REPORT TO:	Safer Halton Policy & Performance Board
DATE:	20 June 2006
REPORTING OFFICER:	Strategic Director, Health & Community
SUBJECT:	Widnes Crematorium – Cremations and Mercury Abatement
WARDS:	Borough-wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 To update members of the Board on the issue of cremations and mercury abatement.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That the Board maintains a watching brief on this subject and receives update reports as appropriate to inform ongoing policy development.

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 There has been growing concern over the damaging health effects of mercury absorption on the human body over the past decade with mercury emissions being linked to birth defects, kidney disease, multiple-sclerosis, brain damage and fertility problems.

3.2 Mercury has been used in dentistry for the past 150 years (it accounts for 50% of an amalgam filling). Demographically, due to the rise of "the fluoride generation" (who need less fillings) and cosmetic dentistry (which promotes the use of the more aesthetically pleasing "white filling"), the use of mercury fillings peaked between 1960 and 1980 and is therefore most prevalent in the 45-65 age category.

3.3 Consequently, with the average life expectancy of men and women in the UK being 75 and 79 respectively, if unabated, mercury emissions from crematoria (as a result of filling vaporisation) is certain to increase over the next 20-30 years as the "heavy metal generation" (adults with high quantities of amalgam fillings) begin to pass away in greater numbers.

3.4 It is unsurprising therefore that mercury emissions controls are to be introduced. We now know that at least 50% of all cremations carried out in the UK after 31 December 2012 must satisfy mercury emissions controls.

3.5 It is the view of Defra (the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) that the environmental impact from mercury emitted from

crematoria is through long-range transportation, possibly twice around the globe before being deposited in the North East Atlantic. Thus, the focus is not on local environmental protection and it is for this reason that Defra has set a national reduction figure rather than limits for each individual crematoria.

3.6 The four main options that the Council may consider with regard to the existing crematorium, in the light of the above, are explored below. Other options could include selling the cremation operation to a private concern or entering into a partnership arrangement with a private sector partner, or looking at building a completely new facility (with or without public or private sector partners) but such options may prove to be rather over-optimistic, given the costings involved and the relatively low usage of Widnes crematorium.

Option 1 – Install the necessary mercury abatement equipment to one of the existing cremators

3.7 Installation will require the permanent removal of one of the two cremators in Widnes Crematorium to accommodate the new equipment. The equipment will be installed via the rear wall of the building and the building work involved is costly as the crematorium is a Grade 2 listed building. The main financial costs associated with this option amount to £454,000. Under this option, the only operational impact upon Service users would be a relatively short shutdown of the facility for a period of about 4 weeks, for the installation of the new equipment. If this option were pursued, the costs could be mitigated over time through membership of an industry-wide cost-sharing scheme (see below).

Option 2 – Install the necessary mercury abatement equipment together with a new cremator

3.8 The installation work associated with this option would be similar for that Option 1 above except that both existing cremators would be removed and a single, new cremator would be installed with the new filtration equipment. The main financial costs associated with this option amount to a little over £546,000, though these could be reduced to a little under £499,000 by installing the basic specification cremator without the automated ancillary equipment. Under this option, the only operational impact upon Service users would be a relatively short shutdown of the facility for a period of about 4 weeks, for the installation of the new equipment. Again, if this option were pursued, the costs could be mitigated over time through membership of an industry-wide cost-sharing scheme (see below).

Option 3 – Continue to operate the crematorium without installing the necessary mercury abatement equipment

3.9 This option would be feasible via an industry-wide cost-sharing scheme (see below). Under this option there would be no operational impact on

Service users, as the operation of the facility will not be affected in any way.

Option 4 – Close the cremation operation

3.10 Although this option is included for completeness there is no good reason why the issue of mercury abatement should in itself trigger the closure of the Council's crematorium. Presently, the budget book shows an annual surplus of £76,740 from the operation of the crematorium. Moreover, given the downtime that neighbouring crematoria may well experience at some time in the next five years whilst they install the necessary abatement equipment (and possibly new cremators) and the present threat of a flu pandemic, closing the crematorium operation in the foreseeable future could compromise the cremation capacity in this area at certain times between now and 2013.

Proposed industry wide Cost-Sharing scheme

3.11 It has been calculated that presently, the cost to the industry of mercury abating 50% of cremations amounts to £27.50 for every cremation carried out in the UK, based on 2005 calculations. The theory of the cost-sharing scheme is that all crematoria pay £27.50 into the scheme for each cremation completed. This money is then re-distributed at the rate of £55 per cremation to crematoria that have had the mercury abatement equipment installed. (The £27.50 would probably simply be added to the cost of a cremation met by the customer.)

3.12 The above calculation is rather over simplistic. There will inevitably be a cost to administer such a scheme. Moreover if the numbers of cremations abated is more than 50% nationally, then the £55 referred to above will have to be reduced, unless of course the £27.50 referred to above (the figure to be passed on to our customers) is increased. However, the calculations are sufficient to explain the principles that will apply to a national cost-sharing scheme.

3.13 The concept of a cost-sharing scheme is being developed because it has been recognised that smaller crematoria with relatively low throughput, such as the Widnes crematorium, could well find it financially prohibitive to install the expensive mercury abatement equipment.

Notifying the individual regulator of the Council's intentions

3.14 What the Council was required to do by 1 June 2006 was to notify the individual regulator (the local Environmental Health Service) as to how Halton intends to implement the mercury abatement requirements. Given the timescale, an agenda item was considered by the Executive Board Sub-Committee on 22 May 2006, when it was decided to notify the regulator that the Council "plans to contribute to a national cremation burden-sharing (i.e. cost-sharing) scheme from 1 January 2013, and has no immediate plans to install mercury abatement equipment, though this

position remains under review". The Sub-Committee also resolved that "an agenda item along the lines of the item before the Sub-Committee be submitted to the next meeting of the Safer Halton PPB so that the policy issues may be given ongoing consideration".

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Any decisions made by the Board will inform the Council's policy on the medium to longer-term operation of the Widnes crematorium.

5.0 OTHER IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Joining a cost-sharing scheme would provide the most sustainable solution to maintaining a crematorium operation in the Borough, to serve families that have used the facility since it was opened in1959. The operation of the facility has a significant positive impact on the costs of the overall Bereavement Services operation.

6.0 RISK ANALYSIS

6.1 There would be financial risk associated with the installation of mercury abatement equipment bearing in mind the cost of approximately half a million pounds. Additionally, there could well be capacity risks at key times over the next five years, if the crematorium operation were to be closed.

6.2 Defra have already stated that once they know the intentions of Cremation Authorities, if evidence shows that the 50% target of abated cremations will not be met, they will revert to the more conventional approach of requiring all crematoria above a certain size to fit mercury abatement. We are advised that this will affect 30% of crematoria, so it is unlikely that Defra would require Widnes Crematorium to fit the additional equipment.

7.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

7.1 There are no equality or diversity issues flowing from this report.

8.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

8.1 There are no background papers under the meaning of the Act.