

Bereavement Services Sub-group Report



7 November 2016



North Tyneside Council

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Reason for the Sub-group

At its first meeting of the Overview, Scrutiny & Policy Development Committee of the municipal year on 6 June 2016, the Committee agreed its work programme for the year ahead.

The Committee was reminded that the topic of a review on the Bereavement Services had been raised for potential review the previous year due to concerns to the level of information and guidance available to the bereaved at what is an emotional and stressful time.

To help the bereaved and Funeral Directors the service and advice available should be both easily assessable and consistent.

It was requested that a review be undertaken in relation to the services provided by the Authority's Bereavement Services.

Approach

It was agreed that establishing a Bereavement Services Sub-group to carry out a short review would be most appropriate means of undertaking this piece of work.

The following members volunteered to serve on the group:

Church Representative – Rev M Vine
Councillor Sandra Graham
Councillor John O'Shea

The Sub-group met on 2 occasions and also carried out a visit to Preston Cemetery & Crematorium to see first hand the facilities available including the customer front door services and back office accommodation/working environment.

At its first meeting the Sub-group received an overview of the services provided from Sam Dand, Senior Manager – Local Environment Services and Julie Evans, Manger - Bereavement Services.

The Sub-group established the following objectives for the review:

- 1) To have an understanding to the extent of advice customers receive and to ensure that procedures are implemented consistently.
- 2) To investigate the facilities and customer/personal space available within the building used by the service.
- 3) Identify where any improvements could be made to the services delivered to customers

Bereavement service facilities and staff structure

Bereavement Services provides facilities for the cremation and burial of deceased persons, with additional provision of gardens and facilities for the bereaved to remember their loved ones.

The service provides support and guidance to the bereaved, funeral directors and general members of the public. This includes services such as arranging a funeral, grave digging, ensuring the service proceeds as planned on the day and advising on memorial options.

In recent years there has been an increased interest in family history research and an increase in grave searches.

The service in North Tyneside works to the Institute Cemetery and Cremation Management (ICCM) Charter for the Bereaved, which is a recognised industry standard. North Tyneside Bereavement Services has achieved the ICCM Gold Charter status for five successive years, which is the highest rating possible.

The Bereavement Services office is located in Preston Cemetery and has office opening times of Monday to Friday 9am to 12pm and 1pm to 3pm.

The Bereavement Service as a whole in North Tyneside is responsible for:

7 Cemeteries and 2 crematoria:

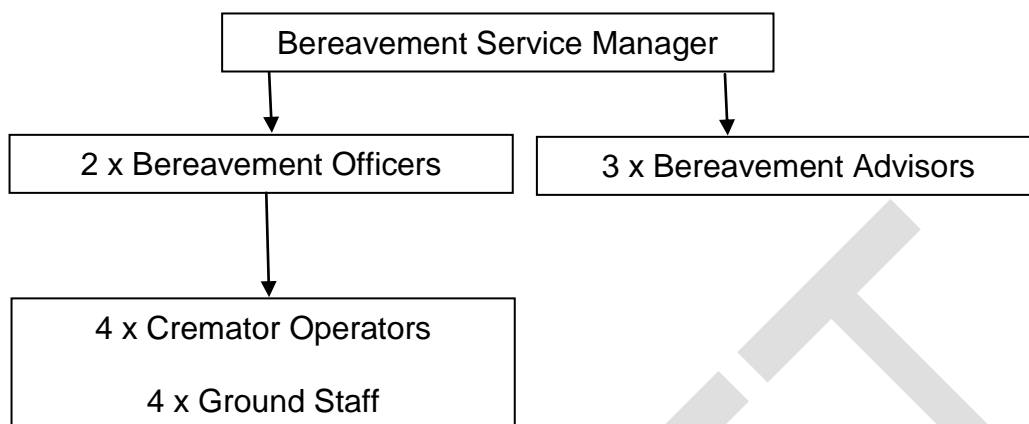
- Preston Cemetery & Tynemouth Crematorium, North Shields
Opening times: 1 November to 31 March - 9am to 5pm & 1 April to 31 October - 9am to 7pm
- Whitley Bay Cemetery & Crematorium
Opening times: 1 November to- 31 March - 9am to 4pm & 1 April - 31 October - 9am to 7pm
- Benton Cemetery, Forest Hall
- Church Bank Cemetery, Wallsend
- Dudley and Weetslade Cemetery
- Earsdon Cemetery, Whitley Bay
- Holy Cross Cemetery, Wallsend

And 6 closed churchyards (declared as full)

- Christ Church, North Shields
- Holy Cross Ruins, Wallsend
- St Albans, Whitley Bay
- St Bartholomew's, Benton
- St Johns, Killingworth
- St Paul's, Whitley Bay
- St Peter's, Wallsend

Service Structure

The Bereavement Service's team is comprised of fourteen full time staff.



Council ground staff are responsible for memorial stability testing, litter picking, bin emptying in addition to planting and the maintenance of flower beds across all 7 cemeteries.

The major elements of the ground maintenance are undertaken by ISS Ltd, as well as grave digging.

Advice and services

Most advice provided is centred on contact with Funeral Directors in facilitating the arrangements for carrying out a burial or cremation.

Customers can contact the services for advice in person at the Preston Cemetery Office during office opening hours, telephone, email and letter. The primary advice given to the bereaved occurs at any time through the bereavement journey however most occur after the funeral has taken place.

Advice and services provided include:

- Purchasing a memorial plaque or entry in the Book of Remembrance
- Renewing a memorial plaque
- To buy urns/flower containers
- Pre purchasing a burial plot
- Organisation of an interment of cremated remains
- Organisation of the scattering of cremated remains
- Attend a burial or scattering of cremated remains
- Organise the legal transfer of ownership of a grave
- Carry out search for a particular grave or several graves
- Organise a funeral where no Funeral Director has been appointed
- To pay permit fees for a memorial
- To enquire when/where funerals will take place
- To progress any concerns/complaints raised by the public

Analysis was undertaken to monitoring customer contact at the reception area. This demonstrated staff attend to customers on an average of 17 times per day and the duration of the contact varies from a document drop off of information taking 1 minute to grave transfer that could take 1 hour. The average time spent by staff is almost 9 hours per week.

Duration in minutes	% of total contacts
1-5	70%
6-10	13%
11-20	9%
21-30	3.6%
Over 30 minutes	3%

Key Statistics

North Tyneside cremates circa 2000 people per year, however the sub-group heard that this number can vary greatly as was demonstrated during 2015/16 where over 3200 cremations were carried out due to the prolonged closure of Blyth Crematorium in Northumberland.

Analysis also demonstrated that almost a third of the activity at Whitley Bay Crematorium was through custom from outside borough, due to shorter waiting times in North Tyneside.

Although there had been recent investment to upgrade software to lengthen the life span of the Whitley Bay Cremator it was estimated that its current lifespan would take it into 2021, with the costs associated to replace the cremator estimated to be in the region of £1.5m.

North Tyneside also carries out approximately 400 Burials per year.

Customer reception and offices

Preston Cemetery Office is the main office for all the 7 cemeteries, 6 closed churchyards and 2 crematoria in North Tyneside. The building is a converted bungalow and accommodates three bereavement advisors, the manager and the two bereavement officers (who are mostly out of the office).

Although the building is not spacious, the rooms interconnect and work well.

Personal space in the two crematoria is quite limited as both buildings were not purposely built for their use. The buildings are either listed or have been identified as being of historical interest.

A visit was carried out to view the facilities at Preston Cemetery & Crematorium and the following observations were made;

Reception and offices:

Members noted that the Reception area for customers had limited space. This space can accommodate only approx 6 people comfortably and would be restrictive if any more were in attendance. There was a high counter area which served as some protection to staff (in case of any possible security issues).

Through discussion at the first meeting the group learned and noted that although there was an available facility for private consultations, there was no signage to inform customers of the facility. The group therefore asked that this be promoted immediately within the reception area.

On the visit the Members were pleased to see that a sign had been put in place, although, having a room where customers did not need to be escorted through back offices would be more appropriate for the security of staff.

The office spaces for staff were inspected and it was noted that these areas were in need of decoration. The sub group was informed that due to the age of the building the heating etc could be troublesome maintaining a constant temperature throughout the year.

The building has a large secure fire proofed room where all ledgers for seven cemeteries and cash safe are stored. This allows access for staff to carry out grave searches for customers.

Grave searches etc can and are a time consuming activity and if the information was available online, this would enable a more efficient self service solution allowing for customers to search for themselves.

Although the office is not spacious, staff had ensured that they were all workable spaces.

Crematorium

The crematorium building has recently been remodelled and provides an indoor waiting area (with seating) and toilet facilities for an increased number of people.

The waiting area also has monitors that allow people attending services a view inside the chapel on occasions of very high numbers attending.

The furniture was new and was easily moveable to accommodate the wishes of different faith groups (i.e. Quakers like circular seating configurations for services).

The behind service areas accommodated space for changing facilities for clergy and the operation space for the Cremator Operators. The chapel has CCTV and operators are able to oversee and carryout their duties from behind the scenes, including the timing of the music which was all held on a digital system that was continually being added to.

The facility has and is compliant to all mercury abatement system requirements.

Garden of Remembrance

The garden of remembrance consists of plaques and Memorial Benches. It was noted there are issues to the amount of memorial ornaments and boundary fencing that people

place around memorial plaques acquired. This causes increased amount of complaints from members of the public that have been raised with officers.

Burial Chapel

The cemetery also has a Burial Chapel, on occasion burial services can overrun and extend the time planned. This then has resource consequences in respect of time for staff to complete all the necessary activities. When this occurs the Authority currently does not charge for over-run of burial or cremation services, however, there is provision for additional time to be booked in advance, at an additional cost.

With regards to the chapel maintenance it was noted the responsibility lay with the Authority's Partner Capita. It was noted that there were areas where vegetation had grown extensively around the spire of the chapel. This raised concern to the frequency of the partner was carrying out its responsibility and raised the question who would incur costs if damage occurred as a consequence.

Other Building (North Lodge)

There is another building on the site which is not used in the working of the Cemetery. It was understood that the building was on the Authority's accommodation review list and work was underway to look at options for its future use or sale, which the group considered would potentially benefit from early disposal.

Consistency of procedures

Procedures in Bereavements Services are mostly pre prescribed and undertaken through the software system it uses and therefore consistency in this regards was assured.

The Local Authorities Cemeteries Order 1977 states that only the registered owner of a grave can allow a burial or memorial to be erected in a purchased grave space.

Comprehensive training is provided to all staff in the use of the correct legal procedures to transfer a grave by the ICCM standards and North Tyneside legal team had also assisted with the wording in documentation used. This provides assurances that the correct procedure is in place.

Cost fees/charges comparison with other Local Authorities

There was a differential in charging for adult Resident/Non Resident fees for interment and non resident adult surcharge compared to other authorities in the north east region.

North Tyneside charges a surcharge for the purchase of graves by non residents (although not double the resident fee as in other Authorities) but no additional charge is made for the interment of non residents. The additional charge to purchase a grave is designed to preserve burial space for residents who pay council tax to the borough but charging more to inter would be difficult to justify as this activity is the same regardless of where the deceased came from.

The categorisation of resident/non resident is that anyone who was living in North Tyneside at the time of death (this could be a very short period of time in the borough) would be considered as a resident. If for example a person who had lived in North Tyneside for the majority of their life and then needed to move outside the borough and then passed away twelve months or more later, they would be classed as non-resident.

This raised concerns to the fairness to how to determine resident/non resident status.

Concerns were also raised with regards to residents with low income and their ability to fund the costs of funerals and consideration should be taken when determining the level of charge in addition with the ability to access death benefit.

It recommends that

- (1) Cabinet carry out a review of its charging policy for Resident/Non Resident interment fee and be mindful of the charges of other local authorities of the North East; and**
- (2) if it determines to change Interment fees that guidance is established with distinct criteria to reduce any ambiguity to who would have resident/non resident status.**

With regards to the maintenance to unstable headstones - a permit fee is charged that ensures headstones are of a standard specification and are to designed guidelines only, this also covers the cost of stability testing

A grave would be periodically topped up when required in the first 12 months and grass seeded before the responsibility to maintain the grave would be passed to the family. If it is determined that a gravestone is becoming unstable, hazard tape would be placed on the headstone if it is over 2 metres in height or laid flat by cemetery staff below this height and the family would be informed of their responsibility to carry out maintenance.

It was evident following the visit to Preston Cemetery that a number of graves had tributes that had been left for extended period of time. Complaints from visitors are often raised with officers to the condition of some graves in cemeteries; however, there was no resource available to offer maintenance of graves service of this nature.

It recommends that Cabinet be asked to carry out a review of guidelines to the use of tributes. The review should look at actions that would be taken to remove old tributes to ensure that graves are maintained and kept in an orderly presentable condition with associated timescales.

Future innovations for the service – what are they?

i). There were a number of innovations that could be considered for future years that included the digitalisation of Grave searches. It is possible to scan the relevant documents, plans and link them in such a way that customers can search and locate graves online, enabling customers to self serve for a fee.

This would be in line with the Authority's Target Operating Model and would enable families to enquire online when they are planning to purchase a burial plot and make the appropriate payments.

ii). It was noted that the possibility of setting up a North Tyneside Council Funeral Director service was being investigated as Councils are well placed to offer an end to end funeral service. The sub-group understands that there is legally no restrictions on councils provide services of this nature.

It was believed that this was a real opportunity for the Authority's Trading Company to establish a transparent business that would be attractive to customers.

iii). New methods to dispose of a body that are currently achieving success in the USA and with companies setting up in the UK were considered, these being;

Resomation – A funeral involving resomation is very similar to that of a cremation, until the point at which the coffin is committed from view. The coffin is placed in a special pressure chamber, but instead of fire, resomation uses water and alkali based method to reduce the body down to its basic elements. Once complete, the liquid is drained off and you end up with a pure white powder (very similar to cremation ashes), which can be placed in an urn or scattered.

Cryomation has been developed in the UK. The process itself uses Liquid Nitrogen to freeze the body to -196 degrees C until the body is brittle. The body is then fragmented, foreign metal objects removed, and body materials returned to the process. The remains are then freeze dried under a range of vacuumed conditions to remove the moisture. The patented process ensures that the final powder is sterile and 100% free of all bacteria and viruses. An accelerated composting process further reduces the mass and means that what is returned can itself, generate and sustain life.

Benefits of these new methods

- Compared to Cremation, the Cryomation process has 0% emissions (no mercury, dioxins or CO2).
- All of the body is returned (less the moisture) instead of approximately 2.5% of the body with Cremation (which just consists of the crushed calcified bone).
- Remains are returned in a form that gives life, (ie. you can plant a flower or tree with the remains) and in doing so complete the "circle of life" preferred by many religions.
- If you bury the remains from Cryomation, then this would return to loam in the ground in 6-12 months. In this case you could have one plot (a 3rd of the traditional plot size) that could be sustainably used in the family for generations.
- Compared to traditional burial there is a considerable space/land saving, which is a big issue for many overcrowded urbanised burial grounds.

It is known that the cremators currently at Whitley Bay still have a working life of approx 5 years. With this in mind it was thought that investigation should be undertaken and monitoring of using new methods as an alternative when the Whitley Bay facility ceases to be functional.

It recommends that Cabinet notes and monitors the possibility to use new body disposal techniques in the future.

Customer Journey

The current process for customers to make application for a plaque or entry into the Book of Remembrance is to access the form online, however, this then needs to be printed filled in and post/taken to the office for processing.

This could easily be handled all online and therefore reducing both congestion at the counter and the number of cheques being received and processed.

The main customers who visit the office are not the bereaved but Funeral Directors and the bulk of the telephone calls received are from them booking funerals. The sub-group considered these activities could be done online, reducing any need to receive visits to the office.

It recommends that Cabinet (1) implements a online service that enables Funeral Directors/Customers to book and pay for funerals and (2) implement processes to enable customers to make applications and pay for other services online.

Marketing of services available

In recent years a comprehensive brochure had been produced and is still available along with a range of other information on the Bereavement Service page on the North Tyneside Website. However it was realised that customers without access/knowledge to the use of IT could not access information except by telephone or a visit into the office in person.

It recommends that information for customers be made available and marketed at Libraries/CFC for ease of access for customers.

Visit to Preston Cemetery and crematorium

Following the visit to view the facilities and working practices at Preston Cemetery & Crematorium. It was noted that the sign advising customers that a private consultation area to discuss their needs was available. It was understood that the private room was accommodated in the Bereavement Services Managers office. Due to its location concerns were raised to possible risks to staff and on questioning it was understood that there was no alarm facility available to safeguard staff.

It recommends that all staff should be provided personal alarm devices that could be triggered in the event of potential personal risk.

The sub-group noted the opening hours/operation hours of the office and that customers are able to contact the bereavement office by phone, letter and email during standard office hours and in person during the hours 9am-12noon & 1pm-3pm.

It was noted that office staff benefitted having flexible working hours. The sub-group questions the reason why the opening times to visit in person were restricted to those stated.

It recommends that the opening times be reviewed with the intention to ensure customers were able to access advice etc throughout the working day (including lunchtime) in line with the operation of other Council customer centres.

In viewing the Garden of Remembrance the sub-group noted that the garden seat memorials were both difficult to access and were not being used for seating but as displays for further memorials and flowers. It was viewed that this practice not only served no practical purpose but also had a detrimental visual effect to the whole of the garden of remembrance.

There was a belief that a more acceptable usable arrangement would be better to place Garden Seats throughout the cemetery and that controls be put in place to restrict the size of memorial flowers etc that could be placed on the seats.

It was also the belief that the Garden of Remembrance would benefit the moving of the inaccessible unusable Garden Seats into an area where they were usable to visitors in the garden of remembrance/cemetery.

It recommends that a review be undertaken to provide guidance on the positioning of garden seats in the garden/cemeteries to future buyers and the limiting of the amount of further memorials and flowers that could be attached.

Views of Funeral Directors

All North Tyneside Funeral Directors were invited by the sub-group to a session to meet and discuss the service provided. Unfortunately there was no response to the invitation and so a questionnaire was sent as an alternative to gather their opinion.

The response to the questionnaire wasn't high but of those that were received rated the services as good/excellent overall, however, it was noted that there was some concern with regards to the presentation of the Garden of Remembrance, the arrangement of music for services and issues with the enforcement of allocated times in respect to the interment of cremated remains.

Views from recent customers

The sub-group wanted to understand the views of recent customers of the range of services provided.

It understood that this had to be conducted with sensitivity due to the emotional aspect to the services provided. A number of options were discussed to how to gather views and opinion from customers.

Customer satisfaction information was available, however, it was thought this brought limited feedback. The short satisfaction survey was designed for feedback on the service provided when they visited the main office and didn't seek views on the whole service and to what if any improvements would like to be seen.

The sub-group believed the best way to gather an overall view/opinion from customers was to use the Authority social media platforms. It was hoped that the range of topics that arose would help the sub-group identify areas where opinions were strong and identify any gaps in the service review.

The following was the proposed for posting on social media:

“The Council is currently seeking the views from those who have recently needed to use our Bereavement Service. It is keen to hear the views to what your experience was like, how well are we are performing, identify the areas of the service that could be improved and how could this be done”.

Following discussions it was advised that due to the sensitive nature of the services provided by the Bereavement Service, that further thought was needed given to how to best gather information from customers and the option to posting on social media was withdrawn.

The sub-group understands that its customers are at the heart of the services it provides and therefore their opinions and views are important to how services are structured and by gathering views/opinions would only benefit those who are responsible for delivering this service.

It recommends that a customer survey be undertaken to seek the views and opinions on all elements of the Bereavement Services and facilities.

Delivering future customer service

The sub-group have made a number of recommendations that it believes can benefit bereavement service delivery in the short, mid and long term.

It considers that if arrangements were implemented for the digitalisation of information, this would enable customers to self serve and pay online for services, which is aligned with the Authority’s Target Operating Model.

This would result in enabling staff to be then relocated to one of the Authority’s larger offices and alternative use options or sale of the current building could be considered.

Recommendations

The Sub-group recommends that Cabinet:

- (1) carry out a review of its charging policy for Resident/Non Resident interment fee and be mindful of the charges of other local authorities of the North East;**
- (2) if it determines to change Interment fees that guidance is established with distinct criteria to reduce any ambiguity to who would have resident/non resident status;**
- (3) carry out a review of guidelines to the use of tributes. The review should look at actions that would be taken to remove old tributes to ensure that graves are maintained and kept in an orderly presentable condition with associated timescales;**
- (4) notes and monitors the possibility to use new body disposal techniques in the future;**
- (5) implements a online service that enables Funeral Directors/Customers to book and pay for funerals;**
- (6) implements processes to enable customers to make applications and pay for other services online;**
- (7) information for customers be made available and marketed at Libraries/CFC for ease of access for customers;**
- (8) Bereavement Services staff be provided personal alarm devices that could be triggered in the event of potential personal risk;**
- (9) the opening times be reviewed with the intention to ensure customers were able to access advice etc throughout the working day (including lunchtime) in line with the operation of other Council customer centres;**
- (10) that a review be undertaken to provide guidance on the positioning of garden seats in the garden/cemeteries to future buyers and the limiting of the amount of further memorials and flowers that could be attached.**
- (11) that a customer survey be undertaken to seek the views and opinions of those who use all the Bereavement Services and facilities.**

Background Information

An Overview of the Bereavement Service – briefing note
Information & Views requested at meeting of 09/08/16 – briefing note
Notes of the sub-group meetings and visit to Preston Cemetery
North East Cemetery fees 2016/17
Funeral Process workflow
Intestate Deaths information
Non resident grave purchases 2015-2016
Customer Satisfaction Survey 2013/14 – results
Questionnaire to Funeral Directors

North Tyneside Bereavement Service webpage:

http://www.northtyneside.gov.uk/browse.shtml?p_subjectCategory=403

Acknowledgements

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