
First, I would like to thank you, and your committee, for the work you have done to raise this important issue. The committee's report and recommendation were very helpful in informing the work of my Department on this issue.

I will respond to your questions as you have listed them in your letter:

1. **Might you please share any developments on a reasonably priced funeral negotiated with funeral director associations?**

   In your letter, you refer to what the Government has done, working collaboratively with stakeholders to agree what elements might constitute a standard package, and define what a reasonable cost might be.

   Perhaps it would be helpful if I set out Government's position. We do not believe the Government should be mandating or promoting a specific form of funeral provision for benefits claimants. More people are seeking alternatives to what is sometimes referred to as a 'traditional' or 'simple' funeral, and we do not want to interfere with individuals' choices about their funeral or burial arrangements. A one-size fits all funeral approach is not appropriate when considering the diverse needs of the population. However it is clear that the industry must be more transparent on costs, to help people make informed choices, and as part of their responsibilities for supporting vulnerable people.

   We continue to liaise with the funeral industry on cost transparency and the elements of a 'standard' package but to date we have not secured the level of assistance and commitment we would have liked from them on this matter.
2. **Does the Department intend to increase the average SFFEP in line with rising funeral costs? If not, why not?**

We believe the Social Fund Funeral Expenses Payments (FEP) scheme makes an important contribution towards a funeral. Our priority has been to ensure the scheme meets the full necessary costs of a cremation or burial for these people. Average payments have increased year-on-year to meet these necessary costs in full. We have protected the £700 limit for other costs, despite pressure to reduce welfare spending. And we have continued to give people a choice on how they can spend this money on funeral expenses.

In 2016/17 27,000 Funeral Expenses Payments awards were made, at £38.6 million. The average payment in 2016/17 was £1,427. The average payment made has increased in value in the past ten years by about 28 per cent – from £1,117 in 2006/07 to £1,427 in 2016/17 – as the necessary costs have increased. At the same time we have also made interest-free Social Fund Budgeting Loans available for funeral costs.

The Department has many different calls on our limited budget, and we have to make some very difficult decisions about how best to spend these finite resources.

3. **Why, please, has the number of successful SFFEP applicants reduced?**

The number of FEP applications received by the DWP have been steadily decreasing in recent years (since around 2010/11) which explains lower real net expenditure. We do not know the cause behind the decline in applications.

4. **Does the Department intend to make improvements to the SFFEP form?**

We have listened to stakeholders’ concerns about the need to support the bereaved parents for children and in April 2018, we introduced a new shorter Funeral Expenses Application form designed specifically for bereaved parents who are seeking support for funeral expenses.

In April 2018, we introduced changes to the Funeral Expenses Payment Regulations and these changes have been uploaded to the Funeral Expenses Payment application form, this includes the change to extend applications from 3 to 6 months.

Further changes are planned by the end of the year to take into account changes related to Devolution. We are also considering how we might take into account the recommendation by the Work and Pensions select Committee. For example, by adding some text to the application form which clearly articulates that an application will not be successful if another close relative is deemed able to pay for the funeral.

5. **Might you please set out what further steps the Government is taking to tackle funeral inflation and funeral poverty?**

We believe the best way to consider issues relating to helping people pay for funerals is in the context of the discussions we are having with the funeral industry and groups helping bereaved people. We continue to work closely with colleagues in
other departments, and have worked closely with stakeholders to try to understand better the extent of the issue around cost and transparency.

The Government recently announced the Children’s Funeral Fund (CFF), which will be administered and delivered by Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government. This means that grieving parents will no longer have to meet the costs of burials or cremations as the fees will be waived by all local authorities and met instead by government funding.

The Government is absolutely committed to supporting the bereaved and ensuring that individuals have the opportunity to access the funeral expenses payments scheme. Our priorities remain to improve the funeral expenses scheme, to raise awareness of the scheme. We remain committed to listening to our stakeholders and working together to find solutions that are in the interests of the most vulnerable.

I hope this answers your questions.

Kit Malthouse MP
Minister for Family Support, Housing and Child Maintenance