apse membership resources

Briefing 19-39 November 2019

Cemeteries and Crematoria: Trend analysis 2018/19

Key Issues

- This briefing provides information on the cost quality and performance of cemeteries and crematoria services for the year 2018/19.
- Costs for service provision have remained relatively unchanged on the previous year. Regarding the need to inspect memorials, there has been a significant increase, probably as more local authorities are introducing 5 year inspection programmes which may be identifying more memorials needing inspection.
- Income from burials and cremations has continued to rise based on an annual price increase, but also in the case of woodland burials, there has been noticeable price increase, possibly due to the need to purchase suitable land. In relation from income from memorialisation burials has seen an increase in income, however crematoria memorial income has fallen, possibly due to the relatively smaller range of memorials available.
- The cost of maintaining land has reduced, which is likely to be due to reduced frequencies as well as the move to naturalise some cemetery lands especially in the older parts of the grounds where few visitors attend. It should be noted this does not mean land is left to go wild but is managed but with a much lighter touch.
- Cremator maintenance costs have risen as opposed to the previous year. This may be a simple anomaly but APSE will monitor this element closely if this continues.

Overview

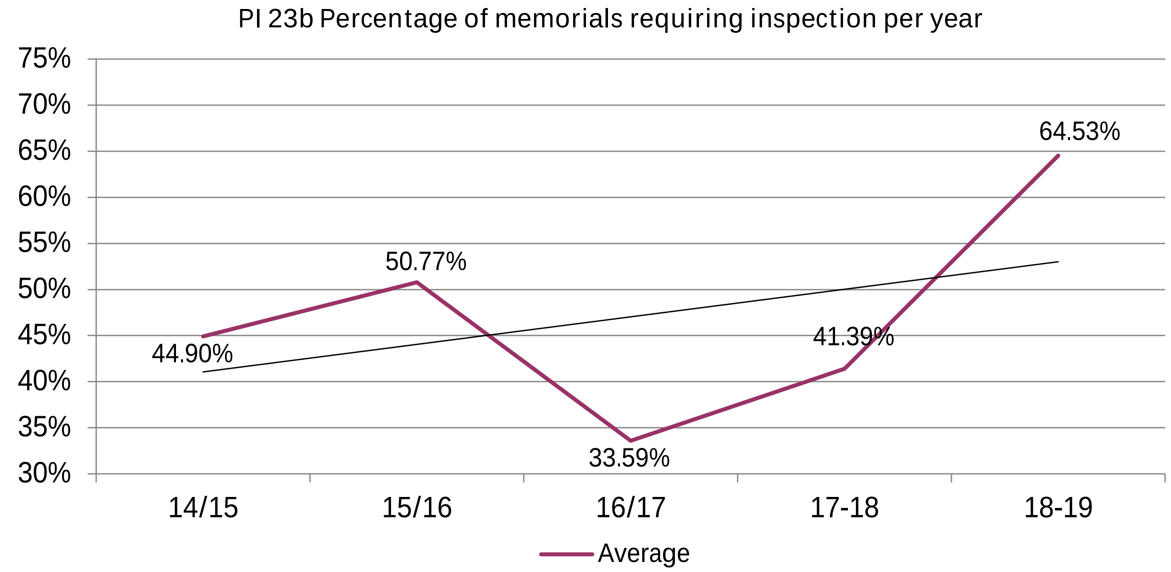
The APSE performance networks benchmarking model for cemeteries and crematoria services provides vital indicators for time efficiency, human resources, maintenance, memorial safety, absenteeism and financial performance for the local authority operators throughout the UK. This document provides participating authorities with an overview of the 2018/19 service data compared to previous financial years. The analysis in this executive summary is based on 'service wide averages' across all family groups.

This performance report should inform local councils and provide assurance that bereaved families are treated with dignity and respect, through the stringent indicators which relate to service quality measures. The report will also ensure that during difficult times for those dealing with bereavement, their authority is providing a good quality and appropriately costed service for its residents. Whilst many matters relating to the service may be outside the control of the local authority, such as fees charged by officiants or funeral directors, those elements of the service within the scope of the local authority are able to be measured on a UK wide basis to ensure the service is provided effectively, and on an improving basis, using the APSE performance networks data.

Quality

Percentage of memorials requiring inspection per year

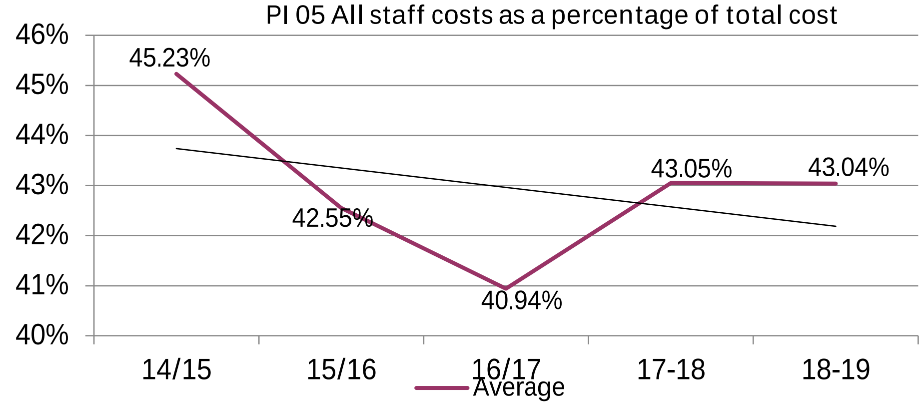
Memorial safety has since the turn of the century been a key activity in UK cemeteries and for most authorities annual inspections have become the norm. This graph suggests that the number of memorials requiring inspection has almost doubled since 2016/17 albeit that year we witnessed a significant drop that year. While some cemeteries are now doing safety checks on memorials that have already been inspected at least once, this increase to near to 65% in 2018/19 may indicate that the industry has relaxed its grip on the important health and safety assessments in this area. It will need a concerted effort to regain the lost ground if the benchmark of inspecting memorials every five years is to be achieved.



Cost

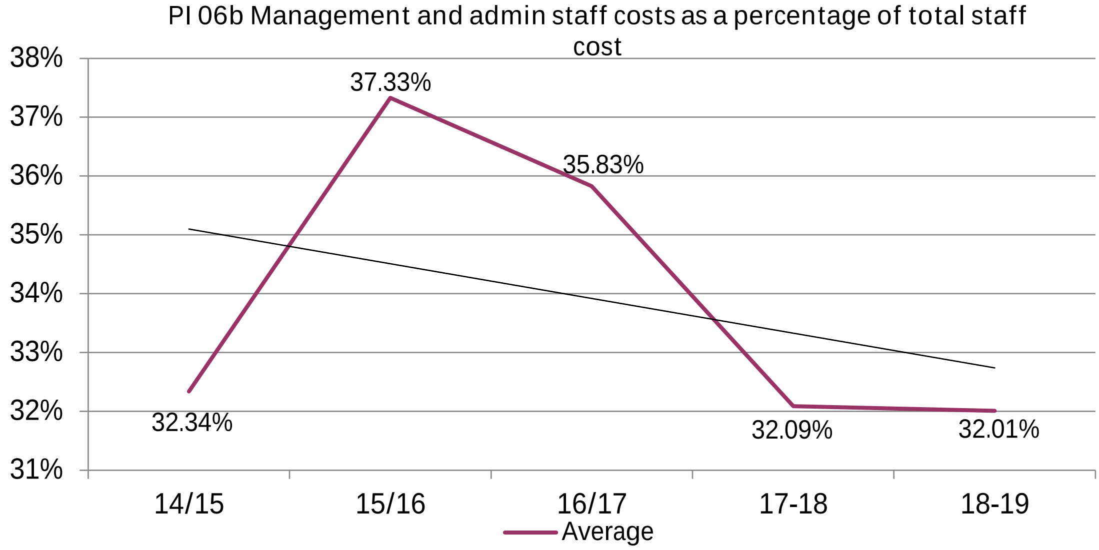
All staff costs as a percentage of total cost

All staff costs as a proportion of total costs has remained at the same level as last year and has stayed within the 41- 43% range for the last four years now.



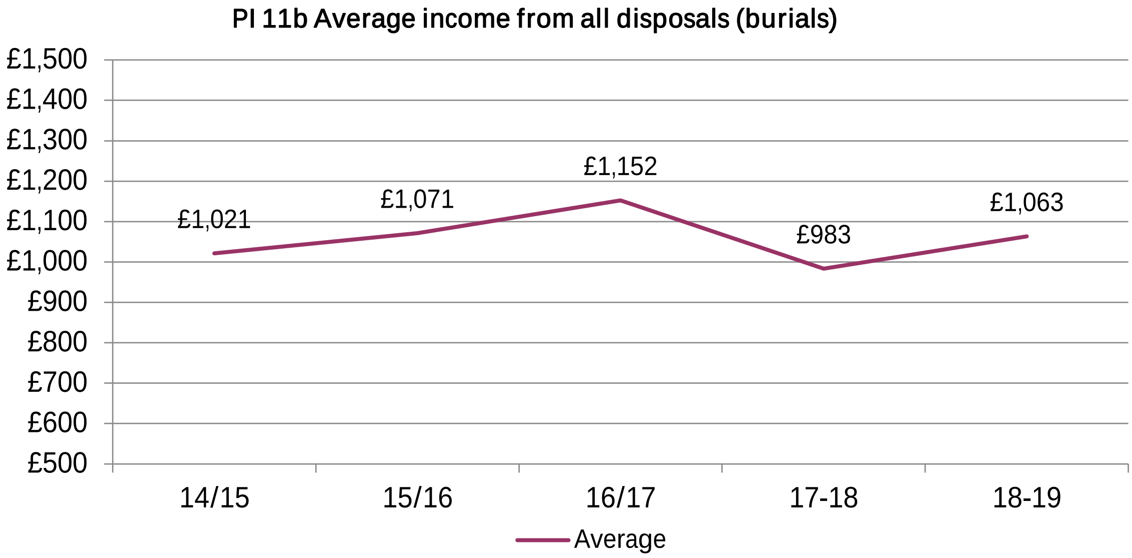
Management and admin staff costs as a percentage of total staff cost

Management costs represent a significant proportion of total staff costs, a squeeze on spending on management and supervisory positions looks to continue, remaining at 32% of total staff costs.



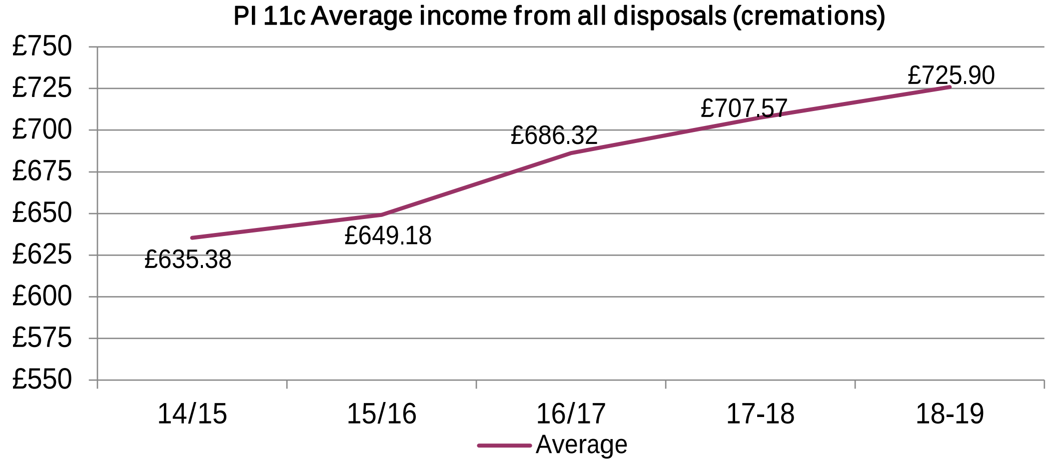
Average income from all disposals (burials)

After the recent upward surge in burials income was broken by a significant dip last year, in 2018/19 the figure increased to over the £1,060 mark but remains lower than the £1,152 in 16/17. This was brought about by higher adult burial charges, up 4% on last year; and a 17% rise in woodland grave charges.



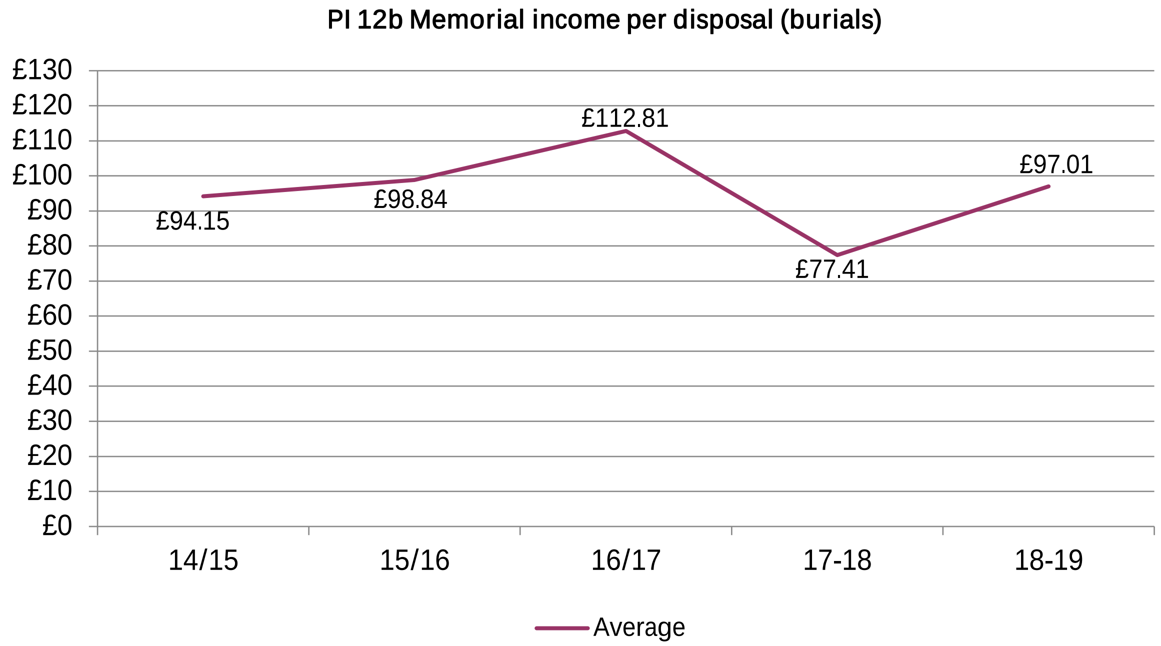
Average income from all disposals (cremations)

The modest 3% rise on cremation fees has led to an increase in average cremation income nationally reflecting the balance between affordability and service costs in the face of ongoing pressure on council budgets .



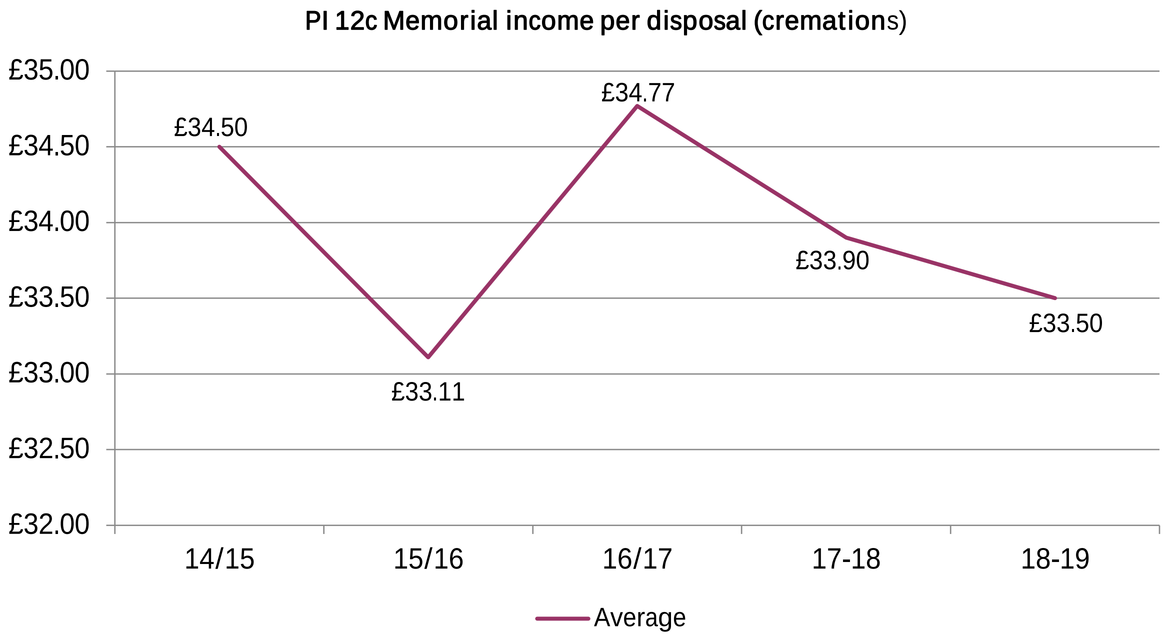
Memorial income per disposal (burials)

After the previous year's drop to its lowest level in years, memorial sales from burials recovered in 2018/19, up 25%. Memorial income continues to make an important revenue contribution to cemetery services nationally.



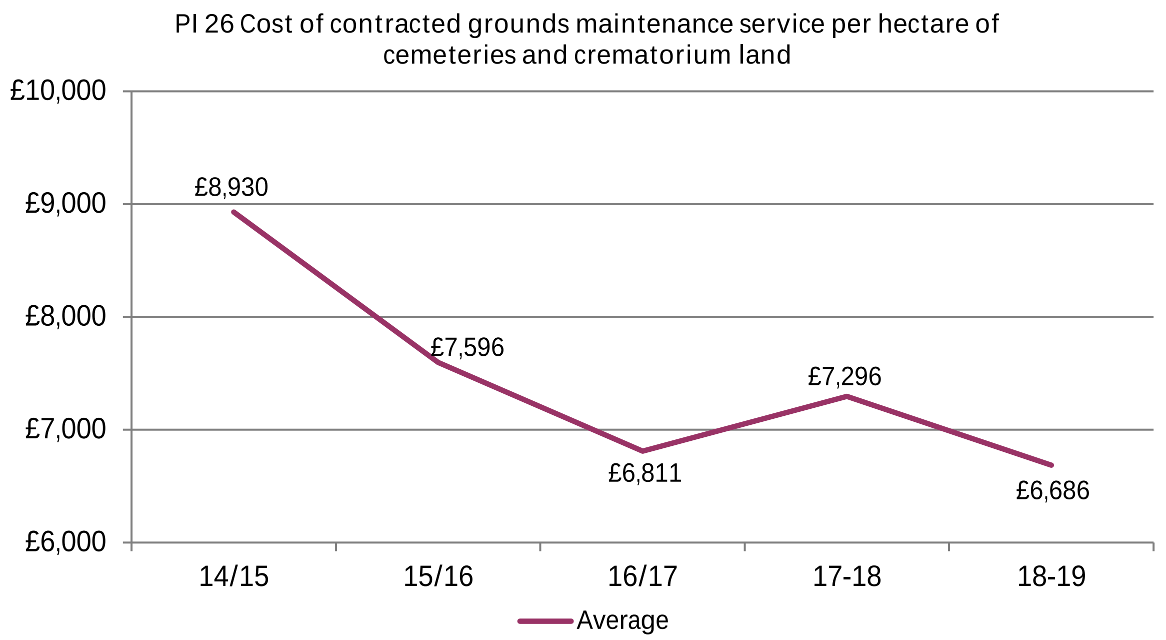
Memorial income per disposal (cremations)

A further 1% dip in 2018/19 kept the overall average memorial income from cremations in the £33 to £35 zone.



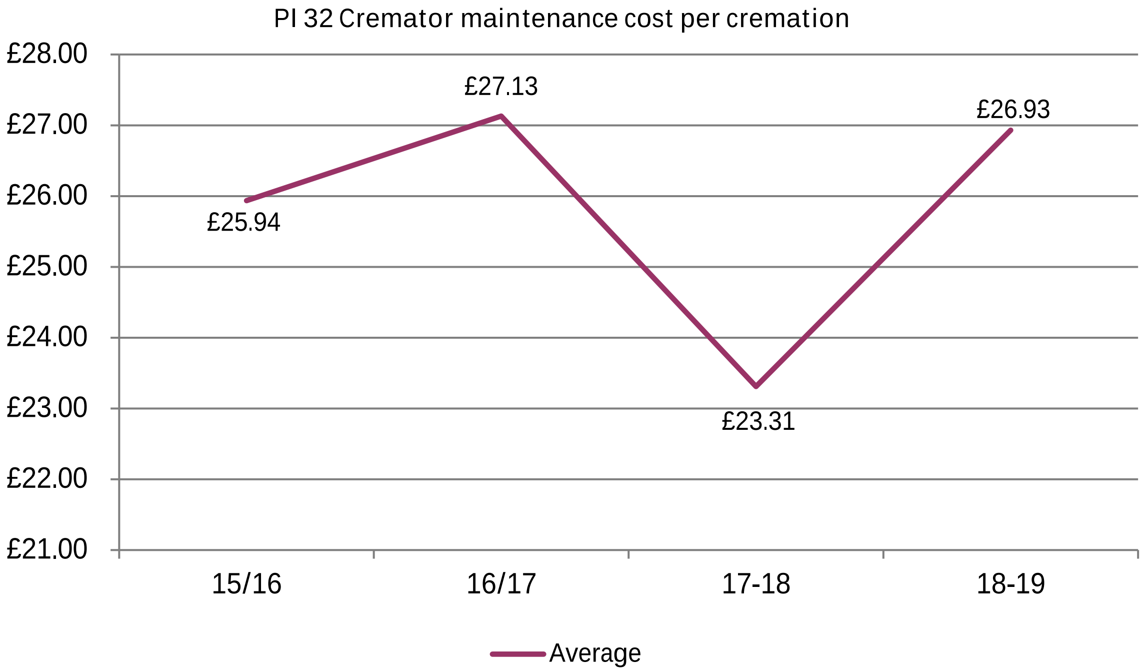
Cost of contracted grounds maintenance service per hectare of cemeteries and crematoria land

Grounds maintenance costs still represent a considerable element of total costs in cemeteries and crematoria. After an against-trend rise of 11% in 2017/18, this year contracted grounds maintenance dropped back to below £6,700 in 2018/19 (-8%).



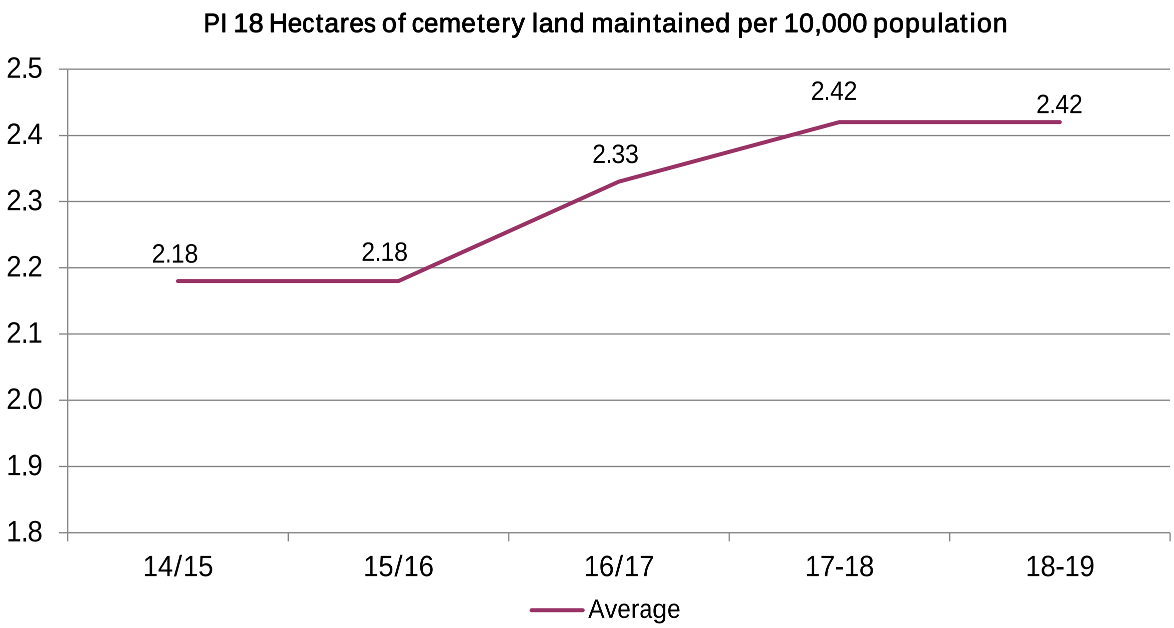
Cremator maintenance cost per cremation

There was a 14% drop in cremator maintenance costs in 2017/18. However data returns in 2018/19 shows that cremator maintenance costs have risen by 16% (£3.60) to bring the costs for cremations to almost £27 however this is only a marginal difference to 16/17 and suggests that the 17/18 figure of £23.31 was against the overall trend.



Productivity

The chart below shows that the amount of maintained cemetery land has remained at just above 2.4 hectares per 10,000 people. In the coming years we expect the opening of new facilities across the country to cater for burials as existing sites become full, leading to an increase in maintained cemetery land.



Interpretation of data

Authorities appear to have regained control of contracted grounds maintenance costs but this has been counter-balanced by an increase in cremator maintenance costs. These factors will need to be monitored closely as new cemeteries and crematoria are expected to open in the coming few years; costs will be a major consideration in their operation.

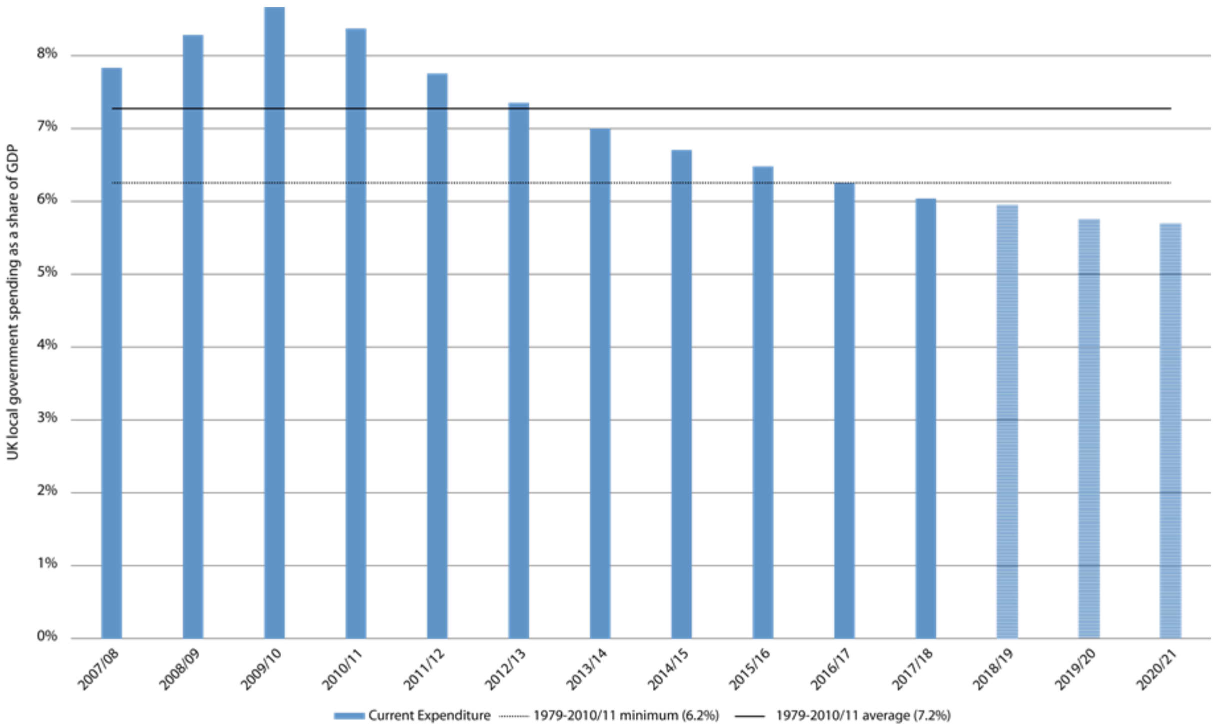
Whilst staff costs appear to have stabilised proportionately, income from cremations, burials and cemetery memorials have all increased albeit modestly reflecting the balance between the cost of the service and the need to reflect budget pressures that remain in place across local councils. Cremation memorial income has stabilised.

Bereavement services are still encouraged to continue actively marketing their memorial options whilst still ensuring this is not done in a manner which impacts unfairly on the vulnerability of the service user.

The sharp increase in the percentage of memorials requiring inspection over the last two years is alarming. Memorial safety needs to be the focus of a burial authority's risk assessment programme. However overall it appears that progress continues to be made in this area.

Future focus

In 2009/10, local government spending as a share of all spending in the economy reached 8.6 per cent, a high for the post-1979 period and only just below the all-time high (1975). In 2017/18, it fell below the previous post-1979 low of 6.2 per cent (1997/98). Since then, it has continued to head down. Including capital spending, total spending by local government as a share of GDP is now at a record low for the post 1948 period.



Source: Neighbourhood services and sustainable local government, APSE 2019

In addition, over the nine years from 2009/10 to 2017/18, the resources devoted to neighbourhood services across England, Wales and Scotland fell 27 per cent, equal to £8.9bn at 2017/18 prices. *(Grouped under the broad headings of highways and transportation, environment and regulation, culture, and planning, neighbourhood services are roughly* *speaking what councils do that is neither education, housing nor social care).* This is against the background of a real fall in total UK local government spending over the same period of 19 per cent.

Performance management is increasingly being used by public service providers as a mechanism to withstand austerity and demonstrate value for money to a range of internal and external stakeholders. As W. Edwards Deming stated:

"Without data, you're just another person with an opinion."

Despite measuring and improving performance being critical to managing services effectively and for accountability purposes, the need for this has never been greater in order to know your own service and to be able to identify achievable cost savings and innovative approaches to service delivery. Otherwise, how do you know you are delivering what you want to deliver?

Information and data provides intelligence on how effective any service change is, to establish a starting point and to identify future targets. Performance measurement is also a mechanism to learn how other local authorities are meeting the challenges and the impact that their service changes is making in terms of cost, quality, productivity and customer satisfaction levels.

Data is also increasingly in demand at a national level as well and as a result, APSE performance networks' influence at a national level is growing. APSE has been working with a range of government bodies and professional associations at a national level. This includes Defra (Waste Dataflow and the National Litter Strategy), Scottish Government and Zero Waste Scotland (Litter Strategy), Department for Transport, DMG, SCOTS, CSS Wales and the Improvement Service (Roads, highways and street lighting), the Society of Chief Officers of Environmental Health in Scotland, SCOTTS (Trading Standards), NABMA (Markets), Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Parks Action Group), SOLACE (corporate services) and the Department for Communities (Northern Ireland project).

In England, there is a focus on a more decentralised approach to performance improvement following the abolition of the previous national performance framework. This means that local authorities are responsible for their own performance and improvement and are accountable to local communities (rather than government or inspectorates). There is an increased emphasis on value for money, with a focus on data transparency and the use of data to hold public authorities to account. It is clear that the drive for performance improvement and publishing meaningful data on performance has not gone away, but is being designed around greater data transparency and public accountability at a local level.

In Scotland, there is a requirement to report the Local Government Benchmarking Framework indicators, which are a set of high-level indicators covering major service areas. APSE and SCOTS have been working with the Improvement Service in relation to collecting and providing data required for the national Local Government Benchmarking Framework, in particular on roads financial data. The purpose of this is to reduce the burden on councils of providing data to multiple national bodies and using existing reliable, established benchmarking models where possible. APSE have also been working with Zero Waste Scotland and Keep Scotland Beautiful on the monitoring system for the revised Code of Practice on Litter and Refuse 2018.

In Wales, councils themselves remain responsible for identifying their own improvement priorities, identifying and mitigating improvement challenges and risks and managing service performance. Local authorities openly and transparently report performance publicly on an annual basis. In addition, there is a small set of nationally co-ordinated performance indicators called Public Accountability Measures which are co-ordinated for benchmarking purposes by Data Cymru. External assurance and challenge is provided mainly through the audit, inspection and regulatory regime coordinated by the Auditor General for Wales. This voluntary, decentralised approach is similar to the approach taken in England which has created a greater need for information at a local level to measure value for money and to ensure accountability. In addition, benchmarking through national organisations like APSE provides the national comparisons for continuous improvement purposes and a mechanism to measure your own performance against changing standards.

In Northern Ireland, under the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014, there is a duty on each council to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of its functions, to collect information relating to performance and to assess performance in previous financial years and as far as practicable, against the performance of other councils. APSE have been working with local councils in Northern Ireland to ensure that performance networks meets the responsibilities councils have under the Act. As such, existing, relevant modules have been refined and new performance modules have been created in conjunction with the Northern Ireland councils for planning, community development, economic development, arts and heritage, building control and corporate services. APSE continue to liaise with the Department for Communities over this development work. Four sets of reports for the Northern Ireland project have now been successfully produced; for 2015-16 to 2018-19.

Good performance information supports the decisions that lead to good directions, instructions and targets. APSE performance networks can assist local authorities by:

- Helping to set a clear baseline on which competitiveness, efficiency and value for money can be measured in a systematic manner.
- Identifying the impact of service changes and interventions for your own local authorities and for others.
- Assessing the quality, cost and competitiveness of the services that councils provide on a regular basis.
- Helping to report data in meaningful ways to both elected members and the public.
- Identifying direction of travel and pace of change with regard to service delivery.
- Identifying inefficiencies such as poor productivity and high cost.
- Supporting service improvement through process benchmarking and sharing best practice examples.

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