

Compassion drives us as funeral directors – not commerce

Opinion

By Abi Pattenden,
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I was concerned to read funeral director Poppy Mardell's characterisation that her fellow funeral directors see "a funeral as a sale and a dead body as a hazard" in the *Financial Times* last month entitled *Dragging funerals out of the dark ages*. You may have seen the letter from me that was published, in response, four days later on 8 April.

Poppy's comments certainly don't fit with my experience of the thousands of compassionate, dedicated men and women working in NAFD member funeral homes across the country that I've met during my year as President, nor my colleagues on the Executive and Membership Committee, or my own team at Freeman Brothers. Yes, as businesses we must operate profitably, but as professionals there has to be something deep inside you that is called to care for bereaved people to make someone choose to be a funeral director. It's too difficult a job to do without any kind of enduring vocational motivation.

In the article, funeral director Poppy Mardall talked about there being an unhelpful culture in the funeral profession that the Competition & Markets Authority

(CMA) Investigation would root out. I share her view that the CMA's market investigation is a welcome intervention, but not because there's a culture that needs to change, but because decent, honourable funeral directors are fed up with the reputation of the profession being ruined by the small minority of businesses that don't act in the public interest. As our CEO, Jon Levett, said a few months ago, these businesses need to be pulled into line, or put out of business - and that's what we hope the CMA will help us to do.

The article also talked about the cost of a funeral and the reported 6% increase in the last twelve months. The reality is that most responsible firms have been keeping price increases down for several years and, as we all know, it's principally the

huge rises in burial and cremation fees that are driving prices up. The most recent Funeral Cost Index by Royal London showed that local councils have hiked up cremation fees by 4.9% and burial fees by 6.1% in the last year alone - well ahead of inflation - and we all know local authorities that are levying double-digit price increases and using the additional revenue to plug holes in their overall budget.

Given that many of us are also filling the gaps in a government funeral benefit that doesn't adequately support those who need it, providing our services for free when a child dies and offering increasingly flexible options to enable people to take more control of a funeral themselves, I am not sure it's in any way accurate to portray the funeral profession as "living in the dark ages".

For me, the greatest challenge that the CMA will face when it comes to the funeral profession is one it has already identified - the reluctance of consumers to engage with the topic of their funeral.

There is plenty of information available for anyone who would like to think about funeral options - not only from the funeral profession, but also from charity and bereavement support services too - and all of us are willing to chat about it to the public whenever we get the chance, such as at community events or at open days in our funeral homes. However, despite years of work by funeral directors, Dying Matters, the Death Café movement and many others, we still face a challenge in how we find a way to help a largely unwilling society to feel more comfortable thinking about the end of life, and to put some plans in place, well ahead of time. To me, it is the opportunity for the CMA's assistance in helping to bring the conversation about death 'out of the dark ages' that could be one of the greatest positive outcomes of its engagement with our profession.



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