

PROVINCIAL GRAND ALMONERS WORKING GROUP 3

KEEPING IN TOUCH

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This paper is not a 'how to'. It was never the intention of the authors to produce a set of rules, but simply to draw on experience and best practice thus arriving at suggestions for helping to make 'Keeping in Touch' both practical and achievable for Lodge Almoners. Dip in for help; or read the whole paper – it is hoped that it may help to tease your plans into action.

For ease of reference you can find help on the following issues:

TOPIC	SECTION NUMBER
Absence of Brethren from Lodge	22
Almoner's Reports in Lodge	28
Amalgamation of Lodge	17-19
Appointment of Lodge Almoner	21
Assistants to the Lodge Almoner	10
Change of membership status	23
Closure of Lodge (General)	17-19
Closure of Lodge (Procedure)	31
Confidentiality	8-9
Contact Renewal	33a-b
Death (member or dependent)	24
Dependant-definition	4
Dependants-records	13
Expenses (Lodge Almoner)	27
Friendships Clubs	30
Good Practice-suggestions	21-33
Illness (member of dependent)	25
Individuals' Wishes	32
Initiates	15-16
Joining Members	15-16
Local help providers	17-19
Lodge Almoner appointment	21
Lodge Almoner's Records	11-14
Lodge Amalgamation	17-19
Lodge Closure	17-19
Lodge Committee	26
Membership List	12
Multiple Lodge Members (Records)	11
New Members	15-16
Non-attendance of Brethren	22
Other sources of help	17-19
Phone Call Records	14
Provincial Grand Almoner-Role	5-7
Regularity of Contact	13
Renewing Contact	33
Reports in Lodge (by Almoner)	28
Social Events	19
Suggestions of operations from Good Practice	21-33
Visit Records	14
Wishes of Individuals	32

A. Introduction

1. One of the core values of Freemasonry is to look after the health and welfare of poor and distressed Freemasons, their wives, widows and dependants. Individual Lodges, Provinces and the central Masonic charities each has a role to play in facilitating this provision which can only be effectively achieved if contact is maintained with past and present members of the Craft and their dependants. This view was supported by the Report of the Second Committee of Review (Second Bryce Report November 1989) which stated that "Many Lodges cannot afford to help their people financially, but they must all make the effort to ensure that they know who their people are, what their problems are, help them insofar as they can (visiting, transport, moral rather than necessarily financial support) and pass on the details to the Province or relevant Masonic Charity".
2. Whilst it may be possible to re-establish contact with those that have been 'lost', it is more realistic and cost-effective to attempt to minimise any future losses by establishing and maintaining reliable systems in respect of current members. In many Lodges and Provinces this is already achieved successfully with tangible benefits. In other areas current practice does not enable effective communication with the inevitable result that many Freemasons and their dependants are lost disenfranchised or isolated.
3. This paper seeks to draw on best practice and the collective experience of the members of the Working Group to offer a range of practices for the benefit of all Freemasons and their dependants. The members of the Working Group are not seeking to direct or impose their views on others. However, their experience as Provincial Grand Almoners, coupled with the research undertaken in compiling this paper, has identified examples of good practice which are offered for consideration. In conjunction with the Almoner's Handbook and the training manual this document is for each Province to consider and to put in place any of the suggestions that might be deemed to be appropriate according to the local circumstances.
4. Reference is made throughout this paper to 'Dependants'. The working group defined a dependant as any non-mason who may be a potential beneficiary of one or more of the central Masonic Charities.

B. Provincial Grand Almoners

5. Provincial Grand Almoners have a crucial role to play in supporting individual Lodge Almoners through the provision of effective training and development opportunities. The training manual and Almoners Handbook both offer valuable support to the Provincial Grand Almoner in this role. Regular updates to both publications will need to be disseminated via the Provincial Grand Almoner. He should have in place procedures for effective two way communication between him and all his Lodge Almoners. It is recommended that Provincial Grand Almoners are invited to attend and contribute to Provincial Executive/Committee meetings as an effective way of facilitating better communication.
6. Provincial Grand Almoners should ensure that Lodge Almoners are aware of the procedures for members and their dependants who re-locate to outside the Province. Provincial Grand Almoners should seek to maintain a close working relationship with their peers to make sure that members are not lost as they relocate across Provincial borders.

7. Provincial Grand Almoners should seek to identify examples of good practice from within their own area which have the potential to be of benefit to others. The effective sharing of new examples will inform future iterations of this paper.

C. Lodge Almoners

8. Much of the work of the Almoner involves the handling of information about potentially sensitive issues about individual Freemasons and their family members. The Almoner should seek to develop a trusting relationship with members of his Lodge and their dependants and must respect the confidentiality of any information he is given.
9. All communication regarding potential charitable support for an individual should be directed via the Almoner and not the Secretary unless specifically agreed with the potential applicant.
10. At Lodge level the key office for 'Keeping in Touch' is that of Almoner. However, to be effective and to offer support to all on demand is a time consuming requirement. It is, therefore, for consideration that the Almoner might wish to appoint one or more assistants. The appointment of one or more assistants will help with future succession planning.
11. It is inevitable that a significant number of Freemasons will have multiple memberships within the Craft. The management of contact from multiple lodges will require careful consideration according to the specific circumstances.
12. An effective working relationship between the Lodge Almoner and the Lodge Secretary is crucial to ensuring that a full and up to date membership list is maintained. This list should be checked annually and all changes identified.
13. The Almoner will need to supplement the membership information with details of family members. The Almoner, or a member of his team, should make regular personal contact with Lodge members and their dependants. Where possible this contact should involve a personal visit rather than relying on a phone call or letter. A personal visit offers a much better opportunity to identify any real need for help or assistance.
14. An Almoner will need to keep effective records of relevant details relating to the membership and should record all visits made and actions taken as a result. Details should include, where appropriate, notes on the best channel for access to the Brother or his wife/partner in the event of bereavement. In some circumstances the shortest and most obvious approach may not be the most appropriate. Records will ensure that appropriate follow-up has been taken as well as ensuring that an effective handover is possible as and when an individual Almoner stands down.
15. Consideration should be given to new Lodge members, either initiates or joining members, being visited at their home. This provides an opportunity to obtain details about the Masons' family and home circumstances. It may offer an early indication of whether any support may be required. It should also determine the need and frequency of future visits. A home visit also increases the opportunity of ensuring that a wife or partner is aware of the existence of a support system through the Almoner should it be needed. It is recommended that the Almoner should undertake this initial visit in person and should not delegate responsibility to a member of his team.
16. Arrangements should be made to ensure that a new member, either an initiate or joining member, attending his second meeting, in the absence of his proposer and seconder, is hosted by another member of the Lodge. It may be appropriate for the

Lodge Mentor to assume this task but it remains the responsibility of the Almoner to ensure that someone is nominated to this role.

17. As a Lodge closes there is a real danger of losing contact with members, and more particularly dependants. In consultation with the Secretary, the Almoner of a Lodge that has applied to surrender its warrant should identify all current members and widows, partners etc. It is likely that active members of the Lodge will make their own arrangements to transfer, but this should be individually confirmed with each member (active or not). Before passing on any information to another Lodge, individuals should be asked to confirm they are happy for their details to be shared and that the information held on them is correct. A similar approach will be required when Lodges amalgamate to ensure that contact is maintained with everyone.
18. All Lodge widows and dependants should be informed of the impending closure of the Lodge and given the contact details of the Almoner of the Lodge who has assumed responsibility for them. The new Almoner should be given all appropriate details relating to the widows that they are being asked to be responsible for. As with details of the members the Almoner will need to seek permission from the widow or dependant before forwarding details to a third party.
19. The Provincial Grand Almoner has ultimate responsibility for ensuring that the dependants of members from Lodges that surrender their warrants are transferred to the care of another Lodge. He should be the focus for advice and action and his ability to support Lodge Almoners in this respect should be widely promulgated.
20. Opportunity should be taken by Lodge Almoners to keep in contact with other care providers, advice organisations and charities operating in the local area and to make them aware of the support that is available to their 'customers' who have a Masonic connection.

D. Suggestions Based on Evidence of Good Practice

21. Accessibility of the Lodge Almoner: When considering the appointment of a Lodge Almoner, consideration should be given to the need for the individual to live within close proximity of the majority of his members. Extension of this principle to include the selection of assistants should help to ensure appropriate coverage within geographically dispersed Provinces.
22. Non-attendance: The Lodge Secretary should inform the Almoner of any Brother who has missed two consecutive meetings so contact can be made by the Lodge Almoner.
23. Change of membership status: The Almoner should be advised of any application to change membership status (resignation, exclusion, country membership). The Almoner should visit the member before any membership change is effective in order to determine if the change is as a result of medical, financial or other need for which support may be available. It should be remembered that although a Brother may be excluded his dependants may still be eligible for support from one or more of the central Masonic Charities. The Lodge Treasurer should make early contact with the Almoner to advise on any member who is facing exclusion for non-payment of dues as this may be as a result of financial need. It is inevitable that some resignations will occur through dissatisfaction where the Freemason concerned expresses a clear wish for no further contact with his Lodge. Although difficult, it is important that the Almoner seeks to ensure that the Freemason, and his

dependants, understand that support from one or more of the Masonic Charities may still be available in years to come.

24. Death: The Almoner should be advised of the death of any member or dependant so that a visit can be arranged to the widow or partner of the deceased. Previous knowledge of the bereaved will help to determine the most appropriate means of contact. There may be a requirement to identify a third party (family member?) as the best means of contact at what will inevitably be a difficult time. When visiting, the Almoner is encouraged if possible, to be accompanied by his wife/partner or another Brother.
25. Illness/Distress: All Lodge members have a responsibility for advising the Almoner if they are aware of anyone who is ill or in distress. In order to facilitate this it is proposed that the contact details for the Lodge Almoner should be included on the Lodge summons. In most circumstances many well-meaning members of the Lodge will visit but the Almoner is responsible for ensuring that a visit is made by a competent member of his team who can identify if support is needed and available.
26. Lodge Committee: Liaison between the Almoner and Lodge Officers will be easier if the office of Lodge Almoner is included in the membership of the Lodge Committee.
27. Expenses: Given the importance of personal home visits, with the associated travelling costs, Lodge Almoners should be able to submit out-of-pocket expenses incurred in order to fulfil their role.
28. Profile of the Office: Placing the Almoner's Report higher on the agenda for both the Lodge and Committee meetings will enhance the profile of the office. If a report cannot be given in open Lodge consideration can be given to alternatives such as: at the festive board as part of the toast to absent Brethren or by e-mail.
29. Social Events: Many Lodges make effective use of meetings and social events that are not based around Lodge meetings in order to maintain contact with members and dependants. Regardless of the title given to such a format they have an important role to play in maintaining a method of keeping in touch. Such events should be open to Lodge members as well as wives, widows and dependants. Membership lists should be maintained and contact made with those who have not attended for two consecutive meetings.
30. Friendship Clubs: Experience has shown that some 'friendship clubs' struggle to survive in isolation. An overarching structure at Provincial and national level can help to ensure that these clubs remain viable. Funding remains an issue for many and Provinces should be encouraged to provide initial start-up funding for new clubs.
31. Closure Procedures: In order to ensure that all Lodge members and dependants (to include non-active members and widows) are identified for transfer to the care of another Lodge the Provincial Grand Almoner should attend the meeting convened to discuss the closure procedures.
32. Respecting the Individual's Wishes: An annual review of the membership (to include widows and dependants) should prevent further lost members. However if a member or widow wishes to have no further contact from the Lodge this preference should be recorded and respected and a Freemasonry Cares leaflet left.

33. Renewing Contact: The mere fact that members are already lost means that it is likely to be difficult to re-establish contact. The following suggested options should be considered as they offer the potential to identify some who may welcome renewed contact.

33a) Every 'lost' member will have had a proposer and seconder. Existing Lodge members should be invited to identify the whereabouts of everyone that they have brought into the Lodge in order to confirm if they are still active and, if not, if they are known to a Lodge. This review should include identifying the whereabouts of the widows or surviving partners. The same principle can be applied in reverse where all members are invited to identify the whereabouts of their proposer and seconder.

33b) Local publicity of Lodge and Provincial events may attract some previously lost members. The Freemasonry in the Community campaign confirmed the potential of such initiatives.

E. The Way Ahead

34. The main concern for Almoners and all Lodge members should be to ensure that the number of Masons and dependants within this category does not increase. If implemented effectively, the measures proposed above should make this possible. At the same time there is a need to take practical steps to try to recover members and their dependants who have been lost to the system.