

# Working with the community to improve bereavement services: A Case Study for Local Authorities

RoadPeace and many of its members have long called for improvements to both coroner and bereavement services. Whilst the coroner service is independent to local authorities, it is funded by them, and is a service which has a profound impact on the community. Lacking coroner and bereavement services can quickly compound the grief that families face, through what is an already immensely difficult and challenging time. RoadPeace believe that wherever possible, unnecessary delays and invasive investigations should be avoided, while signposting and support should be readily available.

Birmingham City Council has committed to working with community groups, charities and families to improve the provision of bereavement services. The result? A community which feels better served by the council, an improvement in the services offered, and the voices of the bereaved kept at the heart of important decisions.



**RoadPeace**

The national charity for  
road crash victims

## The situation in Birmingham

“ When Lucy and I approached the council about our concerns of what we had experienced during our bereavements our hope was for a better service. We knew that in order to bring about change it would not be simple, however the council was open to hearing our concerns. The introduction of the round table that Sharon has facilitated has enabled in my opinion better communication between the council, the bereaved and those who support the bereaved. The goal is to provide a better service to the public. Sharon and her team made significant positive changes for the city of Birmingham. ”

Elaine J Gordon,  
RoadPeace West Midlands

Elaine Gordon and Lucy Harrison were both sadly bereaved through road traffic collisions in 2014. Elaine lost her sister, and Lucy lost her brother. Both women were left profoundly affected when their families had to wait weeks to hold the funeral, as the defendants in each case, were given the chance to consider a second post-mortem. Elaine and Lucy campaigned around this matter over a number of years and discovered that the unnecessary and traumatic wait that they had experienced in holding their loved ones' funerals, could have been avoided. Lucy and Elaine resolved that other families should not have to experience their loved ones being treated with indignity in death, and in 2019, started a campaign for a CT scanner to be trialled in Birmingham. A CT scanner allows for faster and less invasive post-mortems to be carried out. This is particularly pertinent in the case of road deaths, as the cause of death is often less difficult to ascertain than other unnatural deaths, which might necessitate more invasive investigations.

At around the time Elaine and Lucy began to push for this, other organisations and community groups were also pushing for change, and there was a sense that the bereavement service in Birmingham was felt to be lacking. Indeed, Shabana Mahmood MP had been charged with writing a report into the Bereavement and Coroner Services in Birmingham.

Elaine and Lucy were supported in their campaign by local MP Preet Gill, and they were also able to meet with Shabana Mahmood MP to discuss their experience, ahead of the publication of her report. Preet Gill wrote to Birmingham City Council and facilitated a meeting between Lucy, Elaine and Councillor Sharon Thompson. In July 2019, the campaign for the use of CT was successful, with the announcement of a 12-month pilot use of CT scanning, to include road crash victims. Both RoadPeace West Midlands, and the Birmingham Muslim Burial Council, who had also been pushing for the use of CT, were given credit by Councillor Thompson.

Then, in January 2020, Shabana Mahmood MP published her report into Bereavement and Coroner Services in Birmingham. The report was extensive, and cited several key areas where the Coroner and Bereavement Services were failing to meet the needs of the community it served:

- Birmingham and Solihull's Coroner's Court and Mortuary Services was an outdated building, no longer fit for purpose. With lack of provision for parking causing distress to families and queues for vans delivering and removing bodies.
- Faith communities reported they were having to wait too long for the release of bodies – not in accordance with religious practices.
- The trial of a CT scanner – which had been called for by bereaved families, had not been publicised by the council, and official council communications indicated reticence towards the trial prior to its conclusion.
- That the service was overly politicised, riven by a refusal to accept criticism or change at a senior level, and was failing to properly serve many citizens.

“ It is not easy for those newly bereaved to complain or highlight concerns. They can be exhausted, feel not listened to, even feel frightened to challenge things. Certainly, Elaine and I felt not listened to in many ways for a long time. The best bit about the roundtable is the resulting change in culture – open to listening, open to debate, open to constructive challenge, open to collaboration. This is so vital, and I imagine there are very few councils that are acting in this way. This is probably what Sharon should be most proud of – she instigated a culture of welcoming feedback and wanting to do the best for the bereaved. ”

Lucy Harrison,  
RoadPeace West Midlands

## Working with the community

Councillor Sharon Thompson (former Cabinet Member for Homes and Neighbourhoods for Birmingham City Council, whose portfolio included Bereavement Services) was forthcoming in her desire to improve bereavement services and create an open-door policy, at the council. Shortly before Shabana Mahmood's report was published, Councillor Thompson established a bereavement services roundtable meeting, recognising the need to bring a variety of voices together. The roundtable has a clear aim of ensuring the best possible service is given to the bereaved, at the worst time in their lives. Elaine and Lucy were invited to join the meetings, to represent RoadPeace West Midlands, and to act as critical friends, while speaking up for the experiences of road crash victims. The roundtable has involvement from a number of organisations, including:

- Bereavement charities such as RoadPeace, Cruse, St Mary's Hospice
- Faith groups including the Birmingham Muslim Burial Council and leaders from other faith groups
- Council officers delivering the bereavement portfolio and cabinet support officers
- Aids from the Coroner's office

The roundtable has meant that the concerns and issues raised by community groups and outlined in the report can be addressed in an open and constructive forum, allowing the concerns of the community, which the council and coroner serves, to be heard. Councillor Thompson demonstrated real leadership in these meetings – both in terms of putting across the Council's point of view and providing key updates, and in demonstrating a genuine passion for listening to feedback and committing to improvement. The roundtable meetings will now be taken forward by Councillor John Cotton, who will now oversee bereavement services as a part of his role as Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion, Community Safety and Equalities.

Key successes following the formation of the roundtable include:

- Facilitating an open forum for organisations to collaborate and share knowledge. As an example, Cruse Birmingham and Beyond the Horizon through this medium learned about the RoadPeace World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims, and shared relevant information with their members.
- Keeping the community informed of developments affecting the bereavement service, which in turn affects the community. As an example, the pandemic affected funerals and cemetery opening hours – all crucial information which the groups were able to communicate to newly bereaved families.
- Ongoing feasibility studies being undertaken for the new Centre of Excellence.
- Purchasing and refurbishing the Youth Court for the Coroner's Court, eliminating the issues caused by the old building. The building is due to open November 2021.
- Commitment by the council to publicise the CT scanner trial, and assurance by the Birmingham Coroner that they would utilise the CT scanner as first the port of call for trauma post-mortems (including crash victims).
- Commitment by the council to extend the CT scanner trial until the opening of a Centre of Excellence, where it is hoped a new scanner will be installed.
- Commitment by the council to have the Bereavement Services staff and councillors undertake training delivered by bereavement charities and faith groups, including RoadPeace – to further understanding of different types of bereavement, and sensitivities amongst different communities.
- A commitment to ensure there is signposting to relevant charities on the council's website, and to help with the distribution of relevant literature to crematoriums across the city.

“ *Having myself lost loved ones to road traffic collisions, RoadPeace’s campaign to make the post-mortem process as painless as possible for bereaved families really struck a chord with me.*

*We must never forget the individual stories behind every road death — how due to their sudden nature, there is rarely time for friends and families to say goodbye.*

*People like Lucy and Elaine are remarkable, in their passion to turn personal tragedy into lasting change for others.*

*Their insight, evidence base and clarity of vision has impressed everyone they have worked with, and made it easy to bring about positive change for road crash victims and their families in Birmingham.*

*Their area credit to our community.* ”

Preet Kaur Gill, MP

## Learning lessons from Birmingham

The commitment by Birmingham City Council to address the issues that existed within their bereavement services is commendable. Local authorities should learn from the work undertaken in Birmingham and:

- 1 Undertake a review of their bereavement services and how effectively they are serving their community.
- 2 Engage with the community through a working group on how to improve the service and ensure that bereaved families (including those of road crash victims) are represented as part of this.
- 3 As funders of the coroner’s service, ensure that the coroner’s service is participating in working groups.
- 4 Ensure that those working within the bereavement portfolio receive training from diverse community groups, and organisations who support the bereaved, and work with RoadPeace to ensure there is an awareness of the particular challenges faced following the sudden and violent loss of a loved one in a road crash.
- 5 Look to modernise, and be willing and open-minded towards trialling new technology which can speed up processes, and alleviate unnecessary suffering for grieving families.
- 6 Ensure that caring for the bereaved and being sensitive of their needs, remains central to all decisions.

Want to follow Birmingham City Council’s lead and improve the bereavement services in your area?

If you work for a local authority or are bereaved as a result of a road crash and want to see change, please get in touch with RoadPeace.

### Contact RoadPeace

**Helpline:** 0845 4500 355  
helpline@roadpeace.org

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“ *Meeting Elaine and Lucy really impacted the way I tried to be inclusive in the portfolio, especially when it concerned the grassroots charities. Thank you so much for all you do to support other families, and for being amazing to work with.* ”

Councillor Sharon Thompson,  
Birmingham City Council

“ *I strongly support the excellent work RoadPeace are doing to support families, to campaign for justice for victims and reduce danger and crashes on our roads. I am committed to further strengthening the council’s partnership with RoadPeace and to working with them on these vital issues.* ”

Councillor John Cotton, Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion, Community Safety and Equalities for Birmingham City Council