

## **FUNERALS MARKET INVESTIGATION**

### **Summary of roundtable with ‘progressive funeral directors’ held on 21 August 2019 and hosted by the Good Funeral Guide**

#### **Introduction**

1. The purpose of the roundtable was to obtain views from a range of funeral directors (the attendees) on: the psychology and vulnerability of bereaved people at the point of need when purchasing a funeral; and initiatives to increase transparency by funeral directors. The roundtable was also intended to seek views on possible remedies.
2. The attendees described themselves as ‘progressive funeral directors’. The term ‘progressive funeral directors’ is the collective description chosen by those attending the meeting to identify themselves as working in a different way to traditional funeral companies.
3. The attendees each gave a presentation on their work. A paper was also given on the psychology of grief which covered topics such as: factors that can influence how someone reacts to and manages bereavement; common symptoms of grief; and a summary of research studies on the psychology and social power of uniform and obedience to authority figures.

#### **Summary of the presentations**

4. There was a general discussion about how bereavement can impact upon a grieving person’s cognitive skills and result in a feeling of helplessness and low self-esteem. Attendees pointed out that these factors can make it more difficult for bereaved people to arrange and make decisions about a funeral.
5. Some attendees suggested that many bereaved people feel unsupported. They also said that people who are recently bereaved can be particularly vulnerable to the authority associated with funeral directors and this can be reinforced by formal uniforms, having certain facilities such as particular types of hearses in the garage and general behaviour. This enables many traditional funeral directors to influence the sort of funeral which a grieving person may purchase and limit their potential choices.

6. Some attendees raised concerns about the lack of up to date training to understand the needs of bereaved people, how to maintain good professional boundaries and the impact of compassion fatigue. They also flagged the need for a set of ethical standards for funeral directors and continuing professional development.
7. There was a discussion about the potential psychological harm and mental health problems which can arise from damaging experiences in the immediate aftermath of a death and whilst arranging a funeral. Some attendees suggested that people want a funeral director to help provide a 'meaningful farewell'. They emphasised the importance to many grieving people of an appropriate ceremony rather than the traditional services and products which many funeral directors offer, and which often suit the funeral director more than they do the bereaved families.
8. Attendees outlined the different ways in which they seek to provide compassionate services to their customers and try to give them as much time and choice as possible. So, for example, they will enable people to keep the deceased at home pending the funeral and enable them to view the deceased in an informal and comfortable setting.
9. One attendee described how they will assist mourners to wash the deceased if they wish to do so. Some attendees raised concerns about routine embalming without the relative being given a choice or without a full understanding of exactly what the embalming process entails. Another attendee said that they provide embalming only if specifically requested to do so and that they thought embalming was often simply a way for funeral directors to make money and store deceased people over busy periods. They said that 'selling more' generally was written into their staff contracts as misconduct. There was a discussion among attendees about the fact that embalming is not generally needed even if the body is to be viewed and / or washed and dressed by the family, and attendees supported this stance.
10. Attendees described the importance of explaining honestly to people what they are doing with the deceased but not overwhelming them. They said that their ethos was not to push people into buying expensive coffins, but rather to 'take care of vulnerable people'. They stressed the importance of giving the bereaved a sense of empowerment.
11. Attendees said that they thought funeral directors learn to 'read people'. The attendees said that their approach is to focus on encouraging people to ask questions and to remain engaged in decision making. Unlike some funeral directors, they said that they do not rush bereaved people into making decisions or follow a tick-box approach with the focus just on getting the

contract signed. Instead, they make sure that the client is always in charge of what they are spending.

12. One funeral director said that they always send their clients 15 questions. Another said that at their first meeting with a client, they would simply explain what decisions they may wish to make, but they did not expect them to make any decisions at that stage.
13. Attendees pointed out that if someone's relative has been moved into a funeral director's care (without the family knowing) then it can be incredibly difficult for the family to feel strongly enough to ask for a change of funeral director.
14. There was a general discussion about the need to empower clients and provide them the time and choice which a large corporate entity may not provide. They said that a small, independent funeral director would not survive if they had, for example, a 4% complaint record which a larger funeral director may consider to be acceptable.
15. A short video on the annual BrumYODO 'A Matter of Life & Death Festival' was shown. The festival is intended to encourage a more open conversation about death and dying and receives funding from the Arts Council and other sponsors. This was followed by a discussion on the need for the public to have a greater understanding of the choices available to them when arranging a funeral.

## **Summary of the discussion of possible remedies**

### ***Cooling off period***

16. There were mixed views about the benefits of introducing a cooling off period after a contract is signed on business premises. Some attendees said that people's expectations were often so low that it would be of little benefit as they would still not have any indication of what else they could expect. Others pointed out that funeral directors are often working within tight parameters and the client may want to arrange the funeral very quickly. They said that some crematoria are pushing for the paperwork to be completed more quickly and there was a general view that 'everything is getting more pressured'.
17. There was a discussion about the significance of the 'green form' which the registrar provides after a death has been registered and which enables a burial or cremation to take place. Some attendees said that people should be told not to hand this over too quickly to a funeral director. This is because

many funeral directors assume, and act as if, they have been instructed as soon as they hold the 'green form'.

18. Many attendees said that it would be helpful if people were also told not to sign the contract straight away. Instead they should have an opportunity to take the contract home so they would have more time to make any decisions.

### ***Regulation***

19. Some attendees were in favour of a licensing system provided it focused on up to date education in dealing with bereaved people and responsibilities rather than just process.
20. They expressed fears that regulation may deter new entrants, not least because of the costs this may entail in terms of their facilities. Some also expressed concerns about the independence of a regulator and the influence of the large funeral directors and trade associations on it. For example, attendees were opposed to the possibility that a regulator may set training requirements based on those which the trade associations currently promote, and which may not be in line with the standards and ethos which they wish to promote.
21. Attendees thought that regulation should comprise elements such as:
  - ethical standards for funeral directors governing how they communicate with bereaved people and some form of unannounced inspections to ensure that these were being followed;
  - supervision and Continuing Professional Development as a requirement of membership of a trade association. Supervision should address empathic overwhelm/compassion fatigue to safeguard the wellbeing of the funeral director, and protect the bereaved from poor bereavement advice that could prolong or complicate grieving;
  - funeral directors being taught good professional boundaries including awareness of 'pressure disguised as helpfulness';
  - some 'process' aspects such as not removing the body to a place without telling the family or embalming a body without the relatives' consent.
22. The absence of an official funeral ombudsman was discussed, and the fact that this meant the trade associations were, in practice, the only route for escalating a complaint. Attendees felt this was problematic since trade associations represent the interests of their membership.

### ***Separating the functions of transportation and storage from the provision of the funeral***

23. Attendees pointed out that if a coroner is appointed after death, the deceased will need to stay in the locality. This applies in the case of the significant number of deaths that occur in care homes, or in the person's own home, where the person who has died was not seen by the doctor who signed the medical certificate within 14 days before death or after they died.
24. There was further discussion about the problems associated with the 'green form' and the fact that many funeral directors assume that once they have obtained this, they also have access to the body and can keep them on their premises. Attendees pointed out that some care homes and hospices do not have any mortuary facilities and to address the issue enter into informal arrangements with local funeral directors to collect the deceased.
25. There was a discussion about how a coroner's contract enables the relevant funeral director to encourage the relatives to use their services. One attendee said that they were aware of funeral directors who will collect bodies from a coroner for free so that they can then secure the funeral from the relatives. There were also cases of funeral directors who carry out Coroner's removals giving their cards to the bereaved and saying 'we recommend this company', giving the impression that the recommendation comes from the Coroner's Office.
26. It was suggested that it should be the hospitals', hospices' or care homes' responsibility to cover the cost for the moving of the body should the family decide on a different funeral director, if and when the hospital, hospice or care home has instructed a funeral director not chosen by the family to collect the person and transfer them to their facilities, due to their own lack of suitable facilities for looking after the deceased.

### ***Information***

27. Some attendees said that they thought that many hospices and hospital staff give limited information to bereaved people. They pointed out that they often simply give out a list of funeral directors within a local radius and do not tell people that they do not need to have a funeral director or that there are different types of funeral directors and that they should make sure they find one who is 'right for them'.
28. They pointed out that bereavement literature in hospitals is often sponsored by local funeral directors and that the Government's website (gov.uk)

recommends that people use a funeral director who is a member of NAFD and SAIF thereby implying that this is a guarantee of quality.

29. Some attendees thought that there needs to be someone independent of the funeral directors, who can advise the bereaved of their options and rights.
30. They pointed out a bereavement service would also remove the increasing reliance on the funeral director to provide emotional support and enable the newly bereaved to make more informed choices.

## **Appendix: List of organisations represented at the discussion**

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