Historically, funeral directors have always been an integral part of their community, sharing families’ bereavements over the generations. This has evolved into the formation of close bonds and an understanding between funeral businesses and their local population.

Understanding local needs

The experiences of any one funeral director coping with the bereaved would be echoed by other companies both large and small. Variations in dealing with families and communities, however, can be affected by numerous factors. Urban and rural life is very different and in many urban areas large immigrant populations and the multi-cultural issues they present affect how the funeral companies operate.

It is in the funeral director’s best interest to engage with their neighbourhood and local groups as traditionally most businesses grow through word of mouth. Bereavement support groups and counselling facilities are an ideal opportunity to connect locally.

Many funeral directors acknowledge the value of being a part of the community; some of the larger groups build specific community strategies to enhance their profile which makes sound business sense. Such activities may include sponsorships and supporting local groups, churches and residential homes. Many independent funeral directors are attending Dr Bill Webster’s “grief seminars” in order to understand the issues that affect the bereaved and the dying and to be aware of how their actions can help or hinder those affected.

Pre-arranged funerals

As more and more people become comfortable pre-arranging their own funerals, funeral directors have the opportunity to allow families to discuss in a relaxed and calm manner arrangements for the end of life.

Of course there are also disadvantages to pre-arrangements. Not all plans are suitable for all people and some can be more of a burden than a help. It is important to ask questions and to learn about the product before purchasing any pre-payment plan. If none is suitable, it may be just as well to talk to the family and make them aware of options and alternatives.

Communities vary greatly across England. There appears to be a larger than ever gulf between urban and rural areas. Working in an inner city environment is a challenge for our profession with mobility making local community life fragmented. In the East End of London there are a myriad of groups, both large and
Funeral directors play an important role in the community, working with emergency services and health and social care providers

small, divided by nationality, culture and religion. Trying to involve such a diversity of groups presents unique problems but the funeral trade has to deal with these issues when carrying out burials and cremations, so bereavement care is just an extension of this skill.

To develop a local network of support relating to dying, death and bereavement is a major task and the funeral profession is well placed to assist. It understands and has grown to meet local needs, and through two national associations there is the mechanism to coordinate a national programme, remembering that many funeral directors already work in this area.

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Example

T Cribb and Sons Funeral Directors

T Cribb and Sons are active members of the South West Essex VERVE group. VERVE stands for Valuing Local Diversity, Enhancing Patient Experience, Raising Public Awareness and Visible Equality in End of Life Care

The group is made up of a range of organisations including funeral directors, Hospices, Hospital Palliative Care Teams, voluntary sector organisations and members of the public, and is a member of the Dying Matters Community Development Project. Together they designed awareness-raising roadshow events at two main town centres to coincide with Dying Matters week in March 2010. The events were widely publicised in the local press in conjunction with detailed articles about local end of life care services. Following the success of these events, a large two day event was staged at BasFest, a community festival attended by thousands of local people and supported by members of the group, including T Cribb and Sons.

One of the key initiatives was an End of Life Care Planning and Choice Questionnaire which included: preferred place for care/death; practical planning e.g. funerals and wills; burial or cremation; and whether discussions about wishes had taken place with family, friends or professionals. Many readily completed questionnaires, while others were able to access information, support and even referral to appropriate services. Results seem to indicate a significant gap between people’s real needs and professional assumptions.

The questionnaire is now being used in a range of different settings to raise awareness and gain information about attitudes, preferences and priorities of the local population to promote inclusion and equal access to information.

By John Harris, Partner, T.Cribb and Sons Funeral Directors

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Useful weblinks:

www.nafd.org.uk
www.saif.org.uk
www.www.bifd.org.uk