

# BEREAVEMENT SERVICES UPDATE

Housing and Community Scrutiny: October 2024



## I. The Park and what it offers

- 1.1. Plymouth's new crematorium, The Park, opened on the 12 August 2024. The building design is inspired by the landscape, where the buildings nestle into the slope of the site. It is built of Plymouth Limestone, while inside light and airy ceremony rooms look out onto pooled water.
- 1.2. The Park offers three ceremony rooms, each designed to accommodate different needs and preferences, embracing all faiths and cultures. The two main ceremony rooms can accommodate 120 and 80 (with additional standing) with the third ceremony room providing a more intimate space with capacity for 12.
- 1.3. The ceremony rooms feature modular / movable seating for accessibility, a rise & fall lectern, colour-wash wall (the first in the country), customisable lighting, and an undercover flower view area with raised plinth. None of these features were available at Efford or Weston Mill.
- 1.4. The Park offers dedicated memorial spaces including a children's memorial area, surrounded by nature, trees and running water.
- 1.5. The site also benefits from a new public café, which will be open to serve refreshments for people attending funerals, for those visiting the site to pay their respects and for passers-by. It has two rooms available for families to hire for wakes, memorialisation events or other family functions. The rooms will be able to accommodate up to 40 guests or combine both rooms with the retractable wall and it will hold 75 guests.
- 1.6. The cremator technology is also significantly different from the cremators at Efford and Weston Mill. All three are fitted with 100% mercury abatement technology that meet current, and future, emissions requirements that support a green, sustainable city. The cremators are also designed to accommodate bariatric patients, who would otherwise be cremated at Bodmin or Exeter. There is space for an additional cremator if required in the future.

## 2. The Park development process; from empty field to final product

- 2.1. The rationale for investing in a new crematorium was provided by issues with the existing crematoria at Efford and Weston Mill, and the desire to continue to provide key services to the residents of the city and surrounding areas.
- 2.2. The issues faced at the time included the time limited life expectancy of the existing cremators, estimated at five years to critical failure, and that none of the existing facilities had space to enable the latest abatement technology to be installed to reduce emissions to meet the requirements of central government. DEFRA were undertaking a review of regulatory guidance it is thought that this will place a statutory requirement to retro fit abatement equipment to all cremators. As that could not be done easily at either Efford and Weston Mill and there would be a risk of the sites being closed.
- 2.3. In addition, the existing sites are limited in terms of parking provision and accessibility. Limitations of the existing aging facilities at Efford and Weston Mill in terms on seated capacity, flexibility, cultural sensitivity and ability to meet the expectations of modern customers.

- 2.4. There was also the service desire to achieve operational efficiencies to better resource maintenance of green estate and improve front-of-house service, and to enhance customer experience and broaden the offer available.
- 2.5. Investing in the existing facilities at Efford and Weston Mill was not recommended due to several factors. Although new cremators would bring financial savings and improved environmental impacts, modern cremators have a larger footprint due to width for wider coffins, automatic charge-in equipment for improved operation and safety and filtration systems required. Therefore, physical extension would be required. However, existing sites are physically constrained by existing burials, paths and driveways with Victorian structures already presenting challenges for maintenance in confined spaces, poor ventilation and the required movement of trolleys to charge-in coffins and rake out chambers.
- 2.6. Investing in the existing sites would also fail to address other identified weaknesses. Crematory at both sites are limited in terms of space, have limited welfare facilities for staff, have poor ventilation and do not provide an efficient flow for working and movement of staff and coffins. The crematorium buildings are limited in terms of capacity and flexibility to overflow. They are also of a physical design due to their era that is not culturally sensitive. Existing car parking facilities and pedestrian and vehicle flow around both sites are not suitable to meet modern requirements. Finally, existing facilities at Efford and Weston Mill do not meet modern accessibility requirements.
- 2.7. It was also recognised that continued two site operation will not achieve optimum operation for efficient gas consumption, building or resourcing efficiencies that a single two / three chapel site would provide.
- 2.8. Thus, investing in a new site was the recommended option in order to accommodate new cremator technology, provide flexibility for future expansion, enable accompanying provision of memorialisation and burial plots for at least the investment period and provide opportunity to address identified weaknesses to meet customer expectations.
- 2.9. General guidance for the siting of a crematorium is provided by the Crematorium Society of Great Britain who state: 'sufficient land is required to provide an appropriate setting for a crematoria, adequate internal access roads, car parking space and space for disposal of ashes'. Research has shown that sites of around 3-5 acres will suffice, with some recently approved sites ranging from 5-10 acres.
- 2.10. The siting of the crematorium building is constrained by the Crematorium Act 1902 which determines that no crematorium shall be constructed nearer to any dwelling-house than two hundred yards (approx. 183m), except with the consent, in writing of the owner, lessee and occupier of such house, nor within 50 yards (approx. 45m) of any public highway.
- 2.11. These factors present restrictions to the possibility of the new crematorium being sited either within an urban environment or on the edge of settlements. The open nature of crematorium developments and the need for gardens and a landscaped setting are very important in achieving a peaceful setting for services and remembrance, making crematoria inappropriate within many busy urban environments.
- 2.12. A detailed site search and site assessment was therefore undertaken to identify potential sites to provide a new crematorium, with or without cemetery space. The search area was defined as the city of Plymouth, and an adjoining area of the South Hams at Langage and Sherford. 50+ small sites were investigated but ruled out. A small number of potential sites were investigated and SWOT analysis undertaken, with the one area of land off Haye Road (Sherford West) considered most suitable.
- 2.13. An Executive Board was established for the Project, including a wide range of internal and external partners. Project Management support included Rose Project Management initially and then Ward Williams Associates.

- 2.14. Aecom were appointed early in the life of the project following a very comprehensive tender process. Aecom were able to offer a multi-disciplined team that covers a range of required specialists including planning, ecological, landscape, transport and highways consultants. Therefore they were able to offer a joined up team approach. They selected Bailey Partnership to provide the Architectural support for the project based on a long term relationship and a number of impressive local designs in the region.
- 2.15. Though not factored in to the original plans and budget, the vision for The Park included a separate space where families and friends could gather, perhaps before a funeral, or at key dates afterwards when they come to visit memorials. From market testing, it was clear that people would also welcome a facility for wakes, that was easily accessible to those attending the service. Therefore a Café and Events space was designed and included within the design and financial envelope. The Haye Road site allowed for this to be sited completely separately to the Crematorium (a five minute walk away) close to the entrance, and discretely shielded by trees.
- 2.16. In July 2022, a delegated decision was taken to appoint Kier Construction Ltd the main contract award for the new Plymouth Crematorium at the Park. Kier Construction Ltd were awarded under a NEC4 contract which was procured through the Southern Construction Framework demonstrating competition and value for money.
- 2.17. The form of the contract reduced the risk of delays and of overspends by its nature. This was important for such a complex project, which had a number of testing, commissioning and training elements which all need to be completed as part of that handover process. This can take time and often involves a number of different parties. In the case of the new cremators we also have the added complexity of a different contractor with its own set of testing and commissioning that needs to be carried out again as part of handover process.
- 2.18. The Park was handed over to PCC in July. There followed a short period of completing all of the internal fit out, and training for staff. For the first 3 weeks there was a programme of familiarisation and testing for staff and for our key customers such as Funeral Directors and celebrants. The Café also opened, managed by Fully CaterEd. We were also very pleased to be able to welcome members of the public who were some of the first to make bookings at The Park, to come and look around so that they felt familiar with the buildings and location before the funeral of their loved one.
- 2.19. By mid August, The Park was fully operational.

### **3. The Park Finances**

- 3.1. The capital funding for The Park has been through a number of iterations. The first iteration in 2018, was very much based on estimates and only included the crematorium building. This was for £11.985m.
- 3.2. In July 2020, the total resources were increased by £4.044m to £16.029, to cover the revised crematorium costs and to include a café & wake facility.
- 3.3. A further funding approval of £13.352m was approved July 2022, the latest approved budget is therefore £29.381m (table 1).

Table I: Executive Decision approvals

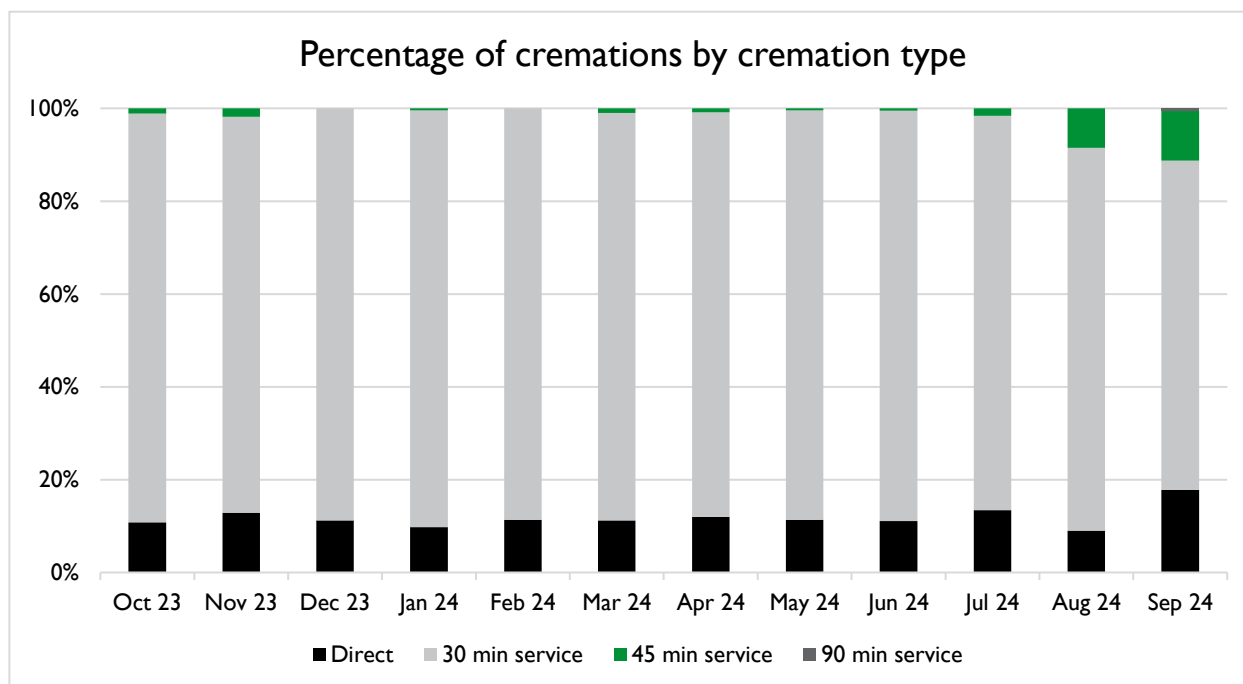
	Capital Approvals	Funding Source	
		Corporate Borrowing	Service Borrowing
	£m	£m	£m
July 2018	11.985		11.985
July 2020	4.044		4.044
July 2022	13.352	13.352	
<b>Total</b>	<b>29.381</b>	<b>13.352</b>	<b>16.029</b>

- 3.4. The project is still in the final stages of budget reconciliation, with certainty over around £28.2m. Current estimates, which have overestimated commitments, are that the final figures will be less than 2% over budget.
- 3.5. The Council's commitment to this project and the associated costs was based on a business model which demonstrated the need for the new crematorium and showed how the costs would be offset by savings. This model was based on a number of assumptions such as;
- Reduced gas costs due to more efficient cremation
  - Reduced repair and maintenance costs due to new equipment (previous cremators were circa 25 years old)
  - Greater operational efficiency due to the use of one site, modern and customised for the required purposes
  - A growth in services, created by projected increased population as well as wider catchment area given the higher quality of customer experience
  - An increase in income as a result of the improved customer services on offer at the new site
- 3.6. The business model has been regularly updated, and will continue to be so as the assumptions are tested. It should be noted that the first two years after opening were noted as higher risk due to a combination of some higher costs in the first two years and the need to develop the offer to customers.

#### 4. The Park; initial observations from the first 6 weeks

- 4.1. The location people are choosing for cremations has changed significantly since the opening of The Park. In the first few weeks of opening, there was a strong shift to The Park with 90 per cent of all booked cremations occurring at The Park instead. Demand for the other sites has continued to drop, to almost zero.
- 4.2. As well as this shift from the older sites to The Park, the service has also seen a shift towards customers choosing longer services times at The Park, indicating that the improvement in the facilities is being reflected in customers choosing to spend longer there.
- 4.3. September was the first full month of offering wakes or other events in the Function Rooms at the café; 29 bookings were made by the Bereavement Service. By the 2nd October the team already have 13 bookings made.
- 4.4. The lack of a bus route to The Park has been highlighted recently. Plymouth City Council recognise the importance of the site being accessible to all, and are in discussions around this issue currently.

Figure 1: Percentage of cremations by cremation type.



#### 4.5. Customer feedback has been extremely positive.

- Funeral Directors and Celebrants have particularly praised the attention to detail which means that the whole customer experience has been considered and planned for. *“You have really thought about everything to make the worst day easiest for us”.*
- The ceremony spaces were found to be *‘impressive, lovely and light and airy but warm and welcoming as well’, ‘The facilities at The Park in reality are stunning, providing a serene and peaceful environment that was beautifully conducive to reflection and remembrance.’*
- the way in which the staff met their needs with compassion; the staff *‘were incredibly supportive and attentive. They displayed a level of professionalism that was both reassuring and comforting, helping to ease the burden of an emotionally challenging process’*
- on the flexibility and sense of flow that the wake facility provided. *The Wake facility and Cafe added to the whole experience. Being able to stay on site created a flow to the event, which you cannot underestimate.. we wanted something that continued the calm, light, private, relaxed feeling that everyone had experienced during a very emotional ceremony.*

## 5. Weston Mill and Efford

- 5.1. As was always expected, The Crematorium at the Park has replaced both of the crematoria at Weston Mill and Efford. Following EDs L10 18/19 and CSLCC02 24/25 Efford and Weston Mill are no longer functioning crematoria and officially cease to be crematoria from the 6 October 2024. The cremators at Efford have now been decommissioned, and the cremators at Weston Mill are contracted to be decommissioned soon.
- 5.2. However, both sites continue to be used for burials and memorialisation, including the Book of Remembrance Room.
- 5.3. Since the Park opening, there has only been one enquiry about the use of the ceremony space at Efford or Weston Mill; and no bookings made. As a result, the service has temporarily stopped offering use of the crematorium buildings at Efford and Weston Mill until mid-October due to the lack of demand.
- 5.4. This change is not unexpected. As part of the pre-design consultations run in August and September 2018 members of the public and stakeholders were asked about their potential future use of Efford and Weston Mill. Responses were clear. The majority of respondents

were unlikely to use either site for funeral services or burial in the future and were also unlikely to book the crematorium buildings for any other purpose.

- 5.5. It is however important to note that the facilities offered by Plymouth City Council Bereavement Services are not the only places in the city where a funeral service can be held prior to interment. Additional to the various churches and chapels across the city and surrounding areas, alternative venues include Boringdon Park Golf Club, Devonport Guildhall, Langdon Court, Mount Batten Centre, Ford Park Cemetery, Staddon Heights Golf Club, and The Moorland Garden (Yelverton). A full list of locations is provided in appendix A.
- 5.6. The ceremony building spaces at Efford and Weston Mill are costly to maintain. They are Victorian buildings with high ceilings and the heating costs alone are extremely high. It is therefore not cost effective to keep the buildings maintained, heated, and with sufficient staffing to be able to open them up. With this combined with the fact that demand has been at zero within a few weeks of The Park opening, and the recognised inability of these buildings to offer modern facilities which are inclusive for all, it is proposed that Plymouth City Council consider closing the buildings permanently for the purposes of Bereavement Services.
- 5.7. This would require a formal decision process, along with consultation on the options of any alternative models or uses.