

**Briefing 20-95      December 2020**

**Second Survey Results: COVID-19 impact on cemetery and crematoria services**

**Introduction**

This briefing covers APSE's second resilience survey on how local authorities are dealing with the on-going impacts of COVID-19 and further or ongoing restrictions being placed on services such as cemeteries and crematoria services

It provides the most up-to-date information via a second survey carried out by APSE, at the end November 2020 the first survey taking place in April / May 2020 ([which you can view using this link](#)), as to how bereavement services managers are dealing with the on-going impacts of COVID-19 in relation to the provision of cemetery and crematoria services.

The briefing will be of particular interest to those officers and elected members responsible for cemeteries and crematoria services.

**Background**

In light of the ongoing impacts of COVID-19, local authorities across the UK have had to adapt and make changes to the way they are delivering front-line services.

APSE is committed to sharing best practice and at this time it is felt it would be useful to look at any further changes to services councils have had to make in order to deal with the ongoing pandemic.

Therefore, APSE is collecting information regarding the changes being implemented in response to the new or on-going restrictions in different local authority frontline services across the UK.

With regards to Cemetery and Crematoria services, APSE asked Bereavement Managers to provide information about any additional changes which may have been made to services following further restrictions placed on their services since our original survey in March/April 2020.

**Findings of the survey**

This short- life survey was issued to APSE members during the last week of November 2020 and received 40 council responses in just over a week. What follows are the main findings of the survey.

### **What has been the impact of the additional COVID-19 restrictions in your service area since the Autumn?**

- **50%** have felt further cost pressures on their service
- **41%** have not noticed any real difference.
- No respondents felt that their service would be unsustainable as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions imposed upon local authorities.

Further comments received in relation to this question referred to a downturn in memorial applications despite increases in cremation numbers, although this will likely be addressed when families are able to return to normal life and celebratory / memorial events take place which may include the purchasing of memorials.

Respondents who stated they had felt increased cost pressures also commented on the increase cost regards providing PPE and other perishables relating to hygiene, but also due to the need to reduce mourner numbers some authorities had reduced the cost of additional services such as webcasting or even provided it free of charges thereby reducing income but helping to provide service experiences to those who were unable to attend.

### **What have been the ongoing impacts on staffing levels due to COVID-19?**

- **66%** of respondents stated that staff numbers have remained at a reasonable and manageable level.
- **12.5%** stated that they now had more staff self-isolating or unable to work
- **6.5%** said they had noticed an increase in staff absence levels.
- **28%** stated that staff are being redeployed differently to cope with the impacts of further restrictions and the pandemic across other council services

Although there was mostly a view that staffing levels had been able to cope with the current level of demands, there were some concerns expressed that the loss of additional staff redeployed into Bereavement Services may cause problems for the service when those staff concerned returned to their current roles if absences were still an issue.

### **Have services recovered to pre-COVID-19 levels?**

- **38%** stated that their service had not been impacted severely by either the first or second wave of the pandemic,
- **35%** reported that they had recovered their service to pre-pandemic levels and the further restrictions have had no impact on this recovery.
- **22%** replied that they were still to recover their service levels and that the further restrictions had hindered their recovery.

**Are there any other comments you would like to make regarding the further restrictions or the ongoing impacts COVID-19 has made on your service area?**

Perhaps an unexpected consequence of the pandemic has been an increase in the number of people enquiring about new and existing grave space in family plots, as one respondent stated, 'it appears some people appear to be getting their affairs in order'. There has also been a noticeable increase in the number of family history enquiries, possibly due to people spending more time at home, or having had a family bereavement.

The increase in burial and cremation numbers has also led to the need for an addition in numbers of staff being trained in internments and cremations.

One comment highlighted the need for better partnership working, in particular the fact that it would be helpful if hospitals, doctors and funeral directors could use 100% electronic forms which could be collated into packs so office staff do not need to track various parts and file and input data from a variety of sources.

A final point and one which has resonance across a number of local authority services has been the difficulties and uncertainties caused by changes and alterations made to regulations and guidance and the time taken to confirm the details had led to many adopting their own interpretations for the exigencies of the service. There were also additional comments about the lack of reliable modelling to predict demand, causing further problems.

**APSE Comment.**

It is quite clear from the results that many Bereavement Service Managers have been working very successfully to combat the effects of the pandemic and in doing so delivering both the Government's public health requirements and at the same time maintaining empathetic and dignified services to bereaved families.

The pandemic has shown the value of Bereavement Services as a key service to the public. The value of integrated directly provided council services has allowed other council staff to be re-deployed to support the service in times of greatest need. Some areas have clearly been harder hit than others but it does appear that many services have managed to bring themselves back to a level of 'normality'.

However, what is clear, throughout the survey returns, is the commitment of staff in very challenging times and Managers have been keen to make this point where ever the opportunity has presented itself. This commitment has resulted in many cases in the adoption of new systems including appropriate health and safety measures, new systems to allow social distancing, greater use of online and digital technologies, and excellent internal and external communications, including new practices to safeguard mourners, funeral directors and local authority staff as well as religious ministers conducting funeral services.

It is hoped that the worst of the pandemic is now past and with the roll out of vaccines there will be a clear light at the end of the tunnel.

APSE will continue to monitor how Bereavement Services as a profession is faring over the coming months and report on any issues which are relevant to member authorities.

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