

dying matters in St Helens

St Helens Council are one of the 32,000 members of the Dying Matters Coalition across England and Wales. This year Bereavement Services decided to take part in Dying Matters Awareness Week and made the decision that holding open days at St Helens Crematorium and Cemetery – the first for 25 years – and also at Newton-le-Willows Cemetery, would be the best option.

Why We Decided To Hold Open Days

In July 2015 a Council report prepared by the Scrutiny Panel concerning funeral fees highlighted concerns for the rising cost for funerals and the then reported 142 billion national debts in the UK from funeral costs. Since then we have worked hard to encourage local funeral directors to be more transparent and open concerning the fees and charges for a funeral.

We reviewed our Partnership Funeral Service arrangement in December 2015 and provided a more self-explanatory, informative leaflet to the bereaved highlighting further additional optional costs that would hopefully prompt and help the bereaved to be more aware of the expected costs associated with our cremation/burial funeral service in St Helens.

The Partnership Funeral Service at that time was re-launched and also extended to four reputable well established reliable local funeral directors, whom all wanted to assist, support and show a commitment to providing a dignified and respectable funeral service for a reasonable cost.

Since early January 2016 Bereavement Services have worked closely with the local representatives of the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) Kath Inkpen and Michael Egan, to campaign for funeral directors to sign up to the national 'Fair Funeral Pledge' which is run by the Quaker Social Action charity who set up the Funeral Poverty Alliance to support bereaved people struggling to meet payments of funeral fees. The CAB have supported the Council with promoting the pledge by asking local funeral directors to commit to it.

To date we are still working with the CAB to promote this further however the take up by funeral directors is still relatively low, despite having wrote to over 85 of them.

As a Council we felt that we should be promoting and informing the public about the options available concerning choice and costs. An Open Day was the perfect opportunity to do just this.

Planning For The Days

There were a number of suggestions about what the day would involve, such as tours of the Crematorium and Cemetery, the Friends of the Cemetery Group would also support the Council and prepare some heritage booklets to share on the day and a postcard of the much-valued Crematorium Dalle de Verre windows designed by Pierre Fourmaitreaux of Powell & Sons (later Whitefriars Glass).

Exhibitors/stands on the day would be from our Partnership Funeral Service Funeral Directors, Friends of the Cemetery Group, old documents on display from the library, open new grave display and memorial fixing. Information about the 'Fair Funeral Pledge', the CAB, burial, cremations and death, the NAFD and SAIF – and of course there would be refreshments.

Promoting The Events

We advertised the event via a number of different avenues such as:

- Posters & flyers in local funeral directors
- Posters in A-frames in the cemetery
- Council Website
- Council Intranet
- What's On In St Helens
- Friends of St Helens Cemetery Website
- Social media via Facebook and twitter

As Bereavement Services Manager I met with the Liverpool Echo and created a video-blog which was advertised on the newspaper's website and also on their social media pages.

On The Days

The first event, at the Newton-le-Willows Cemetery, took place on Saturday 6th May.

We had stands from St Helens and Newton Co-op, the Friends of St Helens Cemetery and the Bereavement Services Team. We also arranged for a representative from St Helens Councils security team to be present for any security-related questions.



Unfortunately turn out at this event was not as high as we hoped but we were delighted to see the recently appointed ICCM Technical & Member Services Officer Mat Crawley, pictured with Hazel Boden, my Administrative Assistant who covers the office and any other duties as required.

The next day, Sunday 7th May, St Helens Crematorium and Cemetery opened all its doors to the public. Over 200 people attended and approximately 160 took part in a guided tour behind the scenes of the crematorium, which opened in 1962.



We had stands by the Bereavement Services Team, local CAB, the Friends of St Helens Cemetery, A E Holland Stone Masons, local funeral celebrants and our Partnership Funeral Directors Garvey & Young and St Helens Co-operative. As at the event at Newton Cemetery a representative from St Helens Council's security team was also present.



Throughout the day bereavement services staff dispelled the many myths surrounding cremation ceremonies – including ash contamination, a specific person holding the service, and the coffin going on to be instantly cremated once it goes through the blue curtains.



Some of the positive feedback we received from the day included;

- Took a lot of fear out of the process
- Enjoyed the behind the scenes tour
- Put my mind at ease
- After years of pondering, listening to myth now seen for ourselves the reality, no more worries
- Peace of mind



- Everything was informative and professional
- Greater insight into what goes on
- Tour of Crematorium surprisingly educational, removed myths

- We found today very interesting and calm, far from dark and depressing
- It gave me a sense of peace
- Being able to participate in a usually secret process
- A chance to visit that wasn't emotionally laden
- Open and frank. Good guide.

We asked our visitors some of the music they would like to be played at their funeral and we had a good selection of music choices!

- Wild Thing – The Troggs
- Shiny Happy People – REM
- Sit Down – James
- When your feet don't touch the ground – Neverland
- For Good – Wicked
- Oh when the saints
- Falling Leaves – Nat King Cole
- You'll Never Walk Alone – Gerry and the Pacemakers
- Piper / piano music

We also asked our visitors to think about what one thing they would like to do before you die? Here are a selection of the responses we got;

- See my daughter married and happy
- Go to see Andre Rieu in Maastericht
- Travel the world
- Learn to swim
- Ride in a Rolls Royce
- Spend time with my son
- Find a cure for cancer
- Learn a new language



A lot of people noted that they hadn't given it a thought but would go away and think about it now. 100% of people who completed a questionnaire regarding the open days confirmed that they would recommend the event to other people. Meanwhile in the cemetery, which opened in 1858 but has subsequently been extended several times, we had an open grave demonstration.



Dawn, Val and Marion from Co-operative Funeralcare, one of our Partnership Funeral Directors



The Future

Due to the success of the open days and positive feedback that we have received we would look at holding more events like this in the future to build on the responses that we received from the public.

We have had a number of suggestions from the public and staff that could help us to make the event even better in the future;

- Advertising in more channels and start advertising earlier
- Run the event for longer
- Hold guided tours of the cemetery
- Possibly have the event over a full weekend, 1 day focussing on the cemetery and 1 day focussing on the crematorium.

Staff Feedback

It was important to me to ask the staff who worked on the days to provide some feedback on how they felt they went;

What did you find most beneficial about the open day?

- Having the building cleaned up and being able to help the public
- I learned many things myself, also meeting and talking to people
- Seeing all the staff work as a team
- Everybody working together

Planning Ahead

Planning ahead gives people a chance to talk to organisations that can provide information, advice and guidance on a wide range of issues. It's been really touching to read all of the positive feedback from visitors – with many commenting on how it has put their mind at ease, and that it was far from dark or depressing – and my staff.

Given its success, I'm sure it won't be another 25 years until the next one. Maybe for the Crematorium's 'diamond' anniversary in 5 years time, if not before!

How did you feel the open day could be improved in the future?

- Perhaps more involvement from the clergy or celebrants and officiants
- Purchase additional signage, better set up area for public to complete questionnaires
- The day to be longer
- Better advertisement
- More things for people to be interactive with, talks, tours, walks of the cemetery

How did the open day make you feel?

- It was good to be able to talk to people and help them with any questions
- Happy to help and inform the public as much as possible
- I was really proud to be part of the bereavement team
- Proud to be part of an excellent team who all worked hard to make the day a success

Sonia Neighbour

St Helens Council staff, Partnership Funeral Directors and Friends of St Helens Cemetery

