

Adjectives describing one's perception of Council services may well be: traditional, bureaucratic, minimal, slow, elephant-like, more-than-my-job's-worth, organised-to-suit-the-providers... Income is influenced by government audit.

Slough Borough Council have been working on a change to that image by using a Quality approach to change and improvement.

- * Managing for a culture change
- * Working to understand customer's (rate payers) needs. Surveys, working in teams with the funeral directors
- * Carrying out process analysis to eliminate waste and highlight illogical procedures in the old traditional system.
- * Outsourcing to find value for money
- * Tendering to improve procurement value
- * Sharing of services with other councils to be more effective.

The changes in progress were illustrated by reference to the improvements made in the Burials and Cremation service. The Quality achieved in the crematorium has been recognised through its

- * role as national model
- * Royal approval since Princess Margaret's cremation.
- * Achievement of quality standards; ICCM and Chartermark

① Background to the Service

The cemetery was opened in 1932 and the crematorium in 1963.

In 2009 there were 1750 cremations and 450 burials. There are 45 acres of cemetery. There is an income of £1.2M and the service operates with a net surplus within the Council.

② Obstacles to customer satisfaction

There was a lengthy process between death of a person and burial/cremation. This was due to a variety of stand-alone departments, each requiring a separate visit.

- * Registrar for death certificate. A job description requiring *Good handwriting* implied certificates should be hand written. Traditional working hours were very limited and needed an appointment days ahead.
- * Chapel to arrange service and a date.
- * Grave diggers.
- * This was made more complicated for the large percentage (45%) of ethnic minorities speaking 50 different languages, struggling with a set of forms which were not user friendly.

③ Improvements already made

To date the following improvements are in place

- * £1.5M has been saved through competitive tendering
- * Registrar is located at the cemetery and hours extended to meet needs of public.
- * Registration of deaths is computerised to speed up process and eliminate duplication of records. The old paper system was a source of fraud. Soon this is to be a national database with the possibility of registering on-line.
- * Ability to say yes to any unusual funeral request (for example disco service), rather than allow only a standard service.
- * Close co-operation with the funeral directors.
- * Bereaved families can chose from 18,000 hymns/songs/pieces of music during the service.
- * Four hour lead time between registration of the death and burial.

- * A simplified set of forms to be completed designed to eliminate error and avoid Shipman type malpractices.
- * A clean and tidy environment. Standards for cleanliness and maintenance of the facility – inside and out.
- * A clear procedure to provide a sympathetic environment around the grave before, during and after the interment.
- * Slough is one of the few crematoriums in the UK to have an oversize cremator to handle unusually large bodies. Installed as a result of analysis of existing residents body size; they know this will be required in the short term for certain Slough residents.
- * Mechanical diggers used for graves, providing holes of a specified size, rather than a standard size; this avoids last minute problems of coffins not fitting the hole. There is a tendency for coffins to become larger as the standard body size increases.

④ Future improvements

On the list of short – medium term improvements are

- * Registration of deaths is soon to be a national database with the possibility of registering on-line.
- * Once European legislation has been modified, Councils will be able to share services (for example IT support, payroll) and so reduce costs.
- * The present cremators meet existing environmental standards for discharge, but will require further modification to meet European standards on Hg discharge; this will potentially add 50% to the cost of a cremation.

Thought is already being given to long term changes in the way we may dispose of our earthly bodies:

- * Re-use of graves (widely practised across Europe, but not in the UK).
- * Firing bodies into space (definitely not carbon neutral today).
- * Converting ashes into a diamond.

⑤ A policy of ...

- * You have to get it right first time!
- * Always look to improve
- * Maintain high standards
- * Follow the rules
- * Be flexible

... which reflects the views any quality service organisation wanting to become leader in its class.

Endpiece

John Betjeman's famous poem seems strangely inappropriate.

Come friendly bombs and fall on Slough!
It isn't fit for humans now,
There isn't grass to graze a cow.
Swarm over, Death!

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