

**Annotated Minutes from the
Community Overview & Scrutiny Committee
Meeting held on Thursday 6 June 2002**

The following is an annotated extract of the minutes from the meeting which relate to the Bereavement Services Best Value Review. The boxes in the right-hand margin provide references to the report before you today, showing where changes have been made from the report you commented on on 6 June 2002.

COS.80/02 BEREAVEMENT SERVICES BEST VALUE REVIEW

The Director of Leisure and Community Development submitted a comprehensive report on the Best Value Fundamental Performance Review in respect of Bereavement Services. The report identified the key service issues arising from the Review and included an Action Plan for improvement.

Members gave detailed consideration to the key service issues and Action Plan items arising from the Review. The Corporate Best Value Officer was present at the meeting and submitted her observations on the various issues.

The main points arising were:

(a) Service Standards

On Grounds Maintenance, the Best Value Officer considered that

- (i) there was a need for formal consultation with Carlisle Works to develop working relationships;
- (ii) cost comparisons for the Grounds Maintenance aspect of the service should be undertaken with other Local Authorities. Information could be sought through the Institute of Burial Authorities or the City Council's family group of comparator Authorities;
- (iii) in order to satisfy the competition element of the Review, consideration needed to be given to market testing the Grounds Maintenance aspect of the Bereavement Service.

The Director of Leisure and Community Development indicated that action could be taken to carry out the cost comparisons. He did point out that the standards of maintenance at Carlisle were very high and comparisons with other Authorities' services may not always be on a like for like basis. With regard to the possibility of market testing the Grounds Maintenance element of the Bereavement Service, he considered that this had broader issues for the Local Authority as a whole as to how the City Council wished to market test a range of services in the future.

See section 8.1.1 and Appendix 14

The Best Value Officer indicated that, in the Improvement Plan, there were specific targets to reduce dog fouling in the cemetery and to reduce the volume of plastic flowers in the cemetery by a specific percentage over three years. She considered that measuring performance in these areas would be difficult, and that further thought should be given to how these issues could be best addressed in the Improvement Plan.

(b) Environmental

Proposals to introduce a scheme to recycle wreath components were supported by Members.

(c) Financial

Members noted that, in the light of "The Price is Right," the Council had already adopted a policy of increasing charges for Bereavement Services above the rate of inflation to reach a position over time where the real costs of service provision are more closely matched by the charges levied. It was noted that the Executive had, at their meeting on 27 May 2002, further indicated that options be investigated to bring into balance the income and expenditure of the Bereavement Services over the course of the next few years. Members considered that the timescale for doing this would be significant for people just above benefit levels who would be affected most if charges were increased sharply over the next couple of years.

Members asked the Director of Leisure and Community Development to include further detailed information on the future use of the Capital Fund.

Members also considered that there should be information included on the support and grants available for people on lower incomes in relation to arranging funerals.

See
section
5.3 (no
changes
made)

No
changes
made

(d) Asset Management

With regard to the period of grave rights, it was noted that public opinion was divided on the issue of reducing the term of grave rights from 50 to 25/30 years with a substantial minority (39%) believing that the cost of this should continue to be borne by the Council Tax. Members considered that investigations could be made into a lesser reduction in the term of grave rights and the possibility of differential pricing for various terms. Any re-testing of public opinion on this issue would need to identify those people who did not agree with any reduction in the term of grave rights from 50 years.

With regard to potential income streams, the Director of Leisure and Community Development was asked to investigate whether other Local

Authorities operated any schemes which may be suitable for operation in Carlisle.

See 8.4.4
– work
deferred

(e) Operational

The Best Value Officer indicated that the Carlisle Works Ground Maintenance Team and the Bereavement Services Team operated separately, which meant that there was no joined up service for users. Investigations should be made into formal negotiations with Carlisle Works to improve the service.

See 8.5.1
– work
deferred

With regard to options for service provision, the Best Value Officer indicated that a number of other Local Authorities had chosen to deliver Cemetery and Crematorium services through the private sector. Questionnaires had been sent out to certain Local Authorities which had gone down this route in order that comparison information could be obtained. However, there had been a poor response to the questionnaire.

Whilst Members did not believe that the City Council wished to outsource the Bereavement Services, it was agreed that, for the sake of completeness in the Best Value Review, comparison information should be sought.

See 8.5.2

Members supported proposals to improve publicity for the Bereavement Services.

(f) Funeral Service Provision

Members considered that it was worth exploring the development of a Quality Assurance Scheme to develop a local charter mark on quality criteria for the provision of funeral services. The possibility of transparent pricing and the level of service which could be expected from a Funeral Director was supported. It would be important to ensure that the City Council was seen to be endorsing quality standards and not particular Funeral Directors, and that joining any scheme was voluntary.

See 8.6.1
– work
deferred

The Best Value Officer indicated that there was also an issue in the provision of funerals for people with certain religious beliefs where there was a requirement for burial to take place within 24 hours. If this meant that a weekend service was required then the costs charged by the City Council were greater than for a weekday service. The Director of Leisure and Community Development undertook to investigate how other Local Authorities approached this issue.

See 8.6.3
– no
change of
policy

It was agreed that detailed information on arranging funeral services should be distributed to Advice Agencies and Solicitors' offices.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted and the Director of Leisure and Community Development be requested to consider the issues raised above, and submit a final draft report on the Bereavement Services Best Value Review to a future meeting of this Committee.

EXTRACT FROM REPORT BY THE OFFICE OF FAIR TRADING

- 4.5 Our survey of the trade found that local directories are a good source of information. Many funeral directors advertise and virtually all will have entries in local directories. After family and friends, directories were cited in our survey more often than any other sources as places where information was either used or available, ahead of hospitals, doctors and citizens advice bureaux. Given directories such as Thomson Local and Yellow Pages already carry general consumer advice, **the Office recommends that local directories build on this by publishing succinct guidance on making funeral arrangements, in a prominent place within the listings.** This will ensure that information is available before the funeral firm is contacted. The Office has already entered into discussions with these organisations.

The role of local authorities and NHS trusts

- 4.6 Current literature on funerals provides detailed advice on legal requirements and on dealing with grief, but tends to lack advice on the practicalities of arranging a funeral such as selecting a funeral director and the role of the trade associations. This was a key concern of many stakeholders who wanted a local information source.
- 4.7 On a practical level, local authorities and NHS trusts seem best placed to provide independent information, being in an ideal position to reach the bereaved immediately following a death. The level and quality of information provided by individual local authorities varies enormously, ranging from in-depth advice leaflets covering all aspects of death and funerals, including prices, to no advice at all. Information on complaints procedures tends to focus on local authority procedures, rather than trade association complaint systems. Some authorities are willing to give oral advice, but others rely on funeral directors.
- 4.8 Local authority cemeteries and crematoria generally produce information on their facilities, with funeral directors often providing the primary means of circulation of such information. Where information on these facilities is produced, we encourage funeral directors to pass it on, not least because all of the cemeteries and crematoria consulted were more than willing to provide advice and assistance when requested.
- 4.9 The Office was impressed with a leaflet produced by the London Borough of Croydon Trading Standards, which offers clear concise advice about arranging a funeral, including details of the trade associations and the Funerals Ombudsman Scheme. It also provides information on local funeral directors in the area.

- 4.10 We found that the literature supplied by NHS trusts is generally very good, typically including contact details of organisations that provide support for the bereaved, details of local funeral firms, the legal procedures surrounding death, and advice on coping with grief. As with material from local authorities, it tends not to include advice on the selection of a funeral director and arranging the funeral. Few mentioned the trade associations or explained that a funeral could be conducted without a funeral director, although in many cases trusts do advise people to phone for quotes and to shop around.
- 4.11 Given that many local authorities and NHS trusts already produce literature, the Office believes that relatively small changes are required to achieve a consistent approach to funeral advice. In partnership with the National Funerals College (NFC), and inspired by the work done by the London Borough of Croydon Trading Standards, the Office has prepared a template, a copy of which can be found at annexe F of this report and also on the OFT's website at www.oft.gov.uk. **We recommend that local authorities and NHS trusts employ the template in preparing their own leaflets, or incorporate it into the literature already produced by them. We also recommend that an insert to accompany this leaflet is produced which sets out local information such as details of funeral directors, crematoria and cemeteries with brief details on the services/prices available.** The Croydon leaflet referred to above contains an insert along these lines. The template is also available to other organisations that publish consumer literature on funerals. Future amendments will be reflected on the OFT website.
- 4.12 **It is also recommended that the literature produced by local authorities and NHS trusts, as well as that produced by cemeteries and crematoria, is made more widely available in places where those arranging funerals are likely to visit or where deaths are likely to occur.** The most obvious place would be the Registrar's Office, as, in most circumstances, deaths have to be registered within five days, in person, by someone who knew the deceased. Residential homes for the elderly, hospitals and GP's surgeries could also be encouraged to provide information. While websites are growing in popularity, the bereaved are more in need of human contact. The internet may, nevertheless, serve to raise awareness.

Local authority promoted funerals and accreditation schemes

- 4.13 In addition to producing information on funerals, some local authorities actively seek to provide further assistance for local residents, by operating funeral director accreditation schemes and/or promoting fixed price funeral packages.

- 4.14 Accreditation schemes are fairly common in respect of memorial masons, but less so for funeral directors. A few local authorities promote such schemes as a service in their area. In operating these schemes the local authority usually requires the funeral director to meet certain standards, often those laid down by one of the industry codes of practice. In return the local authority publishes an 'approved list' of firms and distributes the list throughout council offices. There is no active monitoring of the firms on the list; rather the local authority relies on enforcement of codes and complaints they receive about the business.
- 4.15 A smaller number of local authorities such as Crewe and Nantwich, Hounslow and Cardiff, promote fixed price funeral packages, or 'community funerals' to residents in the local area. The operation of these schemes varies slightly between authorities. The most common approach is for the local authority to award the provision of the local funeral package to one funeral firm, by means of competitive tender. The council sets out the services to be provided and a fixed price is agreed. The funeral is given a name by which it can be easily recognised and the local authority takes steps to publicise its availability.
- 4.16 Similar schemes operate whereby all local funeral directors are open to join, provided they can supply the specified service at the agreed price. Monitoring of these schemes varies from authority to authority, with some local authorities carrying out spot checks and visiting premises and others relying solely on complaints to identify problems.
- 4.17 If they are actively monitored, these schemes provide a useful service, particularly to customers who want a low cost funeral with an acceptable quality of service.

Independent funeral adviser

- 4.18 People welcome human support and compassion at the time of bereavement. Recognising this need the NFC recommends that a funeral adviser is appointed in institutions in which deaths occur, such as hospitals, hospices, nursing and residential homes. Their role would be to provide independent advice and practical help to those who need it. We await the outcome of the NFC's pilot study, but, provided the adviser's independence could be assured and they are subject to minimum training standards, we support this suggestion as a practical step forward and a further means of addressing the public's disinclination to seek information. The Office does not believe that there would be a major cost burden involved, as the funeral adviser could simply be an existing member of staff or volunteer. The funeral adviser should make available the information recommended earlier in this chapter.

F TEMPLATE

Arranging a funeral and choosing a funeral director

This leaflet offers information about arranging a funeral. It explains:

- Your rights and options.
- The funeral director's role.
- What a simple funeral might include.
- Funeral costs and sources of help.
- How to complain if you are not satisfied with the services provided.

Rights and options

The main requirements in England and Wales are that the death is certified by a doctor or coroner, registered with a Registrar of Births, Marriages and Deaths, and the body either buried or cremated.

- You do not have to have a funeral ceremony.
- You do not have to use a religious minister.
- You do not have to use a funeral director.
- A ceremony does not have to take place in a crematorium or place of worship.

There are more options concerning the content of a funeral ceremony and its duration than many people realise.

Woodland burial and other green options are increasingly available.

The majority of people choose to make their arrangements through a funeral director. But some people see 'do-it-yourself' funerals as more personal and less expensive. If this approach appeals, and you have time to research and prepare, enquire at the cemeteries and crematorium department of your local authority for guidance. You could also get information from the Natural Death Centre. Some funeral directors are willing to help with such funerals.

Choosing a funeral director

Funeral directors will manage funeral arrangements and give advice and support.

Check if the funeral director you choose belongs to a trade association. This requires them to provide full information about their services and prices.

These factors may influence your choice:

- Location of the firm's premises.
- Range of services provided.
- The way you are treated by the staff.
- Cost.
- Recommendation of those who have used the service.
- Ownership (small family business or large firm).

A simple funeral

Most people would probably require the funeral director to provide the following services as a minimum:

- Make all the necessary arrangements.
- Provide appropriate staff.
- Provide a suitable coffin.
- Transfer the deceased from the place of death to the funeral director's premises.
- Care for the deceased prior to the funeral.
- Provide a hearse to the nearest cemetery or crematorium.
- Arrange for burial or cremation as appropriate.

Embalming, viewing of the deceased, or providing a limousine for mourners are optional extras.

Funeral costs

Costs for the same services may vary considerably from one funeral director to another. You may wish to get more than one quote to compare costs.

'Disbursements' are fees paid to others, eg for crematorium, minister, doctors' certificates, newspaper announcements, flowers etc.

Ask the funeral director for a written quotation detailing all these fees.

- Funeral payments are normally recoverable from the deceased's estate.
- Remember the cheapest service is not necessarily the best value.

Financial help

If you arrange a funeral you are responsible for paying the bill, so check where the money will come from first.

If you are finding it difficult to pay for a funeral that you have to arrange, you may be able to get a Social Fund Funeral Payment providing you or your partner receive one of the following:

- Income support.
- Housing benefit.
- Council tax benefit.
- Job seeker's allowance (income based).
- Disabled person's tax credit.
- Working family's tax credit.

Complaints

Most funerals are conducted well. But if you have a justified complaint, you should contact your funeral director.

If you are not satisfied with the response, you can complain to whichever of the three trade associations listed below your funeral director belongs to:

- The National Association of Funeral Directors (NAFD).
- The National Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors (SAIF).
- Funeral Standards Council (FSC).

The Funeral Ombudsman Scheme (FOS) deals with complaints that cannot be resolved at trade association level. It does not deal with complaints relating to members of nafd, which has its own independent client redress scheme.

Advice may also be obtained from your local trading standards department.

Further information

National Association of Funeral Directors
618 Warwick Road
Solihull
West Midlands B91 1AA
Tel 0121 711 1343
www.nafd.org.uk

The National Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors
3 Bullfields
Sawbridgeworth
Hertfordshire CM21 9DB
Tel 01279 726777
www.saif.org.uk

Funeral Standards Council
30 North Road
Cardiff CF1 3DY
Tel 029 2038 2046
www.funeral-standards-council.co.uk

Funeral Ombudsman Scheme
26-28 Bedford Row
London WC1R 4HE
Tel 020 7430 1112
www.funeralombudsman.org.uk

Natural Death Centre
20 Heber Road
London NW2 6AA
Tel 020 8203 2853
www.naturaldeath.org.uk

National Funerals College
3 Priory Road
Bristol BS8 1TX
Tel 0117 954 5558

A Consumer's Guide to Funerals
www.oft.gov.uk

What to do after a death
Free booklet (D49) from Benefits Agency

This leaflet was inspired by an initiative from Croydon Council Trading Standards, and was compiled by the National Funerals College, a charity promoting better funeral practice, in partnership with the Office of Fair Trading.

Copying and distribution of this leaflet is permitted. To the best of our knowledge information was accurate at 27/06/01.

Updates available from: www.oft.gov.uk and www.helpthehospices.org.uk