

# **Cross Party Group for Funerals and Bereavement**

**Monday 27 March 2023**

## **Draft Minutes**

### **1. In attendance**

- Mark Isherwood MS (Chair)
- Deborah Smith, Wordsmith Communication (Secretary)
- Andrew Judd, NAFD
- Philip Blatchly, PR Blatchly
- Rachel Bradburne, NAFD
- Terry Tennens, SAIF
- Abdul Azim-Ahmed (Muslim Council of Wales)
- Kathy Riddick, Humanists UK
- Gordon Swan
- Kate Edwards,
- Gethin Rhys, Church in Wales
- Selima Bahadur, EYST
- Rhys Price, Gwilym Price
- Stephen Tom, Phillip Tom & Sons
- Kirsty Rees
- Rebecca Aylott, NAFD

### **2. Welcome and apologies**

Mark Isherwood began the meeting by welcoming attendees to the first meeting of 2023.

DS reported that apologies had been received from:

- Verity Stirling, on behalf of the Archbishop of Wales
- Llyr Gruffydd MS
- Emma Kneebone, 2Wish

### **3. Approval of Minutes**

Mark Isherwood noted that the previous meeting was held on 24 November 2022 at the Senedd and a link to the draft minutes had been supplied with the meeting papers.

A request had been received prior to the meeting to correct the records of attendance to include Philip Blatchly. There were no further amends or additions to the minutes.

Acceptance of the minutes was proposed by Stephen Tom and seconded by Philip Blatchly.

### **4. Matters Arising**

Mark Isherwood drew the Group's attention to the response received from Andrew Griffith MP following the letter sent to the Rt.Hon. John Glen MP, Chief Secretary to the Treasury, in relation to funeral plan regulation and vulnerable consumers, after the last meeting.

This letter was circulated prior to the meeting and related to the regulation of funeral plans and the protection of consumers, in light of the failure of plan providers and implications for plan holders whose chosen funeral plan provider was either not successful in securing FCA approval or chose not to seek it.

In his response, Andrew Griffith MP, who is Economic Secretary to the Treasury, set out the steps the Government has taken to minimise the risks to consumers and the steps taken by the sector to accommodate affected consumers, but made no new commitments to protect those who fall through the gaps, which had been central to the concerns expressed by the Group in its letter.

It was noted by Mark Isherwood MS that as the response did not answer the key questions posed in the original letter, the Group would need to look for other ways to press home key points about protection of consumers who have lost money and funeral directors who have lost business, perhaps directly with the FCA.

Gordon Swan was invited to provide a brief update on meetings underway to form a new representative body for funeral plan providers, which would engage with FCA on a range of matters including this. To date, 22 of the 24 existing authorised plan providers have agreed in principle to participate. There is also a newly authorised plan provider, Aura Life who have indicated that they are keen to engage with the association.

Deborah Smith went through the other actions from the previous meeting, confirming that the re-use of graves project continued to progress with a focus on establishing need through understanding how much space remained available for burial in Wales, to inform the approach to the Welsh Government.

To support this, Martin Birch is trialling capacity data collection with a group of south Wales councils, Deborah is reaching out to other cemetery owners and a recent meeting with Abdul Azim-Ahmed (Muslim Council of Wales) on work the Council is doing on this topic, had led to an invitation to Abdul-Azim to join the CPG and present at this meeting.

***ACTION: a preliminary letter to the Welsh Government would be sent, to establish if any parallel work is underway within Government.***

- 1. ACTION: Deborah Smith will be contacting North Wales bodies identified to the Group by Martin Birch.***

Also in the previous meeting minutes, it had been resolved that Deborah would keep a watching brief on opportunities to engage with the Law Commission review of burial and cremation law in England and Wales. A first opportunity has presented itself in the form of a meeting in the House of Commons, in May, to which Mark Isherwood MS, as Group chair, will be invited.

- 5. Speaker: Abdul-Azim Ahmed, Muslim Council of Wales – draft guidance for policy makers on re-use of graves and the Muslim faith.**

Mark Isherwood MS, Deborah Smith and Martin Birch have had productive discussions in recent weeks with Abdul-Azim Ahmed, from the Muslim Council of Wales, on work that the Council has been undertaking on the re-use of graves in the Muslim faith. Abdul-Azim presented to the Group on the work to date, expected next steps and how the CPG may be able to support the work, going forward.

Abdul-Azim explained that the invitation to participate in the CPG informal survey on the topic last summer, for which they were able to engage with some broad themes and topics, had led the Council to decide to pursue a piece of work which would result in a religious opinion on the subject.

This has now been drafted and is broadly agreed by Muslim scholars so is now entering a stage of civil society conversation among the Muslim community in Wales. Abdul-Azim noted that reburial was the norm in the UK for Muslims in previous centuries and, indeed, still is in some other places in the world. However, many Muslims do feel uncomfortable with it, as in the Islamic faith the body of a deceased person is treated as if it is still living.

For reuse of graves to be acceptable in the Muslim faith, any remains previously buried in the location must be fully decomposed and the time this will take is affected by local conditions, so it is something that potentially must be decided on a local basis. Having undertaken significant research and listened to scholarly voices, the option to 'lift and deepen' would be the preferred approach. The most difficult area, which is almost a red line for the Muslim faith, would be exhuming remains and moving them to a new site as this is seen as undignified.

Abdul-Azim also stressed it would be important that it is always clear who is buried in a particular grave and that issues around the length of burial space lease must be addressed.

The Muslim Council of Wales is now working towards the release of both a policy document and a community conversation document and would appreciate the support of the CPG with this once the draft is published, potentially to include a foreword from Mark Isherwood as Group chair.

***ACTION: Abdul-Azim to advise Deborah Smith when support from the CPG can be provided.***

## **6. Discussion: Use of digital post-mortems in the UK**

It was reported to the meeting that, in some areas of the UK, delays in carrying out post-mortems are contributing significantly to delays between death and a funeral.

A funeral date cannot be finalised until the deceased person is released by the Coroner. Some Coronial services in the UK are moving to the use of digital post-mortems, which can assist in reducing these delays.

Deborah Smith updated the Group on which local authorities are using digital post-mortems – all of which are in England - and asked if the Group felt it was something that should be raised with the Welsh Government and local authorities.

Abdul-Azim noted that many Muslims are uncomfortable with traditional post-mortems as they are an invasive process, so there would be benefits to Muslim communities in Wales of the greater use of digital autopsies.

Philip Blatchly echoed Abdul-Azim's comments and said that many families don't like the thought of a post-mortem and the option to increase the speed of the process was also potentially very beneficial, as delays of 2-3 weeks were not untypical.

Rhys Price noted that families in his firm's care had used the Sheffield digital autopsy facility and took comfort in the non-invasive aspect of the process. He believed that there had been some discussions about a Swansea facility in the past. Rhys also noted that he believed there were several options available from iGene, the provider of the service, to local authorities to support its introduction.

***ACTION: DS agreed to research options and establish what, if any, discussions are ongoing in Wales. iGene are to be invited to attend a future meeting and an invitation also extended to a minister from the Welsh Government to discuss this and other active areas of inquiry for the CPG.***

## **7. Update: Rachel Bradburne (NAFD) to update on the Law Commission review of Burial and Cremation Law and the Data Protection and Digital Information (No. 2) Bill.**

Rachel Bradburne of the NAFD updated the Group that, this year, the Law Commission will begin a long overdue review of burial and cremation law in England and Wales. This is a topic that the Group has previously discussed, and it is now at scoping stage.

The review was first announced in 2016, but only secured funding in 2022. It will involve a wide range of government departments and themes in its scope, including regulations relating to both current (burial and cremation) and future alternative methods of disposal, such as resomation and human composting. It will also cover issues around cremated remains, entitlement to arrange a funeral and other topics and so will be an extremely comprehensive piece of work. When complete it will be up to the government to decide which aspects of the review recommendations to take forward.

Terry Tennens noted that the Law Commission team have been very open and effective in their communication thus far.

Philip Blatchly welcomed the review and the potential to answer years-old questions around the ownership of cremated remains and who can arrange a funeral – often the cause of considerable conflict for families. Rachel Bradburne agreed that family conflicts on these topics were very difficult to resolve at present due to the lack of clear regulations.

***ACTION: Mark Isherwood to be invited to attend a meeting with the Law Commission in May in the House of Commons and Deborah Smith to maintain watching brief as to when the CPG can submit evidence to the review.***

Finally, Rachel Bradburne also updated on the recent publication of the government's Data Protection and Digital Information (No. 2) Bill which includes provision for deaths to be registered remotely.

The choice to register deaths remotely in England and Wales was universally agreed to have been one of the positive outcomes of the Coronavirus Act 2020 and were something that the funeral profession, bereavement groups, Government and consumers all expressed a desire to protect. Indeed, Mark Isherwood MS wrote, on behalf of the Group, to the Home Office on the topic in 2022.

An attempt by Government to secure the long-term retention of remote registration, through a Private Members Bill was unsuccessful but, noted Rachel, this is now a Government Bill and has a greater chance of success.

#### **8. Discussion: Janette Bourne (Cruse) to lead discussion on the NatCen report on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on bereavement and grief – implications of recommendations for Wales.**

In February, a report by the National Centre for Social Research was published following a year-long study. It recommends an overhaul of bereavement support in the UK in the wake of COVID-19, identifies longstanding gaps in support for bereaved people and concludes that these have only been exacerbated and made worse by the pandemic. This follows the publication of recommendations for Wales by the UK Bereavement Commission and ongoing work as part of the National Bereavement Framework for Wales.

Although it was agreed to hold this topic over until the next meeting due to the unavailability of Janette Bourne, who is central to these discussions given her involvement with the Framework, there were discussions about the opportunity to also involve the CPG on Hospices and Palliative Care which had recently published a report into 'Experiences of palliative and end of life care in the community during the COVID-19 pandemic' in Wales. Mark Isherwood noted that he would be leading a debate on the topic in the Senedd (For further information, click here: [Senedd unanimously supports Welsh Conservative palliative care motion | The Welsh Conservative Party \(conservatives.wales\)](https://www.conservatives.wales/))

It was generally agreed that the CPG should be encouraging discussions with policy makers on this subject.

Kathy Riddick noted that the Spirituality, Health and Wellbeing group within the NHS Wales Health and Social Care review were considering these matters and, together with Gethin Rhys offered to update the Group at the next meeting.

***ACTION: Deborah Smith to pursue a joint discussion with the CPG on Hospices and Palliative Care on this topic.***

***ACTION: Kathy Riddick and Gethin Rhys to be invited to update the next CPG meeting.***

#### **9. AOB**

No matters were raised during Any Other Business.

#### **10. Next meeting date**

Deborah Smith advised that there would be a short, virtual Annual General Meeting in June, which all Group members were invited to attend and that plans were underway for a joint meeting with the CPG on Hospices and Palliative Care, at the Senedd, with a date in September/October to be advised as soon as it is agreed.

Mark Isherwood noted that the AGM date/time would need to work for Members of the Senedd due to the CPG rules requiring a certain number to be present for the meeting to be quorate.

***ACTION: Deborah Smith to explore the best date/time of day on which the meeting could be held.***

**DS/April 2023**