

Your Plymouth Cooperative Scrutiny Review – Public Funerals

Wednesday 26 February 2014

PRESENT:

Councillor Mrs Aspinall, in the Chair.
Councillors Mrs Bowyer, Casey, Martin Leaves and Tuffin.

Also in attendance: Councillor Vincent, Cabinet Member for Environment, Nicola Horne, Environmental Protection and Monitoring Manager, Jayne Glynn, Patient Experience Manager, Plymouth Hospitals NHS Trust, Adrian Smart, Westlake's Funeral Directors, Michael Hull, ICSA Funeral Services (Exeter), Wendy Coulton, Civil Funeral Celebrant, Darin Halifax, Community Cohesion Co-ordinator (Lead Officer) and Katey Johns, Democratic Support Officer.

The meeting started at 10 am and finished at 2.55 pm.

Note: At a future meeting, the committee will consider the accuracy of these draft minutes, so they may be subject to change. Please check the minutes of that meeting to confirm whether these minutes have been amended.

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In accordance with the code of conduct there were no declarations of interest made by members in respect of matters under discussion at this meeting.

2. CHAIR'S URGENT BUSINESS

There were no items of Chair's urgent business.

3. COOPERATIVE REVIEW: PUBLIC FUNERALS (Pages 3 - 20)

The task and finish group considered the written evidence submitted and heard from the witnesses invited. The full report arising from this task and finish group containing the findings, conclusions and recommendations is attached as an annex to this minute.

4. EXEMPT BUSINESS

No matters of exempt business were discussed.

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**PUBLIC
FUNERALS**



A report of the Your Plymouth Scrutiny Panel
following a co-operative review into Public Funerals

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Plymouth City Council has a legal duty under the Public Health (Control of Diseases) Act 1984 to provide a funeral to anyone who has died within the Plymouth City boundary, including non-residents, where no funeral plan is in place and the next of kin cannot be located or are unwilling to pay.

1.2 The following table gives an indication of the number of enquiries and cases where the Council duty to make arrangements and pay has been invoked –

Public funerals	Male	Female	Total where council made arrangements	Additional Enquiries where advice given
2008/ 2009	27	1	28	
2009/ 2010	5	3	8	8
2010/ 2011	15	2	17	10
2011/ 2012	14	6	20	12
2012/ 2013	21	5	26	13
2013/2014 to date (22/10/13)	4	3	7 to date	25

1.3 The cost to the Council for each Public Funeral, is in the region of £2000 to £2200 but can be more, depending on the time spent investigating the case. Traditionally, the older generation have made provision in their wills for their funeral arrangements but this is no longer the case and, with the number of public funerals set to rise combined with the existing budget pressures of the current economic climate, it is essential that the Council looks at ways of making better use of its resources.

2. SCRUTINY APPROACH

2.1 The Cooperative Scrutiny Board approved the establishment of a cooperative review into public funerals at its meeting on 27 November 2013.

2.2 Cooperative Review Aims and Objectives

2.2.1 The aims and objectives of the Public Funerals cooperative review are set out in the attached as Appendix A to this report but, in summary, were to give consideration to the following –

- public funeral arrangements are made at a time to suit the Bereavement Service, rather than give a choice to family members. Should the council accommodate the wishes of the family?
- even when family members have not accepted responsibility, the council still notifies them of the time and date of the funeral. Should this continue?
- the council offer a simple, non-denominational burial, and no choice is given to family members for burial or cremation. The law requires that cremation should not be

carried out if it was contrary to the wishes of the deceased, and if a next of kin was unable to be traced, the council would always be legally required to provide a burial only. Should the council offer a choice of burial or cremation to family members, even if cremation is more expensive?

- should the council employ a minister where the denomination of the deceased is known, which currently has a fee of £179?
- the service is basic and minimal and does not provide for flowers or anything but a graveside service, and no marking of a grave. Is the council happy that this is acceptable?

2.3 Cooperative Review Group Membership

2.3.1 The cooperative review group had cross-party membership comprising the following -

- Councillor Mrs Aspinall (Chair)
- Councillor Mrs Bowyer
- Councillor Casey
- Councillor Martin Leaves
- Councillor Tuffin

2.3.2 For the purposes of the review, the cooperative review was supported by -

- Darin Halifax, Community Cohesion Coordinator (Lead Officer)
- Katey Johns, Democratic Support Officer

2.4 Cooperative Review Methodology

2.4.1 The cooperative review met on 26 February 2014 to review the documentation submitted as evidence and to hear from a number of witnesses.

2.4.2 Witnesses -

- Nicola Horne, Environmental Protection and Monitoring Manager
- Councillor Brian Vincent, Cabinet Member for Environment
- Jayne Glynn, Patient Experience Manager, Plymouth Hospitals NHS Trust
- Adrian Smart, Westlake's Funeral Directors
- Michael Hull, ISCA Funeral Services (Exeter)
- Wendy Coulton, Civil Funeral Celebrant

2.4.3 A summary of the evidence provided by each witness is attached at Appendix B to this report.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Current Arrangements

3.1.1 The Public Protection Service (PPS) undertakes the Public Funeral duties on behalf of the Council and, upon notification of a death, will commence enquiries in order to establish whether there is a next of kin. This will include the gathering of personal papers and assets in order to establish whether or not the deceased has left a will. If a will is found contact is made with the executor.

3.1.2 In most cases, however, no will is found and where no next of kin or other person is willing to make funeral arrangements the Council arranges a dignified but no frills non-denominational burial using forfeit graves where a funeral director will conduct a short service. Burial is currently the cheapest option and enables any next of kin who may be identified in the future to make alternative arrangements.

3.1.3 The Council has a right to recover any expenses incurred, including officer time, from the estate of the deceased. The deceased's property is searched and if any assets or valuables are found they are sold to recover the expenses. If property is owned by the deceased, it will be referred to the Treasury Solicitor if there is no next of kin.

3.1.4 Property searches are conducted under strict controlled procedures requiring two members of staff to be present at all times who video record their actions. This procedure is subject to external audit as is the sale of any assets which is carried out via a local auctioneer.

3.1.5 Many properties are rented and the cost of clearing the property after any valuables are sold is the responsibility of the landlord.

3.1.6 With regard to the actual funeral arrangements, the provision of public funerals is tendered on an annual basis. The current provider will look after the body and undertake a simple no-frills burial, which is accompanied by a brief non-denominational service. The grave is left unmarked.

3.1.7 The Council's legal duty to provide public funerals applies to anyone who has died within the Plymouth City boundary, including non-residents. Existing arrangements currently exclude any person who dies within Plymouth after being admitted to a ward at the local hospitals. The hospitals therefore have similar arrangements in place.

3.2 Costs

3.2.1 The cost to the Council for each public funeral is in the region of £2000 to £2200 but can be more. This will depend on the amount of time spent investigating the case, collecting together any assets, organising the burial, the cost of the burial and the funeral director's services. Burial is often chosen as the main form of interment as it is cheaper than cremation. Cremation requires the additional expense of doctors' fees which are in the region of £150.

3.2.2 The cost of private funerals can vary dramatically depending on the type and nature of the arrangements in place, the more elaborate the higher the cost. Where the next of kin or friend are in receipt of benefits, the Department for Works and Pensions (DWP) may provide a funeral payment which, on application, will entitle successful claimants to assistance with the cost of a basic funeral. However, only the person making the arrangements for the funeral may apply providing they are in receipt of one of the following -

- Income support
- Jobseeker's allowance
- Pension credit
- Working tax credit (where a disabled worker is included in the assessment)
- Child tax credit (at a rate higher than the family element)
- Housing benefit
- Council tax benefit

3.2.3 The amount of DWP funeral payment depends on a person's individual circumstance but can help pay for -

- Burial fees and exclusive rights to burial in a particular plot
- Cremation fees, including the cost of the doctor's certificate
- Up to £700 for funeral expenses, e.g. funeral director's fees, flowers, coffin
- Travel to arrange or go to the funeral
- The cost of moving the body within the UK

The Council is not entitled to make a claim against this benefit to assist in paying for public funerals.

3.2.4 With the number of public funerals set to rise, combined with the existing budget pressures of the current economic climate, it is essential that the Council looks at ways of making better use of its resources. Officers have therefore looked at the existing contract arrangements and at what other local authorities are providing in order to draw comparisons. Most local authorities appear to have tender arrangements in place that are reviewed periodically or, where requirements to use the powers are infrequent, arrangements are made on an ad hoc basis with a local funeral director at the time. Costs vary between Councils based upon the funeral directors charges and the cost of disbursements. The majority of local authorities looked at (18 in total) were found to be providing a similar basic, no frills service at a similar cost.

3.2.5 The costs incurred by the Hospitals for funeral director fees in respect of burials were significantly less than those paid by the Council, a difference of £675.

4 CONCLUSIONS

4.1 Having considered all of the evidence and heard from witnesses, Members were of the opinion that public funerals could be provided at a cheaper cost and alternative arrangements should therefore be further explored. By so doing, Members accepted that a cheaper option would not necessarily allow for –

- Flexibility over the date and time of the funeral;
- Choice of burial or cremation;
- A simple non-denominational service;
- Flowers or grave marker;
- Storage of the deceased or transportation costs should the successful contractor be located outside of the city.

4.2 Concern was expressed that, in these times of austerity, it was possible that the hospitals could decide not to arrange public funerals for patients and that additional cost would have to be borne by the Council.

4.3 The importance of making arrangements and financial provision for one's funeral appears to have been diminished and this needs to be brought back to the attention of the general public. Discussions with credit unions around provision of personal savings plans and personal loan scheme options in this regard could also be worth exploring.

4.4 It was unfair for the Council to bear the full cost of public funerals and not be able to claim anything back from the government. Members were keen to lobby the City's MPs in this regard, particularly around enabling council's to claim for the funeral grant from the DWP. In addition, where family members were unable to afford the full cost of a funeral and were not in receipt of any benefits, consideration should be given to allowing them to make a contribution, however small.

4.5 Members were alarmed that a lack of data-sharing amongst funeral directors could result in families unnecessarily picking up the cost of a funeral when a payment plan was in existence. They were of the opinion that this situation was something that could be easily addressed through co-operative working.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 The Co-operative Review recommends –

1		public funeral arrangements continue to be made at a time to suit the Bereavement Service whilst maintaining some degree of flexibility to accommodate family members and/or friends of the deceased;
2		that even when family members have not accepted responsibility the Council will still notify them of the time and date of the funeral;
3		that unless something exists in writing by the deceased stipulating disposal requirements, the most economic method will be used. However, if no instructions are left by the deceased and the family have a specific preference, they will be asked to meet the difference;

4	the Council will not employ a minister. However, if families wish to engage a religious or non-religious celebrant that will be done at their discretion and/or expense;
5	continuation of the current provision of a basic and minimal service without flowers or a marking of the grave and that the contract should be retendered on that basis;
6	negotiations with the coroner and/or Plymouth Hospitals NHS Trust are entered into over the storage of bodies;
7	a publicity campaign is launched to get the message out to the general public that it is their responsibility to make provision for their funeral (to include provision of information on the Council's website, inclusion of a flyer in council tax bills – also to be sent to care homes and registered social landlords);
8	that funeral directors consider sharing information with each other about funeral plans where family members are unsure as to whether one exists with a view to the possible implementation of a registration scheme for pre-paid funeral plans;
9	<p>the City Council lobbies it's Members of Parliament and the appropriate Secretary of State –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to re-evaluate the funding structure for DWP funeral grants and to make this funding available to local authorities when providing public funerals; • regarding possible implementation of a registration scheme for pre-paid funeral plans;
10	that officers explore the potential to work with credit unions over the provision of personal loans to families struggling to pay for funerals for loved ones and develop funeral plan saving schemes;
11	that officers enter into dialogue with RSLs to improve the process for dealing with the death of a tenant where no immediate family can be identified;
12	that officers explore the use of hardship funds provided by the Council in assisting people to pay for deposits whilst awaiting claims to the DWP funeral payment scheme;
13	consideration is given to production of a leaflet providing advice to families on what to expect from a public funeral if they cannot pay;

14	given that there is only ten years of space left in the City's cemeteries (based on current internment projections) and the Council's aim to increase the City's population, urgent consideration needs to be given to where this additional cemetery space will be provided;
15	a progress update report is submitted to the Your Plymouth Scrutiny Panel in six months.

REQUEST FOR A COOPERATIVE REVIEW



Please submit this document to Democratic Support once complete.

The request will be submitted to the Co-operative Scrutiny Board for consideration against the approval criteria and you will be notified of its success. If the Board approve the request for a Co-operative Review on the subject matter below then a project plan will be completed and you may be asked for further information.

What is the name of the review	Public Funerals
Please provide a brief outline of the subject and scope of the review?	<p>Plymouth City Council has a legal duty under the Public Health (Control of Diseases) Act 1984 to</p> <p><i>'cause to be buried or cremated the body of any person who dies or has been found dead, within its area, in any case where it appears to the local authority that no suitable arrangements for the disposal of the body have been or are being made otherwise than by the local authority.'</i></p> <p>As agreed at the Your Plymouth panel meeting on 4 November 2013, the scope of the review will be limited to consideration of the following –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The funeral arrangements are made at a time to suit the Bereavement Service, rather than give a choice to family members. Should we accommodate the wishes of the family? • Even when family members have not accepted responsibility, we still notify them of the time and date of the funeral. Should we continue to do this? • The Council offer a simple, non-denominational burial, and no choice is given to family members for burial or cremation. The law requires that cremation should not be carried out if it was contrary to the wishes of the deceased, and if a next of kin was unable to be traced, the Council would always be legally required to provide a burial only. Should we offer a choice of burial or cremation to family members, even if cremation is more expensive? • Should we employ a minister where the denomination of the deceased is known, which currently has a fee of £179? • The service is basic and minimal and does not provide for flowers or anything but a graveside service, and no marking of a grave. Are the Council happy that this is acceptable? Some information is available from other Councils but further benchmarking data could be obtained about what is offered elsewhere.

Please outline the reasons as to why you believe a review needs to take place?	The cost to the Council for each Public Funeral, is in the region of £2000 to £2200 but can be more, depending on the time spent investigating the case. Traditionally, the older generation have made provision in their wills for their funeral arrangements but this is no longer the case and, with the number of public funerals set to rise combined with the existing budget pressures of the current economic climate, it is essential that the Council looks at ways of making better use of its resources.
What will the review attempt to achieve?	The review will help inform the Council's policy on dealing with public funerals which, in turn, will sustain and improve service delivery and public confidence.
Who will benefit from the review?	Members of the public, Councillors and Officers.
How long do you think the review might take?	It is anticipated that the review will be in the form of one half-day meeting.
When do you think the review should commence and why?	It is proposed that the review takes place in December 2013. Given the panel's existing work programme commitments this is the most suitable time for a review to be undertaken.
When do you think the review should be completed by and why?	The review will be completed by the end of December 2013 in order to avoid any conflict with budget scrutiny taking place in January 2014.
Review requested by?	Your Plymouth Scrutiny Panel

Received in Democratic Support Section:	Reviewed by the Co-operative Scrutiny Board:
Date: <input type="text"/>	Date: <input type="text"/>
Scrutiny Review Approved/Rejected	
If approved initial Project Plan meeting date:	

WITNESS EVIDENCE SUMMARIES**No. Witness****BI Nicola Horne, Environmental Protection and Monitoring Manager, and
Councillor Brian Vincent, Cabinet Member for Environment**

- Public funeral requests can come in to the council from a variety of sources – members of the public, coroner, care home etc.;
- where no-one comes forward to claim the body, the council will, in the first instance, look for a relative who, if found, will be encouraged to pick up the funeral arrangements;
- once the Coroner has issued the relevant paperwork, the Council's Public Protection staff can obtain keys to the deceased's premises and begin searching for relatives or an executor. During the search, items of value will be recorded and assessed for future disposal, and any bank accounts frozen in order to recover as much of the funeral costs as possible from the estate. To protect staff during the investigation, property searches are always undertaken in pairs under controlled procedures which are subject to external audit;
- two officers within the Public Protection service have received specialist training to undertake these investigations. One must be present on each property search but the second officer could be average cost of officer time for investigations is around £400 from start to finish;
- whilst investigating, the Council will take responsibility and liaise on making the necessary public funeral arrangements with its appointed contractor. A public funeral will comprise a simple no-frills, non-denominational burial service at an unmarked grave. Whilst there is no visual marker, a record of all burials and their locations is kept at the crematoria;
- burial is the cheaper option. A cremation requires the signature of two doctors which incurs added cost and will, therefore, only be the chosen option if burial is contrary to the wishes of the deceased;
- with a public funeral cremation ashes are not retained, they are scattered in a communal area;
- funeral costs vary widely, depending on the type/style of funeral, starting from around £3,000. Local funeral directors require a minimum up-front payment of £1,000;
- cheaper public funeral provider options are available outside of the city offering services for as much as half the cost locally, however, there is a difference in the level of service provided which usually involves simply disposing of the body of the deceased with no service;
- families in receipt of benefits can apply for a funeral grant from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The amount paid out will depend on the claimant's individual circumstances. Staff in the Public Protection team offer assistance with completing claim forms and, if awarded, payments are either forwarded direct to the funeral director if they haven't been paid or the claimant's bank account if payment has already been made;
- in Plymouth, where someone dies on a ward whilst in hospital, the hospital will take responsibility for the body and arrange a funeral. However, if a person dies whilst in A&E, the Council retains responsibility.

No. Witness

B2 Jayne Glynn, Patient Experience Manager, and Mary Anderson, Bereavement Services, Plymouth Hospitals NHS Trust

- where a patient dies on ward the hospital will implement its bereavement administration process (<http://tinyurl.com/kadgrum>);
- hospitals usually have the benefit of next of kin details as they are normally provided at the time of admission, either by an accompanying relative or the patient's care home provider. Where family members can be contacted it is made clear to them that it is their responsibility to take the funeral forward and information is made available to them or the next of kin through the hospital's bereavement booklet. However, where families or next of kin are unable to pay in full they are at least encouraged to make a contribution;
- only where no contact has been provided and no-one comes forward does the hospital take on the arrangements for a public funeral;
- attempts would be made to claim money back from the patient's estate through the Treasury and £6,000 had been claimed back in the last 12 months;
- public funeral costs arranged by the hospital are cheaper than those provided by the City Council but this was in the main due to the fact that the hospital did not have to undertake the same indepth investigations expected of the Council and because the cost of the doctors' signature fees required for cremations could be absorbed by the hospital.

B3 Adrian Smart, Westlake's Funeral Directors

- hold current contract and would agree it is fair to say that it has not been refreshed for some time;
- our contract cost for public funerals is for a full service arrangement and includes storage of the body, allowing family members to view the body. Prices quoted by other companies will usually just be for disposal of the body only;
- bodies are not embalmed due to cost;
- the cost of a regular priced funeral is in the order of £3,000, of that £2,000 will go to the funeral director for payment of coffin, ministers fees, flowers, notice in paper, cars and pall bearers etc. The other £1,000 is for disbursement fees – crematorium and doctors' fees (if applicable) which require payment up-front before the funeral takes place;
- when a client requests a quote we provide a detailed, itemised estimate which is 98 per cent accurate;
- do have a policy on deposits and this is purely because of the disbursement fees, other than that clients have up to 28 days after the funeral has taken place to pay in full;
- ask clients at outset how they will be paying for the funeral – if they can't pay the £1,000 deposit how will they pay the remainder? Where there is evidence of a life insurance policy in place that will cover the entire cost, we will waive the deposit;
- do offer clients credit facilities but will carry out credit checks first. If the risk is too high, credit will be refused. We are a business and cannot afford financial losses and we have been caught out in the past;

No. Witness

- sell a lot of funeral pre-payment plans. Nationally, one sixth of all funerals are paid for using pre-payment plans but this is probably higher in Plymouth;
- on average 60 per cent of claims for funeral grant payments from the DWP are successful;
- need to take into consideration the requirement for bodies to be stored if looking at a provider out of the city. Who will collect the body and where would it be stored? Bodies can occasionally need to be stored for long periods of time. If the body is taken out of the city, this will make it difficult/impossible for family members to view the body prior to the funeral taking place and transportation costs will also need to be taken into account;
- experience of public funerals held by other local authorities is that most of the contracts do not allow for consultation on funeral times with family members and they are held at the convenience of the service. It is also more cost effective and better use of our staff's time to hold public funerals either before or after a scheduled private service;
- most other local authority public funerals are cremations;
- funeral plans have been around for some time but have only been regulated since 2003. We guarantee that the price you are quoted is the price you will pay;
- most of our records are computerised and so if a family member asks if a plan is held we can advise them straight away, however, we have no way of knowing if the plan is needed unless family members contact us. Sometimes the family will make arrangements elsewhere as they are unaware of the existence of a plan, where this happens we would fully refund the value of the plan;
- would consider waiving requirement for a deposit if the council acted as a guarantor.

B4 Michael Hull, ISCA Funeral Services (Exeter)

- can provide all-inclusive package which includes cremation, doctors' fees and simple oak-effect coffin, brief service for £1,890;
- many clients are in receipt of benefits and claim the funeral grant payment from the DWP. This payment typically amounts to £1,449 leaving them a shortfall of £450 which is then often extremely difficult to recover after the funeral. As a result, we have adopted a policy of asking for that payment up-front;
- have provided low-cost funerals for 12 months now and are currently performing an average of one per week in Plymouth;
- service area covers Lands End to Bristol and same fixed price fee applies;
- the cost includes for collecting the body from the place of death (within 24 hours), care of the deceased at premises in Exeter, liaison with coroner, family, fee to crematorium, GP fee of £157, simple oak-effect coffin, service, and car. Flowers and order of service sheets are not included.

B5 Wendy Coulton, Civil Funeral Celebrant

Please refer to separate attachment at Appendix B(i).

**Representation to Plymouth City Council co-operative scrutiny committee
review of public funded funerals – 26th February 2014 – by Civil Funeral
Celebrant Wendy Coulton**

Background of Wendy Coulton

For eight years Wendy was a director trustee of Ford Park Cemetery Trust, a charitable trust which owns and manages a working Victorian cemetery in Plymouth. Her primary role was public relations and community engagement using over 25 years professional media and PR experience in the public and voluntary sector.

As a Public and Media Relations professional within the Ministry of Defence, Plymouth City Council and an NHS acute hospital trust, Wendy had extensive experience of supporting families and communities through challenging circumstances, including bereavement and life threatening illness or injuries.

In 2010 Wendy passed the National Association of Funeral Directors Foundation Diploma course in Funeral Directing.

In 2013 Wendy completed an intensive residential course run by the Institute of Civil Funerals and passed the Level 3 Diploma in Funeral Celebrancy. She launched her own business Dragonfly Funerals as the only Plymouth-based professionally qualified funeral celebrant – www.dragonflyfunerals.co.uk

Overview statement on the review of public funded funerals

As a former public sector employee and citizen of this city I understand fully why this review is taking place but services related to funerals and bereavement support are like no other council service.

It is my personal belief in my capacity as a professional funeral celebrant, that every life lived should be acknowledged and marked with respect and dignity – no matter what the financial circumstances of the deceased, relatives or the council.

There are two distinct purposes of a funeral – the first is the formal means of disposal of the body in a way which does not present a public health risk

and the second is for the bereaved and the community to pay their final respects and have some sense of closure on a life that was lived and has ended.

The questions being considered by the council scrutiny committee today apply to the second aspect.

I would respectfully caution against seeing these aspects as 'nice to have's' and that families who cannot (or will not) pay for the funerals therefore do not 'deserve or warrant' compassion and choice.

There is a sub text to some of the questions in the report before the committee which infers that if you are not paying for the funeral and taxpayers are then you forfeit:-

1. The courtesy of being consulted and given some choice as next of kin about when the funeral is held.
2. The decency of being informed of when and what time the funeral is being held so that you can attend.
3. The choice of cremation or burial when relevant and practicable to offer that choice
4. A simple marking of a grave

None of these points are 'extra's' – like flowers, funeral cars, organists and Death announcements in the local paper.

In response to points 1 & 2:

Having the opportunity to pay respects and come together in grief is what a civilised caring community does.

Local authorities and their officers do not have the legal or moral mandate to deny relatives and friends the opportunity to attend the funeral or consultation on when it could be held.

There is no public interest to be served in not consulting or informing a family. The motive for not doing so could be seen as vindictive and judgemental.

In response to point 3:

If PPS enquiries establish any evidence that the deceased wanted to be cremated (or explicitly not to be buried) then that should be respected and carried out.

If next of kin are known and consulted they should always have the choice of burial or cremation.

The cost to the council between cremation and burial I understand to be as follows:

- Cremation fee £749 plus fee of £157 for two doctors to sign legally required Cremation forms 4 & 5
- Burial (without exclusive right of burial in that plot) is £674.50
- The difference between them being £231.50

However what doesn't appear to have been factored in is the ongoing cost for many years of maintenance of a grave by the council.

Why does it matter whether buried or cremated?

I can cite a personal example where my great grandfather served his country in the First World War digging trenches in France and a trench collapsed and he was buried alive. He survived by the traumatic experience meant his absolutely did not want to be buried when he died. His cremated remains are in the grave plot of his wife and son.

If the financial circumstances of a family were investigated and the conclusion was that they did not have the means to pay for the funeral and the public would – should they be denied the choice of burial or cremation when they may be clear on what the deceased would have wanted say like my great grandfather?

Response to point 4:

It is unacceptable that any known grave of a person is unmarked because of their financial circumstances, hardship or no next of kin could be traced or would accept responsibility for the arrangements.

Holocaust survivors have expressed how distressing it was knowing that people died and any trace that they even existed was wiped out without marked graves.

Pauper graves do not have a place in this century. Plymouth City Council should provide a simple grave marker for public funded burials. The council could explore mutual benefit opportunities from perhaps using a social enterprise or skills programme as a supplier of the markers?

Should a minister be employed if the denomination of the deceased is known?

If the PPS enquiries establish that faith was important to the deceased then yes the council should carry out a funeral/committal in accordance with that faith. Some faiths in the city will do this without charge in genuine hardship cases when approached by the PPS officers.

Since July 2013 Plymouth has also been served by a Civil Funeral Celebrant who can conduct funerals with some or no religious content for burial or cremation on local authority land.

It is also acceptable for funeral directors to conduct a simple funeral and committal.

Summary conclusion about this policy:

The council policy regarding public funerals should not be cynical and assume that everyone is out to take advantage or walk away from their responsibilities.

In the report it states on agenda item 4a page 1 'Even when family members have not accepted responsibility we still notify them of the time and date of the funeral.' The tone and emphasis of these words can be seen as judgemental and fails to take into account that some people may have justifiable reasons not to accept responsibility and may not wish to or feel able to disclose those reasons to the authorities.

Your PPS officers are experienced and diligent at investigating and exploring all avenues to ensure the public purse is the last resort.

Not everyone wants to have to ask for state help with such matters, not everyone has a loving or close relationship with next of kin (in the worst case scenarios they may have been abused by them) and increasingly decent people find themselves struggling with their household finances and unable to set aside savings for funeral costs.

The policy needs to continue to give PPS officers the discretion to assess each case without prejudice but with the overriding duty to ensure that the city of Plymouth will endeavour to do right by the person who has died and, if known, by the bereaved.