

# **Cross-Party Group on <Funerals and Bereavement >**

Date and Time: 4<sup>th</sup> December 2024 6.30pm

Minutes

Present

MSPs

Jeremy Balfour MSP  
Douglas Lumsden MSP

Invited guests

None

Non-MSP Group Members

Nick Britten – Secretary

Julia Shillito – Jeremy Balfour's office

Jane Matheson – Edinburgh City Council

Paul Cuthell - Thomas Cuthell & Sons/NAFD

Andy Brown – Coop Funeralcare/NAFD

James Blackburn - Scotmid/NAFD

Andrew Purves – William Purves/NAFD

Rose Jackson, Scottish Pensioners' Forum

Alison Wilson – Golden Charter

Helen Chandler – Kindly Earth

Gordon Swan – NAFPP

Fiona Arnott-Barron – Cruse Scotland

Nicola Reed – Cruse Scotland

Reid Stillman – Funeral Link

Eileen Cawley - STUC

## Apologies

Mark Hazlewood – Scottish Partnership for Palliative Care

Gerry Boyle – Dignity/NAFD

Gill Burton – Scottish Cot Death Trust

## Agenda item 1

### **Welcome, minutes of previous meetings, matters arising, correspondence**

Jeremy Balfour welcomed attendees to the meeting.

No matters arising

Correspondence: Following the previous meeting, letters were sent to COSLA, Falkirk Council and the Cabinet Secretary for Social Security. Responses had been received from all and either have been or will be sent to members.

Paul Cuthell said the response from Falkirk Council was not adequate and requested that the group write a follow up letter to ask the Council to clarify certain points made in the original letter. He suggested that the figures they provided were not correctly benchmarked and the investment the Council highlighted was not new money to improve services, but was spent to correct previous failures, in 2017, in cremator procurement and quality, which led to the Council having to replace those. He said a recent example of monthly costs, because of the 30% rise in Council prices, was £40,000 to £58,000 and was concerned that Funeral Directors would be left with bad debt if people could not afford to pay.

**Action point: The Group agreed to write to Falkirk Council, and also early in the new year to publicly highlight concerns for bereaved people about potential rises in cremation and burial costs across all local authorities in Scotland.**

## Agenda item 2

A presentation from Nicola Reed (NR), Director of Client Services, Cruse Scotland, on **The Changing Needs of Bereavement Support in Scotland** based on the observations of Cruse Scotland, and that of colleague organisations in the field. The presentation was to raise awareness of the movement in what bereaved people are seeking, how and when, and the implications all round.

NR highlighted a key change being that people are seeking services earlier, with a 61% increase in people seeking help within 6 months of a bereavement. As a result

the charity had started offering group support to ensure it could manage the increase in demand. NR thanked Scotmid for its sponsorship of some of this work.

NR said there had been an increase in complexity of required help and increased layers of difficulty in people requiring support. Since the pandemic, some external support services had closed so signposting was harder.

There had been a strong uptake in Grief Chat, a new text-based offer done in real time, and an increase in hybrid service offer of support via telephone, online or in person. People preferred telephone support over online.

NR said some volunteers had not returned since the Pandemic, while others had reduced their volunteer hours or what they were prepared to do, which has led to higher demand for services but with lower numbers of volunteers to provide them.

Jeremy Balfour (JB) said a recent survey had showed volunteering in Scotland had fallen to 18%, its lowest level since the 1950s, and asked whether people were requiring support because they had not been able to mourn at a funeral if it was unattended. NR responded that they were seeing conflict from people who were forcibly unable to attend a funeral during the pandemic now concerned, if they were to have a full funeral for another deceased person, whether the deceased person during lockdown was devalued in some way.

Eileen Cawley said she recognised burnout in the volunteer support sector and wondered whether more training was required.

NR finished by calling for Scotland to be more “grief literate” and said if people were able to have conversations about death and able to express grief through family, friends, faith communities or in other way, demand for Cruse Scotland services would ease.

JB asked if Cruse Scotland worked in schools. Fiona Arnott-Barron said they could, but only when paid. Reid Stillman said Funeral Link had recently worked with schools in Dundee. Nick Britten highlighted a recent debate in the UK Parliament around putting bereavement teaching on the national curriculum for school children.

**Action point: Jeremy Balfour to raise with the relevant Minister.**

## Agenda item 3

### **Pathology Services in Aberdeen.**

Douglas Lumsden MSP (DL) highlighted a series of questions he had tabled at the Scottish Parliament about the lack of pathology services in Aberdeen, which has seen post mortem cases having to be moved to Edinburgh and Glasgow. He said locums were being flown from London to cover cases in Aberdeen and asked the group to support trying to find a solution.

Nick Britten said it was a subject the group had engaged the Lord Advocate in two years ago and little seems to have improved.

Jane Matheson (JM) said that services used to be provided by Aberdeen University, but they resigned the contract. NHS Grampian had agreed to provide the service going forward but finding a qualified forensic pathologist was extremely difficult.

Paul Cuthell said it was having an impact on funeral directors who are being asked to store deceased persons for longer due to procedural delays, and had been told by police they were not allowed to look after the deceased person in the way they normally would, which raised concerns around decomposition and their condition, and the knock on effect if a family wanted to view the deceased person at any stage. He said digital autopsy was a possible way to improve the process.

JM said delays to the process were compounded by inaccurate reports from police, which had to be corrected and leads to delays.

DL asked about whether post mortem toxicology results turnaround times, at approximately 28 days for priority cases and 30 days for non-priority cases, was adequate. JM said it was a lot faster than it used to be.

**Action point: The group will work with DL, JM, Police Scotland and NHS Grampian to get an up to date picture, and support the expediting of raising awareness among the relevant stakeholder bodies, and try to support finding a solution.**

## Agenda item 4

### Alkaline Hydrolysis

James Blackburn expressed disappointment that four legislative regulations were raised last year, but only three – inspections, licensing and burial – had been laid in Parliament, and asked when the fourth, around the introduction of alkaline hydrolysis, would be tabled. He said the only broad date the Government had given was at some time in 2025.

Helen Chandler said elsewhere it had been a strong period for the introduction of AH globally. It was set up in Ireland in 2023, in the Netherlands regulations had been laid in Parliament. Orders had been received from New Zealand, Canada and the United States of America. She said a facility had been set up in the north of England and they were hopeful of a pilot taking place “at some point”. She added that other considerations in the funeral and deathcare sector, including events in Hull, the Fuller Inquiry, changes to the medical examiner regulations had removed political attention away from the introduction of AH.

Nick Britten read out a recent response from the Government, which said that no exact date can be given at this stage for when regulations would be laid in Parliament, but said preparations were underway for laying them in 2025. They said

as part of the regulations they were currently engaging with relevant organisations in the sector.

Reid Stillman said an option for using AH was on the application form for the Funeral Support Payment.

**Action point: Jeremy Balfour said he would ask a question in Parliament to raise awareness and to try to get more details on a date.**

## Agenda item 5:

### **Concerns for winter 2024**

No immediate concerns were raised. James Blackburn said he was concerned that following an extensive period of low death rates, this winter might see a sharp increase to balance expected levels. He said at a recent meeting of the NAFD Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders Funeral Director Association, East Lothian Council had said that a lack of time slots for registration and burial was due to a lack of funding. He said the Council was working hard to improve communication, but one issue was a lack of provision to book a burial on the telephone – it required a change of emails, which took longer and led to unnecessary delays.

Andrew Purves said he had recently received the first email in a long time from the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary mortuary saying it was at full capacity, and asked funeral directors to collect deceased persons as soon as possible. Jane Matheson said numbers of deceased persons were rising and that Edinburgh had put in extra mortuary capacity for winter. She said Edinburgh had greater capacity than some other local authorities to process registrations, and urged people to make use of that so as not to delay funerals.

Andrew Brown said that the Deaths in the Community Group, on which he sits, highlighted that Scotland was better prepared for a sharp rise in excess deaths than in previous years.

## Agenda item 6

### **Any other business**

James Blackburn highlighted that the Scottish Government Funeral Director Code comes into operation on March 1<sup>st</sup> 2025, and asked that the Group discuss how its implementation is going in a future session, in Autumn 2025.

Andrew Purves raised an ongoing issue as part of the recent issues with repatriation to Scotland caused by changes to the medical examiner regulations in England and Wales. He said that paperwork being issued by coroners in England did not cover a

requirement in Scotland to inform the cremation authorities whether there was any hazardous material in the deceased person, and that this issue needs to be addressed. As such, cremation authorities can and are declining applications.

Jane Matheson said it was being left to funeral directors in Scotland to source a way of finding this out before applying for cremation, which was causing stress and delays. She said it was a reasonable expectation for coroners to provide the information to protect staff at crematoria.

Action point: The Group agreed to write to the Scottish Government and Ministry of Justice to raise the issue as a way of encouraging a solution to be found. The letter to the Scottish Government would also thank them for addressing the initial problems caused by the changes and highlighted in the previous meeting so promptly.

## Agenda item 7

Dates of meetings in 2025:

March 4<sup>th</sup>

June

September

November