

Cross Party Group for Funerals and Bereavement
12 March 2021 (Via Video Conference)

Draft Meeting Minutes

In Attendance:

Mark Isherwood MS (Chair)	Carol Humphreys (Care for the Elderly)
Ahmed Alsisi (White Rose Funerals)	Rhys Price (Gwilym Price & Daughters)
Emma Kneebone (2 Wish Upon A Star)	Stephen Tom (Phillip Tom & Sons)
Martin Birch (Cardiff Council)	Kate Edwards (Tutor)
Janette Bourne (Cruse Bereavement Care)	Patrick McGlinchy (Golden Charter)
Jon Levett (NAFD)	Rachel Bradburne (NAFD)
Kim Bird (About the Funeral)	Catrin Edwards (Hospice UK)
Terry Tennens (SAIF)	Deborah Smith (Secretary)
David Beamer (Brevia Consulting)	

Item 1: Apologies

James Tovey (SAIF Charter)
Lorraine Barrett (Humanist Celebrant)
Darren Millar MS

Item 2: Approval of Minutes (Funerals and Bereavement Group)

The minutes of the last meeting were approved.

Item 3: Matters Arising

The Secretary informed the Group that, following the last meeting, answers to written questions had been received from Vaughan Gething MS (Minister for Health and Social Services) on the following topics:

- Will funeral workers, who need to enter domestic properties and care homes where a death has occurred due to COVID-19, receive the COVID-19 vaccine?
- Will funeral service operatives, along with frontline health and social care workers, be made a priority for the coronavirus vaccine as they are in Scotland and England?
- What consideration has been given to prioritising funeral workers for the COVID-19 vaccine due to their requirement to enter COVID-19 positive environments?
- What research has been undertaken by the Welsh Government into the risks faced by cemetery staff and funeral workers due to the isolation requirement exceptions contained in Regulation 15 (2) (e) of the Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (No. 4) (Wales) Regulations 2020?

Copies of the responses were provided with the meeting paperwork and were noted, with no comments.

Item 4: Election of Officers

The following officers were elected:

Deborah Smith (Secretary)

Deborah was proposed by Kate Edwards and seconded by Kim Bird.

Item 5: COVID-19 update

Jon Levett updated the Group on recent developments, including SAGE modelling on the potential for a third wave as a result of the easing of restrictions, the severity of which is contingent on the success of the vaccination programme, public support for maintaining restrictions and the impact of variants on transmission and severity of illness. The report to which Mr Levett referred can be found [here](#).

Mr Levett also discussed the planned easing of funeral attendance restrictions, saying it was important that those who are grieving are not left behind as society reopens. He highlighted what the NAFD believes that Wales has got right, which is to restrict numbers to the COVID secure limit of the funeral venue and at the invitation of the bereaved family.

He also highlighted concerns that, if there is a sudden lifting of all restrictions, rather than a gradual process, families may seek to delay funerals until the date when restrictions are fully lifted – which could cause delays in the system, particularly as dates are not guaranteed.

Finally, Mr Levett highlighted the ongoing vaccination programme and prioritisation of funeral service employees, noting that, in large part, employees of funeral firms in Wales had now received their first vaccinations, and where there were issues, these were being resolved at a local level.

Turning to post-COVID funerals, Mr Levett highlighted the successful temporary easement of death registration processes through the Coronavirus Act – making the process less paper-driven by the introduction of digital transmission of paperwork. He noted the potential for these beneficial easements to be lost when the Coronavirus Act is rescinded (potentially in 2022) and the need to press the UK Government to retain these easements to ensure the positive progress is for bereaved families is not lost.

Ahmed Alsisi supported Mr Levett's comments, saying these were of benefit to all families, but particularly families of faith where speed is an important factor in meeting religious requirements.

Martin Birch also supported permanent change and highlighted that cremation forms are already accepted electronically, although not those for burial. He noted that the General Registry Office (GRO) are already looking into this issue.

Jon Levett noted that there was a Private Members Bill before Parliament in Westminster on this matter and, while this is likely to fall, due to parliamentary time or objections from backbench MPs, it had received UK Government support and therefore was a positive indication.

Action: Kim Bird suggested a letter from the Group should be sent to the Home Office highlighting the importance to bereaved families in Wales of retaining these beneficial easements.

Item 6: Medical Examiners' Service - Wales

Speaker: Dr Jason Shannon

Dr Shannon, who is a Lead Medical Examiner for Wales, updated the Group on the non-statutory rollout of the Medical Examiners' Service in Wales.

Dr Shannon described his background as a pathologist, Clinical Director and Assistant Medical Director, before serving as the National Clinical Lead on Mortality, prior to becoming a Lead Medical Examiner alongside his clinical duties.

Dr Shannon explained the background to the introduction of Medical Examiners, which was born from the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 following the actions of Dr Harold Shipman and the failings at Mid Staffordshire Hospital. He also described how the service is planned to be provided in Wales and how it is different to that planned in England, particularly in respect of the fact that all Medical Examiners and their Officers in Wales will be hosted by single service across Wales, rather than employed by individual hospital Health Boards.

He described the three functions of the service:

1. ensure death certificates are accurate and reliable
2. ensure deaths where the Notification of Deaths Regulations apply are brought to the attention of the Coronial service
3. to provide an opportunity for bereaved families to discuss and raise concerns about the cause of death

and that Medical Examiners do not investigate, they scrutinise, detect concerns and pass on to those who do.

There are now 28 doctors performing the role of Medical Examiner, 12 Medical Examiner Officers and four senior Medical Examiners.

He noted that around 20 percent of deaths raise a concern of some type but that in a greater proportion, the bereaved provide compliments to the service providers.

Dr Shannon supported earlier comments about the benefits that the easements under the Coronavirus Act in terms of certification and registration had provided. On certification, he said the easements had not made the process any more or less safe – but they had improved the ease of the process for bereaved people, so it would be important to not go back in his view and that the governance and safety in terms of death certification should be provided by the Medical Examiner's service.

He noted that the non-statutory period for the Medical Examiners service will end shortly before the planned rescinding of the Coronavirus Act in 2022.

Jannette Bourne welcomed the introduction of the service and asked about how fees for the service will be paid and by whom. She further welcomed Dr Shannon's response that, while this was not yet settled, he hoped that they would not be borne by bereaved families but that was a decision for Welsh Government ministers in due course. He also noted that the costs of the service had been centrally met to date under coronavirus funding.

Martin Birch asked about the impartiality of the Medical Examiners if they were called to scrutinise a death in their own Health Board. Dr Shannon explained that they would only scrutinise deaths out of their own hospitals and Health Boards once the service was fully established.

Rhys Jones asked if the service is and would create any delays to funerals. Dr Shannon replied that any delays were minor – and most likely related to delays in certification by doctors. The aim remains to resolve each case within five days in line with statutory requirements. He also noted that a centrally provided service structure means that resources can be applied where most needed by moving work around Wales through the single digital system.

Ahmed Alsisi asked if the service would operate at weekends and Dr Shannon confirmed that, while it is not currently 24/7, the aim is to ensure that the needs of particular faiths or other circumstances (such as when a child dies) are sought to be accommodated and that the National Medical Examiner, Alan Fletcher is actively considering this issue.

Kin Bird asked whose duty it is to tell bereaved families that they can discuss the death certificate if they have concerns. Dr Shannon said that, during this non-statutory period, there was a balance of ensuring the service is not inundated with requests, but that families are communicated with appropriately.

Jannette Bourne asked for bereavement services outside of hospital settings to be involved in the process. Dr Shannon confirmed that Senior Medical Examiner Dr Daisy Shale sits on the Bereavement Services Working Group and this is something she is aware of.

Dr Shannon was thanked for his time in giving such a comprehensive update.

Items 7/8/9: Bereavement and the BAME Community

Ahmed Alsisi updated the Group on a number of matters, including a meeting held recently with Cardiff Council to discuss improving the working relationship and training for staff in matters pertaining to bereavement, funerals and the Muslim community. Mr Alsisi felt the meeting had been extremely positive and he is optimistic about the outcome.

He also shared information about workshops he is offering on *Bereavement and the BAME Community* and on the needs of different faiths in respect of funerals, following incidents where members of the community felt they had been misrepresented or misunderstood – or their religious needs had not been met.

After several successful sessions, he made the offer to any member of the Group that wished to arrange a workshop for their own organisation.

Mr Alsisi also noted the issues relating to post mortems for some faiths, and the potential to utilise the scanning services now being used in other parts of the UK. He offered to pass a letter from representatives of the Jewish community to the Chair on this issue.

Janette Bourne noted the importance of the BAME community being recognised within the work to develop a Bereavement Framework for Wales and invited their greater involvement, through Mr Alsisi, to discuss faith funerals as part of the working group. This was warmly welcomed by Mr Alsisi.

Catrin Edwards noted the importance of the working group taking evidence from the community to find out which services were not accessible to BAME families and ensure there is explicit reference to their needs in the Framework.

The Secretary agreed to assist in an exchange of contact details.

Item 10: CMA Funerals Market Investigation

Jon Levett updated the Group on recent developments on the CMA's investigation on the Funerals Market following publication of the Final Report, as expected, in December 2020.

Mr Levett explained that the CMA has made some recommendations to the UK Government, broadly in line with expectations, for the future regulation of standards in funeral homes and has also proposed 'sunlight' remedies to increase visibility and transparency of information about services and pricing. The CMA can take the sunlight remedies forward under its existing powers and the NAFD has been given sight of a draft Order, which will bring them into force. The Order is expected to be published for consultation shortly.

The Group also noted a background note provided by the National Pensioners Convention Wales and agreed to await the publication of the Order for consultation before taking further action.

Kim Bird asked several questions of the NAFD in respect of the future role of Funeral Directory, its online membership directory, in light of the CMA's final report. Jon Levett explained that additional investment has and will be made on the site to ensure it assists funeral firms in complying with the CMA's requirements – but that further work on its development is paused until these are clear, once the Order is published.

Item 11: Continued participation in the Group, in the new Parliament

Chair Mark Isherwood reminded the Group that this would be the final meeting ahead of the dissolution of the Welsh Parliament and elections in May. It is hoped that the Group will be reformed in the new Parliament and there was general enthusiasm expressed for continued involvement with the Group.

Item 12: Any Other Business

It was agreed that a letter would be sent from the Group to the Home Office, in respect of the death registration easements, as proposed above.

Item 13: Date of next meeting

To be agreed following the Parliamentary elections in May.