

FUNERALS MARKET INVESTIGATION

Summary of roundtable discussion held in Belfast on 5 September 2019

Introduction

1. The following is a summary of points raised in a discussion with organisations representing the interests of consumers and older people, held at the CMA's Belfast office on 5 September 2019.
2. In advance of the roundtable discussion, the CMA gave a presentation on its funerals market investigation, setting out the key stages in the investigation, the key issues under consideration, and the four categories of remedies that might be appropriate, should the Inquiry Group find one or more adverse effects on competition (AEC).

Summary of the discussion

Complaints about funeral services

3. Attendees explained that they had received a very limited number of complaints about funeral services, and suggested that, given the circumstances of the situation, customers are probably reluctant to complain. It was also suggested that customers with a complaint may be signposted to complain to the trade associations.

Funeral choices

4. It was suggested that, in Northern Ireland, there is a big difference between funeral director businesses in rural and urban areas. In rural areas, families may have been in business as a funeral director for many generations and be very well-known locally. Family connections with that funeral director may also have built up generationally. So, in such circumstances, when someone in a family dies, they will automatically lift the phone to call that business. Therefore, there is no choice as such, as customers are captive. This also makes it difficult for customers to judge quality.

5. Further, given these family connections built up over many years, it was suggested that customers may feel disloyal in saying that they did not have a good experience with their community's funeral director.
6. Religious beliefs may also impact on the choice of funeral director, especially where there are two funeral directors effectively serving different religious beliefs, as was explained is often the case in Northern Ireland. It was also suggested that quite often, the church may recommend funeral directors to customers, so a local minister can be quite influential.
7. Some customers who have sought advice in relation to funerals from one organisation represented at the discussion appeared to have no idea of what other options are available to them.
8. One attendee noted that in Northern Ireland, in contrast to Great Britain, there tends to be a very small window to make the funeral arrangements, and a lot of decisions have to be made within a short space of time, since funerals tend to take place within three days of a death. This cultural time constraint makes 'shopping around' difficult.
9. In Northern Ireland there is less choice in terms of cremation services, although one attendee indicated that people do access services in the Republic of Ireland. It was suggested that it is unclear what impact Brexit would have on this situation.

Funeral costs

10. Funeral costs are typically lower in Northern Ireland than the rest of the United Kingdom, but this does not take account of the lower incomes in Northern Ireland, so people could actually be worse off. The cost of a grave also varies from council to council, and there are a number of elements to the costs, including the cost of the grave itself, the cost of opening the grave and annual costs of maintenance. Some burial ground owners may place restrictions on the type of memorial that customers can have. Customers may also feel under social pressure when purchasing a memorial to buy more than they need.
11. The cost of funerals had been raised with one attendee, including in terms of how expensive funerals are compared to previous years.

Social trends

12. In terms of trends, it was suggested that familial bonds may not be as strong as they had been in the past, although this may be happening at a slower

pace in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Customers may be becoming more secular and one attendee suggested that in their experience, there is more of a tendency towards cremation than in the past.

Intermediaries

13. Turning to the role of intermediaries, one attendee suggested that there is perhaps a missing intermediary in the funerals sector, but there is also a question around how you get information out effectively. One attendee wondered if there was a role for the trade associations to play. [3].

Financial assistance

14. There was some discussion on the financial assistance available to customers purchasing a funeral, including the role of credit unions and the social fund.

Appendix: List of organisations represented at the discussion

[3].