

## PLYMOUTH CITY COUNCIL

**Subject:** Your Plymouth Scrutiny Panel Co-operative Review into Public Funerals

**Committee:** Cabinet

**Date:** 9 December 2014

**Cabinet Member:** Councillor Vincent

**CMT Member:** Kelechi Nnoaham (Director of Public Health)

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**Ref:**

**Key Decision:** No

**Part:** I

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### **Purpose of the report:**

The report responds to the recommendations made following a Your Plymouth Scrutiny Review of Public Funerals. Comments and options are presented where appropriate for the implementation of the recommendations.

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### **The Brilliant Co-operative Council Corporate Plan 2013/14 -2016/17:**

The Council wishes to promote a fairer and more equal city where people are treated with dignity and respect.

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### **Other Implications: e.g. Child Poverty, Community Safety, Health and Safety and Risk Management:**

Public Funerals are only required where people or families are unable to make adequate arrangements for burial or cremation. It is often the most vulnerable in our society who will rely on the assistance of public funds to enable a dignified, respectful burial or cremation at the end of their lives.

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### **Implications for Medium Term Financial Plan and Resource Implications:**

There are no additional costs involved with the recommendations of the report as existing resources of staff time can be covered to examine the recommendations. The Council already has a duty to make funeral arrangements for people who die within Plymouth, where no other suitable arrangements are being made. The recommendations of this report seek to provide mechanisms to inform and educate the public about making suitable plans for funeral arrangements, thereby attempting to limit any additional burden that may be placed on the Council. However, the duty will remain in those cases where no arrangements have been made.

November 2014

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**Recommendations and Reasons for recommended action:**

1. Cabinet thanks the members of the Your Plymouth Scrutiny Review of Public Funerals and the Scrutiny Board.
2. Cabinet notes the recommendations contained in the Your Plymouth Scrutiny Report on Public Funerals and agrees to the actions against each recommendation as set out in the report below.

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**Alternative options considered and rejected:**

Many of the recommendations confirm the current practice of the Bereavement Service. The scrutiny panel considered options before making its recommendations and these are contained within the report.

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**Published work / information:**

Public Health (Control of Diseases) Act 1984 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1984/22>

**Background papers:**

None

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**Sign off:**

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Originating SMT Member – Kelechi Nnoaham													
Has the Cabinet Member(s) agreed the contents of the report? Yes													

## **1.0 Introduction**

- 1.1.1 In February 2014 a cross party task and finish group was established to conduct a corporate review of public funerals, with the aims of informing the Council's policy on dealing with public funerals, to sustain and improve service delivery and public confidence.
- 1.2 The Council has a legal duty under the Public Health (Control of Diseases) Act 1984 to bury or cremated the body of any person who has died or been found dead within the Plymouth City boundary, where it appears to the authority that no suitable arrangements are being for the burial or cremation of the body.
- 1.3 The review, which was held over one day, called as witnesses:
- Nicola Horne, Environmental Protection Manager from Plymouth City Council with operational responsibilities for public funerals
  - The Cabinet member for Environment
  - Staff from Plymouth Hospitals NHS Trust (Jayne Glynn and Mary Anderson)
  - Adrian Smart, Manager representing Westlake's Funeral Directors
  - Michael Hull, Manager ISCA Funeral Services (Exeter)
  - Wendy Coulton, Civil Funeral Celebrant
- 1.4 The following written evidence was also considered:
- A briefing report from the Head of Public Protection Service which summarised the legal, social and financial considerations.
- 1.5 The findings of the Cooperative Review were published in a report which was endorsed by the Cooperative Scrutiny Board on 10<sup>th</sup> October 2014. The report Public Funerals concluded that:
- Public funerals could be provided at a cheaper cost and alternative arrangements should be further explored.
  - Hospitals may not arrange funerals in future for people that die whilst in their care, and this may provide additional budgetary pressures for the Council.
  - The importance of making funeral arrangements and provision for funding needs to be brought back to the attention of the public. Options or credit union or personal loans should be explored.
  - Lobbying of MP's should occur to enable suitable costs to be recovered from other Government departments, and family members should be permitted to contribute any available funds, however small.
  - Processes for data sharing between Funeral Directors should be explored to understand when a payment plan exists.

## **2. Recommendations from the review**

- 2.1 The report made fifteen recommendations. The Council's response to these recommendations is set out below.

### **Recommendation 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;

#### **Action**

The Bereavement Service will continue to make public funeral arrangements at a time to suit the Bereavement Service whilst maintaining some degree of flexibility to accommodate family members and/or friends of the deceased;

### **Recommendation 2**

That even when family members have not accepted responsibility the Council will still notify them of the time and date of the funeral;

#### **Action**

The Bereavement Service will continue to notify family members who the Council have been interacting with of the time and date of the funeral.

### **Recommendation 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;

#### **Action**

The Bereavement Service will, having satisfied itself of the authenticity of written instructions and subject to any legal requirements that may stipulate otherwise, follow written instructions of the deceased as to the method of disposal of the body. Cremation as a method of disposal is subject to the agreement of the medical referee.

Where no instructions are left by the deceased the authority will chose the most economic method of disposal. However if the family have a specific preference and that preference can be accommodated by the Bereavement Service, the families' preference will be met subject to them paying the difference in cost to the authority.

### **Recommendation 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;

#### **Action**

The Bereavement Service will not employ a minister. However the funeral will still be conducted with respect and a form of non-denominational words will be said at the graveside, or service. Where families wish to engage a religious or non-religious celebrant that will be done at their discretion and/or expense;

### **Recommendation 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;

#### **Action**

The Bereavement Service will continue to provide a basic and minimal service without flowers or a marking of the grave. The Public Funeral contract will be retendered on this basis.

### **Recommendation 6**

Negotiations with the coroner and/or Plymouth Hospitals NHS Trust are entered into over the storage of bodies;

#### **Action**

Discrepancies between the cost to the NHS and the Council are noted. The Bereavement Service will take steps to understand the differences in costs which may be accounted for within the contracts of each organisation. Negotiations will be undertaken as part of any new contract.

### **Recommendation 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);

#### **Action**

The Bereavement Service will work with the Council's communications team, and available partners, such as Funeral Directors, Age Concern, to get the message out to the general public that it is their responsibility to make provision for their own funeral.

Consideration will be given to the most effective means of communicating this message to the public, which could include the Council's website, inclusion of a flyer in council tax bills and information to be distributed in care homes and registered social landlords;

### **Recommendation 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;

#### **Action**

The Bereavement Service will invite funeral directors to consider sharing information with each other about funeral plans where family members are unsure as to whether one exists. Funeral directors will be invited to consider implementing a registration scheme for pre-paid funeral plans;

### **Recommendation 9**

The City Council lobbies its Members of Parliament and the appropriate Secretary of State –

- to re-evaluate the funding structure for Department for Work and Pensions' 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;

### **Action**

The City Council lobbies its Members of Parliament and the appropriate Secretary of State as recommended.

### **Recommendation 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;

### **Action**

Council officers will discuss with credit unions if there is potential for the credit unions to provide personal loans to families struggling to pay for funerals for loved ones. Officers will also discuss their ability to develop funeral plan saving schemes;

### **Recommendation 11**

That officers enter in to dialogue with Registered Social Landlords to improve the process for dealing with the death of a tenant where no immediate family can be identified.

### **Action**

Officers will work with the main Registered Social Landlords within Plymouth to bring this matter to their attention.

### **Recommendation 12**

That officers explore the use of the hardship fund provided by the Council in assisting people to pay for deposits whilst awaiting claims to the Department for Work and Pension's funeral payment scheme.

### **Action**

Officers will explore this option.

### **Recommendation 13**

Consideration is given to the production of a leaflet providing advice to families on what to expect from a public funeral if they cannot pay.

### **Action**

The Bereavement Service already publishes this information on the Council website, but will also put this information into leaflet form, which can be left with family members who cannot pay.

**Recommendation I 4**

A progress update report is submitted to the Your Plymouth Scrutiny Panel in six months.

**Action**

This recommendation is noted.