

**Report to: Income Generation Sub-Committee, 15<sup>th</sup> June 2022**

**Report of: Head of Finance**

**Subject: BEREAVEMENT SERVICES**

**1. Recommendation**

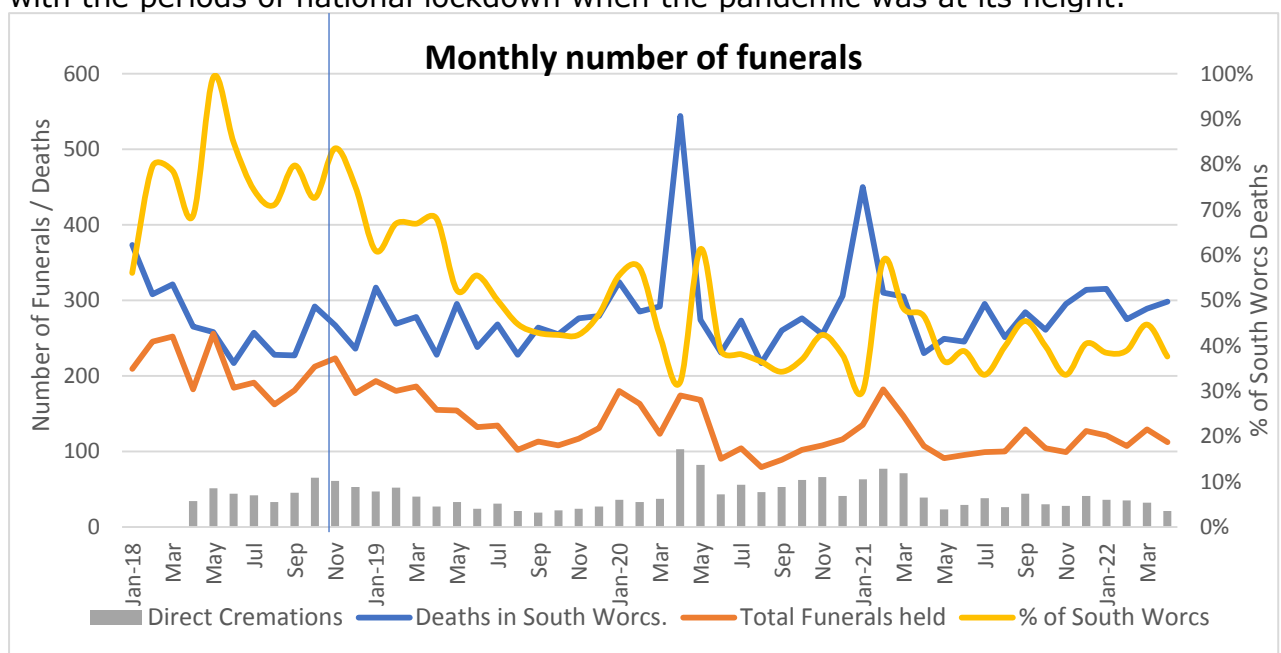
**1.1 That the Sub-Committee note the progress made by Bereavement Services in enhancing the service provided to customers.**

**2. Background**

2.1 The City Council Bereavement Service offers a cremation service at Astwood crematorium and burials at Astwood and St Johns cemeteries. The crematorium was refurbished in 2015 and performs approximately 2,000 cremations per annum and serves customers from both the city and outlying areas.

2.2 In 2018/19 the Service generated income of £2.0m. However, following the opening of the new crematorium at Fladbury, the number of funerals held by the City Council reduced and the income generated fell to £1.5m.

2.3 The Covid-19 pandemic had a significant effect on the Service, causing an increase in the number of funerals and also restricting the number of mourners able to attend. The graph below shows the number of funerals held each month from January 2018 to April 2022. The spikes in April 2020 and January 2021 correspond with the periods of national lockdown when the pandemic was at its height.



- 2.4 The Bereavement Service responded to the increased number of funerals brought on by the pandemic by the reducing the length of funeral services from 45 to 30 minutes and lowering the charges accordingly.
- 2.5 With the exception of the pandemic, the number of deaths in south Worcestershire has remained fairly constant over the four-year period. However, the number of funerals held at Astwood has declined, particularly since the opening at Fladbury.
- 2.6 The number and type of funerals held is shown in the table below.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Full Cremations</b>	<b>Cremation only</b>	<b>Burials</b>	<b>Total</b>
2017/18	2,329	0	212	2541
2018/19	2,238	567	89	2894
2019/20	1,503	334	109	1946
2020/21	1,368	763	126	2257
2021/22	1,229	401	79	1709

- 2.7 The trend for the income generated from Bereavement Services has been as follows:

<b>Year</b>	<b>Income £'000</b>	<b>Notes</b>
2017/18	1,932	
2018/19	2,022	
2019/20	1,542	24% reduction following Fladbury opening in Dec 2018
2020/21	1,684	Affected by Covid-19 pandemic
2021/22	1,440	
2022/23 Budget	1,609	

- 2.8 The budgeted income for 2022/23 is based on the income levels recorded in 2019/20 and 2020/21. As this is greater than the actual income achieved in 2021/22, there is a risk that there will be a shortfall come the end of the year.

### **3. Information**

- 3.1 A new Business Development Manager was appointed in Bereavement Services in February 2020 with the aim of enhancing the Service's offer.

3.2 Previously information on the Council’s bereavement services was held on the City Council’s website. However, in 2021 a new standalone website was launched.

<https://www.worcestercemeteries.co.uk>

This holds a wealth of information on the crematorium and the cemeteries to help customers with planning a funeral. There are many high quality photographs of the building and the surrounding gardens. In a typical month the website has over 2,800 visits.

3.3 Although funerals are arranged through a funeral director, families usually purchase memorials directly. The City Council has sold memorials for several years, with customers generally needing to visit the Astwood site to review the availability. However, the range on offer is now shown on the website and can be ordered on-line.

3.4 The memorial offer has also been extended to include innovative ways of families remembering their loved ones including bird baths, double heart shaped tablets, boulders and others to broaden the offer.

3.5 Memorial income has grown in recent years and it is hoped that these new developments will continue that trend.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Memorial Income £'000</b>	<b>Notes</b>
2018/19	97.6	
2019/20	103.4	
2020/21	110.1	Assisted by the launch of the new website
2021/22	116.9	

3.6 In late March 2022 the service launched its Covid related memorial the 'Forget me Not' garden. So far it has seen over 100 individual notelets written and posted and the wildflowers are nearing their first flowering which will be captured for the website.

3.7 Volunteering has been introduced into the Service with several different groups working on specific tasks. These include beekeepers and a group of ex-service personnel who clean the military headstones and have provided additional data for the website including a detailed bio of every military personnel member buried at Astwood.

3.8 The service has seen several specialist burial services in the last few months including ceremonies for the Plymouth Brethren , Bahá'í Faith, and 2 Muslim services. The team are geared up to make adaptations and changes with immediate effect to make sure people get the experience they desire from our service delivery.

3.9 Fees & Charges – In 2020/21 the fees and charges were completely overhauled with a back to basics ground up approach that enabled a clear distinction between a new memorial offer and the renewal of a memorial lease.

Key charges were also frozen such as the full cremation fee at £822 making us very competitive compared to the neighbouring private facilities. In the 2021/22 we only applied a basic cost of living increase, keeping the key charges very competitive with the other local crematoria.

3.10 A lot of time has been spent with the local Funeral Directors by the Bereavement Business Manager to develop and improve relationships with them as they hold a lot of sway on which service/site is used. To this end the Funeral Directors waiting room has been redecorated.

3.11 The service has seen a number of important changes in the last few months to improve the public experience and also the environmental impact. These include:

- Introduction of the first phase of electric equipment: 6 strimmer's and 1 sit down mower (removing the need for 2 stroke fuel along with it being safer for staff to use and quieter)
- New signage adding additional value to the visitor experience
- Working with probation teams weekly helping maintain both sites
- Resurfacing of the entrance and a section of the exit road along with the visitor car park
- New bike shed
- Rewilding project backed up by a two-page news article and information signs made by local environmental group.

3.12 Astwood Cemetery was assessed for a Green Flag award in the week commencing 16<sup>th</sup> May and the reception was very favourable with the results due to be announced in July 2022.

3.13 Further improvements are planned including the following:

- Picnic benches being added at key areas of Astwood – to further improve user experience
- Transport plan being drawn up and signage /website information to follow to help visitors utilise existing transport options to access both sites
- Electric charging points for Astwood
- Phase 2 of electric equipment replacing final sit down mowers , removing all fossil fuels small plant
- New Artificial flowers in Astwood chapel
- New full size Sign for the chapel overhang
- New shower at Astwood
- Reception redecorated
- New Chapel carpets.

**Ward(s):** All  
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**Background Papers:** None