

Funerals during the coronavirus pandemic

When a relative or friend has passed away, we need to gather, say goodbye and mourn together. But with the coronavirus pandemic, we find ourselves in a particular situation that requires us to adapt how we perform the funeral – so as to prevent the spread of infection.

Those responsible for funerals in Sweden will help you as a loved one to design a funeral that is both dignified and meaningful and that can be performed responsibly during the coronavirus pandemic. This text explains how that is done and what rules apply.

Who is responsible for funerals, cremations and burials in Sweden?

In Sweden, responsibility for funerals, cremations and burials lies with the Church of Sweden's parishes and groups of parishes, and with the Municipalities of Stockholm and Tranås. The authority that is responsible for funerals, cremations and burials is called the *burial authority* ("huvudman"). The authority's responsibility consists of providing, free of charge, to the estate:

- burial plot or equivalent in a public cemetery for 25 years;
- burial, including opening a grave, back-filling (filling in) and preparation of an opened grave,
- transport from the time the authority has assumed responsibility for the deceased's body until burial has taken place, with the exception of transport for burial outside the territory of the authority, unless the transport is within the scope of a contract for the provision of special burial plots;
- cremation,
- premises for the storage and viewing of the deceased's body
- premises for a funeral ceremony without religious symbols.

Furthermore, the authority is required to provide special burial plots for those who are not members of any Christian faith community in their own administrative area or within a nearby administrative area.

The burial authorities (the Church of Sweden and the Municipalities of Stockholm and Tranås) have a social obligation to deal with funerals, cremations and burials for everyone living in Sweden. The obligation is laid down in Swedish law. The authorities respect that people come from different religious traditions and that individuals may have different wishes regarding their funeral. The authorities will do what they can to ensure that loved ones who wish for a prompt burial of the deceased will have this request met.

The authorities are not obliged to provide premises and equipment for pre-burial religious rituals, such as washing and the like. Such rituals are performed by the faith community of which the deceased was a member.

Funeral planning the responsibility of relatives

Planning and organisation of the funeral are the responsibility of the deceased's relatives. If the deceased was a member of the Church of Sweden, it is common for the deceased's relatives to design the funeral service together with the priest in the parish where the funeral is to take place. If the deceased was a member of another religious tradition (e.g. the Catholic Church, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism), the relatives will design the farewell ceremony in consultation with representatives of their own faith community. It is also possible to organise a non-religious funeral (civil funeral).

In the absence of a relative able or willing to take care of the funeral, the municipality is responsible for doing so instead. Irrespective of who organises the funeral, the wishes of the deceased regarding their burial or cremation must be adhered to wherever possible.

The deceased must be cremated or buried

Sweden today has two permitted forms of funeral. The deceased is either *buried* ("gravsatt") or *cremated* ("kremrad") and the ashes are buried. It is the deceased's relatives who decide which alternative is chosen.

It is important that the deceased's remains are cremated or buried as soon as possible. The maximum period permitted between time of death and cremation or burial is one month. In particular circumstances, the Swedish Tax Agency can grant a delay for a cremation or burial. The ashes of a deceased must be buried within a year of cremation. For any delay in burial of the ashes, consent must be obtained from the authority that oversees funerals, cremations and burials.

Special rules during the COVID-19 pandemic

Timing of the funeral

Some mourners will want to delay the funeral because of the coronavirus. However, according to the Swedish Act of Burials, a deceased must be cremated or buried as soon as possible – and no later than one month after death.

There are also other reasons not to postpone a funeral. The funeral is part of the grieving process and experience shows that being able to hold a funeral is often part of the healing process. There is also a risk that problems may arise in storage of the deceased's body if many burials are postponed.

If, as a loved one, you nevertheless need to postpone the funeral, one option is to have the deceased cremated in advance of any funeral ceremonies. In such cases, the burial may be postponed for up to a year and funeral ceremonies can be carried out with an urn instead of coffin.

A memorial service on a later occasion

What can you do if a funeral cannot be arranged in the way that you as a loved one wish? In that situation, it may be an option to send invitations to a gathering subsequently, a memorial service, when more people can take part. On that occasion, a church service, prayer or other ceremony can be arranged in accordance with the appropriate religious tradition.

Funeral service and farewell ceremony

As a relative, you receive help in designing a funeral service/farewell ceremony, together with a representative from the faith community that you choose. During the coronavirus pandemic, it may be useful to be acquainted with some facts before starting this planning. If you are closest mourner, you should consult with representatives of your faith community about how the funeral can be conducted safely for you and your relatives.

The funeral services and farewell ceremonies of faith communities are counted as *public gatherings* (“*allmän sammankomst*”) and the government has decided that a limited number of people – no more than 50 – may participate in such gatherings. In other words, it is advisable for as few people as possible to be present.

Those attending a funeral service must:

- keep two metres apart;
- maintain good hand hygiene,
- not have symptoms of illness.
- avoid physical contact, such as hugs and handshakes.

Keep in mind that the size of the room is crucial in determining how many people can be invited to your funeral service/farewell ceremony.

Even if you choose to have the funeral service outdoors, the location must allow all participants to keep the recommended distance from each other. According to the recommendations of the Public Health Agency, any person who is in a risk group or is feeling symptoms of illness should not attend the funeral.

Memorial service immediately after the funeral

It is comforting to gather for a memorial service immediately after the funeral and feel communion with family and friends. However, to prevent the spread of infection, the recommendations of the government and the Public Health Agency also apply of course to the memorial service. Guests must keep the recommended distance from each other, maintain good hand hygiene and avoid physical contact. Also keep in mind that any catering has to be provided via table service, to avoid crowding at buffet tables.

Alternative forms of funeral service

For the duration of the Covid-19 pandemic, it may be worth considering alternative forms of funeral and farewell ceremony. Some options that might be worth considering:

- Invite guests to a live transmitted or filmed funeral. If you ask any of those present to film, you can transmit live via social media or other digital services. Or you can share the film afterwards.
- Have a small funeral now – and a larger gathering later. A simple funeral service with only the closest mourners present can feel very warm and meaningful. If you as a loved one wish, you can later invite people to a larger social gathering and memorial service for the deceased.
- Funeral after cremation It is also possible to have the funeral after the deceased has been cremated. In that case, the service is conducted with an urn instead of coffin and the funeral can be delayed for up to a year.