



AN ABDICATION OF DUTY?

LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND ACCESS TO PUBLIC
HEALTH FUNERALS

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QUAKER
SOCIAL
ACTION
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An abdication of duty?

Local authorities and access to public health funerals

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This report provides a unique insight into what it is like for a member of the public to try and access a public health funeral from their local authority.

It is a human right to be able to grieve in peace. Yet, at Down to Earth, every year we support hundreds of people unable to do this because they are struggling under the weight of funeral costs. Sometimes, the financial options are so limited, they simply cannot afford to take on the funeral arrangements.

No one should be in this position, but hundreds of people are, every year.

Seeking help from the local authority in this situation can take courage, and be bound up in many difficult emotions. The process needs to be compassionate, simple and equitable. It obviously needs to follow the law.

This report shows a very different reality in many local authority areas.”

Lindesay Mace, Down to Earth manager, Quaker Social Action



Executive summary

- Mystery shopping investigation of 27 local authorities indicates that 10 are not carrying out their legal duty with regard to public health funerals, turning people away when they do not have the funds to pay for a funeral and need their council to take responsibility
- A survey of 40 local authority websites found that at least 65% are not following Government guidelines on public health funerals. 14 had no information available online whatsoever and of the 26 that did, 12 had no contact details for people who need to notify their local authority of a death requiring a public health funeral
- Over half of the websites with information contained incorrect or misleading information. The most common error related to local authorities' legal duty, with a third misrepresenting the circumstances in which someone can access a public health funeral
- Two local authorities indicate from their website that they could cremate someone against their wishes if there were insufficient funds or the cost was deemed unreasonable, which goes against their legal duty in the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984¹.
- Only six local authorities make clear in their online information that family and/or friends would be able to attend the funeral, but one of those also states that “if there is a refusal to pay” they will be under “no obligation” to inform family and friends of the time and place. Only two clearly state that the cremated remains can be collected if wished, whatever the situation.

1. Introduction

At [Quaker Social Action](#), we have been supporting people struggling with funeral costs for over a decade, through our UK-wide funeral costs helpline [Down to Earth](#). The core of the service is direct client work, assisting people to plan a meaningful funeral that is as affordable as possible. In doing so, our front-line experience places us in a unique and privileged position to speak truth to power about funeral poverty in the UK. Exposing failings around public health funerals² is a key part of this work.

For many clients our support takes the form of helping them to find a less expensive funeral director, to consider different choices, to access any money left by the deceased and to raise funds, whether from statutory, charitable or community sources. However, sometimes these options are limited and it just isn't possible for them to take responsibility for the funeral without taking on unmanageable debt. Sadly, this can be when our real battle begins – getting a local authority to carry out its legal duty by arranging and paying for the funeral.

What is a public health funeral?

The legal duty imposed on local authorities in England and Wales is contained in The Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984:

*“It shall be **the duty of a local authority to cause to be buried or cremated the body of any person who has died or been found dead in their area, in any case where it appears to the authority that no suitable arrangements for the disposal of the body have been or are being made otherwise than by the authority**” (our emphasis).*

While local authorities must not cremate the deceased where they have reason to believe this would be against their wishes, otherwise, how they carry out their duty and what arrangements they make is up to them – there is no legal requirement to provide a funeral service, though most do³.

Where a funeral service does take place, they tend to be very simple and take place early in the day. A local authority may recover the associated costs, or however much is available towards them, from the estate of the deceased person where any exists.

Scotland and Northern Ireland are covered by two separate pieces of legislation that are very similar to the Public Health Act regarding this issue⁴. One key difference is that in Scotland local authorities “must ... have regard to any wishes that the person expressed as to means of disposal of the person's remains”, thereby covering not just a rejection of cremation, but also a rejection of burial, and, importantly, “whether the person was of a particular religion or belief”.

When might a public health funeral be needed?

- The deceased has no (traceable) family or close friends OR
- There is no one who can take financial responsibility for the funeral OR
- There is no one willing to take responsibility for the funeral – e.g. the family may have been estranged

2. Research aims and approach

Our starting point: how easy is it to find information on public health funerals?

Our experience is that accessing this crucial support is not always easy, for us when supporting Down to Earth clients, let alone for bereaved people who may well not know the law or how the system works. So, over the last six months, we set out to dig a bit deeper into some local authority practices across the UK.

In September 2020, the UK Government issued [Public health funerals: good practice guidance](#) for England and Wales. While it is only guidance, and therefore unenforceable, and, in our opinion, is lacking in various areas, it is the first time any such government advice has been issued. A positive step, but to what extent is it being followed?

As a small team, we focused our research on 40 local authorities, in England and Wales – the 32 London boroughs, plus eight other councils. In choosing these other areas we aimed for as broad a geographical spread as possible, while also taking into account size of population and the 2019 Index of Multiple Deprivation produced by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. We aim to have the biggest impact where it might be needed most.

Online transparency

In order to have the chance of accessing any kind of service, you first need to be able to make contact with the right people – in this case, the appropriate department at the relevant local authority. This should be easy, but our experience has shown that the reality is often very different. All councils are structured differently, so while the responsibility might fall to bereavement services in one council, in another it will be adult social care, somewhere else environmental health, finance or even court of protection. Unless there is clear, easily accessible information on their website, it is the proverbial minefield.

The Government's good practice guidance states, "it is helpful to have a written policy on public health funerals which can be shared publicly on the local authority's website." The top three pieces of information suggested for inclusion are:

- Explanation of the circumstances in which a funeral will be offered.
- How to notify the local authority of a death which may require a public health funeral, including contact details.
- Local arrangements for a public health burial or cremation and the features of any service (if offered) – including the approach to considerations related to religion or belief.

In order to get a picture of the online information provided by local authorities for the public on this issue, we surveyed the websites of our 40 councils. We collected data⁵ on the following:

- Whether there is any information online
- How easy it was to find
- Any inaccurate information
- Whether it says if burial or cremation is the default
- Any information given regarding the type of grave
- The requirement to consider the deceased's wishes if they are against cremation
- Any information about what is provided
- Whether family and friends are allowed to attend
- Whether ashes can be returned
- The local authority's ability to reclaim costs from the deceased's estate
- Whether any contact details are provided

Mystery shopping

On discovering, not entirely to our surprise, that a large proportion of our 40 local authorities carried no contact details on their website, we also carried out a mystery shopping exercise⁶ with any that did not provide a phone number, to see how easy it was to get through to the right department⁷.

Scenario: the caller's uncle had died – the funeral hadn't been planned, but the body had been collected as they died at home overnight. The caller was in receipt of working tax credit (not including the disability element) and had already been told by the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) that they were not eligible for a Funeral Expenses Payment.

We chose to use a mystery shopping scenario because we anticipated that this would provide a more realistic picture of how people enquiring about public health funerals are treated and how easily, or not, they are able to access the right department, than if we had called the local authorities in our usual persona as a charity working to tackle funeral poverty.

We anticipated, within the mystery shopping, that it may take several calls, or conversations with different departments, before we were hopefully directed to the right person, so we recorded how many of these it took. We also did our best to verify if the number or department we had been directed to was in fact the correct one, but this was not always possible because voicemails we left were not always returned. We then recorded our experience of the call and our attempts to get the help needed.

3. Summary of research findings

Online transparency

Publicly available information of some kind

We found that 14 of 40 local authority websites had no information at all. Where some information existed, we rated the ease with which it could be found (Very Easy, Easy, OK, Difficult, Very Difficult). Seven were deemed Very Difficult to find and five were Difficult. One of the 14 with reasonably accessible information (Hull City) is an 11-page policy and one (Lambeth) provides statistical information rather than guidance for people needing a public health funeral.

Contact details

Only half of those assessed as having reasonably accessible information give clear contact details, another two provide some details, but presented in a way that they are hard to find or that suggest they are not for use if someone, particularly a member of the public, wants to access a public health funeral. Seven councils with webpages classed as Difficult / Very Difficult to find have contact details.

Inaccurate information

16 of the 26 that hold information, one of which serves two councils, contain one or more pieces of inaccurate or misleading information. Categories included: when a public health funeral can be accessed (nine), recovery of costs (four), legal requirement not to cremate against wishes (two) and source of referrals (one). Two of these 15, plus three others, also state that a hospital, or care home, is responsible for arranging the funeral when the person died in their care. While this could be the local arrangement, this was not stated and, as hospitals and care homes have no legal duty to take responsibility, this could be misleading.

Scoring

We used a scoring system to assess the online information of the 26 local authorities that provide some kind of details on their website, scoring them out of a total of 13.

No local authorities got the maximum score and only the top five got 6 or above.

The top five	
Haringey, The London Borough of	11.5
Hackney, The London Borough of	10.5
Birmingham City	8
Hammersmith & Fulham, The London Borough of	8
Nottingham City	6

The bottom five	
Sutton, The London Borough of	0.5
Bromley, The London Borough of	-0.5
Southwark, The London Borough of	-1
Camden, The London Borough of	-3
Islington, The London Borough of	-3

While the guidance only applies to England and Wales, the two pieces of legislation covering Scotland and Northern Ireland are similar to the Public Health Act. So, in addition to the 40 local authorities in England and Wales, we also surveyed those of Belfast (no information), Edinburgh (no information) and Glasgow (score 5.5). We are not aware of any statutory standards, or even any similar guidance, existing in Northern Ireland or Scotland, but our findings suggest that there is just as much of a need for it.

Mystery shopping

Our mystery shopper was only able to make contact with the right department in 15 cases. He called the 27 local authorities on our list that either provide no information online or do not provide a phone number. In four cases he was unable to confirm if the department he was directed to was correct as he had to leave a message and did not get a call back, and with one council there was such a bad line during two attempted phone calls that he couldn't have a conversation.

Only four (Bradford, Croydon, Enfield and Sandwell) of those 15 councils offered the possibility of a public health funeral. Two of these do not have any information online (Bradford and Croydon), so it was positive that they were fairly easy to get through to on the phone. Croydon was the only council our mystery shopper described as providing a positive experience as he was offered condolences; was not persistently asked for personal details, despite saying he was just making an enquiry at this stage, and did not have to argue his case.

The two reasons given for not helping, where we know contact was made with the right department, were firstly (six) that **they could only take referrals from a coroner/hospital/social worker** i.e. they could not take referrals from the public, and secondly (four) that they would not help **if there was any next of kin**, regardless of whether or not they could afford it. A department at one other local authority said they did not think the council carried these out anymore, that they used to hold "paupers' funerals", but for people with no money and no family.

Not only does the guidance state that "notification can be given by the family or a friend", there is no provision in the legislation for councils to impose either of these rules – if arrangements are not being made then the local authority has a legal duty to take responsibility. Our research raises concerns that in some cases councils are abdicating their duty and that people who need help are falling through the cracks. As would have been the case with our client Samantha, had she not been referred to us.

Case study - Samantha's story

Samantha had been estranged from her brother, Kevin, for over eleven years when he died in November 2020. He had no other close relatives. She was told that he couldn't have a public health funeral and that, as a direct relative, she would need to organise and pay for one herself, even though she couldn't afford it.

After an exhaustive period of phone calls, legal guidance, and emotional support from her family, Samantha finally convinced Barnsley Council that it was the only option. A simple, non-attended funeral was arranged for Kevin, over three months after he had died.

'I started looking into direct funerals but the prices were from about £1,500 to £2,500. I just couldn't afford to take on the debt.

'I'd fallen out with Kevin after he didn't turn up to our Dad's funeral – we'd barely been in touch since.

'It wasn't just Kevin's funeral costs. When I called to try and give up his flat, I was told I would need to pay for any repairs. I knew I'd be entering into a money pit; his flat had been left in a bad way. If I took responsibility for the funeral I'd have to take responsibility for everything else. I couldn't afford it and I wasn't eligible for the Funeral Expenses Payment.

'Luckily, I was put in touch with Sophie at Down to Earth. We started contacting the council to organise a public health funeral for Kevin.

'We were being passed from pillar to post. People kept giving me different numbers and I was going round in circles – I wanted to give up.

'It was about doing right by my mum. If she was looking down I knew she would have been saying that I need to do something. At this point Kevin had been in the mortuary for four or five weeks. It was looking more and more disrespectful that he hadn't had a funeral yet.

'One minute, you get off the phone and you think, right, I'm one step ahead here, but the next day you get a phone call and you're two steps back. It was just perseverance, really.

'It wasn't until 21 January 2021, over three months since he'd died, that they finally agreed to give him a public health funeral.

'They did ask if I wanted to attend and I said no as I didn't want to cause more expense if there wasn't enough in his estate. All I wanted was to lay Kevin to rest.

'I scattered his ashes on my mum's grave. When I can afford it I'll put on a headstone so it does show that he was here.

'I don't think you should have to argue for a public health funeral. It should be made more straightforward and quicker. Without Down to Earth I wouldn't have known where to turn.'

Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council does not share any contact details for arranging a public health funeral on its [website](#). It required three phone calls from a Down to Earth case worker to reach Business Core Services, the department in charge of arranging public health funerals. After being turned down twice, it wasn't until the case worker quoted specific legislation from the [Public Health \(Control of Disease\) Act 1984](#) and a further follow up email was sent that Samantha received confirmation that a public health funeral would be arranged. The funeral itself did not take place for a further 10 weeks after this.

Mystery shopping experience - Paul Golding, Down to Earth volunteer

In many cases it proved difficult or even impossible to speak to the right department or person. Most council switchboard operators did not know which department dealt with public health funerals or funeral-related issues and seemingly did not have access to information to find out. In one case, I was transferred to housing benefit with the comment “though they probably cannot help”.

If I was transferred to a department (often adult social services), the majority of council employees I spoke to were not aware of their council’s policy and only a few offered to find out. Many seemed reluctant to help and simply directed me to the DWP to apply for the Funeral Expenses Payment. On numerous occasions, even after informing them I had been in touch with the DWP and I didn’t qualify, I was simply told to call them again.

The most shocking aspect though was the lack of compassion shown by many council employees. Despite informing them of my recent loss and requesting help, most treated me in a cold, dispassionate manner, and in some cases I felt I was an inconvenience.

When I finally did get through to the right person I often felt as if I was being interrogated. I was pressured into divulging personal information (e.g. addresses, financial information, work status, for both myself and the deceased) despite having made it clear that I was just making an enquiry and even, at times, after clarifying I was not comfortable giving out such details at this stage. Several even became indignant and rude after my clarification and told me I might not receive any help at all unless I complied immediately.

While some staff members were kind and offered condolences, there was also a litany of inappropriate comments. One person told me that after the cremation “the remains are thrown in a peace garden” and another scoffed when I asked if it would be a burial or a cremation, indicating it was ridiculous even to suggest a burial.

Overall, I was astonished by the lack of compassion, knowledge and the unwillingness to help. Many councils either stated that it wasn’t something they provided or that I didn’t qualify. Of these, only five councils ventured to offer advice by specifying organisations I could contact for further help, beyond the DWP. The vast majority offered no additional help at all.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

We believe the Government guidance is lacking in several areas. Most importantly, local authorities are not asked to explain their legal duty, only to give an “explanation of the circumstances in which a funeral will be offered”. It also does very little to prevent councils putting up barriers designed to turn people away, lacks specificity regarding what information should be provided about a council’s offering and contains no encouragement for staff training. The guidance needs reviewing in consultation with a wide-range of organisations, including those that support bereaved people struggling with funeral costs, like ourselves.

However, local authorities should at the very least be meeting this good practice guidance. While our research focused on a small proportion of the local authorities across England and Wales, it suggests very clearly that many are not.

More than half of the councils we looked at did not have reasonably accessible information on their websites, and even fewer had contact details. The guidance also states that ashes should be retained “to allow the next of kin (or another friend or relative) to claim them if they wish” and yet eight of the councils we looked at indicate there are only limited circumstances in which this is possible, while one implies it isn’t at all. Our mystery shopper’s experience also showed it is not even guaranteed that bereaved people will be treated considerately or sensitively, as the guidance advises, when making enquiries with their local council.

As Luke Hall, then Minister of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, responded in March 2021, when Fleur Anderson MP asked, on our behalf, about the failure of many councils to follow the guidelines, “This guidance is non-statutory therefore it does not create any new requirements local authorities must adhere to”⁸. This is exactly the problem and the reason why we have been calling for statutory minimum standards for many years now.

Recommendations

As a bare minimum, councils must fulfil their legal duty, but we believe they could and should go further with these **five essential characteristics of a public health funeral**:

- 1. It should be easy for the bereaved, and those supporting them, to find out that public health funerals exist, when they can be accessed and how, and what they contain** e.g. clear, accurate information and contact details on local authority websites, and easy access by phone
- 2. The bereaved should be able to self-refer for a public health funeral** e.g. access does not have to be through a coroner or another official channel
- 3. A funeral service should be held and the bereaved given unquestioned access to it** e.g. they are not victim to a postcode lottery depending on what the policy is in their area
- 4. The bereaved should be given free access to the ashes in the case of cremation** e.g. they do not have to pay for these or argue their case
- 5. The bereaved should be treated respectfully throughout** e.g. they are not left feeling that they are doing something shameful or deceitful

It is also clear from our mystery shopping exercise that staff are not always being given adequate training to enable them to deal with these kinds of enquiries.

While it is important that bereaved people are told about the statutory help that may be available to them, i.e. the Funeral Expenses Payment, Funeral Support Payment (Scotland) and the Bereavement Support Payment, it is also crucial that staff know what to do and who to direct them to if this is not an option for them. We also found multiple instances of incorrect advice or information being given about the payments both on the phone and on websites. However, perhaps most concerning of all, learned through this research and our experience in the Down to Earth team, is the lack of knowledge or understanding of the Public Health Act legislation and the duty it imposes on local authorities. If the snapshot we have taken is indicative of wider practice, it suggests that many people are being turned away and quite probably pushed into debt they cannot manage.

Appendix

Definitions

Very easy – one or two clicks from the ‘Deaths’ or ‘Bereavement Services’ section of the main council website with a heading or sub-heading that gives some indication of what it is, as many people won’t know what a ‘public health funeral’ is.

Easy – one or two clicks from the ‘Deaths’ or ‘Bereavement Services’ section of the main council website, but with a basic heading like ‘public health funeral’, or a helpful heading but with one other thing that makes it harder to find. Or findable by using the council search engine, e.g. for ‘funeral’, in the top three search results and with a heading or sub-heading that gives an indication of what it is.

OK – findable by using the council search engine, e.g. for ‘funeral’, and in the top three search results with a basic heading like ‘public health funeral’. Or as ‘Easy’, but with one element that makes it harder to find, e.g. unclear top categories.

Difficult – one or two clicks from the ‘Deaths’ or ‘Bereavement Services’ section of the main council website, but exclusionary to some users. E.g. inaccurate header/link text regarding who can access a public health funeral, or pathway solely related to burial/cemeteries. Or findable by using the council search engine for ‘funeral’ and in the top three search results, but with two elements that make it harder to find.

Very difficult – findable through the ‘Deaths’ section of the main council website, but exclusionary (see ‘Difficult’) and with one other obstructive element or more clicks away. Not reasonably findable by using the council search engine, e.g. for ‘funeral’, due to its positioning or description. Some information about, or reference to the existence of, public health funerals may sit on another website run by a particular part of the council e.g. cemeteries or adult social care. Possibly only found by doing a search for the council and ‘public health funerals’ on a web search engine.

Finding a webpage by using the search function was given less weight because the results are not necessarily fixed. A good example of this is that, on double-checking something on Sutton’s website on 25 June while compiling the report, we discovered that a search for ‘funeral’ no longer produced the relevant page. It only produced three search results, all about Prince Philip’s funeral.

Scoring

Where some information was held online, we scored each local authority’s website out of a total 13. Please note that this score only reflects the online content of the particular public health funeral information that we assessed.

All started with 11 and then got marks taken away for the webpage being harder to find, for not providing certain information, giving inaccurate information, imposing restrictions on core aspects like the return of ashes or for using negative language. Local authorities can also score extra marks (up to the maximum of 13) for the webpage being easier to find.

Local authority online information scores

Local authority	Scoring
Haringey, The London Borough of	11.5
Hackney, The London Borough of	10.5
Birmingham City	8
Hammersmith & Fulham, The London Borough of	8
Nottingham City	6
Glasgow City	5.5
Hull City	5.5
Kingston upon Thames, The Royal Borough of	5.5
Newham, The London Borough of	5.5
Brent, The London Borough of	5
Kensington and Chelsea, The Royal Borough of*	5
Liverpool City	5
Manchester City	5
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough	5
Westminster, The City of*	5
Barnet, The London Borough of	3.5
Richmond upon Thames, The London Borough of	3
Merton, The London Borough of	2.5
Enfield, The London Borough of	2
Greenwich, The Royal Borough of	1.5
Hounslow, The London Borough of	1.5
Lambeth, The London Borough of	1
Sutton, The London Borough of	0.5
Bromley, The London Borough of	-0.5
Southwark, The London Borough of	-1
Camden, The London Borough of	-3
Islington, The London Borough of	-3

*Kensington & Chelsea and Westminster both lost two points for their information being Very Difficult to find. We acknowledge however that we do not know if the People First website is well-known to residents and if they would automatically look there for help.

Local authorities we surveyed with no public health funeral information online

Local authority
Barking & Dagenham, The London Borough of
Belfast City
Bexley, The London Borough of
Bradford, The City of
Cardiff
Croydon, The London Borough of
Ealing, The London Borough of
Edinburgh, The City of
Harrow, The London Borough of
Havering, The London Borough of
Hillingdon, The London Borough of
Lewisham, The London Borough of
Redbridge, The London Borough of
Tower Hamlets, The London Borough of
Waltham Forest, The London Borough of
Wandsworth, The London Borough of

Scoring system for local authorities with some information online

All local authorities start with 11 and then get marks taken away for various things. Local authorities can also score extra marks (up to the maximum of 13) for the webpage being easier to find.

Category	Default	Scoring
Any information online?	1	Content is clearly not for people who need a PHF = -1 (e.g. Freedom of Information requests, statistics etc.)
How easy was it to find? (see definitions on p.12)	1 (= OK)	Very Easy = +2 Easy = +1 Difficult = -1 Very Difficult = -2
Inaccurate or misleading information about...	0	Circumstances in which a PHF can be accessed* = -2 How a PHF can be accessed (e.g. public can't self-refer) = -2 Legal duty regarding deceased's wishes for burial/cremation* = -1 LAs' ability to recover costs from estate only* = -1 Requirement to revoke the will = -0.5 Unclear text suggesting hospitals/care homes have a responsibility to carry out a funeral = -0.5
Does it say if burial or cremation is the default?	1	Not specified = -1 Only implied = -0.5
Any information given regarding the type of grave?	1	Not specified = -1 Not explained what public/shared/common grave is = -0.5
Legal requirement stated regarding the deceased's wishes for burial/cremation?	1	Not specified or inaccurate* = -1 Only implied = -0.5 OR Restricted circumstances = -0.5 (e.g. written wishes required or the only consideration mentioned is religious beliefs)
Any information about what is provided for the funeral?	1	Not specified or only what is not provided = -1 Limited info = -0.5
Does it state whether people can attend?	1	Not specified = -1 Only implied = -0.5
Does it state whether the ashes can be claimed?	1	Not specified, or clearly not allowed ever = -1 Only implied = -0.5 OR Restricted circumstances = -0.5 (e.g. only in 'exceptional circumstances' or with 'specific instructions in the deceased's possessions or will')
Does it state the LA's ability to reclaim costs from the deceased's estate?	1	Not specified or inaccurate* = -1 Limited info = 0.5 (i.e. no explanation of what the 'estate' might mean/include or only mentioned in relation to certain cases)
Contact details provided?	2	None, or so restricted (e.g. due to context and positioning) that it is as if there are none = -2 Email only = -1 Restricted circumstances = -0.5 (e.g. only given in the context of finding out if they are holding a PHF for someone you know, as opposed to asking for one)
Negative language	0	Per piece = -1 (e.g. 'basic'; 'paupers' funeral'; 'dispose'/'disposal' relating to the deceased; framing the provision of a PHF as only in 'exceptional circumstances' or as a 'last resort'; 'refusal/refuses to pay'.)

LA = local authority

PHF = public health funeral

*If an LA gets a lower findability score solely because of inaccurate text in the link used to access the information (e.g. Difficult/Very Difficult), the scoring in this category is adjusted to ensure a maximum loss of two points. However, if the body of the text also contains an inaccuracy on this issue then it loses a third point for reinforcement of the incorrect information.

*Local authorities lose one point in each category, bringing them in line with inaccuracies on who can access/refer. It is worse to provide inaccurate information than it is to provide no information at all.

Local authority websites we surveyed by five key areas

Local authority	Legal duty met re. deceased's wishes for disposal? ⁹	Allowed to attend?	Ashes returned?	Right to reclaim costs?	Contact details
Barnet, The London Borough of	-	-	-	Y – limited info	-
Birmingham City	Narrow criteria – implied	Y	-	Y – limited info	Y
Brent, The London Borough of	Y – written evidence unless religious	-	Y	Y	Very restricted & email only
Bromley, The London Borough of	Y	-	-	Inaccurate	-
Camden, The London Borough of	-	-	-	Inaccurate	-
Enfield, The London Borough of	-	-	-	Y – limited info	-
Glasgow City	Narrow criteria	N – implied	-	-	Y
Greenwich, The Royal Borough of	-	-	-	Inaccurate	Y
Hackney, The London Borough of	Y	Y	Restricted	Y	Y
Hammersmith & Fulham, The London Borough of	Narrow criteria – implied	Y – implied	Restricted	Y	Y
Haringey, The London Borough of	Y	Y	Restricted	Y	Y
Hounslow, The London Borough of	-	-	-	Y – limited info	Y
Hull City	N – written evidence implied, yet if written in a will only if estate can cover cost	Y	Restricted	Y	Y
Islington, The London Borough of	-	-	-	Inaccurate	-
Kensington and Chelsea, The Royal Borough of	Y	-	-	Y	Y
Kingston upon Thames, The Royal Borough of	Y	Y – implied	Restricted	Y	-
Lambeth, The London Borough of	-	-	-	-	-
Liverpool City	Y	Y – implied	Y	Y	Y
Manchester City	Y	-	-	Y	Y
Merton, The London Borough of	-	-	-	Y – limited info	Y
Newham, The London Borough of	Y – implied, no detail	Y	Restricted	Y – limited info	-
Nottingham City	Y	Y – implied	Restricted	-	Restricted
Richmond upon Thames, The London Borough of	Y	Y – implied	Restricted	Y	-
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough	N - only if cost not unreasonable	Y – unless family refuses to pay	N – implied	Y	-
Southwark, The London Borough of	-	-	-	Y – limited info	-
Sutton, The London Borough of	-	-	-	Y – limited info	Y – email only
Westminster, The City of	Y	-	-	Y	Y

- = not specified

Narrow criteria = the focus is either solely on religious, cultural or “ethnic” beliefs, as opposed to simply personal beliefs or wishes, or does not reference religion at all.

Local authorities we mystery shopped

Local authority	Spoke to right department?	No. of calls it took*	PHF offered?
Barking & Dagenham, The London Borough of	N	2 – both to S/B, inc. being on hold 15-20 mins each time	N/A
Barnet, The London Borough of	Y	1	N – existence of family
Bexley, The London Borough of	Y	1	N – only take referrals from coroner
Bradford, The City of	Y	2	Y
Brent, The London Borough of	N – call not returned	1	N/A
Bromley, The London Borough of	N	2	N – Grants: believes the council doesn't do it anymore, used to do "paupers' funerals", but for people with no money and no family
Camden, The London Borough of	Y	1 – but on hold for 15 mins while S/B looked into it	N – only take referrals from coroner, hospital or social worker
Cardiff	N – call not returned	2	N/A
Croydon, The London Borough of	Y	2 – S/B couldn't help. B/S number found on website	Y
Ealing, The London Borough of	No – bad line	N/A	N/A
Enfield, The London Borough of	Y	3	Y
Harrow, The London Borough of	Y	1 – no S/B due to pandemic. ASC number found on website	N – existence of family
Havering, The London Borough of	N	1st S/B attempt – given DWP number. 4 other attempts – couldn't get through to operator	N/A
Hillingdon, The London Borough of	N	3	N – Social Services: "Not something the council helps with"
Islington, The London Borough of	N – call not returned	3 – inc. being on hold for 10 mins while S/B looked into it, then cut off	N/A
Kingston upon Thames, The Royal Borough of	N	S/B couldn't help. B/S number found on website, but couldn't get through or leave message	N/A
Lambeth, The London Borough of	Y	3	N – only take referrals from coroner
Lewisham, The London Borough of	Y	2	N – existence of family
Newham, The London Borough of	N	3 – ASC couldn't help	N/A
Redbridge, The London Borough of	Y	2	N – existence of family
Richmond upon Thames, The London Borough of	Y	1 – but on hold for 15 mins while S/B looked into it	N – only take referrals from coroner
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough	Y	3	Y
Southwark, The London Borough of	Y	2 – S/B didn't work. B/S number found on website	N – only take referrals from coroner or hospital
Sutton, The London Borough of	Y – contact unavailable	2	N/A – direct line not provided to call back and it previously took 12 and 20 mins to get through to the S/B
Tower Hamlets, The London Borough of	N – call not returned	S/B couldn't help. ASC number found on website	S/B: No help available from council
Waltham Forest, The London Borough of	N	3 – all to S/B. 1. Cut off, 2. Transferred to unknown voicemail, 3. 20+ mins on hold while S/B looked into it	S/B: No help available from council
Wandsworth, The London Borough of	Y	1	N – only take referrals from coroner

*The call to the switchboard and the first transfer they made/number they provided has been counted as one call. Some calls were made over several days as we were told to call back another time.

S/B = Switchboard B/S = Bereavement Services ASC = Adult Social Care

Notes

1 The Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984, which applies to England and Wales states “an authority shall not cause a body to be cremated ... where they have reason to believe that cremation would be contrary to the wishes of the deceased”.

2 These funerals are often called public health funerals, after The Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984, which applies to England and Wales, but can also be referred to by many other names including council, community and municipal funerals. We will use the term public health funeral in this report.

3 94% of local authorities who responded to 2020 Freedom of Information requests from Royal London unequivocally stated that they allow mourners to attend.

4 Burial and Cremation (Scotland) Act 2016 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2016/20/section/87>
Welfare Services Act (Northern Ireland) 1971 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/apni/1971/2/section/25>

5 Website data was first gathered between 29 September and 26 November 2020. As the second peak of the pandemic prevented us publishing the data straightaway, it was then re-checked between 27 May and 2 June 2021.

6 The mystery shopping exercise was carried out between 14 and 23 April 2021, with one final call made on 7 June 2021.

7 We did not contact those local authorities who provided a number, but whose online information we deemed Difficult or Very Difficult to find.

8 <https://www.parallelparliament.co.uk/question/157319/funerals-coronavirus>

9 The Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984, which applies to England and Wales states “an authority shall not cause a body to be cremated ... where they have reason to believe that cremation would be contrary to the wishes of the deceased”.

The Burial and Cremation (Scotland) Act 2016 states “the local authority must, so far as known to the authority, have regard to a) any wishes that the person expressed as to means of disposal of the person’s remains, and b) whether the person was of a particular religion or belief”.

Quaker Social Action is an independent UK charity working with people on low incomes to seek solutions to the issues affecting their lives. Projects and services include: crisis support for those unable to afford funerals; courses that empower people to manage their money more confidently; practical support for people experiencing homelessness such as a mobile library and a community kitchen space; wellbeing interventions, and the UK's first dedicated supported housing project for young carers.

Down to Earth, a project of Quaker Social Action, is the only UK-wide service providing practical support for people unable to afford the costs of a funeral.

downtoearthsupport.org.uk

SUPPORT QUAKER SOCIAL ACTION

Please make a regular or single donation

quakersocialaction.org.uk/donate

Cheques can be made payable to
Quaker Social Action and sent to:
QSA
17 Old Ford Road
London
E2 9PJ

Tel: 020 8983 5030
info@qsa.org.uk

Charity number 1069157

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