

BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

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

**UPDATE ON COUNCIL NOTICE OF MOTION
15 September 2022**

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Summary

This report is provided to give an update on the approved resolution of Council on 14 June 2022 in respect of bereavement services.

Members are invited to comment and identify any issues they wish further information on.

Recommendation

It is recommended the report be noted.

1. Council Resolution- Bereavement Services

On 14 June 2022 the City Council approved the following resolution:-

This Council notes with concern continued delays in the release of the deceased for burial and in the registration processes for births and deaths. It notes this can cause extreme distress and in some instances, financial hardship.

This Council further notes that these issues are the result of significant impact of the changes to death registration arrangements resulting from the expiry of the Coronavirus Act on 25 March 2022, together with post-pandemic changes in GP practices impacting on the issuing of Medical Certificates for the Cause of Death, which resulted in the overnight doubling of cases referred to the Coroner. In addition, the temporary ceasing of birth registrations during the pandemic generated a backlog of some 6,000 cases which Register Office staff have worked hard to reduce.

Council recognises the success of the Autopsy Scanner trial with communities throughout Birmingham welcoming its use by the Coroners Office.

Council recognises that the Coroners Service is an independent judicial function separate from the local authority and under the present law, its performance management is the responsibility of the Chief Coroner for England and Wales, not the City Council.

Notwithstanding these legal restrictions on the Council's ability to directly intervene in the management of coronial services, Council endorses the representations made by the Executive to the Coroner, seeking clarity over the steps the service is taking to eliminate delays and also to properly engage with representatives of faith communities, funeral directors and organisations supporting those affected by bereavement.

Council welcomes the action taken by the Executive to allocate additional financial and staffing resources to support the Coroners Service at this challenging time. It also notes, with approval, the programme of work and investment brought forward by the Executive to further improve and strengthen Bereavement Services, including:

- The extension of Kings Norton and Quinton cemeteries, ensuring that the city has sufficient capacity to accommodate burials for many years to come, including specific additional provision for Islamic burials.
- The development of shroud burial grounds.
- The re-hearthing of the Sutton Coldfield crematorium and the scheduled rebuilding of Yardley crematorium, which will provide improved services to communities and citizens for whom cremation is their funeral choice.
- Investment in a new ICT infrastructure to ensure that our services provide the efficient and prompt response citizens expect.
- Joint work with our partners in faith communities to develop a Memorandum of Understanding and with all stakeholders to launch a new Customer Charter, to ensure that our services meet the needs and reflect the requirements of our diverse communities.

Council calls on the executive to:

1. Continue to engage and work with the Coroner, partners and communities on steps to eliminate delays within the service.
2. Continue with the work to develop a new mortuary facility for the city, which will include a permanent digital autopsy scanner.
3. Report back on progress with this work to the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee in September.

The purpose of this report is to fulfil the action in point 3 above.

2. Work with the Coroner, Partners and Communities

The Portfolio Holder and Interim Director have attended various meetings with the Senior Coroner, partners and various communities since June to address any concerns and issues there might be. This has included:-

- Meeting hosted by the Senior Coroner with Muslim Community Leaders and Funeral Directors addressing issues concerning the perceived delay in the release of bodies from the Coronial Service. Since the meeting there has been no further issues raised over the release of the deceased for burial.
- The Portfolio Holder and Interim Director attended the launch of the Muslim Association of Funeral Directors. It is pleasing to note the City Council received awards in recognition of the leadership, dedication and support given to the Funeral Directors. Additional work is being carried out to further links including the potential for reciprocal training.
- The Interim Director and Director Designate are attending a meeting with the West Midlands Guild of Funeral Directors to address concerns that were being raised by this organisation- the Interim Director attended a previous meeting in the Summer and this is a follow up. Further information will be made available at the meeting of the Committee.

- The service hosted an open day at Yardley Cemetery/ Crematorium to consult on the proposals for the refurbishment of that facility. This provided useful information which will be incorporated into the project.
- The Bereavement Service previously had separate telephone lines (and numbers) going into offices at each cemetery/ crematorium. This then required staff to be present at each office to answer calls relating to that site. Calls from the community and funeral directors all used the same number and there was not a way of prioritising any caller. There were often complaints about calls not being answered

As part of the work on the City Council's Customer Services Strategy a new telephony system for burials and cremations has been installed. This provides a single number for all telephone calls and a menu option for the caller to choose the service they want, which reduces missed calls about services. Staff are also able to deal with calls about any site at any location. This improves the service to customers, reducing delays that may have occurred.

- The Portfolio Holder has initiated a Muslim Bereavement Steering Group. This had its inaugural meeting at the end of August 2022. The Group's functions are:-
 - Feedback on the bereavement services provided by Birmingham City Council;
 - Be a forum for views on proposed innovations, streamlining processes and service initiatives being undertaken;
 - Be a forum for views on major projects being undertaken in cemeteries;
 - Consider and be a forum for views on proposals for Friends of Cemeteries Groups proposals;
 - Be a forum for comments on priorities for the services;
 - Be a forum for views on and the impact of the Bereavement Services Charter;
 - Discuss and prepare guidance on any proposed and actual legal changes in bereavement services;
 - Collaboration with the Portfolio Holder's Round table on the bereavement services;
 - Organise training events/ seminars for the community and the City Council on relevant topics.
- The Portfolio Holder has met with the Interim Director to address delays in registration arrangements. It is noted there are no existing delays for registrations required for short notice burials or removal of the deceased out of the country. Other registrations (non-urgent) are being undertaken in date order, but any registration requiring earlier recording is prioritised.

Delays do exist for non-urgent registrations. This is due to the demands on the service at a time when there are several staff with long term sickness and vacancies. Recruitment of additional staff is underway but there is an unavoidable time lag. It is clear there is a limited labour market of trained registrars and there will need to be a programmed recruitment of apprentices so the City Council can 'grow its own' staff.

Delays in non-urgent registrations are exacerbated by failure of people to turn up to the agreed appointment and the practice by some of making multiple contacts with the

Register Office about the same case. (This is a similar issue for the Senior Coroner in managing caseload.) The same staff answer repeat requests as carry out registrations, so multiple calls about the same case reduce the time available to register deaths, births and marriages.

A complete review of the staffing structure is being undertaken, and support to staff to reduce sickness due to stress is being provided through awareness sessions.

3. Work to develop a new Mortuary

Work in relation to this project is in the medium to longer term. Following the lack of willingness (due to the business case not stacking up) from other local authorities this project will cover the Birmingham and Solihull Coronal area.

The following work has been undertaken:-

- a. The identification of the area required for the facility
- b. The likely specification for the facility- number of freezer and refrigerated spaces, the number of post mortem facilities, provision of a scanner etc. (It is intended to create a facility that is future proofed for 25 years.)
- c. An initial survey of land in the City Council's ownership that may be suitable. One site is being looked at but requires significant conversion works. An alternative site might be at a cemetery site. A project group is being set up to prepare a business case.

Update reports will be provided in due course.

4. Priorities

The works being undertaken in respect of this Council resolution are continuing at a pace. They are included in the portfolio holder's priorities for the next year. The Portfolio Holder will attend a future meeting of this Committee to outline these priorities.

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Portfolio Holder

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and Enforcement