



# Public health funerals in the UK

Time to end the postcode lottery

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## 1

## Working to tackle funeral poverty

In 1861 Royal London was formed as a friendly society. The organisation had one priority: to help people avoid what were then commonly known as ‘paupers’ funerals’. In Victorian Britain such funerals were stigmatised. Royal London’s idea was simple, save a little regularly with the new friendly society and in return you’d be guaranteed a decent send-off.

Royal London is now a mutual – owned by our members – and we remain committed to tackling funeral poverty in the UK. We have two main issues where we campaign for change:

1. Improving the benefits system to ensure the Funeral Expenses Payment is fit for purpose, and adequately funded to protect people from being forced into funeral debt as the gap between government support and the cost of a funeral grows.
2. Demanding minimum standards for public health funerals (historically described as paupers’ funerals) provided by local councils. Local council provision varies hugely and minimum standards would ensure those eligible are entitled to a simple, but dignified send-off.

1/3

of public health funerals were undertaken by local councils because bereaved families were unable to afford the cost



## 2

## Improving the benefits system

In 2019 our annual National Funeral Cost Index Report revealed funeral poverty had increased by 12% to £147m. The gap for people struggling to pay for a funeral increased from £1,744 to £1,990, a rise of 14% on the previous year and a record high.

Last year we stepped up our campaigning work with regular Ministerial meetings, and the establishment of a new Funeral Poverty Working Group, made up of MPs from the Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat and SNP parties. It is chaired by Carolyn Harris MP, who has successfully campaigned for the introduction of a Children’s Funeral Fund.

We have also continued to work closely with the Quaker Social Action’s Down to Earth team and they have provided invaluable insight that has helped us to build the case for urgent change.

In 2019, our campaigning helped to influence change, resulting in significant progress on improving funeral support for people on low incomes. In November we were delighted that after a 17 year freeze on the level of the Funeral Expenses Payment, the Government announced the payment for ‘other’ costs, which are capped, will finally be increased. In April the capped payment will rise by 39%, from £700 - £1,000. In our view, while this announcement was of course welcome, it does not go far enough and we are asking the Government to at least commit to annual increases.

## 3

## Public health funerals

Royal London's latest research reveals there is still much that needs to be done to improve levels of local council provision. They have a duty to arrange a public health funeral for anyone who dies in their area where there is no one willing or able to arrange one. If the deceased leaves behind assets, including property, the local authority can recover the cost of the funeral.

To establish the latest position on the differences in public health funeral provision we sent Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to 400 local councils and we received 383 responses. We asked local authorities to provide information on levels of expenditure for the 2018/19 financial year and examples of basic provision we believe should be included to guarantee a dignified send-off. We specifically asked whether the funeral service allowed family to attend, whether ashes (from a cremation) were returned, and if so, whether there was a charge for this.

### Expenditure

Responses from local councils show that more than 4,000 public health funerals took place in 2018/19. The total spend on public health funerals was £6.3m and the average cost of a public health funeral to local councils is £1,507.

The responses also revealed clear differences in levels of council expenditure which can be seen in the tables below:

Table 1: 10 councils with the highest expenditure on public health funerals

Council	Expenditure	No of funerals	Av. Expenditure
Birmingham City	£967,658	387	£2,500
Cornwall Council	£744,963	100	£7,450
Salford City	£143,417	66	£2,173
Leeds City	£114,788	57	£2,014
Dudley Metropolitan Borough	£91,894	56	£1,641
Sheffield City	£91,624	57	£1,607
Nottingham City	£75,336	120	£628
London Borough of Brent	£69,624	33	£2,110
Portsmouth City	£67,641	55	£1,230
Fife Council	£63,579	49	£1,298

Table 2: 10 councils with the lowest expenditure on public health funerals

Council	Expenditure	No of funerals	Av. Expenditure
Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon Borough	£250	1	£250
Ards and North Down Borough	£495	1	£495
City of London	£750	1	£750
Newry and Mourne District	£905	2	£453
Allerdale Borough	£945	1	£945
Mid & East Antrim (covers Ballymena, Carrickfergus and Larne)	£980	1	£980
North West Leicestershire District	£1,000	2	£500
Torfaen County Borough	£1,006	1	£1,006
Hertsmere Borough	£1,050	1	£1,050
Mid Suffolk District Council	£1,056	2	£528

# £6.3M

was spent on public health funerals by local councils in the financial year 2018/19



The tables make it clear to see that there are huge disparities in expenditure levels. As the largest council in the UK, Birmingham City Council carries out the most public health funerals in the UK, with an average spend of £2,500. Cornwall Council, however, carries out fewer public health funerals, but spends the most on average per funeral at £7,450. Clearly a degree of difference is to be expected as local factors will affect some costs, but that alone does not tell the whole story.

### Minimum standards

There are currently no rules or regulations which set out what should and shouldn't be provided by local councils as part of a public health funeral. It is for each and every council to decide and our research reveals that there is a postcode lottery, as the provision is very different dependent on where you live.

Responses to our FOI request show that:

# 21

local councils do not return ashes to bereaved families after a public health funeral



# 18

local councils charge bereaved families for ashes to be returned after a public health funeral



# 14

local councils do not allow family members to attend a public health funeral



### Lindsey Mace, Down to Earth

The government urgently needs to set minimum standards for public health funerals. Varied criteria can see you sent away to apply to charities before returning, which can take months and not cover the full cost, or potential eligibility for the DWP Funeral Expenses Payment can mean rejection, despite not being able to afford the shortfall. If you do manage to get a public health funeral, then in one part of the country you'll be prevented from attending; in another you'll get just a minute's silence and be unable to keep the ashes; while in yet another you'll have to wait three months. While some councils do employ good practice, too many are imposing harsh restrictions in a bid to 'put off' families from having one. The bereaved should not have to experience hostile gatekeeping just to see their family/friends laid to rest.

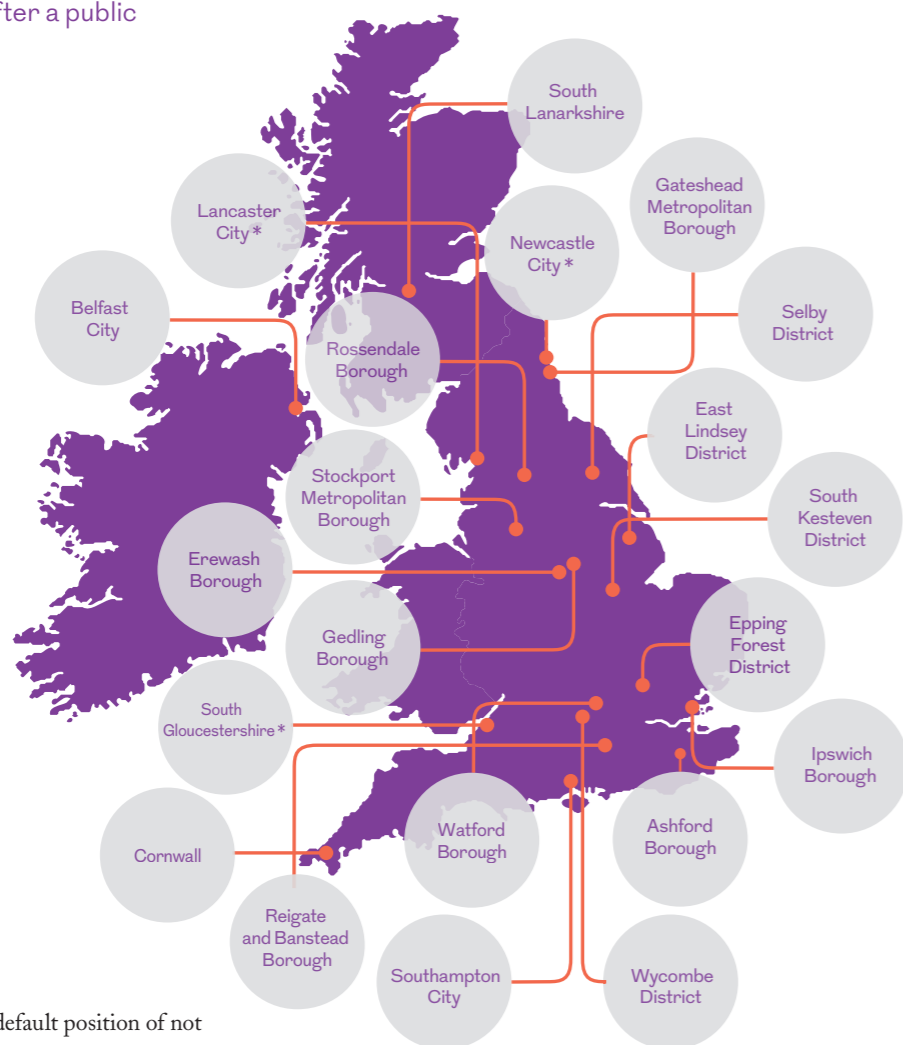
# 4 Call for change

Royal London is calling for the urgent introduction of minimum standards for public health funerals. They should be backed by legislation and ensure that: Minimum levels of provision should at least include families being allowed to attend the funeral service, and in the case of cremations, ashes to be returned free of charge to the family.

**Julie Dunk, Chief Executive, Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management (ICCM)**

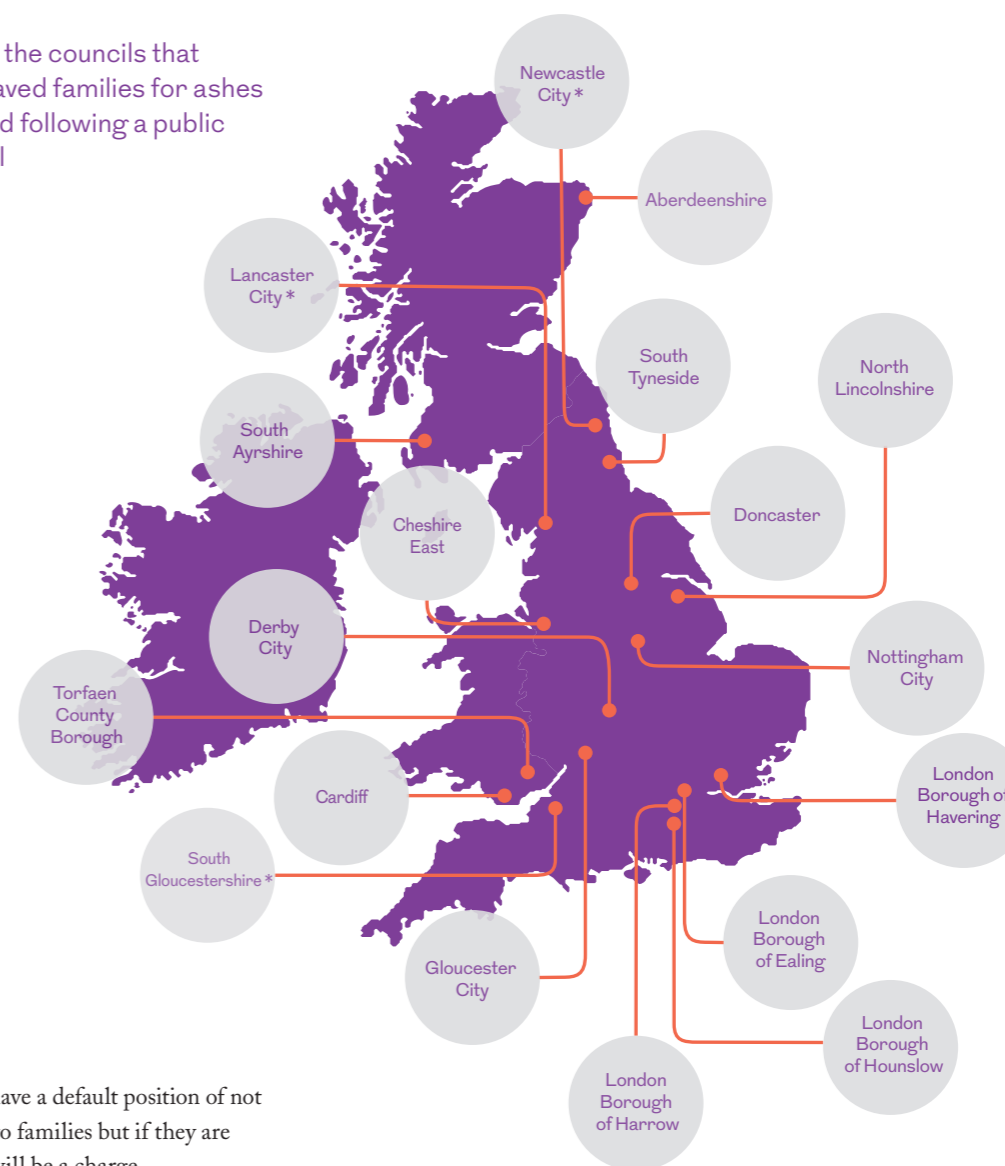
Local authorities have a legal duty under the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984 to cause to be buried or cremated the body of a person who died or was found dead in their area. There is no legal requirement for a local authority to actually provide a funeral. Fortunately most local authorities go over and above their statutory duty and will arrange a funeral, and will allow family and friends to attend and participate in the funeral. Most will also let families have ashes following a cremation, and there is no good reason for any authority to refuse this request. As part of the training that the ICCM provides for local authority officers, we encourage authorities to produce a clear policy based on our own ICCM Position Statement on public health funerals. The Position Statement sets out standards that bereaved families in the unfortunate position of needing a public health funeral can expect from the authority, but it is only advisory and not enforceable. The ICCM welcomes the call for mandatory minimum standards throughout the UK.

Map 1 shows the councils that do not return ashes after a public health funeral



\*These councils have a default position of not returning ashes to families but if they are returned, there will be a charge.

Map 2 shows the councils that charge bereaved families for ashes to be returned following a public health funeral



\*These councils have a default position of not returning ashes to families but if they are returned, there will be a charge.

# 5 Conclusion

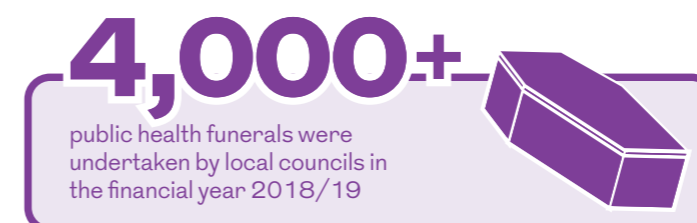
After many years of campaigning by Royal London, Down to Earth and many others, the Government has agreed to significantly boost funeral payment support available to people on low incomes. This will help thousands of people to provide a better send-off for their loved ones. We continue to campaign for further increases, and for the payment to at least be increased annually.

Our latest research reveals there is still much to be done to improve public health funeral provision. As it was in 1861, this continues to be a

priority for Royal London. While the vast majority of councils provide an acceptable service, there are still a number that do not. The real impact on those families who live in these areas should not be underestimated. Grieving families who have no alternative than to apply for a public health funeral are being prevented from saying goodbye to their loved ones and having their ashes held to ransom. These indignities compound the distress of people at their most vulnerable.

It is time to put in place minimum standards, backed by legislation. Over the coming months we will continue to work closely with the Funeral Poverty Working Group and Down to Earth in order to achieve our aim, and ensure everyone – regardless of income – is given access to a dignified send-off.

Map 3 shows the councils that do not allow family members to attend a public health funeral



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