

Restaurant-style ratings to combat funeral rip-offs

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Ratings for funeral directors will be based on factors such as price clarity and staff training ALAMY

Funeral directors are to be given restaurant-style ratings as the industry battles accusations of over-charging and inconsistent standards.

Classifications based on clarity of prices, conduct of funerals, vehicles and staff training, and mortuary and refrigeration facilities will be issued to thousands of funeral parlours based on inspections of their premises.

Those given the lowest ratings are likely to be reported to their [local authority](#) for investigation under consumer protection law.

Ratings scorecards are planned by a group set up by the funeral industry to improve standards as it braces for criticism from the government's competition watchdog.

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) is [conducting an inquiry](#) after the average cost of a funeral rose by three times the rate of inflation over a decade to reach £4,271.

Its interim report found that many funeral directors do not publish prices online, making it hard for bereaved and distressed families to compare fees, and pointed out that people could save more than £1,000 by looking at alternatives. The Treasury has also investigated the sale of pre-paid funeral plans.

The £2 billion-a-year funeral industry, which is fragmented across 5,000 branches and two trade bodies, responded by appointing a group to address inconsistency in standards and the lack of transparency on fees.

Its chairman Lewis Shand Smith, former head of the dispute resolution body Ombudsman Services, told *The Times* it wanted a tougher code for practices such as collection of the body, care of the deceased and conduct of funerals. It also plans a charter mark system and common inspection regime for the sector in England. These would produce ratings that funeral directors would have to display in their premises and on their websites, similar to those issued by the Food Standards Agency for restaurants, hotels, supermarkets and care homes. These rate hygiene standards on a 0-5 scale, where 0 means urgent improvement is needed and 5 is very good.

“There is an awareness growing that standards may not be the same across the industry,” Mr Shand Smith said. “The industry itself is concerned that the few can bring the whole industry into disrepute and it is time to correct that.”

The review will report by December and seek to introduce the changes next year. It will be voluntary but the industry has agreed to spend millions of pounds to publicise the charter marks and ratings system for funeral directors who sign up.

The two biggest funeral providers, Dignity and Co-op Funeralcare, are represented on the review group, as are the National Association of Funeral Directors, Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors and Chartered Trading Standards Institute. The CMA attends as an observer.

Mr Shand Smith said: “What is absolutely key here is to make sure that people have a choice, they are helped to make that choice at a time when they are most vulnerable and that they know what they are getting from the money they are spending.”

Funeral directors will be required to display prices for different types of funerals, include cheaper funerals and agree to a common complaints system including offers of compensation.

Inspection ratings are intended to enable families to compare items such as mortuary facilities, care of the deceased including identification and refrigeration practices, dealing with ashes and vehicles available.