

Deceased Management Advisory Group

Pandemic COVID-19 Interim Lessons Learned Paper

The pandemic has had a profound impact on the delivery of essential services across the UK, including those related to deceased management. It was necessary to increase capacity as the number of excess deaths rose through the current emergency, whilst maintaining the care and dignity required of the sector.

The support of the UK government and devolved administrations has been essential, providing not only a regulatory framework to streamline funeral administration but also practical measures, such as PPE supplies through the LRF network. DMAG welcomes the initiatives taken by government and praises their willingness to work with the sector.

We are aware that there remain concerns both about a 'second wave' and localised 'hot spots' of the virus developing. With these concerns in mind DMAG has carried out an interim review of the response by the death management sector to the pandemic. The purpose of this review is not to arrive at a definitive position on the success or otherwise of the measures implemented, clearly that will be for any inquiry which takes place later. It is to learn any lessons from our collective experience and apply them so the sector will be better placed to react to any increase in deaths during the short to medium term.

On that basis we commend the attached report and welcome the opportunity to discuss its contents and the 7 outcomes we believe are essential to improving any future response to a renewed increase in deaths.

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Introduction

It was known that the pandemic would result in an unprecedented increase in deaths.

The three key objectives for the sector at this time were:

- Ensuring mortuary capacity was not overwhelmed, through:
- Delivering an increased number of dignified, limited funeral services.
- Delivering an increased number of dignified, limited cremations and burials.

To achieve the increase in capacity it was necessary to introduce a range of initiatives and radically alter operating procedures. These changes had varying results, in view of a possible 'second wave' this interim paper considers learning which could be applied to enable the sector to deliver a more effective response.

Government

The government has responsibility to define the framework and culture of the response to the pandemic through legislative changes, sector engagement, communication and implementing the pandemic planning which the sector organisations had contributed to as recently as 2019. It was questioned why the 2007-2009 pandemic planning by the NAFD and SAIF with the Civil Contingencies Unit was not deployed.

Legislative changes

- Streamlining statutory cremation documentation and enabling registration of deaths via phone calls increased capacity and was widely welcomed across the sector.
- Closing crematoria, apart from for funerals, enabled cremation authorities to focus on delivering cremation services.
- Closing cemeteries was also welcomed for the same reasons, however, the original legislation in England was poorly drafted and confusing.

Overall, the legislative changes were viewed as being extremely supportive to the sector in achieving its objectives.



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In particular, the GRO who introduced fast tracked death registration and certification. There were some reports of delays by the Coroners' offices, which added to storage capacity issues in funeral homes. Can the deployment of additional resources in any future event be explored with the Office of the Chief Coroner?

However, it was recognised that if government had shared their proposals with a representative group from the sector first, the legislation could have been more effective.

Engagement

- The primary channel for government to engage with the sector was through the Cabinet Office. The weekly meeting was extremely inclusive involving representatives of trade organisations, individual companies, government departments and devolved administrations. Whilst the meetings were informative the large number attending, approximately 40, and limited to an hour did not allow for any in depth discussion, exploration of topics or resolution of cross cutting issues.
- The introduction of the Deceased Management Advisory Group (DMAG) provided a sector wide point of contact for central and devolved governments. The dialogue which developed proved extremely useful for sharing information, exploring issues and inputting into the development of policy. The Group welcomed and continues to do so, the regular interaction with the various Government Departments and devolved Parliaments at their daily meetings.
- Despite the channels available on occasion, especially at the start of the emergency, it was felt that government were not taking the opportunity to engage with the sector over specific initiatives, for example, the varied responses from LRF's or to take the lead in co-ordinating their activities.
- Overall, the engagement through DMAG was extremely productive, enabling both government and the sector to explore issues, seek solutions and share a wide range of information. Hopefully, this will continue going forward into the longer term future.



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- In addition, DMAG proved to be an early warning system of the prevalence of the virus across the regions and notably occurrences of deaths in care homes 10 days prior to other streams of information being collected by the Government.

Communication

- The lack of communication over key information, for example death rate modelling, was felt to be a significant issue and remains a concern for preparedness in the sector for a second surge in COVID-19 deaths.
- The introduction of PMARTs without any prior discussion or communication was felt to have undermined local funeral directors. No information has been shared justifying why it was necessary to introduce this measure of 'last resort'.
- The wide number of government departments issuing communications and advice relating to the death management sector was confusing.
- The delays in receiving guidance on crucial issues such as PPE usage, and a lack of consultation on the guidance, led to confusion and a lack of confidence among sector colleagues once the guidance was issued. This was further exacerbated by devolved administrations issuing guidance which sometimes differed on fundamental matters, such as the use of body bags.
- Excessive requests for information from LRFs led to survey fatigue, and a reluctance from some in the sector to engage

The desire on the part of government to communicate was recognised. However, it was felt that there should have been a central point in government clearing/issuing information as it was unclear which department was dealing with what. Furthermore, if the sector could have had an input into the development of communication, guidance, and advice, this would have benefited from that expert input.

Sector

The funeral, as a process, is delivered through a partnership of two distinct providers, funeral directors and cemetery/crematoria operators. A significant increase in capacity can only be delivered through both groups of providers cooperating to deliver the agreed outcome.



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Strategic level

- The development of the Deceased Management Advisory Group (DMAG) provided a high-level cross sector working group. Providing all representatives with valuable insights into each other's ways of working, issues and solutions.
- The creation of DMAG sent out a strong message of closer working and cooperation across the representative trade bodies. The culture of working more closely together for the benefit of all was one which delivered benefits to all parts of the sector.
- The group became the first point of contact for central and devolved governments, and as a small group, focusing on strategic issues worked well.
- DMAG provided a single voice to government on behalf of the entire sector.
- DMAG website provided a central point for disseminating information to all parts of the sector.

The creation of DMAG has worked well for the benefit of the sector and it will continue well beyond the current emergency.

Local level

The ability to deliver increased capacity requires partnership working between funeral directors and cemetery/crematoria providers. Embracing flexibility and innovation enables new and different ways of working.

Among the changes which have delivered benefits are:

- Regular meetings (weekly) between funeral directors, and cemetery/crematoria operators and suppliers to the industry provides a forum for issues to be discussed and better ways of working explored.
- Service delivery was streamlined through the adoption of electronic working, registration, electronic statutory forms and greater use of digital meetings.
- Closure of places of worship and catering facilities, along with reduced numbers of mourners shortened the time taken on funerals. As a result, it was possible to increase the number of funerals undertaken in a day.



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- It was best to increase funeral capacity incrementally to meet demand in the following order:
 - a. Additional cremation slots Mon - Fri through shortening service times.
 - b. Add early and late slots, outside normal times.
 - c. Provide slots during weekends and bank holidays.
- Encouraging families to use the 'out of hours' times through funeral directors and cemetery/crematoria operators not adding additional charges.
- Encourage maximum use of crematoria availability through:
 - a. Allow mourners to attend chapel services, following risk-based assessments. Experience suggests families will wish to use crematoria where mourners can attend.
 - b. Stream and record services so those beyond the immediate family can feel involved. (Live streaming can be problematic when there is a high demand for broadband in an area)
 - c. Promote availability of slots at different crematoria to encourage families to use alternative facilities which have capacity.

Whilst a small number of 'hotspots' developed at busy crematoria; the overall response enabled the sector to cope with the increased number of deaths resulting from COVID-19.

Greater clarity on the 'hotspots', along with identifying capacity nearby, could have been achieved if a UK wide, central service availability portal had been available.

Conclusion

The deceased management sector was able to add capacity to meet the demand of the increased death rate, enabling scaled back funerals, burials and cremations to continue in a caring and dignified manner.

Whilst the sector has worked closely with government for several years planning for a pandemic, the practical experience has provided several invaluable insights into how the process could be improved. To be better placed to meet the demand created by any subsequent waves, on behalf of the deceased management sector, DMAG are calling for the following specific outcomes:



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1. The creation of a single government department to take the lead on death management.
2. Improved coordination of LRF's by the lead government department to ensure a more consistent response to their interaction with the deceased management sector.
3. DMAG to be the recognised consultative body by government for the sector.
4. Electronic forms to be retained and their wider adoption encouraged.
5. Telephone death registration to be retained.
6. Greater use of video conferencing to be encouraged.
7. A UK wide central cremation service availability portal is developed, and its adoption encouraged.



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