

CHILTERN'S CREMATORIUM JOINT COMMITTEE

MEETING 24TH JANUARY 2012

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

5.3. COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS 2011

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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 2011 from the 3,050 questionnaires sent out 245 were returned from people who were satisfied (some with added compliments) and 25 from people who were mostly satisfied but including comments about matters they thought could be improved. During the year 21 substantial complaints were received (compared to 10 the previous year). 'Substantial' is defined as either having been submitted in writing or, if verbal, considered being of sufficient gravity to warrant a reply from the Superintendent.

Changes proposed/made as result of comments

3.2 Any 'used' temporary cardboard ashes containers finding their way back into the Crematorium are destroyed immediately after the ashes have been taken out of them (to prevent them being used again with old labels left on), and extra checks are made before ashes are released from the office.

3.3 An additional checking procedure has been introduced before the ashes and commemoration information letters are printed to try to ensure they are correctly addressed.

3.4 A notice has been placed on the lecterns in both chapels reminding people taking the service of the need to project their voice and speak clearly, even in the Milton chapel where there is assistance from a public address system.

3.5 An email circulation has been sent to all funeral directors reminding them of the importance of observing the traffic light system, which indicates whether or not a funeral chapel is free, and explaining that if they do decide to pull up to the chapel entrance early to be aware of the need to keep noise levels down e.g. revving engines, banging car doors, loud talking, etc, to avoid disturbing a funeral service still in progress.

3.6 A recommendation has been made to the Joint Committee to allow extra funeral service time to be booked.

Actions taken in response to substantial complaints

3.7 The following substantial complaints were received:-

Complaint 1: A person telephoned and complained that when she was visiting the Garden of Remembrance at the weekend there were dogs running around making a 'mess.'

Response: There is a notice at the gates which still says that only guide dogs are allowed, although in reality we have relaxed this rule. We explained that staff politely request that dogs are put on a lead when they are seen not to be, but at weekends in particular there are very few staff around and we have to rely on the public to cooperate.

Complaint 2: An applicant returned the service provision questionnaire commenting that she didn't get the version of the music she requested, played at the time she wanted it, and that the coffin wasn't carried into the chapel but was already in position on the catafalque when she arrived. She did however go on to write that the service went very well and was "appreciated by all."

Response: The coffin wasn't carried in because the family had arranged with the funeral director for it to be brought to the Crematorium and placed in position in advance of the service. The funeral director also said that the person seemed very upset/confused when the funeral arrangements were being made and, with this in mind and in view of her comments that overall she was very satisfied with the proceedings, the Superintendent decided it was probably better not to respond.

Complaint 3: A person wrote commenting that he had attended a number of funeral services over the last few months, in both chapels, and had difficulty in hearing. He suggested a notice be put on the lecterns reminding those taking the service of the need to project their voice. He also commented that he thought this was becoming more of a problem with family members giving a eulogy who were unused to and nervous about public speaking, and also emotional.

Response: The Superintendent took the gentleman up on his suggestion of a notice on the lecterns and wrote to tell him so, also explaining that both chapels have hard of hearing loops and that there is also a public address system in the Milton chapel, but not in the Hampden. He has heard back from the gentleman after he attended another funeral to say he was able to hear.

Complaint 4: A widow wrote complaining that the start of her husband's service was delayed because the funeral before was overrunning, and she thought the 45 minute time slots were not long enough.

Response: The Superintendent wrote and apologised, explaining that overrunning services are often something over which we have little control, and that because the Crematorium currently carries out a relatively large number of funerals extending the time to an hour was unfortunately not an option.

Complaint 5: An applicant wrote to say he was 99% satisfied with our services except for the 'grumpy' attitude of the chapel attendant when an

admittedly last minute request was made to use an electrical socket to enable a piano keyboard to be played.

Response: The Superintendent wrote and apologised and explained that the chapel attendant said that at first he misunderstood and thought he was being asked for the audio visual equipment, which needs time to set up (and for which a charge is made), but admitted this didn't excuse his grumpy response.

Complaint 6: A person wrote to complain that the re-gilding on her stone memorial was not satisfactory, and that her pot of pansies had been 'thrown away' which she later retrieved from the bin.

Response: The Superintendent agreed that the re-gilding was unsatisfactory and arranged for it to be done again. The Superintendent also apologised about the plant pot, but explained that from time to time the grounds maintenance staff clear around the stone memorials, including throwing away any plants which are dead. However, any pots or other paraphernalia removed is placed on a hard standing beside the tap and bin area from where it can be retrieved by the owners if required.

Complaint 7: An applicant complained that there should be better facilities for wheelchairs; in particular to prevent them having to be stuck out in the aisle during a service. More space was also needed to be able to move around in the floral tribute area. The funeral service in question took place in the Hampden chapel.

Response: The Superintendent made enquiries of both the chapel attendant and the funeral director, but neither was able to recall any particular problem. The Superintendent wrote an apology, explaining that some of the pews had been specifically replaced with chairs when the chapel was refurbished in 2006 so that they could be put aside to enable a wheelchair to be accommodated, and he was sorry this hadn't happened on this occasion. He also explained that the floral tribute area is normally more than big enough, but regrettably a degree of overcrowding can occur when a very large number of people attend.

Complaint 8: A person telephoned to complain that other family members were accusing him of moving paraphernalia from a stone memorial, which he hadn't done!

Response: The Superintendent explained that the grounds maintenance staff do clear around the stone memorials from time to time (see complaint 6 above), and wrote to all members of the family concerned explaining this procedure and apologising if any misunderstandings had arisen as a result.

Complaint 9: An applicant complained that, in response to an inquiry, Crematorium office staff had advised that it was alright for children and babies to be brought to a funeral service, instead of referring the inquiry to the main family. Other members of the family had decided not to bring their children which caused upset, and the baby cried in the service.

Response: The Superintendent wrote and apologised if the Crematorium had unintentionally caused a problem, but explained that we were simply

clarifying the position that as far as we are concerned children of any age can attend a funeral.

Complaint 10: A family ordered a web-cast of a funeral service but at the critical moment the equipment didn't work! Subsequently it transpired that the camera was faulty (and was later replaced under warranty).

Response: A letter of apology was sent and a donation of £100 to the family's chosen charity, the Betty Callaway Fund for Young Ice Dancers.

Complaint 11: A person complained by email about the shock she and other relatives had felt on opening our cardboard ashes container and finding the ashes contained inside in a paper bag secured with sticky tape. Was this "common procedure"?

Response: The Superintendent apologised for any distress caused but explained this container, which we describe quite openly as our 'temporary ashes container', is commonly used to transport ashes away from the Crematorium. Often when ashes are handed to families the funeral director will have transferred them into a 'proper' urn, but if still in our temporary container then we are heavily reliant on funeral directors describing how the ashes are contained within it.

Complaint 12: This was potentially the most serious complaint of the year in terms of the gravity of the Crematorium's error. Ashes were released to a funeral director in one of our temporary containers, who subsequently released it to the family, labelled with the correct name but also with another name label with a different name. The family did not discover this until they had travelled 400 miles to Scotland to disperse the ashes.

Response: On investigating this incident the Superintendent quickly discovered that one of the crematorium attendants had picked up the lid of a used box left lying on a worktop in the ashes room and very carelessly, without noticing the original label on one end, stuck a new label on the other end. Unfortunately no one subsequently noticed this in the Crematorium office or at the funeral directors.

Fortunately the Superintendent was able to discover a sequence of events which proved conclusively that there was absolutely no question the family had taken anything other than the correct ashes to Scotland. A full report was sent to the family, with profuse apologies, which they accepted.

Obviously with a mistake of this calibre we reviewed our procedures and it was agreed that in future any boxes coming back into the Crematorium will be destroyed as soon as the ashes are taken out of them, and extra checks are made before ashes are released from the office.

Complaint 13: A person on the waiting list for commemorative benches complained that it was taking a long time to work through the list and she had noticed there was a particular space that hadn't had a bench on it for several months.

Response: The Superintendent wrote a letter of apology and explained that due to the long term sickness absence of a key member of the office staff this matter could not be attended to for the time being.

Complaint 14: An applicant complained that he had been advised by people at the back of the (Hampden) chapel that they couldn't hear properly, and also that the quality of the sound reproduction for the music was poor "i.e. base not adjusted."

Response: The Superintendent wrote apologising for the incident, explaining that there isn't a public address system in the Hampden chapel and there is a notice on the lectern advising this. Regarding the music, ironically the system had been renewed just the day before (replacing a 20 years old system) and although the chapel attendant was unable to recall a problem he suggested maybe he hadn't quite got used to the new settings.

Complaint 15: An applicant complained that some people had been unable to hear because the hard of hearing loop had not been switched on.

Response: The Superintendent wrote and apologised. The chapel attendant was aware of his error and had apologised at the time (hence the reason why the person knew).

Complaint 16: A funeral director complained about another funeral director deliberately blocking the entrance to the chapel by leaving his hearse parked under the porte cochere whilst the service he was conducting was taking place in the chapel, and his "totally unprofessional" response when asked to move it.

Response: This is a long running saga which goes back before the Milton chapel was built in 2005, when funeral directors who ignored the traffic light system and pulled up in front of the chapel before the previous funeral had finished could potentially cause a disturbance. The design of the Milton chapel entrance and the re-design of the Hampden chapel entrance has all but eliminated the chance of a disturbance occurring, but the old feuds simmer on. The Superintendent wrote a conciliatory but firm letter to the offending funeral director advising that if one of his funeral services was genuinely disturbed by a cortege pulling up prematurely then he would take the matter up with the funeral director concerned, but in the meantime his practice of taking unilateral action and using his hearse as a blocking mechanism must stop.

Complaint 17: A person telephoned to complain that, despite previous promises not to do so in future, "once again" we had removed his British Legion wooden remembrance cross from the rose bed before Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday.

Response: Inquiries revealed that the Ground's Supervisor had actually reminded his staff three weeks earlier not to move the crosses and the gentleman was advised that, although we were sorry his cross had been moved, this time we were not responsible.

Complaint 18: An applicant emailed complaining that at the committal the curtains weren't closed as she had expected, and that the music she had requested at the end of the service was delayed and didn't start playing until after she had left the chapel.

Response: The Superintendent's inquiries revealed that the decision not to close the committal curtains had been taken unilaterally by the minister.

Regarding the music, although none of the 'officials' involved could remember it being delayed, the only possible explanation was that the funeral director had shown the family out relatively quickly at the end of the service, which the lady accepted in her response to the Superintendent's apology/explanation.

Complaint 19: A person complained that having received exemplary service on the day of the funeral service, when she returned the next day to scatter her father's ashes she felt we were unprepared for her arrival and found the attitude of the members of staff "completely inappropriate".

Response: The Superintendent telephoned the complainer to discuss what had happened. In essence it appeared largely to be a wrong judgement call on the part of the staff who, the lady felt, had been too 'talkative' in their efforts to ease the tension of the occasion, when she would have preferred more solemnity. The Superintendent apologised, and gave this feedback to the staff concerned.

Complaint 20: A person complained about the way she and her companions had been spoken to by the chapel attendant when they wished to enter the chapel before the start of a funeral service.

Response: The chapel attendants often have to politely advise mourners who drift into the chapel between services that it is traditional for everyone to wait until the appointed time and then follow in behind the coffin. In any event there are good reasons why it is better if mourners are not in the chapel at this point when they could witness clearing up tasks after the previous funeral and/or preparations for the next. In the case in question the cortege had just arrived and so everyone was about to go into the chapel anyway; there was certainly no intention to cause any offence and in his reply the Superintendent explained the procedure and expressed his regret for the incident and any misunderstanding which had arisen.

Complaint 21: A widower complained that a letter had been sent to him after his wife's funeral addressed 'Mrs' instead of 'Mr'.

Response: The letter in question about ashes and commemoration is generated automatically by the cremation administration system after a funeral, and the mistake was down to human error during the data input process. Unfortunately it has happened before. The Superintendent apologised and explained how it had occurred and that an additional check had been introduced to try to prevent a recurrence.

3.7 This item is included for information.

Background Papers: None