

COUNCILS TAX GRIEVING FAMILIES TO BALANCE THEIR BOOKS

A survey of local authorities, published in February by the LGiU think tank and The Municipal Journal, revealed the extent of the pressure local councils are under to balance their books and the degree to which this is leading them to levy additional charges on local communities. The 2018 State of Local Government Finance report highlights how councils are not only intending to increase council tax, but are also draining their reserves and looking for additional ways to increase charges to residents too.

A target for these rises is often bereaved people. In recent years, the National Association of Funeral Directors has seen countless examples of local authorities introducing double above-inflation (and often double digit) rises for burials and cremations, as well as introducing fines for late running funerals and excess charges for out-of-area funerals.

In fact, these kinds of third party charges now account for a third of all funeral costs and are the fastest rising cost connected to a funeral. In 2017, both burial and cremation fees attracted above-inflation price rises (Royal London reported burial fees up by an average of 3.5% for residents and 5.3% for non-residents and cremation fees up by 5.4% in September 2017).

Just last month, Worcester City Council announced increases to burial and cremation charges – but car parking charges would remain the same, despite many of the council's car parks charging below the level of privately-run alternatives. The reason for hiking up fees for bereaved families but not for car drivers? "We don't want to discourage shoppers coming to the city by increasing the charges too much," says Councillor Mike Johnson, who chairs the Communities Committee.

The latest Walsall Council draft budget includes proposals to increase cremation fees by 6% in 2018-19 and 2019-20, with the aim of raising an additional £180,000 a year to shore up the council budget.

In 2017, East Ayrshire Council in Scotland increased the cost of a lair (burial plot) and interment by 25%. The previous year, Coventry Council announced increases in excess of 20% to burial charges and 15% for cremation fees, as well as the introduction of fees for overrunning services which were previously free.

North East Lincolnshire Council has increased the cost of purchasing a grave at its cemeteries by 250% since 2012 and cremation charges have gone up by 25%, while a burial plot in Watford rose by 60% in five years, from £810 in 2012 to £1,300 by late 2016.

In some areas residents are fighting back, with local media reporting that Kirklees Council in West Yorkshire has been forced to cave into pressure and backtrack on planned increases in burial charges.

Councils might make the argument that burial plots can be in short supply in some areas and so higher fees are appropriate, but it is particularly galling to see councils then also increase cremation fees by inflation busting amounts too, leaving families with no choice but to pay these higher fees. For example, in the Scottish Highlands cremation fees increased by 59% to £849 between 2015 and 2016.

In contrast, many funeral directors are introducing flexible payment options, pegging any price increases at the lowest possible level, introducing an ever-wider range of choices and publishing comprehensive price lists online in order to act in the public interest and ensure families can make informed decisions and feel confident that the funeral they choose is within their budget range.

Alison Crake, President of the National Association of Funeral Directors, said: "The NAFD sympathises with local authorities for the difficult financial circumstances they are facing; however, we do not feel that it is fair to exploit bereaved families who have little choice but to pay these fees."