▼ Members from the NAFD Greater Manchester & Local District Association tour the Recomation Ltd factory in Leeds

STRENGTH BY *(local)* ASSOCIATION

How the NAFD's local guilds and associations support member businesses across the UK

Over the years, the NAFD's local Guilds and Associations have been a vital cog in the Association's structure - supporting members in getting the very best value for their annual subscription.

However, these are challenging times for all businesses and, across the UK today, the success of Local Associations varies wildly. Some are active, campaigning and benefitting greatly from shared knowledge, experience and strength in numbers. Others, though, have withered on the vine and, in some cases, have ceased activity altogether.

The NAFD is actively seeking to ensure that, moving forward, Local Associations can play an important role in keeping funeral directors informed about important issues facing the profession, act as a conduit to National Office, campaign on local issues and create a strong community based on shared values and experience.

Morgan Harris, the NAFD's Policy & Legislation Manager, said: "Over the years, the number and strength of Local Associations has peaked and troughed for a whole variety of reasons, but they have always played a vital role in the growth and success of the NAFD.

"When they work well, they are a strong force for good and do some brilliant work at local level, enabling members to support each other and solve local problems.

"National Office tries to keep members informed via email briefings and *Funeral Director Monthly* but, in truth, there is no substitute for being updated in person and being able to ask questions and talk things through - especially at a time where there is considerable change in the profession.

"Local secretaries play a vital role in sending information in the other direction, which helps National Office understand members' concerns, identify trends and have a finger on the pulse of what's happening across the regions which, in turn, helps us develop policy and provide an overall better service."

Su Lewis, NAFD Membership Secretary and also Secretary of the Midlands Area Federation, adds: "For me, the NAFD's Local Associations are about building a community. For smaller funeral businesses, it can sometimes be a lonely profession and I think it's important that members meet, aren't frightened to exchange business ideas and stories but, importantly, have a chance to socialise with other funeral directors and

▲ Past President Abi Pattenden at the Sussex Local Association during her presidency.

▲ NAFD Chief Executive Jon Levett addressing the London Association

suppliers. After all, the NAFD is not a service that members buy, it's an association of fellow professionals that they belong to and are an important part of."

Hilary Hackett, Secretary of the Coventry & District Funeral Directors' Guild, agrees. Her view is that funeral directors joining together in the area has solved local issues as well as creating a strong community. The Guild meets four times a year and has an annual dinner dance.

She said: "We all get on professionally and personally, which helps, and we have found that, with local problems such as the coroner's rota and lack of cemetery space, taking action as a Guild has proven successful - whereas writing as individual businesses simply hasn't.

"The key is ensuring that, in-between meetings, action is taken and there's lots going on so that, when people come to the next meeting, there are visible signs of progress and activity.

"By pulling together we have a far stronger voice and are taken more seriously which, in turn, means that people want to get involved because they can see it is worthwhile doing so. And that would be our message to any Local Association that isn't really active - if you put the effort in and pull together, it can be very rewarding in lots of ways."

In other areas, however, it isn't as straightforward. Mike Oglesby, Secretary of the Greater Manchester & District Local Association, paints a rather bleaker picture.

He said: "It's no exaggeration to say that the funeral market is overcrowded and, in areas, aggressively driven, and it has become clear since taking on this role that a lot of people don't want to share their ideas or best business practices with other members they may class as competitors, which is a shame as we have shown in the past that we have enjoyed success in campaigning when we join together.

"But, to be a successful local force for good, we need people to turn up and voice their concerns and opinions, and that's been the problem. There are 197 member firms aligned to the Greater Manchester & District Local Association, yet I now only have 90 on our mailing list as the remainder have unsubscribed from meeting notifications. Even so, with that number we should be able to attract a decent turnout, but that hasn't been the case of late."

The Association was dormant but started again in 2016 following a strong desire from members in the area, and has tried several methods of building interest, including creating a social media presence, alternate meeting formats, moving meetings around the large area they cover to make it easier for members, frequent articles in *Funeral Director Monthly*, putting on food and drink, booking industry specific speakers and even sending out feedback requests to garner opinion on what they could do better or what members want from the meetings.

"We have tried most things, but are finding most members simply won't engage with us. From archives, I can see that Local Associations were most successful in the days when networking and socialising within the industry were important and frequent as that's how you got the important information you needed, and even competitors would help each other in the spirit of the profession. But it feels like we're more guarded these days and, as with most of society, prefer to receive information or communicate digitally."

IF MORE OF US CAN PULL TOGETHER, WE CAN UNDOUBTEDLY BE A GREATER FORCE FOR GOOD.

Mr Oglesby, however, is determined that the Association can be a success. "We have proven a number of times since 2016 that we are able to bring about change locally that benefits both ourselves and the families we serve. If more of us can pull together, we can undoubtedly be a greater force for good. We look forward to continuing our efforts and welcoming local members new and old in 2020."

A common theme speaking to Local Associations is that, generally, only funeral directors or senior people within businesses tend to get involved, whereas all Local Association we spoke to were keen to stress that all employees are welcome at meetings.

Chloe Lymn Rose, Secretary of the Nottingham, Derby & District Funeral Directors' Association, commented that, too often, people were not aware of meetings because news never filtered down.

She said: "Some staff didn't even know they were allowed to attend, let alone knew when and where the meetings were. We email branches and managers but that's often where the buck stops, so staff don't even know they are allowed to come along. It would be good for ours, and every Local Association, to have a wider mix of people and skillsets attend."

She said that getting involved "doesn't have to be a huge responsibility," adding: "People think it would take up a lot of time but it doesn't have to - and we have seen that being a member of a Local Association does make a difference to companies."

The Nottingham, Derby & District Funeral Directors' Association has helped itself, Chloe adds, by moving meetings away from periods where businesses are traditionally busy, so it meets in February and April, then September and November, moving around the region. This, she said, helps ensure a better turnout, as does regular communication with members and a defined plan of action.

Marisa Slade, who recently took over the role of Secretary of the Southampton & District Local Association, said that she had found that some areas of the industry didn't welcome change, and that could put people off.

She said: "We need more people to be engaged and more employees, arrangers, administrators, etc, to know we are there to help them, not just managers and funeral directors.

"We need interesting speakers that are presenting innovative new ideas, such as resomation, or speakers that can help on issues affecting the profession, such as direct cremation. There is a lot going on and it would be great to get to a place where we have a thriving Local Association that shares, discusses, campaigns and helps each other."

Marisa added that the Association had a strong social side because it put on unusual events, such as having a steel band, or a wine tasting. However, she confessed, there were significant challenges, including the broad geography of the membership, and covering costs when putting on events and food, but said the positives still outweighed the negatives.

She said: "It's about being inclusive, being innovative and interesting, and giving people reason to join and come along. It's an important part of the NAFD and I'd encourage everyone to give it a go."

Get your Local Association back up and running

The NAFD will provide support to any members that wish to reinvigorate a dormant Local Association. Please contact Su Lewis on **0121 711 1343** ext **1001** or email **su@nafd.org.uk** for information on the support the Association can provide.

In the next edition of *Funeral Director Monthly…*

We take a look at the NAFD's Area Federations, how they work in tandem with Local Associations and Guilds and what makes the most successful ones tick.