

NENE VALLEY CREMATORIUM – ANNUAL REPORT

1 Purpose of report

The board of Wellingborough Bereavement Services (WBS) Ltd has submitted its annual report to its sole shareholder (the council), and this is attached as Appendix 1.

2 Executive summary

Nene Valley Crematorium (NVC) has been trading since September 2016 and its report to the council as shareholder demonstrates the approach taken by directors and sets out the proposed fees for the coming year.

3 Appendices

The appendix contains the annual report of Wellingborough Bereavement Services Ltd.

4 Proposed action:

4.1 NOTE the report of Wellingborough Bereavement Services Ltd.

4.2 The committee is invited to RECOMMEND that the council sets the fees for 2020-21 as follows:

- a) core fee for cremation remains at £899.00;**
- b) increase the no service fee of £675.00 to £699.00; and**
- c) to include a new “simple” service cremation fee of £600**

5 Background

5.1 Nene Valley Crematorium was built in 2015-16, and the keys were handed to the council on 31 May 2016. The building was then staffed and set up for business, with the first cremation taking place on 19 September 2016.

5.2 The contract included provision of a limited amount of landscaping around the building but no funds or plans for the development of the remainder of the site as a Garden of Remembrance. Capital monies have been made available by the council for the first phases of the Garden of Remembrance and associated memorial gardens, and a range of memorials are now in place and available for lease and purchase.

- 5.3 As the site is so large, Resources Committee agreed to commit a further capital sum in principle for infrastructure to support the ongoing development of the gardens and landscaping.
- 5.4 The council agreed the creation of a wholly owned company to operate the crematorium in September 2015. This would be governed by a board comprising two members and two senior managers.
- 5.5 The board first met in June 2016. It met more regularly at first, but has now settled to bi-monthly meetings.

6 Discussion

- 6.1 The feasibility study carried out as part of the viability exercise estimated 500 cremations for the first year of trading, reaching a peak of 900 after a few years' trading. It is clear from the report that NVC performed better than expected, with 694 cremations having taken place on the anniversary of its opening, 734 in the financial year 2017-18, and 899 for 2018-19 More details of this are included in the annual report.
- 6.2 Because of significant start-up costs, facilitated by a loan from the council at commercial rates, the company was not expected to make any profit in the first year. The first year accounts reported a gross profit of £86,269, but a net loss of £18,881, as at 31 March 2017. At the end of 2017-18 a gross profit of £174,826 and a net profit of £18,847 was reported. And for 2018-19 a gross profit of £434,155 and a net profit of £164,619 was reported.
- 6.3 Early expectations in relation to the way in which the company operated have been refined following further advice and experience. The intention to put in place a market lease (Resources Committee, June 2016) would not have met tax and state aid requirements, so a decision was made to put in place a five year lease from June 2016 by Resources Committee in June 2018.
- 6.4 Resources Committee made several recommendations after receiving the annual report in December 2017, as follows:

“RESOLVED that:

- (i) the report of Wellingborough Bereavement Services Ltd be noted;
- (ii) consideration be given to the allocation of a capital budget to enable phased development of the Garden of Remembrance, in line with the request made the company;
- (iii) consideration be given to the allocation of a capital budget to enable alterations to the canopy outside the waiting room.

R4 RECOMMENDED that:

- (i) approval be given to the introduction of a fee of £450 for a direct cremation, which could take place at a time convenient to the crematorium staff and without any use of the chapel or other related services;
- (ii) approval be given to amend the make-up of the Board of Wellingborough Bereavement Services Ltd to two councillors and two employees of the council or the company.”

At the council meeting on 16 January 2018 recommendation 4 (ii) was withdrawn because the constitution working group was in the process of producing a code of corporate governance which would address the appointment of directors to wholly-owned companies, and it was essential to provide a consistent approach. This code was approved at the council meeting in April 2018.

6.5 Updates on the resolutions and recommendations above are included in the appendix and an audit trail back to the policy route.

6.6 The Council is required to set the fees for the coming year. This year includes the proposal of a new fee of a “simple” service cremation fee of £600 that provides a limited ten minute service. This has been trialled during the year and proved a success.

6.7 The proposed fees for the year keep them competitive against other providers.

7 Legal powers

7.1 Section 111 of The Local Government Act 1972 gives the Council power to do anything which is calculated to facilitate, or is conducive or incidental to, the discharge of any of its functions.

7.2 Section 2 of the Local Government Act 2000 gives the Council the power (subject to certain exceptions which do not apply here) to do anything which they consider is likely to achieve the promotion or improvement of the economic, social or environmental well-being of the Borough

8 Financial and value for money implications

8.1 At its meeting on 13 June 2018, Resources Committee approved for capital funding for investment in the site.

8.2 The company is investing in the creation and improvement of the memorial gardens to meet demand. The income from this investment has already begun to materialise and more details are set out in the appendix.

9 Risk analysis

9.1 The operation of the business continues to work well in partnership with all its users, noticeably going from strength to strength in its third year of trading, having listened and acted upon customer feedback. Feedback is still received but there are no significant risks to the reputation or operation of the company. A risk register is in place which has been approved by the board, and is reviewed twice a year.

9.2 There are still two key unresolved remedial works with the design and build contractor: cooling of the building and contractual landscaping. Both aspects are under constant scrutiny, and regular discussions take place between Wates and council officers. The responsibility to resolve these is with council officers because they are works which are part of the initial contract.

- 9.3 New challenges, such as the prison re-build and the unitary transition are included in the risk register and remain under review by the board.

Implications for resources

The primary implication for resources is the officer time needed to make this project a success. Senior management involvement reduced in 2017-18, and continued to do so in 2018-19 as the manager and her team became more self-sufficient. Time spent by officers on crematorium business is recharged to the company.

10 Implications for stronger and safer communities and equalities

None identified directly from this report.

11 Author and contact officer

Liz Elliott, Managing Director

Karen Denton, Assistant Director

12 Consultees

Board Directors

Manager and Registrar

13 Background papers

Minutes of project team meetings and member advisory groups

Correspondence with officers and relevant internal/external contacts.

Appendix

WELLINGBOROUGH BEREAVEMENT SERVICES LTD

ANNUAL REPORT 2018-19

Chairman's message

Earlier this year I was honoured to be appointed to the role of Chairman of the Board for Nene Valley Crematorium and would like to express my thanks to the previous Chairman, Barry Graves, for the good work and leadership he provided during his time as Chairman.

As we celebrate three years since Nene Valley Crematorium first opened its doors, I am pleased to report that the business is continuing to grow as do the facilities on offer to our community.

The number of cremations has increased further in our third year as we have continued to be well-known for convenience, flexibility and a good team of people who have the priorities of bereaved friends and families at the forefront of their minds.

This year has seen progression of the site with the opening of the Wendelburie Garden memorial area and this is ahead of our evolving plans to expand and improve the offering to our community and service users.

My priority for the coming year will be to see these plans materialise to enhance the business and site.

Client feedback continues to be positive and represents the compassion and care given to the bereaved by the team – who are an absolute credit to the business.

This is also reflected by the retention of gold level standard accreditation from the ICCM (Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management).

This year has also seen a repeat of the incredibly popular candlelit services in December that were very well attended once again and provided the opportunity to remember loved ones lost this year.

My ambitions for the coming year are to see the crematorium continue to strengthen, develop and build on its existing popularity and support the business to thrive.

Paul Bell
Chairman

Introduction

This is the third annual report of Wellingborough Bereavement Services Ltd.

The company was formed on 30 December 2015.

Registered number: 09932293

Registered Office: Swanspool House, Doddington Road, Wellingborough NN8 1BP

Operational address: Nene Valley Crematorium, 305 Doddington Road, Wellingborough NN8 2NX

Board: Paul Bell (Chairman), Tim Maguire, Karen Denton (Operations Director) and Liz Elliott.

Its first (and currently sole) venture – Nene Valley Crematorium – was opened for business on 19 September 2016. This report looks back on the second year of trading.

Vision

“A tranquil setting that respects and accommodates the wishes and needs of all our community.”

The crematorium is a modern building with modern facilities and technology which recognises the need for flexibility and good service.

The Guiding Principles of the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management are observed.

Performance

In its first year of business the crematorium undertook 694 cremations, and in the second year this increased to 734, rising from an average of 12 cremations each week to just over 14. The feasibility study undertaken before opening forecast 700 cremations in year three. The busiest month in 2017-18 was January 2018, when 78 cremations took place. This number was exceeded by the first three months of 2018-19 when the number of cremations reached over 80 for each of those months, performing higher than the key performance indicator (KPI) set that was increased by 10% on the KPI for 2017-18.

There is a slight decrease to 41% from last years 42% of the deceased having been resident in the borough, with a change to the East Northants area (including Rushden) with 19% being represented third (from last year's second position), replaced by 30% of Northampton's deceased at second It has become clear that the facility is serving a wide area covering Northamptonshire, Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire.

To date, reduced cost “out of core hours” cremations have increased from 71 in 2017-18 to 88 for 2018-19. Such cremations are available earlier in the morning and during late afternoon when people do not generally have work commitments. Cremations can also be booked during the evening, on Saturdays, Sundays and on bank holidays at the standard rate, with no enhancement in fees for these periods of day and night.

A new category of direct cremation was introduced on 1 April 2018, which allowed a reduced cost for a cremation which did not require use of the chapel or related services. This new category was utilised 38 times during 2018-19 and to date 56 times in the current financial year. Another new category of “simple service” was introduced on a trial basis during the summer of this year, following a request from a funeral director working in partnership with a local ceremony leader, which has been used 20 times to date and has received positive feedback. This type of service is time bound to 10 minutes and is generally managed by a ceremony leader. This type of service offers further choice for the community, who have a preference for a simplified service and/or are on a budget.

The Board

The Board meets every two months, which follows a newly introduced operational management team meeting between the two officer directors of the board and the crematorium manager, with invites for other council managers occurring periodically when subject specific items are tabled for discussion.

The Board receives regular operational reports from the crematorium manager and monitors finance, health and safety, and performance. Key performance indicators were introduced for 2017-18, and a risk register reviewed before approval. The crematorium has operational manuals, which encompasses internal procedures and business continuity plans to ensure as far as is possible the smooth running of the business.

A business plan is in place and a subsequent two-year action plan has recently been approved, which will continue to be refined and developed over the year. A simplified marketing plan, including improvements to the company’s website as well as use of social media was included within the action plan and has progressed during current year.

Staffing

The operational team of five people at the crematorium is headed by Tracy Lawrence – Manager and Registrar. The role of a business type apprentice was introduced on 1 April 2019, shortly after adding two part time caretaker/cleaner roles to her team to provide an opportunity for a local young person to learn the trade, and bring the cleaning “in house” respectively, to allow for additional essential tasks such as custodial and minor repairs/maintenance to be carried out as a part of the new post holders responsibilities.

As a result of the company's success, at a board meeting on the 18 June it was approved for the manager to reinvest company profit from 2018-19 into increasing staffing levels to support business growth and develop new areas for focus during the remaining time in the current financial year, and for 2020-2021. As a result of increasing staffing levels, salaries were also reviewed as part of a benchmarking exercise to ensure competitive rates of pay for all team members, existing and new. The overall new team will consist of 12 team members (within 11 posts) to include three new posts of Head Gardener, Gardener/Relief Cremator Technician and Memorial Consultant. All job descriptions and person specifications will also be reviewed.

The company will continue to review its current contractual arrangements further for maintenance and grounds work, and consider whether to propose for those services to be brought in-house to aid flexibility and provide cover.

In February 2018 a decision was made that one of the Directors of the company (Bridget Gamble) be identified as the lead on the operational aspects of the business, working closely with Tracy Lawrence and the team. In September 2018 Bridget Gamble left the council and Karen Denton took over this role.

On the 1 October 2019, Lisa Sheppard's role as Executive Director naturally ceased as part of a two year fixed term contract arrangement. The project work from this post has transferred to the council's project team - Victoria Phillipson has been identified as the lead officer to work closely with Tracy Lawrence on this. The primary focus is to implement the pathway infrastructure, memorial gardens and enhance the grounds.

Environmental issues

The crematorium was granted a permit to operate under the Pollution, Prevention and Control Act 1999 and The Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) Regulations 2010 as amended. Emissions are tested in accordance with the requirements of the permit. The permit was renewed in 2018, and a review for 2019 is pending.

A policy is in place in relation to the recycling of metals and has developed to include the recycling of pacemakers.

Feedback

The crematorium staff have been collecting feedback from users since it opened, and one formal survey has been carried out to establish the key issues, which have been addressed by the Board.

The crematorium facilities continue to be well received, and has embedded the established good reputation locally, with positive comments continuing to be received about the staff, the views over the lake towards the river, and the tranquility, as well as the modern look and approach.

A number of further improvements have been made over the past year and some projects are still ongoing; these are outlined below. Comments will be reviewed by the Board and potential changes considered as part of business planning.

In addition to the feedback from users of the crematorium, the company and the council have been jointly addressing issues following its completion and handover by the contractor; these now focus on two issues: air cooling and contractual planting. Discussions will continue until a resolution is found to all outstanding issues. Despite officer's best endeavours both issues continue to exist but have progressed.

A solution to the air-cooling issue has been identified, for consideration by the board of directors to enable installation before spring 2020.

There was a need by the manager to resolve an element of contractual planting issue, which related to turfing the banks adjacent to the car parks. This need was to enhance the aesthetics of the grounds in support of preparation works for two events during September this year, a public open day and dedication opening of a new memorial garden by the council's Mayor. Therefore a proposal to capitalise the cost of these works has been submitted to the council as part of the capital bid process for the current financial year.

Achievements

The Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management (ICCM) - the team were delighted in the summer of this year to receive the gold award certificate for the second consecutive year from their professions (ICCM) Charter for the Bereaved. Maintaining and improving a place within gold position is an excellent achievement - this year the increased position within gold is primarily because of the increased choice of memorials available and access to a wide variety of information from brochures and leaflets.

Chamber of Commerce – the team were thrilled to be shortlisted as a finalist for the Chamber of Commerce Business Awards. This being the first year the team have entered for the Chamber Community Award and Service Business of the Year categories. A breakfast ceremony will take place on the 29 November 2019, which the team will attend.

Events

In December 2018 two **andlelit memorial services** were held (to cope with demand), primarily to remember all those who had died during the preceding 12 months, but also for anyone wishing to remember loved ones. This will be repeated for this year, with a potential third if needed.

A second Open Day was held on 14 September 2019, which was well received by those who attended and supported by a range of companies who supply goods or services to the crematorium, and wider profession. We recognise the importance of being visible and accessible, dispelling some of the worries and concerns about the cremation process. This event was well attended with positive comments received,

particularly around how such an event helps those planning decisions for their end of life journey to reach informed choices.

The official **dedication** of the new Wendelburie (memorial) garden took place on 19 September 2019, on the third anniversary of the opening date, when the Mayor was delighted to preside over a short ceremony and small reception over tea and cake to mark the occasion. The following memorials around the Wendelburie Garden are now available for lease, and there continues to be interest in them:

- Benches
- Niches - for the placing of ashes and/or memorabilia
- Planters

The team would like local people to view the crematorium as a safe community space for those bereft, and look forward to introducing new services, building on recent successful events. New events linked with special dates such as Mothers' Day and Fathers' Day are also in the planning stage, together with an offering of regular bereavement support type services.

Memorials

The memorial gardens will take some time to develop completely because this is a huge site with many constraints and challenges: there are underground pipes and cables crisscrossing the site which limits what can be done, and it is flanked by a prison and a field full of solar panels. It will take some time to cultivate the kind of peaceful garden environment we aspire to provide. We will therefore aim to address this in a phased approach so that we are able to offer some memorial options as soon as possible – but a wider range in the longer term.

The **Anniversary Garden, which encompasses a scattering lawn for laying to rest ashes of the deceased** – was opened on 19 September 2017. The following memorials around the Anniversary Garden are now available for lease, and there continues to be interest in them:

- Roses
- Trees
- Pillars with plaques
- Interring spaces
- Seats
- Seat with internal space for ashes

The company also displays and sells **remembrance jewellery and urns** as keepsakes

The purchase of the **memorial wall** (sited in the Wendelburie Garden) began in 2017-18; it the project was completed in September this year, and is sited adjacent to the top car park so that it is easily accessible by anyone with mobility issues.

The next stages in the development of the site will consist of staged infrastructure, for which the council has agreed in a capital budget, for the installation of pathways. Each stage will require a business case. In the interim of developing the site via the capital budget (which encompasses strategically placed standpipes) two standpipes were installed during this financial year to service both memorial gardens and support staff with the watering of the site.

The crematorium manager is working with the council's project team on a capital bid to propose a grounds (green) infrastructure project for the wider landscaping of the grounds. Subject to approval this project will consist of the planting of: Hedging to provide privacy for those visiting memorial gardens; trees to screen the solar panels and prison boundary, to provide an all-encompassing feel as you enter the grounds; specimen trees and fledgling trees to create additional memorial choice to include a woodland, and associated soft planting to include focal and transitional areas between the memorial gardens. This capital bid will be submitted in February 2020 to Resources Committee.

The site

Because of the topography of the site the car parks are on a slope. To assist disabled drivers and passengers we have a wheelchair which staff are happy to use to collect any passengers who need assistance.

We have now also created two spaces adjacent to the building specifically for the use of disabled drivers.

In January 2018 the council approved a capital bid for a roof to cover the area outside the waiting room. A design was commissioned and the contract let, but the contractor was unable to proceed because it was discovered that the design was not suitable for the roof in place. This design was referred back for further investigation and a revised design requested. This canopy was installed during the summer of this year and has been positively received by various users of the crematorium.

Discussions have been ongoing with the contractors rebuilding Wellingborough Prison, together with the Ministry of Justice. An agreement has been reached in respect of the use of some of the crematorium's land to accommodate a temporary car park and portakabins to enable the works to go ahead. In connection with this, negotiations in relation to planting are ongoing; it is hoped that this will initially help to provide a screen but later become part of the memorial gardens. Any resurfacing to create car parks will either be removed at the end of the project or made good in discussion with the council/crematorium staff.

As part of the prison project, a roundabout will be constructed on Doddington Road. This could have an impact on funerals, but funeral directors are regularly being updated and kept informed.

Looking to the future the company is monitoring performance and business growth in general, but particularly so that an optimum time can be identified for the installation of a second cremator and construction of a second chapel. Neither may be required for some time, but forward planning will identify whether and when the

already installed infrastructure will be needed.

In addition to the immediate projects outlined above the company continue to investigate ways in which it can extend its support for bereaved families by providing additional facilities and relevant services.

Financial performance

The company's accounts have been produced, presented to the board, signed off and the final document is attached as an appendix.

The third year's performance is encouraging and reflects the fact that the target of cremations in the third year has been surpassed, for three consecutive years.

The manager has reviewed fees for 2020-21 and recommends for the core cremation fee to remain at £899, and for no increase to all other fees, (except for the no service fee) to prepare for the unitary transition.