



Muslim Burials

SUMMARY

- 1.1 The Minority Communities Development Forum on 16 September 2010 considered a report from Mr Paul Gluszkowski, detailing problems that had occurred at two Muslim funerals, one in December 2007; the other in December 2009, where the level of service provided by the council's Bereavement Services was considered unsatisfactory. The Forum requested that Bereavement Services respond to each of the points raised in a report to the next meeting.
- 1.2 This report outlines the action that has been taken by Bereavement Services since 2007 to improve its burial services to the Muslim community and acknowledges that more work still needs to be done
- 1.3 Significant progress has been by Bereavement Services over the past 3 years, including detailed consultation on a new type of burial chamber; the nomination and training of seven 'Community Representatives' (who now take a lead role in Muslim burials; production of a detailed information booklet (available in hard copy or via the council's website); changes to the ground surfaces in the burial area; improved health and safety guidance and training; increased availability of equipment for community use; better information on the council's website; guaranteed officer availability for burials both during and outside normal office hours and regular officer attendance at appropriate forums and action groups to develop an improved understanding of the community's needs. It is recognised, however, that not all sectors of the Muslim community have as yet been fully engaged with the process and that this is the main area for future service development

RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 To acknowledge the steps that have already been taken and are continuing to be implemented by the council in ensuring ensure that all future Muslim burials are carried out with all due respect and dignity for bereaved families

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION

- 3.1 Bereavement Services acknowledges that the problems that occurred at both funerals referred to by Mr Gluszkowski were unacceptable and that all necessary steps should be taken to prevent a recurrence. It also acknowledges that the most appropriate mechanism for ensuring this is better engagement and partnership working with the

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 4.1 Muslims strive to bury their deceased as soon as possible after death and aim to carry out funerals within 24 hours. Religious tradition requires not only dignity and respect for the deceased but also that the last rites of passage take place as soon as possible. This provides operational challenges for Bereavement Services, not least for burials taking place outside normal working hours e.g. at weekends or during Bank Holidays. However, the council believes that action taken since 2007 has successfully eradicated many of the issues raised by Mr Gluszkowski
- 4.2 For ease of reference, the comments made in Mr Gluszkowski report are broken down section by section below and are followed by the council's response.
- 4.3 Mr Gluszkowski: (Items 3 and 4 *My dear, late father in law, Ayoub Hosenbux, died on Friday, 21st December 2007. His funeral could not take place until the following Friday. We went to see the funeral director, Lymns, with our friend, Ashiq, as we were told they knew the procedures relating to Muslim burials. During the discussion, Lymns were to take my father in law to the mosque and then on to the cemetery for burial. We asked about the burial itself but they could not give us any details at that point.*
- 4.4 Council response: Lymns are very knowledgeable in the funeral industry so should have been able to brief the family of what was required. A copy of Mr Gluszkowski presentation has been forwarded to Lymns for comment. At the time of writing, no response has been received.
- 4.5 Mr Gluszkowski: (Item 5) *Ashiq arranged for the mosque to carry out all the necessary preparations and prayers for my father in law to be buried. All this went as expected and according to plan. In the days before the funeral, we tried to find out as much as we could through the internet, the Council website and phone line, visits to people within the Muslim community and the mosque. We couldn't find out anything. On the Thursday afternoon before the funeral my wife and I went to the Muslim section at the cemetery to look at the area. We were greeted with a building site, partially caged off. I had no idea what was going on and did not believe that the grave could possibly be in this area. Lymns called me later to tell me that I would need a few spades and helpers because I had to prepare the grave. I would have to dig the soil off the top and open the vault. You can imagine my consternation and panic because the next day was my father in law's funeral. It was getting dark and late but I dashed to B&Q and Wickes to get Wellington boots and plastic sheets just before they shut. Ashiq managed to find 2 helpers and I could only find 1 friend at such a late hour, to help the next day.*

- 4.6 Council response: Although it is surprising that the Mosque could not assist with the relevant information the council accepts that, at the time, its Website did not contain sufficient self-help information and that Derby's Muslim community had not been adequately briefed to provide the necessary level of assistance – both of these issues have now been rectified:

There have been considerable improvements in the Muslim burial area over the past 3 years and funeral requirements are now much better understood. For example, a new road has been laid to the burial area, the ground surrounding the graves is now gravelled (following consultation with the community) to improve safety. Public consultation has resulted in an improved vaulting system and the production of a guidance booklet containing the contact details of trained Community Representatives, who are responsible for leading families through the burial process.

Better information is now also available on the council's Website and, by the end of the year; this will be supplemented by a pictorial flowchart demonstrating safe and appropriate procedures and practices to be adopted by bereaved families during the burial process.

A further outcome of consultation is that burial vaults are no longer covered with soil prior to use. A light covering of gravel is now used, which can readily be removed prior to the funeral taking place.

A member of Bereavement Services staff is now always made available for any burial taking place outside normal office hours

- 4.7 Mr Gluszkowski: (Item 6) *I knew that it would be an early start the next day so I loaded the car with spades and an assortment of tools. I had a sleepless night. I left home at 6.30 a.m. and collected my friend. There was a bitter wind and it was extremely cold. Thankfully, the gates at the cemetery were open and the other two volunteers had turned up much to my relief. We drove to the grave which was the building site we had seen the previous day. The volunteers knew which plot it was and imagine my horror, to find that we were to dig 2 tonnes of frozen, slippery clay in a confined and dangerous area. It took hours. We eventually uncovered the vault and removed the concrete lintels. We then found that the bottom of the grave was covered in a foot and a half of very cold water which had to be removed by hand.*

- 4.8 Council response: The vault pre-preparation process has been greatly improved since 2007. Following public consultation, a different design of vault is now used. It is common for water to seep into vaults over time because they cannot be sealed properly until used. The new vaults are, however, less susceptible to water ingress and sponging is now normally sufficient to remove any water before a burial.

Sponges, a water pump and other useful equipment are now stored on site and available for community use. The Community Representatives and Bereavement Services staff can provide detailed advice and assistance on this at the appropriate time

4.9 Mr Gluszkowski: (Item 7) *I had to get ready for the funeral and go to the mosque to ensure that everything was okay but the grave kept refilling with water so we had to stay on to empty it. I went to the gatehouse for help and spoke to a lady there. She could see that I was distressed but stated that the Council did not get involved with Muslim funerals. I returned to the grave. A little later, 2 workmen came down in a truck and approached us. I spoke to one of them and they said that due to health and safety reasons, they were not allowed to help. They also told me that there was a water pump at the gatehouse, by which time the water situation was under control with the help of a handy dustpan which I'd brought from home. They also told me that the grave was not deep enough. It was not what I wanted to hear and there was nothing I could do about this with my father in law's coffin on its way within a couple of hours.*

4.10 Council response: Following community consultation and the introduction of a new type of vault, water ingress is now less of a problem.

The lady referred to above was the tenant of the gatehouse in 2007 and not a council employee and therefore would have had no background or knowledge of bereavement issues. Bereavement Services has no knowledge of the identity of the workmen referred to. It is very unlikely that they would have been council employees. They should not, therefore, have offered an opinion on the depth of the vault and, in any case, their advice was incorrect as all vaulted graves are excavated to a standard depth.

4.11 Mr Gluszkowski: (Item 8) *One of the Muslim volunteers said he would stay and ensure that the grave stayed empty of water but I had to return with some sand to tidy the bottom. I had to dash to the Mosque to meet the hearse there, drop my friend and the other volunteer off and get some sand, which luckily I had at home.*

4.12 Council response: The placing of sand or sawdust in the base of a vaulted grave is a common practice. Either the council or the Mosque or the Funeral Director or community representative could have made the family aware of this aware of this beforehand. It is therefore regrettable that this advice was either not offered or understood.

4.13 Mr Gluszkowski: (Item 9) *I got home, changed, and dashed back to the cemetery with my family. I had to get the sand in the grave and tidy everything up with the family, in deep mourning, looking on. Eventually, the hearse turned up followed by some members of the Muslim Community. We took the coffin from the hearse and carried it to the graveside. It was difficult and dangerous to manoeuvre the coffin into the grave without slipping in because of the huge mounds of wet clay, surrounding the grave in a confined space.*

4.14 Council response: The area is now tarmaced and gravelled and the ground surface is no longer slippery. A health and safety risk assessment has been completed and community representatives have been briefed and trained on its contents. Copies are also offered to all bereaved families attending the cemetery and the document is available for download on the council's Website.

- 4.15 Mr Gluszkowski: Item 11 Extract from letter from Ms Ali (December 2009):
A representative of the Islamic Centre took one of the brothers to highlight the plot that needed to have the soil removed. There was no mention at either of these meetings of equipment available and, most significantly, the facility of a water pump. Later that afternoon, 8 members of the family attended to remove the soil. On removing the plastic sheeting and removal of the concrete lintels, they then had to spend time removing the water from the plot with anything that came to hand as they had not been prepared for the amount of water present. In total the group spent over two hours doing this and at no point was there anyone to supervise the inexperienced party, or to ensure that Health and Safety requirements were in place. Needless to say due to the mud, the immediate area surrounding the plot was extremely slippery which caused two members of the group to slip. Fortunately they were not seriously hurt.
- Following the prayer service, prior to the main party arriving at the cemetery, a group of 5 Nephews attended the grave and discovered an accumulation of water. Again as they had not been informed of any water pump being available, they had no choice but to get into the plot dressed in their suits for the funeral, to begin removing the water with a jug and bucket. You may be able to comprehend and appreciate the horror of seeing your Nephews and family members bailing water out of the grave that you intend to lay your Mother to rest in.*
- As you will recall further delays were then experienced regarding the requirement of a name plaque on the coffin, which we have been assured, is a recent change of the Derby City Council Cemetery regulations that we were not informed of. I would like to stress emphatically that to see a laminated piece of A4 paper attached to your Mother's coffin was a matter of gross indignation in itself which further contributed to the stress of the family, friends and relatives.*
- The argument that took place with the Hearse driver and yourself, whilst inappropriate, is something that the family will overlook as emotions were at that stage becoming strained due to the frustration felt by everyone. At one point we all started to worry that our Mother would not be buried on the Friday.*
- Once my Mother-in-Law was removed from the Hearse, the brothers were to lift and then lower the coffin into the ground. There was never any instruction or training given to any family member on how to do this. Another difficulty to this was that as there was no one to supervise the removal of the soil, there was no room for the coffin to have been manoeuvred safely and, as you observed, the sons and nephews who were trying to do this were in a very dangerous situation. At one stage two members slipped on the mud and it was only by other relatives standing on the bank of the grave holding onto them that they maintained their balance. In fact another mourner had to direct those lowering the coffin whilst the Islamic Centre representative observed without comment. Again this is the most undignified lowering of a coffin that I have ever witnessed and I hope that I never have the misfortune of witnessing again.*
- The surrounding area of the grave should have been made as safe as reasonably practical, not only for the Pall Bearers, but also for the mourners which included young children and some elderly friends and relatives. On many occasions I slipped, but was able to hold my balance but this would have been very difficult for those members who were not as physically capable or who were carrying young children.*

- 4.16 Council response: Given that so much effort had been put into addressing the needs of the community following the problems experienced by Mr Gluskowski's family in 2007, the events surrounding this funeral are particularly disappointing. By this time (December 2009), consultation with the community had been completed, community representatives had been trained and one of the representatives had been contacted by the family and was guiding them through the process. The community representative in question has subsequently received further training.

The reference to the name plaque on the coffin being a recent change is incorrect. This is a long-standing statutory requirement, which ensures the coffin can be matched to the details of the death registration documents. The community representative involved in this burial now owns appropriate name-plating equipment, so this situation should not recur.

The provision of the H&S risk assessment document coupled with the presence of a member of staff on-site at all burials plus improved guidance and further training of Community Representatives means that health and safety risks have now been minimised

- 4.17 Mr Gluszkowski: (Item 12) *Cllr Saadia Davis approached the Council Officers in charge of the cemetery in January this year and discussed at great length that more communication with funeral directors, the Muslim Community, non Muslims, women and anyone who needed information relating to Muslim burials should be given this. By April, very little had been done. I understand that things are now progressing and I hope that nobody will ever have to experience such a terrible, fraught and tragic day in their lives which still leaves them traumatised for many years to come.*

- 4.18 Council response: Funeral Directors are now invited as a matter of course to all Bereavement Services Forum meetings; the most recent of which was held on 2 November 2010.

Bereavement Services staff attend all meetings of the Muslim Burial Action Group and the Assistant Bereavement Services Manager also now regularly attends the Muslim Women's Forum Group.

- 4.19 Mr Gluszkowski: (Item 13) *We need to address who at the burial site is in charge of that area and somebody responsible from the Muslim community, the funeral director or the Council should be in attendance. This is particularly for health and safety reasons. Who is responsible for H&S?*
- 4.20 Council response: The council is responsible under the Health and Safety at Work Act for the safe provision of graves/vaults at the cemetery. Muslim burials are usually conducted in private with council officers being requested to keep a respectful distance. Each community representative is therefore trained on health and safety issues and all bereaved families are given a copy of the council's risk assessment for the burial process, which contains all necessary guidance on safe practice. A member of staff is now always available at the cemetery to deal with any ad-hoc health and safety issues, should they arise.
- 4.21 Mr Gluszkowski: (Item 14) *Equipment should be made available and this should be communicated to the bereaved family.*

- 4.22 Council response: A pump, sponges and other tools and equipment are readily available at the cemetery on request. Funeral Directors and community representatives, in addition to council staff, are aware of this.
- 4.23 Mr Gluszkowski: (Item 15) *Information should be available on the internet, via leaflets and again there should be training of responsible people. There are leaflets for the vaults but not for the procedures. Muslims are from all nationalities with different funeral variations. The existing system should be communicated to them. You are obliged to help bereaved families – please do so. Could we have a review in 6 months' time?*
- 4.24 Council response: A booklet about Muslim burials was produced and widely circulated in the community in 2009. It can also now be downloaded from the Council's website. Since 2007, seven Muslim members of the community (Community representatives) have been trained on conducting safe and respectful burials. Their contact details are available in the guidance booklet. Although all the representatives are from the Pakistani Muslim community, each has stated their willingness to provide guidance and help for families from any Muslim community in the city

For non-English speaking communities, work is in progress to produce a pictorial flowchart of the process, which will be uploaded onto the council's website by the end of December 2010

- 4.25 Although not complete at the time of writing an Equality Impact Assessment for Muslim burials is in draft. This contains timetabled actions for further improvements to services