

Cross-Party Group on Funerals and Bereavement

Date and Time: 21st September 2022, 7pm

Minutes

Present

MSPs

Jeremy Balfour MSP
Graham Simpson MSP
Pam Duncan-Clancy MSP

Invited guests

Ben Macpherson, Minister for Social Security and Local Government
Lynne Forsyth, Scottish Government

Non-MSP Group Members

Jon Levett, NAFD

James Blackburn - Scotmid Co-operative, Edinburgh

Rose Jackson, Scottish Pensioners Forum

Gerry Boyle, Dignity

Nick Britten, Secretary

Andrew Brown NAFD Scotland

Paul Cuthell, NAFD

Darryl Cuthbert, Cruse Scotland,

James Carcary SAIF,

Sandy Sullivan Resomation Ltd

Emma Kelso, Caledonia Funeral Aid

Apologies

Colin Beattie MSP

Rhoda Grant MSP

Gillian Mackay MSP

Alexander Burnett MSP

Agenda item 1

1. Welcome and apologies

Jeremy Balfour (JB) welcomed the group and the Minister

Agenda item 2

2. Approval of the minutes from previous meeting

Previous minutes were agreed unanimously.

Agenda item 3

3. Ben Macpherson, Minister for Social Security and Local Government

Mr Macpherson gave an update on the Funeral Support Payment. Central was a discussion around how the nature of funerals had shifted during the pandemic, specifically around the increase in direct cremations, and what effect that had on the funeral support payment when applicants were continuing to receive money to help cover the cost of funerals that, in the case of direct cremations, did not have any “funeral” element. It was suggested that that money could be put to better use helping other people. It was also suggested the way the payment was “bundled together” could be addressed given the changing market.

Mr Macpherson said the payment was constantly under review but was designed to be both “accessible and flexible” and the department was always looking for feedback on how to improve the service.

He said that the benefit was performing well and was supporting 40% more people than the UK Government benefit, costing £20 million. Take up was 59%, which can be improved, and the benefit had increased by 6% since its introduction.

Mr Macpherson said that as part of improvements and to increase take up rates, Social Security Scotland had deployed local delivery teams to help people access and apply for the payment face to face, and called upon agencies including Funeral Directors to signpost people towards them.

He also confirmed that the Government was committed to paying any increase in take up of the fund caused by the cost of living crisis, and that it was actively pushing to raise awareness of the funeral payment.

He concluded his participation in the meeting by saying that he would like the chance to visit a funeral director's premises to see how the funeral support payment was managed at their end. Several funeral directors at the meeting said they would be happy to take him up on the offer.

Action point: The group is to write to Social Security Scotland to ask whether the "tick box" was a standard on all social security forms, or exclusive to the Funeral Support Payment, and if so, whether it was fair to have it there.

Agenda item 4

4. Discussion on funeral delays

There was a discussion around the delays caused to funerals over the summer, put down to a lack of pathologists in Scotland and a backlog in the courts, which in turn has delayed Procurator Fiscals' assessment of sudden death cases. It was noted that these delays were causing families extra grief, although problems caused by delays at registrars' offices were noted to have eased. It was agreed that there was little the Government could do to help as the problems were multi-agency, and it was agreed to keep the item on the agenda to reference how matters had continued over winter.

Agenda item 5:

5. Update on Resomation

James Blackburn said the Scottish Government would be announcing a 12-week public consultation on alkaline hydrolysis in October 2022. Sandy Sullivan updated members on how Resomation was performing in other countries, noting that the first facility in England would become operational in January 2023 and the company had consents in Scotland, England and Northern Ireland. He said that there was significant movement in the Netherlands, Belgium and Norway to facilitate the introduction of resomation, while in North America it was now legalised in 28 states.

Action point: The group will write to Marie Todd, Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport, to confirm the dates for the public enquiry and timetable for its lifecycle, and to invite Ms Todd to a meeting at an appropriate time to discuss water cremation's introduction to Scotland.

Agenda item 6

6. Future speakers and the work of the group in 2023

It was proposed that future speakers at the group included representatives from the Burial and Cremation team to update on regulation and licensing, the National Records of Scotland to discuss changes to the registration system.

Agenda item 7

7. Any other business.

John Levett, CEO of the National Association, on behalf of Golden Charter, who could not be present at the meeting, said that concerns had been raised by Funeral Plan providers that the recently introduced FCA regulation might conflict with the Scottish Government's licensing scheme and there should be greater dialogue between plan providers and the Burial and Cremation team to ensure consistency. The group agreed to write to the Burial and Cremation team to raise these concerns.

Darryl Cuthbert, from Cruse Scotland, also gave an update on their activities, and said that they were quieter than anticipated following the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, where they had expected an increase in contacts during the period of national mourning.

Action point: To write to the Burial and Cremation team to raise the concerns of Golden Charter

Agenda item 8

8. Time and date of next meeting: January 18th 2023, 7pm.