



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA
All-Party Parliamentary Group for Funerals and Bereavement

APPG Minutes, 26th April 2022

Attendees

Sir John Hayes MP, Sir Robert Goodwill MP, Martin Vickers MP, Tom Tugendhat MP (represented by Conor Dobbs), Paul Allcock (SAIF), Richard Barradell (APCC), Jon Levett (NAFD), Rachel Bradburne (NAFD), Wendy Buchan (The Cremation Society), Terry Tennens (SAIF), Anne Barber (CCL), Philip Spicksley (AOIC), Richy Thompson (Humanists UK), Jennifer Bryant-Pearson (JBP).

Apologies

Baroness Garden of Frognal, Baroness Ilora Finlay, Mark Pawsey MP, Lord Taylor, Mohamed Omer OBE (Gardens of Peace), Julie Dunk (ICCM), Brendan Day (FBCA), Alun Tucker (FFMA).

Introductions

Sir John Hayes MP opened the meeting and welcomed those in attendance.

Sir John invited the guests, Philip Spicksley (Association of Independent Celebrants), Anne Barber (Civil Ceremonies Limited) and Richy Thompson (Humanists UK), to give the Group an account of their experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Introduction to Philip Spicksley, Executive Chairman of the Association of Independent Celebrants (AOIC)

Philip Spicksley introduced himself and his organisation, noting recent growth and current organisation structure. Philip noted that the AOIC was the only Celebrant trade body in existence. The AOIC are a member of numerous other trade associations. Philip noted that Celebrants are an integral part of the sector and that there are many people who still do not understand the difference between Humanist Celebrants and Independent Celebrants; he explained that there are indeed many in the sector that do not understand what a Celebrant is. Philip noted that an independent celebrant will include anything that the family wishes, catering to their requests, and are popular because they allow grieving families certain freedoms of choice that may not be awarded by a religious minister or service.

During Covid-19, the Association met once a week to update members on the changing regulatory environment. Upon establishment of the Deceased Management Advisory Group (DMAG), the AOIC

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expressed a wish to be involved, and they maintain a close relationship with members such as the NAFD, SAIF and the FFMA.

Philip noted the difficulty the AOIC experienced with changing regulations and government guidelines. He was concerned that Celebrants were overlooked during government communication and that had they been represented properly this issue would not have arisen.

Sir John Hayes MP thanked Philip for his contributions and his account of the pandemic and asked Anne Barber to speak.

Anne Barber introduced herself and her role at Civil Ceremonies Limited and explained that her role is to train Celebrants. Once accredited with the appropriate qualifications Celebrants will then join organisations such as the AOIC. Anne noted that the CCL maintain close relationships with their graduates.

Richy Thompson from Humanists UK then explained that Humanists are non-religious people who maintain a naturalistic view of the world. About 7% of the UK population identify as humanists – although the number of people who share the humanist view of life is much higher. Humanists UK have 100,000 members and supporters and have been active since 1896. Richy noted that there are 550 active Humanist Celebrants. Creating a personal service was made very difficult in the pandemic, where funerals had to be short and limited in attendees. Often funerals did not happen at all, with a ceremony taking place later. Humanists UK managed to communicate effectively with various government departments throughout the pandemic. The pastoral care side of Humanism was however, made more difficult due to restrictions.

Sir John thanked the speakers and noted the importance of all people and organisations involved in funerals and death care. Sir John noted a shared view about the significance of the roles they play in working with funeral directors. There is a need to recognise the role of people associated with funeral ceremonies.

Sir Robert Goodwill noted that a number of families opt for direct cremations, where a memorial event takes place after the death. Sir Robert asked if a Humanist or Celebrant could give a ceremony at a memorial event, when there has been an earlier direct cremation.

Anne Barber highlighted that the qualification CCL offers teaches people how to give a memorial service. Covid often meant that a memorial service was taking place sometimes up to a year after the death. Many families have yet to have the opportunity to hold such a service.

Paul Allcock noted that the conversation would need to take place at the point of direct cremation, and said that there are many people who have postponed funerals. There is currently an increase in demand for memorials, sometimes 18 months after the death. Funeral directors will still liaise with the celebrant in the traditional way.

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Westminster Hall Debate: Covid-19 Inquiry

Sir John noted the recent success of the APPG during the recent Westminster Hall debate where the Group received a very positive response from the Minister (Heather Wheeler MP) - noting that the Cabinet Office will include the deathcare sector in its terms of reference as frontline workers. Sir John has followed up with a letter to confirm the government's position.

Public Health Funerals (PHFs)

Rachel Bradburne explained recent issues surrounding Public Health Funerals (PHFs), specifically in the last 6 months. NAFD is concerned by the QSA (Quaker Social Action) report published in June last year, on the inconsistency in the provision of PHFs.

Some local authorities (LAs) are not carrying out their responsibilities correctly according to the QSA report. These issues are: guidance not being followed, ashes not being returned, and untimely action. In some cases it can take up to a year for decisions to be made. Rachel confirmed that she has liaised with Julie Dunk (ICCM) who shares this concern. Some London boroughs are not coping with the sheer amount of PHFs. LAs have limited budgets, so are struggling to cope. The NAFD is asking all LAs to look at policy and procedure and see if they comply with the government guidance. Rachel reminded the Group that training is available for Local Authorities to ensure they are meeting the standard expected of them – this training can be provided by the ICCM.

Sir John noted his support for these issues and highlighted the responsibility of LAs to behave appropriately. Sir John agreed that PHFs should maintain a minimum standard and that this should not be too hard to achieve. If PHFs are failing then it is the APPG's responsibility to bring this to the government's attention. Sir John noted that PHFs should meet a basic human standard. The Group must make it very clear to government that PHFs must be meeting that standard.

Wendy Buchan explained that the Churches Funerals Group is about to publish guidance on PHFs and best practice. It would be beneficial to liaise with them.

Paul Allcock agreed it is important that there is a standard for all to follow. Many PHFs have minimal attendance, but it should not make any difference to the service that is provided to the dead. There has to be a duty of respect and care to the dead – whether or not people are in attendance.

Sir John noted that in some instances LAs prevented any attendance to PHFs and this mustn't be the case.

Sir Robert noted that one of the reasons why unattended cremations take place, is that having a cremation at the end of the day is much cheaper. Some LAs take the view that if families want to attend the funeral then they can pay for it. If the option is too easily accessible, then we might see many families who can pay for a funeral themselves, using PHFs. We must find the right balance.

Sir John said that the Group should ask government to reinforce core standards, noting he does not think it appropriate for LAs to decide who attends.

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Rachel Bradburne said that LAs do work hard to locate someone to pay and have a commitment to upholding dignity; the government must however reinforce best practice.

Update on Medical Examiners Scheme

At the last APPG meeting, Richard Barradell discussed the MoJ and DHSC's plans to roll out the Medical Examiners system this summer. Despite concerns expressed from the sector around the amount of work that must be completed prior to the full introduction of the system, the sector has still not received full details or a timetable from central government.

Sir John noted that he has tabled some Parliamentary Questions on this topic to the aforementioned Departments and that the APPG will write to the Ministers on this issue.

Any other business

Sir John noted that he has submitted a Parliamentary Question on the issue of rebated fuels for the crematorium and cemeteries sector but is yet to receive a response from HMRC. Sir John will endeavour to follow up with HMRC to get an answer for Julie Dunk.

Sir John noted that our in-person meeting in May will focus on the Environment, and we have worked hard to secure the attendance of the Environment Minister, Rebecca Pow MP.

With no other business, Sir John closed the meeting and thanked everyone for their attendance.

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