

APSE Cemeteries and crematoria seminar – Report back

To: all UK authorities

1 About the event

On Thursday 30 April 2026, APSE welcomed local councils from across the UK and sector experts to our sector specific seminar in Stoke on Trent.

As local authority bereavement services face unprecedented pressure to achieve more with less, authorities are being forced to consider alternative ways of delivering this vital and sensitive service.

This seminar explored the delivery of local authority cemetery and crematoria services and examined examples of innovation in service delivery, the legal environment and the challenges ahead, with expert speakers from local authorities and the wider sector sharing their knowledge and experience and was kindly sponsored by Clear Skies Software.

The event was chaired by Councillor Mark Wilson, Cabinet Member for Neighbourhoods and Building Services at Vale of Glamorgan Council and Chair of the [APSE Cemeteries and Crematoria Network](#). This briefing provides an overview of the presentations delivered at the event.

2 Session one – What's on the horizon

2.1 The present and future of local authority bereavement services

Vickie Hacking, Principal Advisor, APSE presented a summary of the findings from [APSE's 2026 State of the Market Survey on local authority bereavement services](#), based on an online survey conducted between February and April 2026 with responses from across the UK. It provides a current snapshot of how cemetery and crematorium services are being delivered, the pressures they face, and where councils are prioritising resources, supporting benchmarking and forward planning.

Most authorities report predominantly in-house delivery; with strong expectations this will continue given the need for public accountability and the sensitive nature of the service. The survey highlights significant financial strain, nearly two-thirds agree that bereavement services are disproportionately affected by funding cuts, and over 90% say under-investment is impacting quality; this may arguably be evidenced by a move from highly manicured to more naturalised grounds within cemeteries and crematoria sites, and limited scope to rely on volunteers. Respondent councils did not expect charges for services to remain static and instead expect increases across burials, cremations and memorialisation, requiring careful balancing of affordability with financial sustainability amid rising funeral costs and concerns about funeral poverty.

Operationally, low-level anti-social behaviour is found to be commonplace. In terms of staffing issues staff absence is generally manageable and training budgets are expected to be maintained, reflecting ongoing compliance and skills requirements. Councils continue to draw income beyond core fees through memorialisation and books of remembrance, with such income supporting affordability in the core service offering, however most councils report that they do not trade externally.

Looking ahead, priorities include emissions control, biodiversity and recycling, alongside targeted capital investment for compliance, modernisation and burial capacity; however, many anticipate reductions in grounds maintenance frequency and formal planting. Overall, the survey points to sustained pressure on services, a continued commitment to compassionate, professional in-house provision, and the importance of investment and sustainability in maintaining service quality.

2.2 Direct Cremation: What it is, what it isn't and why it matters

Matthew Crawley, Chief Executive at the Institute of Cemetery and Crematoria Management provided a presentation which outlined the rapid growth of direct cremation in the UK and why this matters for bereavement services. Direct cremation is typically an unattended cremation with no formal ceremony at the time, often costing significantly less than attended services. Market indicators suggest strong and continuing demand, including high awareness, increasing uptake, and a large share of the pre-need (funeral plan) market.

For local authorities, the shift raises both commercial and public interest considerations. Councils report difficulty competing with low-cost direct providers, and the presentation highlights risks linked to inconsistency in what is included, variable communication and marketing, and the potential for families to feel they had no opportunity to say goodbye or to be unclear about where and when the cremation took place. The key issue is ensuring that affordability does not come at the expense of dignity, transparency, and informed choice for

especially for bereaved families.

Matthew proposed a sector-wide “Direct Cremation Standard” to provide clear definitions and minimum service requirements, protecting the public while supporting a consistent baseline for providers. Suggested components include standards for dignity, accountability, accessibility, pricing transparency, safeguarding and ethical practice, cultural and religious considerations, and governance. The intended outcome is to maintain affordability while preventing a ‘race to the bottom’ on quality and improving trust across both local authority and private sector provision.

2.3 BACSA Nova: A proven System – Reimagined for the future

Simon Matthew, Customer Success Manager, from Clear Skies Software, part of the IEG Group and the seminars overall sponsor presented an overview of the system, outlining the key objectives, scope, and outcomes of project. The primary focus was on ensuring alignment with organisational priorities and stakeholder expectations. Activities were structured to deliver measurable value while maintaining efficiency and quality standards.

Throughout the process, the system was developed by users, and emphasis was placed on key actions, methods, or improvements, resulting in notable results or impacts. Any challenges encountered were addressed proactively through high-level solutions or approaches, supporting consistent progress and informed decision-making.

Overall, the project to develop the system has achieved its intended objectives and provides a strong foundation for next steps, future improvements, or long-term benefits for local authorities. The outcomes demonstrate effectiveness, scalability, and strategic relevance.

3 Session two – Ask the expert

3.1 Burial and Cremation reform

Andrew Bazeley, Lawyer at the Law Commission provided an overview of the Law Commission’s work on reforming the law relating to burial and cremation, following consultation under its 13th Programme of Law Reform. He explained that the Burial and Cremation report was published in March 2026, alongside two related strands: proposals on New Funerary Methods (due June 2026) and a wider project on Rights and Obligations relating to funerals, funerary methods and remains which begun in April 2026. The scope is focused on core burial and cremation law and does not address areas such as regulation of funeral directors or wider planning and environmental reforms.

For burial authorities, the presentation highlighted proposed changes on grave re-use and reclamation, including a two-stage process to obtain powers and implement a local plan, and grave-level safeguards such as a requirement that at least 100 years has elapsed since the last burial and that relatives are notified and given an opportunity to object. It also summarises recommendations to strengthen and make more consistent the regulation of burial grounds (while retaining flexibility across Church of England, private and local authority sites), including clearer maintenance duties, written burial and memorial rights, updated registration requirements, and modernised enforcement powers. On cremation, the proposals include additional safeguards around identification and consent (including for direct and joint cremation) and a prohibition on cremating unidentified remains, alongside measures to address operational issues such as pacemakers and a new framework to allow funeral directors to return ashes within a regulated timeframe and fee structure.

For local authorities, the overall direction is towards clearer statutory frameworks, improved auditability and more consistent safeguards, with an emphasis on transparent processes where councils seek new powers and consult communities. The presentation also flags that further work is underway on who should have decision-making rights over funerals and remains, how disputes should be resolved, and whether the current approach to public health funerals and related duties requires reform - areas that may have future operational and financial implications for councils depending on Government decisions to take forward the Commission's recommendations.

4 Session three – Investing and improving for future generations

4.1 £19.5m Regeneration of Highgate Cemetery

Dr Ian Dungavell, Chief Executive at the Friends of Highgate Cemetery Trust's presentation outlined the £19.5m regeneration programme for Highgate Cemetery, a nationally significant heritage asset that also operates as an active cemetery and major visitor attraction. It summarised the site's dual role: supporting around 70 burials each year (with income from grave sales), while welcoming more than 100,000 visitors annually in recent years and generating substantial visitor revenue.

The presentation set out the delivery pathway and key enablers, including the Conservation Plan (2019), architect and landscape appointments (2020), legislative change to allow reuse of graves (2022), and a staged Heritage Fund approach through development and delivery phases. The proposals focus on practical conservation and long-term management—such as restoring historic views, improving paths and drainage, and introducing carefully designed tree planting—alongside upgrades to visitor and operational facilities to support safe access, education, and community use.

4.2 One step closer to replacing an existing 70-year-old facility

Sheena Ratcliffe, Bereavement Services Manager at Derby City Council set out Derby City Council's progress towards replacing the 70-year-old Markeaton Crematorium with a modern, inclusive and accessible facility. The project aims to improve competitiveness and efficiency in response to market pressures, deliver within the approved capital budget, reduce the risk of service failure, and cut carbon emissions in line with the Council's Net Zero commitments.

The presentation summarised key milestones and decision points, including the crematorium's phased development since opening in 1956 and the increasing competitive context following the opening of new crematoria in neighbouring areas (2015 and 2018). Following feasibility work in 2022 and subsequent investment appraisal, the project was added to the Council plan in February 2025 with funding allocated to complete the feasibility stage. A project board has been established, a preferred site confirmed, initial stakeholder engagement undertaken, and contractor support appointed, with land and environmental surveys scheduled for spring 2026 and concept design work progressing.

Next steps focus on widening engagement and moving into formal design, including full stakeholder and public consultation in summer 2026, finalising the Equality Impact Assessment, and confirming the cremation technology and capacity (with electric cremators under consideration to support Net Zero targets). Subject to approvals, concept designs will be finalised following consultation. The detailed design stage is expected from summer 2026, construction is planned to commence in 2028, and the new facility is currently targeted to open in 2029.

4.3 Impacts on long grasslands at burial sites

Tom Guilbert-Newell, Sustainability Environment Officer at Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council's presented details of the council Grassland Management Strategy and associated research into the impacts of reduced mowing and long grasslands on bereavement sites. Adopted in April 2024 following sustainable land management training, the strategy introduces differentiated mowing regimes across six area types to support biodiversity and nature recovery networks, improve the efficiency of grounds maintenance resources, contribute to Net Zero ambitions (2030 for the council and 2050 for the borough), and strengthen public understanding of the rationale for changing grassland management.

A joint study with Keele University focused on 11 bereavement sites (cemeteries and churchyards) to assess pollinator diversity, bat diversity and habitat connectivity, alongside a

council-led survey of visitor perceptions. Early results from the pollinator work indicate that reduced mowing generally increases pollinator abundance and, in most cases, species richness, with outcomes influenced by days since mowing and floral richness and variations between taxonomic groups. The social feedback to date indicates broad support when changes are well explained: across Phase 2 engagement activity, 235 residents provided feedback (198 positive, 37 negative, with concerns mainly relating to accessibility and health and safety), and bereavement-site visitors reported valuing natural beauty and wildlife while generally viewing long grass positively.

The strategy is also presented as delivering measurable operational and environmental benefits, including an estimated 60.5 hectares of long grasslands across the initial 18 Phase 1 sites with a calculated sequestration and storage capacity of approximately 3,632 tCO₂e, alongside estimated resource savings of £5,883.84 from reduced mowing activity. Following implementation and review through 2024–2025, Phase 3 is extending the approach to additional green spaces, including district parks and further bereavement sites, with the Council planning to publish the remaining bat and habitat connectivity analysis and continue embedding the work within the Sustainable Environment Strategy and Delivery Plan.

5 Session four – APSE Cemeteries and Crematoria’s Innovation Award presentations

5.1 About the award

The APSE Cemeteries and Crematoria Innovation Award celebrates outstanding local councils that use innovative ideas and solutions to tackle the challenges facing their Cemetery and Crematoria services. In this session of the seminar, the shortlisted finalists showcased an overview of their submissions.

5.2 Digital Management of our tree estate - Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC)

Marcus Forster, Senior Horticulture Consultant, at the CWGC’s presentation outlined how the CWGC is addressing the challenge of managing a complex, geographically dispersed tree estate, with thousands of locations and significant variation in species, landscape context and risk profile. It highlights that the previous approach relied on fragmented data and inconsistent governance, which in turn drove variability in inspection practices, limited organisational visibility and continuity, and made long-term maintenance planning difficult at a time of increasing compliance and risk-management expectations.

In response, CWGC has implemented a single, global digital platform designed for live, mobile-

friendly use by both staff and contractors, with standardised workflows and data capture. The system goes beyond a basic tree inventory by recording species and cultivar information at scale, integrating environmental metrics, and capturing landscape and heritage features alongside risk, condition and works programming—supporting a long-term programme that aims to coordinate maintenance and reporting consistently, including planning for 39,000 trees for 2039. The intended benefits are improved compliance and risk management, stronger and more consistent data, better collaboration across teams and suppliers, and a future-ready approach that supports sustainable stewardship of a significant public and heritage asset base.

5.3 Data-Driven Innovation: Gas Usage Dashboard for Cremators - Buckinghamshire Council

Matthew Reynolds, Strategic Compliance Manager at Buckinghamshire Council outlined the council's data-driven initiative to improve energy management for FTIII cremators commissioned in 2023, in response to rising energy costs and the limitations of manual gas monitoring. The previous approach relied on retrospective logbooks and offered limited real-time insight, which delayed the identification of abnormal consumption and operational inefficiencies.

The innovation is a bespoke gas-usage dashboard built from weekly FTIII cremator reports, which automates data capture and visualisation to provide proactive oversight across the service. The dashboard supports transparency and shared operational ownership, enables earlier intervention when usage patterns are outside expected ranges, and creates robust, auditable records to support compliance reporting. It also provides an objective basis for workforce training and coaching, helping staff to understand the link between operational actions and energy outcomes.

Reported financial outcomes include a sustained reduction in gas consumption, with savings of £5.77 per cremation across the first two quarters and over £5,300 saved during that period, supporting delivery of cost-effective public services. Strategically, the approach strengthens operational resilience and environmental performance, embeds routine data-led decision-making, and is presented as scalable for adoption across other crematoria and wider council services.

5.4 The Greater London Pet Crematorium (Streatham Cemetery) - Lambeth Council

Sam Richards, Technician, Bereavement Services, London Borough of Lambeth, outlined the development and launch of the Greater London Pet Crematorium at Streatham Cemetery, delivered by the council as an additional bereavement service offer for residents and the wider

London area. The proposal was prompted by staff awareness of limited and costly pet-bereavement options across London, alongside practical barriers to home burial (including lack of garden access for many households). The service is positioned to provide an affordable, dignified alternative to typical veterinary cremations, with pricing capped at £237 for larger animals and the ability to support a broad range of domestic pets up to 50kg.

The delivery approach repurposes underused council assets, notably a largely dormant chapel building and associated rooms, limiting capital expenditure through adaptation of an existing facility on unconsecrated ground while retaining the chapel's use for funerals. Works were described as minimal (e.g., access adjustments and flue accommodation) but required coordination across 2020–2024, including planning considerations. Operationally, the offer is designed as an end-to-end, in-house service using the existing bereavement team and resources, including collection and care of the deceased animal (where needed), use of a non-denominational chapel for farewells, and options for ash collection or scattering on site. Environmental Health have been engaged throughout, and the chosen equipment is described as fuel-efficient with odourless emissions and limited ancillary impacts, aligning with borough priorities to reduce carbon emissions and cut waste.

The crematorium fully opened in January 2026 and, at the time of writing, has supported 18 service users, with a range of pets cremated (from small animals and birds to cats and dogs). The initiative has created a new revenue stream for the council, with the previously underutilised building now reported to generate an estimated 56% profit per cremation, while also enabling internal support to Animal Welfare functions (e.g., disposal of roadkill) with potential for wider contractual arrangements. Early feedback indicates that ease of access, the ability to say goodbye in an appropriate setting, and modest memorial options are valued by customers; further enhancements under consideration include expanding keepsake/memorial products and establishing a dedicated memorial wall.

5.5 A Whole-System Approach to Modernising Bereavement Services Across Southampton - Southampton City Council

Heather White, Service Manager/Registrar at Southampton City Council set out the whole-system approach adopted to modernising bereavement services across its crematorium and five cemeteries, recognising the needs of a large and diverse population and the high expectations families hold at a difficult time. She identified key pressures including rising customer expectations, increasing cultural and faith requirements, constrained resources, and the need to deliver consistent standards and experiences across sites with different histories and operational needs.

The proposed approach focuses on four strands: improving customer experience through clearer communication, consistent standards, strengthened support for families, and balanced

digital access alongside in-person services; inclusion and multi-faith provision, including supporting same-day burials where possible, coffined and uncoffined options, and flexible chapel arrangements; enhanced community support through grief cafés, memorial events, and partnership working with local charities; and an environmental approach that maintains historic sites while delivering practical improvements within funding constraints and exploring future standards. Delivery is underpinned by strong leadership, a consistent service model across all sites, and skilled, compassionate staff. The anticipated outcomes are improved accessibility and choice, better support for bereaved families, stronger community engagement, consistent standards, and ongoing investment to modernise the bereavement journey for every family supported.

5.6 Tewkesbury Borough Council: Digital Transformation of Cemetery Records - Tewkesbury Borough Council

Amy Adams, Programme Manager and Joseph Durrant, GIS Officer at Tewkesbury Borough Council outlined the innovative approach to modernise cemetery administration across its two sites (Tewkesbury and Bishops Cleeve). The presentation sets out that, prior to the project, grave and plot locations were recorded on hand-drawn paper plans and burial/ashes information was largely paper-based, creating inefficiencies, inconsistent records and, in some cases, difficulty locating ashes plots due to limited descriptive information and resultant data duplication.

The project was to create a digital map of grave and plot locations for both cemeteries, build an internal management system for day-to-day operations, and introduce public-facing search functionality to help residents and visitors find grave locations. In parallel, the service digitised paper records for grave ownership and ashes reservations and began modernising memorial safety processes through a more structured approach to topple testing, including dashboards to plan and record inspections, risk categories and actions.

Reported outcomes include significantly improved accessibility to information, with 3,789 headstones available to view and 14,107 burials recorded within the system, and an estimated time saving of over 90% through the ability to locate graves in seconds. The presentation also highlights positive stakeholder feedback, describing the new capability as accessible, customer-focused and sustainable, and positions the system as a platform for continued service improvement as further functionality is developed and embedded.

6 Winner of the APSE Cemeteries and Crematoria Innovation Award.

The winner was announced of the APSE Cemeteries and Crematoria Innovation Award was announced as **Buckinghamshire Council**. Matthew Reynolds, Strategic Compliance Manager

at Buckinghamshire Council, accepted the award from Cllr Mark Wilson, Cabinet Member for Neighbourhoods and Building Services at Vale of Glamorgan Council.

APSE Chief Executive Mo Baines said: *"We are thrilled to recognise the innovative work being effectively implemented by councils to meet the challenges facing cemetery and crematoria services head-on. This year's award is presented to **Buckinghamshire Council** for its forward-thinking approach to service improvement."*

7 APSE COMMENT

APSE would like to take the opportunity to thank all the speakers for presenting, the delegates for attending and Clear Skies Software for being the overall sponsor and the exhibitors who supported the Seminar. Congratulations to the finalist and winners in the 2026 innovation awards. Further details of the speakers, a copy of the presentation and an overview of the exhibitors can be accessed [using this link](#).

Through our training suite, advisory groups, research programmes and benchmarking service, membership of APSE can bring significant benefits to those who work in local government – from officers to directors to elected members to chief executives – by helping them comprehensively get to grips with the latest policy and technological developments.

All APSE members can sign up to APSE's Cemeteries and Crematoria Network, which is an online network providing at least four learning events across the year, with expert speakers from across local government. You can sign up to the network using [this link](#).

For more information, **Vickie Hacking, Principal Advisor, APSE** can be contacted on vhacking@apse.org.uk

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