

**TITLE OF REPORT:** Birtley Crematorium Cremator Replacement

**REPORT OF:** Paul Dowling, Strategic Director, Development and Enterprise

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### **Purpose of the Report**

1. To seek Cabinet approval to replace the cremator at Birtley Crematorium.

### **Background**

2. The Council provides a Bereavement Service for all, currently having ten cemeteries and two crematoria.
3. The cremator at Birtley was installed in 1989 and has now exceed the upper end of expected operations (25 years). Although this cremator has been well maintained, maintenance costs are rising due to the increased difficulties in sourcing available parts and equipment which are obsolete due to the age of the cremator, and the increasing need to replace worn parts. Reliability of the cremator is reducing.
4. Birtley crematorium continues to bring income into the Council.

### **Proposal**

5. It is proposed that Cabinet approves the proposals for the replacement of the cremator and the installation of mercury abatement system equipment at Birtley Crematorium. Approval is also sought to improve staff welfare facilities and building of an extension at Birtley Crematorium to house the mercury abatement equipment if required. The need for the extension will not be confirmed until the procurement process is complete and designs have been submitted by tendering companies.
6. Appendix 1 provides information on Birtley Crematorium and the requirement to replace the cremator with estimated costings.

### **Recommendations**

7. It is recommended that Cabinet:
  - (i) Approves the replacement of the cremator at Birtley Crematorium with one cremator, a mercury abatement system and associated equipment.
  - (ii) Authorises an extension to Birtley Crematorium (if required) to house a mercury abatement system and improved staff welfare facilities.
  - (iii) Notes that subject to the above recommendations being agreed a further report will be submitted following the procurement process and recommending a tender for the necessary works.

For the following reasons:

- To continue to offer a crematorium facility to residents in the South of the Borough.
- To have capacity to increase cremations in the event of a pandemic.

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**Policy Context**

1. The proposal in this report is consistent with the Council's Thrive Agenda by putting the service at the heart of the community, ensuring consistency of services offered to residents, best use of resources to deliver value for money services and long-term financial sustainability.

**Background**

2. Birtley Crematorium opened in 1957. The current cremator was installed in 1989. A cremator's lifespan is around 20-25 years and the cremator at Birtley has now exceeded this having operated for 29 years.
3. The two cremators at Saltwell Crematorium were replaced in 2013 to comply with legislation and a mercury abatement system installed. Supporting cremation equipment was renewed to minimise health and safety risks to staff.
4. Although the cremator at Birtley has been well maintained, maintenance costs are rising due to the increased difficulties in sourcing available parts and equipment which are obsolete due to the age of the cremator, and the increasing need to replace worn parts.
5. In December 2017 an urgent shut-down was required for a period of 3 weeks due to excessive smoke being emitted from the cremator which also created an unacceptable working environment for staff. Coffins had to be transferred to Saltwell Crematorium at short notice for services already booked at Birtley Crematorium with no new bookings taken. Although this was repaired by the contractor, at a cost of £6,000, in March 2018, smoke was again visible from the cremator and an urgent shut-down was implemented, diverting coffins to Saltwell Crematorium for services booked at Birtley. After further repairs the cremator became operational again but smoke became visible again on 4<sup>th</sup> April 2018. It was decided at this time to close Birtley Crematorium for cremations until a full repair could take place.
6. Work was programmed into Strategic Maintenance to replace a monitor at a cost of £14,000 and to replace gas valves at a cost of £6,000. These were ordered in March 2018, but due to their specialist nature weren't available until mid-late June. The impact of this was that Birtley remained closed for cremations until 18<sup>th</sup> June 2018. Birtley is now operational but we are closely monitoring the operation of the cremator.
7. The cremator at Birtley requires a fan to operate the system. There are two fans which are alternated every 6 months for even wear. In February 2018, one of these fans failed and a repair requested at a cost of £5,000. As both fans have had even wear it is assumed that the fan currently operating may also require maintenance work in the future at a similar cost.
8. The cremator at Birtley isn't as efficient and uses more gas than the ones at Saltwell Crematorium. It now takes longer to pre-heat the chamber which isn't economical.
9. Without investment, the crematorium will find it increasingly difficult to meet the needs of its environmental permit as the performance of the cremator deteriorates.

10. The cremation process naturally generates 'emissions' and these are subject to regulation. Current legislation requires 50% of all cremations to be 'abated' to remove mercury from the emissions. (Mercury emissions are as a result of amalgam fillings). These emissions are not controlled by the actual cremator, but through abatement equipment which is currently installed at Saltwell Crematorium but not at Birtley.
11. Cremation numbers at both Saltwell and Birtley Crematoria are starting to increase. At Birtley an additional 56 cremations carried out in 2017 (Jan-Dec) compared to the same period in 2016 creating further strain on the ageing cremator. As cremation numbers start to increase, the demand at Saltwell Crematorium will also increase, thus reducing the capacity at Saltwell to take cremations from Birtley if the cremator at Birtley isn't replaced and resulting in long delays for cremation services leading to reputational damage for the Council.
12. Office of National Statistics has projected that mortality rates are expected to fluctuate from 2018 to 2023 then rise yearly from 2024 to 2039.
13. In addition to the rise in the number of cremations in 2017 compared to 2018, burial land at Birtley is expected to be full in the next 15 years (based on current burial rates). Burial land is becoming more difficult to secure. Although burial numbers are reducing yearly, burial land still needs to be provided. £1.580m (2018/2019 – 2022/2023) has been set aside in the Council's Capital Programme to purchase and develop suitable land at Birtley. Investigations to find new burial land in Birtley have to date, proved unsuccessful. If new burial land cannot be found in Birtley it is anticipated that the number of cremations will increase further at Birtley Crematorium.
14. Despite its ageing equipment, Birtley Crematorium provides a service that is highly valued and given the consistent numbers of services each year it is likely to remain a viable and sustainable facility for the foreseeable future.

### **Possible Options**

15. **Option One** – The Council could decide not to replace the cremator once it is no longer serviceable, which would result in the ultimate closure of the crematorium at Birtley. Residents would need to go to Saltwell Crematorium or to crematoria outside the borough such as Durham or Sunderland. The risks associated with continuing to support the existing cremator will see a continued increase in operational costs as the equipment becomes gradually less efficient and requires more attention. Adverse publicity and risk of cancellation or diversion of funerals will be more likely due to delays caused by breakdowns, problems sourcing replacement parts and equipment.
16. In previous years it was suggested that Birtley Crematorium could close as Saltwell Crematorium had the capacity to carry out all cremations. Recent statistics have shown that cremation numbers are increasing. Since November 2017 the amount of spare capacity at Saltwell Crematorium hasn't been sufficient to meet the number of cremations carried out at Birtley. In the first 3 months of 2018 there would have been a need to have 111 service times available at Saltwell to accommodate cremations from Birtley, however only 41 service times were available creating a shortfall of 70. It would have resulted in further delays for families to hold cremation services for their loved ones (possibly of up to 4½ weeks) causing further upset and prolonged

distress, or resulting in them having to go outside of the Borough to have their loved ones cremated.

17. **Option Two** - Replace the cremator with one cremator with a mercury abatement system and supplementary cremation equipment. This may require an extension to be built to house the abatement system and improve staff welfare facilities. The new cremators lifespan will be around 25 years. It is estimated that the capital cost to undertake this would be £2.1m.
18. Although capital investment is required to replace the cremator at Birtley Crematorium, the income yield that the Council would receive will be over the 25-year lifespan of the cremator. The current cost of running the Crematorium and Chapel and the capital financing costs associated with the investment required for the replacement cremator would result in a net income yield of c£2.4m to the Council over a 25-year period (not taking into account any increases in fees or the number of cremations).
19. **Option Three** - Replace with two cremators (if space allows), a mercury abatement system and supplementary cremation equipment, which will allow Gateshead to be self-sufficient for cremations ensuring at least one cremator can accept larger coffins (numbers of these are increasing) with no need for closure when servicing or relining is taking place. The cremators lifespan will be around 25 years. If Saltwell Crematorium was to have operational difficulties, Birtley could be used to carry out cremations rather than relying on neighbouring authorities. Gateshead would also be in an advantageous position to help other authorities experiencing cremation difficulties. Under normal circumstances, numbers of cremations at Birtley are not expected to increase to an extent that two cremators would be required to be in use at the same time. The estimated capital cost for these works is £2.5m.
20. If it is decided to replace the cremator there will be an additional yearly revenue cost for reagent supply and recycling and for servicing of c£15,000 per cremator.
21. If Cabinet approve the replacement of the cremator at Birtley the project will go through a procurement process to ensure that the cremators and abatement plant acquired are best suited to the crematorium. A project team will be established to manage this process.

## **Consultation**

22. Consultation has taken place with the Leader of the Cabinet Members for Communities and Volunteering.

## **Implications of Recommended Option**

### **23. Resources**

- a. **Financial Implications** – The Strategic Director of Corporate Resources confirms that the proposed £2.1m required for the replacement of the cremator can be accommodated within the Capital Programme. Replacement of the cremator would maintain existing income levels assumed in the revenue budget. The additional revenue costs in relation to reagent supply and servicing would be accommodated within existing budgets. The rise in mortality rates as predicted by

ONS could result in additional income to the Council over the life of the new cremator.

**b. Human Resources Implications – Nil**

**c. Property Implications** –Extension to building (if required as result of procurement process and submitted designs) to house mercury abatement equipment and staff welfare facilities.

24. **Risk Management Implications** - The risks associated with continuing to support the existing cremator will potentially see a continued increase in operational costs as the equipment becomes gradually less efficient and requires more attention. Adverse publicity and risk of cancellation or diversion of funerals will be more likely due to delays caused by breakdowns, problems sourcing replacement parts and equipment.
25. **Equality and Diversity Implications** - Nil
26. **Crime and Disorder Implications** – Nil
27. **Health Implications** - Nil
28. **Sustainability Implications** – Nil
29. **Human Rights Implications** - Nil
30. **Area and Ward Implications** – Nil