

29th March 2020

For the attention of

Will Tuckley Chief Executive London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Dear Will,

RE: Considering Funerals and Deaths in the COVID-19 Pandemic – Tower Hamlets  
I hope this email finds you well and in good health. I have already raised enquiries with Tower Hamlets council regarding what the council will be doing to prepare for the possible unprecedented numbers of deaths in the borough, which we can expect as a result of Covid-19.

In the last few days of supporting residents who have been impacted by COVID-19 and have lost loved ones I have been asked frequently how the borough will cope with the increase of registering of deaths, support with funerals and burials for people of faith and no faith.

#### CURRENT CONTEXT

Tower Hamlets, like other parts of the country, is home to many minorities. Muslims and Jews cannot cremate their dead, but Muslims do accept that – under pressing conditions – certain traditions and funeral rites will not be possible to honour, due to concern for contamination. Nevertheless, burial is something that Muslims cannot compromise on. It is achievable if authorities are understanding and not dismissive of human and minority rights. In the case of the Muslim population, there can be compromises; acceptance of not washing, handling or shrouding the body and not to congregate to mourn or collectively perform the funeral prayer. But Muslims will insist that bodies are buried.

For Muslims, the grave should be perpendicular to the direction of the Makkah, so that the body, placed in the grave without a coffin, is lying on its right side, facing Makkah. Graves will neither be walked on nor sat on. Grave markers are simple, because outwardly lavish displays are discouraged in Islam.

If the authorities are concerned about contamination, there are no restrictions in Islam regarding lining the grave with concrete or cement. In fact, many Muslim cemeteries do this as standard. I would also like to add my voice to similar concerns raised by our Jewish community. Their concerns are our concerns, as has been the case on so many occasions, where both our rights are in danger of being trampled on.

Every local authority (and the government, should the government take over the responsibility) should be given the funding and resources to deal with increased

demands on morgues, crematoriums and registry offices, while respecting the wishes of those communities for whom cremation is not an option.

We must be proactive in putting in contingencies. Other officials, representatives, councillors and authorities must act proactively and collectively and provide the government with information and guidance. Tower Hamlets is a densely populated and diverse borough, so I would ask that you begin to think about the way the borough will need to support people registering deaths, funerals and burials, and how this will impact on faith communities e.g. how the dignity of a deceased person's faith is upheld and how people are supported to bury their loved ones. It will also affect people of no faith and they too will need their wishes to be honoured and upheld. The following are questions I have been asked and should be mindful of and prepare for.

- How will funeral directors and crematoriums cope with the increase in deaths and funerals?
- How will this affect storage capacity for bodies within the borough? Where will they be stored?
- What measures are in place for accommodating multi-faith needs? Muslim and Jewish burials, for example, must take place immediately
- Muslims and Jews should not be forced to abandon their beliefs and be compelled to cremate their loved ones because the local authorities did not move quickly enough
- How much capacity is there in existing cemeteries? Do residents have knowledge of their nearest crematorium and cemetery?
- How will residents be supported emotionally and financially to bury their loved ones and the deceased? This is a question for all people of faith and no faith
- How will funeral services take place without increasing the risk of infection?
- LBTH has already announced that the Register Office is now only accepting death registrations and the only means of contact is a single email address. This is neither appropriate nor enough capacity.
- How will LBTH support bereaved families and people?
- Do we have enough land in Tower Hamlets, or London for burials? If not where will burials take place for Tower Hamlets residents and how will people unable to pay for burials in such a crisis be supported?

London is home to a large population of Muslims, and Tower Hamlets has the largest Muslim population in London at 37.8%. Human rights are valid in both life and death. The Annual Population Survey of 2018 (APS) showed that in total, there are 336,965 Jews living in the UK and over two-thirds of British Jews live in London. The Jewish funeral consists of a burial, also known as an interment. Cremation is forbidden.

The APS of 2018 showed that there are 1,021,449 Hindus who live in the UK. According to Hindu funeral customs, the body remains at the home until it is

cremated, which is usually within 24 hours after death. We need to be mindful of other faiths and people of no faiths to ensure that we honour burials accordingly.

What is the protocol for to accommodate to meet the wishes of people of faith and no faith regarding burials? There are approximately 300 crematoriums in the UK and 24 in London. There are approximately 45 general cemeteries in London, 2 Roman Catholic cemeteries and many Jewish cemeteries, some of which are listed here. Before the Covid-19 outbreak, London still faced challenges regarding burial provision. The Audit of London Burial Provision used projections to model demand for burial space from 2010/11-2030/31, but this was based on predicted deaths at the time. It showed a changing preference for burial over cremation based on the increase in religious/ethnic groupings in London, with more people opting for burial over cremation. Boroughs with a larger proportion of Jewish people and Muslims face increasing pressure for burial space and tend to seek just one interment in each grave. There is no significant burial provision in eight Inner London boroughs.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,

Cllr Rabina Khan

Liberal Democrats

London Borough of Tower Hamlets