

Scottish Parliament Cross-Party Group for Funerals and Bereavement

15th September 2021

Meeting Minutes (Virtual meeting)

Convener: Jeremy Balfour

Secretary: Nick Britten

In attendance:

Jeremy Balfour MSP	Colin Beattie MSP	Eileen Cawley
Gordon Swan	James Blackburn	Terry Tennens
David Beamer	Sharryn McKelvie	John Halliday
Sandy Sullivan	Rose Jackson	Nick Britten
Andrew Brown	Rachel Bradburne	Gerry Boyle
Brian Corrigan	Dorothy McHugh	Christine Dumonceau

1. Welcome and apologies

Jeremy Balfour welcomed the group, highlighting that it was the first time it had met since the Scottish Parliament elections in May and as such had to formally reconvene.

Apologies: Jon Levett, James Morris, Paul Cuthell, Kate Mulley.

2. Approval of the minutes from previous meeting

The minutes from the previous meeting were approved subject to the following changes highlighted by James Blackburn in Section 6: Delays caused by Procurator Fiscal:

That: "James Blackburn said it was a funding issue and not something that the authorities want to address", be altered to "James Blackburn said it was a funding issue."

3. Voting on new officers

Jeremy Balfour MSP was voted in as Convenor. Nick Britten was voted in as secretariat. Jeremy said he was working to secure a co-convenor and the said group did not require a Treasurer as it did not hold funds.

4. Confirmation of group name/membership/new members

The group name remains unchanged, and the following organisations were confirmed as being members of the group:

Scottish Pensioners' Forum, SAIF, Cruse Scotland, Resomation, Compassionate Friends, Community Renewal, Co-op Funeralcare, Dignity, Scotmid, National Association of Funeral Directors, SAIF, Scottish Pensioners Forum, Citizens Advice Bureau, Golden Charter, William Purves Funeral Directors, Thomas Cuthell and Sons, Sands.

5. Scope of new work – immediate priorities and working timetable

Jeremy Balfour highlighted that the group had a clean slate of working and asked members of the group to contribute their thoughts as to its priorities.

James Blackburn highlighted resomation, saying Scotmid is struggling to make headway and get a timetable for the Scottish Government for its public inquiry, and the minister responsible has now changed. He invited the group to invite the new Minister to a meeting to explore progress. He said from a Funeral Director perspective, post-Covid lessons, relationships with the Burial and Cremation team and working together were important topics.

Gordon Swan raised increased visibility on the progress and processes within the Scottish Government in introducing licensing for funeral directors. He also raised the Financial Conduct Authority and the forthcoming regulation of the pre-paid funeral market, inviting the group to consider how it can assist to ensure an orderly transformation into a regulated environment.

Gerry Boyle raised problems with delays to death registration, which were discussed later in the meeting.

Rose Jackson asked the group to consider the action points from the last meeting and three letters which were to be written. Nick Britten confirmed they had been written and sent, but given the elections, potential change in personnel, and Covid, in the case where the issue was still live, it was worth rewriting.

Rachel Bradburne raised the FCA, the National Resilience Strategy and asked how the UK Cabinet Office consultation will work with Scotland.

Andrew Brown raised investigating practices that had changed temporarily and permanently for the better as a result of the pandemic, and what the industry can learn.

Dorothy McHugh raised funeral poverty and the Conduct and Market Authority Funeral Order on clearer pricing.

John Halliday said he would like to assess the group's appetite to start influencing other parts of Government around education to assist with greater resilience in society, looking at a long-term, five-year strategy if there was as an appetite to work together.

Eileen Cawley said that over the last 18 months the group had been focused heavily on funerals but cannot ignore the effect of the pandemic on the bereaved and those who required support because they had not been allowed to grieve properly. She asked the group for a plan of action to help them.

Christine Dumonceau raised the issue of confusion around state benefits and the long waiting lists for counselling. She requested the group assist in raising awareness of support groups such as CAB that people can turn to.

Sharryn McKelvie mirrored this saying that people are not aware enough of bereavement support groups once they realise the wait for counselling. She said greater awareness was required of peer-to-peer support.

Brian Corrigan said Cruse Scotland are experiencing growing demand for its services and waiting times are increasing as a consequence. He said it would be useful to discuss support for services in a climate where complex grief is growing with people experiencing numerous mental health issues during Covid.

Jeremy Balfour said it was important to understand the context of where Parliament is and where Scottish Government is with these issues, and said he would write to the Minister responsible for funerals to invite her to the meeting. He said there is a new committee in Parliament called the Social Justice and Social Security committee which deals with all issues around poverty, social security, homelessness, debt etc, and upon which he sits. He said the groups would invite Shona Robinson MSP, Committee Chair to a meeting. He also requested that at the start of the next few meetings, it would be helpful if representatives of sectors/professions gave a 10-minute overview of the challenges being faced. The first group would be Funeral Directors, the second representatives from the bereavement sector.

Rachel Bradburne asked whether it was possible to have a round table event to look at bereavement. The APPG in Westminster held one and it was considered very useful with tangible outcomes on education. Jeremy Balfour said he was happy to take this forward.

Dorothy McHugh raised bereavement support as a priority, saying there was volunteer burnout given the demand on support services. Brian Corrigan agreed and said it would be useful to be able to offer education (diplomas) for counselling to encourage more people to offer their services. James Blackburn said funeral services and bereavement support/liasing with bereaved people about their experiences are closely linked, and all group members can share experiences.

Eileen Cawley said the Group should hold a reception for MSPs/support groups/interested parties to raise awareness of the support available and work going on behind the scenes to support bereaved people. It would be helpful for Minister to inform the public of this.

Nick Britten said the Scottish Government had just announced consultation for the scope of a public inquiry into Covid, and that the Group should play a role in that.

Action points:

The group agreed to rewrite to the Health Minister to raise issues of signposting of bereavement services.

The group to write to Marie Todd, Minister responsible for funerals, to invite her to the next meeting.

The group to write to the relevant minister asking for an update/timetable on the Scottish Government's public inquiry into resomation.

The group to write to Shona Robinson MSP, highlighting some of the issues raised and inviting her to a future meeting.

Jeremy Balfour to table a Ministerial question on the issue of raising awareness for bereavement support services.

6. Future speakers

As discussed above. Eileen Cawley said it would be useful to hear from bereaved people affected by the pandemic.

7. Delays in death registration

Andrew Brown said that there were considerable delays in death registration in different areas and it had now become a postcode lottery, with some areas including East Lothian now taking 12 days or more. There are also significant delays in Glasgow. This was being compounded by other factors, including that the registrars ask Funeral Directors not to book a funeral until a Form 14 (Certification of Registration of Death) is issued and delays in post mortems raised at earlier meetings. Doctors are also taking a long time in some cases to issue the necessary paperwork to registrars.

Another factor was that registrars are now allowing face to face for marriage and birth registration, and so are prioritising them, causing further delays. A more joined up system is required.

Action point:

The group to write to the Registrar General and COSLA raising these issues and asking for clarification on processes and whether all 32 local authorities operate in the same way.

8. AOB:

David Beamer said he would update the letter for the Health Minister and send to Jeremy Balfour for sign off and submission.

9. Date of next meeting

Jeremy Balfour said the date would be set on confirmation when the Minister for Public Health was available to attend.