



**LOCAL ORGANISING
TO AVOID CREMATATIONS
AND SUPPORT LOCAL
AUTHORITIES DURING
THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK**

Muslim engagement
& development

mend

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Local organising to avoid cremations and support local authorities during the Covid-19 outbreak

Over the course of the last week, a variety of Muslim organisations raised concerns about the Coronavirus Bill 2019-21 and its provisions for allowing designated local authorities to cremate bodies against the wishes of the deceased.

On 23rd March 2020 the second reading of the Coronavirus Bill 2019-21 was held in the House of Commons. In light of the concerns that had been raised by Muslim and other faith groups and in response to an amendment which was tabled by Naz Shah MP and supported by over 100 MPs, the Government tabled its own similar amendment to the bill.

This amendment is undoubtedly an improvement as it clarifies that both national and local authorities **“must have regard to the desirability of disposing of a dead person’s body or other remains -**

- a) **in accordance with the person’s wishes, if known, or**
- b) **otherwise in a way that appears consistent with the person’s religion or beliefs, if known.”**

Therefore, the amendment ensures that religious beliefs are considered and respected when dealing with the crisis and means that the Government has accepted it should consult with the families before proceeding to cremation. Penny Mordaunt (a Government Minister) later gave a verbal assurance that the Government could not foresee any circumstances where anyone would be cremated against their wishes.

Whilst all this is extremely encouraging, it should still be noted that there is still a provision within the legislation for cremations to take place in the event that a local authority is overwhelmed and does not believe suitable arrangements are available that would not compromise public health. Consequently, while the risk of this situation is fairly low, the Bill may not be an absolute exemption for Muslim and Jewish communities as we had hoped. It is however a very positive development and Insha’Allah will achieve the objective at hand.

Therefore, in order to avoid this situation arising, as a community, we must ensure that local authorities are supported and not in a position where they believe that no other suitable arrangements are available without compromising public health.

Having explored all of the foreseeable circumstances that may place limits upon normal Muslim burial practice and which could result in a situation where these extreme circumstances and potential cremations could occur, below is guidance and suggestions

regarding how to ensure that both religious beliefs are upheld and that public health is assured.

Possible limitations of normal Muslim burial practice:

- An overwhelming number of deaths (including Muslim deaths) occurring from Covid-19 in a very short space of time that will place strains on a local authorities' resources and capacity to transport, store, or dispose of dead bodies.
- A local authority not being aware of the arrangements that have been made and the logistical and strategic capability of local communities. This may lead them to assume that no suitable arrangements are available without compromising public health.
- A lack of available grave plots that have been allocated to Muslim burials.
- A lack of prepared graves.
- A lack of storage facilities for dead bodies.
- A lack of appropriate transportation for dead bodies that can comply with public health demands.
- Non-availability of people to perform ghusl, especially sisters (most of those doing this are over sixty in the community at the moment).
- Poor access/availability of personal protective equipment (PPE) that will be required for:
 - Ghusl,
 - Cleaning vehicles required for transportation,
 - And the burial itself.
- A lack of training in how to use PPE.
- A lack of resources required for burial (for example, coffins of the required specifications).
- A lack of established procedures to prevent excessive numbers of people being in contact with bodies.
- A lack of established procedures to prevent excessive touching and handling of bodies and equipment that has come into contact with them.

Organisational requirements

As stated above, a primary concern is local authorities assuming that no suitable arrangements are available without compromising public health due to being unaware of the logistical and strategic capability of local communities. Communication is thus central to ensuring that this situation does not arise.

Therefore, it is imperative that communities are organised and cohesive in order to communicate effectively with local authorities. This obviously requires grassroots leadership including those with the expertise to navigate the necessary channels of communication. Our suggested structure involves:

- **An overarching representative body:** this should include a number of well-connected local Muslim organisations, Masajid, and individuals (such as councillors and/or MPs). The aim of this body would be to ensure that all guidelines on social distancing are maintained and to oversee a specialised 'taskforce' designated to oversee burials within the community.
- **The 'taskforce':** this group would be designed to act as a liaison between the community and local authorities; to examine possible scenarios and local limitations; and to establish a local strategy to overcome foreseeable challenges. The roles that should be involved within this taskforce include (but are not necessarily limited to):
 - a. *A local Aalim:* someone who can provide theological guidance and anticipate the needs of the community.
 - b. *Doctors or individuals with expertise in healthcare:* these individuals will be central in providing health protection advice and in liaising effectively with administrators in local hospitals and public health authorities. Moreover, these individuals will be required to demonstrate that the community are understanding and appreciative of the public health requirements of an epidemic.
 - c. *Representatives of local undertakers:* those that can oversee the organisation of burials.
 - d. *Representatives from local burial committees:* those who can provide guidance on the practicalities of religious burials.
 - e. *Local political representatives:* the task force will also require someone who is capable of effectively communicating with local councils.
 - f. *Representatives of other faith communities:* other faith communities, such as Jewish communities, are facing a similar situation and can provide solidarity and examples of best practice.
- **The National Muslim Burial Council:** The NBC has produced valuable guidelines for handling the body after Muslim deaths. These are attached to this document as an Appendix and can be downloaded from the NBC website at www.nbc.org. We recommend that you contact the NBC to provide strategic guidance, advice, and logistical support to your communities.

Possible solutions to proactively consider:

- **Encourage social distancing and adherence to government guidelines:** Use the mosque receivers, Muslim media, and social media to send messages explaining the importance of social distancing.

- **Local engagement:** Utilise community stakeholders, such as councillors, MPs, mosques, and faith organisations to assure councils and local authorities that there is capacity to deal with dead bodies safely, and thus cremation is unnecessary.
- **Securing Muslim burial plots:** Where general plots are available in larger numbers, work with local councils to have an immediate transfer of general plots to Muslim specific plots. It is also important to support parallel moves by other faith communities who are in a similar situation.
- **Preparing graves:** Apply pressure upon councils to immediately prepare a large number of graves to avoid a lack of prepared graves should they be needed.
- **Assuring space for the preparation and storage of dead bodies:** Engage with local councils to ensure that they have contingencies in place to deal with the potential space requirements for storing and preparing dead bodies, whether these be in disused churches, mosque halls, community halls, or other large indoor spaces. Local burial councils and communities should immediately look to acquiring storage facilities, including refrigerated containers for extra private capacity.
- **Local volunteers:** Use all the resources at your disposal (be it WhatsApp or social media) to recruit and organise local volunteers for tasks such as ghusl and burial.
- **Local training:** With an abundance of willing volunteers, it is essential that effective online training is developed to address issues such as:
 - a. Ghusl,
 - b. The usage of PPE,
 - c. Procedures for cleaning vehicles and equipment that has come into contact with dead bodies,
 - d. How to avoid excessive touching of dead bodies.
- **Acquire PPE:** Establish procedures and logistical infrastructure to ensure that PPE is available for use when needed.
- **Ensuring supplies of resources:** Establish procedures and logistical infrastructure to ensure that there are sufficient resources required for burial (for example, coffins of the required specifications) should there be an unprecedented number of deaths.
- **Establishing transportation strategies:** Establish procedures and logistical infrastructure to ensure that the transportation of bodies can be accomplished in compliance with public health demands. This includes the cleaning of vehicles and the use of PPE.
- **Establishing procedures for handling dead bodies:** Establish procedures to prevent excessive numbers of people being in contact with bodies, as well as to prevent excessive touching and handling of bodies and equipment that has come into contact with them. It is important that these procedures are developed in consultation with those experienced in public health and that they are written down and available so

that they may be used to demonstrate that the community are understanding and appreciative of the public health requirements of an epidemic.

Useful contacts & sources of guidance

1. National Muslim Burial Council

Their guidance is available at www.nbc.org.uk

2. British Board of Scholars & Imams (BBSI)

<http://www.bbsi.org.uk/coronavirus/>

3. British Islamic Medical Association (BIMA)

<https://www.britishima.org/blog/>

4. Muslim Council of Britain (MCB)

<https://mcb.org.uk/mcb-updates/coronavirus-guidance-for-mosques-and-madrassas/>

5. Muslim Engagement & Development (MEND)

<https://www.mend.org.uk/>

[Download NBC guidelines](#) or see the guidelines below.

These guidelines are accurate at the date of publishing (25-03-2020), they will be regularly updated and the latest version can be found here:

<https://bit.ly/Covid19-Burial>

PRECAUTION AND DEAD BODY CARE

AT THE TIME OF DEATH

- The dead body is classified by the attending physician as category risk.
- All tubes, drains, and catheters attached to the dead body should be removed.

ADVISEABLE PRECAUTIONS FOR INFECTION CONTROL

- Wear Protective Clothing (PPE): gloves, water resistant gown / plastic apron over water repellent gown, and surgical mask. Use goggles or face shield to protect eyes, if there is a risk of splashes.
- Contact with the deceased restricted to individuals under the age of 60 years and in good health.

PRECAUTION AND DEAD BODY CARE HANDLING THE DECEASED

FUNERAL WORKERS

- All dead bodies must have been identified and correctly labelled with identity labels and category tags.
- Move the body as prepared by the mortuary staff.

ADVISEABLE PRECAUTIONS FOR INFECTION CONTROL

- Avoid direct contact with blood or body fluids from the dead body.
- Observe strict personal hygiene and put on appropriate PPE. Avoid touching the body without gloves.
- Once the body is transported wipe down the stretcher and the inside section of the van with 1 in 4 diluted household bleach (mixing 1 part of 5.25% bleach with 4 parts of water) and allow to air dry.
- Remove PPE after handling of the dead body. Then, wash hands with liquid soap and water immediately.

PREPARING THE BODY FOR FUNERAL

WASHING THE BODY

- Wash the body as normal (Ghusl).
- Observe strict personal hygiene and put on appropriate PPE (mask, gown, gloves & eye shield).
- Avoid direct contact with blood or body fluids from the body.
- Make sure any wounds are covered with waterproof bandages.

SHROUDING

- Shroud the body as normal.
- Place the body in the coffin / casket and close the lid as normal.

ADVISEABLE PRECAUTIONS FOR INFECTION CONTROL

- Contact with the deceased should be kept to a minimum for people aged over 60 with underlying health conditions.
- Observe strict personal hygiene and put on appropriate PPE. Avoid touching the body without gloves.
- Thoroughly washdown environment clean the room including the wash trolley, tables etc and all areas with 1 in 4 diluted household bleach (mixing 1 part of 5.25% bleach with 4 parts of water) and allow to air dry
- Wipe the outside of the coffin / casket as with the trolley allow to air dry.

**PREPARING THE BODY FOR FUNERAL
PAYING LAST RESPECT**

- Viewing can be arranged as normal in accordance with the families wishes and Islamic teaching.

ADVISEABLE PRECAUTIONS FOR INFECTION CONTROL

- Keep the numbers for viewing to a minimum.
- Wash your hands more often than usual, for 20 seconds using soap and hot water, particularly after coughing, sneezing and blowing your nose, or after being in public areas where other people are doing so. Use hand sanitiser if that's all you have access to.
- To reduce the spread of germs when you cough or sneeze, cover your mouth and nose with a tissue, or your sleeve (not your hands) if you don't have a tissue, and throw the tissue away immediately. Then wash your hands or use a hand sanitising gel.
- Avoid transporting the body to different locations.
- **Contact with the deceased should be kept to a minimum for people aged over 60 with underlying health conditions or anyone with flu like symptoms should self-isolate and not attend the burial process.**

PREPARING THE BODY FOR FUNERAL

JANAZAH AND BURIAL

- Janazah prayer can take place as normal.
- Burials can take place as normal (Shroud / coffin please check with cemetery for local policy).
- Burying in a shroud should not pose any additional infection risk (as long as those in contact with the body are protected appropriately, as discussed).

ADVISEABLE PRECAUTIONS FOR INFECTION CONTROL

- Those handling the body / coffin to observe appropriate PPE (mask, gown, gloves & eye shield).
- Keep the number of people involved to a minimum
- If possible, the janazah prayer should be observed at the cemetery.

NOTE: The National Burial Council (NBC) is an umbrella organisation of Muslim funeral organisation in the UK.

NBC are leading discussions on behalf of the organisations with the government and Public Health England.

The above is based on revised guidance for prevention and infection control issued jointly on 14th March 2020 by The Department of Health and Social Care, NHS England, Public Health England, , Public Health Wales, Health Protection Scotland and, Public Health Agency Northern Ireland.

This change is a result of the Government moving into delay phase. The government guidance states the emerging evidence base on COVID-19 is rapidly evolving and this guidance will be updated as new evidence emerges. We will also review this guidance accordingly.

The current guidance from the Chief Coroner is that all death from COVID-19 will be treated as normal deaths and will be registered as normal. This may be able to be done over the phone or give authority to a third party.

Please note that should there be increase in the number of deaths it may result in delays with the burial process.

Should you have any queries please contact us and we will try and assist in the best way possible. This is also a general guidance; please contact your local scholars before proceeding with any of the above.