

The Lambeth Simple Funeral: interview with Jacqueline Landy, Bereavement Services Manager, Lambeth Council

Ciarán O'Fathaigh [COF]

So the obvious first question is - why did you want to do this?

Jacqueline Landy [JL]

There are high levels of deprivation and many people struggle. If the unexpected happens, very few people can get their hands on 6k.

Death is a taboo subject, people tend not to put money aside or plan for things like that. People tend to get a loan, pawn, get a credit card or worse, abandon the body.

Working in Lewisham Borough, which has a similar demographic and social profile to Lambeth - lots of people below the poverty line - we would routinely get people in the funeral home who had no money.

People would get loans, credit cards, people would do illegal things - they would pay on the deceased credit card - I even knew one family who sold their car. I worked with a pawn broker who regularly came across people who would pawn their valuables in order to pay for funerals - sometimes for children - sometimes people couldn't afford to bury their children.

Alternatively, they'd paid for the funeral by maxing out their credit cards [or] they would try to pawn the person's belongings. Sometimes they'd try to find things that weren't of sentimental value, but sometimes the items did have sentimental value. Wedding rings were quite common, engagement rings with stones ... And you and I both know that people don't always buy their stuff back, they just need money in a jam.

Imagine you have a shock - someone's died in traumatic circumstances - someone young? An accident? And then maybe you can afford the funeral, but it's between paydays - and most funeral directors want - because again, they're a business, they need to stay afloat, too, but they need "disbursement", so if you need a burial, they need to pay the grounds on your behalf. So they need the four grand. It's not negotiable. Some funeral directors do credit checks. Some people don't even get to the point or would never ask us for help, they've already maxed out their credit card, they've already put themselves in trouble, but there are also people who come to us and say that they really want to take care of a funeral, but they can't afford it and they're not eligible for help from the DWP either ...

COF

Is this a council service or is this a West Norwood Cemetery and Crematorium service? Do any other public bodies offer a similar service?

JL

The way that we're doing it is specific to Lambeth. So Lambeth runs 3 cemeteries, 2 crematoria, and public health funerals. The statutory public health function - so section 46 of the 1984 public health act, control of diseases - that's the only thing we can work from for a public health funeral. If someone dies, and there's no-one, it's the council's remit because, if I'm using old terminology, you have to dispose of the body before it presents a health issue.

It does literally stem from Victorian times when people didn't dispose of the deceased properly and you had dysentery pits and cholera pits and things like that and obviously people did lie in the streets for periods of time, you know? So obviously 1984 is a bit closer than Victorian times, but that's where it comes from, you can't have deceased lying around, so if nobody is around, then it will be referred to the council.

Some councils manage it in their waste department, some manage it in their public health department, some don't have a public health department ... Lambeth up until I came on board in 2017 - it was managed through our waste department.

We do interact with people with public health funerals, it isn't just a case of oh, they've got no-one, we don't speak to anyone, we do, we speak to neighbours, we speak to social workers ... We had a funeral today and unfortunately nobody attended - we always attend, we always sit in, we don't want anyone to pass without someone to watch over them - but the person's key-worker came. She didn't have to, but she did ... but we do interact with people. But then again, there's a phenomenon or a trend or a cultural move to ... and it's not just us, it's other cemeteries and crematorium - people can't afford the funeral and they know that if they abandon the body, then we will deal with it.

Sometimes they do it cynically, sometimes they're like, I didn't care, or I don't want to do it, sometimes they're like I really want to, but I can't, so then less than 2 years ago, it got moved into cemeteries and crematoriums which is where I think it belongs anyway - I think it should sit with burial services - but we're rare, we're quite rare, a lot of them don't.

COF

How did it move to burial services? Who's decision was that?

JL

Because of me. Because my head of service ... I explained to him my background and one day I found out how they ran it and I said, 'I can do that'.

COF

So the short answer to the question is, no, other people don't do this and if they do it's picked up by other departments and you're the only bereavement department that offer an affordable funeral and that's because of you?

JL

No, that's not true - Cardiff offer it, but they don't offer it in-house, Bristol are looking into it, but they all engage funeral directors. Milton Keynes are looking into it as well, they're quite progressive ...

COF

So again, the answer to the question is, you're the only one?

JL

In London, yes.

COF

Well, in the country ...

JL

Well yeah - I don't know what people are preparing behind closed doors, because the government is pushing funeral poverty as an issue and the [Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management](#) which we adhere to, they've been asking our authorities to think about what they can do for the last year or so, so they've done a survey, they've actively encouraged people to bring it in house - I don't think many people have got the skills to bring it in-house. Dealing with burials all day if someone's in a coffin is not the same as dealing with a deceased - it's really different.

Funeral directors can't do cemetery and crematorium jobs and vice versa, so I'm quite lucky in that I have almost identical levels of experience in both.

I got asked to help on an investigation into the statutory funeral officer because of my background and then I said I was able to do that job and it was assigned to me - I wanted to do it, because I knew I could do it better than them. And then I explained what I needed, we found capital funds for the fridges, I've got capital funding for the car, we wrote reports, it had to go through cabinet, we got approval, we really did work the funeral poverty angle, I'm not doing this to make money.

I'd like to prove that I can balance the public health funerals with ... because as I've said, people do abandon the bodies because they know they can, and they will come to the funeral. We're never going to stop them. Never going to stop anyone from coming to a funeral, it's a public space, but it's becoming more of a problem. But then I get a really small budget and the numbers are going up.

So it can be a mixture of things - it could be that someone's not identifiable, they could be a non UK national and we can't get hold of anyone back home or we can get hold of someone back home and there's no means to repatriate, it can be someone who's deliberately isolated themselves and it can be a family member that doesn't want to take responsibility because a fractious relationship or an ex wife they don't give two monkeys about, or it genuinely sometimes can be they really want to, but they can't, they really can't for whatever reasons, they might have mental health issues, money issues ... it's not always about money, it's not always about money but often ...

COF

So you're one of the Magnificent Seven - is it correct that you're the only functioning Magnificent Seven? Do the others offer some kind of service on their grounds?

JL

So the other six are full - like we are - actually Highgate's still got space, but Highgate's not operated by a charity and they don't have a crematorium, we're the only ones that operate a crematorium. Kensal Rise is a Magnificent Seven, also known as Kensal Green, they have a crematorium that operates within their site, but it's separate, it's called West London Crematorium and it's slightly off, it's not within the grounds.

To get to our crematorium, you travel through a Magnificent Seven and we're bang in the middle, on the hill ... So Kensal Rise has West London attached, but it's not quite the same and obviously all of them have ... as I've said before we're closed [space for graves is used up], but if someone has a grave opened, we have burials. We have burials for people who have never used, you know, they [?] a grave for a hundred years ...

COF

So you you are the only person who is running a working community service at a Magnificent Seven and you're also the only person who has moved that social function into the bereavement section of a local council while offering an affordable funeral service.

JL

Yes. At the risk of sounding flippant, but you come to us, we'll help you arrange the funeral, we will go and get your loved one as soon as we can and we arrange the cremation, we fill in all the paperwork for you. If you go to see a funeral director, they do their bit, they help you fill in our bit, but then they have to call us to organise ...

COF

So it's a proper community service - so when I come to you and that awful thing has happened, you've got me all the way through?

JL

Yes and we can refer you to registrars as well, we're trying to build that relationship so that we can book appointments for you at the registrars. The Lambeth registrar is the busiest in the country so it's really hard to get an appointment. In fact, I've even looked into training registrars so that we can register deaths as an outpost, so you wouldn't have to go anywhere else.

COF

So you are the only person who is running a working, integrated community service at a Magnificent Seven and you're also the only person who's moved that social function into the bereavement department as well as offering a 360° affordable funeral service?

JL

Yes.

COF

How should people get in touch to find out more?

JL

So the website - <https://www.lambeth.gov.uk/places/west-norwood-crematorium-and-cemetery> - and our phone line - 020 7926 7999 and email - bereavementservices@lambeth.gov.uk - and here's our official flyer:

The Simple Lambeth Funeral



Our prices

£1310.00

£1410.00 out of hours

We will

- Arrange the funeral - cremation costs included
- Collect the deceased in working hours
- Organise statutory medical papers if required
- Provide a coffin suitable for cremation

Find out more
bereavementservices@lambeth.gov.uk
Monday - Friday, 8am 'till 4pm 0207 926 7999
Out of hours 0208 695 9500



What we do



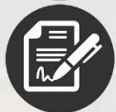
Arrange the funeral

This involves collection and care of the deceased, a service at West Norwood Crematorium Chapel as well as the cremation itself - all included in the price



Collect the deceased in working hours

We will collect the deceased between 8am and 4pm, Monday to Friday
If a collection out of hours is required, please use the out of hours number below



Organise statutory medical papers if required

If statutory medical papers are required in order to release the deceased, we will liaise with the relevant medical or coroner personnel and manage this process for you



Provide a coffin suitable for cremation

We will also include a simple coffin, approved for use in cremations



What we don't do

Hygienic treatment (embalm) ○

Permit viewing of the deceased once in our care ○

Organise ministers' bookings and fees - do feel free to ask for guidance if needed ○

Convey the deceased to anywhere other than our crematoria ○

Bring the deceased into our care from beyond a 10 mile radius - additional mileage would apply ○

These fees apply to cremation only - if you would prefer a burial, please call our office to discuss your options

All payments must be made before the date of the proposed funeral

To make arrangements or for any queries, please call between Monday to Friday, 8am 'till 4pm on 0207 926 7999

To arrange a collection out of hours, please call 020 869 59500