



QSA Submission to UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty – Funeral Poverty

14 September 2018

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QSA is making this submission in response to the following question:

What is the definition of poverty and extreme poverty that your organisation employs in the context of the United Kingdom and to what extent do official definitions used by the state adequately encompass poverty in all its dimensions?

Why talk about funeral poverty?

Official definitions of poverty – for example defining poor or low income households as those with income below 60% of the median household income – do not capture the full extent of poverty that can be triggered by a particular crisis in the affairs of a household. An example of this is bereavement leading to ‘funeral poverty’, which is the focus of this submission.

In her [first statement](#) as Prime Minister on 13 July 2016 Theresa May spoke about families who are “just about managing”. For low income households which can be characterised as “just about managing”, the financial shock of a funeral can create serious financial problems.

Brief introduction to Quaker Social Action and its work to tackle funeral poverty

Originally established in 1867 in east London as the Bedford Institute Association, Quaker Social Action (QSA) has been working with people on low incomes for over 150 years. Our mission is to enable people on low incomes to seek solutions to the issues affecting their lives.

QSA’s longstanding work with people on low incomes alerted us to a common issue shared by many service users: the financial shock of a funeral. We are widely regarded as leading experts on addressing funeral poverty. For eight years we’ve run the UK’s only project offering practical support for people struggling with basic funeral costs and funeral debt. In 2010 we launched our ‘Down to Earth’ project after 18 months of research. What began as a local pilot has grown and evolved into a service with national reach.

We have helped more than 3,200 people as the UK’s only source of practical support for people struggling with basic funeral costs. [Down to Earth](#) is trusted with referrals from a wide network of hospitals, hospices and other organisations working with people on low incomes. Over the past year Down to Earth has achieved average savings per client of £1,680, and average money raised per client of £1,401 from government, charitable and benevolent funds and other sources.

In 2014 our practical experience with Down to Earth led us to launch the UK’s first funeral poverty campaign, [Fair Funerals](#). For four years the QSA-led campaign has had a huge impact across three key areas – the funeral industry, in government and by generating public awareness:

- Well over one third of the UK’s funeral industry is now signed up to the Fair Funerals Pledge, confirming that they have their cheapest prices readily available online for their customers
- We have put funeral poverty into the spotlight, with a constant demand from the public and media to hear from our brave campaign spokespeople who share their deeply personal experiences
- Along with the support of the Funeral Poverty Alliance, journalists and MPs, we have seen huge government breakthroughs in the last year alone, namely the introduction of a Child’s Funeral Fund in England and Wales, and more recently, changes calling a halt to the appalling practises of some local authorities when handling public health funerals
- We’ve sown the seeds for some much needed reforms to the Social Fund Funeral Payment – a grant for those struggling with funerals costs, which hasn’t moved for 15 years and pays less than 40% of the most basic funeral cost.



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The dimensions of funeral poverty

- Put simply, funeral poverty is where the price of a funeral is beyond a person's ability to pay
- There has been a huge rise in prices, 122% since 2004 including a 4.7% jump from 2017 to 2018, meaning that the average cost of a funeral now stands at £4,271 (SunLife Cost of Dying Report 2018)
- "For almost 1 in 8 (12%) families, finding the money to pay for their loved ones' funeral caused them notable financial problems. This is an increase from 1 in 9 families last year. And on average, this group had to find £2,775 to pay for the funeral" (SunLife Cost of Dying Report 2018)
- The impact of funeral poverty can be financial, in the form of a legacy of debt but it can also be emotional in the form of the distress, shame and the perceived stigma of not being able to provide a 'decent send-off' for someone we love
- Struggling with the financial pressures of funeral poverty often gets in the way of people's ability to grieve
- Grieving people are taking on increased levels of funeral debt, and the problem is set to increase significantly if steps are not taken to address funeral poverty
- As a society we need to get better at discussing, confronting and planning for death. But for an increasing number of people, after they've paid out for basic living costs there is little or nothing left to save. And death often occurs unexpectedly, or after a period where savings have been depleted by long term ill health or by taking time off work to be a carer.

"When I didn't know how I was going to pay for the funeral, I was tearing my hair out. It was all I could think about. I couldn't even start saying bye to Dad".

Valerie, 49, Bow in east London

A shrinking safety net

- The cost of funerals has increased at the same time as financial support from the state has been eroded. This means funeral poverty is inevitable for a section of our society
- The Social Fund Funeral Payment (SFFP) administered by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) was established in 1989 to cover the cost of a basic funeral for people on qualifying benefits where there were no other funds available through relatives or the estate of the deceased
- Over the past 12 years, the value of the SFFP has been eroded dramatically in real terms. The average award in 2016-17 was £1,427, around 35% of the average cost of a funeral (DWP Annual Report by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the Social Fund 2016-17). As a result, even people awarded a grant are left with a potential shortfall of thousands of pounds, often leading them into unmanageable debts
- In 2012-13 there were 66,000 applications for SFFPs in the UK but only 35,000 awards. This means 47% of applications were turned down. A House of Commons note on the SFFP states: "The adequacy of Funeral Payments, in light of actual funeral costs, has long been a source of complaint" (House of Commons, Standard Note, SN01419, 1 November 2013)
- In 2016-2017, 27,000 grants were awarded worth around £38.6million. The amount spent on the SFFP has only increased from £2 million since 1988. In real terms this represents a large decrease in expenditure
- Making a claim can be a complex process and can leave people confused and frustrated at a very stressful and disorientating time. Bereaved people struggle to absorb information so navigating the SFFP system becomes particularly challenging.
- The DWP will only pay out a grant once the funeral has taken place. However, funeral directors normally require a deposit of over £1,200 before a cremation can go ahead, rising to over £3,000 for a burial. So



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people find themselves having to raise this money fairly quickly before they know if they'll receive anything from the DWP, often leaving them with no choice but to access unaffordable forms of credit.

Sophie, 39, Liverpool, applied to the Social Fund after her Mum's death.

"I was working but claiming household benefit to help cover my rent. I have no savings and am on a low income. At first the DWP told me I was eligible for a grant. But I was turned down. They told me that my brother should pay for the funeral. But my brother has severe physical and mental disabilities, and has lived in a residential care home for the past 15 years. I don't understand how they think my brother would be able to pay for the funeral."

- QSA's Down to Earth project supports many people turned down for a grant because the DWP deems another sibling or family member as able to pay, even when this sibling/family member is disabled, estranged or is in prison. It's hard to see how these individuals can be expected to cover the cost of a funeral. These rules mean often the most vulnerable people receive no help
- Public health funerals ('paupers' funerals): local authorities have a statutory duty under Section 46 of the Public Health Act 1984 to make arrangements for the funeral of any person who has died in their borough, where it appears "that no suitable arrangements for the disposal of the body have been made or are being made". There are no national guidelines on how hospitals and local authorities manage public health funerals and in reality there are huge discrepancies in service, with many vulnerable people receiving a poor service. The number of public health funerals has increased by 50% in four years (iNews 16 April 2017), and we expect this to continue until sustainable action is taken to address funeral poverty.

Recommendations

In light of its experience of delivering the Down to Earth service and of the Fair Funerals campaign, QSA has made the following practical recommendations for tackling funeral poverty.

- **Raise the SFFP to cover basic costs:** as recommended by the Work and Pensions Select Committee, the SFFP must be increased to cover basic funeral costs. We're calling on the government to raise the amount of money available for funeral expenses within the funeral fund in line with funeral cost inflation, which would increase the £700 to £1,377. This would increase government spending by £18,262,000, which is, in our view a small amount to ensure we have a safety net for grieving people that our country can be proud of. After this point, the fund should be increased annually in line with the retail price index
- **A government plan to tackle funeral poverty:** funeral poverty is a multi-faceted problem which spans different government departments including the DWP, the Department of Health, the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy and the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government. Very little is known within government about how different state bodies converge and interact with bereaved people on low incomes. A government inquiry should be undertaken involving the relevant departments and recommendations made for improving the situation of people on low incomes arranging a funeral
- **Third party advocate scheme:** a third party advocate scheme could provide a solution to several of the factors that converge to create funeral poverty. The scheme could very quickly determine for people their eligibility for the SFFP and other state and charitable grants and help them find a funeral that meets their needs at a reasonable price. Such a scheme would be likely to save the DWP time and money because state funds would be channelled towards funeral directors charging a reasonable price as opposed to those with inflated costs. This could have the overall effect of bringing prices down across the funeral industry
- **Senior decision maker:** a senior decision maker should be appointed who can re-consider cases where an applicant for the SFFP has been turned down but their case involves exceptional levels of vulnerability and need



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- **Local authorities – transparency:** local authorities should provide transparent, accessible pricing information for cremations and burials to allow bereaved customers to make informed choices. Currently there is a dramatic postcode lottery in the prices charged for cremations and burials
- **Local authorities – cost recovery for cremations:** local authorities should not be making a profit from their funeral service. As suggested by the consultation recently undertaken by the Scottish government, this service should be run on a cost-recovery basis
- **Local authorities – public health funerals:** central government guidelines should be published which ensure compassion and consistency across local authority provision of public health funerals. Local authorities should be required to make information about public health funerals public, have a fair system of eligibility and provide a simple funeral service that families can attend. Recently, QSA's work with Times journalist Gabriel Pogrund to highlight people's experiences of public health funerals has resulted in the [government commissioning new statutory guidelines](#) so that relatives must be able to attend and receive their ashes back. This change has not yet taken effect.

Further information

The [Fair Funerals](#) campaign website provides a wealth of further information about funeral poverty and what needs to change.

A [House of Commons Library briefing](#) in preparation for the recent (11 September) Westminster Hall debate on funeral poverty can be found [here](#).

Other recent and pertinent news articles may also be of interest:

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/family-ban-to-be-lifted-for-paupers-funerals-svg7lkwf>

<http://www.itv.com/news/2018-08-03/dead-waiting-more-than-a-year-for-burial-as-funeral-poverty-grows/>

<http://www.itv.com/news/2018-08-20/department-of-work-and-pensions-funeral-poverty-scheme-criticised-as-disgusting-leaving-many-in-debt/>

<http://www.itv.com/news/2018-08-09/bereaved-beg-for-as-funeral-costs-spiral/>
