

HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

**COMMUNITY INFORMATION AND PROTECTION
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

TUESDAY 11 MARCH 2003 10.30 A.M.

Agenda Item No.

3

CIVIL FUNERALS

Report of the County Secretary

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Executive Member: Gerald Game

1. Purpose of Report

To enable members to review progress to date on the Civil Funerals pilot and feedback from customers following the decision of the Community Information and Protection Scrutiny Committee on 12 March 2002 to include Civil Funerals on the Scrutiny work programme.

A progress report was provided on the 29 October 2002 and a further report requested for the meeting on 11 March 2003.

2. Summary

Hertfordshire is one of eight Registration Authorities piloting Civil Funeral Ceremonies, though others are beginning to offer the service as well. These are funerals that take place anywhere except a religious building. There is no restriction on the service containing religious elements, however, requests for a number of hymns and prayers would result in staff advising families to contact their local vicar who would be better able to meet their needs.

3. Conclusions

Members are asked to consider continuing the development of Civil Funerals in line with on going customer feedback and to consider whether the service should be offered beyond the end of the pilot.

Members are also asked to agree whether further scrutiny of this issue is required, and if so in what format.

1. Background

- 1.1. The Hertfordshire Registration Service has, over the past 2 years, attended meetings with other like-minded authorities to discuss a Civil Funerals pilot. In December 2001 it became apparent that everything was in place to enable a pilot to be undertaken. The pilot commenced in April 2002.
- 1.2. The purpose of the pilot is to offer customers a greater choice of funerals through the provision of a civil ceremony. Currently the main choices are a religious ceremony or a non-religious ceremony offered by humanists. A civil ceremony can contain some religious elements.
- 1.3. The pilot is being run in partnership with a private sector business, Civil Ceremonies Limited, who are responsible for the administration and assessing of customer satisfaction through a questionnaire. Civil Ceremonies make an administration charge for this aspect of the service.

2. What has happened in Hertfordshire during 2002

- 2.1. Hertfordshire are piloting an approach that involves fact to face contact at a venue of the customer's choice. This could be at the Register Office, Funeral Directors or the relative's home.
- 2.2. Meetings were held before the commencement of the pilot with Hertfordshire Funeral Directors both individually, and in groups, to explain the service to them. They indicated their support for what we were proposing to offer specifically requesting for the purposes of the pilot that we rely on them alone to hand out the leaflets. At the time we agreed to this.
- 2.3. 12 Hertfordshire Registration staff have attended and passed the 3-day residential Funeral training course.
- 2.4. There is a flat rate charge of £180 for the service. The charge is the same for each pilot authority.
- 2.5. To date we have carried out six ceremonies. This compares with two carried out at the time of the last report on the 29 October 2002.
- 2.6. During 2002 we carried out no advertising ourselves. Instead we relied on Hertfordshire Funeral Directors and Hospital Bereavement Officers to provide a leaflet to the bereaved advising them of our service (see Appendix i)

3. Feedback

- 3.1. All families were profuse in their thanks to the Registrar for both the service and the support they had given prior to each ceremony.

4. Financial Implications

- 4.1 A charge of £180 is made for each service.
- 4.2 The service has been set up to be self-funding using a marginal costing calculation that only includes the salary in the costs.
- 4.3 If a deputy carries out a ceremony they are paid a lump sum of £80. There may also be a small amount of mileage payable. This leaves a surplus of £90 that can be reinvested in the development of the service in areas such as training and marketing.
- 4.4. If a permanent member of staff carries out a ceremony then they do it during their normal working hours. The hourly rate at September 29 (the highest hourly rate of anyone acting as a Civil Funeral celebrant) from April 1 2003 will be £16.38.
- 4.5 Staff who have carried out funerals say it is currently taking between 10 and 12 hours to prepare for and carry out the ceremonies. This is a cost in the range of £163.80 to £196.56 at the highest salary payable to anyone carrying out a ceremony. However, if a permanent member of staff is carrying out the ceremony they are doing it in their normal working hours so are being paid anyway.
- 4.6 Looking to the future staff who have carried out funerals think that with practise and volume the time taken should come down to around 7 hours.

5. The Way Forward

- 5.1 Take up of the service has been disappointing, though other pilot authorities have been no more successful. The latest figures available show that we have carried out more ceremonies than any other authority (see Appendix iii).
- 5.2 Staff have been identified who are now holding one to one meetings with Funeral Directors in a bid to raise the profile of the service.
- 5.3 We are now carrying out our own advertising and hope this will inspire take up.
 - 5.3.1 An article appeared in Herts Direct in January advertising the service, (see Appendix ii).
 - 5.3.2 From February 2003 leaflets advertising the service have been available at Register Office receptions. (Appendix i).
- 5.4 We will continue to monitor the time spent on each ceremony.
- 5.5 We propose continuing to offer the service beyond the end of the pilot.

Background Papers Used By The Author When Compiling This Report

None