

Pressure on Service Availability at Gwent Crematorium

Background

Gwent Crematorium opened in 1960, and serves a wide geographical area of South East Wales. The most recent available statistics show Gwent as being the 17th busiest crematorium out of 273 nationwide. It is the busiest single chapel crematorium in the UK, and the busiest in Wales, carrying out 13.17% of the 21,628 cremations in Wales.

	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010	2009	2008	2007	2006
Jan	262	278	220*	254	278	254	283	298	279	263
Feb	262	254	200*	268	256	226	262	227	239	225
Mar	287	241	267	279	249	235	253	218	250	241
Apr	245	222	268	237	193	229	222	246	227	227
May	230	234	274	270	232	198	204	236	224	226
Jun	241	239	218	193*	232	235	206	201	224	202
Jul	237	257	211	175*	204	208	205	206	247	202
Aug	187	206	183	168*	241	198	191	223	220	215
Sep	232	204	194	158*	221	218	204	210	211	211
Oct	225	243	234	186*	233	232	225	251	241	210
Nov	249	222	226	176*	220	219	212	200	225	217
Dec	266	248	200	182*	234	227	238	234	207	186
TOTAL	2913	2848	2695	2546*	2793	2679	2705	2750	2794	2625

**Figures marked with an asterisk are at times with reduced service provision due to the installation of mercury abatement plant.*

The average number of cremations per year over the past 20 years is 2743, with the highest being 2944.

Causes of Raised Demand

Demand for cremation services are driven by a number of factors, including

- Changes in public perception of cremation have led to a long term increase in demand.
- The death rate varies year to year, due to outbreaks of illnesses like influenza, and due to weather-related changes.
- Demographic factors, specifically an aging population profile
- Pricing. Burial fees have risen significantly in recent years
- External factors, e.g. in recent months Llwydcoed Crematorium in Aberdare closed for refurbishment, leading to increased demand in December 2015.

Causes of Delay in Service Time Availability

The time between booking a funeral service and it actually happening is influenced not only by simple pressure of numbers, but also by a number of other factors:

- Although the crematorium may have plenty of times available for services, the family's funeral director may be otherwise committed
- Families may be unwilling to take the times available, for any number of reasons
- Funeral officiants may not be available to suit the times offered
- Families may wish to postpone funerals due to pre-booked holidays, exam periods, etc.

These factors, often in combination may lead to very significant delays in the provision of service times, but are beyond the control of the crematorium.

Cultural Changes

In the past decade, there has been a very significant trend to not engage ministers of religion to officiate at funerals, as society becomes generally more secular. Initially, this showed through a rise in Humanist funerals, but more recently has been evidenced in the rapid growth in popularity of independent secular funeral celebrants. This has an important impact on service provision, because whilst the "traditional" funeral was held first in a local church or chapel, with a committal service at the crematorium, the secular funeral tends to be solely at the crematorium. The standard service time at Gwent Crematorium is 20 minutes, which is ideal for a committal service, but not long enough for numerous pieces of music, eulogies, poems, etc. There is a serious lack of provision of suitable venues for secular funeral services outside the crematorium itself; hence the secular services tend to use a "double slot" at the crematorium, giving a total of 50 minutes.

These "double slots" were previously virtually unknown, but now impact significantly on the availability of service times. In 2015, 247 "double slots" were used; effectively more than three full working weeks of cremation times were "lost". In week beginning 25th January 2016, for example, 12 "double slots" have been booked, which has a very significant local impact.

Current Situation

January 2016 seems set to have the lowest number of cremations for that month since 1989. There are no significant pressures on the facility. At the time of presentation of this report, only one day (21st January) has no available time for funeral services.

The availability of cremation times is being published on the crematorium's website (www.gwentcrematorium.org.uk)

Mitigating Against Delays

If undue pressure on availability is noted, there are a number of options;

- Limit the number of "double slots" made available in any given week. This would have a variable effect, since the numbers of "double slots" required normally is beyond the control of the crematorium.

- Revert to the pattern of 22 cremation times per day instead of the current 15. This would have a significant negative impact on each service, since it allows 20 minutes, including entry and exit to the chapel. With the increased use of orders of service, recorded music that needs to be confirmed, etc., this is recommended only as a last resort.
- Open on Saturdays for a limited period. This would have a limited impact on provision. Each coffin received on a Saturday would need to be cremated that day. Allowing for the possibility of coffins that would have extended cremation times, and allowing any staff involved to be leaving at 5.00pm, this would allow about 10 funeral times to be made available. Because of the extreme elasticity of demand for cremations, this would not increase revenue for the crematorium. However, it would entail fixed costs, namely:

Staffing : Minimum staffing levels would be 1xChapel Attendant, 2xCremator Technician 1xAdministrative. All crematorium staff in this scenario are paid at grade 4, £12.79 at overtime rates. Over a 7.5 hour day, this equates to a wage cost of £384. To provide a Saturday service on a short notice ad hoc basis would need the availability and co-operation of half of the crematorium staff on any given Saturday.

Utility Costs: This is virtually impossible to calculate, because it would depend on how fully the day was booked, but would certainly run into £100s

There would be other dis-benefits, in that any maintenance planned for a Saturday would not be able to be done. If this involved essential work on a cremator, there could be major disruption to the operation of the crematorium.

Likewise, persons who habitually use the crematorium chapel on the weekend for contemplation would be stopped from doing so.

There are concerns for the well-being of the crematorium staff, who need a break after constantly dealing with death for five consecutive days.