



Independent Equalities Review of Bereavement Services Provision

**Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council
(RMBC)**

Prepared by

Kaushar Tai

Management & Training Consultant
& Director of Aksaa

March 2025



Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
The Brief	5
The Muslim Community's Concerns with the Authorities Relating to Quick Burials	6
The Legal Framework - Appropriate protected characteristics, as outlined in the Equalities Act and Public Sector Equalities Duty	7
The Role of the Hospital Chaplain in End-of-Life Care, Hospice, GP, and Community-based Support Provision	8
Short-Notice Burial Protocols and Good Practices	10
The New Medical Examiner System	11
Implications of the New Medical Examiner System on Muslim Burials	12
Burial Provision and Funeral Management for Muslim Communities	14
The Islamic Perspective on Post-Mortem Examinations	16
Types of Graves Permissible and impermissible in Islam	16
The Management of the Rotherham Cemetery	19
What are the issues relating to Muslim Burials	19
Post-Burial Support from the Muslim Community	21
The Importance of Quick Burials in Islam	23
Feedback from Muslim Funeral Directors from across the UK	24
Opinions and Feedback from the Muslim Community in Rotherham and Rotherham Councillors	26
Feedback from the meeting with the Rotherham Muslim Burial Council	29
Recommendations	
Key Improvement Recommendations for Authorities in Bereavement Services, Cemetery Management, and Burial Practices	35
Specific Recommendations for Faith-Based Burial Protocols	36
Key Improvement Recommendations for Managing the Muslim Section of Rotherham Cemetery	36

Key Improvement Recommendations for Rotherham Muslim Burial Council Representatives	37
Partnership working of public sector organisations in the Bereavement Process – Examples of Good Practice	38
Conclusion	39
Acknowledgements and Appreciations	39



Executive Summary

Rotherham Borough Council's decision to initiate a review to assess the current state of Muslim Burial Provision underscores their commitment to equality by addressing concerns raised by the Muslim Community regarding the services provided. This proactive step reflects the council's dedication to enhancing service delivery and inclusion, particularly in response to matters concerning the Muslim community following grief and loss.

The Purpose of the Review

Commissioned by Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council (RMBC), the review aims to assess the end-to-end bereavement support and burial services for the Muslim community, focusing on the roles of statutory and community voluntary agencies before, during, and after bereavement.

Contextual Importance:

End-of-life care, including support during the bereavement process, is critical to the well-being of the deceased's family. The report emphasises the need for comprehensive support from "womb to tomb," which includes cases of miscarriage, non-viable foetus, and post-burial care for the bereaved.

Challenges Identified

Bereaved families face significant emotional and practical challenges during the immediate aftermath of a death. Statutory and community organizations must provide accessible information and compassionate support to ease this process.

Impact of Bereavement

The quality of support provided by professionals and volunteers impacts the grieving process, with implications for mental and physical health, affecting bereaved families' long-term well-being and healthcare usage.

Collaborative Approach

Strong partnerships across statutory and voluntary sectors are essential for consistent, culturally competent services. Cultural sensitivity and understanding of Islamic burial practices are critical for effective support.

The key issues collated from Muslim Funeral Directors across the Country

The key issues found in the Bereavement and Burial Process in Muslim communities following discussions among Muslim Funeral Directors nationally, were as follows:

1. Delay in bureaucracy in obtaining the medical certificate.
2. Lack of Burial Sites in their areas.

3. Water ingress in the cemeteries.
4. Worry about possible delays due to the new Medical Examiner system.
5. Lack of connectivity between authorities, the Muslim Funeral Service, and the Bereaved.
6. Competing Funeral directors and volunteers with no joined-up planning and execution of the Burial Process.
7. Coroner referrals causing delays and the worry of post-mortems.
8. Affordability of CT scans for digital autopsy.
9. Out-of-hour provision and coverage by key departments and personnel.
10. GP's availability for out-of-hours community deaths.
11. Coroner referrals where scans are inconclusive, and a Post-Mortem examination needs to be done and the time it takes for this to happen.
12. Thoughtful and clear communication, guided by sensitivity to the loss and compassion when supporting families.
13. Running out of burial land.
14. Under-utilisation of community specialist care such as hospices and palliative care.

Although the above concerns were acknowledged, I observed that in many areas, including in Rotherham, Muslim Funeral Directors maintain excellent relationships and collaborative working arrangements with local Council Bereavement Services, Coroners' Officers, Registrars, Cemetery Staff, the Chaplaincy Department, and others involved in death and burial services.

Independent Review of Burial Provision for the Muslim Community

The Brief

This independent review of the Burial Provision for the Muslim Community has been commissioned by Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council (RMBC) to gain a deeper understanding of the practicalities and challenges for each stage of the life journey of a patient and the contribution of statutory and community voluntary agencies before, during and post bereavement processes end to end.

This review also identified the need to learn from examples of good practice, explore areas for improvement, and make key recommendations.

The Rotherham Council commissioned Kaushar Tai, a Management and Training Consultant to do this work. He has undertaken several projects for the Government, Local Authorities, and voluntary and community sectors. These include research and consultancy work on housing; the environment; employability skills; elderly care service provision; and recruiting Muslim Foster Carers across the UK.

Kaushar also specialises in CPD-accredited soft skills training courses, including leadership and management, mental health workshops, faith, and cultural awareness competency training, challenging Islamophobia, etc., for the public sector and civil service professionals. Over 25,000 delegates have attended his courses and seminars throughout the country since, 2004 including some overseas.

The context

The care of people in the last few days of life, and the availability of care and support for bereaved people are essential components of good end-of-life care. The immediate period following a death can be a very difficult time for the bereaved, and many struggle with the need to handle administrative details around registering the death, notifying the relevant authorities, and making the necessary funeral arrangements.

Death can occur anytime following inception. There is, therefore, a need to adopt a comprehensive approach that covers “womb to tomb”, including eventualities such as miscarriage, non-viable foetus, etc. as well as after-care of the bereaved following burial.

People must be provided with comprehensive, trustworthy, and easy-to-understand information, in addition to practical and emotional support that makes this time as trouble-free as possible.

Statutory organisations have a responsibility to ensure that information and practical and emotional support is available to the bereaved. Community and Voluntary organisations and volunteers also offer important services to the relatives of the deceased.

How professionals and volunteers respond to those who are bereaved can have a long-term impact on how they grieve, their health, and their memories of the individual who has died. For families and carers, bereavement can be associated with poorer mental and physical health, and increased use of health services.

Effective links between staff, both within and between sectors, are important to ensure a consistent service is offered to the bereaved.

Statutory services also need to understand the specific religious and cultural expectations and how the local community and faith organisations play their part in mobilising resources to support families and relatives at such challenging times.

The Muslim Community's Concerns with the Authorities Relating to Quick Burials

Quick Muslim burials are important for the Muslim community due to religious beliefs and practices. In Islam, it is customary to bury the deceased as soon as possible, ideally within 24 hours. This practice is rooted in religious tradition and serves to honour the deceased and provide closure for the family.

However, concerns may arise when authorities or local regulations hinder the ability to perform quick burials. This can happen for various reasons, such as legal requirements, bureaucratic processes, or logistical challenges. When these delays occur, they can cause distress and frustration within the Muslim community, as it goes against their religious obligations and cultural norms.

Some specific concerns that may arise include:

- **Respect for the deceased**
Delayed burials can be seen as disrespectful to the deceased and their family according to Islamic beliefs. Muslims believe in treating the deceased with dignity and reverence, and delaying burial can be distressing for both the deceased and their loved ones.
- **Emotional impact**
Quick burials are not only a religious obligation but also help in the grieving process. Delayed burials prolong the grieving period and can add to the emotional burden on the family and community members.
- **Community cohesion**
Quick burials often involve the participation of the wider Muslim community, including family, friends, and religious leaders. Delays can disrupt this communal support system and lead to feelings of isolation and alienation.
- **Legal and bureaucratic hurdles**
In some cases, local regulations or administrative procedures may impede the timely burial of Muslim individuals. This can create tension between the Muslim community and local authorities, especially if there is a lack of understanding or accommodation of religious practices.

- **Families and Friends attending the funeral**

It is a religious duty to attend a Muslim funeral if one becomes aware, even to attend where they do not know the deceased. This is to foster a sense of identity and belonging and to provide comfort and solace to bereaved families and friends. As a result, people will travel from a distance, particularly if they know the individual or bereaved family who may live outside the town.

If the deceased person is known to them then they will take time off from work to travel, sometimes long distances to attend the funeral prayer and burial. Therefore, delays in the funeral and burial for whatever reason, would cause much disruption for those having to travel away from their home and work.

Addressing these concerns requires cooperation and understanding between the Muslim community and relevant authorities. It is important for authorities to be aware of and sensitive to the religious and cultural practices of the Muslim community when dealing with matters related to burials. This may involve streamlining bureaucratic processes, providing exemptions or accommodations for religious practices, and fostering open communication and dialogue between the community and authorities.

For this reason, Religious and Cultural Competency Training is vital for a greater understanding of religious and cultural practices relating to Muslim Bereavement and Burials.

Legal Framework for Burial Services in the Context of Equality and Human Rights

Equality Act 2010 and Protected Characteristics: The Equality Act 2010 prohibits discrimination based on protected characteristics, including race, religion, disability, and more. In burial services, this ensures fair and non-discriminatory access to all individuals, respecting diverse needs across cultural and religious contexts.

Religious and Cultural Sensitivity: The Act mandates that burial services accommodate religious and cultural practices, such as rapid burial for Muslims and Jews. Failure to facilitate timely burials can contravene the Act's requirements for respecting religious practices.

Accessibility for People with Disabilities: Burial services are required to be accessible, including provisions like wheelchair access and support for those with disabilities, ensuring equal access to all aspects of the service.

Non-Discrimination and Fair Pricing: Service providers cannot discriminate based on race, religion, or other protected characteristics, nor can they impose additional fees based on these characteristics. This ensures burial services are equitable and fair.

Reasonable Accommodations: Providers must make reasonable accommodations, such as offering burial services outside standard hours for religious reasons, wherever feasible, in line with the Act's goal of inclusivity.

Public Sector Equality Duty: Public authorities are not only required to avoid discrimination but must also actively consider the needs of disadvantaged groups in their policies and services, particularly regarding religious and cultural practices in burial services.

Indirect Discrimination: The Equality Act 2010 also protects against indirect discrimination, where policies or practices disadvantage specific religious groups. Policies that ignore the need for quick burials, for instance, could disadvantage Muslims and Jews disproportionately and may be legally challengeable.

Human Rights Act 1998 and European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR): Article 9 of the ECHR protects freedom of religion and belief, while Article 14 ensures protection from discrimination based on religion or belief. Burial policies and practices must balance these rights carefully with other public service considerations, ensuring that any restrictions on religious practices are both necessary and proportionate.

Legal Precedents and Sensitivity in Service: Previous rulings emphasise that religious and cultural considerations in bereavement services are essential. Authorities must avoid rigid, standardised “cab-rank” approaches and should maintain policies that can withstand potential legal challenges related to religious burial rights.

Role of the Hospital Muslim Chaplain in End-of-Life Care

Spiritual Guidance: The Muslim Chaplain provides religious guidance rooted in Islamic beliefs, offering prayers, reciting Quranic verses, and providing reassurance about Allah's mercy. This guidance helps patients and families find comfort and peace in their final moments.

Emotional Support and Comfort: The Chaplain offers emotional support to both the dying and their families, helping them cope with the challenges of end-of-life decisions and providing encouragement and a compassionate presence during a difficult time.

Cultural Sensitivity and Adherence to Islamic Customs: Skilled in Islamic customs related to death, the Chaplain ensures practices like specific prayers, body preparation rituals, and timely burial arrangements are followed, respecting the cultural and religious needs of the Muslim patient.

Guidance in Medical Decision-Making: The Chaplain aids families in understanding religious and ethical considerations in medical decisions, supporting discussions with healthcare providers to honour the patient's wishes regarding medical care and end-of-life interventions.

Coordination with Healthcare Providers: Collaborating closely with healthcare teams, the Chaplain advocates for the patient's spiritual needs, facilitating accommodations for prayer, halal food, and a peaceful environment for the final moments of life.

Grief Support and Post-Death Arrangements: The Chaplain offers continued grief support to family members, assisting with funeral arrangements and connecting them with community resources to aid in the grieving process.

Key Role During the COVID-19 Pandemic: During COVID-19, Chaplains bridged the gap between dying patients and families, despite severe restrictions, providing a vital link from death to burial and supporting families through remote and direct means.

Examples of Good Practice: Chaplains, often trained as Imams and religious scholars, handle administrative processes, including death certificate expediting, coordination with hospital and mortuary staff, and liaising with families and funeral directors. This comprehensive role, especially highlighted during the pandemic, is deeply valued within the Muslim community for both its practical and spiritual contributions.

The Muslim Chaplain provides a holistic approach to end-of-life care, combining religious knowledge, cultural sensitivity, and pastoral skills to support Muslim patients and families at a critical time. Rotherham is fortunate to have Muslim Chaplains employed in the Hospital and Hospice setting, providing the essential services described above.

Hospice Care and Muslim Community Engagement

Hospice care, rooted in Christian traditions, has evolved to accommodate diverse cultural and religious needs. Modern hospices provide care for those with life-limiting conditions while respecting individual beliefs and values, especially with growing demand from Muslim communities. While historically underutilised by Muslim patients, hospices now incorporate chaplaincy services, dedicated prayer spaces, dietary accommodations, and rapid burial arrangements to meet specific needs.

Rotherham Hospice Services

Rotherham Hospice's 14-bed inpatient unit offers 24/7 palliative care, free of charge, supported by community outreach to assist patients at home. The hospice is an independent charity, not NHS-funded, focusing on holistic care.

They support patients, and their families, in a variety of ways, which includes, Bereavement Support, Counselling, Social Work, Carer and Family Support, Children's Bereavement Support, and Chaplaincy Services.

They respect all beliefs, religions, and cultures and tailor care accordingly. They have a Quiet Room available for patients and visitors.

Councillor Rukhsana Ismail, Trustee of the Hospice, and Mirban Hussain are the two Muslim members involved at the Rotherham Hospice.

Community-Based Support for Bereaved Muslim Families and Short-Notice Burial Protocols

The concept of *Taziyah* in Islamic tradition is a community-based approach that offers comfort and practical support to grieving families. This practice involves consoling the bereaved and providing practical assistance to ease their burden without imposing on them as hosts. Community members often contribute by managing household chores, grocery shopping, or childcare, allowing the family to focus on grieving. Islamic teachings highlight the importance and spiritual reward of supporting the bereaved through their grief, by establishing *Taziyah* as a valued communal responsibility.

Taziyah Practices and Community Gatherings

Muslim communities commonly gather in mosques or community halls over three days, where friends and family visit to offer condolences, sometimes reciting the Quran. To strengthen this tradition, partnerships with mosques, funeral directors, and specialised community agencies can further enhance support and expand resources for grieving families.

Short-Notice Burial Protocols and Good Practices

Muslim traditions place importance on timely burials, often requiring coordination between various service providers. For short-notice burials, an effective service model includes:

Collaborative Relationships

A strong, collaborative framework among the Hospital Chaplaincy, Mortuary Service, Bereavement Office, Medical Examiner, Registrar, and Local Authority Burial Sites is essential. The availability of pre-dug graves helps facilitate these timely burials.

Out-of-Hours Staffing

Key personnel, such as hospital and mortuary staff, community GPs, the bereavement office, medical examiner, registrar, coroner's office, funeral director, and mosque representatives, need to be available out of hours to ensure uninterrupted service. A lack of staffing or resources at any point could delay the burial process significantly.

Operational Preparedness

For effective short-notice burials, operational readiness includes ensuring that grave diggers, site staff, and necessary equipment are on hand. A streamlined system of service delivery, with reliable staffing and resource allocation, is essential to meet the specific needs of Muslim communities and avoid disruptions.

Developing community-based bereavement support and refining the short-notice burial framework will allow for a respectful, timely, and culturally sensitive response that aligns with Islamic customs and the needs of bereaved families.

The New Medical Examiner System

Background and Implementation

The new Medical Examiner (ME) system, launched in England and Wales on 9 September 2024, mandates independent review of all deaths not referred to the coroner, both in hospitals and community settings. This statutory system, led by senior independent doctors in medical examiner offices, now oversees the verification of causes of death through a structured process before death registration. The ME's role includes reviewing medical records, consulting with the family to discuss the proposed Medical Certificate of Cause of Death (MCCD) and providing the bereaved with an opportunity to raise questions or concerns about the care received.

Changes from Previous Protocols

Before this system, community deaths (e.g., at home or in care facilities) allowed the attending doctor to complete the MCCD directly, sending it to the registrar for certification. Now, each death in the community must be reviewed by the ME before the MCCD can be issued. Hospitals, where ME offices were already operational, have expanded their roles to include community deaths, ensuring only the necessary cases are referred to coroners.

Purpose of the New System

The ME system aims to improve bereaved family support, enhance transparency, and strengthen healthcare safeguards by confirming accurate cause-of-death details and offering families a forum for concerns. It allows for positive or constructive feedback, which can help identify and share good practices across healthcare teams. This change also ensures all deaths undergo a consistent scrutiny process, fostering improvements in end-of-life care quality.

Role of Medical Examiner Officers

ME officers consist of senior, independent doctors (medical examiners) and support staff (medical examiner officers) who facilitate the death certification process. The ME collaborates with doctors to verify cause-of-death accuracy, refer cases to coroners if needed, and address any questions families may have. Typically, discussions with families are conducted over the phone, though in-person meetings are possible when necessary. ME officers aim to provide clarity on the MCCD wording, ensuring families understand medical terminology related to the cause of death.

Benefits for Bereaved Families

Families experience minimal procedural changes, aside from a conversation with ME officers about the MCCD. This process allows them to register the death with the registrar's office within five days. ME offices work with healthcare providers and registrars to prevent delays, and most MCCDs are issued promptly. In rare cases, additional information may be required, potentially causing slight delays, especially during busy periods like post-bank holiday weeks.

Impact on Funeral Arrangements

The ME system is structured to avoid delays that could affect funeral planning or body release. GP practices and ME offices coordinate closely to ensure a smooth process. Key participants, including coroners, registrars, funeral directors and chaplaincy services collaborate to support bereaved families during this sensitive time.

Additional Support for Families and Addressing Concerns

The ME system offers a new avenue for open discussions, allowing family members to ask questions, address any care concerns, and receive clear explanations about the cause of death. This impartial setting encourages families to express concerns and receive independent insights from MEs. If care issues arise that require further investigation, MEs will refer these to the appropriate parties. The ME system thus provides a balanced approach to patient and family support, enhancing bereavement care while safeguarding the accuracy of death certifications.

The new ME system represents a substantial change aimed at safeguarding end-of-life care standards and ensuring families have a transparent and supportive channel to discuss the cause of death. By working in tandem with community healthcare providers and out-of-hours services, the ME offices are expected to provide timely certification while addressing any family concerns, ultimately improving care for both patients and bereaved families.

Source: Dept. of Health and Social Care

Implications of the New Medical Examiner System on Muslim Burials

The newly implemented Medical Examiner System in England and Wales introduces an additional step for certifying deaths, requiring non-coronial deaths to be independently reviewed before death certificates are issued. While the system enhances accountability, it has specific implications for Muslim communities who prioritise prompt burials, ideally within 24 hours of death, as per religious requirements.

Potential Impact on Muslim Burials

Delayed Burials

The ME system's requirement for an extra review may delay the issuance of death certificates and release of bodies, which could hinder the timely burials mandated by religious and cultural traditions. These delays are particularly concerning given that the ME service does not currently operate during out-of-office hours or bank holidays in Rotherham, creating further bottlenecks in the process.

Disrespect for Religious Practices

Extended waiting periods for certification and release may lead Muslim communities to feel that their religious practices are not being respected. For Muslims, quick burials are a core religious obligation and cultural norm, and delays could be perceived as a disregard for these values.

Emotional Distress for Families

Prolonged waiting times for burial can heighten emotional distress for grieving families, complicating the grieving process and adding unnecessary emotional burdens. Prompt burial is considered part of a respectful farewell, and delays can increase family members' anguish.

Potential for Community Tensions

Persistent delays or perceived lack of respect for religious burial practices could lead to tensions between Muslim communities and authorities. This could diminish trust in the ME system and other public services, risking long-term disengagement or dissatisfaction within the community.

Risk of Legal Challenges

The ME system may face legal scrutiny if perceived as infringing on religious rights, particularly if delays are frequent or prolonged. Legal actions could further delay burial processes and escalate community dissatisfaction.

Recommendations for Mitigation

To address these challenges and foster a collaborative relationship with Muslim communities, the following steps should be proactively considered:

Engage with Muslim Community Representatives

Establish regular dialogue with Muslim community leadership, funeral directors, and mosque representatives to understand their needs and concerns. This collaborative approach can help in tailoring the ME service to respect religious timelines and improve community relations.

Out-of-Hours Coverage

To minimise delays, out-of-hours ME services, including weekends and bank holidays, are essential. Rotherham's ME services are available out of hours on all weekends and bank holidays excluding Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Year's Day.

Pre-Scrutiny of End-of-Life Care Patients

Implementing pre-scrutiny measures for individuals receiving end-of-life care could streamline the review process, allowing for expedited certification when death occurs. This proactive approach can significantly reduce the waiting time for families.

Train Staff in Cultural Competency

Ensure that ME officers and staff receive training on religious and cultural sensitivities, particularly around Muslim burial practices. This training can foster greater empathy and respect for religious needs, reducing the likelihood of misunderstandings or unintentional disrespect.

Current ME Provision in Rotherham

Rotherham's ME service includes 10 sessions per week, managed by 7 medical examiners, compared to Sheffield's 18. However, Rotherham provides out-of-hours service. This should work well as the burial numbers are far less than in other areas.

The Rotherham ME team has been effective in managing documentation for non-coronial deaths, with the Medical Examiner Officer overseeing paperwork efficiently.

The new ME system provides essential benefits for public health and death certification accuracy, but to meet the specific needs of Muslim communities, additional considerations and adjustments are needed. By adopting community engagement, operational flexibility, and cultural competency, the ME system can respect religious practices, ease the emotional strain on bereaved families, and maintain positive relationships with diverse community groups.

Burial Provision and Funeral Management for Muslim Communities

The Muslim burial process, or Janazah, is rooted in Islamic customs that emphasise respect, simplicity, and expediency in handling the deceased. Key principles include ritual cleansing (Ghusl), preparation of the body (Kafan), and prompt burial with communal support.

Steps in the Muslim Burial Process

Immediate Burial

Islam strongly encourages burying the deceased as soon as possible, ideally within 24 hours. This timing aligns with Islamic beliefs about the transition to the afterlife and respects the dignity of the deceased.

Ghusl (Ritual Washing)

The deceased is washed by members of the family and relatives of the same gender and following a structured process, known as Ghusl, which involves three ritual washes. Privacy and dignity are essential throughout this step, underscoring respect for the deceased.

Kafan (Shrouding)

The body is wrapped in a simple white shroud (kafan), using three cloths for men and five for women. The white cloth symbolises equality in death, simplicity, and humility, values central to religious teachings.

Salat al-Janazah (Funeral Prayer)

The community performs Salat al-Janazah, a prayer for forgiveness and mercy for the deceased. This prayer may be held in a mosque, at the cemetery, or in a suitable open space. Congregational participation reflects respect for the deceased and communal support for the bereaved.

Burial

The body is transported to the burial site and placed in the grave on its right side, facing the Qibla (direction of Makkah). Family and friends traditionally help fill the grave, an act of solidarity and respect. The community often supports the family by hosting meals and offering hospitality for up to three days following the burial, emphasising the importance of logistical readiness.

Dua (Supplication)

After burial, attendees offer supplications asking for forgiveness and mercy for the deceased. The bereaved are consoled, and attendees' express sympathy to the family.

The Mourning Period

Islam prescribes a period of moderated mourning, lasting three days, during which friends and relatives provide support and express sympathy, fostering patience and acceptance in the face of loss. This period is extended to those who are widowed.

The Islamic Perspective on Post-Mortem Examinations

Traditional autopsies, which involve surgical procedures to examine internal organs, conflict with Islamic beliefs and practices.

In Islam, there is a strong emphasis on respecting the deceased and preserving the integrity of the body as much as possible. Traditional autopsies, which involve invasive procedures, are seen as disrespectful or harmful to the body, which is considered sacred in Islamic teachings.

Digital autopsies offer a non-invasive alternative that allows for the examination of the body without physically disturbing it. This aligns more closely with Islamic beliefs about respecting the deceased and preserving their dignity.

Additionally, digital autopsies can provide valuable information about the cause of death without the need for invasive procedures, making them a preferred option for Muslims who wish to adhere to their religious beliefs while still obtaining important medical and forensic information.

Overall, the preference for digital autopsies among Muslims stems from a desire to uphold religious principles while still benefitting from modern medical and forensic techniques.

Types of Graves permissible and impermissible in Islam

In Islam, there are certain guidelines regarding the types of graves that are permissible and impermissible.

Permissible types of graves

The most common type of grave in Islam is a simple pit dug into the ground, where the deceased is buried without the use of a coffin. This practice aligns with the simplicity and humility emphasised in Islamic burial traditions.

The scholars unanimously agree that burial in the Lahd and burial in the Shaqq are both permissible.

However, if the ground is stable and the soil will not collapse then the Lahd is preferable, otherwise the Shaqq would be more suitable.

What is a Shaqq?

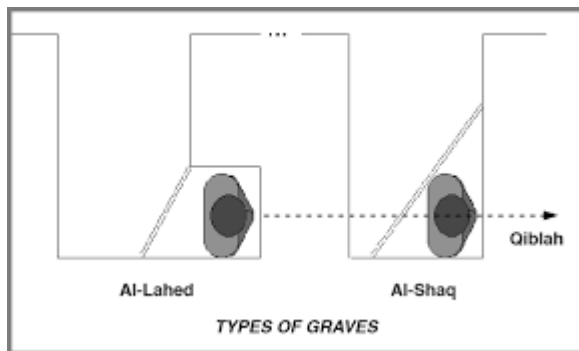
The Shaqq refers to a trench that is dug in the middle of the grave to suit the size of the deceased, and its sides are built with bricks so that it will not collapse on the deceased, and the deceased is placed in it on his right side facing the Qiblah, then this trench is covered with stones or the like such as timber and the ceiling is raised a little so that it will not touch the deceased, then the soil is filled in. The Shaqq method shown in the diagram below is also

acceptable where the timber is placed at an angle to protect the body and then filled with soil in the remaining part of the grave.

What is a Lahd?

The Lahd (niche) refers to a place that is dug at the bottom of one of the sides of the grave on the side that is closest to the Qiblah, in which the deceased is placed on his right side facing the Qiblah, then the remaining part of the grave is filled in with bricks behind the deceased. Then the remainder of the grave should be filled with soil or sand until it reaches above ground level in a mound shape from all sides.

Lahd is for firmer ground. It is a grave with a space dug into the side of the bottom of the grave, which is toward the direction of prayer and is large enough for the body; as shown in the diagram.



Both the Lahd and the Shaqq are permissible according to scholarly consensus, but the Lahd is preferable because this is what was done with the grave of the Messenger pbuh and is practiced in Makkah and Madina.

Due to the soil in many parts of the UK is affected by raised levels of water due to the climate and underground streams, a Shaqq grave is deemed more suitable.

So, a grave hole should be dug with a trench in the middle, and supported by bricks or concrete slabs placed on both sides of the area where the deceased is placed so that the earth will not collapse.

The soil should not be filled directly on the face or body of the deceased, whether the grave is a Lahd or a Shaqq. Planks of wood etc should be placed as a barrier to prevent soil from falling directly onto the body of the deceased. In the Lahd method the deceased is placed in the niche which is dug in the wall of the grave, and the soil is not filled in above him. In the Shaqq, the soil is filled above the roof (wooden planks etc) of the Shaqq, and not directly on top of the deceased.

Use of Concrete Liners in Graves

Concrete liners or slabs are permissible to use, if there is fear that the ground could collapse, due to the nature of the soil or due to water ingress and there is no other option.

This is widely used in the Rotherham Cemetery.

If the water regression is severe, a concrete liner could also be placed in the bottom part, as is the case in Rotherham. Holes could be made to drain the water.

Sufficient Depth

The grave should be deep enough to prevent the body from being disturbed by animals or exposed to natural elements. The depth is generally considered sufficient when it reaches at least the height of an average person standing upright, approximately 1.5 to 2 meters (about 5 to 6.5 feet).

Graves Facing Qiblah

The deceased should be buried with their body oriented towards the Qiblah (the direction of the Kaaba in Mecca), which is considered the holiest direction in Islam.

Placing a Distinguishing Mark on a Grave

It is permissible to place a mark, such as a stone or a piece of wood, over a grave so that it can be recognised. This is based on a hadith reported by Ibn Majah from Anas that the Prophet pbuh, "placed a rock over Uthman ibn Mazeun's grave so that it could be recognised."

These practices ensure that the grave is respectfully maintained and identified while adhering to the Islamic principles of modesty and simplicity. The guidelines can vary slightly based on cultural practices and interpretations of Islamic law (Sharia) in different communities, but the underlying principles remain consistent.

Cultural and Local Practices

While the general guidelines are consistent, the exact depth can vary based on local customs, soil conditions, and community practices. In some regions, the grave may be dug deeper to ensure stability and to accommodate local environmental conditions.

The primary aim is to ensure that the burial is conducted with dignity, respecting the deceased, and adhering to Islamic principles. The depth should be sufficient to ensure that the grave remains undisturbed and that the burial site is properly maintained.

This information is endorsed by Scholars from all the main schools of thought.

The Management of the Rotherham Cemetery - Dignity and Glendale

Information supplied by: Kim Phillips, Business Lead – Dignity Funerals Ltd, and Richard Gregory, Contract Manager - Glendale

Who are Dignity Funerals Ltd and Glendale

Dignity Funerals Ltd has been contracted since August 2008 to manage Rotherham Borough Council's cemeteries and crematorium. The contract is to provide a chapel and facilities for cremation, burial, and memorial placement in 9 cemeteries including the main site at East Herringthorpe where the Muslim burial section is located at East Herringthorpe.

Glendale is the partner organisation within the Rotherham Borough Council contract that undertakes the provision of grounds maintenance including the work to ensure grave plots are provided for families in a timely manner.

A notification process to enable work to commence has been developed over the contract period to allow the time constraints experienced with Muslim faith burials to be accommodated.

The Muslim Cemetery Site Location

The Muslim Cemetery Site is located at East Herringthorpe Cemetery, Ridgeway, Rotherham. The Rotherham Central Mosque is 1.4 miles from the site and within the vicinity of all the Mosques from about a further distance of 2.2 miles.

Current Muslim Burial Plots and Long-term Plans

At the time of writing, the following was the availability quoted by Dignity:

- Occupied plots 1134
- Available lined 73
- Earthen 5
- Baby/child 46

Dignity is currently working with the Council to identify a suitable extension plan to ensure availability for all families in the area. The current availability is estimated to be 2/3 years based on the rate of take-up.

What are the issues relating to Muslim Burials

Water ingress

The site has undertaken significant work to ensure the drainage in this area meets the expectations of the community. The geology of the area is a natural clay soil which creates a difficult environment.

Grave type – Lined or Earthen

The Muslim community has historically requested lined graves and therefore Dignity has provided lined with the request. Earthen graves are available, but the demand has not historically been high.

Short notice burials

The Dignity/Glendale team is aware of Muslim burials' short notice requirements. An early notification system is in place with the Funeral Director and Glendale to ensure the plot is prepared in line with the timescales.

The paperwork is the main concern with this as often the team is chasing the information to ensure the documentation is received in line with legal requirements before the burial.

There have been occasions of significant pressure placed on the team by the local community to agree a burial can take place before the receipt of the paperwork.

Death Certificate

Internment certificate, coffin dimension, and burial certificate are provided in the first instance to allow Glendale to prepare the plot.

The death certificate would not be provided for any of the Dignity/Glendale processes.

Working with other agencies – joining up planning streamline

The position of Dignity and Glendale is that the communication and working discussion should be with the Funeral Director only to facilitate the burial in the faith-lead timescale. Often faith leaders become involved which can complicate communication and put pressure on staff.

The Muslim Funeral Director and the documentation received

As mentioned, the Funeral Director should be the main contact with both Dignity, in arranging the burial, and Glendale to ensure the plot is available for the burial.

The paperwork is needed prior to being able to confirm the burial. The Dignity team has stated that the Funeral Director will provide the paperwork in a timely manner however there are often missing elements of information and therefore time is taken up chasing this.

The Muslim Community contact and issues from this

The Muslim faith leaders do contact in respect of organising burials, this can cause some communication issues and pressure on the team.

For non-Muslim faith burial, there would be little contact with the bereaved family prior to the burial as this is the Funeral Director's responsibility.

Facilities for prayer/water/wudhu

Water is available for use through the Muslim burial area. Dignity does not have any historical records of a request by the Community for any additional facilities.

Timings – and issues that hold back burial

Non-receipt of paperwork is the only reason for a delay in the burial due to the arrangements in place with Glendale to ensure the plot is ready.

Evening burials

These are offered until 18:30 on weekdays. Detailed risk assessment is in place for this along with battery-powered lighting has been provided by Dignity to facilitate this in winter months.

Any other comments

Black grave covers for short-term burial.

Post-Burial Support from the Muslim Community

This is a consistent practice in all parts of the country including Rotherham.

In Islam, providing support to the bereaved extends beyond the funeral and burial process. The teachings of Islam emphasize the importance of comforting and assisting those who have lost a loved one. Here are some post-burial support practices rooted in Islamic teachings:

Visiting the Bereaved

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) encouraged visiting the homes of the bereaved to offer condolences and support. This tradition, known as "Taziyah" in Arabic, demonstrates solidarity with the grieving family and provides an opportunity to offer words of comfort and assistance.

Offering Prayers for the Deceased

Muslims are encouraged to continue offering prayers (dua) for the deceased even after the burial. This ongoing remembrance is believed to benefit the departed soul and provide solace to the bereaved.

Providing Food and Assistance

Islam emphasises the importance of providing practical assistance to the bereaved, including preparing and delivering meals to the grieving family. This helps alleviate their burden during a difficult time and demonstrates care and support from the community.

Reciting Quranic Verses

Reading and reciting verses from the Quran that offer comfort and solace is a common practice in supporting the bereaved. These verses remind the grieving individuals of Allah's mercy and the promise of reunion in the Hereafter.

Encouraging Patience and Resilience

Islamic teachings emphasise the importance of patience (Sabr) in times of adversity. Providing words of encouragement and reminding the bereaved of the reward promised to those who endure trials with patience can offer comfort and strength.

Maintaining Contact and Support

Islam encourages maintaining contact with the bereaved beyond the immediate aftermath of the funeral. Checking in on them regularly, offering assistance, and providing ongoing emotional support demonstrate care and compassion for those who are grieving.

Participating in Commemorative Acts

Muslims may participate in commemorative acts such as organising gatherings to recite the Quran, conducting charitable acts in the name of the deceased, or sponsoring ongoing charitable projects as a form of ongoing remembrance and benefit for the departed soul.

Overall, Islamic teachings emphasise compassion, support, and solidarity with the bereaved, both immediately after the burial and in the days, weeks, and months that follow. By following these teachings, individuals and communities can provide meaningful and impactful support to those who are grieving.

Seeking help and support from others by means of *Taziyah*

Taziyah is a term used to help and support the bereaved. It is a means to console, comfort and give solace to someone who is suffering grief. The Islamic concept of *taziyah* at the time of someone's death is one of consoling the bereaved with such words or actions as will remove or lessen their grief.

The aim of *taziyah* is to strengthen the broken-hearted and give them hope at a time when their hope may be waning; it is to lighten the load of the bereaved. It is important for those who wish to support the bereaved to spend time with them without imposing on them as a guest and expecting them to host you with food and drink. One can offer to assist in by buying groceries, doing household chores, or watching their children, etc.

The Prophet pbuh said: *"Prepare food for the family of Jafar for there came upon them an incident which has engaged them."* Abu Dawood. The reward of someone who consoles the bereaved through the sunnah of *taziyah* is great.

The Prophet pbuh said: *"A Muslim is a brother of another Muslim, so he should not oppress him, nor should he hand him over to an oppressor. Whoever fulfilled the needs of his brother,*

Allah will fulfil his needs; whoever brought his fellow Muslim out of discomfort, Allah will bring him out of the discomforts of the Day of Resurrection, and whoever concealed the shortcomings of a Muslim, Allah will conceal his faults on the Day of Resurrection.” Bukhari.

The Importance of Quick Burials in Islam

In Islam, death is viewed as a transitional phase between earthly life and the hereafter. Quick burials are crucial to ensure the deceased are treated with dignity, respecting their human rights as bestowed by God. This practice aligns with Islamic teachings that emphasise the significance of human dignity, cleanliness, and community support during mourning.

Theological Foundations

Islam posits that every individual, as God's representative on Earth, deserves respect both in life and death. This perspective is illustrated in the Quranic narrative of Cain and Abel (Quran 5:31), where God sends a raven to teach Cain how to bury his brother, highlighting the intrinsic value of honouring the deceased.

Reasons for Quick Burials: Several key reasons, rooted in religious teachings and cultural practices, underpin the emphasis on prompt burials:

Respect for the Dead: Delaying a burial is perceived as disrespectful to the deceased and their soul. Swift action honours their memory.

Preservation of Dignity: Quick burial is essential to preserve the deceased's dignity, preventing exposure or mistreatment of the body.

Hygiene and Sanitation: Islam prioritises cleanliness. Prompt burials help maintain public health by preventing disease spread.

Mourning Process: Timely burials enable families to begin their grieving process, allowing community support to materialize effectively.

Closure for the Family: Immediate burial helps families achieve emotional closure, facilitating the healing process.

Submission to God's Will (Qadr): Quick burials symbolize acceptance of God's decree regarding life and death, reflecting a core Islamic belief.

The Islamic Teachings that Support Quick Burials

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) emphasised the urgency of burials through several narrations:

Abu Hurayrah narrated, "Make haste in burying the deceased; if it is a pious servant, quickly enjoy this goodness; and if it is an evil person, dispose of such a load from your shoulders." (Bukhari and Muslim).

The Prophet also indicated that the deceased desires a quick burial, saying, "If it was pious, it will say, 'Take me quickly,' and if it was not, it will say, 'Destruction to it; where are they taking it?'" (Bukhari).

In another narration, the Prophet advised against delaying three things, including the Janazah prayer: "Do not delay three things: [1] Salah, when its time begins; [2] Janazah Salah when the deceased is brought before you; [3] and the marriage of a woman when you find her a suitable match." (Tirmidhi).

Additionally, the Prophet stated, "Breaking the bone of a dead person is equivalent to breaking it when the person is alive," emphasising the respect due to the deceased (Ibn Majah).

Feedback from Muslim Funeral Directors from across the UK

Feedback from Muslim funeral directors reveals important practices, challenges, and recommendations for improving Muslim burial services, highlighting the need for efficient, culturally sensitive processes and collaborative efforts among service providers.

Key Roles and Responsibilities

Muslim funeral directors primarily handle logistics, such as coordination with hospitals, general practitioners (GPs), registrars, and medical examiners (MEs), as well as paperwork, guiding families, and educating the community. Many Funeral Directors have contributed years of service at low cost, reflecting strong community support.

Current Practices and Efficient Procedures

The burial process is generally efficient, allowing burials within 4-6 hours of receiving the Medical Certificate of Cause of Death (MCCD). Partnerships with chaplaincies, medical staff, and local authorities also enable prompt body release, essential for timely burials. Technology aids in communication, streamlining coordination across parties.

Effective Relationships and Concerns with Authorities

Strong relationships have been established with chaplaincy services, medical examiners, and registrars, fostering smooth operations. However, funeral directors voice concerns over the new ME system's potential to slow processes, fearing that added scrutiny of MCCDs might create backlogs, especially in the community. The need for out-of-hours coverage, particularly from GPs and mortuary staff, is another challenge affecting timely burials.

Challenges and Process Delays

Some deaths require further investigation, causing delays, especially in cases involving coroner referrals or inconclusive scan results. Burial site maintenance also poses issues, as family modifications like adding fences or stones can hinder upkeep. Communication gaps, especially between GPs and MEs, occasionally create misunderstandings that delay processes. Educating families on potential delays in same-day burials can help manage expectations and reduce stress.

Maintenance of Burial Sites and Water Management Issues

Burial sites maintained by local councils often face challenges, with inadequate drainage leading to water ingress in certain graves. Funeral directors recommend adding wood chippings or sand to maintain dry spaces and hand pumps to manage water. Additionally, concrete lining has been introduced in some areas, such as Batley Cemetery, to enhance grave durability.

Suggestions for Improved Burial Provisions

Funeral Directors propose several improvements

1. **Communication:** Enhanced dialogue between GPs, MEs, and families to reduce delays.
2. **Community Education:** Providing information to families about the burial process and potential delays.
3. **Infrastructure:** Installing floodlights to accommodate evening burials, particularly in winter.
4. **Digital Systems:** Transitioning from paper to online systems for approvals and easier management.
5. **Dedicated Points of Contact:** Assigning a single contact per family for streamlined communication.
6. **Resource Allocation:** Ensuring more Muslim staff are available within funeral services to provide culturally aware care.
7. **Pre-emptive Palliative Registry:** Developing a registry for imminent death cases to reduce paperwork at critical times.

Preparation for Medical Examiner System Implementation

With the ME system's rollout, there is an emphasis on early ME notification of deaths to mitigate delays. Strengthening cooperation with the ME office and engaging GPs to maintain clear and timely documentation are seen as crucial. Training for administrative staff on faith-specific practices is recommended to avoid procedural delays that could distress families.

Future Considerations: Private Muslim Cemeteries

Due to limited space in council-maintained cemeteries and varied maintenance standards, establishing privately owned Muslim cemeteries is under consideration. This would ensure a controlled environment that aligns with Islamic burial practices and provides families with reliable services.

Summary

This feedback highlights the importance of compassionate, culturally respectful, and efficient burial processes for the Muslim community. Improved communication, enhanced partnerships, digital systems, and resource allocation are among the recommended steps to address current challenges. Continued cooperation among funeral directors, authorities, and the Muslim community will be essential to ensure that the burial experience meets cultural and religious needs.

Opinions and Feedback from the Muslim Community in Rotherham

Feedback from the Muslim community in Rotherham concerning the bereavement services and burial services provided by Rotherham Council has been positive.

There were some concerns and suggestions regarding the burial process, reflecting their needs and preferences. Input was gathered from several groups, including the Tassibee Group, Jamia Masjid Abu Bakr, and Chapel Walk Mosque. Below is a summary of the key points raised during these discussions.

Key Feedback

Timing of Burials:

The community has expressed a hope for burials to be allowed later in the day, suggesting that streamlined pre-medical processes could support this. This reflects a desire for greater flexibility in scheduling to align with cultural and religious practices.

Communication and Coordination:

There is a suggestion to establish a dedicated point of contact within the Council to manage communication regarding burials. This could help streamline the process and make it easier for families to organise funeral arrangements during a challenging time.

Weekend Burials:

The community has shown interest in the possibility of weekend burials, recognising that this would provide families with more flexibility, especially for those managing work or other commitments.

Burial Land Availability:

Concerns have been raised about the availability of burial plots, with worries that current space may not meet the community's needs over the next five years. Additionally, issues such as contamination of designated land have prompted questions about future plans for acquiring burial space.

Infrastructure Improvements:

Feedback from the community has highlighted the need for additional water taps in cemeteries to support cleanliness. There is also a suggestion to extend opening hours, with some proposing that cemeteries remain accessible until 10 PM to accommodate visitors.

Medical Certificate Delays:

The community has noted concerns about potential delays in obtaining Medical Certificates of Cause of Death (MCCD) due to changes in the medical examiner system. To address this, they have proposed the use of pre-death notes for anticipated deaths, which could help reduce delays in documentation.

Training and Awareness:

There is a recommendation for training Coroner staff on Muslim death and burial practices. Regular dialogue between the Coroner's Office and the Muslim community was suggested to build understanding and ensure respectful collaboration.

Access and Transportation:

Parking at cemeteries has been identified as a concern. The community has suggested carpooling as one way to reduce congestion and ease access for funeral attendees.

Grave Preparation:

The introduction of electronic systems for transferring death certificates and burial documentation has been positively received by the community for expediting the process. However, they have expressed a desire for further improvements in communication and efficiency.

The Muslim community in Rotherham has highlighted the importance of compassionate, culturally sensitive, and timely practices in the bereavement process. They have expressed hope for improved communication with local authorities, enhanced cemetery facilities, and thoughtful planning to address future burial space needs. By taking these perspectives into account, public sector organisations can work towards better supporting the Muslim community during such a significant and sensitive time. Ongoing dialogue and collaboration between the community and relevant organisations will play a vital role in creating a caring and supportive environment for grieving families.

Meeting with Rotherham Councillors

These are the meeting highlights from Rotherham Councillors.

Cllr Taiba Yaseen mentioned that initially, Rotherham was unaware of burial issues within the Muslim community. Concerns began over two years ago, especially regarding water accumulation at the cemetery. Cllr Yaseen, got involved as part of the Rotherham Muslim Burial Council, and has actively engaged the community through public meetings to address these issues. Urgent and long-term solutions are needed for burial spaces.

Since 2021, Cllr Saghir had taken steps to hold Dignity (the cemetery contractors) accountable, as the initial contract had not been scrutinised. Proposed the use of space designated for non-Muslim burials for Muslim use, which was declined. The whole point of review is our communities are aware of what to do when someone is end of life.

The newly appointed Muslim medical examiner and local Muslim GP's contribute further to the culturally diverse approach, though potential delays in GP record reviews can pose challenges for timely burials.

Cllr Taiba Yaseen stated: You must address so many issues to have a body released from hospital. It should not require a lengthy process. Educate people how the system works – Our community should have the burial service number and should know who to contact when someone dies.

Cllr Saghir Alam stated: The process has gone better over the years. Sometimes the trust and the process are not there, then they contact Councillors. Also, the Hospital needs to understand that a nurse practitioner should not be sent for Palliative Care needs to be a GP. Issues arise when family falls out with the coroner.

Cllr Haroon Rashid stated: Muslims are suggesting having separate land for burial. Cllr Angham Ahmad stated: End of life room 'Butterfly Room' is not working – Room is in the Hospital

Cllr Taiba Yaseen said: Issues at the cemetery have not been fully addressed – They do not know where the water is coming from. Land needs to be developed. Cemetery is the responsible of Dignity (contractors). Council has the responsibility of reviewing the contract, which they did not. Maintenance was not happening on the Muslim side of the cemetery. Drainage system has been put in good idea – Review of the system needs to be in the contract.

Cllr Taiba Yaseen said: We don't need private land – council need to address the issues – we live here and pay our taxes. Council needs to do a site visit.

Challenges discussed in relation to the Rotherham perspective

Lengthy Procedures for Releasing Bodies

Families face a complicated process to release bodies from hospitals, often unaware of whom to contact and what steps to follow. There is a need to streamline this and educate the community on the process.

Lack of Awareness Among Healthcare Providers

Hospital staff, including hospice and palliative care teams, need more awareness of Muslim burial practices. There is also a need for hospitals to recognise that GP involvement is essential in palliative care cases, rather than nurse practitioners alone.

Post-Burial Mental Health Support

A lack of bereavement support for Muslim families was noted, emphasising that emotional support is needed regardless of family size.

Cemetery Management and Maintenance Issues

Persistent issues with cemetery management include unresolved drainage problems and lack of maintenance on the Muslim side. The Council's role in reviewing Dignity's contract is crucial, as maintenance, including the drainage system, should be a contractually enforced responsibility.

Land and Space Solutions

Land Allocation for Muslim Burials

Proposals for a designated burial space for Muslims are being discussed, though the Council declined private land due to high costs. There are 30 cemeteries in Rotherham, but only one designated for Muslim burials.

Public vs. Private Land

Some suggest private land for Muslim burials, but others argue that the Council must address these needs within public spaces, as the Muslim community contributes through taxes.

Feedback from the meeting with the Rotherham Muslim Burial Council

The following feedback was presented during the meeting with the Rotherham Muslim Burial Council. These focus on improving the burial process and addressing the needs of the Muslim community regarding cemetery practices.

Documentation of Processes

- Ensure all burial-related processes are documented and accessible to avoid any confusion among stakeholders.

Training for Quick Release

- Provide training to relevant personnel about the importance of promptly releasing the deceased and the reasons behind this necessity.

Comprehensive Process Documentation

Outline the steps for handling:

- Hospital referrals leading to expected/unexpected deaths
- Emergency department entries resulting in expected/unexpected deaths
- Community deaths
- Repatriation requirements

Medical Examiner Communication

- Develop an "idiot's guide" or instructional video that explains the Medical Examiner process and how GPs can assist. This guide should clarify what families can expect during the release of the deceased.

Long-Term Operational Planning

- Create an operational plan that outlines requirements and fulfilment strategies over the next 2, 5, 10, and 20 years.

Aligning Operating Hours

- Review and align the operating hours of all services involved in the burial process to enhance efficiency and reduce delays.

Site Visits

- Organise cemetery visits for members of the Rotherham Muslim Burial Council to better understand current practices and identify areas for improvement.

Standardised Grave Templates

- Establish a standard template for graves, ensuring consistent spacing and adherence to health and safety guidelines.

Leaseholder Guidelines

- Update and distribute a documented agreement to grave leaseholders that outlines permissible practices agreed upon with the community.

Headstone Installation Recommendations

- Provide recommendations on headstone installation that fall within budgetary constraints without requiring extensive applications.

Extended Burial Hours

- Consider extending the last burial time from 6:30 PM to 8 PM during Spring and Summer to accommodate the needs of families, especially with the introduction of the Medical Examiner system.

Grave Marking

- Ensure all graves are properly marked, as many are currently unmarked.

Digital Grave Mapping

- Develop a digital map of grave locations to enhance accessibility and tracking of burial sites.

Cemetery Drainage

- Identify and document the locations of drainage systems within the cemetery to ensure functionality and proper water management.

Burial of Amputated Limbs

- Establish a clear process for the burial of amputated limbs and any other non-viable foetal remains (NVF).

Night Prayer/Zikr Opportunities

- Consider allowing night prayers or Zikr on the 15th of Shabaan, as requested by community members.

Community Notice Board

- Install a notice board that reflects the community's needs and preferences for displayed information.

Shroud Burial Templates

- Create and disseminate a template for shroud burials to ensure compliance with Islamic practices.

Biodegradable Materials

- Promote the use of biodegradable materials for burials, aligning with Islamic values.

Earthen Burials

- Address issues related to earthen burials, particularly regarding soil stability and collapse during heavy rain.

Service Level Agreements (SLAs)

- Develop SLAs or Operational Level Agreements (OLAs) for maintenance tasks and ensure timely completion of requested work, such as placing soil on graves.

Grave Surround Options

- Discuss options for grave surrounds and establish guidelines for providing permits based on safety considerations.

Framework for Public Communication

- Commission a framework for effectively communicating the review findings and recommendations to the broader public, irrespective of faith.

Community Engagement

- After presenting the report to a panel, ensure that the findings are shared with the community and stakeholders involved in the process.

Baby Graves

- Concerns about unmarked baby graves scattered across different areas of the cemetery, lacking systematic planning and dignity.

Lawn Maintenance Considerations

Grieving relatives are upset by lawn maintenance practices that damage unmarked graves, highlighting the need for respectful handling.

Separation of Graves

- For future development and to help with the separation of graves, tree planting to create a physical demarcation between Muslim and non-Muslim graves would be helpful.

Digital Mapping Delays

- Dignity has not yet provided the promised digital map of grave locations, causing frustration within the community.

Access Issue

Lack of footpaths between grave rows results in muddy conditions, making it difficult for visitors to access graves.

Insufficient Seating

- The Muslim section has limited seating compared to other cemetery areas, necessitating more benches for community use.

Space Constraint

- Concerns regarding the depletion of burial space, with suggestions for the council to consider purchasing adjacent farmland for future burials.

Inconsistent Grave Standards

- The need for standardisation of graves and spacing to ensure uniformity and compliance with health and safety requirements.

Lack of Green Space

- Insufficient green areas for community members to visit and enjoy the cemetery surroundings.

High Burial Fees

- The community feels that burial fees are disproportionately high, especially considering their involvement in backfilling graves.

Collaboration with Dignity

- Emphasis on the necessity for Dignity to work closely with the Rotherham Muslim Burial Council to meet cultural and religious needs.

Water Drainage Issues

- Concerns about inadequate drainage systems in parts of the cemetery leading to potential flooding or waterlogging.

Community-Led Maintenance Proposals

- Suggestions for the council to consider delegating burial and maintenance work to the Muslim community.

Addressing these key recommendations and concerns will require a collaborative approach involving the Rotherham Muslim Burial Council, Dignity, and relevant authorities. Implementing these changes can significantly improve the burial experience for Muslim families, honouring their cultural and religious practices while ensuring dignity and respect in the burial process.

Recommendations

Key Improvement Recommendations for Authorities in Bereavement Services, Cemetery Management, and Burial Practices

To improve the efficiency, cultural sensitivity, and accessibility of bereavement services, it is recommended that the authorities incorporate where possible, the following actions:

1. Streamline Processes

Simplify bureaucratic requirements and consider necessary accommodations for religious practices to expedite burials, particularly for communities that require timely burial. The new ME system creates procedural bottlenecks impacting burial timelines for religious communities. Address these challenges through flexible GP-ME collaboration, especially during weekends and after hours. Establish quick review pathways are crucial steps to minimise delays and supporting timely service delivery.

2. Enhance Cultural Competency

Implement targeted training programmes to deepen understanding of Islamic and other cultural bereavement customs. This will enhance confidence within faith communities that service provision by the authorities is based on a genuine desire to be culturally sensitive.

Most of the staff members in Bereavement Services and Dignity have attended this training which is a positive step towards understanding the needs of the Community.

3. Establish Open Communication Channels

Facilitate regular dialogue between local authorities and the Muslim community to foster trust, promote understanding, and support effective cooperation around burial practices.

4. Ensure Religious and Cultural Sensitivity Compliance

Burial services must adhere to the Equality 2010 Act's mandate to respect religious customs, such as expedited burials for Muslims and Jews. Delays or failure to accommodate timely burials may contravene legal requirements for honouring religious practices.

5. Accessibility for People with Disabilities

Ensure burial services are fully accessible by incorporating features like wheelchair access and adequate support for individuals with disabilities, facilitating equal access to all aspects of bereavement services.

6. Uphold Non-Discrimination and Fair Pricing Standards

Burial service providers need to avoid discrimination based on race, religion, or other protected characteristics. Additional fee imposed based on these factors, would contravene equality principles. Need to ensure equitable access and fair pricing for all community members.

7. Provide Reasonable Accommodations

Make reasonable accommodations for religious needs, such as offering burial services outside standard hours. This aligns with the Equality Act's inclusivity goals and recognises the diverse requirements of the Muslim and Jewish communities.

Specific Recommendations for Faith-Based Burial Protocols

1. Develop and Disseminate Faith-Sensitive Burial Guidelines

Create a clear, inclusive policy on managing faith-based burials, addressing the specific needs of Muslim, Jewish, and other religious communities, with particular attention to expedited burial requirements. Highlight customised service provision for diverse communities through online and printed literature. Attend or host regular events and information sessions within community settings.

2. Review of Fees and Community Maintenance Proposals

Reassess burial fees in response to community feedback on pricing concerns and explore options for delegating cemetery maintenance work to community organisations, particularly for tasks where cultural sensitivity is paramount.

3. Infrastructure Improvements

Address water drainage issues with sustainable measures to prevent water pooling and regression.

4. Foster Collaborative Relationships

Currently, the Bereavement Services consult with the Muslim Liaison Group which meets regularly to discuss issues concerning Services provided in Rotherham. This needs to continue.

5. Car Park Management for Accessibility

Collaborate with the Rotherham Muslim Burial Council to improve car park management, ensuring adequate space for disabled parking and sufficient capacity during peak times.

Key Improvement Recommendations for Managing the Muslim Section of Rotherham Cemetery

- 1. Headstone Restoration:** Locate and reinstate missing headstones, including those on infant graves.
- 2. Digital Mapping:** Provide a digital map of grave locations accessible to bereaved families.
- 3. Respectful Groundskeeping:** Avoid overgrown grass around graves. This is seen as culturally insensitive. Ensure ground maintenance does not soil headstones.

4. **Future Burial Space:** Proactively identify and secure land to accommodate future burials, given the limited remaining cemetery space.
5. **Grave Spacing and Safety:** Maintain adequate space between graves for safety and compliance with health standards.
6. **Pathways and Accessibility:** Construct paved pathways to graves to prevent muddy areas, and ensure disabled access. Add any additional taps where necessary for those who have to do ablution at the site.
7. **Community Management Feasibility:** Explore options for community-managed burial sites, with a focus on cultural alignment and autonomy.
8. **Standardised Grave Dimensions:** Implement consistent standards for grave sizes across the cemetery. This can be done on future burial sites.
9. **Visitor Seating:** Install seating areas for bereaved families who frequent the cemetery.

Key Improvement Recommendations for Rotherham Muslim Burial Council Representatives

1. Strengthen Partnerships

Partner with relevant authorities to streamline bereavement processes for the Muslim community, ensuring an efficient and respectful experience from registration to burial.

Disseminate relevant information promptly within Rotherham Muslim Burial Council affiliates by hosting regular topical training around death and dying. Collaborate with funeral directors and others within the sector to exchange information and good guidance. Promote events and local authority initiatives within the local community on good practice.

2. Standardisation and Community Education

Work with Muslim scholars across different schools of thought to unify burial practices and standardise grave specifications. Educate the community on the new Medical Examiner System and clarify any procedural delays due to regulatory changes.

Support community projects for men, women, and young people by raising awareness of issues that impact individual and communal life following death. This could be via Quarterly Newsletters etc.

3. Foster Collaborative Relationships

Strengthen communication and collaboration between the Rotherham Muslim Burial Council, local authorities, and relevant service providers to enhance service delivery and resolve issues efficiently.

4. Collaborate in developing healthy relationships between stakeholders

Explore the potential of engaging justice system partners and the community to use cemeteries, community buildings, places of worship, and green space around community assets for restorative justice projects.

These recommendations are intended to foster an inclusive, respectful, and efficient bereavement service experience, aligned with legal standards and sensitive to the diverse needs of the community.

Partnership working of public sector organisations in the Bereavement Process – Examples of Good Practice

Partnership working among public sector organisations in the bereavement process is essential for providing holistic and comprehensive support to individuals and families experiencing loss.

The key aspects of partnership working include:

1. Collaborative Approach

Public sector organisations, such as healthcare providers, social services, coroner's offices, funeral homes, local government agencies, and Muslim funeral directors need to work collaboratively to address the diverse needs of bereaved individuals and families. This involves recognising the unique expertise and resources that each organisation brings to the table and finding ways to integrate these resources for better outcomes.

2. Shared Goals and Objectives

Establishing shared goals and objectives is crucial for effective partnership working. This might include providing timely and sensitive support to bereaved individuals, ensuring access to necessary services and resources, and promoting resilience and coping strategies.

3. Clear Communication Channels

Effective communication is essential for partnership working in the bereavement process. Establishing clear communication channels between different organisations, as well as with bereaved individuals and their families, helps ensure that information is shared promptly, accurately, and sensitively.

4. Referral Pathways and Coordination

Developing clear referral pathways and coordination mechanisms between public sector organisations is vital for ensuring that bereaved individuals receive the support they need in a timely manner. This might involve establishing formal protocols for referrals, case conferencing, and joint assessment processes.

5. Training and Professional Development

Providing training and professional development opportunities for staff members across different public sector organisations can enhance their understanding of bereavement issues and equip them with the skills and knowledge needed to provide sensitive and effective support. This might include training in grief counselling, cultural competency, and trauma-informed care.

6. Integration of Services

Working towards the integration of services across different public sector organisations can help streamline the bereavement process and reduce duplication of efforts. This might involve co-locating services, sharing resources, and developing joint care plans to address the holistic needs of bereaved individuals and families.

7. Continuous Improvement and Evaluation

Regularly evaluating partnerships working in the bereavement process is essential for identifying areas of strength and areas for improvement. This might involve collecting feedback from bereaved individuals and families, conducting joint audits or reviews, and monitoring outcomes to ensure that services are meeting the needs of those they serve.

Overall, partnership working among public sector organisations in the bereavement process is essential for providing compassionate, coordinated, and effective support to individuals and families during their time of loss. By working together, these organisations can ensure that bereaved individuals receive the holistic care and support they need to navigate the grieving process.

In Conclusion

This review was commissioned by Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council to assess the end-to-end bereavement support and burial services for the Muslim community, focusing on the roles of statutory and community voluntary agencies before, during, and after bereavement. The review's remit was timely in that it addressed issues of genuine concern and coincided with the introduction of the Medical Examiner process for deaths in hospitals and the community.

Acknowledgments

I want to acknowledge the people who have contributed to this review. I remain indebted to them all for their generosity of spirit, sacrifice of time, and energy. Despite my requests and demands on their time, their willingness to share perspectives regarding this sensitive topic has been incredible.

There are some who have a professional interest in this area of work and are keen to improve service delivery. Many others volunteered their time selflessly so that people could be better assisted in coping with grief and loss in a timely, culturally sensitive manner.

Appreciations

Sincere thanks are due to all the individuals and organisations listed below who have been of significant help, as are those who have also contributed significantly but prefer to remain anonymous. Without their input, this task would have been nearly impossible to conclude.

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council

Ashleigh Wilford - RMBC - Superintendent Registrar & Bereavement Services Manager.

Bal Nahal - RMBC - Head of Legal, Registration, and Bereavement Services.

Chris Willis - RMBC - Assistant Bereavement Services Manager.

Waheed Akhtar – RMBC - Communities Manager, Policy, Performance and Intelligence Service.

Asif Akram - RMBC - Communities Officer, Policy and Performance.

Key Stakeholder Service Leads

Nicola Mundy – H.M. Senior Coroner, HM Coroner's Office.

Dr Amar Joshi – Lead Medical Examiner NHS - Medical Examiner's Office.

Kim Phillips – Dignity Rotherham Business Lead.

Richard Gregory - Glendale Services, Rotherham Manager.

Murtaza Awan - Business Manager, Bereavement and Coronial Services, Sheffield.

Adrian Marriott – Digital Autopsies Digital Autopsy UK Ltd.

Mortuary Team, George Elliot Hospital, Nuneaton.

Community Practices

Dr.Merhban Ghani, GP.

Dr. Saheel Batt, GP.

Dr. Tariq Sabir, GP.

Councillors

Cllr. Angham Ahmad.

Cllr. Ashiq Hussain.

Cllr. Haroon Rashid.

Cllr. Rukhsana Ismail.

Cllr. Sagir Alam.

Cllr. Taiba Yaseen.

Mosques

Br. Sabir, Chairman with Members of Jamia Masjid Abu Bakr Russell Street, Rotherham.

Haji Gulam Yasin Chairman, and Members of Chapel Walk Mosque, Rotherham.

Members of Masjid Al Salaam, Rotherham.

Members of Madni Jamia Masjid, Rotherham.

Br. Abid Trustee and Members of Jamiat Ahle Hadith Mosque, Moorgate Street, Rotherham.

Br. Shakoor - Trustee of Milton Road Mosque, Rotherham.

Br. Arif, Chairman and Trustee, Wellgate Jamia Mosque, Gerard Road, Rotherham.

Chaplaincy Services and Pastoral Care

Imam Mohammed Nadeem - Muslim Chaplain, Rotherham Hospital.

Mol. Yunus Dudhwala, Chaplaincy Manager, St. Barts Hospital.

Rev'd. Janelle Kingham, Lead Chaplain, George Elliot Hospital, Nuneaton.

Sr. Sabia, Muslim Chaplain, Sheffield Hospital.

Imam Osman Sheikh, Team Chaplain, George Elliot Hospital, Nuneaton.

Imam Ilyas Dalal, Chaplain, Pinderfields Hospital.

Imam Aslam Seedat, Chaplain, Pinderfields Hospital.

Burial Councils and Committees

Rotherham Muslim Burial Council, 12 Members, led by Br. Saghir & Br. Arshad.

Br. Soyeb Modla - Muslim Burial Council, Dewsbury.

National Muslim Burial Council, London.

MBCOL –Mol. Asjad- Southampton Burial Committee.

Muslim Burial Council of Leicestershire.

Arshad Khan - Wolverhampton Burial Committee

Funeral Directors & Bereavement Support Services

Coordinator Sr. Khalida Luqman and Members of the Tasibeeh Group.

Br Javed, Sadaqa Jaria, Yorkshire.

Garden of Peace, London.

Br. Tariq Choudhry, Funeral Director, Yorkshire Muslim Academy.

Br. Yaseen Ahmadabadi, Funeral Director, Nuneaton Mosque.

Br. Seemab Tariq, Funeral Director, Yorkshire Muslim Academy.

Br. Nazir Daud, Funeral Director, Batley.

Br. Mahboob Ali, Funeral Director, Fatimah Muslim Funeral Service.

Imam Abid Salik – Hull Mosque and Islamic Centre.