



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Parks and Leisure Committee
Subject:	Review of Death Certification: Consultation response
Date:	10 February 2011
Reporting Officer:	Andrew Hassard, Director Parks and Leisure
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1.0	Relevant Background Information
1.1	The purpose of this report is to inform Members that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPNI) has commissioned a consultation exercise on a review of the current arrangements for death certification in Northern Ireland. A summary of the consultation document is attached at Appendix 1.
1.2	Appended to the report (at Appendix 3) is the draft written response which is submitted for review and comment by Members. The deadline for submitting the response to the Department is 11 March 2011.
1.3	Current arrangements for death certification in Northern Ireland are being reviewed which is the first time since 1976 that a review has been undertaken.
1.4	The review follows changes in England, Scotland and Wales in the wake of the Shipman Inquiry and the Luce Review – further details of which are attached at Appendix 2.
1.5	Both Shipman and Luce recommended the introduction of a single system for death certification, regardless of whether the deceased was to be buried or cremated. They also found that the scrutiny of medical certificates for cause of death fell short of what is required to provide adequate protection for patients.
1.6	Significant developments have taken place in England and Wales to implement the Shipman and Luce recommendations in respect of death certification processes and the Scottish Government has recently consulted on proposals to strengthen arrangements for death certification in Scotland.

1.7	It is important therefore that current practice in respect of certifying deaths in Northern Ireland be reviewed in light of these developments to ensure that it remains fit for purpose.
1.8	Registration of death here is governed by the Births and Deaths Registration (N.I.) Order 1976, but the process of registration itself has changed little since 1927. A death should normally be registered within five days, to allow funeral arrangements to be made. This is with the exception of deaths which have been reported to the coroner.
1.9	Registrars are based in district council offices, and each death is registered with the district in which the person died, or in the district in which the person normally lived, if this is within Northern Ireland. A Medical Certificate of Cause of Death (MCCD), signed by a registered medical practitioner, must be provided to enable the death to be registered.
1.10	Under current arrangements in Northern Ireland, differing levels of scrutiny apply depending on whether the body of a deceased person is to be cremated or buried (i.e. 3 levels of sign-off, as opposed to 2).
1.11	In the case of a cremation, the certificates are then submitted to the medical referee appointed by Belfast City Council, who is required to satisfy him/herself that the certificates and all other necessary documents are in order before issuing an authority for the cremation to take place.
1.12	This second level of scrutiny does not apply in the case of a burial, where there is no opportunity for further challenge to the cause of death. The current arrangements mean in effect that there is disparity in the level of scrutiny applied to certification of deaths, depending upon the method of disposal.
1.13	For the majority of deaths in Northern Ireland burial is the preferred method of disposal, and therefore no further scrutiny takes place after the initial completion of the MCCD, unless the death is referred to the Coroners Service.

2.0	Key Issues
2.1	The government's response to the Shipman Inquiry in 2007 included the publication of a consultation document on Improving the Process of Death Certification, which outlined a programme of work to design, pilot and implement a rigorous and unified system of death certification for both burials and cremations in England and Wales .
2.2	Both Shipman and Luce (See Appendix 2) concluded that it is unacceptable to have different certification processes according to whether the deceased was to be buried or cremated, and recommended the introduction of a single system for death

	certification.
2.3	This consultation sets out recommendations made by an Inter-Departmental Death Certification Working Group for Northern Ireland which was established in November 2008 to review local death certification processes, and to make recommendations for improvement.
2.4	<p>The consultation document is 33 pages and poses 17 specific questions (copies of which can be provided to Members on request). It proposes 2 options neither of which propose that the current requirement in the cremation process for deaths to be registered before disposal be extended to all deaths:</p> <p>Option 1: <i>The first option would see an enhancement of the existing assurance arrangements for death certification, with a view to strengthening and improving the current processes.</i></p> <p>Option 2: <i>Includes the suggestions in option 1 along with the introduction of a new post of Medical Examiner (along with necessary support staff), with appropriate accompanying accountability and governance structures, with a view to strengthening existing assurance and clinical governance arrangements.</i></p>
2.5	<p>The Council's response focuses in the main on potential impact on future service delivery and the need for sustained public confidence in death certification. An officer group of bereavement service and administrative staff and including the medical referee met to review the document and develop the draft response. The consensus was that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The options provided did not have sufficient detail to make an informed decision or sufficiently connected key recommendations included in the report which were emerging in England, Wales, and Scotland or referred to in any of the inquiry reports. ▪ There were discrepancies in how the information was presented in the main and summary documents. ▪ Officers also believed there was opportunity to share learning on the council's provision to inform the options that were presented.
2.6	<p>For these reasons there is no preferred option being confirmed in the draft response which does take the opportunity to highlight the council's interest from a service-delivery perspective, for example:</p> <p>Time period for disposal - It is clearly presented in the council response that there should be no unnecessary delay caused from registration of death to disposal where possible.</p> <p>Cost - general costs were provided in the consultation however it was difficult with the information available to fully appreciate whether or not they were value for money.</p>

2.8	<p>Public confidence - one of the drivers for change noted in the death certification review is to ensure another 'Shipman' situation does not take place. The method and level of scrutiny required to retain public confidence needs confirmed more clearly to enable it to ensure the process is fit for purpose. What is being proposed in both options provides retrospective scrutiny of patterns and trends experienced in the process of death certification; it is more likely to identify potential cases however not prevent them.</p> <p>The complete and more detailed response is attached at Appendix 3 for Member review and feedback.</p>
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3.0	Resource Implications
	None.

4.0	Equality and Good Relations Implications
4.1	The draft response makes reference to the need for the council to be able to manage requests for disposal of the dead within 24 hours – including the required levels of sign-off (scrutiny) - as this is preferred by some cultures now resident in Northern Ireland.

5.0	Recommendations
5.1	<p>Members are asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) note the content of the report (ii) review and approve the draft response subject to any amendments or comments they may wish to provide.

6.0	Decision Tracking
	N/A

7.0	Key to Abbreviations
	MCCD: medical certificate of cause of death

8.0	Documents Attached
	<p>Appendix 1: summary of consultation document from DHSSPSNI</p> <p>Appendix 2: additional information on the Shipman Inquiry and Luce review</p> <p>Appendix 3: council's proposed response to the review of death certification</p>