

COVID19 - "We will be ready next time"

- How the industry dealt with the unexpected whilst having to manage expectations.

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Three areas covered – peer group survey

- Initial concerns and service priorities
- Dealing with the expected and the unexpected
- Lessons for the future

What were your initial concerns when lockdown commenced? (1 of 3)

- How we would cope with the possible large increase in burial bookings, especially if our external grave digging contractor became ill himself or had to self-isolate.
- **Our in-house grave diggers were only trained at the end of June this year so I had major concerns about a back up plan should our external contractor be 'out of action'.**
- To overcome this we asked our external contractor to 'pre-dig' two graves at each cemetery which were covered and secured so we had these ready should bookings increase quickly. As each one was used we asked him to dig another so we always had two at each site ready to use

What were your initial concerns when lockdown commenced? (2 of 3)

- The safety of the staff and how best to manage an excessive death situation
- **That staff could fall ill and we would be unable to deliver the service**
- **That mourners/the public wouldn't respect the rules and could endanger us and each other**
- **That we wouldn't be able to get hold of PPE (or toilet rolls!)**
- Being able to cope with the initial projected deaths and having sufficient resources to meet demand
- **Reducing number attending services at our crematorium**

What were your initial concerns when lockdown commenced? (3 of 3)

- Coping with the expected death toll
- Availability of PPE, how we would manage the service with increased numbers (which were not as high as first thought) under lockdown conditions
- **How we were going to manage if the figures we were being given at the start were to be true**

What have been your service priorities during lockdown? (1 of 3)

- Getting through day to day as safe as we can
- To ensure families still have the service they wanted to commemorate their loved one under the restrictions
- Keeping staff safe & social distancing and turnaround times on cremations & burials
- **Service priorities were protecting staff and safely delivering burials and cremations**
- **PPE and sufficient resources such as fleet and equipment, staff welfare, concentrating solely on the provision of burial and cremation with all other service provision halted, complying with Scottish government guidance**

What have been your service priorities during lockdown? (2 of 3)

- Keeping burials and cremations going, reintroducing other previously suspended elements of the service as soon as possible as restrictions eased.
- Keeping staff and the public safe – carrying out regular risk assessments and trying to enforce physical distancing as much as possible. We put a number of measures in place in the crematorium and cemeteries.
- **Maintaining staff safety, ensuring government guidance has been followed and ensuring Funeral Directors and other stakeholders have been kept fully up-to-date of developments in a timely manner.**

What have been your service priorities during lockdown? (3 of 3)

- **To deliver our service within the changing constraints whilst still trying to provide a meaningful funeral for the bereaved**
- Safety of our staff, contractor and members of the public attending burials.
- Ensuring as far as possible, no interruption to the provision of burials, including ashes interments.
- Following government guidance
- **Dealing with increase in Public Health Act funerals.**
- Liaising with funeral directors (and other stakeholders) closely and keeping messages consistent.

Have you been provided with clear guidance as to what is expected of you and your service? (1 of 4)

- Yes, I feel with us only having two cemeteries (with no chapels) in the main the guidance from central government was sufficient.
- Could have been more info from registration services on how they wanted to deal with the return of Part C's
- **Considering this has been a new and challenging experience for us all I would say so. Although the closure of crematoriums whilst the burial ground remained open wasn't exactly thought through!**
- **Government guidance has been slightly ambiguous at times therefore a regional, consistent approach adopted by a number of West Midlands authorities has helped**

Have you been provided with clear guidance as to what is expected of you and your service? (2 of 4)

- **No! Have mainly relied on colleagues in other boroughs/ authorities for advice and guidance sharing. Long delays getting information from our own HR and Public Health colleagues. Our LA overall was pretty slow getting started on it all.**
- Government guidance has often been unhelpful and raised public expectations of our services – putting staff at risk.
- **Haven't been overly impressed by industry professional bodies – advice vague and not always timely. Would have been good if our advice could have been sought before policy was fully formulated and guidance was issued. Many of us were aware that *some* people were being consulted but it was never clear how those people were being selected!**

Have you been provided with clear guidance as to what is expected of you and your service? (3 of 4)

- **In the main, the Scottish Government guidance has been very clear and comprehensive. Sometimes the guidance and the timeline for it's implementation has been unrealistically short. Other areas where more definitive guidance would have been helpful for a common approach over all local authorities and private companies would have been in relation to numbers allowed to attend services which was only defined once Phase 3 was reached.**
- Guidance was provided by ICCM & FBCA
- Keeping Funeral directors & public aware of changes. Acting quickly on new legislation

Have you been provided with clear guidance as to what is expected of you and your service? (4 of 4)

- NO! we have found the information to be very woolly and contradictory
- **No very poor, government FBCA and ICCM guidance very open to interpretation and not clear. It seems as we are getting clearer guidance since the last update (9th July 2020) on numbers and we could have used that previously. Guidance such as 'modest numbers' or 'close family' do not help anyone**

Have any unexpected developments or outcomes arisen from the Covid-19 epidemic? (1 of 3)

- **No, apart from the team have pulled together and worked as needed without issues**
- **Confusion on how many can attend funerals and the length of time guidelines have taken to come through for clarification.**
- Unexpected development was having to install webcasting within a very small timeframe
- **The push for digital service provision i.e., web streaming, Books Of Remembrance - these are moving on much more quickly for us now due to the needs that arose during the epidemic.**

Have any unexpected developments or outcomes arisen from the Covid-19 epidemic? (2 of 3)

- **All sorts of unexpected and unimaginable (before any of this happened) issues have arisen that we've had to resolve on the hoof, as it were.**
- **The realisation on the part of the council that if Bereavement Services staff aren't around there isn't actually anyone else who can just step in and do our jobs!**
- **At a local level I have been deeply impressed by and grateful for the response of my team throughout the pandemic so far. They have been tolerant, flexible and sensible. Unfortunately I can't say the same for the leadership of the authority who have been oblivious to most of our hard work and at times, demanding and unreasonable. The relationship between our service and the authority has been soured and will take time to recover**

Have any unexpected developments or outcomes arisen from the Covid-19 epidemic? (3 of 3)

- **The need to support local mortuary provision by installing temporary coffin/body facilities at local Funeral Directors' premises was initially unexpected. These facilities are however now in place should a second wave occur.**
- **I feel everyone has gained more knowledge of IT particularly the use of 'on line' meetings. The speed of which crem papers can be delivered!**
- **Ability to do things differently in terms of paperwork from FD's and memorial masons (receiving it electronically).**
- **More contact with other local authority Bereavement Services teams across Staffordshire to discuss issues arising – this hasn't happened until Covid-19 came about but I hope it continues as it has proved to be very useful and could lead to further sharing of resources in the future (I think the Black Country authorities already have a group but South Staffs Council haven't been part of that)**

Are there any lessons which will help you deal with this and similar emergencies in the future?

(1 of 4)

- **Communication with stakeholders is key**
- **Having the ability to have some graves 'pre-dug' and ready to use should the death toll increase quickly**
- **Knowing that other local authorities are there to call on for advice and support is really important – I think we've always known we could do that but not necessarily done it before now**
- **The early creation of a 'cems & cremes' local groups to make sure we are all sending out a uniformed message to all.**
- **The use of staff from non essential services to help with data input**
- **Early on, splitting the team into two shifts this helps with business continuity should one member fall ill and the rest then isolate.**
- **IT equipment ready and able to facilitate Home working**

Are there any lessons which will help you deal with this and similar emergencies in the future?

(2 of 4)

- **Within the service we coped extremely well with what came our way, of course there could still be worse to come and we are gearing up for that.**
- **I think generally speaking that comms can always be improved on. Some of the information the council published was a bit confusing for people.**
- **Keep a timeline type of record as you go along of the developments and measures taken. I'm trying to draw one up retrospectively and so much has happened that it's incredibly hard to remember and capture it all!**

Are there any lessons which will help you deal with this and similar emergencies in the future?

(3 of 4)

- **Staff coped really well and we were quick off the mark in ensuring we had adequate PPE etc. however through networking we would need to look more closely at split shift working for staff to ensure continuity in case one shift was required to self isolate due to the virus.**
- **Lessons learned, during these quieter times prepare for next spike over a longer period**
- **Yes we know what to expect and have better resources readily available from staff seconded from other depts. and the effect of the longer operational day.**
- **In local government the service should be treated as a priority and supported, not ignored**

Are there any lessons which will help you deal with this and similar emergencies in the future?

(4 of 4)

- **The support from staff from non-essential services has enabled Bereavement Services to operate with minimal disruption (under the circumstances). The need to identify and provide a level of training for such staff has been a useful lesson.**
- **The importance of good communication with the public, and giving a clear and definite information**

Main takeaways (1)

- Back-up plans had to be developed and these should now be in place.
- Training of staff outside the service and their support has been vital
- For everything to work the support and understanding of service users is essential
- Building and retaining a stock of PPE is a good idea
- The stress to staff has been a major concern. Clarity of roles and responsibilities and strong, demonstrable support and understanding from senior management is crucial, expected and deserved by front-line staff. This has not always been the case.

Main takeaways (2)

- Understanding and keeping with changing guidance has been a struggle and caused a lot of confusion and distress. Consultation with neighbouring authorities has at least ensured some consistency and cooperation
- Some disappointment with how the main trade associations have handled the interpretation and dissemination of government guidance
- The agility to quickly introduce and use IT solutions and working from home has been impressive and will possibly change the way we work for the better going forward
- There is an expectation of a second spike but we should be better placed to deal with it next time