practices.

Areas where services have been suspended include, 69% of respondents reported they have suspended Books of Remembrance, 60% had suspended the scattering of ashes, and more than 42% stated that they have reduced onsite office facilities, with 21.3% having closed onsite offices completely.

Have you maintained access for the general public to visit and tend graves in cemetery and crematoria grounds?

72.6% of respondent reported that all of their cemetery grounds remain open to the public to allow them to tend graves. Notably 9% of respondents reported that they have closed all grounds. These responses were from Northern Ireland councils and reflects the differences in Northern Ireland where initial instructions were much more clear-cut, stating that cemeteries were to be closed to the public. However, changes in guidance in Northern Ireland and clarification in England essentially means that cemeteries can remain open if social distancing is adhered to.

This difference in national approaches as well as the lack of clarity in England was reflected in survey responses with 69% of respondents stating that Government guidance had been confusing, or a bit confusing, on whether or not grounds should remain open. However, a further 22% stated that they had not been confused with government directives and 21% of those who had found it a bit confusing had adopted their own policies within the framework of the guidance. It should be noted that revised guidance has since been issued in England and Northern Ireland.

Due to social distancing rules are local authorities offering graveside services only and if so, are they limiting mourner numbers who can attend?

Due to the closure of many cemetery chapels, 65.7% of local authorities are offering graveside only services with restrictions on the number of mourners who can attend. From the responses received on mourner numbers, 32% of respondents are limiting mourners to 10 or less, 10.3% are limiting mourners to 15 or less and 7.3% to 20 or less.

Are any local authorities implementing or offering direct cremations as part of their response to Covid-19?

The responses showed that 20.5% have offered direct cremations only but the majority continue to offer full cremation services.

Are people abiding by the social distancing requirements either when visiting cemeteries or attending funerals?

66.2% of respondents replies showed that 80% or more of visitors are observing social distancing. A further 16.8% of respondents stated that only 70% of visitors are observing social distancing, but perhaps more worryingly over 10% stated less than half of visitors are observing social distancing.

In an attempt to address the issues of social distancing almost 95% of respondents were liaising with funeral directors and faith leaders to reinforce the message of social distancing. A further measure shows that over 65% have introduced notices and public messaging to reinforce this message.

Other approaches being taken include stipulating 'immediate family only' are to attend funeral services, and if these are still taking place in chapels then some have removed benches within chapels to reduce attendee numbers. However, respondents did state that problems were occurring when large numbers turn up at the graveside or outside of chapel buildings in spite of social distancing being observed within built facilities.

As a result of social distancing measures has there been any incidents of anti-social behaviour or threats of violence to bereavement services staff?

Thankfully 71% of responses stated that they had not experienced any violent or aggressive behaviour towards staff, but just over 19% said they had experienced this but very infrequently, but more of concern was that 5.1% of respondents said that anti-social or violent behaviour was a frequent occurrence.

APSE COVID-19 Parks WhatsApp Group

As well as regular surveys APSE has introduced a Cemeteries and Crematoria WhatsApp group which allows members to ask questions on bereavement related issues, often receiving swift answers to their queries. As part of this APSE has been monitoring these responses closely, and have been reporting back to members about these changes via its web pages, briefings notes, which cover a variety of other service areas as well as parks. These WhatsApp groups allow members of APSE to keep in touch on a minute by minute basis discussing the latest developments in their service areas.

You can join the WhatsApp group for cemeteries and crematoria services (APSE members only) by using this [online registration form](#).

APSE Comment

It is clear our Bereavement Services are continuing to play a vital role in maintaining societal norms in these times of uncertainty. The cost in human lives has been immense with tens of thousands losing their lives to Coronavirus. Each death is a tragic loss to an individual family and despite the restrictions being placed upon the service, many which are extremely unpopular with large sections of society and the families of the deceased, bereavement staff are continuing to provide services which are full of compassion and understanding, whilst maintaining safe and effective operational services.

Wayne Priestley, Principal Advisor