

Funeral Costs

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Councils are ramping up the amount they charge for funerals and cremations by as much as 50 per cent in a shameless raid on grieving families.

Experts say there has never been a more expensive time to die.

The cost of burials has increased by as much as half over the past year to around £2,000 as local authorities try to offset the impact of swingeing budget cuts.

Basic charges at council-run crematoriums have also soared by as much as 30 per cent in that time.

MPs have referred private funeral operators Dignity and the Co-op to the competition watchdog over fears their stranglehold on the market enables them to ratchet up prices.

But the revelation that local authorities are driving up their charges so aggressively has infuriated MPs, who have accused them of imposing a hidden tax on the bereaved.

The average cost for a funeral in the UK is £3,700. This pays for everything from burial or cremation costs to renting limousines for the family and hiring a minister for the service.

Most people employ a funeral director to arrange the day for them, who typically pays these fees and passes them on to the customer.

Half of the average funeral bill goes on basic burial costs — paying a gravedigger and buying the lease of a grave plot with the right to erect a headstone.

Cremation is typically cheaper, but the basic costs of using the crematorium still account for a third of a funeral bill.

When a council hikes its charges for burial and cremation, the impact on grieving families is devastating.

Milton Keynes council has increased its basic charges from £1,460 to £2,100 at eight cemeteries — an increase of just under 44 per cent.

Meanwhile, Watford Council has ratcheted up charges by 49.1 per cent from £1,325 to £1,975, according to figures compiled for Money Mail by Funeralbooker, a price comparison website.

‘When there is a death in the family, all sorts of people put their hands in your pockets and try to take advantage,’ says Mark Garnier, a Conservative member of the Treasury Committee.

‘When you have suffered a bereavement, your ability to fight your corner is massively reduced, giving the provider a big advantage.’

Councils have been forced to slash their budgets as the Government tries to fix the nation’s finances.

Milton Keynes council told Money Mail it has increased prices ‘from a low-cost base’ in line with other councils and private funeral homes.

It said it had not increased burial fees for children, despite ‘facing increasing financial pressures due to reduced funding’.

Basic charges at council-run crematoriums have also soared by as much as 30% over the past year But the council’s justification for the huge price hikes is not borne out by the figures, as it charges far more than neighbouring local authorities.

Northampton Borough council charges £884 for burials at Towcester Road cemetery, while Luton Borough council charges £1,345 at The Vale cemetery.

‘Cuts in funding may mean councils are turning to the crematoriums and cemeteries to balance the books,’ says James Dunn of Funeralbooker.

‘These prices could be a hidden cost of austerity.’

The price of funerals varies hugely across the country. For burials, London is by far the most expensive, with four cemeteries in Wandsworth, South-West London, charging £4,561.

This is almost 18 times the £255 fee charged by Cross Cemetery, run by Fermanagh &

Omagh district council in Northern Ireland.

Prices are set by councils for public facilities or by private firms such as Dignity, which owns 767 funeral homes and 39 crematoriums.

John Mann, a Labour member of the Treasury Committee, says funeral costs should be capped. 'This is a hidden tax on grieving families and the dead. These increases are completely out of order and should not be allowed,' he says.

'People have the right to be buried or cremated in the area where they have lived and not penalised in this way by greedy councils.'

It is not just local authorities that are cashing in. The majority of the most expensive crematoriums are privately run by Dignity, whose £2.4 million-a-year boss is Mike McCollum. Dignity crematoriums in Beckenham in Kent, Crawley and Chichester in West Sussex, and Nuneaton in Warwickshire all charge £956.

This is almost three times the £364 charged at the City of Belfast Crematorium, which is the cheapest place to be cremated.

A spokesman for Milton Keynes council says: 'We understand this is a very sensitive subject, often at a difficult time for families and loved ones, so we need to ensure our service meets their expectations.'

'So, while we are facing increasing financial pressures due to reduced funding, where we have had discretion we have used it.'

A Dignity spokesman says: 'We operate at the high end of the market and provide excellent client service and facilities to care for the deceased.'

Read more: <http://www.thisismoney.co.uk/money/news/article-3607313/Families-hit-50-hike-cost-funerals-cash-strapped-councils-ramp-prices.html#ixzz49gMOKrLN>

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