

July 2024

A patchwork of provision: council funerals across the UK

Executive Summary

Local councils have a legal duty to carry out a funeral for someone who died in their area when no other arrangements are being made. However, this research shows that standards and access to help vary hugely across councils.

Aside from stipulations regarding the deceased person's wishes for burial or cremation, there are no legal requirements around how councils fulfil their legal duty or what arrangements they make. Government guidelines are in place in England and Wales, but they are not consistently followed, and none exist in the rest of the UK.

When someone is dying and has no family or friends to arrange their funeral, they should be able to find out from their local council what will happen to them after they die. A bereaved person who is unable to make funeral arrangements, for instance because they have no way of paying for them, should be able to contact someone at the council who can advise them. Reaching out to a council for help in these situations can demand courage and involve a host of complex emotions. The process needs to follow the law, be compassionate, simple and equitable.

Our new research shows that some of these things are far from guaranteed in parts of the country.

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Executive Summary

- **Government guidance not being followed:** A survey of 102 council websites across the UK suggests that more than half of councils in England and Wales are not fully following Government guidelines on council funerals (sometimes known as public health funerals).¹ More than a third (36) had no information online for the public about their council funeral provision and of the 66 that did, over a quarter (18) gave no contact details for people who need to notify their local authority of a death requiring a council funeral. (See the appendix for detailed data on individual councils.)
- **Inaccurate information:** 7 in 10 of the 66 websites that did have information contained incorrect or misleading information, with half of this wrong information relating to the circumstances in which a council funeral can take place.
- **Labyrinthine journey:** Phone calls to 54 councils reveal the unnecessarily labyrinthine journey bereaved people would have to go through to reach the right department at some councils. Only a third of correct departments (15 of 46) were reached in one call.
- **Access denied:** Where we were able to conclude our calls, nearly a quarter of councils (11 in 47) turned us away or presented us with significant barriers.
- **Legal compliance in question:** Nearly 4 in 10 councils appeared to interpret narrowly their legal requirement regarding the deceased person's wishes, suggesting they could bury or cremate them against their wishes. Note - this is of the 46 councils that, through their online information or in a call, gave some indication of their legal duty in this area and/or respecting the wishes of the deceased.
- **Lack of information:** Of the 66 councils with online information, less than half (29) stated their policy on whether people can attend council funerals and only a quarter (17) clearly stated that cremated remains, or ashes, can be collected without restriction.
- **Change is possible:** 11 of the 40 councils we researched in 2021 have improved their online information, either by making changes to their existing information or providing some where there wasn't any. However, five councils have dropped points and one has deleted their page.

7 in 10

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¹ These funerals are often called public health funerals, after the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984, which applies to England and Wales, but they can also be referred to by many other names including council, community and municipal funerals. Some councils don't even have consistency on their own websites. We use the term council funeral in this report.

Recommendations

Local government

1

Ensure there is information about your council funeral provision on your council's main website and regularly check it is accurate. Use the UK Government's [Public health funerals: good practice guidance](#) and [Down to Earth's website](#) guides. Where people can access the internet, this will save your staff time in answering questions and getting people through to the right department easily.

2

Make this information available on your intranet or knowledge hub to make life easier for your staff and to save them time. We encountered many busy, apologetic call handlers who were keen to try and help but just didn't have what they needed.

3

Ensure all switchboard call handlers know which department to transfer people to, and what role name to ask for. If you have an automated switchboard provide this information to staff in the departments people will most likely select, like adult social care, cemeteries or benefits team.

4

Provide a direct line for the specific team, rather than an automated switchboard for the whole department. If they must be transferred to an automated switchboard, like Environmental Health, equip your staff to advise what option to select. Consider how a bereaved person might feel if they hear this recorded message, 'the council doesn't provide a pest control service', or have to select 'pest control' as the option.

5

Ensure staff have information about sources of support for raising funds, beyond just government benefits, so that where a caller would like to take responsibility for a funeral, but doesn't have the funds, they can explore this.

6

Consider if all staff who regularly come into contact with bereaved people have the skills and support they need, to protect both them and the public they engage with. Bereavement or grief awareness training is available from organisations like [Cruse Bereavement Support](#) and the [National Bereavement Service](#).

7

Organise training for relevant staff on the Funeral Expenses Payment (FEP) (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) and its complex eligibility criteria – [book with us](#). We encountered lots of councils giving incorrect information about it, including the false assumption that if someone is ineligible it must mean there are funds available. There are many reasons why an applicant may not be eligible for a payment, even if they are in receipt of a qualifying benefit.

8

Consider setting up a municipal or residents' funeral service, like [Tameside](#) or [Salford](#) councils, offering a less expensive simple funeral option for residents. This might enable more bereaved people to take responsibility for the funeral where funds are a barrier.

9

Review your policy and procedure regarding how you ascertain the deceased person's wishes for burial or cremation, ensuring you meet your legal duty. People can feel strongly about this for all kinds of reasons, not just religious or cultural ones, and they are more likely to have told someone verbally than written it down.

10

Review your policies regarding attendance and the return of ashes - most councils allow both. If you don't, is there a good enough reason why not? If you are concerned about family disputes regarding the ashes, there are ways to deal with this, such as splitting them between family members. A blanket ban on returning them is unnecessary – consider booking [training with the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management](#).

UK Government, Northern Ireland Executive and Scottish Government

1

Create statutory minimum standards for council funerals, covering both provision and process to stop the current postcode lottery and ensure everyone who needs a council funeral, both those who have died and those who are bereaved, is treated with dignity and respect.

2

Increase the 'other funeral costs' amount of both the Funeral Expenses Payment and the Funeral Support Payment to £2,484 – this is the portion of the payments that can be used for funeral director fees. £2,484 is the average cost of funeral director fees for a simple Attended Funeral in the UK, as assessed by the Competition and Markets Authority in its 2024 Review of market outcomes.

3

Expand the eligibility criteria for these funeral payments - bring the Funeral Expenses Payment criteria in line with the Funeral Support Payment, as around 40% fewer people can access a payment in England, Wales and Northern Ireland than in Scotland. Extend both payments to students.

Down to Earth - Quaker Social Action

Quaker Social Action is an independent UK charity working with people on low incomes to seek solutions to the issues affecting their lives. Its Down to Earth project is a UK-wide funeral costs service helping people to plan a meaningful funeral that is as affordable as possible through extensive digital resources and direct support to those in the greatest need. This front-line experience places them in a unique and privileged position to speak truth to power about funeral poverty in the UK.

<https://quakersocialaction.org.uk/we-can-help/helping-funerals/down-earth>

abrdn Financial Fairness Trust

abrdn Financial Fairness Trust funds research, policy work and campaigning activities to tackle financial problems and improve living standards for people on low-to-middle incomes in the UK. It is an independent charitable trust registered in Scotland (SC040877).

