

Bereavement Services – fees and charges

February 2018

Like all councils, Kirklees Council is facing significant financial challenges and is looking at services where the cost of delivery is higher than the amount we charge. The burials service currently operates at a loss and we need to ensure the costs are covered.

Public Engagement - Methodology

To raise awareness and start a conversation about this topic, following initial consideration at Cabinet Committee on 19 September 2017, Kirklees Council ran an online public engagement process for six weeks, from Monday 30 October 2017 to Friday 8 December 2017. This was followed by face-to-face meetings with some of those who had engaged with us online.

Bereavement Services reached out to various groups in and around Kirklees to invite comments and suggestions. These included:

- funeral directors
- burial committees
- stonemasons (headstones and memorials)
- faith schools
- places of worship
- cultural or faith-based organisations
- community organisations
- Kirklees councillors
- MPs

Some individuals had expressed an interest before the engagement period began, due to publicity around the Cabinet report and Committee meeting on 19th September 2017. We also got back in touch with those people to invite them to share their views during the engagement period.

The engagement and proposals were more generally promoted on the Kirklees Council website, via social media, and in the local press.

Online engagement

This involved emailing groups and individuals, providing them with a link to the Council's website. On the website, we:

- shared headline information on the service,
- shared proposed fees and charges,
- showed local comparators,
- asked for views on the proposed increase in charges needed for the service to operate on a non-subsidised basis, and
- invited suggestions on how we can provide the service in an affordable and more efficient way in the future.

A dedicated email account (bereavement.engagement@kirklees.gov.uk) was created and monitored daily throughout the engagement period. All respondents received a thank you acknowledgement, with bespoke responses and further information sent where needed.

Face to face meetings

Following from the six week period, some respondents were invited to face to face discussions on the proposals and potential ways forward.

Sessions were held in January 2018 in:

- Batley Town Hall
- Dewsbury town Hall
- Huddersfield Town Hall.

Sessions were led by Cllr Shabir Pandor (Deputy Leader), Naz Parkar (Strategic Director) and Joanne Bartholomew (Service Director).

Attendees included funeral directors, burial committees, community representatives and individuals.

Who responded?

457 responses were received through the online engagement process, during the 6 week period in November and December 2017. Responses carried from a single word or sentence objection to the proposals, through to detailed expressions of considered views. Some responses were from representatives of community – based groups and committees.

Many of the community groups outlined above took time to provide a response, usually by email but also via letter, phone call, via a local councillor and through a group response or petition.

Responses were received from funeral directors, councillors and MPs as well as from burial committees including the Muslim Burial Council of North Kirklees, Huddersfield Muslim Burial Council and IMWS Burial Services.

Two petitions were also received following the publication of the Cabinet Committee report in September 2017.

The majority of responses received are from members of our Muslim communities. It is clear that some groups felt they will be more affected by the proposed changes than others, and so the overall response cannot be said to be representative of the Kirklees population in general. Instead, it provided as indication of the strength of feeling from those that have chosen to share their views.

A number of local ward councillors responded with own views or to share comments of constituents,

3 local MPs responded to oppose the proposed changes.

Press coverage and messages on social media enabled the invitation to participate in the 6 week engagement period to be shared widely.

The face to face meetings during January 2018 were well attended, with each session lasting approximately 90 minutes. The sessions were consistent in their agenda and format, including explaining the purpose of the session, providing an overview of feedback to date, clarifying key facts and challenges and providing an open question time. Next steps were outlined at the end with participants thanked for their contributions and attendance.

All sessions had consistency in individuals expressing views that funeral costs were high for most and that some people struggled to afford funeral costs now. All sessions

acknowledged that faith and belief meant that cheaper options were not feasible for them to choose. All sessions sought transparency of information, particularly bookings and service times for burials.

Summary of findings

The emailed responses and face to face meetings generated a variety of views, suggestions, requests and observations.

Against the proposed changes

Key themes from comments received against the proposed charges related to:

- The costs increasing too steeply / above the rate of inflation, making them unaffordable.
- Any increase in costs would make paying for these services more difficult for low income families.
- Costs increasing for burials more than cremations, being viewed as unfair / having more of an effect on those faiths that believe burial to be a necessity on religious grounds.
- Similarly, criticism of a lack of or insufficient Equality Impact Assessments.
- A feeling that grieving families should not have to bear high costs / any cost at all to obtain bereavement services.
- A perception that Kirklees Council is treating bereavement as a business (trying to make a profit).
- While some recognised that savings need to be made, they felt other council services should bear the brunt of the cuts.
- Some felt there had not been sufficient engagement or consultation before the draft proposals were discussed at Cabinet.
- There were requests for transparency of costs - costs to deliver services, costs to recover.
- Some criticism of a reduction in Saturday cremation fee but burial fees increasing – felt to 'target' the Muslim community / faith.
- Disagreement with published costs.

In favour of the proposed changes

While the majority of responses were objecting to the proposed changes, a small selection of supportive comments was also received. These generally related to the following points:

- The cost of the service should reflect the cost of delivery – it should run at full cost recovery.
- An understanding that the council needs to reduce costs due to a changing population and reduced central Government funding.
- An understanding that charging more for burials (particularly out of hours/weekend services) is necessary as those services cost more to deliver.
- Agreement to remove charges for children's burial and cremations.
- Short notice funerals should incur additional charges,

Suggestions for alternative approaches

Some respondents made suggestions for alternative approaches which they felt could mitigate the need to raise (mainly burial) costs:

- Increase the cost of cremations in order to subsidise burial services.
- Consider providing additional services / charges such as memorials, annual fees.
- Make savings in other ways including reducing the number of ward councillors per ward, senior managers or tiers of management within Bereavement Services.
- Means testing – charge individually, according to finances available.
- Explore opportunities to work with communities to deliver their own burials.
- A few provided detailed proposals to potential new ways of charging (for specific times/aspects of the service).
- Increase Council Tax to prevent the increases in burial fees.
- Increase prices only in line with inflation.
- Freeze burial prices.
- Align burial and cremation charges.
- Review service times in crematoria (to remove lunchtime closure) and burials (to avoid prayer times and offer later evening burials)
- Transparency of burials bookings within set / defined service times.
- Cease use of references to 'pauper funerals' with respect to Government-provided funeral expense payments.
- Use of pre-cast burial chambers / grave linings to enable pre-dug stock of graves.

Requests for information

- More detailed breakdown of costs
- Benchmarking / how we compare with other local authorities
- Technical queries regarding depths for burials and grave types
- Clarity on charges for under 18 year olds
- Queries regarding cemetery capacity and grave re-use
- How to access the Equality Impact Assessments
- Locations of the 14 council cemeteries
- Query re lease periods for grave ownership

Some general observations were made regarding the quality of the service currently provided, specifically noting poor quality services and inefficiencies.

A suggestion was made for the Council to value the outcome of the engagement before proposals are finalised.

Next steps

We have now, over a 3 month period, provided online and face to face opportunities for local people and local groups to have their say about changes to Bereavement Services fees and charges.

The engagement process has enabled a variety of views to be heard and for suggestions to be made about how the service could be provided in an affordable and more efficient way in the future.

February 2018 – Summary of Engagement Process

We will now consider the outcomes of the public engagement exercise and evaluate what options can be considered in the short, medium and long term.

This summary of responses will be shared with decision makers, those who took part in the engagement process as well as being made available online.

A revised Cabinet report on the future fees and charges for Bereavement Services will be considered by Cabinet Committee in March 2018. Kirklees Council's Cabinet Committee will make the final decision regarding fees and charges for Bereavement Services. The outcomes of Cabinet Committee will be communicated to those who have participated in the full engagement process as well as an update being provided online.

Sarah Durdin, February 2018.