

Information/Discussion Paper

Overview and Scrutiny – 23rd April, 2018

Cremator problems update

This note contains the information to keep Members informed of matters relating to the work of the Committee, but where no decisions from Members are needed.

1. Why has this come to scrutiny?

- 1.1 The committee requested an update on progress relating to the recent issues with the existing cremators at Cheltenham Bouncer's Lane Crematorium, including details of the problems encountered, how long it took to be resolved, how it was resolved, how many people it affected, how many complaints were received and what lessons have been learnt as a result.

2. Summary of the Issue

- 2.1 Members will be aware of the longstanding reliability problems in relation to the two cremators at the Council's crematorium. These were installed under a project which ran from 2009 to 2011, during which period the contracted company Crawfords went into liquidation, resulting in the unsatisfactory commissioning of the new plant, many aspects of which have since been found to be of poor quality.
- 2.2 A total of 12 local authorities installed plant using the same company and every one of the installations has been unsatisfactory, resulting in one crematorium at Margam in south Wales burning down and another having a serious fire.
- 2.3 Every local authority affected has since decided to replace the defective plant or build a new cremation facility.
- 2.4 In addition to trying to keep the service operational with the current poor quality equipment, Cheltenham's response to this difficult situation has been to commission a new two chapel crematorium facility to the east of the current cemetery site, which is being financed principally by borrowing, underwritten by an increase in charges to cover both interest and repayment of capital. The Council's charges remain comparable with those of other crematoria in the region.

3. Summary of recent cremator problems

- 3.1** On Friday 9th February, 2018, the Director of Environment attended the crematorium site in relation to reports that smoke was being emitted from the cremators into the operational crematory area and could at times be smelt in the south chapel. Having witnessed the situation first hand and in consultation with health and safety advisors, the Director determined that cremations should cease, pending a full assessment of the safety of the plant by maintenance engineers. Cremations scheduled for Friday 9th February were completed to minimise the disruption to families that day, but as of Monday 12th February, the business continuity plan for the service was initiated.
- 3.2** It subsequently transpired that despite regular maintenance and safety checks, there were quite extensive works needed to both cremators, including re-bricking, hearth repairs, welding of flues and replacement of an oxygen sensor which had to be sourced from and manufactured abroad. A further delay arose due to poor weather which affected the delivery of the required component.
- 3.3** Given the impact which the shutdown would have on booked cremations, it was important that funeral directors were contacted quickly to ensure that alternative arrangements could be put into place for families expecting their loved ones to be cremated from Monday 12th February onwards.
- 3.4** Due to the time of year and associated peak demand for cremations, other large crematoria in the locality (Gloucester and Worcester) said they were not in a position to take displaced cremations from Cheltenham. As a result, the service decided that the best available option was to make alternative arrangements with a private funeral provider, Westerleigh, which had sufficient capacity at its brand new facility in a countryside location just outside of Newport. Subsequently, we also needed to arrange for some cremations to take place in Somerset to meet our total requirement.
- 3.5** On the morning of Tuesday 13th February, all five coffins from Monday's services were transported to Newport, where they were cremated at Westerleigh's new Crematorium at Langstone Vale Crematorium. The same applied for all of Tuesday's services, and so on for that weeks' worth of bookings. We ensured that the process was as dignified as anyone would expect, with the coffin leaving Cheltenham Crematorium via the catafalque, through the chapel, and out of the main doors, where it was placed into the private ambulance ready for transportation. Upon arrival at Newport, the coffins were carried into the chapel, placed on the catafalque where the curtains were closed and the coffin taken into the crematory or storage area, where it waited for cremation. This again was done one coffin at a time. We used a local Funeral Director, Alexander Burns, for all of the transportation.
- 3.6** After the first week, we needed to organise an alternative crematorium to help with the number of cremations required, as Newport's Langstone Vale could not cope with the demand due to their own commitments, so the Westerleigh Group organised another of their crematoriums located at Sedgemoor in Somerset to help out. The Newport cremations were collected on the morning every day for transportation, and the Sedgemoor cremations were collected in the afternoon. Obviously, the same care and respect shown at Langstone Vale was mirrored at Sedgemoor. A third Westerleigh crematorium located in the Forest of Dean was used for a couple of cremations also. When coffins were transported to the crematoria, cremated remains from the previous days cremations were collected by the Funeral Director and

returned to Cheltenham Crematorium ready for collection.

- 3.7** Funeral directors supported the process of communications with bereaved families and were instrumental in helping the authority deal with what was an emotionally challenging situation. Some families chose to make alternative funeral arrangements either in their entirety, or in relation to the cremation rather than the funeral service.
- 3.8** Throughout this process, briefings were provided to the Funeral Directors, so all clients involved could have regular updates and real time information at what was a very worrying time for them. Although the situation wasn't ideal, the service did what it could to ensure that families could still have a funeral service in Cheltenham and that loved ones could be cremated in as timely and dignified a manner as possible. By informing the funeral directors regularly, we were ensuring that the information could be passed on to the families and options given to them. Also, by using a funeral director to transport the deceased, we ensured they were treated with as much dignity and respect as possible.
- 3.9** Clearly, this was not an ideal situation and a small number of bereaved families made known that they were unhappy to learn that cremations were going to take place remote from Cheltenham. In relation to booked services taking place from 12th February, some were also concerned about the lack of notice and perceived failure by the Council to make direct contact with families. This was because the Council's contractual arrangement is invariably with funeral directors, as opposed to the family of the deceased and it was felt that the strongest relationship was between the funeral directors and bereaved families. If the Council had sought to contact relatives directly, this would have risked further confusion and distress to the bereaved.
- 3.10** Where complaints were received, these have been dealt with through the Council's established 3 stage complaints' procedure, which gives the opportunity for independent review through the Local Government Ombudsman where a complainant remains dissatisfied with the authority's consideration of the complaint.
- 3.11** In recognition of the authority's inability to provide the intended level of service, the following specific arrangements were made:-
- A hold was placed on any new cremation service bookings;
 - Chapel service fees were waived from those who had services booked prior to 9th February (£159 per service);
 - All additional coffin transfer costs by private ambulance to the place of cremation were offered free of charge (£50 to £75 per funeral).
- 3.12** The Crematorium member working group has been kept updated regarding the issues with the current plant and continues to be a useful sounding board for progression of the new crematorium scheme.

4. Duration of disruption

- 4.1** Our cremators were out of operation for 13 working days and we started to cremate again on Thursday 1st March. We are still cremating on limited throughput, with one fully functioning cremator and another operating with limited use due to ongoing issues.

5. How many services were affected?

- 5.1** We organised transportation of the deceased and associated cremations for 93 families, with a further 71 choosing to have cremations undertaken elsewhere, at a crematorium selected by either themselves, or by their chosen Funeral Director, but with the service still held at one of the Cheltenham Crematorium Chapels.

6. Complaints Received

- 6.1** We received 3 formal complaints about the situation.

7. Lessons learnt

- 7.1** In summary, I believe the service acted swiftly and efficiently to ensure families could still have a funeral service which offered as much dignity and respect as possible, in what was an extraordinary situation. The choices made were the best and most viable available, to ensure optimum service delivery in a time of crisis and to help the bereaved families involved to suffer as little stress and impact as possible.
- 7.2** With the benefit of hindsight, there were clearly issues with the original procurement of the current cremators at Cheltenham crematorium in 2009. This process was the subject of a previous scrutiny review, which set out a range of recommendations that are helping to guide the process of the new crematorium project and associated procurement decisions. One of the key lessons with the procurement of the new plant has been a greater emphasis on quality and to ensure that maintenance is undertaken by the specialist company providing the cremator equipment, which is one of the market leaders.
- 7.3** In order to procure satisfactory plant and abatement equipment, it has been determined that this cannot be successfully accommodated within our existing crematory, so in this respect the decision to provide a new facility is considered the right one.
- 7.4** If another shutdown was required, much of the process would be similar to that employed during the recent continuity event. The choices made were considered to be the best and most viable, to ensure optimal service delivery in a time of crisis and to minimise the stress and impact on bereaved families as far as possible.

- 7.5** The principal lesson is likely to be with regard to communication. We relied heavily on Funeral Directors to pass on all relevant information and changes to their clients on our behalf. From the small number of formal complaints we have received about disrupted cremation arrangements, we have identified a need to review the Council's relationship with bereaved families and will consult with funeral directors about our role in communicating any future business continuity issues.
- 7.6** Similarly, we would welcome views from members about how best we should brief on any future service continuity issues, bearing in mind the potential for customers to approach councillors directly when problems arise.
- 7.7** A review has taken place of the range of essential spares which we have in stock for the cremators and some additional items have now been purchased, although we were already keeping the range of spares in stock recommended by our maintenance contractor. Some service items are not achieving their design life-expectancy, as a result of the cremators seemingly operating at too high a temperature. This has been a recurring problem and has not been solved by a change in our cremator maintenance contractor. This is another key justification for investment in the new facility which is currently under construction.

Next Steps – we will pursue the outstanding issues identified under the 'Lessons learnt' section above and continue to update on service issues and progress with the new crematorium through the member working group.

Background Papers

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Accountability

Councillor Chris Coleman, Cabinet member
Clean and Green

