

Cross-Party Group on <Funerals and Bereavement >

AGM and Members' meeting

Date and Time: 5th October 2023 7.30pm

Minutes

Present

MSPs

Jeremy Balfour MSP

Brian Whittle MSP

John Mason MSP

Invited guests

None

Non-MSP Group Members

Nick Britten - Secretariat

Paul Cuthell - Thomas Cuthell and Sons/NAFD

Andy Brown – Co-op/NAFD

James Blackburn - Scotmid/ NAFD

Barry Pritchard NAFD President

Gerry Boyle – Dignity/NAFD

Terry Tennens – SAIF

Eileen Cawley – Scottish Pensioners Forum

Alison Wilson – Golden Charter

Fiona Arnott-Barron – Cruse

Lynsey Kidd – Scottish Cot Death Trust

Jane Matheson – City of Edinburgh Council

Gordon Swan – NAFPP

Apologies

Rachel Bradburne – NAFD

AGM

Agenda item 1

Welcome and apologies. Approval of previous minutes of 12 October 2022

Jeremy Balfour Welcomed the group.

Minutes were proposed by Andrew Brown, seconded by Jeremy Balfour, approved by Group.

Agenda item 2

Election of office bearers. The following officers were elected:

Jeremy Balfour MSP – convener

Alex Burnett MSP - deputy convener

Nick Britten - Secretariat

No treasurer was elected as the group does not hold funds.

Agenda item 3

Any other business

No other business was proposed. AGM was closed.

Group meeting

Agenda item 1

Welcome and apologies

Jeremy Balfour welcomed the group.

Agenda item 2

Approval of the minutes from previous meeting, matters arising. Election of new members.

Minutes were approved by the group. Proposed – Barry Pritchard. Seconded – Andrew Brown. No matters arising.

Mairi Handy (independent celebrant) and Jane Matheson (City of Edinburgh mortuaries) were proposed and welcomed to the group as new members.

Agenda item 3

Correspondence

Nick Britten highlighted the letter sent to and response from Bert Swanson, Senior Inspector of Crematoria and Funeral Directors. The letter and response had been previously sent to members.

Agenda item 4

Main discussion: Winter preparedness 2023 - Bereavement sector

Fiona Arnott-Barron (FA) highlighted key challenges that Cruse Scotland are facing: Complexity of client cases, volume of cases and the cost of living.

She said the complexity of client need has changed dramatically since the pandemic. Whereas before 10% of clients were made up from those with most complex needs, and the majority were ones that just required advice and reassurance, that had turned around with the majority of people presenting now having complex needs. The impact of that for Cruse is more sessions per client.

Volume of people needing support has also risen considerably and Cruse is looking to refer onwards. They are also seeing more people needing help where bereavement is only a small part of their need. This is due to long NHS waiting list.

Costs of living have gone up, leading to volunteers leaving for paid work. The overall affect is more demand with fewer volunteers. Public grants and funding is also reduced.

Lynsey Kidd (LK): This echoes what is happening at the Scottish Cot Death Trust. Complexity of cases is the biggest challenge. They are expecting an even bigger workload in winter, where cot deaths increase.

Barry Pritchard (BP): asked both organisations how long that can survive in the current climate before having to reduce service.

FA said they don't just rely on public funding and are looking at lots of different way to increase revenue. Reserve running costs are for nine months.

Jeremy Balfour (JB) asked how people found support groups FB answered that 60% came through GP and psychiatric nurses; others through word of mouth, social media.

Eileen Cawley (EC) said that more funding was required post-pandemic and that burnout from volunteers was being exacerbated. : A while back there was breakdown in mental health provision. She asked what could be done within the sector.

FA: Supervision service for volunteers has increased and every effort was being made.

BP asked whether support groups were seeing an increase in unattended funerals as a result of the cost of living.

FA said the absence of rituals, such as a funeral, were huge for bereaved people, especially if the deceased person had asked for it and it had come as a shock.

JB said unattended funerals and direct cremation was a big issue that warranted further discussion, and asked for it to be an agenda item at a future meeting.

LK asked whether funeral directors in the group would make a referral on behalf of a family to a support service, rather than signpost.

Andrew Brown (AB) said it would be difficult as funeral directors are only involved in the death care cycle for a short amount of time and they would not want to judge too early what service the bereaved might need. BP said funeral directors were not qualified to make an assessment so signposting was appropriate.

LK said it was very hard for bereaved families to pick up the phone to support services, so it would perhaps be something funeral directors could help with, making a call on behalf of a bereaved person.

JB said the group Held in your hearts might be worth speaking to.

FA asked whether more money would be available from Government to tackle the rise mental health cases. JB said parliament was looking at it more than ever and Government was aware of the issues, but also that it was working to a tight budget.

Agenda item 5:

Main discussion: Winter preparedness 2023 – Funeral sector

Jane Matheson (JM) said that significant progress was being made to prevent some of the issues faced in winters past. The East of Scotland RRP had met three times recently to discuss mutual aid around storage space. City of Edinburgh mortuaries had changed procedures. It is hoped to get through Winter 2023 avoiding some of the main problems previously encountered.

AB said that except for Glasgow, Scotland is in a better place for winter. He highlighted challenges raised in the West RRP of conflict between NHS and Police and where funeral directors were holding deceased for a long time ahead of a post mortem with the QEH refusing to take the deceased until 24 hours before the PM. He also said there was concern around capacity in the West and the RRP was looking at options.

Paul Cuthell (PC): said storage was an issue but there were other concerns ahead of winter. He said burial authorities were cutting back and only accepting funerals they want to accept. A higher volume of deaths resulted in a longer period where bereaved were waiting for a funeral, which were taking upwards of three weeks. He asked what local authorities and public bodies were doing over Christmas to help.

JM said that for the last two years Edinburgh mortuary had not closed for the four day holiday and that post mortems and funerals will take place on 26th and Jan 2.

Nick Britten (NB) asked about East Lothian, which has been singled out in previous meetings as having significant registration problems. JM said Edinburgh had been mentoring East Lothian burial staff and forensic pathology staff. East Lothian has appointed a new cemetery office and registration staff has been spoken to.

JB to PC: Will you be open boxing day to do funerals. PC: We operate the same 24 hours service as any weekend. Yes we will do funeral if the family wants one.

JM: We had 3 burials on Christmas Day last year, we don't turn away anyone. Especially those with cultural sensitives requiring a quick disposal. Last year took a referral from Manchester.

JB asked where the group could get a more holistic view of what local authorities were offering over the holiday period. JM said the best place was the Scottish Bereavement Benchmarking Group (SBBG). Most of the 32 burial authorities take part in that group. AB said the time period of the request should expand to mid-February, as most people wait until the new year for a funeral rather than have it over the Christmas period, so the delays often came in January and February.

Action point: Group to write to David McColl, SBBG, to get a broad picture of what local authorities are offering and when they are open up to mid February 2024.

JB asked funeral directors what their biggest concern for winter was.

James Blackburn (JaBI) said the delay in registration and the delay in payment of the Funeral Support Payment, which was taking up to 45 days to process. Registration was delaying the whole process. He said that people don't want funerals between Christmas and new year.

Terry Tennens (TT) asked whether, if there was a particular delay around crematoria, could they open later or on Saturday? Or could a mortuary can to collect can there be expanded hours?

JB said there was also a shortage of ministers to conduct ceremonies.

JM said Edinburgh mortuaries had trained managers to carry out funerals and they offer a reduced rate of £90 per service. NHS mortuaries close at 2pm on a Friday afternoon, which is a problem. Council mortuary would stay open later if need be.

Agenda item 6

Any other business

There was no AOB

Agenda item 7

Date and time of next meeting

The next meeting will be held on 12th December via Microsoft Teams only. The meeting will start at 6.30pm.