

Report of Councillor Smith on Burials and Cremations

Foreword

My interest in these issues began 9 or 10 years ago, when I became aware of neglected and unused chapels of rest in Monmouthshire cemeteries, leading me to wonder whether Monmouthshire County Council could provide a total bereavement service for residents.ⁱ Funerals can be expensive and it is a very trying time for the organisers. Some of those little chapels have since been renovated and are in use. My comments have been compiled from well over 100 articles which have appeared in The Times, The Abergavenny Chronicle, South Wales Argus, APSE (Association for Public Service Excellence) reports, and the BBC, over approximately 8 years.

Background to the Inquiry and Terms of Reference

In 2016, an APSE report identified 60% of UK adults don't have a valid will, and 37% die having made no plans to pay for their funeral. APSE established an advisory group of staff, elected members and unions, to consider the commercial opportunities in bereavement services for councils. They concluded that councils were well placed to make a strong business case.ⁱⁱ Funerals are often a 'crisis' purchase: quick decisions about substantial expenditure are made at an incredibly emotional time. Funeral poverty is increasing: people unable to meet the costs involved are borrowing (including payday loans), taking on debt to pay. People have been known to sell possessions to cover funeral costs. It is a sad reflection on us all.

Key Findings

Fees

- KF1)** In a decade (to 2016), Funeral directors increased fees over two thirds, cremation fees increased by 84%, inflation was 25%.ⁱⁱⁱ
- KF2)** A 2016 report by MPs revealed that fees had increased by 300% in 20 years.
- KF3)** In 2018, funeral business was calculated as worth over £2bn in Britain, dominated by a handful of chains.^{iv}
- KF4)** The Competition Marketing Authority's preliminary investigation wrote that "low-income households are disproportionately affected by high funeral prices," shelved plans for price control because of disruption to the funeral industry caused by the pandemic.^v
- KF5)** The outcome of the CMA's investigations is due in 2021. Following a review of Pre-paid funerals by the Treasury, the Financial Conduct Authority will probably regulate the Industry in mid-2022.

Report of Councillor Smith on Burials and Cremations

- KF6)** There is a big difference in prices between regions: Dignity offers a ‘Dignity Traditional Funeral’ which costs £5300 in Glasgow, £2600 in a Cheshire village, £4850 in Newcastle, and £3050 in south Wales.^{vi}
- KF7)** The insurer Sun Life said average funeral prices have risen by £146 to £4,417 in the past year.
- KF8)** In February 2019, the National Association of Funeral directors required all of its members to publish full fees on the site www.funerary.directory.co.uk, or their own websites, because of “shameful sales tactics.”^{vii}
- KF9)** In 2018, approximately 15,000 public health funerals were held by local authorities for families who couldn’t afford to bury or cremate their deceased.
- KF10)** For mourners on benefits the government provides funeral grants capped in 2003 at £700, now approximately 17% of a funeral bill.
- KF11)** On the lowest income, funeral costs amount to 40% of a family’s annual outgoings – more than food, energy and clothing – leading to debt, credit cards, payday loans, individuals sometimes selling belongings.^{viii}
- KF12)** There is a shortage of crematoria, approximately 315 in total in the UK.^{ix}

Councils

- KF13)** In 2019, councils were estimated to profit by £95m from funeral fees, with cremation, burial and mortuary services operating on an average profit margin of 43%.^x Local authorities operate around two-thirds of Britain’s crematoria.^{xi}
- KF14)** Many authorities, including Monmouthshire, are severely challenged over space for burials.^{xii}
- KF15)** In 2013, a BBC study found that a quarter of cemeteries run by local authorities would be full by 2023.^{xiii}
- KF16)** Many authorities and cemeteries are looking at how space can be re-used, and what is legally permissible. Highgate Cemetery in London is applying for an act of Parliament to cancel burial rights bought in the 19th century and never used, and to finance the upkeep of the cemetery.^{xiv}

Positive Exemplars

- KF17)** In 2017, Kettering Borough Council was the winner of the APSE ‘Best Cemetery and Crematorium Service’ award. Kettering has a crematorium, 8 cemeteries and 9 closed churchyards. The council carries out approximately 2000 cremations and 180 burials per annum. They took the initiative to do things themselves, and

Report of Councillor Smith on Burials and Cremations

have now expanded into licensing for weddings to be operated at their establishments.

- KF18)** Cardiff Bereavement Service is an innovative total service, income-generating, customer-focussed, with a 99% customer satisfaction rating. It consists of a small team committed to assisting the bereaved, and meeting the needs of the community. They are the only south Wales holders of the Gold Standard for the Charter Of The Bereaved. In 2018, the service achieved the Heritage Green Flag for Cathays cemetery.^{xv}
- KF19)** Wigan Council saved residents more than £500,000 in one year by working with local funeral directors to offer affordable funerals. Wigan Council saved £115m over 6 years by transforming services, rather than cutting them.

New Services

- KF20)** 'Recompose' will open in the U.S.A. in 2021. It will accept bodies from anywhere in the world, and the family will receive back potting compost. Saving carbon, there are no embalming chemicals.^{xvi} There has even been the suggestion to line roads with trees grown from interments.^{xvii}
- KF21)** In 2018, a company in San Francisco, 'Tulip', started offering low cost, online, 'no frills' cremation services, at a cost of \$700; the average funeral cost in the US is \$6000.^{xviii} Ashes are returned by post or personal delivery. In the UK, cremated remains cannot be posted legally, due to insurance restrictions.
- KF22)** Direct cremations average a cost of £1500, while average funeral costs are £3300-4300. Interestingly, as of 11th April 2020, enquiries for direct cremations were 50% higher than any other kind of cremation or funeral plan in the two weeks prior to that date (probably an impact from Covid-19.)
- KF23)** A Natural Undertaking is a service that can be tailored to each customer, for unique funerals.^{xix}

Administration

- KF24)** There are no standards for conduct or training to become a Funeral director: essentially, anyone can open their own funeral service.^{xx}
- KF25)** The two biggest providers of funeral services are Co-Operative Funeral Care and Dignity (a listed company.)^{xxi} Since the Shipman episode, there has been greater scrutiny of records before cremation takes place.^{xxii}
- KF26)** A lot of red tape is associated with death. A good service that is offered by HM Revenue and Customs is 'Tell Us Once', an example of the public sector being more efficient than the private sector. It cuts out multiple calls to utilities, banks,

Report of Councillor Smith on Burials and Cremations

etc. Banks offer a similar service – a Death Notification Service – which 18 banks and building societies are due to sign up to.

Recommendations

- R1)** Identify what services MCC provides, as well as Registrar, Cemetery, Crematorium.
- R2)** Reconcile the Council's profits from crematoria with the Social Justice Agenda.
- R3)** The Competition and Markets Authority needs to make funeral costs transparent. The recommendation is for the Cabinet Member to write to them to request greater transparency around funeral costs, in order that the public can make informed decisions. The CMA is to resume enquiries.
- R4)** There is a need for greater awareness that everyone should make a will to avoid the additional distress families experience in the absence of a will. The public needs to be aware of the role which banks play: up to 1.5m families could be tied into wills written by banks, which is an unregulated service.^{xxiii} The Council could lead a communications exercise to encourage the public to consider making an independent will.
- R5)** There is a need for cremation and burial planning to feature in the council's Local Development Plan and the council's Green Spaces strategies. The Local Development Plan is currently being renewed, which provides a timely opportunity to consider forward planning for burial services.
- R6)** Campaigners are pushing for reducing the distress placed on bereaved people through making repeated telephone calls to notify public service providers of a death. The government's 'Tell Us Once' initiative has made extraordinary progress and the awareness of this scheme should be communicated to the public by the Council.^{xxiv}
- R7)** Organising a funeral is part of life's journey, however, we need to make it as easy and stress-free for the public as we can. This report provides examples of local authorities who have adopted the service and are providing a highly efficient service to its public which is self-sustaining and profit generating. The Council could consider whether it could provide a better service to the public than existing providers.

ⁱ Abergavenny Chronicle, 9th October 2014

ⁱⁱ APSE February/March 2016

ⁱⁱⁱ The Times, 30th November 2018

^{iv} The Times, 1st April 2019

Report of Councillor Smith on Burials and Cremations

- v The Times, 7th April 2019
- vi The Times, 12th March 2018
- vii The Times, 4th June 2019
- viii The Times, 25th February 2019
- ix The Times, 17th March 2016
- x The Times, 19th January 2019
- xi The Times, 19th January 2019
- xii Abergavenny Chronicle, 15th March 2018
- xiii The Times, 22nd May 2019
- xiv The Times, 29th September 2018
- xv APSE September 2019
- xvi The Times, 16th February 2020; 31st December 2018
- xvii The Times, 5th July 2019
- xviii The Times, 12th January 2020
- xix The Times, 4th September 2017
- xx The Times, 31st March 2016
- xxi The Times, 12th March 2018
- xxii The Times, 1st August 2012
- xxiii The Times, 20th June 2018
- xxiv The Times, 2nd May 2020