

Streamlining the Medical-Legal Pathway After a Death in an Acute Hospital: A Quality Improvement Approach

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THE PROBLEM

Delays in statutory medical documentation following a hospital death are causing prolonged mortuary stays, uncertainty for families and Funeral Directors, and distress for staff. Inconsistent understanding of legal requirements and unclear ownership of the process across clinical teams contribute to inefficiency and avoidable harm.



...it was the following week before the certificate was issued leading to a delay in funeral arrangements.

...the complainant’s perception that there had been an unreasonable delay in issuing a death certificate.

...delay in issuing a death certificate and a bereaved family having to make some effort to obtain it. An apology was offered for their experience.

IRISH CULTURE AND PRACTICES AROUND DEATH

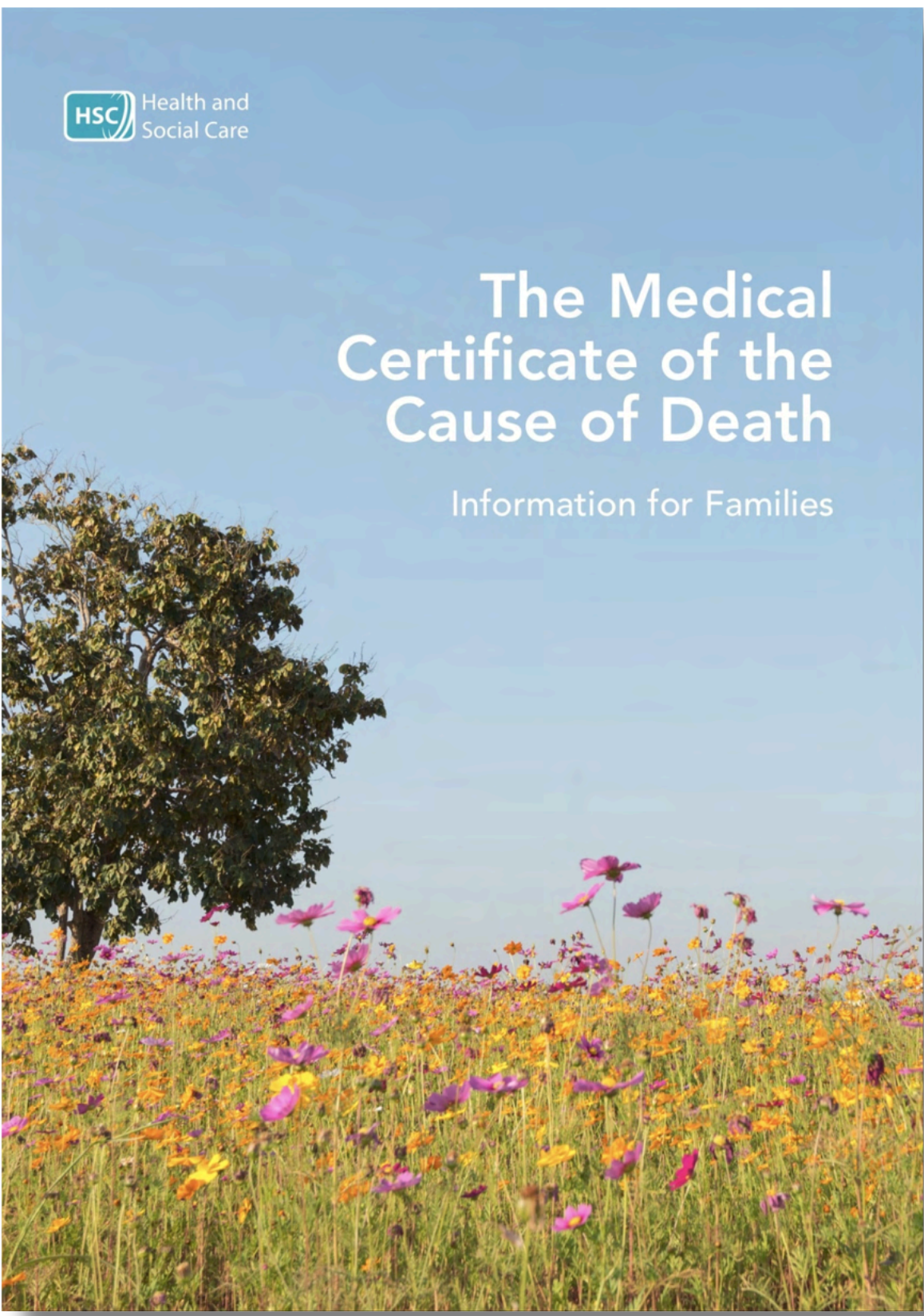
Irish bereavement culture, characterised by communal rituals and strong social support, has been associated with lower rates of prolonged grief, suggesting a potential protective effect against complex grief responses (Hyland et al, 2023).

WHY IT MATTERS

Delays after death may disrupt culturally protective bereavement practices in Ireland, where communal rituals and social support are associated with lower rates of prolonged grief, highlighting the importance of timely post death processes.

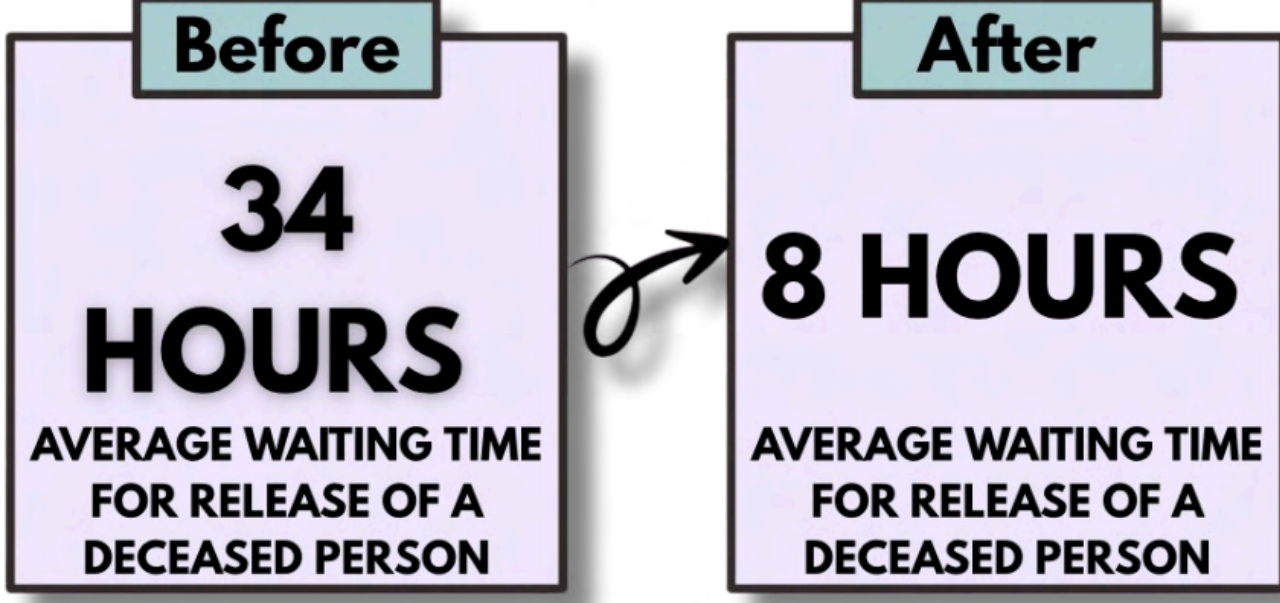
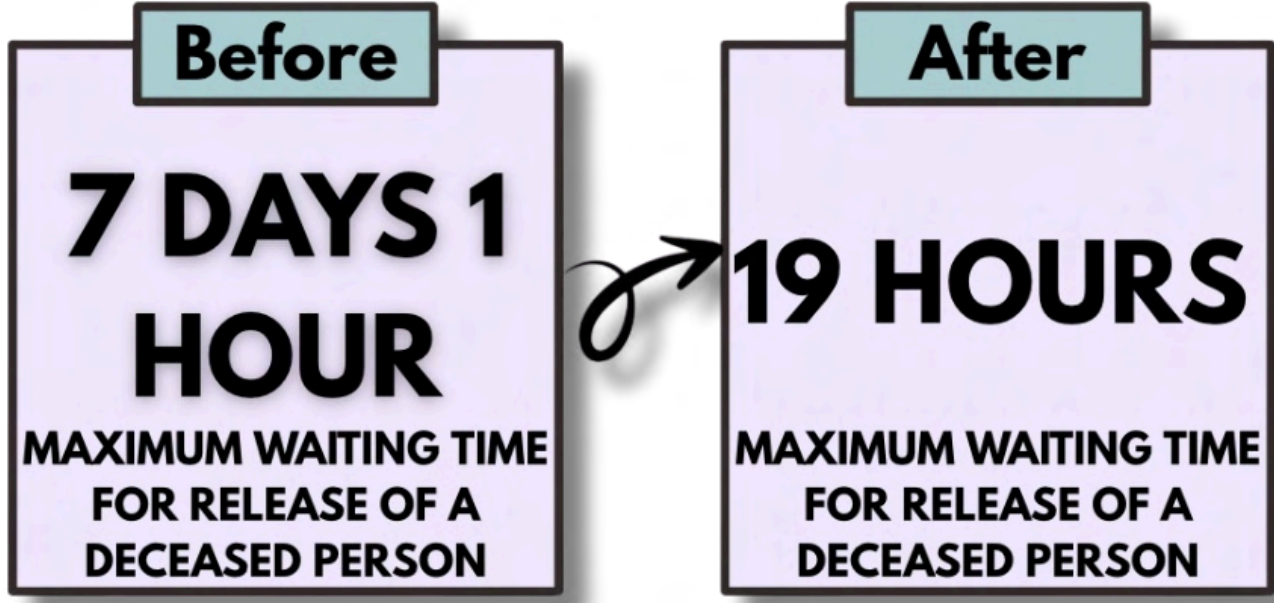
AIM STATEMENT

By September 2025, we aim to ensure that at least 90% of statutory medical documentation following a hospital death is completed within 24 hours, reducing avoidable delays, improving communication, and minimising distress for bereaved families, Funeral Directors and clinical staff.

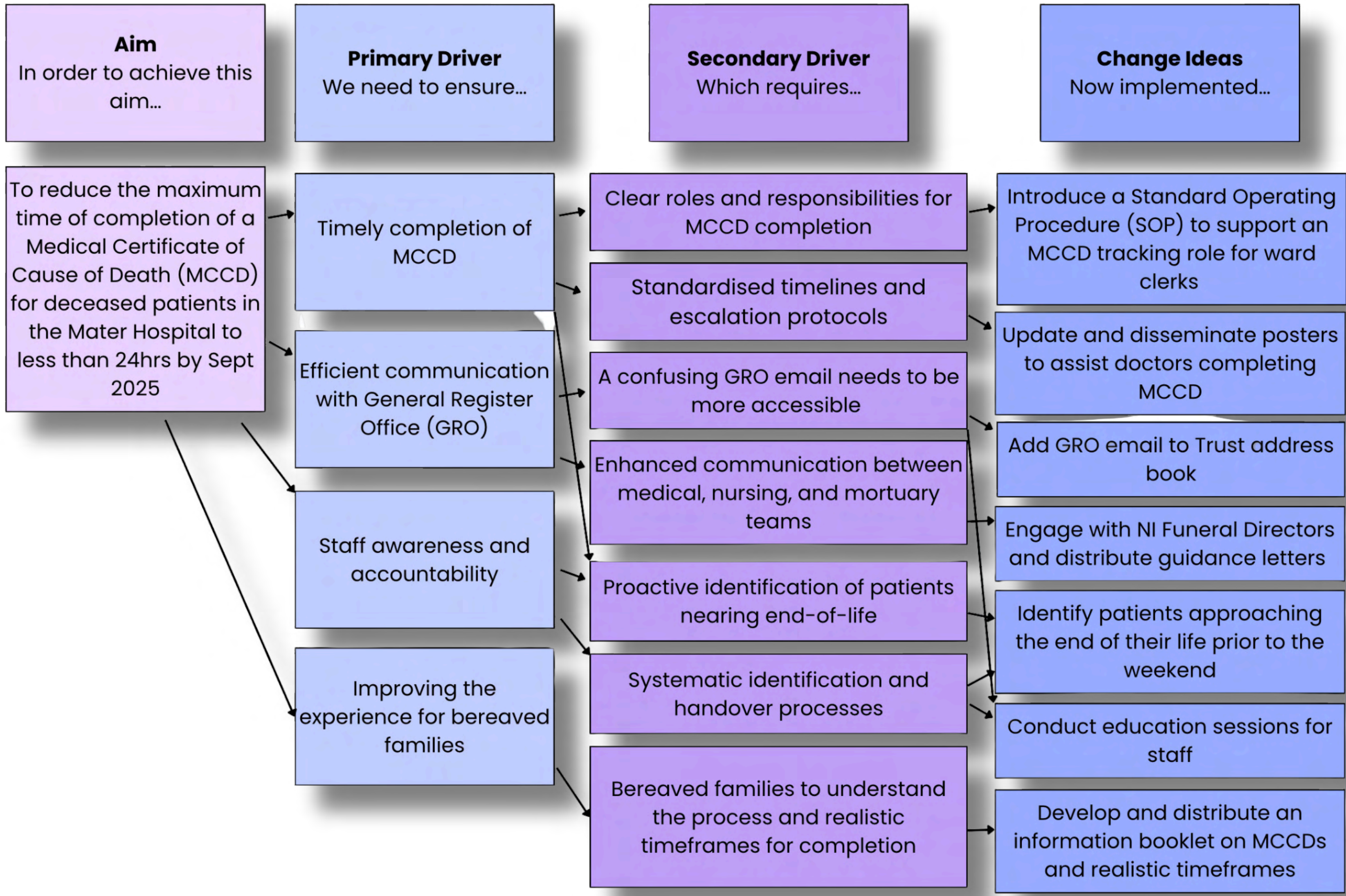


KEY ACHIEVEMENTS AND IMPACT

- Identified delays in completion of Medical Certificates of the Cause of Death (MCCD) as a trust wide patient experience, staff wellbeing, and system flow issue.
- Led multi disciplinary stakeholder engagement, achieving consensus for urgent quality improvement action.
- Established cross organisational collaboration, including partnership with the national association of funeral directors.
- Implemented a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP), including early alert and ward clerk tracking to reduce variation and delay.
- Strengthened accountability through consultant oversight of outstanding MCCDs.
- Improved workforce capability through updated guidance and targeted education for medical and nursing staff.
- Improved reliability of electronic MCCD submission by integrating General Register Office (GRO) contact details into trust systems.
- Aligned service improvement with culturally significant Irish bereavement practices to support timely funerals and reduce distress.



DRIVER DIAGRAM



FEEDBACK

Chairman of the National Association of Funeral Directors Feedback

“The turnaround time has certainly improved.”

“The process is smoother and quicker with fewer delays.”

“Belfast Trust is a leading light.”

Ward Manager Feedback

“We’re no longer receiving calls from undertakers or families.

Communication has improved, and the process is smoother for staff and families alike.”

“There’s increased awareness among staff of the impact delays have on families. The ward clerk’s role has added value and improved team communication.”

Ward Clerk Survey Results

100% agree delays cause unnecessary grief

100% agree the new role helps families

100% feel they are making a difference

100% are satisfied with their new role