

## SPSO decision report

**Case:** 201608601, Falkirk Council  
**Sector:** local government  
**Subject:** burial grounds/crematoria  
**Decision:** some upheld, recommendations

### Summary

The funeral service for Mrs C's late mother (Mrs A) was delayed due to earlier services over-running. However, Mrs C said that Mrs A's family and the other people attending the funeral were not pro-actively made aware of the delay and that they were not advised that there was nowhere sheltered for them to sit whilst they waited after they vacated their cars. The council responded to Mrs C's complaints about these matters, but did not accept that they bore any responsibility for the delay or that any further action by them was required.

Mrs C brought her complaints to us. She complained that the council did not act reasonably to minimise the delay to the funeral, that they did not advise the family or the other people attending the funeral of the likelihood of a delay and that they did not respond reasonably to her complaints.

We found that the council could not have acted to minimise the delay once it emerged, so we did not uphold this part of the complaint. However, we agreed that several actions that the council had proposed in their response to us could reduce the likelihood of similar delays occurring in the future.

We found that the council did not act reasonably in communicating the circumstances to Mrs A's family or the other people attending the funeral, and so we upheld these aspects of Mrs C's complaint.

We further found that the council had not responded reasonably to Mrs C's complaints. We found that they had not responded in line with their complaints procedure and that they had included contradictory information in their responses to Mrs C. We upheld this aspect of Mrs C's complaint.

### Recommendations

What we asked the organisation to do in this case:

- Apologise to Mrs C that they:
- did not act reasonably to advise her family or other mourners of the likelihood of a delay to Mrs A's funeral service
- did not respond to her complaints in line with their complaints procedure
- provided her with contradictory information within and between complaints responses.
- The apologies should meet the standards set out in the SPSO guidelines on apology available at <https://www.spsso.org.uk/leaflets-and-guidance>.

What we said should change to put things right in future:

- The council should:
- implement a system to ensure that, when a service is booked, an advisory note will be issued automatically to the funeral director or person making the booking regarding the length of service and what is expected of the funeral directors and celebrants with regard to timeous running of services and what the

consequences may be if a service overruns

- give further practical and sensitive consideration to installing a light system in the service chapel, which will be visible to officiants but not mourners, and which will be operated by crematorium staff, to advise the officiant of the time left for the service to be completed. Advise an appropriate point of contact immediately when likely delays to funeral services emerge.
- Advise an appropriate point of contact immediately when likely delays to funeral services emerge.
- Additional seats should be installed outside of the crematorium. This should ensure that, if delays occur, those waiting do not have to stand whilst waiting for entry to the crematorium.
- Information should be provided to arriving mourners when there are delays to services beginning, or when sheltered waiting areas cannot be accessed at the crematorium.

In relation to complaints handling, we recommended:

- Complaints responses should not contain contradictory information.

We have asked the organisation to provide us with evidence that they have implemented the recommendations we have made on this case by the deadline we set.