



NAFD NEWSCAST VIRTUAL BRIEFING

BRIEFINGS ON CMA AND COVID – AND
MEMBERS THANKED FOR THEIR FORTITUDE.



In December, the NAFD hosted a virtual briefing for members, with Chief Executive Officer, Jon Levett, reflecting on an extraordinary year dominated by COVID-19 and the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) investigation.

The meeting was chaired by NAFD President David Barrington and 79 member firms logged in, pointing to an encouragingly sizeable audience.

Jon paid tribute to all members for their fortitude during the pandemic despite having to deal with the highest death toll in Europe. “We have not seen some of the terrible scenes we have seen in other countries with mass graves, bodies being transported in army vehicles, etc” he said, adding: “that’s largely down to your hard work.”

Underlining the work being done at National Office, he reminded members that he and Past President Jeremy Field continued to have weekly briefings with

the Cabinet Office, and twice-weekly meetings with the Ministry of Justice and devolved administrations through the Deceased Management Advisory Group (DMAG).

He said: “If there’s an upside to COVID, and it’s difficult to talk about an upside, it is that it has enabled us to build relationships with Government departments that would have otherwise taken years to establish.”

Jon added that, through the work of the NAFD and DMAG, funeral staff had been granted key worker status, had access to PPE and seen a temporary pause on VAT on PPE. Currently, Jon said, they were pushing for funeral staff to receive priority for the COVID-19 vaccine on the basis they were frontline workers and were going in and out of care homes.

Jon said he would also be pushing for information from the Cabinet Office about expectations of death rates

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following the relaxation of restrictions over Christmas.

Away from COVID-19, plenty of work was carrying on, which, Jon said, would see rewards in 2021.

The Association launched The Funeral Director Code at the Autumn General Meeting in October, which replaced the NAFD Code of Practice, and was looking for feedback from members to allow for any adjustments to be made before the Code fully came into force in April.

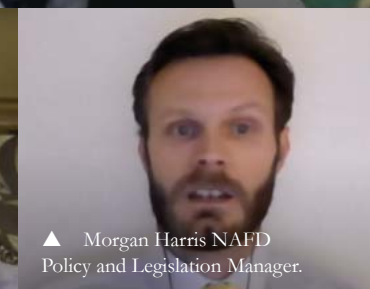
While inspections had been paused during the pandemic, Natalie McKail – the former Inspector of Funeral Directors in Scotland – had undertaken a review of the NAFD inspection framework – which would become



▲ David Barrington NAFD President.



▲ Jon Levett, NAFD Chief Executive Officer.



▲ Morgan Harris NAFD Policy and Legislation Manager.

more risk-based in its approach, with a new focus on back-of-house facilities and arrangements, a point raised by the CMA.

A pilot for a new training programme for funeral service operatives was underway, developed in conjunction with North Tees College. The programme was a mixture of face-to-face and online learning, and Jon reported that the pilot was progressing well. The NAFD was hoping to launch this course to all member firms early in 2021.

Members would also see a more personalised and improved experience in the members’ section of the NAFD website thanks to a major IT upgrade that was currently taking place.

Jon thanked Past President Alison Crake and First Vice-President Kate Edwards for their work on a governance handbook, and revealed that, following “one of the big disappointments from this year” in having to cancel the Annual Conference in Liverpool, and with uncertainty still around physical gatherings, the 2021 Annual Conference would be a virtual event, taking place on 14-15 May.

Morgan Harris, Policy and Legislation Manager, updated members on the 30-month CMA investigation, warning

that the outcome had “equal, if not even greater, potential to change the shape of our sector fundamentally and irreversibly, for both good and bad”.

He said that, following a concerted NAFD campaign, the Association had persuaded the CMA to change its stance on price regulation in the space of a few months and emphasised that the Association had invested “significant time, effort and resource” into arguing, firstly, that price controls would see a decline in consumer choice as firms sought to compete on the benchmark packages and, secondly, it would risk a drop in standards as a price squeeze would not be accompanied by any regulatory checks on quality of service.

Morgan added: “This is probably the most important win we have secured to date and I would like to say a special thank you to the NAFD members who gave up their time to contribute to the Europe Economics research paper that helped us make this case.”

Sounding a note of caution, however, he said that price control wasn’t off the table entirely and warned that this might be revisited by the CMA at a later date.

Members heard that, despite an intensive investigation, the CMA still did

not understand the sector, particularly the smaller firms, underlined by its claim that people paid £400 too much for a funeral and suggestions that all funeral directors should sell certain defined packages.

The final report, which would be scrutinised by the Ministry of Justice as part of the legislation process, was due before Christmas and Morgan urged all firms to begin work on becoming transparent in terms of communicating services, terms of business and pricing – given that a legal requirement to do so was expected before September 2021. Changes made to the NAFD’s funeral-directory website would ensure members who updated their details were in a good position to comply.

With regulation high on the agenda, Morgan advised that the Association was setting up an alternative regulator to avoid the need for a brand new, unnecessarily expensive, government regulator, the cost of which would have to be met by funeral firms, and which would lead to funeral prices rising.

Jon and Morgan also highlighted a forthcoming Brexit webinar – reminding members of the need to consider all the ways that Brexit might affect their business – and new guidance on managing family conflict, more of which you can read elsewhere in this edition.

Following the updates, there were numerous questions from members on topics arising from the discussions, before David Barrington closed the meeting, with a vote of thanks to the NAFD team and Lemonzest events and wishes for peace, happiness and, above all, hope for 2021.

One of the questions was asked by Darryl Smith, Heart of England Co-op. ▼

