

CHILTERN CREMATORIUM JOINT COMMITTEE

MEETING 24TH FEBRUARY 2010

OPEN REPORT OF THE CLERK TO THE JOINT COMMITTEE AND THE SUPERINTENDENT

3. COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS 2009

Contact Officer: Charles Howlett (01494) 724263

3.1 Service provision questionnaires are sent to the applicant for cremation for all cremations carried out. The majority of compliments, comments and complaints received come from this source. In 2009 from the 3,000 questionnaires sent out 244 were returned from people who were satisfied (some with added compliments) and 23 from people who were mostly satisfied but including comments about matters they thought could be improved. A brief summary of the responses to the questionnaires are given in *Appendix 3*. During the year 12 complaints were also received.

Changes proposed/made as result of comments

3.2 During 2010 the Crematorium website is being reviewed and updated.

3.3 In conjunction with the upgrade of the Crematorium website, the methods of applying and paying for services is being reviewed, including the option of enabling memorial applications and payments to be made on line.

3.4 A priority exercise has been carried out resulting in more letters being sent by first class post than was previously the case.

Actions taken in response to complaints

3.5 The following complaints were received:-

Complaint 1: A funeral director wrote complaining that the music that had been programmed to be played on the Wesley Music System was not what he had requested. In the same letter he also complained that in a case where the family opted to view the cremation certificates (a new provision introduced in the Cremation Regulations 2008) he wasn't notified of the outcome of the inspection.

Response: A letter of response was sent which included an apology for any mistake attributable to the Crematorium. However, concerning the incorrect music, it was pointed out that our procedure of requiring the chapel attendant to liaise with the funeral director/person taking the service to check the music selection before each funeral meant that in the event the correct music was played. Concerning the cremation certificates, it is not the Crematorium's policy to advise each funeral director when the medical referee has authorised cremation to go ahead, but only to contact them in the event that there is a problem (which is fortunately a relatively infrequent occurrence).

Complaint 2: A mourner wrote complaining that she and her family felt intimidated by one of the chapel attendants who wanted them to sit in a different place in the chapel to the seats they had chosen.

Response: Our chapel attendants will normally allow people to sit wherever they like and will only ever ask people to sit in a particular place if directed to do so by the funeral director and/or person taking the service. Some funeral directors/officiants are very particular about this, which puts the chapel attendant under pressure when mourners do not cooperate. The complainer was telephoned by the Superintendent to apologise for the incident and also to give an explanation. The complainer responded by saying it was only a momentary thing which had no lasting affect, but she said Crematorium staff should always be aware that mourners can be super-sensitive and pick up on the slightest thing.

Complaint 3: A widower wrote complaining about issues concerning music at his wife's funeral service (not played in accordance with his wishes) and poor communications at the Crematorium regarding the arrangements for the scattering of her ashes.

Response: The Superintendent investigated the issues raised by the complainer and discovered that there had been mistakes on the part of the Crematorium. Although there were some mitigating circumstances, undoubtedly the level of service the family received was below standard. The Superintendent apologised by telephone and a letter and the matter was resolved amicably.

Complaint 4: A retired minister wrote to say he had difficulty hearing what was being said at his wife's funeral in the Milton chapel.

Response: Problems with the public address system in Milton chapel have been ongoing ever since it opened in 2005. Attempts to rectify the situation have never been fully successful, and each year a number of complaints have been received. In view of the very good quality equipment which was installed this is particularly frustrating. A different company to the original installers were engaged during 2009 to investigate the problems and recommended, amongst other things, that the loudspeakers should be moved to a different position. This work is scheduled to be carried out in March 2010.

Complaint 5: A mourner wrote in complaining that loud laughter could be heard during her mother's funeral service from mourners in the floral tribute court from the previous funeral. She also complained that the funeral director's limousine she was travelling in was delayed in leaving after the service because of badly parked cars on the pavement beside the down drive.

Response: Unfortunately both of these incidents arose from inconsiderate behaviour by the public over which the Crematorium has little, if any, control. The Superintendent actually witnessed the car parking incident which was some of the worst he has seen at the Crematorium; anybody could see they were blocking the road, including the drivers concerned! A letter was sent to the complainer saying we were sorry that due to these acts of selfishness her mother's funeral did not go as smoothly as we would have liked.

Complaint 6: A mourner wrote complaining about the length of time after the service had ended before the flowers from the top of the coffin appeared in the floral tribute court and that the tribute card was missing from it.

Response: The Superintendent spoke to the complainer by telephone explaining the difficulties in getting flowers from the chapel when a large number of mourners are present. In fact in this case a very large number of mourners were in attendance and the lady accepted the point. With regard the tribute card, it transpired that in fact she had not seen a card with the flowers at any time and it seems likely that it was never placed with them – the responsibility of either the florist or funeral director.

Complaint 7: A person who paid for commemoration using an old price list complained about being asked for the additional amount.

Response: In a letter of explanation it was pointed out that although some leeway is given for a few months after the prices change there has to be a cut off point. Although the amount may be relatively small (£1.84 in this case), around seven hundred memorial transactions take place each year and if a lot of these were purchased at old prices the total difference would add up to a significant sum.

Complaint 8: An answer in a completed service provision questionnaire indicated that a gardener had been disrespectful by walking past the chapel window whistling whilst the service was taking place.

Response: No member of staff at the Crematorium would behave in this way.

Complaint 9: A mourner wrote with a two part complaint; firstly that all the mourners had been made to sit on one side of the chapel and secondly that the words of the hymn printed in the service sheet didn't match those played on the Wesley Music System.

Response: The first part of the complaint was straightforward to explain – the minister taking the funeral service in question always insists that one side of the chapel is filled up first before anyone is allowed to sit on the other side. Other than helping to carry out his instructions the chapel attendants are not involved (and, incidentally, not in agreement with the idea). The second part of the complaint was more involved. When funeral directors produce service sheets on behalf of families they are aware of the nuances of the Wesley system and ensure this is reflected in the printing, but in this case the family produced the sheet themselves without reference to the funeral director. In addition, the first time our chapel attendant saw the service sheet was when it was produced by the family as they arrived for the service, leaving no time for the words to be checked – something the attendants would normally do. When hymns were first put on the Wesley system it was only ever envisaged they would be used as a 'stand-by', or in the case of the choir-assisted versions when only a few mourners are present. The Crematorium continues to recommend that in the normal course of events singing accompanied by a live organist is always preferable to recorded music.

The Superintendent had a telephone conversation with the person concerned when he explained the circumstances and apologised for any additional distress the incidents caused.

Complaint 10: A complaint was received that the hearing loop in the Milton chapel was not working and also that people with normal hearing couldn't hear properly.

Response: The Superintendent was already aware of the situation regarding the hearing loop because the amplifier had 'blown up' and was away for repair. With regard to the problem with the public address system, see the response to complaint 4.

A letter of apology was sent.

Complaint 11: A further complaint was received about the public address system in the Milton chapel.

Response: See response to complaint 4.

Complaint 12: A visitor came into the office to say a small memorial cross (Remembrance Day wooden cross with a central red poppy) which he had placed a few days before on a commemorative rose bed had been removed before 11th November.

Response: As a matter of policy the grounds maintenance staff regularly remove memorabilia paraphernalia from the grounds and place it on the paved area outside the chapel of remembrance. However the Superintendent agreed that it was insensitive to remove Remembrance Crosses in this way until after Armistice Day and in future years they will be left.

3.6 This item is included for information.

Background Papers: None