

BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

REPORT OF THE INTERIM ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF REGULATION AND ENFORCEMENT TO THE HOUSING AND NEIGHBOURHOODS OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

UPDATE ON BEREAVEMENT SERVICES

17 June 2020

Summary

This report is provided to give an update on issues in the Mortuary provision, Register Office and the Cemeteries and Crematoria.

Explanation is given of the activities during the Covid 19 pandemic and the response of the services. Members are invited to comment and identify any issues they wish further information on.

Recommendation

It is recommended the report be noted.

Bereavement Services

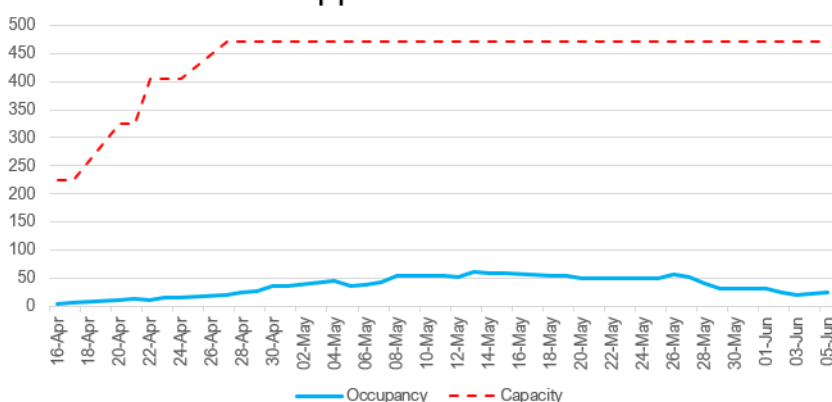
Mortuaries

Like other services the Coroners' Service is receiving additional demands. There may be slight delays in processing cases, but any delays are being kept to a minimum as far as possible.

To help funeral directors with storage capacity, the City Council opened a temporary storage facility at Sutton New Hall cemetery. This helped to ensure mortuaries at NHS hospitals and funeral directors were not full to capacity. This facility will be decommissioned on 26 June 2020. Usage has been limited.

Sutton New Hall Facility Usage

Funeral Director Support

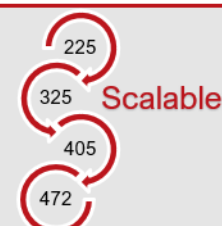


Only deceased that have been released by a Coroner or who have not needed to be referred to the Coroner have been taken into the care of SNH facility.

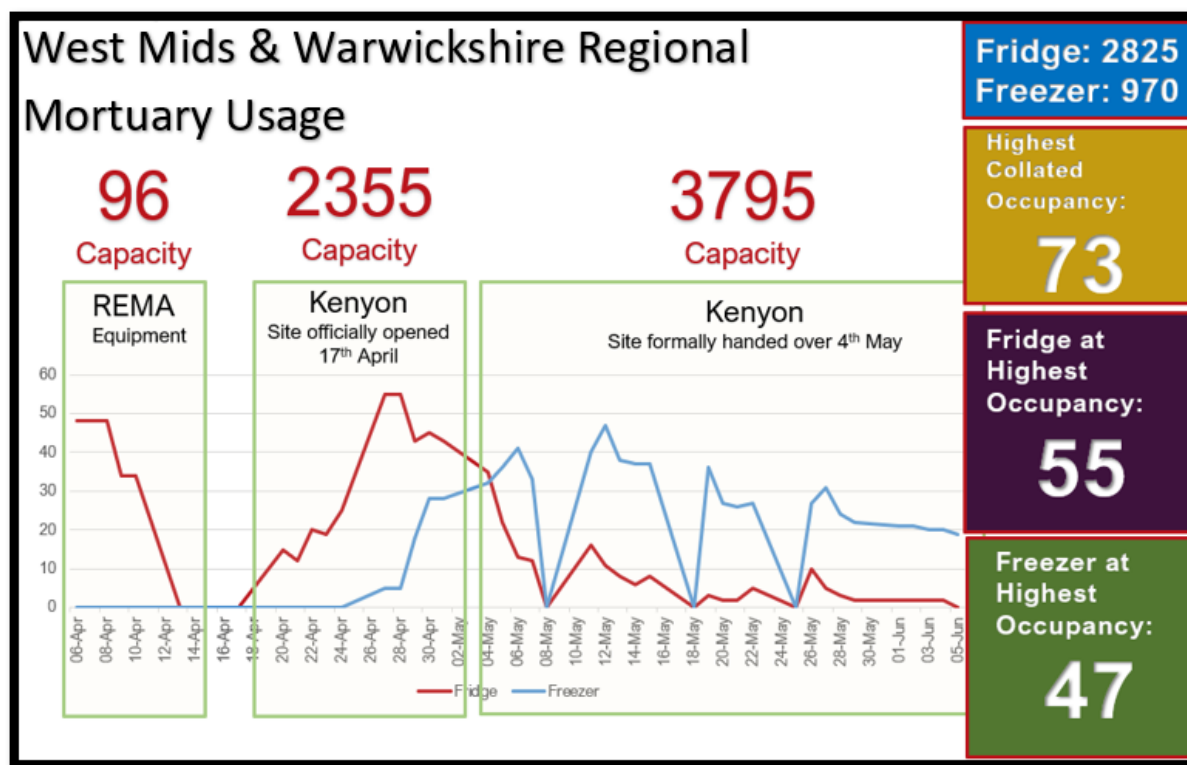
**Fridge: 472
Freezer: 0**

**Highest
Fridge
Occupancy:**

62



Since the middle of April the Regional Facility at Birmingham Airport has been in place which provides storage for over 3,500 deceased. Officers hold the Human Tissue Authority licence for this facility.



The pandemic has proved that the biggest issue for the region is freezer storage, this will need to be addressed in the event a Centre of Excellence is created for mortuary and pathology services.

Bereavement Services (Burials and Cremations)

The services have worked to an excess deaths plan taking into account the prevailing demand, significantly increasing demands on staff, who have managed well. This required changes to the ways funeral services are conducted. For this emergency period and in line with the Government's requirements for social distancing and changes made with effect from 1 June 2020, attendance at funerals was limited to six people and is now limited to 16 people. Services are normally a maximum of 30 minutes at this time and funeral directors are asked to assist with the rules about social distancing and the numbers of attendees. The number of services provided and bookings each week is shown in the table below.

Week Ending	No of Funerals Available	No of Funerals Booked	% Uptake
5/4/2020	283	179	63.3%
12/4/2020	243	172	70.1%
19/04/2020	260	202	77.7%
26/04/2020	349	260	74.5%
3/5/2020	362	286	79%
10/5/2020	327	262	80.1%
17/5/2020	355	261	73.5%
24/5/2020/	350	219	62.6%
31/5/2020	297	144	48.5%
7/6/2020	341	149	43.7%
14/6/2020	348	132	37.9%
21/6/2020	328	128	39%

NB. The level of bookings for week ending 21 June are as at 12 June 2020.

The control of funeral attendances meant there had to be revised arrangements for services, which included making free access to webcasting of funerals. This was well received in light of the numbers being allowed to attend the funeral. The City Council has had a lower permitted number for attenders in comparison to other West Midlands authorities, but this was solely based on the sites and the national guidance in place. At the time of writing this report no more than 16 people (plus the officiating person and funeral director staff) may attend a funeral and attendees will have to practice social distancing. No person diagnosed as suffering from Covid-19 is permitted to attend a funeral, until they have been confirmed as recovered. This action is necessary to save lives.

Backfill Burials

Regrettably at this time there was no option but to suspend the service of Backfill Burials. This reduces the risk to staff and ensures the necessary social distancing. Consideration is being given as to when these services can be allowed once more.

Burial or Scattering of Cremated Remains

This service was suspended between 23 March and 31 May 2020, but with effect from 1 June 2020 bookings have been taken for burial of cremated remains or witness scatterings of ashes.

The current charges for the retention of cremated remain at the crematoria are not being applied for remains that are stored pending collection or disposal during this period. If space becomes an issue, then Birmingham City Council will provide alternative storage options.

Any urns or handles on scattering urns etc. that are handled will be sanitised before and afterwards.

Several systems were changed due to the pandemic. This included the submission of documents for funerals by Funeral Directors. The new system is more efficient for the City Council and is likely to be maintained when services are back to normal.

Cremations- Closure of curtains

The same number of mourners are permitted to attend cremations as for burials, with the requirement for social distancing being adhered to. The practice is to close curtains at the point of committal now. This is to prevent funeral attendees from touching the coffin as they leave due to the potential infection risk to staff to handling the coffin. Ministers have been advised of this requirement so families can be made aware.

Opening of Cemeteries

The Secretary of State announced changes to the ways local authorities operate cemeteries on 18 April 2020. The City Council, having originally closed cemeteries, reviewed its policy on opening and has decided that cemeteries will open each day for three or more hours after funerals have been completed. The times of opening for individual sites vary as the need for more burials becomes evident, with longer opening hours at weekends.

All Birmingham cemeteries and crematoria grounds are open to visitors on weekday opening times of 4pm-7pm with the exception of Handsworth and Sutton New Hall, which will be open

5.30-8.30pm. From June 2020 weekend opening times are 10am – 5pm, except for Handsworth and Sutton New Hall, which will open 2pm – 8pm.

Register Office

This service has been at the forefront of issues relating to Covid 19 deaths, with the service being overloaded in late March and early April. As well as changing the way registration of deaths was undertaken additional resources were applied to help meet demand. Even though the Government suspended marriages, birth registrations and citizenship ceremonies, demands on the service were excessive for a few weeks.

Since mid-March, the service processed predominantly death registrations in line with the Coronavirus Act and the direction of the GRO. Just before the start of April a new process for registering was enacted and the service implemented this and then honed the processes to improve performance. The table below shows the level of death registration compared to 2019 from March to the end of May.

Deaths	2019	2020	% change
March	824	943	+14.4%
April	819	2261	+176.1%
May	863	993	+15.1%
Running Total	2,506	4,197	+67.5%

The Coronavirus Act 2020 changed the death registration process, with electronic or telephone registration permissible. Demand was high and changes were made to the initial process, which increased operational efficiency. This along with additional resources allocated has reduced waiting times for the registration and this is now down to less than half a day for completed applications.

While the service is managing the demands on the service well it is important to note problems were experienced at the beginning of the pandemic. This was due to the volume of registrations, repeated contacts from next of kin, multiple applications for one death and ICT issues. As soon as these issues were resolved performance improved markedly. A revised method of performance monitoring was introduced in April which is set out below. This shows average number of applications in process at the end of the day.

Date	April Average*	May Average	June Average*
Deaths ready to be registered	41.2	17.6	9.1
Urgent applications	4.2	1.6	0.3
Awaiting MCCD	42.7	18.6	18.1
Awaiting NOK details	7.7	3.5	2.4
Coroner referrals	48.7	50.8	44.1
Social Services	35.7	23.5	12.3
Total applications in system	180.0	115.6	86.3
Daily incomplete	134.7	96.4	76.9
Daily complete	45.3	19.2	9.4

Nb * Part of month

In April of the 2,261 deaths registered, just under 45% (1,015) were Covid-19 related. In May 2020 Of the 993 deaths registered 256 were Covid 19 deaths (25.8%).

Births

Birth registration appointments were deferred until 1 June 2020. Revised guidance was issued without any notice and was received on 31 May 2020, and legislation enacted 9 June 2020. The service has been preparing for the reintroduction of births registration. During lockdown just over 5,500 births happened in Birmingham. Urgent arrangements are being made to provide a service to both reduce this backlog and deal with new births- the service will be fully operational from 17 June 2020, but prioritisation of registrations will be in chronological order generally with urgent circumstances taken into account e.g. need for passport application.

Customers can make a claim for child benefit or universal credit prior to the birth being registered.

The Register Office has been reviewed and new arrangements have been made to allow face to face registrations as required under the legislation. The changes are designed to minimise the risk of spread of Covid 19. This is in addition to a new legislative process.

There are concerns about the numbers of births that remain unregistered through the pandemic, in view of any potential child safeguarding issues. Members' views on this would be welcome as the service is considering how it can escalate issues that come to light.

Citizen Ceremonies

These have been cancelled until further notice in line with national policy and Birmingham Registration Service will update this information in due course.

Marriage/Civil Partnerships

Marriage and Civil Partnership ceremonies will no longer be undertaken, as indicated in national policy. Preparations are being made for recommencement of the service when authorised.

Notices of Marriage and Civil Partnership appointments can now be arranged through the Register Office, the service resumed from 18 June 2020.

Registrar General Licence requests for marriage/civil partnerships are being risk assessed and considered on a case by case basis. Advice from Public Health England is being adhered to and staff safety is paramount and considered before proceeding with any request to undertake ceremonies for customers diagnosed with COVID-19. Engagement must take place with the GRO nationally in the normal manner before proceeding. The presumption is generally these requests will not be granted at this time.

Applications to reduce the waiting period for marriages or civil partnerships are not being processed. Any applications received or in progress have been refunded.

Approved premise licences cannot be suspended during this period. However, the Register Office is considering extensions to existing licences where appropriate.

Paul Lankester

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Regulation and Enforcement**