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SENT VIA E-MAIL TO: bcmosques@gmail.com

Dear Jawad

Many thanks your letter dated 31st May and our subsequent discussion on Saturday 6th June, where we were joined by Councillor Sharon Thompson, Cabinet Member for Homes and Neighbourhoods; Robert James, Director of Neighbourhoods and; Dr Justin Varney, Director of Public Health.

Firstly, I found the meeting very useful and informative and recognise your personal contribution to the issues we discussed particularly around community engagement and how we can usefully engage more as we move safely forward in what we hope to be an emergence from the current lockdown situation. I think we all recognise that in doing so we must work together as a City Council, Statutory Partners and Stakeholders but more importantly with the many communities that we serve in this great City.

As we discussed, the Council has been proactively engaging with the diverse communities of our city since the first case of Covid19 appeared in the UK through multiple mechanisms including regular meetings with specific faith groups and interfaith groups, community forums and community radio and online media. This has gone significantly beyond historical levels of engagement and has been highlighted as good practice nationally and we hope to continue to build on this moving forward. Your help in doing so would be very much appreciated.

There has been a weekly open meeting with Mosque leaders and the Director of Public Health and this has been facilitated by the Bahu Trust who offered their zoom facilities quickly to enable this and has been recorded and disseminated to ensure that those Mosques who could not attend the meeting had access to the verbatim conversation. These meetings have an open invitation to all Mosques of the City, and we are keen that this remains open participation for all of our diverse Islamic

faith communities. If you have any thoughts on how we can better engage, I would urge you to attend these meeting and put your suggestions forward.

On the specifics you raise in your letter, we discussed the reason for specific restrictions on the number of people gathering for any purpose but more specifically for the purposes of religious ceremonies including funerals.

As you are aware, and I am grateful that you have made clear to those you represent that it is currently unlawful for people to attend religious establishments like churches and mosques. In the Government's Recovery Plan, there was an intention to perhaps allow such places to open in July if everything was progressing well in terms of the infection rate of Covid etc.

You will know that the Government has relaxed the meeting in the open air provisions from 1 person to 6 people with social distancing. Social distancing must be the guiding factor and the message that we all must adhere to when communicating with our communities.

Government guidance follows the recommendations to avoid the spread of infection and unless there are any exemptions issued to current guidance by the Government the City Council could not support any requests to increase this number in parks, public open spaces etc. This would also include the proposal in your letter regarding the reading of the Janazah prayer at Mosques and in car parks at those facilities.

In relation to the crowding of beaches, this is something not under our control, they are public places, and the risk of spreading infection is significantly raised where increased number of people gather in close proximity.

We did discuss the enforcement of these rules and I think we all agree that this is a very difficult task for the Police and for us all to strike the right balance between advice and enforcement.

As Cemeteries and crematoria are public sector owned places, we do have to ensure that we not only follow the guidelines but recognise that there is a responsibility on the landowner to ensure the health safety and well being of employees and persons other than employees. For clarity, the guidance on funerals is unchanged. It states:

PHE guidance <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-managing-a-funeral-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic> recommends:

- Restrict the number of mourners who attend so that a safe distance of at least 2 metres (6 ft) can be maintained ...
- The size and circumstance of the venue will determine the maximum number that can be accommodated ... but numbers should be minimised ... Venue managers may set caps on numbers ...
- Only the following should attend, alongside the Funeral Director, Chapel Attendant, and funeral staff:

- members of the person's household
- close family members
- or if the above are unable to attend, close friends
- attendance of a celebrant of choice, should the bereaved request this

As you know we restricted the number of mourners for both cremation and burials to six initially, but as we have seen a drop in the numbers of burial taking place we have re-assessed the health and safety requirements, the adherence to social distancing and what can be safely accommodated in with the close proximity of graves etc. We have taken advice on how we can manage the numbers attending funerals etc. and we feel that we are following correct process in determining these numbers. I am aware that some local authorities will be allowing mourners in greater numbers, but as described above " The size and circumstance of the venue will determine the maximum number that can be accommodated ... but numbers should be minimised ... Venue managers may set caps on numbers ...". We must adhere to this information from Government in the assessments made.

We will, of course, keep this under constant review as we will for all our services, and we do understand the sensitivities and feelings that mourners are experiencing when going through the bereavement process. As you know we are now increasing the opening hours of our cemeteries and crematoria and I hope this will help the bereaved.

As the Government works through the stages of recovery, matters relating to religious institutions will be addressed and I know these are currently being considered by the Government. When their assessment of risk warrants further adjustments to current rules, I understand that an announcement will be made which is likely to be soon. We will have to wait for those guidelines to be issued. Again, I am sure these guidelines will come with the advice on how opening of premises also meet the COVID-19 Secure guidelines.

Yours sincerely



Councillor Ian Ward
Leader of Birmingham City Council