# UK local authorities not ready for the number of deaths from Covid-19

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UK local authorities not ready for the number of deaths from Covid-19, according to new researchThe situation could lead to a bottleneck in burials and cremations, mortuaries filled beyond capacity and the possibility of mass graves. Credit: University of Huddersfield

University of Huddersfield experts have made stark warnings about the impact of coronavirus on local authorities. A major increase in mortality rates and staff absences will mean a struggle to issue death certificates, leading to a bottleneck in burials and cremations, with mortuaries filled beyond capacity.

Even if fatality rates are at the lower end of expectations—one percent of virus victims—it is highly likely that death and bereavement services will be overwhelmed, according to newly-published research by Dr. Julia Meaton, Dr. Anna Williams and researcher Helen-Marie Kruger.

They have drawn on a wide range of data that includes the experience of previous pandemics and analysed the readiness of a local authority in England—anonymised in the article—in order to appraise the scale of the challenge.

The article is titled Pandemic Continuity Planning; will coronavirus test local authority business plans? and is published by the online journal *Emergency Management Review*.

The findings are based on research carried out in 2019, examining the potential impact of a flu pandemic, but the authors have updated and adapted their facts and figures so that conclusions and recommendations are of immediate relevance. They provide tables and figures that were up-to-date at the point of publication.

"The personal tragedy and loss will be unquantifiable," write the University trio, adding however that the focus of their paper is on how authorities will manage excess deaths. For example, burial and cremation services could be beyond capacity four or five weeks into the outbreak.

Limited cemetery and body storage space will also be a major problem, with mass graves a possibility, although this would be highly

controversial and would upset and anger many communities, state the authors.

They have examined the role of coroners and analysed the continuity plans drawn up by local authorities in the event of a pandemic, finding a number of flaws.

In making recommendations, the authors state that both registration and bereavement services know the death toll will increase during a pandemic but are unsure of the actual figures to plan for.

"Underestimating the mortality rate could reduce the effectiveness of business continuity plans, whereas knowing what to expect will focus attention on the resources required. An option would be to have an escalating business continuity plan, where the service prepares for a worst-case scenario, which can then be scaled back depending on the anticipated mortality rate."

Recommendations include the possibility of ring-fencing employees so that during periods of severe staff shortfalls their availability will be guaranteed.

Technological innovations could include an online death registration service that would speed up the process, although with insufficient safeguards it could be open to misuse.

The authors conclude: "The focus has been on the operational implications for a local authority service but the issues this paper raises are primarily about people and how we, as a society, treat our citizens in life and in death. In a pandemic situation, there is likely to be a necessary change to the 'business as usual' death and bereavement management services. How humanely these are managed is hugely important for those affected at the time of crisis and the humanity of the

government's response will reflect the nature and values of our society, and will be judged accordingly".

Provided by University of Huddersfield