

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

1 MARCH 2016

FINAL REPORT OF THE ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL - BEREAVEMENT SERVICES

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1. To present the findings of the Environment Scrutiny panel's review on the topic of Bereavement Services.

AIM OF THE SCRUTINY INVESTIGATION

2. The Executive Member for Environment is scheduled to present a Review of Bereavement Services to the Executive in March 2016. In advance of this Review the panel was keen to gain an understanding of how current service provision can be improved to compete with neighbouring offers.
3. The panel is aware that funeral poverty is an increasing problem in the UK and recent studies have indicated that this issue is set to continue. Reductions in welfare benefits coupled with rising funeral costs means even more vulnerable bereaved people are taking on increased debt. The panel was keen to examine how people in Middlesbrough are affected by funeral poverty and consider ways in which the local authority can assist in helping residents to arrange an affordable funeral.

TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE SCRUTINY INVESTIGATION

4. The terms of reference for the review are as follows:-
 - To examine the level of investment required in Bereavement Services to meet the needs of the town including service provision beyond the initial period of bereavement
 - To consider whether an extension of crematorium opening and service times can be achieved without the Council incurring increased costs

- To consider alternative charging policies for Cremation and Burial's and providing a wider offer for families

METHODS OF INVESTIGATION

4. Members of the panel met formally on 8 October, 29 October, 19 November, 17 December and 7 January to discuss/receive evidence relating to this investigation and a detailed record of the topics discussed at the meetings is available from the Committee Management System (E-genda), accessible via the Council's website.

MEMBERSHIP OF THE PANEL

5. The membership of the panel was as detailed below:

Councillor D Rooney (Chair), Councillor T Higgins (Vice-Chair), Councillors Blyth, Cole, Coupe, Goodchild, Purvis, Saunders and Uddin.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

6. Middlesbrough Council is currently reviewing its Bereavement Services functions.
7. The panel was informed that Bereavement Services consist of three core elements which are:-
 - Management responsibility and accountability as the Statutory Burial Authority and Cremation Authority on behalf of Middlesbrough Council with significant technical and operational support from Legal Services, Middlesbrough Registration Service, Teesside Coroners, Area Care, Environmental Health Officers, Ministry of Justice and professional organisations.
 - Cremation Services.
 - Cemetery Services.
8. There are currently seven cemeteries under Council control for which the Council has a statutory responsibility to maintain. St Cuthbert's Churchyard at Marton is a closed churchyard and the Council is responsible for its maintenance. The service delivers approximately 340 burials a year. The Council has recently revised its Headstone Maintenance Policy.
9. Teesside Crematorium is situated within Acklam Cemetery and prior to 2014 carried out approximately 3500 cremations a year. In January 2014 a new crematorium opened at Kirkleatham and during 2014-2015 approximately 900 cremations were carried out there that would previously have been carried out at Teesside. There has also been some talk of another crematorium opening in neighbouring Stockton.
10. The areas that the Service intends to include in its Service Review are:
 - Extension of Burial Services.
 - Future design and policy of cemetery arrangements.
 - Crematorium opening and service times.

- Investment.
 - IT Web and Digital Solutions.
 - Charges, alternative income stream and wider offer.
 - Threats from alternative providers.
11. Within the next few years alternative locations for burials or extensions to existing cemeteries is required as it is predicted that all available graves will be used within 3 years in some cemeteries and within the next 8 to 10 years in all cemeteries. In terms of the Council there will need to be some debate about whether available land should be used for burials or housing.
12. The maintenance of cemeteries presents an ongoing pressure as current policies allow for many choices of graves, headstones and kerb sets. The department acknowledges that many miles of grassed areas around graves have to be trimmed. Consideration needs to be given to future design, style and layout to support an overall standard and more efficient maintenance. For example, if there are no kerbstones and only a grassed area around the headstones, cutting the grass would be much easier.

Bereavement Services – Current Provision

13. The traditional service times for the Crematorium and Burial Service are between 9.00 am and 4.00 pm, Monday to Friday, with a break for lunch. An “Out of Hours” service is also available for religious purposes. Cremation services usually last 30 minutes. It was noted that changing and extending opening times would provide a greater offer to families. However extending service times balanced with opening times could also increase costs. Consultations undertaken by the Council with local Funeral Directors have indicated that Funeral Directors are happy with the current opening times.
14. It was acknowledged that the current facilities at the Crematorium are dated, although some renovations to the Chapel of Remembrance have recently been completed. The Bereavement Services Office is located at Acklam Cemetery and requires significant investment. Currently all the grave records and plans are paper based and require digital mapping. Historical burial records also need to be digitised. There is only one copy of historical burial records which dates back to the 1870s in a book that is 150 years old. Some research had been undertaken into companies that can record and map the information on headstones and produce a digital record. Panel Members suggest that consideration should be given as to whether this project can be undertaken in-house or by a local company.
15. Bereavement Services would like to consider alternative charging policies for cremations and burials. A number of possible income streams are available which are sympathetic to the needs of families but also provide a wider choice. For example, a dedicated website which could provide information such as when services are taking place and enabling people to add options online such as flowers and cards or donations. This idea is also being explored on a national basis. Some Local Authorities levy an additional charge for cremations and burials for non-residents however this is not currently the case in Middlesbrough.

TO EXAMINE THE LEVEL OF INVESTMENT REQUIRED IN BEREAVEMENT SERVICES TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THE TOWN INCLUDING SERVICE PROVISION BEYOND THE INITIAL PERIOD OF BEREAVEMENT

16. In an effort to gain an insight into current service provision at Teesside Crematorium, Acklam Cemetery and Linthorpe Cemetery a site visit was arranged. For comparative purposes a visit to Kirkleatham Memorial Park was also undertaken.

Kirkleatham Crematorium and Memorial Gardens

17. The panel was welcomed to Kirkleatham Crematorium and Memorial Gardens by the Manager of the facility. Reference was made to the processes followed at the Crematorium from the point at which the Funeral Director phones to arrange a time slot for a funeral to the service itself. It was advised that services are held on the hour, every hour depending on demand. The statutory paperwork, which has to be completed, was shown to the panel and the information contained therein was highlighted.
18. Members queried whether Families are required by law to have a Funeral Director organise the funeral on their behalf. It was advised that although a family can legally organise the funeral it is strongly recommended that they contact a Funeral Director, who is fully aware of all the requirements.
20. Reference was made to the Wesley Music Player system and it was advised that a catalogue of tracks is available for families to choose from. In terms of the times for holding a funeral service it was explained that Kirkleatham Crematorium and Memorial Gardens is available on evenings and weekends. However, Funeral Directors very rarely book a service after 4pm. It was also advised that services can be broadcast live on the internet and Kirkleatham has received many lovely comments in respect of this provision. The example was given of a young man whose granddad had died recently, he now lives in Australia and had woken at 2am, put on his suit and watched his granddad's funeral live. The facility to play a montage of photographs from cradle to grave is also available and again there has been a lot of excellent feedback received in respect of this offer.
21. It was noted that efforts are continually made to look at how the facilities / offer available can be improved. It was recognised by Members that the entire facility is managed and operated by four members of staff with a single cremator. The use of internal CCTV cameras to assist staff in the end to end management of the cremation process and equipment purposely designed to facilitate the automated charging of the coffin is state of the art. It was explained to the panel that in Hindu/Sikh funerals the eldest son can, if he so wishes, charge the coffin. The provision of cameras linking the chapel and cremator allows the guests to observe this process live.
22. It was also advised that Kirkleatham Memorial Park make full use of the waste heat produced through the installation of a heat reclamation system. This facility enables the waste heat energy produced to be utilised for the operation of the Crematorium, with any excess being exported off site. In addition the cremator is programmed to start at 6.30am to enable the cremator to heat up to the 850 degrees temperature required before a coffin can be charged.

23. It was advised that a person's ashes can be made available for the family on the day of the funeral if required. Reference was made to the natural burial ground and the provision of palm pilots to allow people to locate their loved ones via an app and take photographs of the site in spring, summer, autumn and winter. The panel was impressed with the commercial operation.

Teesside Crematorium

24. On arrival at the Crematorium the panel was made aware that both large screens in St Hilda's and St Bede's Chapel are not working at present. It was noted that the glare from the sun is also an issue when using the screens in St Bede's Chapel.
25. Upon visiting St Hilda's Chapel it was explained that the Council's architects have been asked to draft some plans to allow more natural light into the Chapel and these designs are at a draft stage at present. It is proposed that stained glass will be used and will feature a contemporary design, with no religious significance, which is designed to be future proofed.
26. In terms of whether Teesside Crematorium is operating at full capacity it was advised that the Crematorium can hold up to 22 services per day and on the day of the panel's the visit there were 17 services being held. Teesside Crematorium generally operates at 40 – 60 % capacity and services are generally held between 10am – 3pm. Saturday services are offered and there are usually 4 slots in each chapel on a Saturday. At present it was advised that there is no provision of evening or Sunday services.
27. With regard to the Crematorium's offer for scattering the ashes it was advised that this service is available at the Crematorium, as is the option to purchase a sanctum, where full or partial remains can be buried. This option costs in the region of £1000 including lease of the land for a period of 25 years.
28. Reference was made to the mercury abatement scheme¹ and the Bereavement Services Manager advised that 66% of cremations were abated in 2014/15. It was noted that there are five cremators at Teesside Crematorium, 3 have abatement equipment fitted but the 2 older cremators do not. It was explained that there is an organisation called CAMEO, who organise the trading value for the number of abated cremations above the 50 per cent DEFRA target. In 2014/15 Middlesbrough Council received a rebate of £8,400 from CAMEO.
29. The panel queried the annual energy bill for Teesside Crematorium and it was confirmed that the cost in 2014/15 was £67,000. In contrast the panel were told that the annual energy bill for Kirkleatham Memorial Gardens is in the region of £16,000. It is important to note, however, that Teesside Crematorium has undertaken three times as many cremations as Kirkleatham Memorial Gardens in 2014/15. The panel expressed the view that although the heat recovery system maybe an issue people feel emotive about it is eco-friendly to ensure that excess heat is used to generate

¹ Mercury abatement is a capital intensive process that removes mercury from the flue gas produced from the cremator. The Government via DEFRA introduced new regulations for the abatement of mercury in Crematoria emissions on the 1st January, 2005. These regulations stated that mercury emissions from crematoria have to be reduced by 50% by the end of 2012.

energy and the Council should consider maximising this potential. Reference was made to the efficiency of the operation at Kirkleatham Crematorium and Memorial Park and the need to improve the offer at Teesside Crematorium.

30. The point was made that the screens have been fitted in St Bede's Chapel and pictorial displays should be able to be displayed. Urgent action is needed in respect of this issue and Members expressed the view that the webcam for family and friends abroad should also be available.
31. Digital grave mapping and digitization of burial records was referenced. The Bereavement Service Manager advised that as long as an individual who is searching for a grave is aware of when the person was born, when they died and their date of birth, the office can locate the grave as far back as 1892. An index of two thirds of the burial records have been manually transferred from paper registers to a computerised database and the remaining third are yet to be transferred. It was advised that the Council is in touch with a number of companies with regards to full digitisation of the records to national archives standards and with regards to grave mapping. The panel expressed the view that a new system needs to be brought in onto which all new records are created to national archive standards and the remaining can be transferred. A Member of the panel expressed the view that there have been significant developments in the Genealogy apps available and this is a further area the Council should be exploring.
32. With regard to the Chapel of Remembrance at the Crematorium it was advised that the design has not changed. The chapel is the original Acklam Cemetery chapel, although all the windows have been modernised. It was noted that people visit the Chapel regularly to sit, reflect and remember.

TO CONSIDER WHETHER AN EXTENSION OF CREMATARIUM OPENING AND SERVICE TIMES CAN BE ACHIEVED WITHOUT THE COUNCIL INCURRING INCREASED COSTS

33. In accordance with the approved terms of reference arrangements were made for a Funeral Director in Middlesbrough to be invited to a meeting of the panel.

Relph's Funeral Directors (Dignity UK)

34. David Harrison has been the Manager at Relph's for the last 12-14 months, he is originally from Newcastle and his appointment at Relph's in Middlesbrough is fairly recent.

How do Teesside Crematorium's current opening and service times match with the demands of families when arranging funerals/burials?

35. In terms of the possibility of extending the chapel times, the Manager at Relph's expressed the view that at present Teesside Crematorium can sometimes be busy. However, extending the opening hours beyond 5pm is not very practical. In winter it is too dark and there is no demand for such provision. The suggestion was put forward that at present Teesside Crematorium closes for an hour for lunch, which is out of step with every other local authority. If the Crematorium remained open during that hour it would provide an additional 20 slots per week for Funeral Directors to book.

How long is the average wait time from a family's initial point of contact to the date/time of a burial/cremation service?

36. Every case is different and it all depends on how busy the Crematorium is at the time. The opening of Kirkleatham Memorial Park has eased the pressure, as the majority of Redcar & Cleveland residents now use that facility and death rates/times will always remain an unknown quantity.

What investment in Teesside Crematorium would have the greatest impact in improving service provision?

37. St Bede's Chapel is dated, cold and not very welcoming. A full refurbishment of St Bede's and St Hilda's is needed. Carpeting of the Chapels would also help to make them feel warmer and more welcoming. A move away from the benches and the provision of chairs would also help make the venue feel a lot more modern. Landscaping of the grounds is another area where the overall feel of Acklam Cemetery and the Crematorium could be enhanced. Wear Valley was cited as an example worthy of visit in terms of its beautiful flower displays. It was suggested that a visit would also give Members insight into how Kirkleatham Memorial Park will look once the gardens are fully established.
38. In terms of staff at Teesside Crematorium it was noted that they are always very helpful and accommodating.

Reference was made to the possibility of adding stained glass windows to the chapels as part of the refurbishment.

39. The view was expressed by Relph's that this would be a backward step no other local Crematoriums have stained glass windows in them. From a family's perspective they are keen to see a natural, warm and neutral environment. Relph's felt that there are a lot of relatively simple and low cost changes that could be made to modernise and refresh the Chapels. Lighting is an issue that was referenced and it was felt that this could easily be improved. The waiting rooms for families prior to the commencement of the service is a further area for improvement, as it is very small and there is not much in the way of facilities. It was suggested that the provision of a canopy outside of St Bede's Chapel would at least provide a certain degree of shelter in bad weather whilst guests are awaiting the arrival of the hearse.
40. With regard to burial provision the point was made that residents are able to purchase a grave in Middlesbrough for 2 people whereby they can pay the second internment fee to more or less guarantee the cost of the second internment at today's prices. However, this is something the family can only do after the funeral service and it would be helpful if families could pay the additional internment fee at the point of the burial simply for reasons of convenience.
41. At Teesside Crematorium / Acklam Cemetery there is also no provision for families to inter cremated remains without purchasing a full burial plot at a cost of £795. In other Crematoriums people can purchase a ½ plot or ¼ plots for this purpose, which is something Middlesbrough Council, could offer.

42. A further area for improvement in terms of provision is in respect of the receptacle in which the families receive their cremated ashes. At present Teesside Crematorium provide the ashes in a green cardboard box with a label affixed to the top and the ashes are contained in a plastic bag inside. This feels disrespectful. When clients are surveyed about the service they receive quite often they mention that they felt disappointed about the presentation of the ashes. Relph's expressed the view that many other options are available, for example scatter tubes, which are not hugely expensive and are much better for the purpose of scattering the ashes. It was advised that at Kirkleatham Memorial Park the ashes are provided in a black scatter tube, which comes in a bag for the family, and although there may be an additional cost added to the cremation service to cover this provision it is something which is really appreciated by the family.
43. Reference was also made to the IT system and the fact that the system at present is not working. This is something that many families would like to use in order to either display a visual tribute to their relative or to stream the funeral service online for other members of the family who live in other parts of the world. It was requested that the system be fixed as soon as possible.
44. Finally, at present Teesside Crematorium Memorial Gardens offers a reduced rate for cremation services at 9.15am whereas Kirkleatham offers a reduced rate for all services before 10am. This is an offer the Council could extend to assist in reducing the overall cost of funerals for residents.

What are the costs of a funeral, and how does this compare with payments from the Social Funeral Fund?

45. The Manager of Relph's explained that there is a huge difference in costs between Funeral Directors and it was acknowledged that Relph's are probably at the higher end of the market. A number of small, independent Funeral Directors have opened up recently, who rent premises and rent vehicles. They have no mortuary or embalming facilities and owing to the overheads being very low they are able to provide a funeral at a lower cost. At Relph's it is very much about providing the service that meets the needs of the client. It was noted that Relph's is a member of the National Association of Funeral Directors (NAFD) and the company agree to abide by the (NAFD) code of practice. In terms of service Relph's aim to provide the best service you can get.

Do funeral homes offer less expensive funeral options for people on low incomes?

46. There will always be families who don't have the funds to pay for a funeral but Social Fund² payments have changed dramatically in recent years. Previously the DWP used to pay 95% of the costs but the average amount paid by DWP is now in the region of £1,400 whereas the average cost of a funeral is approximately £4000 so there's always going to be a shortfall. The Council and James Cook Hospital both have contract funerals for the provision of Public Health funerals (see paragraph 69). However, the rest of the market is governed by market forces and some Funeral Directors provide more services than others. If people, however,

² The Government provides Social Fund payments to help people unable to pay for funerals but these are paid in retrospect and do not necessarily cover the full costs.

request a simple funeral the standard of care the family receives is exactly the same as those purchasing more expensive options.

47. On a weekly basis Relph's encounter a case where the family is unable to even afford a simple funeral and for these cases they will point the person in the direction of social services or the bereavement officers at the hospital.

Is there a regulatory body that keeps a check on Funeral Directors i.e. contract and pricing?

48. At present there is no regulatory body and this is an area Relph's (Dignity UK) is pushing for. There are currently two voluntary bodies, which Funeral Directors can subscribe to: - The National Association of Funeral Directors (NAFD) and the SIF (Society of Independent Funeral Directors) and both organisations aim to drive standards up in an unregulated industry.

TO CONSIDER ALTERNATIVE CHARGING POLICIES FOR CREMATION AND BURIALS AND PROVIDING A WIDER OFFER FOR FAMILIES

The Cardiff Council Funeral Service – Case Study

49. It is no secret that Funeral Costs are increasing throughout the UK with the average UK funeral currently priced at £3,456. In Cardiff the average cost is £3,500 - £4,000. These costs have risen at a rate of 7.2% p.a. since 2004, which is well above the general rate of inflation. With the current economic environment putting pressure on jobs, incomes and pensions, it is not surprising that 17% of people in the UK struggle with the costs of arranging a funeral. On average, people struggle to find a shortfall of £1,246. If you multiply 17% of the 552,000 deaths in the UK in 2011 by the shortfall of £1,246, funeral poverty (the funding gap) stands at £117m.
50. There are several ways in which people try to fund this gap. Some apply to the Government for a Social Fund Funeral Payment. Others dip into their own savings and investments, and many have to cut down on the funeral or sell off personal possessions. Unfortunately the most likely outcome, however, is that people go into debt, whether that is borrowing from a friend, relative or a bank, paying for things on a credit card or owing directly to a funeral director.
51. It's worth noting that the number of people dying each year in the UK is currently at an all-time low, thanks to ever increasing life expectancy. However, this number is expected to grow substantially in the next 20 years when a higher proportion of people (the baby boom generation) move into their later years. So, if the cost of a basic funeral continues to increase at the rate it has in recent years, the number of people with affordability issues is only going to increase as, in turn, will the funeral funding gap.
52. Cardiff City Council recognised that although it cannot control the entire costs associated with a funeral as the majority of funeral directors are owned and operated by private companies who need to make a profit the local authority can help influence the overall funeral cost in the City. The Council is responsible for setting the burial and cremation fees and charges which are paid by the public as part of the overall funeral cost, however invariably the costs for burial or cremation only make up between 20 and 40 per cent of the overall funeral bill. That said, it is

often the costs payable to the Local Authorities that are scrutinised more so than the fees paid to Funeral Directors for their services.

53. In a bid to challenge the rising cost of funerals and make the procurement of a funeral more transparent for the bereaved Cardiff City Council established the Cardiff Council Funeral Service. This is a low cost, high quality, fixed price funeral service available to any resident of the City. The service area produces a specification covering all of the elements required for a basic funeral and then tenders this to local funeral homes. The lowest bidder is then awarded the contract for 2 to 3 years. At present the service is attracting around 150 funerals per year and this is steadily increasing as the service is further publicised. The public are also encouraged by the Council to 'shop around' and establish a fair price before committing to an agreement.

Cardiff City Council Funeral Service

54. In 2015/16 the approximate cost for a Cardiff City Council burial is £2305 and the cost of a cremation is £1709. This service is promoted via local press, events etc.

Cremation

Funeral arrangements and provision of the specification £1030

Cremation Fee at Thornhill Crematorium £480

Doctors Fees £157

Total cost of funeral including Disbursements £1667

Burial

Funeral arrangements and provision of the specification £1030

EROB New Grave2 depth 100 years £650

Interment Fee £580

Chapel Fee £80

Total cost of Funeral including Disbursements £2340

Average UK Funeral Cost - **£3,456**

Average Funeral Cost in Cardiff - **£4000**

55. Cardiff Bereavement Services have recently provided information around this scheme to a number of other Local Authorities keen to help their residents and play a part in keeping funeral costs at an affordable level. Cardiff City Council acknowledges that there are benefits and risks in introducing this scheme as follows:-

- A reduction in public health funerals
- Helpful and positive approach in the current economic climate
- Good news story
- The funeral director is able to sell extras at the family's request
- Raises the profile of funeral poverty
- Funeral Director awarded the contract receives repeat business.

56. A copy of Middlesbrough Council's fees and charges were presented to the panel and are attached at Appendix 1. In addition, comparative information from

Hartlepool, Redcar and Cleveland and Stockton Borough Councils were also provided. A summary of the key costs for comparative purposes are listed below:-

	Chapel Fee	Cremation Fee 2015-16	Burial Fee 2015/16	Grave Purchase Fee 2015/16
Middlesbrough Borough Council	£105	£642.00	£540.00	£785.00
Stockton Borough Council	N/A	N/A	£420.00	£565.00
Hartlepool Borough Council	£100.00	£670.00	£585.00	£730.00
Darlington Borough Council	N/A	£697.00	£625.00	£650.00
Redcar & Cleveland Borough Council	N/A	N/A	£330.00	£700.00

57. It is apparent from the charges that there is relatively little difference between the Cremation Fees charged by local authorities across the Tees Valley. A greater variation is apparent in the burial fees charged (Burial Fee plus Grave Purchase Fee) with fees ranging from £985.00 in Stockton to £1325 in Middlesbrough.

58. The charges for burials / funerals at the independently owned Kirkleatham Memorial Park in 2015/16 were as follows:

Burial Fee	£225.00
Grave Purchase Fee	(from) £400.00

The average cremation fee is £639.00

59. In December 2015 the Government's Work and Pensions Select Committee launched an inquiry into "funeral poverty", and the benefits available to people who lose someone they are financially dependent on. Select Committee Members had heard from constituents who were denied their relatives' ashes because they were unable to pay for the funeral. Anecdotally Members of the panel have also heard of this happening in Middlesbrough. The Bereavement Services Manager advised there was one case in 2014/15 he was aware of where the Council was contacted in respect of such an issue. However, the case was resolved following the Council's involvement.

Work and Pensions Select Committee – January 2016

60. On 6 January 2016 a number of written submissions were presented to the Work and Pensions Select Committee, which are relevant to the panel's current review.

Kensington Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB).

61. There is ample evidence of the inconsistency in how funeral companies publish their costs, so that customers cannot compare and make informed choices. The

grief and distress of bereavement means people are not able to exercise their usual degree of reason or caution, and the industry should make explicit efforts to take this into account.

62. Families will often go to any lengths to borrow money and household bills will go unpaid to ensure that a funeral takes place at the earliest possible date. The CAB are concerned about the long-term distress and poverty caused by the cost of funerals.
63. Some local authorities have addressed the problem of funeral poverty by agreeing a local affordable provision. This is a complete, culturally appropriate package, available to all residents. It is set up at no cost to the Council except the cost of publicity and prevents many families from going into debt.
64. A range of disbursement fees and funeral company charges as well as details of Local Authorities that offer Affordable Funeral Schemes were presented to the Committee and are attached at Appendix 2.
65. The London Borough of Hounslow was highlighted as a local authority that provides clear, accessible information on people's options when it comes to paying for funerals and minimising costs. Hounslow's leaflet advising on what to do after death is attached at Appendix 3. The leaflet is shared by other services that come into contact with people at risk of funeral poverty such as doctor surgeries and citizen advice centres.

Middlesbrough's Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)

66. Whilst debt is a huge issue in Middlesbrough, people do not always state how they got into debt. Funerals are a large and usually unexpected expense, especially for those on low incomes.

Social Fund Funeral Expenses Payments (FEP) – Professor Neville Harris

67. Professor Neville Harris concluded that the FEP scheme is overly complicated and the claims process and particularly the application form, requires improvement.
68. The average payment to successful FEP applicants was £1,225 in 2012-13 (DWP 2015), at a time when the average cost of private funerals was £3,500 (University of Bath, 2014.) Although the FEP scheme is only intended to 'provide help towards a simple, respectful, low cost funeral' (DWP 2015, para 2.5), it is not surprising that the level of assistance provided continues to be widely regarded as too low and a factor in 'funeral poverty'.
69. There is also a case for more radical reforms to be considered aimed at preventing funeral poverty, one suggestion being the inclusion of funeral expenses within a contribution-based welfare system.

Public Health Funerals

70. Local Authorities and hospitals have a legal duty under the Public Health Act 1984 to bury a body when there is no family or next of kin. These Public Health Funerals are planned with due dignity and respect, and friends and family are welcome to

attend, even though the arrangements cannot be made around their needs or expectations. There is little publicity about this service and yet demand on this service is increasing. The number of public health funerals carried out for people who die alone or without relatives able to pay, has risen by 11 per cent in the past four years. The cost to local councils of public health funerals has also risen by almost 30 per cent to £1.7m.³

71. In Middlesbrough the figures for the number of Public Health Funerals paid for by the local authority over the last three years is as follows:-

2013/14 - £26,307.24 (24)

2014/15 - £14,815.80 (14)

2015/16 - £13,888.16 (12)

72. The figures suggest that Middlesbrough is at odds with the national trend. However, from the panel's perspective this raises the question as to whether residents are aware that this service is available.

Linthorpe Cemetery & Nature Reserve

73. The panel had been advised that the Friends of Linthorpe Cemetery and Nature Reserve are a dedicated group drawn from the local community. The group's aim is to preserve and enhance Linthorpe Cemetery and its Nature Reserve for the education of children and adults who seek to enjoy the history and natural history of both the cemetery and the town. It was agreed that a visit to Linthorpe Cemetery would be included as part of this review. The panel visited the cemetery in November 2016 and was introduced to the Chair, Vice Chair and Secretary of the Friends group, which was established in 1996.

74. In 2001 Middlesbrough Council and the Friends of Linthorpe Cemetery successfully secured £1m of funding through the Heritage Lottery Project. This funding was used to renovate paths, repair gravestones, restore the chapel and commission a number of sculptures, which were designed by local children to create a natural space and help make the cemetery feel more welcoming and valued. The main focal area, which features steel flowers alongside sculptures of new buds, represents Middlesbrough's old steel industry and Middlesbrough's future coming to life.

75. A 15 acre nature reserve featuring a wild flower meadow has been established, which is now part of the management plan for the cemetery. It was evident to all Members of the panel that the work undertaken by the Friends Group has made Linthorpe Cemetery a place where people feel very comfortable and safe to visit. Comments from residents in the comments book include "I feel safe on my own and not alone."

76. The panel was informed that 60 per cent of those buried in Linthorpe cemetery are children and babies were buried in the cemetery in small marked graves as recently as 50 years ago. Over the course of the visit a number of graves were also highlighted where an interpretation board has been erected to celebrate the grave. For example, a Japanese Sailor is buried in the cemetery and the writing on the grave is in Japanese. The old Jewish cemetery and Quaker burial area were also

³ BBC News – 'Paupers' Funerals cost councils £1.7m' - 30 November 2015

highlighted as being very distinctive. The panel was advised that the majority of Muslim graves are located in Thorntree and Acklam Cemetery.

77. Reference was made to the work undertaken by the Area Care Gardener with specific responsibility for Linthorpe cemetery, as well as how valued this role is by all who visit the cemetery. Visitors have commented in recent years that they find walking with their dog / children in the cemetery both relaxing and peaceful. It was advised that over 2000 bulbs are planted along the paths to enhance the natural beauty of the cemetery and make it more interesting and relaxing. It was clear to the panel that the work undertaken by the Friends of Linthorpe Cemetery Group is beneficial for all and the group has a fantastic relationship with both Area Care and Bereavement Services.
78. The panel was informed that the wildflowers provide a perfect habitat for the butterflies, as do the brambles. Tees Valley Wildlife Trust has also advised that there a number of grasses and plants in Linthorpe Cemetery, which are limited solely to this area. In managing the nature reserve the point was made that it is all about timing and care needs to be taken when undertaking Area Care work to ensure that all operatives are fully aware that the area is a controlled conservation area.

Middlesbrough's History

79. There are 47 previous Mayors of Middlesbrough buried in Linthorpe Cemetery, alongside sportsmen, soldiers and entrepreneurs of the town. Reference was made to the map of the Cemetery, which as long as you have the name, date and year of when the person was buried the Area Care Gardener 'the keeper of the knowledge' will be able to locate the grave. The panel commented that the Town does not realise what a jewel it has in Linthorpe Cemetery. It was highlighted that the graves of the Dormans, Stewarts, Calverts and Pooles are all located in Linthorpe Cemetery. The history of Middlesbrough rests in Linthorpe Cemetery.
80. The Group explained that it organises butterfly days and insect days for the local school children, who always find the visits intriguing. The Group is also keen to extend this offer to other schools in the town in an effort to educate future generations on the history of Middlesbrough and help the children to recognise what is in their past. Reference was made to the Council's bid to be a Centre of Culture in 2025 and that an annual event at Linthorpe Cemetery would fit well with that agenda. Reference was also made to the growing popularity of genealogy and the Cemetery was described as both a 'living history' book and a 'forgotten jewel'. Reference was made to the Tees Valley First World War Commemoration Project delivered in 2014/15, to mark the 100th anniversary of the end of the First World War. The project included a 'Homecoming' outdoor performance in Albert Park and was hosted by Periplum Outdoor Arts Company.
81. The Chair of the Friends of Linthorpe Cemetery Group advised that the Group is keen to host a similar event on an annual basis and is scheduled to hold its first meeting about the proposed event after Easter. It was recognised that a lot of work will be involved in such an event and any support the Council could offer would be much appreciated. The Group also provided the panel with the programme of events, organised by the Group, which are scheduled to take place between January – July 2016. The panel was informed that there are approximately 80

members of the Friends Group and that the Group has a very good relationship with the Council.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

82. Based on evidence given throughout the investigation the panel concluded:
- a) Over the course of the review the panel has had the opportunity to visit Teesside Crematorium, the Bereavement Services Office and Linthorpe Cemetery. The panel has been impressed by the clear care and commitment with which the service is managed and in putting forward recommendations for modernising and refurbishing the facilities the panel seeks only to enhance the Council's current service provision. In addition the opening of Kirkleatham Memorial Park in Redcar and Cleveland has created competition to which the local authority needs to respond. The panel is very complementary about the offer provided at Kirkleatham Memorial Park and would like to see elements of their business focussed approach adopted at Teesside Crematorium.
 - b) An area of interest for the panel over the course of this review has been funeral poverty. Given the attention this issue has received at a national level in recent months and the fact that the government's Work and Pensions Select Committee is currently examining the issue the panel sought to gain an insight into whether the local authority can play a role in helping reduce funeral costs for Middlesbrough residents and if so how this can be best achieved. The panel heard that the issue of funeral poverty is a growing concern. The average UK funeral is priced at £3,456 and on average people struggle to find a shortfall of £1,246. Cardiff City Council is cited as a local authority that provides an affordable funeral service to help their residents keep funeral costs at an affordable level. The panel found the scheme to be a very proactive response to this emerging issue. The panel is also of the view that the Council has a role to play in providing accessible information on people's options when it comes to paying for funerals and minimising costs.
 - c) The panel's visit to Linthorpe Cemetery was both informative and insightful. The Friends Group of Linthorpe Cemetery have created and continue to manage an area that not only includes the resting place of the town's most prominent figures and families but also provides a space of peace and tranquillity in the heart of the town, which can be enjoyed by all. Linthorpe Cemetery was described as both 'a living history' book and a 'forgotten jewel'. The panel is keen to see Middlesbrough's history publicised and promoted with local school children. In order to highlight the achievements of the town and the people who have helped to make Middlesbrough the town it is today. The panel was surprised to learn that 60 per cent of those buried in Linthorpe Cemetery are children and babies. The marking of unnamed and shared baby graves was highlighted as an issue that the local authority needs to rectify. The panel is confident that the service is committed to undertaking this piece of work and that it will be approached with the care and respect the babies and families rightly deserve.
 - d) Finally the panel is mindful that genealogy is an area of growing interest and the number of apps available offering this type of service is increasing. In light of technological developments in this area the panel is keen to see the digitization of all of Middlesbrough's grave and burial records to national archive standard.

The panel has expressed the view that consideration should be given to whether this project can be undertaken in-house or by a local company.

RECOMMENDATIONS

83. That the Environment Scrutiny Panel recommends to the Executive:

- a) Following consultation and discussion with senior managers that a percentage of the crematorium's income (to be agreed) is identified to reinvest in the service allowing senior staff to ensure that facilities are kept up to date and in line with emerging regulations.
- b) In the short term that any urgent updating is looked as part of 'the invest to save programme' in order that the bereavement services and in particular the Crematorium remains competitive particularly in light of the competition from Kirkleatham and Stockton.
- c) That investment in Bereavement Services is focussed on the following areas to ensure that the crematorium provides an offer that enhances the services available and which is expected of a modern crematorium:-
 - Visual photographic tributes and webcasting of services to be made available
 - The trollies and charging equipment used at the Crematorium to be upgraded to an automated system
 - A full refurbishment of St Bede's and St Hilda's Chapels to be undertaken with a focus on creating a natural, warm and neutral environment (Architectural plans to be provided to the panel in May 2016).
 - Improved waiting room facilities for mourners including some form of shelter
- d) That Bereavement Services examine the feasibility of installing new heat recovery measures at Teesside Crematorium. These measures would make use of the waste heat produced by the cremators which is presently discharged into the atmosphere.
- e) That the Head of Property Services undertakes a piece of work with a nominated Member of the Panel to improve the way in which currently unnamed and shared baby graves are memorialised.
- f) That a digitised plan of all seven cemeteries incorporating site map and section plan, with the ability to highlight specific grave numbers, be commissioned. Burial records also need to be digitised to preserve these original, fragile and historically important documents for future generations.
- g) That the feasibility of introducing a Middlesbrough Council Funeral Service is explored taking into account any potential risks this may pose to the local authority. The panel would like an update to be provided once the officers have attended forthcoming seminars on Funeral Poverty and by June 2016.
- h) That a copy of the Bereavement Services Strategy / Business Plan is provided to the panel at the earliest opportunity.

- i) That consideration is given to the production of relevant information on the Middlesbrough Council Website and other forms of local media including leaflets to advise Middlesbrough residents on 'What to do' following a death and for copies to be made available at key locations across the town.
- j) That the history of Middlesbrough, which is contained in Linthorpe Cemetery, be publicised and promoted with local school children to highlight the achievements of the town and the people who have helped to make Middlesbrough the town it is today.
- k) That a future edition of the Love Middlesbrough magazine carries an article on the history of Linthorpe Cemetery. The panel note that this is promoted through the Middlesbrough Culture programme which is held each September
- l) That the staffing levels of qualified staff for burials remain at 4.5FTE Members of staff.
- m) That an apprentice is employed through the councils apprenticeship programme on a four year apprenticeship to the current Gardener based at Linthorpe Cemetery.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

84. The Panel would like to thank the following people for their help with this review: -

Geoff Field – Head of Property and Commercial Services
 Paul Thwaites – Property Services Manager
 Colin Duncan - Bereavement Services Manager
 Derek Lewis – Chair – Friends of Linthorpe Cemetery and Nature Reserve
 Malcolm Cummins – Vice Chair – Friends of Linthorpe Cemetery and Nature Reserve
 Dorothy Humphreys – Secretary - Friends of Linthorpe Cemetery and Nature Reserve
 Paul Reed – Manager of Kirkleatham Memorial Park
 David Harrison – Manager Relph's, Middlesbrough

BACKGROUND PAPERS

85. The following sources were consulted or referred to in preparing this report:

- Cardiff Bereavement & Registration Services Strategy Framework Document 2014 - 2024
- House of Commons - Work and Pensions Committee: Oral evidence: Bereavement benefits, 6 January 2016
- House of Commons – Work and Pensions Committee: Written evidence: Kensington Citizens Advice Bureau, Professor Neville Harris - School of Law - University of Manchester, The Child Funeral Charity and Allwood of Totnes Independent Funeral Service
- BBC News, Paupers' Funerals cost councils £1.7m' - 30 November 2015
- Report to and minutes of the Environment Scrutiny Panel meetings held on 8 October, 29 October, 19 November, 17 December 2015 and 7 January 2016.

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February 2016