

**Environment and
Sustainable Communities
Overview and Scrutiny
Committee**

23 February 2024

Bereavement Services



**Report of Alan Patrickson, Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods
and Climate Change**

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 The purpose of the report is to provide members of Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee with information relating to the work of Bereavement Services.

Executive summary

- 2 This report provides members of Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an update on Bereavement Services.
- 3 A presentation by the Neighbourhood Protection Manager and Bereavement Services Manager accompanies this report.

Recommendations

- 4 That Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee receive the report and comment on it accordingly.

Background

- 5 The overall vision for all our cemeteries and crematoria is:
 - To provide a sensitive, respectful service fitting for the bereaved.
 - To ensure that sympathetic, supportive, and confidential advice is given to the recently bereaved on funeral service arrangements and give assistance in co-ordinating the funeral process if required.

- To provide suitable standards of maintenance in cemeteries and crematoria across County Durham, working to maximise value for money & biodiversity.
- To ensure the proper respect of all Council cemeteries and crematoria with fair Rules and Regulations, which are explained to all visitors.

Statutory Requirements.

- 6 Burial authorities are authorised, but not required, to provide burial grounds if they have available land. The Local Authorities' Cemeteries Order 1977 regulates depth of burial, the need for grave and burial records and their storage, and the management of memorials (including their removal). The Order also empowers a burial authority to manage, regulate and control cemeteries, to lay out, repair and provide access to the cemetery, apply for part of the cemetery to be consecrated or set apart for some denominations, to provide chapels or mortuaries, to set certain fees and charges, and to maintain graves.
- 7 Durham County Council is responsible for some 46 open cemeteries carrying out @ 1,200 full burials/reopen and ashes graves per year. Durham County Council is also responsible for some 98 closed churchyards. Provision of cemeteries/ closed churchyards also comes from Parish/ Town Councils as well as Churches.
- 8 The service is also responsible for running 2 crematoriums at Mountsett and Durham which are managed by Joint committees working in partnership with other authorities. At Mountsett this is with Gateshead Borough Council and at Durham this is with Spennymoor Town Council. Overall, the service carries @ 3,900 cremations per year and 83% of DCC services are held through crematoria.
- 9 The role of bereavement services overall is to coordinate all the areas identified in Appendix 2, individual elements are delivered by different teams from Clean and Green, Business Support and Bereavement Services.

Clean and Green

- 10 The Clean and Green Team deliver all the grounds maintenance operations associated with bereavement services i.e., grass cutting, flower and shrub bed maintenance, tree works, roads, footpaths, fencing in cemeteries/closed churchyards.
- 11 They also undertaking grave digging operations and have been trained and have all achieved the Health and Safety and the Burial process certificate. This ensures all graves are dug and maintained in accordance with the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management 'Charter for the Bereaved'.

- 12 Within the Clean and Green Team, they also deal with memorial inspections making safe etc, in total there are more than 75,000 memorials to be tested.

Business Support

- 13 Currently within Business support there are a couple of dedicated staff who deal with all aspects of cemeteries including.
- Customer services
 - i. Families (grave bookings, family searches etc)
 - ii. Funeral Directors (funeral arrangements)
 - iii. Memorial Masons - Memorial applications and permits.
 - Coordination of burials and memorials with the relevant teams after a burial has been booked.
 - Paperwork
 - i. Cemetery registers and plans
 - ii. Financial aspects from invoices to reconciliation

Bereavement Services

- 14 Bereavement services have 2 members of staff who deal with Memorial inspections, meeting families regarding unsafe headstones/damage to memorials, closed churchyard orders, infrastructure inspections, grave marking for funeral services, headstone marking for installations, faculty applications, complaints, etc.
- 15 They also carry out 'public health funerals' in response to our statutory duties. This is covered under the provision of section 46 (i) of the Public Health (Control of Diseases) Act 1984, "where the County Council of Durham must, cause to be buried or cremated the body of any person who has died or been found dead in their area, in any case where it appears to the Council that no suitable arrangements have been or are being made otherwise than by the Authority".
- 16 Over the years this type of service has increased mainly due to Funeral Poverty which is having an affect across the UK. SunLife's Cost of Dying Report' (2024) reported that the average funeral costs £4,141. They also highlight that families are in debt for £2,716 on average for each funeral. The Northeast average cost is £3,973. Recent research also shows that Universal Credit is now having an effect also.
- 17 In most instances, we are notified of the death by the Coroner's Officer. The Coroner's Office is involved in the investigation of certain deaths (for

example, where the cause of death is uncertain). In these cases, the Coroner's Officers will make attempts to trace any relatives of the deceased. If the Coroner's Office is unable to trace any relatives; or no person is willing or able to prepare and/or pay for a funeral; then the Coroner's Office notifies Bereavement Services of the death.

- 18 We may also receive notification from hospitals if a person has been found to be deceased upon arrival at hospital (and the Coroner's Office is not involved in the investigation of the death); and there are no persons or relatives to arrange and/or pay for the funeral. We may also be notified of a death by residential homes, hospices and nursing homes.
- 19 This involves carrying out house searches to identify if there is a valid will, any next of kin, assets etc. that may assist with the funding of the funeral arrangements. In carrying out this service we may also use genealogy companies to assist in finding next of kin.
- 20 Whenever the views of the deceased are known, the funeral is arranged accordingly. Most funerals are cremations unless the deceased person's wish to be buried has been expressed in a signed, written statement. A public health funeral arranged by Durham County Council includes the following:
 - Appropriate advice and support
 - Liaison with third parties and personnel required to arrange a funeral
 - provide care and preparation of the deceased
 - carry out the local removal of the deceased from either their home or mortuary
 - provide a standard Windsor type coffin
 - provide a hearse to attend the service at crematorium/cemetery
 - provision of a minister/ celebrant.

Burial space

- 21 Unlike Crematoriums which has a fixed asset base, burial space continues to be used up and maintenance of these community spaces will continue ad infinitum.
- 22 Therefore, we continue to look at areas in which we can suitably extend or create new burial grounds where possible, however this is subject to Environment Agency approval regarding groundwater pollution. Also, availability of either DCC owned land or private land that landowner may be willing to sell.

- 23 Several our existing cemeteries are now full, and several others are starting to reach a critical point where decisions need to be made to find alternative sites or re-locate families to the nearest existing cemetery.
- 24 Work has started on a plan for the future, considering the existing provision, how it is being used, use of plots where exclusive rights have sold and the availability/ ownership of possible land.

Woodland Burial Site

- 25 An area of land to the bottom of South Road Cemetery and Durham crematorium which is owned by Durham County Council was established as a community owned woodland burial site which was created by the Woodland Burial Trust by way of a lease agreement, however this went into administration and Durham County Council have now taken this over and continue to work with a friend's group on this site.
- 26 The site has become popular and gives another alternative for the bereaved when making funeral arrangements.

Crematoria

- 27 There are two crematoria in Durham, both are partnerships and managed through Durham County Council. Both have separate legal status, Central Durham is a partnership with Spennymoor Town Council and Mountsett in partnership with Gateshead Borough Council as Joint Committees. In Durham 83% of services are through a Crematoria.
- 28 All crematoria must follow the legislation in the Cremation Acts 1902, Cremation Regulations (England and Wales 2008), regarding the disposal of the dead.
- 29 There are several areas of change that have affected delivery of the service. The main challenge to the service was the requirement (from 1st January 2013) for 50% of all cremations to be mercury abated. Should this not be achievable, legislation would be introduced whereby all crematoria undertaking excess of 1,970 cremations during 2003 would be required to install abatement equipment.
- 30 The Federation of Burial and Cremation Authorities felt that rather than the cost of Mercury Abatement being met by the busiest crematoria the cost should be shared around the industry and introduced the CAMEO scheme (a burden sharing scheme where those who with abatement equipment would receive payment from those without, based on the number of cremations undertaken).
- 31 In 2003 Durham Crematorium carried out significantly more cremations than the threshold set out in the 2003 legislation (1,326) and was therefore compelled to install equipment in line with legislation. In

consideration of this Members of the Joint Committee agreed to install abatement equipment.

- 32 In 2003 Mountsett Crematorium carried out significantly less cremations than the threshold set and was therefore not compelled to install equipment in line with legislation. In consideration of this Members of the Joint Committee agreed that Mountsett Crematorium should join the CAMEO scheme rather than install abatement equipment.
- 33 Whilst it was envisaged that the number of projected cremations would continue to be lower than the legislative threshold, there were strong environmental reasons why, the old cremators at Mountsett Crematorium were replaced with Mercury Abatement equipment.
- 34 There has been significant capital investment of over £4.5m at Durham Crematorium since 2009, with further investments of nearly £2.3 million planned for the coming years in line with the Service Asset Management Plan for the site. The three cremators at the crematorium were installed in 2012/13, with full mercury abatement equipment being installed at that time. They have a life expectancy of 20 years, so the next cremator replacement programme of £1.6 million, based upon today's market prices, is not scheduled until approximately 2032.

Project	Cost £
New additional car parking	182,899
Crematorium extension	953,983
New cremators and mercury abatement plant	1,292,918
Improvement to office facilities	145,000
Alterations to book of remembrance room	171,463
Refurbishment of chapel	122,698
Refurbishment of internal waiting rooms	131,819
Replacement of copper roofing canopies	277,184
Improvement to office	183,950
Staff car Parking	56,466

- 35 Since 2009 there has also been significant investment in the Mountsett Crematorium totalling of over £4.1m with further investments of nearly £1.5m planned for the coming years in line with the Service Asset Management Plan for the site. The two cremators at the crematorium

were installed in 2022, with full mercury abatement equipment being installed at that time. They have a life expectancy of 20 years, so the next cremator replacement programme of £1.6 million, based upon today's market prices, is not scheduled until approximately 2042.

Project	Cost £
Installation of Memorial Towers	21,530
Road Widening	24,973
Tarmac Access to Car Park	62,200
Car Park Extension	88,398
Cremator Replacement and Extension	1,564,515
Energy improvement works	111,824
Install temporary cremator	334,929
Cremator Replacement	1,593,884

Re-cycling of Metals

- 36 The recycling of metals resulting from cremation is only carried out with the written consent of each bereaved family. Following a cremation of a deceased person the cremated remains contain metals such as items used in the construction of the coffin and on numerous occasions, orthopaedic implants such as hip and knee replacement joints. In the past this metal was removed from the cremated remains and buried within the grounds of the crematorium as the bereaved had never expressed any desire for its return to them. With the onset of modern waste management regulations, the Environment Agency indicated that once the metal is removed from the cremated remains it becomes waste albeit a very sensitive material.
- 37 The Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management (I.C.C.M.) consulted with the Royal Dutch Cremation Federation, which has a metals recycling scheme currently in operation in the Netherlands and decided to model the UK scheme on its experiences. A specialist company called OrthoMetals has been contracted to provide special containers to UK scheme members and to carry out periodic collections. The recycling of pacemakers is also undertaken by the same company.
- 38 The Dutch company then return a payment for the metals/pacemakers collected to the I.C.C.M. which is the distributed to those crematoriums who have nominated a death related charity. Starting in 2023 we have now been able to nominate more than one charity to distribute funds.

- 39 So far £340,761 has been given to local death related charities by both crematoriums.

Memorialisation

- 40 Memorialisation is the commemoration of the lives of those loved, revered, and respected. The cemetery and crematorium offers a number of ways in which memorialisation can take place, including large/small memorial plaques, vase blocks, niche units, seats, entries in the book of remembrance, miniature books, remembrance cards, memorial leaves and Ancillary income is generated from the sale of these, the majority of these can be found at both crematoriums.

Awards

- 41 In July 2009 Durham County Council were awarded The Charter for the Bereaved. The Charter is recognised across England as one of the top standards in Cemetery and Crematoria Services provision and related aspects of bereavement.
- 42 Overall, the service provided is a valued one that has achieved a Gold standard through the ICCM (Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management). In November 2023, Bereavement Services was rated by ICCM as the eleventh best performing service in the country.
- 43 Castleside Cemetery was awarded Cemetery of Year Honourable Mention 2008 and Cemetery of Year Runner-Up in 2009, 2019 and again in 2020.
- 44 Moorside Cemetery was awarded Cemetery of Year small/medium burial ground silver award in 2021.
- 45 There were also two green flags awarded to the crematoriums, in recognition of their maintenance standards and community involvement.
- 46 As well as these awards we also take part in the Association of Public Service Excellence (A.P.S.E.) benchmarking. In 2016 the service was a finalist in the best and most improved performer category in Cemetery and Crematorium services. Again in 2018 we were again a finalist in this category.

Fees and Charges - benchmarking

Cremation

- 47 The current cremation fees for crematoria across the region, shown in the table below, indicates a current average cremation fee of £835

(inclusive of medical referee's fees and environmental surcharge where appropriate) across the region:

Crematorium	Cremation Fee
Gateshead	£793.50
Durham	£810
Stockton	£865
Hartlepool	£890
Middlesbrough	£902
North Tyneside	£897
South Tyneside	£888
Northumberland	£920
Newcastle	£939
Sunderland	£924
Coundon	£1030
Darlington	£982
Average	£903

Burial

48 Burial fees and charges are considered each year, overall Durham's fees are just less than the regional average and have increased by inflation over recent years. The interment of children up to 18 years old remains free. In 2020/21 new charges were introduced for service cancellations (less than 48 hours' notice), overrun exceeding 10 minutes, late attendance at the graveside (more than 20 minutes) and right of burial extensions from 20 to 40 years. Full details of all these charges are shown in Appendix 4.

Authorities	Burial Fee	Exclusive Rights of Burial	Total cost
Sunderland	£1,269	£1,269	£2,538
Northumberland	£1,079	£1,139	£2,218
Newcastle	£1014	£1,153	£2,167
Gateshead	£959	£1,155	£2,114
Hartlepool	£1025	£1,439	£2,464
Darlington	£990	£1010	£2,000
South Tyneside	£962	£1,110	£2,072
Middlesbrough	£790	£1,230	£2,020
Durham	£920	£1020	£1,940
North Tyneside	£994	£875	£1,869
Redcar & Cleveland	£830	£980	£1,810
Stockton	£735	£970	£1,705
Average	£963	£1112	£2,076

Key issues

Sensitivity of the service

- 49 This service is provided at one of the most difficult times in families lives having lost a loved one. This can be a difficult task and good liaison with funeral directors and families is important and it is done with understanding and sensitivity. This task should not be underestimated.
- 50 Staff have also shown their commitment to the bereaved and will go all out to ensure that we provide the best possible service we can whilst being short staffed due to holidays/sickness etc.

Regulation

- 51 There are few laws of general application to burial grounds. Most burial law is directed at particular types of burial grounds, such as those

operated by local authorities (the Local Authorities' Cemeteries Order 1977 (LACO), as amended) or the Church of England (various ecclesiastical Measures, although the law relating to churchyards is mostly common law). However, all crematoriums must follow The Cremation (England and Wales) Regulations 2008.

Funeral Poverty

52 As Previously mentioned, Funeral Poverty is having an affect across the UK. The current market has a lack of transparency making it difficult to compare products and there are significant differentials between suppliers. To help we direct families to the financial help that is available and provide a range of available options for families to take when considering services. For example, at the crematoria some slots are priced differently and there is a direct cremation option. There is also a comparison site for funeral directors' costs <https://www.funeralguide.co.uk> so that families can compare costs.

The Future

53 Resomation a new alternative to burial and flame cremation as a human end of life option. A funeral involving water cremation is the same as one involving flame cremation until the point at which the body is committed from public view. Water cremation uses water-based solution to speed up the natural process the body goes through at the end of life. The body is placed in a coffin or shroud made from biodegradable materials and then carefully positioned in a water chamber. Instead of using fire, water cremation combines a water and alkali-based solution, and this gentle method speeds up the natural process the body goes through at the end of life. The process is on average 3-4 hours long and complete the pure white bone ash that remains is returned to the family in an urn as happens with flame cremation. So outside of a quieter and less environmentally damaging process than flame cremation the public will see no real difference to the funeral service process or the returning of ash.

Conclusion

54 Bereavement services continues to provide services to our communities at a time in life when they are most needs.

Background papers

None

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

The Council undertakes many parts of the service to meet the statutory requirements and within the legislation and regulations that are laid down.

Finance

Not applicable

Consultation

Not applicable

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Not applicable

Human Rights

Not applicable

Climate Change

There have been significant changes within the service to contribute to the reduction in carbon use and this continues with new technology being investigated.

Crime and Disorder

Not applicable

Staffing

Not applicable

Accommodation

Not applicable

Risk

Not applicable

Procurement

Not applicable

Appendix 2: Bereavement Functions

