

Scottish Parliament Cross-Party Group for Funerals and Bereavement

17th November 2021

Meeting Minutes (Virtual meeting)

Convener: Jeremy Balfour

Secretary: Nick Britten

In attendance:

Jeremy Balfour MSP

Jon Levett, NAFD

Andrew Brown NAFD
Scotland

Cheryl Paris - Scottish
Government

James Blackburn - Scotmid
Co-operative, Edinburgh

Euan McArdle - Scottish
Government

Paul Cuthell, NAFD

Howard Pickard,
Resomation Ltd

Alex Wright - Scottish
Government

Christine McLintock, Cruse
Scotland

Gordon Swan Golden
Charter Ltd.

Declan Maguire SAIF

Eileen Cawley, Scottish
Pensioners Forum

Rose Jackson, Scottish
Pensioners Forum

David Beamer, Brevia
Consulting

Sandy Sullivan Resomation
Ltd

Angela Johnstone,
Caledonia Cremation

Mark Hazelwood, Scottish
Partnership for Palliative
Care

James Morris, SAIFCHARTER
Scotland

Nick Britten, Secretary

1. Welcome and apologies

Jeremy Balfour welcomed the group.

Apologies: Terry Tennens, SAIF.

2. Approval of the minutes from previous meeting

The minutes from the previous meeting were approved.

3. CMA update

Jon Levett updated members on a presentation given to Dipesh Shah to NAFD Scotland members recently. Points of note were that Mr Shah felt compliance levels were quite good, which was a surprise to the NAFD.

The vast majority are fully compliant or had tried and were not far off. There is a hardcore element of members not complying. JL said a follow up meeting with the CMA had reiterated its stance. Its approach on enforcement will be very much taken on education and a “nudge” approach rather than taking court action. It will publish a compliance report in April 2022, after which it might take a more heavy-handed approach to enforcement.

Nick Britten reported to the group that the CMA had declared that branded materials such as pens and calendars which are given as gifts to care homes and other establishments did not breach the order as giving them out was not considered soliciting for business.

James Blackburn, for the benefit of group members who are not funeral directors and are not aware of the CMA, briefed the group on what the CMA full market investigation and subsequent Funeral Order is.

Rose Jackson asked the group whether any local authorities other than West Lothian were taking part in the Respectful Funerals scheme whereby funeral directors agree with the local authority a fixed price of a funeral they can offer to those in financial hardship applying to the council for assistance. **James Blackburn** said Scotmid in Edinburgh had agreed and signed to the scheme for two further years. James said he believed all local authorities in Scotland had set up individual schemes as part of Scottish Government guidance to assist those in poverty.

Andy Brown raised concerns that it was the funeral directors making the funerals affordable and local authorities continued to charge full price for burial/cremation. **Paul Cuthell** reiterated AB’s point on local authorities continuing to charge full price.

James Blackburn said the Citizens Advice Scotland had compiled information in the past and would be worth consulting over the issue to assist gaining insight into supply and uptake.

Action point: Cheryl Paris (Scottish Government) said she would ask colleagues for a list of participating local authorities. NB to discuss next steps with Jeremy Balfour.

4.Guest: Maree Todd, Minister for Public Health, Women’s Health and Sport.

Ms Todd expressed her gratitude to all those working in the funeral sector throughout the pandemic. Other key points were:

*The funeral sector is undergoing statutory reform. A phased implantation of regulations is intended to provide improvements to the entire process. This has been delayed but not

*Alkaline hydrolysis – Government is looking at introducing it, has been aware of it for some time; public consultation suggested new methods would be viewed positively. Learning more about it and how other authorities around the world have legislated/introduced it. Understand the implications of how this would safely operate as it is crucial to maintain public confidence. A consultation will seek public perception, which will inform thinking on next steps.

*Looking to Recommence the important work around regulation and licensing, including the publication of the Code of Practice for Funeral Directors. It is high priority will be dependent on Parliamentary schedules and the Covid-19 pandemic, so there is no timeline at the moment regards publication. However, it is undergoing final checks before being laid in Parliament.

*Regulation work for burial authorities in Scotland is also being undertaken. Working group for burial ground regulations has been established.

*Everyone shares the same ambition; to ensure that the public have confidence that their loved ones will be received respectful dignified, high-quality care after death in an environment that is fit for purpose.

Taking questions, the following points were raised:

*Taking a statement from James Blackburn underlining Scotmid's commitment to Scotmid, Ms Todd confirmed alkaline hydrolysis is a service that people in Scotland want.

*Eileen Cawley said face to face consultation (re alkaline hydrolysis) was very important, particularly around faith groups. Ms Todd responded by saying officials would assess what the Government could do and what that might look like. Cheryl Paris noted the Government has a faith group it works with on funerals – they can be engaged in the process.

*Rose Jackson said younger people increasingly did not want religious funerals, so AH was a welcome addition. Ms Todd said she was astonished at how funerals had evolved, particularly since the pandemic began and using digital technology.

*Jon Levett asked whether there was further news around the proposal to extend the remote registration go deaths and still births beyond March 2022. Cheryl Paris responded saying they were currently analysing what the consultation responses said.

NB formally thanked Ms Todd for attending the meeting.

5. AOB

1. **James Morris** asked the group of their experiences around local authorities' policies for taking cords and carrying coffins. Local authorities were being very inconsistent and said it was an excuse to not provide a service yet still charge full amount. He said councils were hiding behind Covid-19 as a way of not providing services. **Nick Britten** said it was an issue the Group and the NAFD had been in discussion with the Government about for some time. **Cheryl Paris** said it was an individual council decision based on risk assessment. There is a group called the Scottish Bereavement Benchmarking Group which has good representation from local authorities and discuss this topic. **Paul Cuthell** said it was a huge part of the funeral tradition and struggling to see why local authorities are refusing to allow it.

Action point: Cheryl to provide contact details for the Group

2. **Christine McLintock** said demand for Cruse services are now spiking following earlier discussions of services not being taken up. With anniversaries, people realising in the passage of time that they need help, they are expecting more people to contact them this year than ever before. They are also seeing more trauma, mental health issues and referrals from counsellors, and are expecting numbers to keep rising. Cruse is meeting demand but training more people.

Mark Hazelwood said there hasn't been a strategy around bereavement done since 2011 and bereavement is an area which cuts across many parts of society and Government, and we are encouraging Government to adopt a more joined up approach. Government policy and thinking might be a good area for this group to consider. The most recent letter was from Kevin Stewart, Minister for Wellbeing and Social Care. **Eileen Cawley** said there must be a push for funding for bereavement counselling services to continue to avoid counsellor burnout.

Action point: NB to discuss with JB about inviting Mr Stewart to a meeting

3. **Nick Britten** said Alexander Burnett MSP was proposed as co-convener and will hopefully attend the next meeting to be elected subject to a vote. He said JB has spoken to Shona Robinson, chair of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, who is happy to come to a future meeting to discuss the work they are doing around funeral poverty.

6. Time and date of next meeting.

To be confirmed.