

Impact of Covid-19 on Bereavement Services

Purpose of report

For direction.

Summary

The paper outlines the LGA's work on death management during the Coronavirus response.

Recommendation

That the Board consider the next steps outlined in this paper, provide comments and highlight if there are any other activities that the LGA should take forwards.

Action

Officers to take forward as directed.

Contact officer: Lucy Ellender
Position: Senior Adviser
Phone no: 020 7664 3321
Email: lucy.ellender@local.gov.uk

Impact of Covid-19 on Bereavement Services

Background

1. The LGA has been working on behalf of councils to provide support and highlight their concerns to Government throughout the Coronavirus response. Death management has been one of the key workstreams for the organisation and our work has consisted of three key activities:
 - 1.1. Responding to concerns or issues raised with us by councils
 - 1.2. Liaising and engaging with Government to represent councils' views and highlight issues
 - 1.3. Producing resources for councils to help respond at a local level.
2. We are now starting to move into the recovery phase of the coronavirus response, though there are some concerns regarding a second wave and the implications for death management. Our work has covered body storage issues, funerals, cemeteries, crematoria and registration services. These services have seen a number of changes to their working practices as a result of coronavirus.
3. We held two workshops on the lessons learned from the pandemic, one with registrars and one with those responsible for wider death management. Those workshops have helped to inform the next steps that this paper outlines for Member's comments. We are proposing that the Board writes to MHCLG to outline the key points that have been highlighted with the LGA on death management issues.

The coronavirus response

4. The coronavirus response took in a wide number of issues on bereavement services. We received over 300 issues related to bereavement services during the pandemic and the key issues we have dealt with during the outbreak are outlined in paragraphs 7 to 15.
5. To help inform our work we established a Bereavement Services Sounding Group and a Registrars and Coroner Managers Sounding Group which have helped us to understand local impacts as they emerge.
6. It is clear that some of these issues will have a long-term impact on councils, especially the financial impact of coronavirus.
7. **Body storage capacity:** Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) worked to increase temporary body storage capacity. Many councils have incurred significant costs on behalf of their LRFs in order to provide the capacity that Government figures suggested would be

necessary. We emphasised to Government the importance of ensuring that councils are recompensed for this early action to ensure that body storage was in place. Councils are now making decisions on the future of that capacity and need certainty on funding.

8. **Section 58 and Schedule 28 of the Coronavirus Act 2020:** we worked with Government as they produced statutory guidance on how Schedule 28 of the Coronavirus Act (dealing with local death management) should operate. Schedule 28 introduced new powers allowing local or national government to direct the transportation, storage and disposal of the deceased if capacity is exceeded locally or nationally. We brought together a group of officers from around the country to help Government turn outline thoughts into a practical set of requirements, that ensured that local authorities would be at the centre of any decisions about whether and how the powers to direct businesses and local authorities would be operated.
9. **Cemeteries:** we encouraged Government to amend regulations to provide clarity on whether or not cemeteries could be kept open. The original regulations were causing confusion across the country. The Government was initially not convinced that there was an issue with the regulations, however, Government's view changed to providing clarification (along with a statement from the Secretary of State that they should be open), and then finally to an amendment to the regulations. This required consistent lobbying over more than two weeks.
10. **Funerals:** we worked to persuade government to strengthen guidance around delaying funerals and to clarify their position on funeral attendance. This led to Public Health England publishing much needed guidance on managing funerals during the pandemic and emphasising the importance of social distancing at funerals. We have continued to emphasise the importance of local decisions on appropriate social distancing for funerals, based on the capacity at individual crematoria chapels.
11. **Personal protective equipment (PPE) and body bags:** as in other areas there were shortages of PPE for those dealing with the deceased. We highlighted these issues with government.
12. **Registrars:** registrars services were changed significantly by the Coronavirus Act 2020, with the electronic sharing of forms between doctors, registrars and burial and cremation services and the ability to do death registrations over the telephone. Registrars services stopped taking notices of marriage, conducting wedding services and birth registrations as well as all other registration activities during the outbreak. The changes to make death registration easier with the electronic transfer of documents and telephone appointments had been well received by registrars. We have shared information with councils on registrars services, as well as providing MHCLG with information on how the registrar service was working during the pandemic.

13. **Crematoria technician's qualifications:** we worked with the Institute of Cemetery and Crematoria Management and the Federation of Burial and Cremation Authorities to agree responses to councils who were concerned about operating crematoria without more flexibility on remote operation or qualifications of staff. This is on our website as an FAQ.
14. **Modelling:** Many areas raised concerns about the lack of modelling from central Government to aid their planning at a local level. The LGA and others raised this issue with Government on a number of occasions. As we look at a second wave, a lack of modelling is still posing an issue for local areas. However, due to the difficulties posed by the large number of unknowns and variations as restrictions are eased, we do not expect this issue to be resolved easily.
15. **Funeral poverty:** there are some concerns that the coronavirus outbreak will lead to higher levels of funeral poverty and possibly public health funerals. The Department of Work and Pensions have made modifications to their processes to try and expedite the payment of the funeral expense's payments to claimants. Anecdotal evidence from councils suggests a mixed picture on the numbers of public health funerals councils are carrying out. We are continuing to monitor the situation.

Support to councils

16. Alongside our work in responding to issues raised with us with the Government we have provided bespoke support to councils through the enquiries line and Principal Advisors. We have also produced materials for the LGA's website to support councils in this work. The [LGA's coronavirus FAQs includes a section on death management](#), and we have created a new [death management webpage](#) and a [death management flowchart](#) which outlines the council processes that people go through after a loved one dies.

Recovery

17. As with other areas of work we are now looking at recovery and what the impact of a return to business as usual might look like following the coronavirus outbreak. We held two workshops with our sounding groups to determine what their lessons learned had been and if there were any particular concerns for their areas.

Registrars

18. Registrars noted several concerns with returning to business as usual, with the resumption of their wider registrar duties including, but not limited to, registering births, conducting wedding ceremonies and providing marriage notices:
- 18.1. There was a significant backlog of births that needed to be registered. The Government have now outlined that these can begin again – taking into account public health guidance around social distancing.

- 18.2. Registrars discussed the positive impact that telephone registration had had for services and were interested in exploring how telephone registration and electronic sharing of information could be expanded. However, this would require primary legislation. Using secondary powers to enable pre-population of the birth certificate and partial telephone process would be the next best option. There is currently a pilot trialling video calling for birth registration.
- 18.3. There were concerns around the validity of existing notices of marriage and venue availability to carry out marriages in line with social distancing guidelines. It was also clear that public pressure on these services would increase. There have been recent media stories that the Government will introduce an easing of restrictions on indoor weddings – allowing up to 10 people to attend an indoor wedding from early July. There have also been reports of the Secretary of State, Robert Jenrick, will be creating legislation to permit outdoor weddings. This would be a significant change to the legislation, where this is currently not permitted except for Jews and Quakers. We are awaiting further information from the General Register Office on this work.

Death Management

19. Death management colleagues outlined concerns around a range of issues including:
 - 19.1. The future of the temporary body storage facilities that had been put in place, especially the financing of those facilities. The investment made by some councils to procure temporary body storage facilities was significant, though there were sizeable variations across councils on how much had been spent. Areas are now considering what the next steps should for those facilities should be, and were taking steps to decommission this provision. Many areas now had a better understanding of what body storage capacity there was in local areas, for example through funeral directors, and would be considering how this storage could be utilised going forwards.
 - 19.2. The impact of seasonal flu on this work area, and the potential for it to coincide with a second wave of infections was a particular concern to practitioners.
 - 19.3. The number of Government departments involved in death management during the coronavirus response led to confusion. Practitioners stated that it would be helpful to have one Government Department that was responsible for all death management issues in any second wave to help provide clarity and a clear point of contact for all queries. They said that the provision of clear and timely guidance was key for councils and v needed to be given alongside announcements.
 - 19.4. Social distancing will continue to have an impact on funerals for the foreseeable future, however there were concerns that is restrictions were reintroduced in particular areas or for limited periods, public support would be difficult to maintain.

Recent media reports have also highlighted that there will be an easing of restrictions on funeral numbers, though no further information has yet been released by the Government

Implications for Wales

20. There were some differences in the way that the death management process has worked in England and Wales, for example the provisions relating to funerals are different, most notably in England attendance is essentially limited to close family, whereas in Wales the determining factor is the number of people who can safely attend. The Welsh Government prescribed that this should be a matter for the council /service provider to determine, based on risk assessment of safe social distancing arrangements per premises. However, the Coronavirus Act changes to registration services applied in both countries.
21. The WLGA has been supporting councils in Wales on these issues. Regular meetings between officials; and weekly Local Authority Leaders meetings with a range of Welsh Parliament Ministers, have helped to develop policy, and regulatory provisions.
22. The WLGA believes this open dialogue will continue over the coming period when further easements of restrictions are considered, planned and announced in good time for the resumption of services.

Financial Implications

23. The work can be undertaken within current budgets.

Next steps

24. In order to support the lessons learned process for the Government, we are seeking members the Board's approval to write to MHCLG in order to highlight the important lessons learned that practitioners outlined during our workshops where we believe Government should take action.
25. We would welcome members' view on whether there are any other potential activities that we should consider. Other potential activities for members to consider would include:
 - 25.1. Officers to explore the extension of the digitisation of registration services further with the National Panel for Registration.
 - 25.2. Officers to collect good practice from councils on death management.