



Profile of **Lewis Shand Smith**, Independent Chair of the Funeral Service Consumer Standards Review steering group

The Funeral Service Consumer Standards Review (FSCSR) steering group is a cross-industry group set up by the funeral sector to review how standards are monitored within the funeral profession. It is working to produce an agreed code of practice, approach to inspections and guidance for funeral directors as to how pricing information should be made available to the public. After these are reviewed by consumer groups and other stakeholders, the aim is to present the proposals to Government and the Competition & Markets Authority (CMA).

Following the first meetings of both the steering group and working group - which will take forward the review - *Funeral Director Monthly* caught up with Lewis to gauge his impressions of the sector so far.

What interested you in the role of Independent Chair for the FSCSR?

I come from a small community in the Shetland Islands and, on returning there as a minister, I was involved in funerals for many years. When I was growing up the local funeral director was my grandfather's cousin. When I was a minister in Lerwick, and leading

funeral services, they were sometimes known as 'family funerals' because the minister (me), the funeral director and the organist were all related.

I became an ombudsman almost by accident. When I was rector of the Episcopal churches in Shetland I became interested in politics, was elected to the local council and, for five years, was the council leader. I subsequently moved to Dumfries with the church and was head hunted to become a part-time deputy ombudsman in public service. Eventually, because of changes to legislation, they needed me to become full time. When that came to an end I was appointed Chief Ombudsman with responsibility for the telecoms, property and energy sectors.

As a result of this diverse set of experiences, there were a number of things about this project that really interested me. I've worked in many different organisations, but always focused on standards and on making sure public and private sector organisations are treating people well. If not, I've worked to find ways to put things right. I am interested in what it looks like when we treat people fairly and what kind of standards we should expect from those providing services.

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When they are bereaved, people are often at their most vulnerable and not at their best in terms of making decisions. Any help we can give people to make it as straightforward as possible is important.

On a personal level, my own experience of funeral directors is very positive. When I was a minister they were always kind, helpful and professional and treated people very well. But I also observed that bereaved people often don't really know what they want and can allow themselves to be guided into decisions that they, perhaps, wouldn't otherwise make, sometimes decisions they can't really afford. While they are driven by the wish to do the best they can for their loved one, they often don't use the same approach as they do when making other important consumer choices, and so we have to help them become better.

What, in terms of your background experience, is proving most useful to you as FSCSR Chair?

For me, my work as an ombudsman is proving invaluable. An ombudsman is a champion for consumer protection. I am enjoying using my experience to examine how standards are monitored in the profession and get

funeral firms to adopt a new system that will work well for consumers and the profession.

I am also drawing upon my regulatory expertise. I am an enthusiast for self regulation and for light-touch principles-based regulation. If a sector can sort itself out, that's healthy. I admire the funeral industry for wanting to tackle this challenge and for getting it underway before the CMA arrived on the scene.

What has surprised you about the funeral sector as you've got to know it better?

What has surprised me most is the lack of cohesion. I expected every firm in the sector to be working to the same set of standards and values. The lack of that has been a surprise.

This is an opportunity to change that, and the sector seems to be grabbing the chance. Collaboration is happening across the sector and there's a genuine willingness to break down barriers and modernise thinking - as well as services.

What action that the FSCSR can take will make the single biggest difference to consumers' experience of funerals?

For me, there are three key outcomes:-

1. an agreed set of standards across the sector;
2. To get the message out there and make sure consumers know which funeral directors are operating to those agreed standards;
3. greater transparency in terms of pricing and service information - make sure consumers know what to expect and are able to compare properly.

If the sector gets these right, they will have made quite a difference to consumers' experience of funerals.

What do you hope the FSCSR will achieve for the funeral profession?

I hope the Funeral Service Consumer Standards Review will help to revitalise the sector. It's a great opportunity for renewal and fresh thinking.

Funeral directors are trusted by customers. But it's easy to lose trust. At present, despite the negative

stories that pop up, that trust is not lost - but it is beginning to slip.

In previous roles I've worked with publicly-funded care homes and there are many similarities. You're often caring for highly vulnerable people and not just them, their family too, and it can be tricky when different parts of the family don't agree about the care that should be provided. Sound familiar?

In the care home sector there are also multiple organisations, but now they have a common code and set of standards so that customers know what to expect. Each firm is unique, but they operate to the same principles.

What's great about the FSCSR is that it is an industry initiative - it pre-dates the arrival of the Competition & Markets Authority investigation. Although the CMA is mostly focused on competition issues, there is overlap with its remit insofar as it is looking at quality as a driver of price. I hope that the whole sector buys in to what we're trying to do here - but it will also be important to make sure we've got government backing for what we're doing, and that's an important part of my role. It's encouraging that the CMA is observing our steering group meetings.

Do you have any words of experience for funeral directors as a result of your background as Chief Ombudsman?

I've met some amazing people through this project and I am really glad to be part of it. I would offer the following advice to funeral directors - don't be frightened, don't be defensive and co-operate wherever you can.

The funeral sector is to be admired and congratulated for its proactivity in tackling those things that aren't quite working right.

Funeral directors do a great job, and let's not lose sight of that. Yes, there are issues, but we're not starting from a low base. We're starting from something that's pretty good and we're building on what is positive about the sector to create consistency and transparency. Rogue companies damage the reputation of everyone. Let's deal with them.

FSCSR steering group and working groups get underway

The Funeral Service Consumer Standards Review steering group met in late June. The steering group's video conference meeting included discussions about a number of documents relating to the review, agreement of a work programme and the creation of cross sector working groups.

These groups, which began their work in July, are reviewing how the services of funeral firms are monitored and inspected and how funeral pricing information can be made more clear, consistent and accessible.

The working groups will deliver a draft code of practice, suggested approach to inspections and draft guidance as to how pricing information should be made available to the public.

This will be reviewed by a Stakeholder Reference Group, comprising a wide range of consumer groups and experts in consumer markets, before the FSCSR Stakeholder Group presents its final report and recommendations.