



# **APSE Cemeteries and Crematoria Services remobilisation report**



## **About this report**

The restrictions implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic are being lifted, and local government services are now looking to remobilise, in order to ensure that they can safely welcome back staff and serve and protect local residents.

However, while some council services have had to limit their operations, services like cemeteries and crematoria services have been working at heightened levels in order to meet both public health needs and to ensure those who have lost loved ones, as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, are still able to arrange burial and cremation services.

Bereavement Services managers and staff have been working hard to ensure that the bereaved have received these services in as empathetic a manner as possible, despite the necessary restrictions being placed on the service by government social distancing guidelines.

In producing this report, APSE established a remobilisation working group to highlight the plans that councils are considering, and currently implementing, to bring services back to the levels required by legislation, elected members and their service users.

This report, therefore, details the approaches being taken by councils to return normality to the cemeteries and crematoria services by focusing on four key areas:

- Operational activity
- Regrouping the workforce
- Budget, finance and re-establishing commercial activity
- Technical Considerations

Whilst these reports may only provide a snapshot of the remobilisation issues at any given point in time it will support our member councils to ensure that what they are doing is 'sense-checked' against the actions of others, within their specific service sector.

This report was facilitated and written by Wayne Priestley, APSE Principal Advisor, working with APSE member councils and incorporates APSE's remobilisation working groups' discussions and comments. It was also informed by APSE's WhatsApp Group for cemeteries and crematoria services.

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# Introduction

Following the outbreak of COVID-19 and the declaration of a pandemic, UK governments implemented a series of measures to mitigate the impact of the outbreak on the population.

As a result of these measures, local authority services have been required to adapt and implement alternative approaches to service delivery to respond to the restrictions and challenges presented.

APSE established a number of groups from across local authority frontline services to provide overviews, and share information, regarding the plans councils are implementing to remobilise services now that the COVID-19 restrictions are beginning to be amended and lifted. The remobilisation meetings for cemeteries and crematoria, therefore, allowed cemeteries and crematoria managers and officers to discuss the current operational impacts of COVID-19 on their services, as well as allowing them to share their remobilisation plans and thoughts for services post lockdown.

The Cemeteries and Crematoria remobilisation group had representatives from a number of APSE member councils, but also used data gathered from APSE's 'WhatsApp' group, which had contributors from across the UK.

The meetings focused on the challenges, solutions and opportunities that have been, and need to be taken into consideration in order to meet current and future service delivery needs.

It was clear from the start of the implementation of the restrictions, designed to combat the pandemic, that the cemeteries and crematoria services provided by local authorities would play a major part in relation to meeting public health demands of sadly burying and cremating those people who died from the disease but also meeting the needs of the bereaved families affected.

Many local authorities already had contingency plans in place, and these were quickly implemented, with staff being redeployed from other services

to help bereavement services managers prepare for the increased demand for burials and cremations.

However, as the virus took hold, more stringent social distancing regulations were enforced, resulting in services having to restrict the numbers of mourners attending funerals. These numbers were reduced, in some areas, from around 50 to less than 10 when the pandemic was at its peak. Added to this, many local authorities had to close chapels in order to prevent large gatherings of mourners. This resulted in some cases of graveside services needing to be held with bereavement staff having to cope with ensuring mourner numbers were restricted and, on rare occasions, having to request police assistance to disperse unauthorised large gatherings. Across the UK there was also some variations in the measures put into place by the different UK administrations. With such restrictions in place, normal standards of service delivery had to be reduced or curtailed.

# Operational Activity

As the pandemic took hold and the number of deaths rose, and social distancing guidelines became more restrictive, local authority bereavement services had to adapt to the daily changes which were being placed upon them.

What follows is a list of those operational service changes which were implemented:

## **Redeployments of staff**

In light of the recognition, that cemetery and crematoria services were a priority service, business continuity plans and pandemic plans had been developed by many authorities and were implemented.

Local authorities identified which council services could be stopped or reduced to free up staff to ensure burials and cremation services could continue. Staff from grounds maintenance; parks and greenspaces; and highways staff have been significant contributors in supporting bereavement services across the country.

Many of these redeployed staff have been trained in grave-digging and support for the administration of burials. This has allowed a wider pool of staffing resource to be created which could be drawn upon to cover COVID-19 related absence, such as staff needing to self-isolate, and meet higher demands. Much of the focus has been on the provision of a burials service largely because there were concerns about whether there would be an availability of qualified crematoria technicians through the possibility of sickness or self-isolation measures.

General comments appear to suggest that nationally there has been an increase of between 30%-50% for requests for burial and cremations compared with the normal levels one would expect for this time of year. In response to this increase, some authorities have extended their operating times, offering extended working days and weekend burials. Despite

these increases, most local authorities are managing demand due to the comprehensive contingency planning, which had already taken place prior to the pandemic.

## **Funeral Services**

Where chapel services were still being offered, reductions in service times from 45 to 30 minutes were implemented to allow for the cleaning of the public access areas between services. Ministers and celebrants were also asked to limit the content of funerals so that the time could be taken to allow additional cleaning. Some chapels have removed all hymn books and have provided photocopied single-use hymn sheets for use in the service which can then be discarded afterwards. Bereavement services managers and funeral directors working together have respectfully asked families to minimise attendance, asking that attendees be limited to 'nearest and dearest' only and also that social distancing be complied with.

Other approaches have included closing car parks and cemetery gates to restrict the number of people within cemeteries, particularly if funeral services are taking place. In some cases, local authorities have restricted funerals to committal services only, whilst a few local authorities have even found the need to offer direct cremations as the only option.

Due to the reductions in mourners who can attend funeral services, some local authorities are offering webcasts as an alternative option to allow family members, not able to attend in person, to still feel part of the proceedings, however, it was commented that where this was offered, gaining an assurance from the webcast provider, that they were able to meet demand, was essential.

## **Internments**

At the time of interment, where sextons would normally meet the cortege and show mourners to the grave, in some cases this has been handed to the funeral directors to undertake, who now make their own way to the grave, place the coffin over the grave and then move back away from the grave. The sexton then checks the nameplate and leaves the grave. The funeral director

and cortege is then permitted to move to the grave and continue as normal. Family soil boxes are no longer provided at the graveside in order to prevent cross-contamination and mourners are discouraged from touching the coffin again to avoid cross-contamination.

Backfilling of graves is now only taking place once all mourners have left the area, with hand sanitisers or wipes being provided for staff after they have officiated at the graveside.

It was also reported that despite increases in burials, actual burial space had not been compromised to date. It was stated that many of the deaths linked to COVID-19 were affecting older people or those with existing life-threatening conditions, so although COVID-19 has heightened the current death rates in local areas the overall provision, across the full year, is such that the services are able to cope, so far, with the increased numbers of burials and availability of burial space, though this will be kept under review if there is a second spike in COVID related infections.

Regarding maintaining cemetery grounds, most local authorities appear to have continued to maintain grounds maintenance standards within their cemeteries in recognition of increased use by the bereaved, but also as some were finding more usage of greenspaces within cemeteries, as part of the public's daily exercise routines.

### **Joint working**

It was also noted that in some areas there was regional co-operation / joint-working taking place to ensure demands could be met. The fact many authorities had agreed on a common approach, which meant that there was no extra demand or lack of demand as a result of the provision or non-provision of different service elements such as scattering or interring ashes or the provision of access to The Book of Remembrance. By agreeing with this approach, residents did not feel they were being provided with a poorer service in their area as opposed to a neighbouring authority as all local authorities were offering roughly the same levels of service.

## **Funeral Directors**

A number of changes have had to be introduced by some authorities with regards to their dealings with funeral directors. One such example is with the request from families to funeral directors to hold back funerals to a time which would allow families to attend in larger numbers. No authority said they were allowing the holding back of funerals due to the need to deal with a larger number of burials and cremations. It transpired that any such instances of holding back funerals were tending to take place with private sector funeral providers. Also, local authorities were requesting cause of death information at the time of provisional booking of interment slot, which is confirmed on interment forms; this was from a pure infection prevention perspective.

Most local authorities were also checking that any contracted funeral directors were able to deal with any increases of Public Health Act funerals.

## **Memorial applications and ancillary services**

Memorial applications and other associated administrative tasks, such as dealing with memorial applications, ancestry searches, and burial of ashes are being recorded as being put on hold until services are fully re-established.

# Remobilising Staff

As well as ensuring that services could still be provided to the bereaved, there is a moral as well as a legal duty, to ensure bereavement staff are protected against infection.

With regards to managing the safety of staff, as mentioned previously, there has been a heavy reliance upon staff from other council service areas such as parks and street cleansing. Authorities have been able to use such staff on additional grave-digging duties and maintaining standards in cemetery ground. Some have also used redeployed staff in supporting increased administrative duties.

Authorities ensured staff were protected by providing appropriate PPE and washing facilities, although some stated that their staff felt the wearing of PPE might seem disrespectful. Most said that they were using trollies to transport coffins as opposed to manual carrying in order to protect staff from contamination, although, if families wished to carry the coffin, they were allowed to do so. Some of the approaches taken to ensure staff safety have included:

## **Management and administration staff**

Where possible, many authorities have set 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. Where this has not been possible, decisions have been taken to lock enquiries offices and reception areas in order to minimise contact with members of the public. Office staff have also been split across more than one site.

## **Technical staff and grave diggers**

Due to the involvement of technical machinery in the service such as operating cremators, there has been a move to 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.

Other approaches have included the closing of curtains in crematorium chapels, again to minimise the potential spread of the virus to the cremation technicians

Chapel attendants are now only checking the nameplates on coffins outside and then leaving the area and are not staying to usher in mourners.

They are also wearing disposable gloves and face masks (where requested) while dealing with mourners. Cordons have also been set around organists, and chapels are being aired continually except in wet weather conditions. Deep cleaning all public and work areas is also carried out at least daily.

With regards to grave diggers, they are being segregated into small groups and taking staggered lunch breaks to minimise contact with larger groups of staff. Hand washing facilities and hand sanitisers are also being supplied.

It has become apparent that as part of future contingency planning, other service staff will need to be trained on the more technical aspects of administration and cremator operation to cover any absences. It was commented in many cases that only staff who were willing to come over to help in bereavement services were asked to do so, as it was acknowledged that not all staff were capable of taking on such duties.

## **Budget, finance and re-establishing commercial activity**

It is clear that there has been a great deal of adaptation and service innovation delivered by bereavement services, across the UK, in order to ensure the deceased and their bereaved families are still receiving the services they require albeit in very strange times. In order to do this, it is acknowledged that elements of the service which would normally be provided, which are also significant income-generating elements helping sustain the cost of the service, have had to be put on hold. To some degree, this may be recompensed by governments' promises to reimburse councils for costs associated with COVID-19, but there is still a degree of uncertainty as to whether this reimbursement will cover all lost income.

Cemetery and crematoria services rely on the income they generate from fees and charges, memorialisation, flower shops, car parks and so forth to help balance their budgets, and keep the overall cost of funerals lower for families, with income related to additional services, that families can opt into, rather than the core cost of the service being increased.

The need for increased burials and cremations has led to reductions in the service offered, such as memorialisation and Books of Remembrance. Also, reductions in service times in order to allow cleaning between services has led some councils to reduce their charges to families. Therefore, because there has been less time to offer memorialisation, undoubtedly such income will be affected. Some have tried to lessen the impacts of reduced service delivery by offering compensatory service elements such as free webcasts of the service

However it is likely that as the lifting of the lockdown continues, and families move to remember their loved ones, some demand on these additional services will materialise such as purchasing memorialisation later, ashes internment, where families are holding onto ashes at home and will plan for services later in the year, and therefore budgets should not be too adversely affected. However, some officers were concerned that the costs of redeployed staff used during the pandemic, may be charged to their service budgets later in the year.

Another uncertainty with regards to managing full-year budgets, that several councils commented on, was that it is too early to forecast overall demands on the service, and the cost and income implications of this, because of the sudden increases in deaths, in the spring. There remains uncertainty as to what this will mean over the full 12 months or if there is a second spike in COVID related deaths.

# Technical Considerations

Most councils felt that there should not be any significant problems in bringing facilities and operational equipment back online as most had been maintaining, or using such items on a daily basis. The point was raised, however, that when lockdown ends, the public will expect the same standards in bereavement services as before, however, if social distancing is still in place, then certain restrictions such as limited mourner numbers may still be required, and this will prove a real challenge for bereavement service managers and officers to manage.

Despite the negative impacts of the pandemic, there have been service improvements which have come out of the need to meet its challenges. In particular, the speed of service change and innovation have been notable. An example is the adoption of electronic 'paperwork' which has been significantly progressed in many bereavement services. This has been driven by the requirement to prevent the need for manual handling of forms which could carry coronavirus, and as a consequence, electronic forms are now becoming more acceptable to many bereavement services. However, it should be noted that there are some reservations about the increased use of electronic forms. Some still consider it necessary to have paper copies for records, which have to be stored for up to 15 years. There are also concerns about the need for accuracy and security when printing off documents, and the need to develop separate file storage systems for bereavement data, which needs to be separate from the corporate system, thereby giving greater security.

Another change, which has been reflected across many local authority services and across the private sector also, has been the success of working from home during the pandemic. This has further strengthened the call for more electronic paperwork and records as these can now be accessed or created away from the office and, as such, many authorities are now looking at the digitisation of administrative processes and the indexing of records. Clearly, there is a need to return cemetery and crematoria services to the pre-pandemic state and to re-open facilities and deliver the services previously

provided. However, as a result of the impacts of COVID-19, there may well be opportunities to change some of the approaches and processes previously used, e.g. the aforementioned adoption of more electronic information recording and greater acceptance of home working.

Linked to the greater use of information technology is the fact organisations have found that many team meetings can now also be held online, without the need for staff to travel from various sites to one central meeting point. Although in the case of bereavement services, it must be remembered that this is very much a customer-focused service, with the need for personal contact, advice and sympathetic handling of service users.

As a result of COVID-19, there will undoubtedly be reassessments and reviews of services to ensure effective contingency plans are in place for any future pandemics. This will require staff to be trained both within the service and from other council services which have supported cemeteries and crematoria during these challenging times.

# Conclusions

Bereavement services have and are being challenged during the current pandemic to meet both UK wide governments' social distancing guidelines and still provide empathetic services to the bereaved.

At times official guidance has been confusing, an unfortunate result of the speed by which new regulations and guidance needed to be developed, and the unknowns relating to the virus transmission. Many councils had to deal with local needs as they saw fit.

Cemeteries, as well as providing resting places for the deceased, have also become vital to some communities as being the closest green spaces available for walking or exercise.

Bereavement managers and officers have been able to meet these challenges through a mixture of well-developed contingency plans and professional dedication.

Therefore, from what we have seen, the importance of bereavement services has been critical to dealing with the impacts of COVID-19, and its funding needs to be protected as far as possible from any corporate cuts which may come out of the COVID-19 costs facing local authorities.

In order to guarantee this, governments across the UK need to ensure that key services such as this are fit to react to future spikes in COVID-19 by compensating local authorities for any losses caused by the pandemic, as they promised they would.

# APSE Comments

APSE would like to thank all the authorities that participated in the remobilisation group for cemeteries and crematoria as well as those officers and authorities who contributed to the WhatsApp group for cemeteries and crematoria thereby contributing to the information contained in this report

APSE has a range of services that are designed to support member authorities through this challenging time. These include the following:

[APSE COVID-19 Information Hub and WhatsApp groups](#) – The hub has been set up to deal with frontline service issues as they arise; ensuring greater resilience and learning between each other during this difficult time

[APSE Online Training](#) – APSE Training is designed to help local authorities invest in their greatest asset—their staff. With staff working at home, or remotely, APSE Training can assist staff with developing new skills during this time to help maximise opportunities

[APSE Performance Networks](#) – The Performance Network teams have developed a variety of ways to support councils with data collection. This includes a new suite of indicators which will explore the impact of COVID-19 on service cost, quality and productivity. The reports will be produced in June, but APSE strongly recommends ensuring the collection of data is ongoing so changes in service performance are explicable during budget setting processes or when revising business plans.

[APSE Solutions](#) – Providing in-house consultancy and interim management services, available to both APSE members and non-member authorities and organisations.

[APSE Energy](#) – which is working on greening frontline councils' services including energy management issues, which may be critical to saving money in services where budgets have been impacted by COVID-19.

[APSE membership resources](#) remain committed to supporting our member local councils with the ongoing briefings service, network queries, access to principal advisor advice and online meetings, advisory groups and events.

There are opportunities for councils to share best practice and learning through virtual advisory groups and thematic sessions. Details of these sessions will be communicated to APSE Members as the sessions are arranged.

For further information on the services that are available, please contact Wayne Priestley [wpriestley@apse.org.uk](mailto:wpriestley@apse.org.uk)

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