

*PART A

Report to: Cabinet

Date of meeting: 7 September 2015

Report of: Environmental Services Client Manager (Parks and Streets)

Title: A Review of the Cemetery Service in Watford

1.0 **SUMMARY**

- 1.1 This report sets out the initial findings of a review of Watford's cemetery service and presents recommendations for taking these forward.
- 1.2 The review was established to build a detailed understanding of the present service, to highlight current challenges and issues and to provide direction on potential changes that would deliver an improved service for Watford residents. A resource from the Institute of Crematorium and Cemetery Management (ICCM) has supported the review to provide external challenge and expertise, including recommendations on industry best practice. The ICCM report is attached (see Appendix I).
- 1.3 In addition, engagement was undertaken with a range of stakeholders to provide an opportunity for the community to provide feedback on the current service and to share their views on future provision (see Appendix II).
- 1.4 The broad scope of the review and the complexity of the range of issues raised means that, at this stage, further work is required to develop a comprehensive Cemetery Strategy and action plan that will address all areas identified. Therefore, this report is seeking approval to progress the review to the next stage (a detailed strategy and action planning).
- 1.5 However, the report is also looking to agree specific recommendations relating to four priority areas highlighted in both the ICCM report and through the engagement undertaken with stakeholders. These areas are covered in detail in this report and are as follows:
- The provision of a weekend and bank holiday burials service for those communities where there is a religious / cultural requirement to bury the deceased as soon as possible
 - The need to address the limited availability of space remaining within Watford (North Watford Cemetery in particular) for burials
 - The requirement to change the regulations relating to memorials
 - The need to review staffing cover and office opening hours and undertake further consultation on these areas

2.0 **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Cabinet is recommended to:

- 2.1 Note the contents of the ICCM Cemetery Report (Appendix I) and the range of issues raised during engagement with local stakeholders (Appendix II) and that the majority of these will be taken forward in a Cemetery Strategy and detailed action plan but with the issues identified in 2.2, 2.3, 2.4 and 2.5 below to be acted on immediately.
- 2.2 Note the review findings in relation to introducing a weekend and bank holiday (to be defined) burial service for those residents and community groups who require burials to be carried out as soon as possible after death for religious or cultural reasons and agree to pursue the option of working with the Garden of Peace charity to provide this service. See 3.3.1 to 3.3.4.
- 2.3 Note the findings of the review in relation to the decreasing amount of burial space available at North Watford Cemetery and agree that a policy be explored which limits burials to Watford residents only but that will also allow for some degree of flexibility and officer discretion in certain circumstances (to be defined). The same policy to also provide details of other options which could be explored to maximise remaining burial space for the benefit of Watford residents. A report detailing this policy, including any financial implications, to be brought to Cabinet for final approval. See 3.3.5 to 3.3.7.
- 2.4 Note the findings of the review concerning the need to standardise the dimensions of new memorials erected within Watford cemeteries and agree the recommendation in 3.3.8 on the dimensions of memorials. This to be approved and implemented immediately. A full review of the cemetery regulations and development of any appropriate enforcement policy will also be undertaken. Cabinet is asked to agree the delegation to the Head of Service in consultation with the Portfolio Holder to approve changes to the regulations and policy.
- 2.5 Note the review findings regarding the need to improve the resilience of the cemetery service and allow for more customer focused office hours by reviewing staff cover and agree to further consultation being undertaken. See 3.3.9.

Contact Officer:

For further information on this report please contact:

Paul Rabbitts, Environmental Services Client Manager (Parks and Streets)

Telephone extension: 8250 Email: paul.rabbitts@watford.gov.uk

Report approved by: Lesley Palumbo, Head of Corporate Strategy and Client Services

3.0 Background

Watford Borough Council currently manages and maintains four cemeteries in the borough on behalf of local residents. These are:

- North Watford Cemetery:
- Vicarage Road Cemetery and
- 2 closed cemeteries (All Saint's Cemetery and St Mary's Church Grounds – grounds maintenance only).

North Watford Cemetery is the only site with space available for new graves, although this availability is estimated to be limited to around 7-9 years, depending on future demand.

The day to day management of the service (bookings, liaison with Funeral Directors, records maintenance, community engagement) is managed by an on-site Cemetery Manager who also lives on site at North Watford Cemetery. The grounds maintenance and cemetery operations element (such as grave preparation) has been managed by the council's strategic partner, Veolia, since it was outsourced in 2013.

Whilst the service has long been an integral part of the town, it is an area of the council's work where we have had limited knowledge in terms of customer perceptions, including from the bereaved, funeral directors and cemetery visitors. Additionally, there is clearly a need to explore a range of emerging issues and to better understand current and future requirements to ensure that the council is well placed to deliver an effective and efficient service that meets the needs of local people and the Watford community.

3.1 Establishing a review of Watford's cemetery service

3.1.1 A comprehensive review of the council's cemetery service was agreed as part of the council's work programme for 2015 (spanning the end of the 2014/15 financial year, with reporting of initial findings set for autumn 2015). The review took as its starting point the Scrutiny Review of Services for the Deceased which was carried out by Watford BC members in 2010. A number of recommendations were made as a result and these were assessed as to whether they had been achieved or should be considered within the current review – see below:

- That the Council continues to provide a wide range of services for the deceased, even though it only has a statutory responsibility to provide for the burial and cremation of any deceased person without relatives or other means of arranging burials or cremation. This was subject to a financial viability recommendation.
(Update: Achieved)
- That the Council should aim to make the cemeteries self-financing in the next five years.
(Update: Not achieved – but income generation opportunities are highlighted in the ICCM report and will be progressed in the Cemeteries Strategy)

- That the pricing structure be reviewed to ensure that it is simple to understand and that the costs of individual services reflect the cost to the Council.
(Update: Partly achieved)
- That officers look further at the areas of the Charter for the Bereaved which could be easily implemented at Watford in order to improve the Council's national ranking, for example, providing a written explanation of 'buying' a grave to purchasers.
(Update: Partly achieved – ranking has improved. The ICCM review has highlighted further areas for improvement that will be included in the Cemeteries Strategy)
- That the Council investigates the feasibility of extending the times during which burials can take place. This would mean operating an 'on call' system on Saturdays for the digging staff. The extra cost to this service would need to be reflected in a revised pricing structure.
(Update: Not achieved – this area is highlighted within the review and options for the delivery of an extended service and associated costs to be explored)
- That the Council continues with the policy of not allowing the pre-purchase of graves.
(Update: Achieved)
- That officers research the logistics of allowing shroud burials within the cemeteries and put in place the requisite measures for shroud burials to be catered for in the future.
(Update: Achieved)
- That the Council considers developing the woodland areas of North Watford Cemetery to allow for the scattering of ashes there.
(Update: Under consideration)
- That green burial grounds be included in the planning for future cemetery sites.
(Update: Under consideration)
- That the Council starts future planning to identify a future site for the cemetery within the next few years due to the scarcity of available land and the cost (at least £1 million).
(Update: Under consideration)

3.1.2 In February 2015, the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management (ICCM) was appointed to support the review of the council's service. The ICCM provides policy and best practice guidance to burial and cremation authorities and is, therefore, an experienced and knowledgeable resource for the council to work with on the review. It can provide appropriate challenge, sign post best practice and consider where improvements could enhance the service and the resident / customer experience.

3.1.3 The parameters for the review were agreed as:

Management

- Staffing and Cover issues
- Relationship with West Herts Crematorium (WHC)
- Hours of opening
- The visitor experience
- ICT and Records Management
- Lone working policy
- Income opportunities
- Updating of Regulations for Management of Cemeteries
- Muslim and other faith Burials (weekend burials)

Perception

- Consultation and Engagement – identifying service demands
- Benchmarking
- Marketing of Cemeteries

Infrastructure and Environment

- Quality of the grounds and cemetery as a green space
- Building infrastructure
- Growth and expansion opportunities – the need for space and Green Burials

3.1.4 The ICCM delivered an initial draft report in August 2015 (Appendix I). It is an extensive exploration of the current cemetery service and identifies a number of key issues that need to be developed into short, medium and long term actions. It is recommended that, as the next stage of the review, these are taken forward through a detailed Cemetery Strategy and action plan.

3.2 Engagement on the cemetery review

3.2.1 The review has been supported by engagement with a range of stakeholders:

- Funeral Directors and Memorial Masons
- The Muslim community
- The Gypsy and Traveller community
- Watford Borough Council members
- Wider Watford community

This engagement confirmed a number of the issues / concerns / proposals for improvement identified in the ICCM review. An overview of the actions identified from the feedback is attached (Appendix II). It also helped confirm the areas in the ICCM report, which require immediate action and for which this report is seeking approval. These are outlined in 3.3.

3.3 Priority areas for action

3.3.1 Introduction of a weekend and bank holiday burial service in Watford cemeteries

This area is covered in detail within the ICCM review and also featured as a

major focus of the engagement with both the Muslim community and Watford Borough Council members.

In addition, the council received a petition with over 2,000 signatures in June 2015 calling for weekend and bank holiday burials in Watford cemeteries and for consideration to be given to space issues within the council cemeteries.

Limited provision on a Saturday has been available to meet the requirements for those residents and community groups who require burials to be carried out as soon as possible after death for religious or cultural reasons – in Watford this is primarily the Muslim community. However, Saturday burials are not an established part of the service and cannot, therefore, be guaranteed when required by the community. This is because current staffing resources (both Watford BC and Veolia) are set at levels to provide sufficient Monday to Friday service cover. Saturday cover is accommodated if staff are available and prepared to work outside of contracted hours.

The review was, therefore, tasked with finding a sustainable solution that meets the needs for an extended service. This extended service would be required for Saturday, Sunday and bank holiday burials.

3.3.2 Demand for Muslim burials overall

As part of identifying options for the delivery of a weekend / bank holiday service for the Muslim community, the review considered the recent number of Muslim burials undertaken to gauge the possible extent of demand. This is detailed below with some analysis of the figures for additional context. The figures are for residents and non-residents.

Year	No. of Full Burials	No. of Muslim Burials	No. of Muslim Burials on a Saturday*	No. of Muslim Burials on a Monday**
2010	175	38	4	3
2011	144	28	2	4
2012	152	26	0	4
2013	169	39	2	2
2014	166	41	1	5
2015	122	35	0	5

* This figure does not represent all requests received for Saturday burials just those that the current service was able to accommodate

** Monday burials could indicate a death over the weekend whilst the service is closed

Whilst the demand is not high in terms of numbers, the council acknowledges the impact on the Muslim community of not having a guaranteed response to requests and that demand might be higher when an extended service is introduced.

3.3.3 Options for delivering a weekend and bank holiday burial service

Taking into account the figures outlined in 3.3.2. and the feedback from the Muslim community and Watford Borough Council members, a number of options

for delivering a weekend and bank holiday burial service to meet the needs of the Muslim community have been explored within the review. These include:

Option 1:

Commissioning the Gardens of Peace charity to provide the service for Watford's cemetery service

This is a registered Muslim charity, which, as well as running its own Muslim cemetery in Ilford, provides a weekend service for St Albans Council. The council hands responsibility to Gardens of Peace to provide burials for the Muslim community (the community liaise with Gardens of Peace directly when a need arises) at the weekend. An additional fee is charged by the Gardens of Peace, which is paid on top of the burial fee charged by the council. St Albans Council has not had to call on the service on many occasions since it was instigated three years ago but its experience of Gardens of Peace is good. A similar arrangement would be proposed for Watford.

This option has a number of benefits including:

- the experience of the providers and their understanding of religious /cultural and statutory requirements
- it would be relatively quick to action and bring into operation
- it requires no additional resource / investment from Watford BC

Option 2:

Watford BC / Veolia to provide the service

To achieve this option, additional resources would need to be employed by both the council and Veolia. Discussions with Veolia (see Appendix III for an overview of Veolia's response to these discussions) have confirmed that the current staffing structure would not provide the resilience required in terms of allowing for holiday cover, sickness etc and that in order to achieve the council's requirements, there would need to be additional staff employed and possibly changes to terms and conditions for existing staff. Whilst the ICCM report provides a rough estimate of what the cost might be for the extended service, this only covers stand by costs (the assumption made is that existing staff would be sufficient to provide the cover) and does not include the costs of employing and training additional staff.

For this option to be progressed, a robust business case with full costings would need to be worked up by the council and Veolia. Whilst some of the cost would be offset by burial fees, it is unlikely that the full costs would be offset by the demand for the service.

Whilst the options has benefits including:

- experienced, qualified staff who know the service and have a good understanding of religious /cultural and statutory requirements
- staff who have a good knowledge of the cemetery service in Watford

there are issues with the option beyond that of the cost of additional staff, which include the time it would take to implement (recruitment, negotiating changes to

the Veolia contract and staff terms and conditions, training).

Option 3:

Explore partnerships with adjacent local authorities

A benchmarking exercise with other authorities indicated that many have arrangements in place for weekend burials (although not necessarily bank holiday burials). Further exploration indicates that in many cases, the service is very seldom used and so has not been fully tested to clarify whether the needs of the community are being met. As indicated above, St Albans Council's preferred option is being investigated for implementation in Watford but there might be other authorities that Watford could partner with. Costs at this stage are unclear as is the appetite of other authorities to share services.

Benefits of this option include:

- Potential for quick implementation
- Less costly than Option 2

Option 4

Facilitate additional land in the borough for a dedicated Muslim cemetery

This option was raised by the Muslim community. It is not a short term solution as it would require further exploration in terms of identifying suitable land, understanding the viability of using the land for cemetery purposes and for looking at options for how the site would be managed.

3.3.4 In order to facilitate an effective extended burial service to meet the needs of the Muslim community, the Gardens of Peace option is the preferred option to pursue. It will deliver the community's requirement for a responsive, 'out of hours' service that can be achieved relatively quickly compared with the other options explored. The council is in contact with Gardens of Peace and discussions have started on a potential partnership with Watford BC.

3.3.5 Preserving burial space in Watford cemeteries

The council's Local Plan recognises that cemetery space within Watford is limited (North Watford cemetery is the only site available for new graves). This reflects the national picture, where a number of local authorities are facing a similar problem to Watford in terms of space running out but little or no remaining open space on which to site a new cemetery. As there are no sites within Watford that could meet long term demand with the current rates of burial, it is recommended that policies (as outlined in the ICCM report and in 3.3.6 below) are explored to make the best use of available space.

Although there is no statutory requirement for the council to provide cemetery space, there is, nevertheless, a need to ensure that there is sufficient infrastructure, including cemeteries, as part of the plan making process. With the proposed amendments to policies being explored as outlined below, it is recommended that forecasts for available burial space to 2031 are re-profiled. Adjoining districts will also be contacted to test availability elsewhere. With this additional work, there should be no impact on the potential soundness of Local Plan 2.

3.3.6 **Limiting burials to Watford residents only**

The Watford cemetery service is provided for the benefit of Watford residents. The cemetery service is, however, open to anyone (albeit the cost of burials for non-residents is higher than that for residents). Over the years, the council has been willing to provide this service for people who live outside the borough but with the issue of available space running out within 7-9 years and, currently, no definitive option for where a new cemetery could be located, the proposal to explore limiting burials to Watford residents is now being considered. To implement a change to current arrangements, officers will be required to explore developing an appropriate policy for approval. Within this policy, there would need to be flexibility for exceptional cases (for example, a proven local connection such as a partner buried within Watford) where discretion would be applied to a non-resident's request. The policy would also need to set out financial implications.

3.3.7 It is proposed that the policy on limiting burials to Watford residents only forms part of a wider policy that covers all identified measures to preserve / make the most of current burial space within Watford cemeteries. This would include a full audit of space availability and how space is currently designated. This policy to be presented to Cabinet for approval by February 2016.

3.3.8 **Memorial regulations**

The current regulations relating to memorials are out of date and hinder the consistent and effective application of an acceptable height and width for memorials that meet the needs of the bereaved.

Five foot is now a standard height for memorials and it is proposed to set this as the new maximum height for Watford cemeteries. This increased height is important to certain groups within the community. In terms of width, this needs to remain at 3 foot for a single grave and up to a maximum of 7 foot for a double grave. All memorials must be erected by a professional memorial mason.

If approval is given for the revised memorial dimensions, the associated new regulations will be implemented immediately and apply to the erection of all new memorials; it will not be applied retrospectively. However, in order to avoid the past situation when little, or no, enforcement was undertaken when memorials were erected that did not comply with regulations, these new regulations will be enforced fairly and consistently. A policy on enforcement will be developed.

3.3.9 **Staff cover and office hours**

The current cemetery service in terms of day to day management is reliant on one member of council staff – the cemetery manager. As outlined in the ICCM report the cemetery manager works a 37 hour week and also occasionally works on Saturdays. When the cemetery manager is on leave, attending training or is unexpectedly ill, cover is provided by a Veolia employee who is undergoing training via the ICCM. This cover provides a basic service and comes at an additional cost to the council and relies on the Veolia member of staff being available at short, medium and long term notice.

Cover has also recently been provided by West Herts Crematorium as part of a Service Level Agreement but, again, cannot always be guaranteed.

The current level of staff resource means that the service has limited resilience and the quality of the service is compromised in areas such as office cover, which is not available if the cemetery manager is conducting a burial or is engaged in other cemetery business away from the office.

It is proposed that staff cover is reviewed to ensure improved resilience and customer experience of the service, including changes to office opening hours.

4.0 **IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 **Financial**

4.1.2 The Head of Strategic Finance comments that there are a range of financial implications identified within the report to deliver the priority areas outlined.

At this stage the detailed costings for the recommendations are not known but, where they cannot be met within existing budgets, growth bids will have to be put forward for approval.

The financial implications of delivering a weekend / bank holiday burial will be dependent on the final solution adopted. The recommendation to pursue the Gardens of Peace option should be cost neutral to the council but other options are likely to require additional revenue spend, which would need to be met through a growth bid and be approved as part of the budget setting process.

The financial implications of any proposed policy on limiting burials to Watford residents will be considered as the policy is developed and will be included in the budget setting process.

Any increase in staff cover will need to be put forward as a growth bid and considered within the council's overall medium term financial strategy, although securing an additional resource would reduce the payments currently made to Veolia to provide cover for the cemetery manager.

4.2 **Legal Issues (Monitoring Officer)**

4.2.1 The Head of Democracy and Governance comments that any revision of the cemetery policy will require to be considered in terms of the council's statutory duties under the Equalities Act 2010 and an Equality Impact Analysis (EIA) has been developed to address those matters referred to in recommendations 2.2 and 2.4 (see Appendix IV). An EIA for the remainder of the recommendations will be developed as these are progressed.

Consideration will also need to be given to the council's procurement rules in obtaining additional providers to run an enhanced service. Should it be likely that Veolia is required to assist with the provision of an enhanced service the current contract with them will need to be varied.

4.3 Equalities

4.3.1 An initial EIA has been developed alongside the review to address the issues raised in 2.2 and 2.4 (see Appendix IV). As these are progressed the EIA will be reviewed. As individual elements are progressed further EIAs will be developed to ascertain the equalities implications of proposals and to ensure the council's duties under the Equality Act 2010 are considered and equality impacts identified.

4.4 Risk

4.4.1 The Environmental Services Client team will develop a detailed risk register for the Cemeteries Strategy and action plan which will set out all the current risks and identify the mitigating actions needed to manage the risks. This will continue to be monitored and updated throughout the life of the new Strategy.

In terms of the priority areas identified in this report:

Potential Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Overall score
Unable to secure a weekend / bank holiday burial service for Watford	2	4	8
Unable to mitigate current lack of staff resource / cover	2	3	6
Unable to develop a policy to support the preservation / best use of remaining burial space	2	4	8
Unable to secure the necessary resource to provide additional resilience	1	4	4

4.5 Staffing

4.5.1 The ICCM report highlights a number of issues related to staffing, ranging from cover, developmental and strategic work, ICT, data collection, records management. This report seeks approval to review the current level of resource as an initial priority. Staff consultation will be undertaken.

4.6 Accommodation

4.6.1 The office accommodation / storage / income generation options will be explored as part of the Cemetery Strategy development.

4.7 **Community Safety**

4.7.1 Issues of security have been considered as part of this review.

Appendix 1: ICCM Review of Watford Cemeteries - FINAL 2015

Appendix II: Cemetery Review. Overview of engagement issues

Appendix III: Veolia report Cemetery Review Operational Considerations

Appendix IV: Equality Impact Analysis on Cemetery Review – initial recommendations