

Cross-Party Group on <Funerals and Bereavement >

Date and Time: 14th June 2023 7pm

Minutes

Present

MSPs

Jeremy Balfour MSP

Stuart McMillan MSP

Invited guests

Ben Kane
Priya Khambhaita

Non-MSP Group Members

Paul Cuthell - NAFD

James Morris – SAIF

Andy Brown – NAFD

James Blackburn - NAFD

Andrew Judd – CEO NAFD

Barry Pritchard NAFD President

Jeremy Balfour MSP

Terry Tennens – SAIF

Mark Hazlewood – Scottish Partnership for Palliative Care

Jan Power – Caledonia Cremation

Eileen Cawley – Scottish Pensioners Forum

Rose Jackson

Jim Brodie – Funeral Director

Alison Wilson – Golden Charter

Apologies

Gordon Swan – NAFPP

Fiona Arnott-Barron – Cruse

Rachel Bradburne – NAFD

Linsey Kidd – Scottish Cot Death Trust

Agenda item 1

1. Welcome and apologies

Jeremy Balfour welcomed the group.

Agenda item 2

Approval of the minutes from previous meeting

Minutes were approved by the group. Proposed – James Blackburn. Seconded – James Morris

Agenda item 3

Correspondence

It was noted that correspondence had been made and received from the Lord Advocate and the Chief Executive of Social Security Scotland. The group agreed that the response from the Lord Advocate was comprehensive and helpful. James Blackburn said the response from the Chief Executive of Social Security Scotland was poor while he and Gerry Boyle said that the application decision-making target stated in the letter, of 10 days, was not being met.

Jeremy Balfour said that he sat on the Social Security Committee at the Scottish Parliament and that the Chief Executive of Social Security Scotland was attending the next meeting, so he would raise it with him then and report back to the group, after which a decision would be made whether to continue to put pressure on the organisation around target times. He said there were concerns from other members of the committee around the target time.

Agenda item 4

Speaker – Ben Kane, Increasing bereavement support/education in schools. Ben was a student at Clydeview Academy, Gourock, when in 2020 he founded Clydeview Bereavement Support Group. He has driven a pilot of the first pupil-led bereavement support group in Scotland. His campaign and support programme is now gaining national media, charity and political attention. He talked to the group about his experiences, his campaign and how it is gaining traction.

The group received the presentation warmly and thanked Ben for his time and efforts, wishing him well in the future with it.

Stuart McMillan said that Ben had been invited to take part in a wider strategy group within the Parliament, and suggested that Ben return to the CPG at a later date to report on how that was proceeding. The group agreed it would be willing to help Ben wherever possible.

Andrew Judd said his campaign would tie in with the former NAFD President John Adams' campaign to have bereavement put on the school curriculum and that he would introduce them.

Agenda item 5:

Winter 2022 – follow up on discussion from previous meeting.

Stuart McMillan reiterated the frustrations he had felt following the death of his mother around the Local Authority in Inverclyde, which had chosen to carry out maintenance at its crematoria, cutting operations to half capacity at the busiest time of the year. This led to increasing delays of up to four or five weeks, and the situation was still going on as the work had not finished. He said the timespan between death and funeral was around 24 days, and called on local authorities to show “common sense” when planning works. His views were supported by Gerry Boyle, who added that local authority actions in other areas, including Dundee and Edinburgh, was making it difficult for funeral directors to carry out their duties, such as putting up bollards where hearses would usually stop to collect deceased persons.

Paul Cuthell asked that the group write to the Inspector of Funeral Directors making him aware of the wide set of challenges the funeral and death care sector was facing. The group agreed.

Action point: Write to the Inspector of Funeral Directors raising awareness of the challenges the funeral sector faced in winter 2022 and continues to face.

Agenda item 6

Speaker - Priya Khambhaita, Director of the National Centre for Social Research, on research the organisation carried out which recommends an overhaul of bereavement support in the UK in the

wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Priya talked through the report and its recommendations, and agreed that the slides would be shared post-meeting with the rest of the group.

She said the organisation was searching for funding for further research to explore gaps in the research. The group warmly thanked Priya for her presentation.

Jeremy Balfour reminded the group that the report is online at <https://natcen.ac.uk/publications/overhaul-bereavement-support-wake-pandemic>

In the following discussion, funeral directors said the report accurately reflected the situation from their perspective.

James Morris said the Government was due credit for changing procedures such as digital transfer of documents, but also said some of the regulations, such as a blanket number of attendees at a funeral without taking into account venue or circumstance, was unhelpful.

James Blackburn said he was concerned around lessons not being learned and improvements not being made from one winter to the next.

Barry Pritchard said that storage became an issue for Central Government (UK), who put in extra capacity but did not know how to manage it, so it went to waste. Care home staff did not get enough support either.

Gerry Boyle praised the digital records transfer policy and said that as a result of the pandemic people are choosing different types of funeral, such as an unattended funeral at a crematorium followed by a memorial ceremony elsewhere.

Andrew Judd said from a UK perspective, having different rules for different UK countries proved difficult to manage and that the nuances did not make sense as it was the “same virus in the same place”. This was especially difficult in cross-border operations.

Stuart McMillan asked Barry Pritchard around how the problems with capacity arose. Mr Pritchard said that the Government put in extra spend to pop-up mortuaries but then did not have any qualified personnel to manage them, so they went unused. Gerry Boyle added that three or four local authorities in Glasgow had joint funded a large mortuary, but that it was so visually unattractive, families did not want to have their loved ones kept there.

James Morris said that looking ahead to Winter 2023, storage of the deceased will be the key problem for them. The average storage time had grown from 14-24 days and more storage was required across the board.

Priya Khambhaita thanked everyone for their comments and said that she was seeking funding to further her research.

Agenda item 7

Future speakers/group activity

Jeremy Balfour said that due to time limitations of the meeting, this would be taken off line and discussed via email.

Agenda item 8

Any other business

Jim Brodie, Funeral Director, raised the issue of the Funeral Support Payment, and said that families who initially put down on their application that the funeral director should receive the FSP but then chose, late in the process, to have the FSP sent to them instead, were then not paying the funeral director, who was left with significant debt. He said that when his company asked Social Security Scotland for the details of the relevant families who had successfully applied for an FSP, in order that his company could pursue them for costs, he was told GDPR prevented Social Security Scotland from providing any. He said his company would not have done the funeral had it not had the guarantee of the FSP and has now stopped doing FSP funerals until they are paid. He said he was concerned that families were then turning to means to procure the necessary costs from high-interest lenders, which he did not want.

His view was challenged by James Blackburn, who said families taking an FSP and not paying the funeral director happened very rarely and there was little or no evidence of it happening. He said Mr Brodie's practice of declining to assist families was not usual funeral director practice.

Jeremy Balfour disputed Mr Brodie's assertion that allowing families to change their mind on where the payment was sent was part of a little-known European law, saying that it was Scottish Government regulations. Gerry Boyle suggested that if it was in the regulations, it might be possible to have it changed.

Nick Britten said the group had discussed and raised this with the Scottish Government previously. He highlighted the response to the group and said he would send the letter onto Mr Brodie for reference.

Stuart McMillan urged funeral directors who were experiencing this to contact their MSPs.

Action point: Jeremy Balfour to write to the Scottish Parliament Social Security Committee asking them to put this on their agenda for a forthcoming meeting so that he can raise it with them.

Eileen Cawley asked that the group consider responding to the Government's Covid-19 "Let's be heard" inquiry and raised the prospect of a backlash against health professionals, funeral directors and bereavement and advocacy services, and asked that the group consider discussion on this.

Action point: Nick Britten to discuss with Jeremy Balfour the group's potential role in supporting the inquiry.

Agenda item 9

Time and date of next meeting.

The next meeting will be held in September, date TBC.