

CHILTERN CREMATORIUM JOINT COMMITTEE

MEETING 16TH FEBRUARY 2015

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

3. COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS 2014

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 2014 from the 3,278 questionnaires sent out 184 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 9 substantial complaints were received (compared to 7 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 The location of the memorial seats in the garden of remembrance will be checked annually.

3.3 Ground’s maintenance staff have been reminded not to drive over the grass near memorials where ashes have been scattered unless necessary for maintenance operations and to be especially mindful of the sensitivities of visiting relatives.

Actions taken in response to substantial complaints

3.3 The following substantial complaints were received:-

Complaint 1: A complaint was received about blocked toilets in the Milton ladies and disabled lavatories.

Response: Both flushing mechanisms broke within hours of each other on the same day. This resulted in heavy use of the disabled lavatory and we then discovered it had a slow-filling cistern which couldn’t keep up with demand and also became clogged with paper. The faults were rectified and an explanation/apology sent.

Complaint 2: Ashes scattered in the wrong location in the garden of remembrance.

Response: An applicant requested that her husband’s ashes be scattered in the garden of remembrance in the same place as her mother’s ashes some years previously, near a particular memorial seat, which she identified by the name of the deceased commemorated on it. The applicant had been present when her mother’s ashes were scattered but, due to illness, had not attended the scattering of her husband’s ashes. But when she next visited the garden of remembrance she found that the seat was no longer where she expected to find it and so she queried the whereabouts of her husband’s ashes.

On investigation it was discovered that the seat in question had been in the incorrect location for a number of years (by the gardeners inadvertently returning it to the wrong place after cleaning). The lady had visited the gardens not long before her husband died, but coincidentally between that visit and the ashes being scattered the seat was relocated correctly. The crematorium attendant duly scattered the ashes near the named seat, but unbeknown to him it was now in a different place.

Fortunately the two seats are relatively close and one looks over the other so in fact the ashes are not far apart. The applicant accepted the Superintendent's explanation and apology.

Complaint 3: A person complained that she had missed seeing the flowers after her husband's funeral and she queried if they were on the ground how she could have seen them anyway as she was in a wheelchair.

Response: A letter was sent explaining that all floral tributes are displayed on a raised platform for this very reason and are only placed on the ground the next day to make room for the current day's flowers on the raised area. The complainer herself remarked that there was a very large crowd and she wondered if the funeral director had inadvertently failed to realise that she hadn't seen the flowers before taking her back to the limousine to depart. This seems the most likely explanation.

Complaint 4: A person returned the service provision questionnaire stating that the wrong version was played of one of the pieces of music she had requested for her father's funeral.

Response: The Superintendent investigated (these issues are not always easy to pin down several weeks after the event) and it seems there was a misunderstanding of exactly what was required between the funeral director, Crematorium and Wesley Music. A letter of apology was sent.

Complaint 5: A person complained that their memorial plaque had been removed from the garden of remembrance and destroyed without their knowledge, and that it should be remade and replaced immediately free of charge.

The space for memorial plaques can be leased for periods of 5 or 10 years, at the end of which a lease renewal invitation letter is sent to the last known address of the applicant. If the lease isn't renewed then the plaque is removed from the garden of remembrance and kept in storage for 12 months before being destroyed and disposed of – the rationale being that if the person visits during this time the plaque can be replaced and the lease renewed (a space is not reused for at least 12 months after a plaque has been removed), or if they don't want to renew the lease they can take the plaque away.

The Superintendent investigated the situation and was satisfied that the Crematorium had followed the procedures correctly.

Response: Following a telephone conversation with the complainer the Superintendent sent a letter of explanation. The person then escalated the complaint to the Clerk to the Joint Committee and included a significant number of additional objections to the Crematorium's procedures and lack of rigour in the way they were applied, and also the way the person had been treated/spoken to on the telephone by the administrative staff. The Clerk carried out an investigation which reached similar conclusions to the Superintendent and accordingly wrote to the complainer, including details of the Ombudsman to which the complaint could be referred if the person was still dissatisfied. To date there has been no further correspondence.

Complaint 6: Ashes were scattered in the garden of remembrance even though the funeral director had asked that the scattering be delayed until there was clarification about the exact location of two previous scatterings of relatives in the 1970's. The situation was complicated by the fact that the family had given an incorrect forename for one of the previous ashes scattered and also the Crematorium had not be fully diligent in searching in the old records.

Response: Fortunately it turned out that the ashes had been scattered relatively close to the location of the previous scatterings and the applicant accepted the Superintendent's explanation and apology for the misunderstanding.

Complaint 7: The Wesley Music Service computer in one of the chapels failed to work early one morning. Before it could be replaced alternative arrangements for special music for one funeral could not be obtained. The family complained and requested a discount from the funeral fee.

Response: The Superintendent discounted the cremation fee by £50.00 and a letter of explanation and apology was sent which was accepted.

Complaint 8: A service provision questionnaire was returned objecting to the cardboard container with inner plastic bag which a person's relative's ashes had been placed in when she collected them from the Crematorium.

Response: The Superintendent telephoned the person and explained that most ashes are collected from the Crematorium by funeral directors on behalf of the relatives and this is the temporary container that the Crematorium provides for their transport, and that it is a container used by many crematoria around the country. Usually when relatives attend the Crematorium in person to collect ashes the funeral director has explained to them about the temporary cardboard container and provided a casket or urn if preferred, but in this case this didn't seem to have happened. The Superintendent also spoke to the funeral director for future reference.

Complaint 9: A person came into the office and complained that when her family were visiting her husband's memorial just before Christmas they witnessed a gardener driving a grounds maintenance truck over the grass where her husband's ashes had been scattered.

Response: The Superintendent spoke with the person and apologised for what had happened and also sent a letter. The Superintendent also brought the matter to the attention of the ground's maintenance supervisor.

3.6 This report is included for information.

Background Papers: None