



Public health funerals

A survey of authorities in England and Wales, 2010

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Executive summary

Introduction

The research team of the Local Government Association conducted this survey on public health funerals undertaken by local authorities in England and Wales.

About the research

The research was conducted between May and June 2010. An electronic invitation was sent to a list of 348 Heads of Environmental Health in England and Wales. When the survey closed, responses had been received from 208 or 60 per cent of the sample it was sent to. Data was collected on the number of public health funerals undertaken for the financial years 2007/08 to 2008/09 and 2009/10.

Key findings

- The number of public health funerals held by local authorities has remained broadly consistent across the last three financial years (2007/8 to 2009/10) with, on average, 12 funerals happening per year in English single tier authorities (that is, London boroughs, metropolitan and unitary councils) and three in districts and Welsh authorities. There was great variation in the number of funerals conducted, particularly within English single tier authorities, with five authorities conducting between 57 and 258 funerals.
- The majority of those funerals are for men with, on average, a proportion of three male public health funerals to one female public health funeral.
- Funerals for over 65s accounted for over half of all public health funerals.
- Nearly half of respondents (46 per cent) thought the number of public health funerals conducted by their authority had stayed the same over the last three years. Two fifths (40 per cent) thought there had been some increase, the top three reasons being “higher numbers of people dying with family and friends *unwilling* to contribute to the costs of the funeral” (59 per cent of respondents); “higher numbers of people dying with family or friends *unable* to contribute to the costs of a funeral” (56 per cent); and “higher numbers of people dying with no friends or family” (49 per cent).
- Authorities on average reported two cases since April 2008 where family or friends have refused to make arrangements for their relatives’ funeral.
- Respondents reported that, of the public health funerals they had conducted in 2009/10, the ratio was around four cremations to one burial. The majority of respondents (87 per cent) indicated that there was no recent or planned changes to the balance of funerals that are cremations or burials.
- Authorities spent in total a median average of £3,517 on public health funerals in 2009/10. Welsh unitary authorities and district authorities had the lowest average total spend (£2,582 and £3,000 respectively). London boroughs had the

highest average total spend (£13,750). The maximum spend in any one authority was £368,682.

- A calculated cost per public health funeral revealed that, on average, funerals cost £959.
- Nearly two fifths of respondents (38 per cent) reported the primary care trust (PCT) in their area had paid for some of the public health funerals they conducted. However most (71 per cent) were unable to say whether costs were recovered.
- The estimated total number of public health funerals conducted in England Wales in 2009/10 was 2,200. This is broadly similar to the two previous financial years.
- The estimated total spend on public health funerals in England and Wales in 2009/10 was £1.56m, which indicates a small increase from last year.

Introduction

Under the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984, when a resident in the area passes away outside of a hospital and there is no one else willing to pay, councils make the necessary arrangements for a public health funeral. Councils will do everything in their power to try and locate living relatives or friends of the deceased, and in some cases, pass the responsibility on to them.

If a council cannot find a friend or family member willing to deal with the deceased's estate and pay for the funeral, then councils will try their hardest to establish the faith of the deceased and arrange a dignified service. If not, then a simple ceremony takes place followed by a burial or cremation. Under their obligation the council will deal with all aspects of the organisation of a state-assisted funeral, including registering the death, dealing with the undertakers and organising the details of the funeral, involving where possible, friends and relatives of the deceased in the process, and paying for the funeral. There are however certain caveats that apply to this provision. Councils will not accept part payment for funerals, contribute to the costs of funerals organised by other persons or administer estates on behalf of others.

This research report looks in detail at public health funerals conducted by local authorities in the last year, to provide a picture of how many funerals councils are conducting and how costly these are.

Method

Survey sample and response rate

An electronic invitation was sent to a list of 348 Heads of Environmental Health in England and Wales on 25 May 2010. When the survey closed, on 18 June, responses had been received from 208 or 60 per cent of the sample it was sent to. Responses were from a broad range of authorities by type and region.

Table 1 Response rate by type of authority

	Response rate
Districts	61%
London boroughs	48%
Metropolitan districts	39%
Unitary authorities	61%
Welsh unitaries	82%
Total	60%

Table 2 Response rate by region

	Response rate
East of England	60%
East Midlands	58%
Greater London	48%
North East	42%
North West	56%
South East	70%
South West	46%
West Midlands	57%
Yorkshire and Humber	52%
Wales	82%
Total	60%

This survey replicates and builds on a survey conducted in 2008. Where possible, results have been compared to those in the previous survey. Data have also been analysed by type and region, and results reported where significant.

Results

Provision of data on public health funerals

Respondents were asked whether they could provide data on the number of public health funerals their authority has undertaken for any of the financial years between 2007/8, 2008/9 and 2009/10.

The table below shows that the vast majority of respondents (96 per cent) could provide data on the number of public health funerals in their authority for at least one of the years. This compares with 90 per cent of authorities who were able to provide data for the years 2003/4 to 2007/8 as reported in the 2008 survey.

Table 3 Provision of data on public health funerals

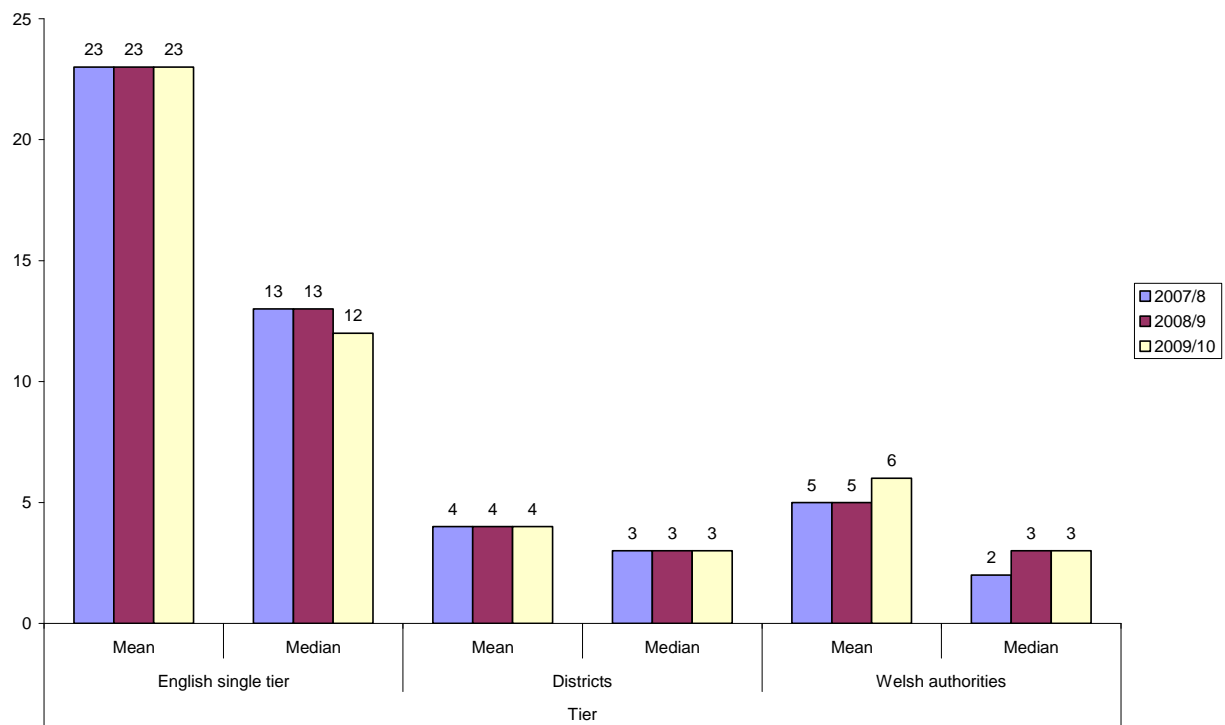
	%
Yes, 2007/8	83
Yes, 2008/9	91
Yes, 2009/10	95
No, I cannot provide data for any of these years	4
<i>Base</i>	<i>208</i>

Average number of public health funerals

Respondents were asked to give the number of public health funerals that their authority had undertaken in the last three financial years. The number of public health funerals varied significantly by type of authority, with English single tier authorities (that is, London boroughs, metropolitan and unitary councils) conducting more public health funerals than district authorities or Welsh unitary authorities. This can most likely be attributed to the size of population the authority serves.

There was great variation in the number of funerals conducted, particularly within English single tier authorities, with five authorities conducting between 57 and 258 funerals. For this reason the median *and* mean have been quoted in the graph below, since these large figures can skew the mean. Comparison of these figures to those from the 2008 survey reveal that median figures have stayed broadly consistent over the last seven years with median figures ranging between nine and 13 for English single tier authorities and hovering around two or three for district and Welsh authorities.

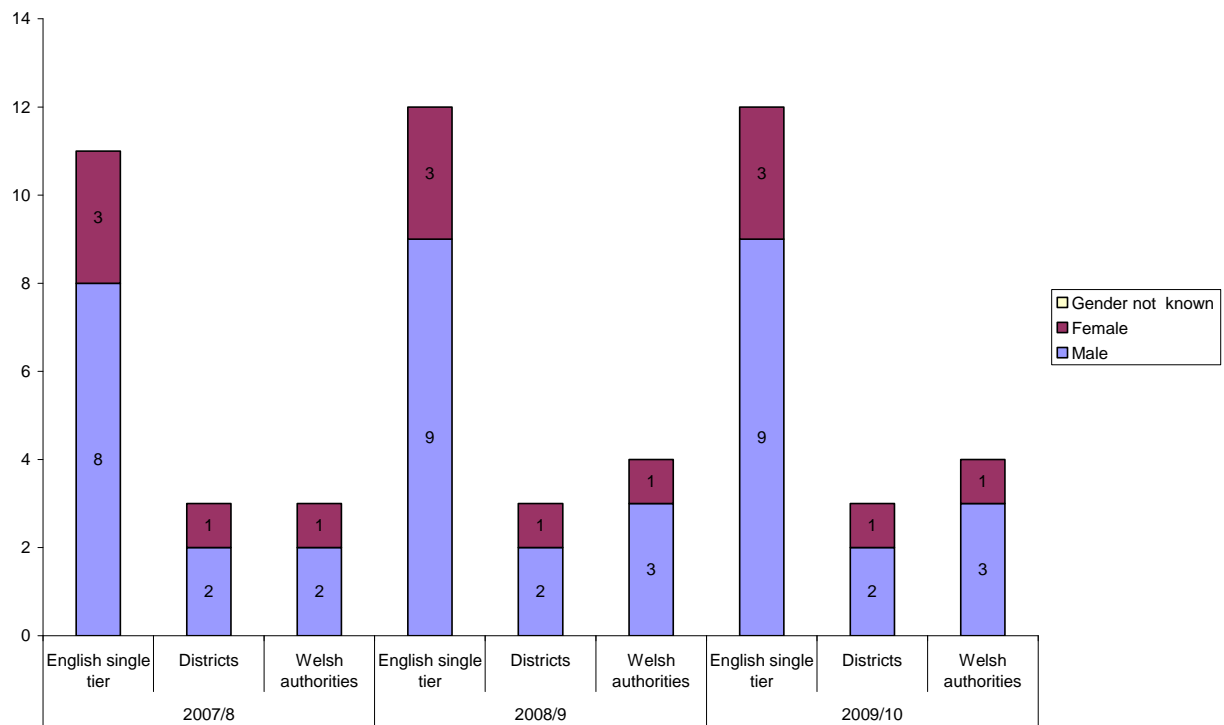
Figure 1 Mean and median number of public health funerals



Base: 172 authorities (2007/8), 190 authorities (2008/9), 197 authorities (2009/10)

Where possible, respondents were asked to break this figure down by gender and by age. The majority (87 per cent) of respondents were able to give a gender breakdown. Across all types of authorities there were more public health funerals for males than females, with over three quarters (a median average figure of 80 per cent) of all public health funerals being for males. Note that the sums of male and female funerals do not necessarily equal the means in figure 1 because not all authorities were able to provide a gender breakdown. Comparison with the 2008 survey reveals that the ratio of male to female funerals has remained broadly consistent.

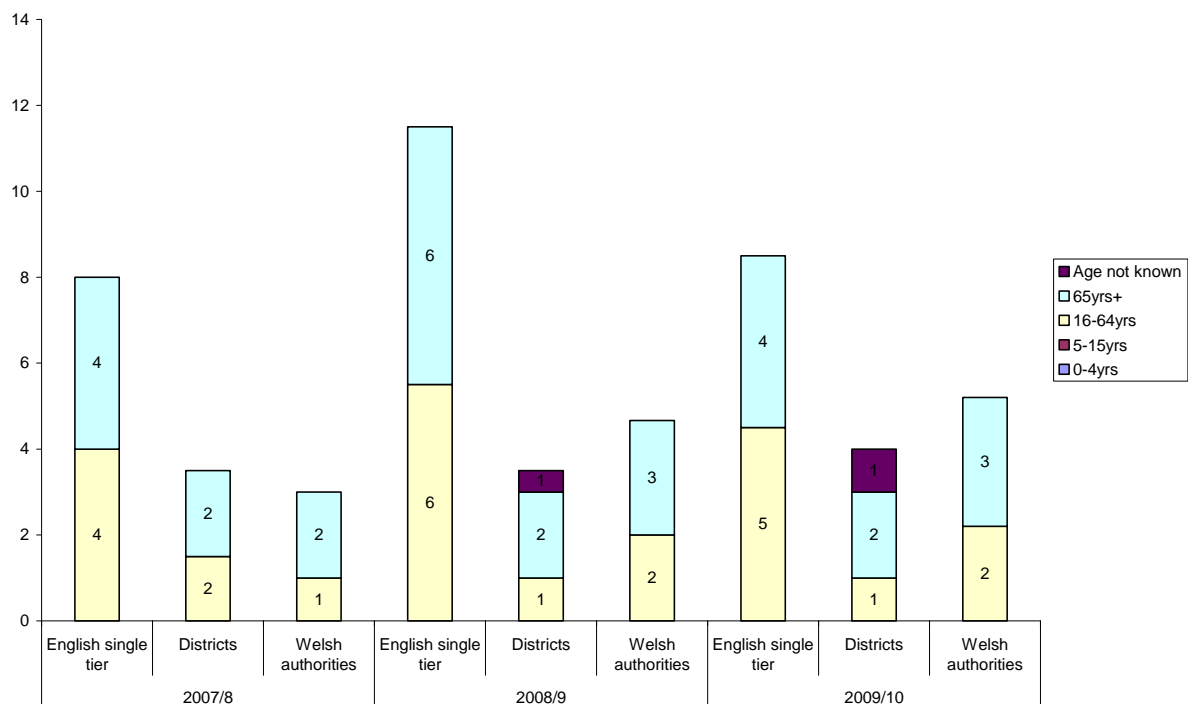
Figure 2 Median average number of public health funerals by gender



Base: 174 authorities

Just over half (52 per cent) of respondents were able to break down total numbers of public health funerals by age. In general, across all authority types, funerals for over 65s accounted for just over half (a median average figure of 54 per cent) of all public health funerals.

Figure 3 Median average number of public health funerals by age



Base: 103 authorities

Opinion on the level of public health funerals undertaken

Respondents were asked whether they thought there had been any change in the number of public health funerals undertaken by their authority in the last three years. Nearly a half of respondents (46 per cent) reported that they had stayed the same, with most of the rest of respondents (40 per cent) generally reporting there had been some degree of increase. This compares to 54 per cent reporting some degree of increase in the 2008 survey.

Table 4 Change in the number of public health funerals

	2010 survey %				2008 survey %
	English single tier authorities	Districts	Welsh unitaries	All authorities	All authorities
Large increase	17	6	22	11	5
Moderate increase	17	16	11	16	23
Small increase	9	15	11	13	25
Stayed the same	42	48	44	46	35
Small decrease	5	8	11	7	7
Moderate decrease	3	4	0	3	3
Large decrease	0	1	0	1	2
Don't know	6	3	0	4	0
<i>Base</i>	<i>64</i>	<i>122</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>204</i>	<i>116</i>

Respondents that reported an increase were then asked why they thought their authority had seen an increase in public health funerals. Respondents were allowed to select as many answers as they felt appropriate. The top three reasons given were “Higher numbers of people dying with family or friends *unwilling* to contribute to the costs of a funeral”, reported by 59 per cent of respondents; “higher numbers of people dying with family or friends *unable* to contribute to the costs of a funeral”, reported by 56 per cent of respondents; and “higher numbers of people dying with no friends or family”, reported by 49 per cent of respondents. These responses are broadly similar to those in the 2008 survey.

Table 5 Reason for increase in number of public health funerals

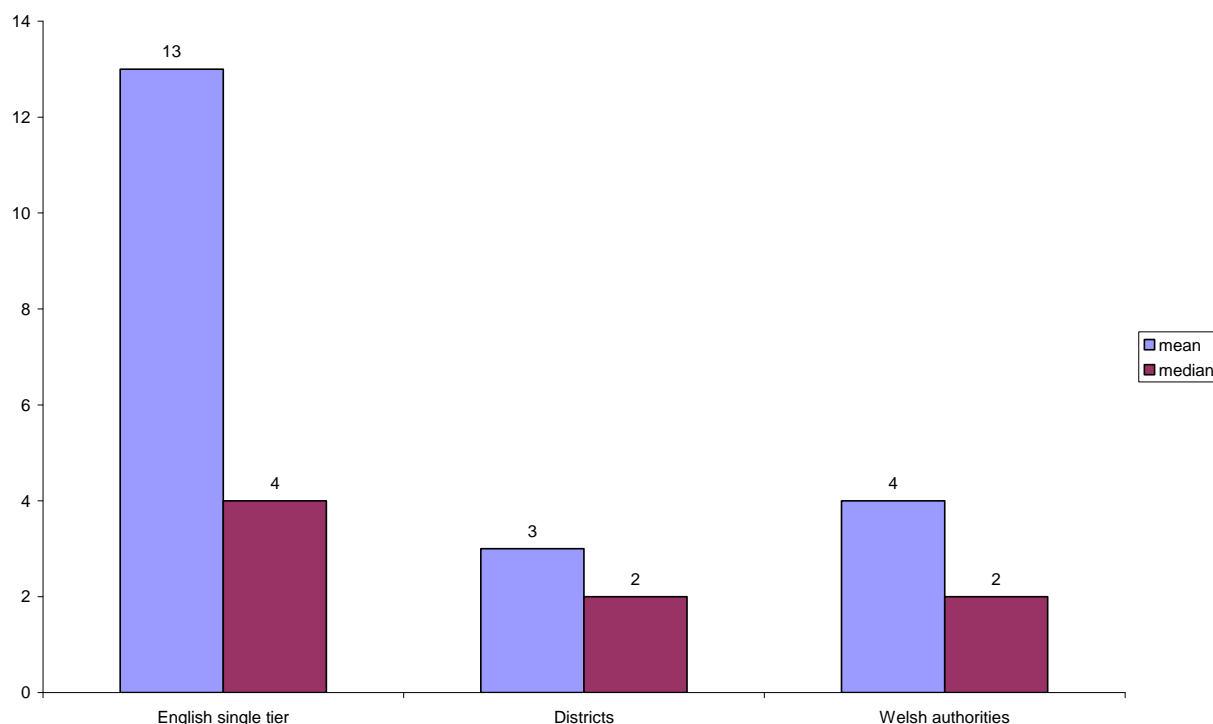
	2010 survey %	2008 survey %
Higher numbers of people dying with no friends or family	49	47
Higher numbers of people dying with family or friends unwilling to contribute to the costs of a funeral	59	61
Higher numbers of people dying with family or friends unable to contribute to the costs of a funeral	56	50
Higher numbers of people dying without any income or assets	29	36
Don't know	4	.
<i>Base</i>	<i>80</i>	<i>62</i>

Number of cases where family or friends have refused to make arrangements for their relatives' funeral

Respondents were asked since April 2008 how many cases there have been where family and friends have refused to finance or make arrangements for their relatives' funeral. Just over a quarter of respondents (26 per cent) indicated that they did not know. Of those that did know, there was a mean average of five cases, however in some authorities there were over 100 cases. This compares to a mean average of four funerals in the 2008 survey.

There was a significant difference between English single tier authorities and districts/Welsh authorities, with significantly more refusals reported by the former. The median average is illustrated on the graph below as large figures for a handful of respondents skewed the mean average figure. The median average number of cases for all authorities was two. The majority of respondents (72 per cent) indicated that this was not an estimate.

Figure 4 Mean and median average number of refusals by family and friends to finance or make arrangements for their relatives' funeral



Base: 148 authorities

Burials or cremations

Respondents were asked how many of the public health funerals which their authority had conducted in 2009/10 were burials and how many were cremations. The majority of funerals were cremations, accounting for over three quarters (76 per cent) of funerals. Only 10 per cent of respondents indicated this was an estimate.

Table 6 Average numbers of burials and cremations

	Mean	Median	Base
Cremations	9	4	182
Burials	3	1	175

Respondents were asked if they were planning to change the balance, or had changed the balance in the last year, between the proportion of funerals that are burials and cremations. The majority of respondents (87 per cent) reported no recent or planned changes to the balance of funerals that are cremations and burials. Similarly, in the 2008 survey the majority of respondents (90 per cent) commented that they had no plans to change the proportion of funerals that are cremations.

Table 7 Balance of burials and cremations

	%
Yes, planning to change the balance	3
Yes, changed the balance in the last year	5
No, no recent or planned changes to the balance of funerals that are cremations and burials	87
Don't know	5
<i>Base</i>	<i>201</i>

Of those that did indicate that there had or will be a change to the balance of cremations and burials, the majority (69 per cent) indicated there would be an increase in the proportion that are cremations.

Average total cost of public health funerals

Respondents were asked how much their authority had spent in total on public health funerals in 2009/10. On average authorities spent £8,900 on public health funerals in 2009/10, however this figure is skewed by some very high spends. The median cost is a more indicative figure and is £3,517. There was great variation between authority types. Welsh unitary authorities and district authorities had the lowest average total spend (with medians of £2,582 and £3,000 respectively). London boroughs had the highest average total spend (a median of £13,750). The maximum spend in any one authority was £368,682.

This was a new question in the 2010 survey, so it is not possible to compare this to previous years. It should also be noted that 42 per cent of respondents indicated this figure was an estimate.

Table 8 Average total cost of public health funerals by type of authority

	London boroughs	Metropolitan districts	Districts	English unitaries	Welsh unitaries	All authorities
Mean	£17,489	£42,678	£4,014	£10,971	£5,709	£8,900
Minimum	£0	£0	£0	£0	£0	£0
Maximum	£64,000	£368,682	£40,000	£40,000	£27,000	£368,682
Lower quartile	£5,864	£876	£1,200	£3,000	£1,200	£1,688
Median	£13,750	£10,890	£3,000	£5,000	£2,582	£3,517
Upper quartile	£23,964	£23,018	£4,781	£16,820	£7,960	£7,730
Base	12	13	113	31	17	186

Note: total costs of £0 relate to authorities which had no public health funerals in 2009/10

Average cost of a public health funeral

For those authorities that had spent money on public health funerals and were able to give data of both spend and numbers of funerals conducted (163 councils), the total cost of public health funerals for each local authority was divided by the number of funerals conducted to give an average cost of a public health funeral. The median average cost in 2009/10 was £959, with a mean average cost of £941. For more information about the average cost for a public health funeral see the methodological annex.

Estimated total number of public health funerals

The following table provides estimated data on the number of funerals between the years 2007/08 and 2009/10 across all local councils. Data has been extrapolated from the 197 returns received and grossed up to provide an estimate of all 201 district councils and all 125 metropolitan, unitary and London boroughs, and 22 Welsh authorities. This data should only be regarded as an estimate since it is based upon responses from 57 per cent of all district and metropolitan, unitary and London boroughs, and assumes the picture for non-respondents is the same as that for respondents.

The table below shows that numbers of funerals have remained fairly stable over the three years to 2009/10.

Table 9 Estimated total number of public health funerals in England and Wales

	Grossed estimates (median average)		
	English single tier authorities	Districts and Welsh authorities	All authorities
2007/8	1,600	600	2,200
2008/9	1,600	700	2,300
2009/10	1,500	700	2,200

Note: Data has been rounded to the nearest hundred.

Estimated total cost of public health funerals

The following table provides estimated data on the total cost of funerals for the year 2009/10 across all local councils. Data has been extrapolated from the 189 returns received and grossed up to provide an estimate of all 201 district councils and all 125 metropolitan, unitary and London boroughs, and 22 Welsh authorities. This data should only be regarded as an estimate since it is based upon a sample of 54 per cent of all district and metropolitan, unitary and London boroughs, and assumes the picture for non-respondents is the same as that for respondents.

This figure indicates a modest increase in the total cost of public health funerals in England and Wales compared to last year (please refer to the methodological annex for further information).

Table 10 Estimated total cost of public health funerals in England and Wales

	Grossed estimates (median average)		
	English single tier authorities	Districts and Welsh authorities	All authorities
2009/10	£900,000	£660,000	£1,560,000

Note: Data has been rounded to the nearest £10,000

Primary care trust financed public health funerals

Respondents were asked whether the primary care trust (PCT) in their area had paid for any public health funerals. Responses were mixed with just under two fifths of respondents (38 per cent) reporting that they did. Where the PCT was reported to have paid for public health funerals, respondents were asked to what extent the costs were recovered. The majority (71 per cent) of respondents did not know.

Table 11 PCT financed public health funerals

	%
Yes	38
No	29
Don't know	33
<i>Base</i>	<i>201</i>

Table 12 Recovery of costs of PCT financed public health funerals

	%
Fully recovered	12
Partially recovered	5
Not recovered at all	12
Don't know	71
<i>Base</i>	<i>76</i>

Annex 1: Methodological note on grossing and averaging

Grossed total estimates

Grossed estimates for the total cost of public health funerals were completed by using each authorities' total spend figure, and then weighting by the type of authority. Note that the total spend figure will not equal the grossed up number of funerals multiplied by the average cost of a funeral, since this would be a rather more crude estimate.

In the previous 2008 survey, total cost figures were calculated for each authority by multiplying the average cost of a funeral by the number of funerals, then grossed using the mean. This new survey has enabled matched sample data comparison (that is, looking at authorities that responded in both 2008 and 2010) and it is felt that a more appropriate grossing method to reflect the total cost of public health funerals in England and Wales is to use the median average. This avoids the skewing impact of a few very high cost figures. The 2008/9 data was therefore recalculated as follows:

Table 13 Grossed estimates of total spend

	Grossed estimates (median average) – 2008 survey		
	English single tier authorities	Districts and Welsh authorities	All authorities
2008/9	£950,000	£510,000	£1,460,000

Note: Data has been rounded to the nearest £10,000

However, it must be noted that this is not directly comparable to this year's total estimate since, in 2008, authorities were not asked to provide a single figure for the total cost over the year; instead and therefore the total spend for each authority had to be calculated.

Comparison of the matched sample data revealed an increase in the average cost per funeral in the order of around 7 per cent. This is approaching statistical significance at the 95 per cent confidence level.

The grossed estimates of the total number of public health funerals conducted in England and Wales in the 2008 survey has also been recalculated to reflect the change in grossing method, again using the median average. The 2007/8 data from it can be recalculated as follows:

Table 14 Grossed estimates of total number of public health funerals

	Grossed estimates (median average) – 2008 survey		
	English single tier authorities	Districts and Welsh authorities	All authorities
2007/8	1,800	700	2,500

Note: Data has been rounded to the nearest hundred.

Note that estimates from grossing of sample data necessarily have a level of error. The 2008 survey had a smaller sample size. It was therefore decided it was more accurate to take the 2007/8 estimate of the total number of public health funerals from the current survey; and therefore it is the 2010 data which is used in the report.

Average cost for a public health funeral

The 2010 survey asked respondents for both the total spend on public health funerals and the average cost of a public health funeral. The total spend figure and a calculated average (produced by taking the total spend of each authority and dividing by the number of funerals they reported) were used in the main report, as an inspection of the data suggested that the 'average cost per public health funeral' figure given by respondents was a less robust estimate of cost. The method used allows for consistency across authorities in how the average cost per funeral is calculated.

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