

**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**  
**10 March 2022**

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**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**

Since the last update the additional mortuary at Sutton Newhall Cemetery was decommissioned after three months use in July 2020. The Regional facility at Birmingham Airport was decommissioned in late 2021.

The pandemic has clarified the availability of freezer spaces is a key issue for the West Midlands conurbation. The City Council has worked with UHB to provide an additional ten freezer spaces, with five spaces available at times when such space is under pressure.

In addition, the service has provided up to 40 temporary spaces for refrigerated storage available when existing space is under pressure due to demands.

Work is underway to provide feasibility studies for the provision of a centre of excellence.

**Bereavement Services (Burials and Cremations)**

During the pandemic the services have worked to an excess deaths plan considering the prevailing demand, time of year and any backlog there may have been. There were significantly increasing demands on staff, who have managed well, but not without impacts on both the funeral directors and the service users.

The Plan identified trigger points across all the death management services and prioritised work in coroners' support, mortuaries, register office, cemeteries and crematoria. Demands in the latter three service areas are still showing excessive demands particularly with increased level of sickness absence, particularly following the emergence of the Omicron variant. This required changes to the ways funeral services are conducted. As a reminder for the Committee, for the emergency period and in line with the Government's requirements for social distancing, attendance at funerals was limited for a long period. After relaxation of the

Government restrictions attendance at the crematoria continued to be controlled in line with regularly reviewed risk assessments.

Cremation services continue to be 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. This is to allow sanitisation between funeral services. The number of services provided is shown in the table below.

<b>Month</b>	<b>No of Funerals Available</b>	<b>No of Funerals Booked</b>	<b>% Uptake</b>
April 2020	1197	676	56%
May 2020	1206	951	79%
June 2020	1544	634	41%
July 2020	1654	599	36%
August 2020	1235	546	44%
September 2020	1302	546	42%
October 2020	1308	644	49%
November 2020	1282	634	49%
December 2020	1245	706	57%
January 2021	1143	759	66%
February 2021	1188	761	64%
March 2021	1359	891	66%
<b>Annual</b>	<b>15,663</b>	<b>8,342</b>	<b>53.3%</b>

<b>Month</b>	<b>No of Funerals Available</b>	<b>No of Funerals Booked</b>	<b>% Uptake</b>
April 2021	1070	716	61%
May 2021	1192	594	52%
June 2021	1171	636	45%
July 2021	1169	576	44%
August 2021	1180	687	58%
September 2021	1182	617	44%
October 2021	1195	663	48%
November 2021	1165	683	59%
December 2021	1211	667	43%
January 2022	1156	660	57%
February 2022	1055	617	46%
March 2022	1274	391	31%
<b>Annual (to date)</b>	<b>14,020</b>	<b>7,507</b>	<b>53.5%</b>

NB. The level of bookings for the months of February and March 2022 are as at 23 February 2022.

The service originally provided free webcasting of funeral services while numbers of attendees were controlled. In quarter 2 2021/2022 this service was no longer provided without charge.

No person diagnosed as suffering from Covid-19 is permitted to attend a funeral, until they have been confirmed as recovered, but this is very difficult to manage/verify. Responsible citizenship is something the City Council can promote but not enforce.

## **Backfill Burials**

The City Council had no option but to suspend the service of Backfill Burials. Consideration is being given on a case by case basis for such requests.

## **Burial or Scattering of Cremated Remains**

This service has resumed and is operating satisfactorily.

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

## **Cremations- Closure of curtains**

The number of mourners permitted to attend cremations is assessed according to the risk assessment for the site. These are reviewed regularly and take into account both staff and public safety.

The practice of closing curtains at the point of committal is still in place. This is to prevent funeral attendees from touching the coffin as they leave due to the 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 City Council operates normal opening hours varying times in the seasons according to daylight hours. Closure of cemeteries at night is necessary due to anti-social behaviour experienced at sites. This is an additional cost the service has met from existing budgets.

## **Register Office**

This service has been at the forefront of issues relating to Covid 19 deaths, with the service excessive demands on a regular basis throughout the pandemic.

## **Death Registrations**

The service is processing death registrations in line with the Coronavirus Act and the direction of the General Register Office (GRO). In late March 2020 a new process for registering was enacted and the service implemented this and honed the processes to improve performance. The table below shows the level of death registrations for April to 13 Dec 2021 compared to the period April - December in 2020-21.

<b>Deaths</b>	<b>2020/21</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>% change</b>
<b>April</b>	2260	811	-64.12
<b>May</b>	982	812	-17.31
<b>June</b>	767	772	+0.67
<b>July</b>	800	826	+ 3.25
<b>August</b>	714	877	+22.83
<b>September</b>	804	979	+21.77
<b>October</b>	904	869	-3.87

<b>November</b>	1132	1109	-2.00
<b>December</b>	1134	1012	-12
<b>Year to date</b>	<b>9497</b>	<b>8067</b>	<b>-15.1%</b>

While the service is managing the demands on the service well it is important to note problems were experienced at the beginning of and at peak times of the pandemic. This was due to the volume of registrations, repeated contacts from next of kin, multiple applications for one death, staff sickness absence and ICT issues.

In December 2021 less than 2% of deaths recorded were due to Covid 19. This is a significant reduction compared to November 2021 when Covid 19 deaths were about 7.5% of deaths recorded.

### **Births**

Birth registration appointments were deferred until 1 June 2020 at the start of the pandemic. This left a backlog of over 6,000 births to register. While the service was successful in reducing this backlog by two thirds, successive waves of Covid 19 has hampered the service's ability to catch up and the backlog has grown to about 3,000 births awaiting registration. Every effort is being made to reduce this backlog particularly with a reduction in Covid 19 related deaths.

During the pandemic customers could make a claim for child benefit or universal credit prior to the birth being registered. This provision is unlikely to continue when the Coronavirus Act is taken off the statute book by Parliament.

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.

### **Citizen Ceremonies**

This service resumed in the last financial year. Services were delivered in innovative ways to meet customer demand.

<b>Citizenship Ceremonies</b>	<b>2020/21</b>	<b>2021/22</b>
April	0	397
May	0	387
June	0	531
July	156	424
August	246	434
September	170	267
October	214	293
November	203	381
December	338	67 (to 13 Dec)
<b>Running Total</b>	<b>1327</b>	<b>3181</b>

### **Marriage/Civil Partnerships**

Marriage and Civil Partnership ceremonies were recommenced during the third quarter of 2020/2021. Notices of Marriage and Civil Partnership appointments are arranged through the Register Office, and just over 6,500 notices were received in 2021.

Applications to reduce the waiting period for marriages or civil partnerships were not being processed during the pandemic. All applications received are now being dealt with on a case by case basis.

### **Preparing for the Future**

An impact of the pandemic has been to stretch resources and the service capacity. This has led to the using up of burial capacity in Handsworth Cemetery and King's Norton Cemetery. A commitment of the City Council in its Delivery Plan was to identify investment in the service by April 2022. To this end the Cabinet is receiving a report on 1 March 2022 recommending investment in the King's Norton Cemetery to open up further phases of the facility. This will add capacity for the Muslim section and Babies section. This work will be undertaken in the coming months.

In addition, funding for a major refurbishment of Yardley Crematorium will be considered so that the facility is made more efficient and has better emission treatment. This work is likely to be undertaken in late Spring/ early Summer.

The City Council is also factoring in other major works across the bereavement services portfolio as part of a 25 year asset plan for all of the City Council's property holding.

### **Work with the Voluntary Sector and Faith Groups**

Partnership working has been a key part of the City Council's work during the pandemic. Working across the City Council services, relationships have been developed with faith groups- this culminated in the production of a Covid 10 Charter- and the voluntary sector.

The voluntary sector support the bereavement process for so many grieving families and the work they do is invaluable. In particular the City Council recognises the crucial work done by organisations like Cruse, Roadpeace and the Edwards Trust, to name but a few. Their input is invaluable and the City Council considers them to be key in the Portfolio Holder's regular roundtable events.

Developing relationships with the voluntary sector will help the service to become more customer-focused and aware of the services on offer.

**Paul Lankester**

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