

# COVID-19

## FUNERAL PROFESSION PREPARED FOR COVID WINTER but stress may prove a bigger problem than the pandemic itself

**In one of the largest responses to an NAFD survey, members and non members shared their perspectives on the months ahead in terms of the COVID-19 response - and how well prepared they feel for what's ahead.**

### *Test and Trace*

While many funeral firms are yet to be deprived of significant numbers of staff due to *Test and Trace*, for those that have the impact has sometimes been significant with one firm, for example, losing a complete team instantly for two weeks.

Only 5% of respondents to the survey have sought to use the Tier One review when staff have been contacted by *Test and Trace*, and some of those that have found that the *Test and Trace* staff were unaware of the option for funeral staff to be reviewed in this way. The NAFD has repeatedly asked the Government for clearer documentation, specifying that funeral firms have this option open to them.

Said one respondent: "I feel *Test and Trace* is the biggest risk and will take the funeral profession out long before COVID... this really needs sorting as this is no appeal, etc. Critical will be funeral assistant/driver bearers and crematorium technicians."

For those respondents unaware of the Tier One review, please see the guidance notes *in the box on page 20*.

### **Staffing levels and wellbeing**

At present most funeral home staff are still able to work, with the vast majority of respondents reporting that less than 1% of their workforce were unavailable to them due to isolating, shielding or being unwell.

This is partly because there is a higher than average proportion of older workers in the sector and, at present, those who were previously shielding are back at work in the main. It is clear that these numbers are creeping up as the weeks go by, with 15% of respondents noticing staff unavailability was increasing a little or a lot, compared to 2.5% noticing a decrease.

However, the impact of stress and anxiety is, perhaps, having the larger impact on staff in the sector at present. One respondent said: "Stress and concern for 'what if' is the largest cause of unwellness and affects a large proportion of staff to a very concerning degree. Most fear they will cause the entire business (as we are small in size and have no option but to work closely) to close as a result, and struggle to cope with the idea that they could be 'patient zero' within our setting."

Another said: "We've had members of staff shielding and a couple of members of staff in need of an extra break due to the stress and anxiety to the pandemic and COVID itself."





Exhaustion, too, was also cited by several respondents, and so caring for staff, checking on their wellbeing and making sure they have proper rest, support and access to help if they need it will prove crucial in the months ahead. There is a new section in the updated version of the NAFD's *Pandemic Planning Guide* to support you in this respect.

### Supply chains

Twenty-five per cent of respondents expressed concern that they were seeing challenges in the supply chain across the autumn - with a global shortage of gloves commonly cited as a key issue. Many firms found the VAT holiday on PPE extremely valuable in partially offsetting the significant additional cost of PPE during the pandemic, and were concerned at the ending of the exemption.

The NAFD has pressed the Treasury to reconsider its position and has also sent out a template letter to members to support them in raising the issue with their local MP. If you haven't seen this letter, please check your emails from us or contact Membership Secretary Su Lewis at [su@nafd.org.uk](mailto:su@nafd.org.uk) who will be able to send a copy to you.

### How prepared do you feel?

Overall, when asked whether they feel that they have made adequate preparations for a second peak of COVID deaths plus the usual seasonal peak in the mortality rate, 95% of respondents felt they had, which is very positive - if not at all surprising - given how hard funeral firms have been working across the summer and autumn to put plans in place.

Issues remain in all parts of the UK with some of the practical and emotional implications of

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restrictions though, with concern over viewing a loved one who has died when infected with COVID mentioned by several respondents. At present this is not allowed in Northern Ireland, and only under certain circumstances elsewhere. However, many funeral firms have successfully adapted their ways of working to prepare deceased people safely and to be able to support families in undertaking a viewing, particularly where they were not able to say 'goodbye' in hospital.

Concerns also remain over the presence of COVID on some death certificates, and questions about the accuracy of reporting COVID as a cause of death. It's likely that these kinds of questions will only be fully examined after COVID-19 is behind us, in the inevitable investigation into the national response to the pandemic. Nevertheless, the NAFD will provide feedback on these concerns to the Ministry of Justice, which is responsible for all death certification matters.

### Stepping up

Finally, when asked what level of cover they will be able to provide over the Christmas and New Year period, the overwhelming majority of respondents responded, unsurprisingly, with a commitment to do whatever is needed and confirmation that, as they always are, funeral firms will be there for bereaved people whenever they are needed - even if it means putting the turkey back in the oven.





### The NAFD's role in supporting you

The NAFD is there to support its members through every challenge they face - and has been there every step of the way through COVID-19 and will remain so. If you need us over the Christmas and New Year period, just contact us and someone will call you back.

info@nafd.org.uk  
or 0121 711 1343  
(general enquiries)

nafd@wordsmith-communication.co.uk  
or 0121 393 3625

**PRESS enquiries only.** All other enquiries to info@nafd.org.uk

### Test and Trace

#### Advice for funeral firms if staff are traced regarding contact that occurred during work-related activities

The NAFD has sought guidance, having been made aware of funeral home staff having to self-isolate through *Track and Trace*, as a result of contact that occurred during work-related activities.

As critical workers, if the contact occurred while an employee was carrying out their duties **AND** there were mitigations which made isolation unnecessary (eg the wearing of PPE) **AND** their absence would have threatened service delivery within the business, we understand that the case can be referred for a 'Tier 1 assessment' with the local health protection team.

We have asked The Cabinet Office for this to be specifically documented in relation to funeral workers. However, until this happens, if you have a case that meets all the above criteria you should make reference to the guidance for health and social providers which can be found at the following link:

<https://bit.ly/Tier1Assess>

### Specifically:-

"If a health or social care worker is considered to be a contact, and the recommendation for them to self-isolate would have implications for the provision of the service, their employer will need to escalate this for a risk- assessment to a Tier 1 contact tracer at the local Health Protection Team (HPT). Advice about whether a risk-assessment is needed may also be sought from the HPT.

"The risk-assessment should take account of any PPE use (including its type and situational appropriateness) and other mitigating factors that may reduce the risk of infection transmission to such an extent that the individual identified as a contact does not need to self-isolate."

Please note, this is **ONLY** to be used if the member of staff concerned is traced as a result of contact which occurred when they were carrying out their duties **AND** there are mitigations which make isolation unnecessary (eg the wearing of PPE) **AND** their absence threatens the ability of the business to remain operational.

**This should NEVER be used for personal contact with infected persons outside the workplace or outside of the course of normal working duties.**

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