

## CHILTERNS CREMATORIUM JOINT COMMITTEE

MEETING 27<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2011

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

#### COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS 2010

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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 2010 from the 3,050 questionnaires sent out 192 were returned from people who were satisfied (some with added compliments) and 27 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 5.3*. During the year 10 complaints were received (compared to 12 the previous year).

#### **Changes proposed/made as result of comments**

3.2 During 2010 the position of the loudspeakers in the Milton chapel was changed which improved the effectiveness of the public address system; previously complaints were being received that the person taking the service could not be heard.

3.3 Funeral directors reminded of the 'temporary' nature of the container provided by the Crematorium for cremation ashes and asked to describe it to members of the public who chose to collect ashes from the Crematorium office themselves so they know what to expect.

3.4 Effectiveness of the hard of hearing loop in the Milton chapel to be reviewed in conjunction with the replacement of the floor in 2011.

#### **Actions taken in response to complaints**

3.5 The following complaints were received:-

*Complaint 1:* An applicant complained that we had removed the stone memorial plaque for her husband from the garden of remembrance even though she had renewed the lease, and also that she was unhappy with remedial work which had been carried out to the gilding of the lettering on two occasions but was still not satisfactory.

*Response:* Investigations showed that the plaque had been removed by mistake. The Superintendent telephoned the applicant to apologise and also discuss the unsatisfactory remedial work which the mason advised was partly due to the type of stone (red granite) which does not take gilding very well. A letter was also sent. The applicant accepted the suggestion to change the infill colour to silver (at cost price)

and an extension of the lease period by two years to compensate for the problems experienced.

*Complaint 2:* An applicant complained about the length of time the memorial plaque she had ordered for her husband was taking to be installed. The clerical assistant she spoke to apologised and was honest enough to say she had found the application form filed without an order having been raised, but understandably this made matters worse.

*Response:* The Superintendent telephoned and wrote to the widow apologising for the error. A check was made to make sure no other forms had been incorrectly filed – three were found – and clerical assistants were reminded of the importance of remaining vigilant to try to prevent ‘avoidable’ errors of this nature occurring.

*Complaint 3:* A widow returned a service provision questionnaire highlighting a number of different aspects of her husband’s funeral service which she was dissatisfied about.

*Response:* Two of the issues were the responsibility of her funeral director, and another appeared to be because she wasn’t aware that there is a room where mourners can shelter from cold weather whilst waiting for a funeral. The other comment was about not being able to hear properly in the Milton chapel, something we were already aware of and which has since been rectified. The Superintendent sent a letter of explanation and apology and also thanked the lady for drawing the matters to his attention.

*Complaint 4:* An email was received from a lady who complained that her mother’s middle names had been included on the notice of services fixed outside the chapel door, even though she had asked the funeral director to make sure they were not used because her mother ‘hated’ them.

*Response:* We had not been informed specifically that the middle names should not be used on any ‘public’ notices (they have to appear in the statutory register of cremations) although the funeral director had written on a form that the deceased was known as ‘Joan’ and we should have picked up on this and enquired further. The Superintendent sent an email response with an explanation and apology.

*Complaint 5:* A niece returned a service provision questionnaire following her aunt’s funeral complaining that she had requested Louis Armstrong singing all five verses of ‘When the Saints Go Marching In’ but in the event he only sang the first verse.

*Response:* This appeared to be down to a misunderstanding between ourselves and the funeral director. In the version we have on the Wesley System, Louis Armstrong only sings the first verse and we didn’t realise the family wanted vocals for all five verses (if such a version is actually available). The Superintendent sent a letter of explanation and apology.

*Complaint 6:* A person whose father had been cremated at the Crematorium in December 2004, and his ashes scattered in the garden of remembrance in April 2006, telephoned to complain that we had scattered their father’s ashes without their knowledge or authority.

*Response:* Normally we will not retain ashes for longer than three months after a cremation and in theory a fee is chargeable after the first month. In practice,

depending on the circumstances, discretion is used about when the charge is applied and in some cases to retain ashes for longer than three months.

In this case there was a definite personal mitigating circumstance which was why the ashes were retained at the Crematorium for so long without a charge being made. The case was made more difficult because apart from a letter received within a month of the funeral taking place, no other communication was received from the person, not even in response to letters sent by us. Ultimately, a notification letter of intent to scatter the ashes was sent by recorded delivery but again was not responded to and so finally we scattered the ashes in the garden of remembrance.

This was a very sensitive case which the Superintendent resolved following lengthy telephone discussions with the person concerned. This culminated in the person visiting the Crematorium and going out with the Superintendent into the part of the garden of remembrance where the ashes were scattered and participating in an impromptu memorial service.

*Complaint 7:* A person who came to the office with his mother to collect his father's ashes wrote a long letter of complaint about the tardy way he perceived they had been received and dealt with in the office, and about the fact that when they got home they found the ashes were contained in a paper bag within a cardboard container.

*Response:* The Superintendent was largely responsible for this complaint as it was he who was waylaying the clerical assistant in a discussion about funeral papers when the family came into the office, and it was also he who had recently changed the plastic ashes container to a cardboard alternative (mainly for environmental reasons) without advising funeral directors in advance.

As far as the container is concerned, complaints had previously been received about the plastic version which preceded the cardboard. The container is included in the fee for a cremation and is provided by the Crematorium as a 'temporary' receptacle for transporting ashes from one place to another (and is described as such in the price list).

The Superintendent telephoned and also wrote to the complainer and apologised. The complainer accepted the apology. He said as far as the container was concerned that he felt the situation could have been avoided if he had known about it before he came to collect the ashes. He also said, once he understood the reasons, that he thought the cardboard container was the better option.

Following this complaint the Superintendent wrote to all local funeral directors to advise them of the change of container. He also took the opportunity to remind them that it is only provided as a 'temporary' container. Families seldom choose to collect ashes from the Crematorium themselves (usually delegating the task to their funeral director) and when they do the funeral director often provides a more 'permanent' container for them. However, in cases when families opt for the Crematorium's container the Superintendent requested that it would be helpful if this was described to them so they knew what to expect.

*Complaint 8:* A mourner who is hard of hearing wrote saying he had difficulty hearing a funeral service in the Milton chapel and enquired if we had a hearing loop and if so was it working? The gentleman indicated he was sitting on the extreme left hand side of the chapel in the back row.

*Response:* We test the loop systems regularly. After receiving the complaint we specifically tested in the location indicated and found it was working although the signal was not as strong as elsewhere in the chapel. The loop is buried under the floor

and the intention is to further investigate its effectiveness when the floor is relayed which may also entail having to install a new loop. The Superintendent wrote a response along these lines.

*Complaint 9:* An applicant for a cremation returned a service provision questionnaire complaining specifically that his instructions regarding the music for the funeral service were not carried out and about the conduct of the service generally.

*Response:* Some of the problems were subjective – the chapel attendant felt the music volume was at the right level but the complainer felt it was too quiet. The priest who was taking the service went ‘off cue’ and started chanting at a critical moment when another piece of music was going to be listened to so the music had to be switched off. The chapel attendant decided to try to play it when the priest finished chanting, but before she could do so he moved on to the next part of the service. As the Superintendent wrote in his letter of apology, it was “one of those unfortunate occasions where, despite best intentions, the communication/coordination between the people involved didn’t work as it should.”

*Complaint 10:* An applicant requested the metals remaining following the cremation were returned to her but unfortunately this request wasn’t noticed on the application forms and so wasn’t carried out. Metals are only requested once or twice a year.

*Response:* As soon as the error came to light the Superintendent contacted the applicant for the cremation and advised that a mistake had been made. In the event, in the ensuing discussion the applicant said she didn’t want the metals but had made the enquiry to the funeral director because a member of the family was concerned about the ultimate destination of the deceased’s gold wedding ring which was left on the body. The Superintendent explained that the ring would be destroyed by the cremation process and the majority of any remaining ‘granules’ mixed with the cremation ashes. The applicant was entirely satisfied once this was explained. A letter of explanation and apology was sent.

3.6 This item is included for information.

***Background Papers:*** None