

Death during the COVID-19 pandemic

Practical guidance



This information has been collated for the Public Health Agency, by Professor Nichola Rooney, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, in conjunction with Dr Sarah Meekin, Consultant Clinical Psychologist and the Department of Health Regional Bereavement Coordinators Network, Northern Ireland.

We would like to offer our sincere sympathy to you, your family and friends who are affected by this sad loss. We are so sorry that you are having to cope with your loss at a time of additional stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to reduce the spread of COVID-19, there is new guidance on procedures that must be in place following a death. Some of these may severely restrict our normal ways of grieving and supporting each other.

We hope that this booklet will help with the burden of navigating the new procedures and also offer some useful information that may help you over the coming weeks.

You will also find contact details for the Bereavement Coordinators within each Health and Social Care Trust, should you need further guidance and help.



In Northern Ireland, irrespective of our background, we find significant comfort and support in the tradition of coming together in the days after a death. We all understand the rituals that happen around a death and they often provide focus and comfort in the early days and weeks of a bereavement.

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged and changed the traditional ways we mark our grief. For the moment, it is not possible to carry out many of the rituals that we usually find helpful. We cannot gather as extended family and friends in wakes to offer condolences and comfort and we cannot share our feelings of loss and sadness in funeral gatherings.

However, there are a number of other things that we can do that offer new and different ways to support each other. In the information below, we have tried to highlight the changes to normal practices and offer some tips that will help to guide you through the difficulties.

Take time to make your plans and decisions. Asking advice and sharing the burden with others can be helpful. If you want to share the information in the booklet, it can be accessed online along with other bereavement resources via the PHA website at [\(link\)](#).

Death registration

When a person dies, a Medical Certificate of Cause of Death (MCCD) is completed by the treating doctor and given to the family. This would have been taken, along with a death registration form, to a Registrar's Office to enable a death certificate to be issued. This has been the required process before a funeral can take place.

What is different now?

During the current COVID-19 pandemic MCCDs are being forwarded electronically by a doctor to the General Registrar's Office, along with the Next of Kin's name and contact details. The Registrar will in turn contact that person via telephone to gather the necessary information to allow the death to be registered. The Next of Kin may also be asked which funeral director they plan to use.

Additional death certificates may be required in order to attend to some of your loved one's affairs. These copies can be ordered online at www.nidirect.gov.uk/contacts/contacts-az/general-register-office-northern-ireland

Burials and cremations

When a person dies, funerals are how we celebrate and commemorate their lives and memories. This normally includes a service attended by family and friends followed by a burial or cremation.

What is different now?

During the current pandemic, traditional funeral services cannot occur. Traditional church services will not take place and funeral services will be held at the graveside with attendance limited to immediate family members, socially distancing where they are not part of the same household.

Cremations will continue to take place at Roselawn Crematorium; however services in the Chapel of Rest have been discontinued and families can no longer attend.

As you are aware, the Government has had to make these difficult changes to prevent further spread of the COVID-19 virus. We recognise that this will add to the distress of everyone who experiences bereavement at this time. As the situation is changing on a regular basis your family funeral director will be able to provide you with the most up-to-date information. It may also be important to have early conversations with your faith leader to understand what they are able to provide.

Property

When someone dies in a place other than their own home, for example a hospital or nursing home, there may be personal clothing and property to be collected.

What is different now?

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic there will need to be additional precautions with regards to your loved one's property. Hospital/care home staff will give you details of any valuables belonging to your loved one that are held securely by them and let you know how personal belongings will be returned to you.



People/organisations to tell

A large number of people and organisations need to be informed when someone dies. This list will help you determine the relevant people to notify - not all will apply in every case. A family member or close friend could help.

Early contact will help avoid the distress of letters, phone calls and supplies/equipment continuing in the weeks and months ahead.

- GP/district nurse/home help/day care centre
- Other health care professionals (for example, optician, dentist, podiatrist etc)
- Provider of medical aids/equipment/supplies
- Any hospital the person was attending
- Solicitor – contact before the funeral to check if there is a will stating person's wishes about burial or cremation
- Social Security Agency Bereavement Service – regarding reporting a death, benefit eligibility check and making a claim for bereavement benefits and/or social fund funeral payment
- Department for Work and Pensions – regarding state retirement pension
- School/higher education institutions
- Employer/trade union/pension company
- Bank/building society/Post Office/credit union/credit card company/financial advisor

- Mortgage company/Housing Executive/landlord
- Insurance company (personal, household, vehicle – if you are 2nd named driver on the policy you will no longer be insured)
- HM Revenue & Customs (tax office)
- DVA (driving licence)/DVLA (vehicle registration)
- Translink regarding travel pass
- Passport office
- Utilities – gas/electricity/telephone/mobile phone companies
- Season ticket issuers
- Catalogue companies

Planning a funeral during this current physical distancing phase

We appreciate that physical distancing requirements make bereavement and funerals even more difficult, but there are immediate steps you can take to plan the funeral of someone you love or care about.

- Contact your preferred funeral director as soon as you are able. Your funeral director will be equipped with the most up-to-date information and procedures due to the COVID-19 pandemic response period. They will guide you through the process.

- Ask as many questions as you need.
- Let people know of the death - you can still place a death notice, but no times or venues of the funeral will be published online, by radio or in print.
- Remember the funeral/burial will be planned as private, for close family only. However, you can request a reading, or a poem to remember them by, even if the service is short
- Remember that everybody will understand how difficult a funeral is at this exceptional time – people will respect and support you as best they can.
- Try to have some sort of ritual in your home that is meaningful to you, where you can reflect on memories of the person who died, say prayers/reflections or burn a candle in their name.
- Make use of online condolence books to record messages of love and appreciation as well as collecting online memories from others that you can look back and reflect on.
- Think about hosting a memorial service at a later time. Opening a Facebook page is another way that friends and family can share messages and photographs.
- Ask people to send you a letter or other communication with their memories of the person who has died.
- Encourage children to draw pictures or write poems.
- Talk about the person who has died, within your household and beyond through telephone calls.
- Seek out the latest technology to help. You may be able to use videoconferencing (Google hangouts, WhatsApp, Zoom etc) to come together with special people who cannot physically be with you.

Grieving in exceptional times

Many of the supports that you might normally draw upon when you are grieving may not be possible to access due to social distancing. Despite this, there are things that you can do which may be of help.

- Allow yourself to feel and react in a way that is natural to you. Grief is an individual experience and each of us will respond to it in our own particular way.
- Try not to become emotionally isolated. Even if people cannot visit you in person they will be able to offer their condolences and support in different ways. You may receive condolence cards, phone-calls, text messages and emails etc.
- Keep conversations going with the people who are closest to you, even by telephone or on social media.
- Having 'conversations' through WhatsApp or through Facebook can mean there is a regular flow of communication and remind you that people are thinking about you.
- Try to limit how much news and social media you consume. When you are feeling very sad, regular news can be distressing.
- Try to stick to your normal routine as much as is currently possible. As well as bedtime and getting up time, mealtimes play an important part in this.
- It is important to remember to eat and to keep hydrated. Your body has needs and grief can be hard work.

- If you can, try to get out into the garden or open the windows to let in some fresh air.
- If there are children in your household, check in with them often. Answer their questions honestly. Helpful information can also be found on the PHA website.
- Make use of reputable sources of online bereavement support such as:
 - **Cruse Bereavement Care** provides free support, advice and information for adults, children and young people.
National Freephone Helpline: 0808 808 1677. Opening hours Monday-Friday 9.30am-5.00pm (excluding bank holidays), with extended hours on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings, until 8pm.
 - **GriefChat** (www.griefchat.co.uk) is a safe online space where people can share their story, explore their feelings and be supported by a qualified bereavement counsellor. The service is free of charge and is open Monday-Friday, 9am-9pm (UK time) for people who are grieving or bereaved.

**Finally, remember to be kind to yourself.
In grief you can only do the best you can.**

Useful contacts

Registrars' offices

The telephone numbers of local Registrars' offices are listed in Yellow Pages under 'Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages' or on NIdirect here: www.nidirect.gov.uk/contacts/district-registrars-northern-ireland

Funeral directors

Details of local funeral directors can be found in Yellow Pages or online.

Bereavement Service

Freephone 0800 085 2463

Contact this service to:

- Report a death to the Social Security Agency
- Check if you might be entitled to benefits/financial help
- Make a claim for bereavement benefits or social fund funeral payment

www.nidirect.gov.uk is the official government website for Northern Ireland and has a very helpful section, 'Death and bereavement', which includes information on wills and probate; what to do after a death; and benefits, property and money. This bereavement section is here:

www.nidirect.gov.uk/information-and-services/births-deaths-marriages-and-civil-partnerships/death-and-bereavement or look under 'Government, citizens and rights'.

HM Revenue & Customs

The telephone numbers of local enquiry centres are listed in The Phone Book in the Business Listings section.

DVA Driver Licensing Division

Castlerock Road
Waterside
Coleraine
BT51 3TB

Belfast Passport Office

Hampton House
47-53 High Street
Belfast BT1 2QS
Tel: 0844 448 5156

Contact www.the-bereavement-register.org.uk to stop all unsolicited/junk mail.

Help and support

Each Health and Social Care Trust has a Bereavement Coordinator who can help you with any questions you have following the death of your loved one. They can also help in signposting you to local supports and resources.

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

Heather Russell, Trust Bereavement Coordinator

heather.russell@belfasttrust.hscni.net

Tel: 028 9063 3904

Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Gwyneth Woods, Trust Bereavement Coordinator

Gwyneth.Woods@northerntrust.hscni.net

Tel: 028 9442 4992

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Paul McCloskey, Trust Bereavement Coordinator

paul.mccloskey@setrust.hscni.net

Tel: 028 9055 3282

Southern Health and Social Care Trust

Sharon McCloskey, Trust Bereavement Coordinator

sharon.mccloskey@southerntrust.hscni.net

Tel: 028 3756 0085

Western Health and Social Care Trust

Carole McKeeman, Trust Bereavement Coordinator

Carole.McKeeman@westerntrust.hscni.net

Tel: 028 7134 5171 ext 214184



Public Health Agency

12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.
Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).
www.publichealth.hscni.net

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