



Civic Pride

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XXXX

Dear Faith Leader

RE: Funeral Procedures related to COVID-19

The death of a loved one at any time can be a challenging and distressing experience for family and friends. In the event of a sudden and unexpected loss due to Covid-19, the impact of the loss can be even greater. Very sadly, some families may not have had the opportunity to say goodbye to their loved ones before they died, which can be particularly upsetting. The observance of other practices and traditions which normally occur after someone has died may also be affected.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the high number of deaths occurring in a short space of time means that all the processes that take place when someone dies are subject to change. A core part of London's response is to ensure that these processes remain as dignified, respectful and supportive as they can be.

They include how the death is registered, restrictions to access to the person who has died, changes to the location of mortuary facilities and transportation from the place of death to the site of burial or cremation.

The need to stay at home and save lives through minimising the spread of infection applies in all circumstances. This presents specific challenges to bereaved families and friends wishing to attend the funerals and cremations of loved ones, or to comfort each other in close proximity; it also affects the religious practices and traditions that take place after someone has died.

We are working hard with our community faith leaders, representatives of the professional funeral sector and others to offer support and to ensure that, wherever possible, family wishes will be acknowledged and respected.

Appendix 1 attached to this letter provides guidance on the death and burial or cremation processes that take place after someone dies of Covid-19.

I hope this information is of some assistance.

Yours sincerely

Themis Skouros
Group Manager, Environmental Health

Enclosures:

Excess Mortuary Storage Instruction form, including contact telephone number to assist in the process.

Appendix 1

Process between death and burial or cremation

Registration of the death

If the person dies in hospital, the doctor will complete the Medical Certificate of Cause of Death (MCCD) form. This will then be scanned and emailed to the Register Office.

If a person dies outside of a hospital environment, in the community, the Pandemic Multi-Agency Response Team (PMART) team will submit the sudden death report and prepare the deceased for removal to a mortuary or funeral home. The PMART will then leave the premises.

The central coordination team includes GPs working remotely who will sign the MCCD and the burial and cremation burial/cremation form (form 4).

The Registrar will then issue a form for burial or cremation by electronic transfer to a funeral director or burial society. The funeral director will then arrange the burial or cremation in accordance with the family's wishes, as far as possible.

Where a family needs assistance finding an available funeral director, it may be possible for the Local Authority Bereavement Services Team to identify a funeral director who has the capacity to engage with the family, using access to a master list of all available funeral directors.

Movement of the deceased

If the person dies in hospital, they will be taken to a mortuary either at that hospital or at another location - a funeral home or a temporary mortuary. A number of temporary mortuaries have been put in place in London as part of the mortality management. If the person died at home or elsewhere in the community, the PMART will come and prepare the deceased so that they can be taken to a mortuary.

Due to the volume of deaths during the Covid-19 outbreak, it is possible that the person may be taken to a mortuary in a different area.

When it is time for the deceased to be buried or cremated, they will be collected by a funeral director and taken from the mortuary to the cemetery or crematorium.

Viewing/washing of the body

The current advice from Public Health England (PHE) and the Royal College of Pathologists (RCP) is that anyone coming into contact with a person who has been infected by Covid-19 must wear an appropriate level of PPE. Non Covid-19 (or otherwise infectious) deaths will be handled as usual guidance requires.

It will not be possible to view the deceased. This is primarily because of the risk of infection from the deceased and also from those coming to view, who may need to be in self-isolation.

Where local guidance states that no mourners may be present at funerals, the only chance for loved ones to say goodbye will be at the point of death or shortly thereafter, in hospitals or community settings.

Government guidance for communities on care of the deceased states that, "Given the very significant risk for vulnerable and extremely vulnerable people who come into contact with the virus, it is strongly advised that they have no contact with the body. This includes washing, preparing or dressing the body. If the person died following Covid-19 infection, their body will be prepared in a way which precludes direct contact, viewing and washing."

Holding a funeral

The high number of deaths – coupled with the ongoing risk of infection during the pandemic – has changed the way that funerals can be carried out.

UK Government guidance does not currently suggest limits to the number of mourners that can attend funerals. Relatives are advised to consult with their funeral director, faith and/or community leader for guidance on how the funeral should be conducted.

- No-one should attend a funeral if they have COVID-19 symptoms or should be self-isolating.
- Anyone who has been in contact with the deceased within a 14-day period leading up to their death should self-isolate.
- Those in 'at risk' groups are urged to stay at home.
- Anyone attending a funeral should observe social distancing guidelines, i.e. to remain two metres apart from anyone not living in their household at all times.
- Transport to and from the funeral should only be shared by those living in the same household.
- Do not publicly advertise the funeral details to reduce the risk of other, well-meaning mourners arriving unexpectedly.
- Gatherings of any form, whether within the boundaries of resting places or in their vicinity (including areas outside the gates of cemeteries or crematoria) present clear and significant risks to those present, including staff and ministers, and increases the pressure on healthcare services.

There are a range of options that may allow mourners to participate remotely in burials and cremations and/or to commemorate the person who has died. These include livestreaming the funeral service, online memorial gatherings and virtual books of remembrance.

In addition, it may be helpful for families to plan memorial services for their loved ones that could be held in the future, potentially many months after a person has been buried.

Our aim is, where possible, is to ensure that faith celebrants, or a dedicated member of staff from crematoria and funeral directors, are on site to offer final prayers or read brief family statements.

As far as possible this will be a celebrant of the family's choice of faith / no faith, but it may not be the individual of their choice. This provides, as a minimum, a personal touch for every person who dies during this wave of Covid-19. Faith-based organisations and crematoria may be able to advise on the options available.

Religious practices

The Faith Cell of the Strategic Coordination Group (SCG) - which leads London's response on behalf of the Mayor of London - is working with faith communities across London to ensure that those of all faiths and none are consulted and kept informed about changes to these processes as the pandemic continues to unfold. It is setting up an Faith Advisory Panel of core representatives of different faiths and backgrounds, together with a much broader contact group.

It is hoped that families will continue to be able to determine whether the deceased should be buried or cremated in accordance with the wishes of that individual.