

CHIEF EXECUTIVE
Ged Curran



Friends of the Faith and Belief Forum

London Borough of Merton
Merton Civic Centre
Morden, SM4 5DX

Direct Line: 020 8545 3332

Email: chief.executive@merton.gov.uk

Date: 6 April 2020

Friends,

Firstly, I am sorry to write to you under such circumstances. The bonds we have built across Merton's faith communities – more accurately, the bonds *you* have forged - are of immense pride to the council, and I am saddened to be communicating to you all in these circumstances.

However, I wanted to make sure I updated you myself following our recent conversations.

We have, inevitably, received guidance from the Government and London Councils' on the forthcoming arrangements being made pan-London for burials and mortuary space.

Under unprecedented circumstances, where lives are at risk, we must all follow this guidance.

However, it does not make comfortable reading and I fully respect the challenges it will potentially present to your local communities, and to their loved ones.

I would stress again that this guidance applies to a scenario that will not be widespread.

However, it will happen to some, and we must be prepared.

The full guidance is overleaf. As always, I am available if you wish to discuss any of these arrangements.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Ged Curran", written in a cursive style.

Ged Curran
Chief Executive

Guidance on respecting the deceased

Sadly, due to existing restrictions, some families may not have the opportunity to say goodbye to their loved ones before they die, which will be particularly upsetting. The observance of other practices and traditions which normally occur after someone has died may also be affected.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the high number of deaths occurring in a short space of time means that all the processes that take place when someone dies are subject to change.

The need to stay at home and save lives through minimising the spread of infection applies in all circumstances. This presents specific challenges to bereaved families and friends wishing to attend the funerals and cremations of loved ones, or to comfort each other in close proximity; it also affects the religious practices and traditions that take place after someone has died.

Process between death and burial or cremation

• Registration of the death

If the person dies in hospital, the doctor will complete the Medical Certificate of Cause of Death. It will then be scanned and emailed to the Register Office. If a person dies in the community, the Pandemic Multi-Agency Response Team (PMART) team will submit the sudden death report and prepare the deceased for removal to a mortuary or funeral home.

The Registrar will then issue a form for burial or cremation by electronic transfer to a funeral director or burial society. The funeral director will then arrange the burial or cremation in accordance with the family's wishes, as far as possible.

• Movement of the deceased

If the person dies in hospital, they will be taken to a mortuary either at that hospital or at another location - a funeral home or a temporary mortuary. If the person died at home or elsewhere in the community, the PMART will come and prepare the deceased so that they can be taken to a mortuary.

Due to the volume of deaths during the Covid-19 outbreak, it is possible that the person may be taken to a mortuary in a different area

When it is time for the deceased to be buried or cremated, they will be collected by a funeral director and taken from the mortuary to the cemetery or crematorium.

• Viewing/washing of the body

The current advice from Public Health England (PHE) and the Royal College of Pathologists (RCP) is that anyone coming into contact with a person who has been infected by Covid-19 must wear an appropriate level of PPE. It will not be possible to view the deceased. This is primarily because of the risk of infection from the deceased and also from those coming to view, who may need to be in self-isolation.

[Government guidance](#) for communities on care of the deceased states that, "Given the very significant risk for vulnerable and extremely vulnerable people who come into contact with the virus, it is strongly advised that they have no

contact with the body. This includes washing, preparing or dressing the body. If the person died following Covid-19 infection, their body will be prepared in a way which precludes direct contact, viewing and washing.”

Holding a funeral

The high number of deaths – coupled with the ongoing risk of infection during the pandemic – has changed the way that funerals can be carried out. UK Government guidance does not currently suggest limits to the number of mourners that can attend funerals. Relatives are advised to consult with their funeral director, faith and belief/or community leader for guidance on how the funeral should be conducted.

- No-one should attend a funeral if they have COVID-19 symptoms or should be self-isolating.
- Anyone who has been in contact with the deceased within a 14- day period leading up to their death should self-isolate.
- Those in ‘at risk’ groups are urged to stay at home.
- Anyone attending a funeral should observe social distancing guidelines, i.e. to remain two metres apart from anyone not living in their household at all times.
- Transport to and from the funeral should only be shared by those living in the same household.
- Do not publicly advertise the funeral details to reduce the risk of other, well-meaning mourners arriving unexpectedly.
- Gatherings of any form, whether within the boundaries of resting places or in their vicinity (including areas outside the gates of cemeteries or crematoria) present clear and significant risks to those present, including staff and ministers, and increases the pressure on healthcare services.

There are a range of options that may allow mourners to participate remotely in burials and cremations and/or to commemorate the person who has died. These include:

- Livestreaming the funeral service
- Online memorial gatherings
- Virtual books of remembrance.

In addition, it may be helpful for families to plan memorial services for their loved ones that could be held in the future, potentially many months after a person has been buried.

Where possible, a faith celebrant, or a dedicated member of staff from crematoria and funeral directors will be on site to offer final prayers or read brief family statements.

As far as possible this will be a celebrant of the family's choice of faith / no faith, but it may not be the individual of their choice. This provides, as a minimum, a personal touch for every person who dies during this wave of Covid-19. Faith-based organisations and crematoria may be able to advise on the options available.

Religious practices

The Faith Cell of the Strategic Coordination Group (SCG) - which leads London's response on behalf of the Mayor of London - is working with faith communities across London to ensure that those of all faiths and none are consulted and kept informed about changes to these processes as the pandemic continues to unfold. It is setting up a Faith Advisory Panel of core representatives of different faiths and backgrounds, together with a much broader contact group.

It is hoped that families will continue to be able to determine whether the deceased should be buried or cremated in accordance with the wishes of that individual.

As we work to address the scale of the impact of the pandemic on London we acknowledge the huge impact on all those directly affected by loss in these very challenging circumstances.