

Appendix III Cemetery Review – Operational Considerations

4th August 2015

Cemetery Review – Operational Considerations

1. Introduction

As part of the contract for the management and operation of front line environmental services including: Waste collection, recycling, street cleaning and maintenance of parks and open spaces for Watford Borough Council (WBC), Veolia undertake the operational maintenance and burials within Watford Borough Council Cemeteries. The management and administration of the cemeteries remains with WBC.

As part of WBC's continuous improvement they have commissioned a review of the Cemetery service by the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management. This review is to ascertain what improvements could be made to ensure a high quality, good value, service, and the estimated amount of time remaining at current use rate for the cemeteries as well as understand if the needs of the community are being met. As part of the review WBC officers also met with local community groups and stakeholders to understand what the local community felt about the current service provision and what improvements they thought would be beneficial. It has emerged that the Muslim community would like the service to operate on a 7 day a week basis to allow for bodies to be buried within 24 hours as per their religious beliefs.

As part of the overall cemetery review WBC have asked Veolia as the operator of the service to outline the works undertaken as part of the service and the potential challenges faced by moving to a 7 day week service which this paper aims to do.

2. Operational Services Undertaken

Under the service specification element of the parks and open spaces contract between WBC and Veolia, Veolia undertake a very wide range of activities to ensure the cemeteries remain aesthetically pleasing and that the service operates with minimal fuss and with the sensitivity required during a highly emotive process.

The Parks and Open Spaces team consists of a total of 19 full time operatives, which is enhanced by a further three seasonal operatives between March and October to help deal with the increased seasonal work load, such as grass cutting, flower bed maintenance, watering and litter collection created by warmer weather. Of the 19 full time operatives there are currently five operatives that have attended the Institute of Cemetery & Crematorium Management (ICCM) Cemetery Operatives Training Scheme (COTS) and deemed competent to undertake excavation and backfilling of graves.

The team at North Watford Cemetery consists of 3 full time employees with some support from the wider team during peak periods and to cover employee annual leave, sickness etc. The Team also assists with funerals that take place at Vicarage Road Cemetery, but these are quite rare with approximately only 10 a year taking place. The teams working hours are:

7:30am – 3:00pm on Mondays
7:30am – 3:30pm Tuesday to Friday

The current contractual requirements are where possible burials shall normally be arranged to take place Monday to Friday between:-

09:30 and 15:00 hours during April to September; and
09:30 and 14:00 hours during October to March.

The reason for the seasonal changes is as a result of the reduction of daylight hours in winter. However, burials may be arranged outside of these days and times and WBC will inform Veolia if any burials are likely to take place outside of the standard days and times as soon as reasonably possible.

Normally WBC will notify Veolia of a burial at least forty eight hours prior to the interment time, and twenty four hours prior to the interment time in exceptional circumstances (i.e. during high demand); and four hours prior to the interment time where special circumstances or religious rites demand an early interment. To ensure that these special circumstances can be accommodated it is intended that two stock graves are pre-dug and secured using lockable excavation covers.

In addition WBC will also notify Veolia of any special requirements in terms of the grave size and special requirements (i.e. bricked grave), and in normal circumstances arrange for only one burial at any one time and no more than three full burials in any one day.

In addition to the excavation of graves and filling in graves, including reinstatement of turf and levelling of graves following burial, other activities and maintenance delivered by the team at North Watford cemetery include, but are not limited to, the activities detailed in table 1 below

Table 1 – Cemetery Team Tasks & Activities

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Un-lock and lock cemeteries at the times specified 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carry out statutory memorial safety inspections including topple tests
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain the grass, trees, shrubs, flowerbeds and hedges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repair and/or remove memorials in the cemeteries as necessary
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carry out weekly cleaning duties to the chapels of rest and as instructed by the Cemetery Manager prior to services being held 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove floral tributes from graves and memorials fourteen days after the date of the interment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top up the grave with top soil following settlement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To empty litter bins to ensure they are never more than three quarters full and to remove any litter of whatsoever type, bags of rubbish, turf, wreaths etc. on the ground surrounding or below the litter bins
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seed graves nine months after the date of the interment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When instructed by the Authority, Veolia will undertake exhumations in line with industry best practice.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assisting others Parks services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrange for collection and disposal of waste and soil spool

Many of these activities are time consuming and some are reactive or seasonal, but it is very rare that the services are not completed to a good standard. This is due to the diligence of the team at North Watford Cemetery and the support network from the rest of the parks and open spaces department who assist when required in ensuring standards are met and objectives achieved.

3. Challenges of Supplying a Weekend Service

Following the consultation with the community stakeholders as part of the service review there is a desire to explore the potential of delivering a burials service at the weekends and bank holidays (the extent of bank holiday cover to be confirmed). An extended service would accommodate those of a Muslim faith where burial is the only option and there is a religious imperative to bury the deceased as soon as possible with a preference of within 24 hours of death. This emerged strongly from the engagement undertaken with Watford's Muslim community. Engagement did not identify that there was a high demand for weekend and bank holiday burials from other areas of the Watford community but, should a service be available, it would be anticipated that other residents might want to avail themselves of this option.

Delivering such a service comes with operational, managerial and administrative challenges. With these challenges comes potential additional cost for both WBC as the Local Authority and Veolia as its service delivery partner and these costs would need to be discussed at length before any final decisions could be made as they would create a variation to the current contractual terms.

Operational Challenges – Labour

The main challenge faced in operating a 7 day a week service relates to resources. From a labour perspective, and as outlined previously, the Parks and Open Spaces team consists of 19 full time frontline employees. This is a small workforce due to the size of the works needed to be undertaken within Watford. In order to complete existing scheduled and reactive tasks the team works efficiently and very closely with the Street Cleansing service to complete litter bin emptying, graffiti removal, cleansing of hard services, and maintenance and inspection of assets.

Added to the standard working week are the ground staff duties at the weekend for sports where 3 operatives will work Saturday and another 3 operatives will work on Sunday (totalling 6 operatives) at Cassiobury Park, King George V Playing Fields and Woodside Playing Fields. This often includes members of the cemetery team. Generally speaking an operative will not work both days over the weekend as they will want, and we encourage, at least one days rest per week and to try and achieve a reasonable home life, work life balance.

This additional work, along with occasional events in the parks, and street cleansing services in the town centre coupled with annual leave and sickness seriously reduces the potential competent work force available to work within the cemetery over the weekend and bank holidays. Even with more individuals trained to the COTS standard the existing work force would not have the capacity to take on weekend burial services.

We have considered creating a shift pattern for employees with two operatives working Monday to Friday and two Operatives working Wednesday to Sunday. However we would need to consult and negotiate with the work force Union over changes in employee terms and conditions, and potentially pay as the employees working the weekend would expect a financial enhancement for weekend work. This in turn would create a two tier work force and it is likely that this would be a very unpopular decision and would lead to low morale and motivation and a reduction in service quality and team spirit. The secondary risk that could potentially be realised is that the service could be over staffed on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday by one operative (although the operative could be deployed on other parks services as well), but understaffed on Monday, Tuesday, Saturday and Sunday by one operative.

The recruitment of any additional prequalified staff could be difficult, especially if trying to incorporate weekend working into the working week without any enhancement as culturally the industry has predominantly a 5 day week service and there is an expectation for enhanced rates.

Some thought has been given to operating set burial times in order to alleviate labour issues such as 12pm to 3pm on Saturdays, Sundays and Bank Holidays, but many of the points discussed above regarding human resource would remain. The work associated in preparing for the funeral, the funeral itself, and backfilling would generally need to be carried out on the day of the funeral. The list of works to be completed is broken down in table 2.

Table 2 – Funeral preparation, Service and Backfilling tasks

Preparation & Excavation

- At all times employees will conduct themselves in accordance with the Institute of Cemetery & Crematorium Management (ICCM) Code of Safe Working Practice for Cemeteries;
- Not excavate a grave earlier than one Working Day prior to the day of interment unless agreed in advance by the Authority
- Store all topsoil excavated from the grave in a designated area within the cemetery;
- Ensure that the bottom of the grave is level and free of undulations in excess of 50mm;
- Shore all excavations with either hydraulic shoring or timber walling;
- Ensure all paths, roadways adjoining graves and adjacent areas are free from all soil arising from the work of the excavation;
- Wash down with clean water any memorial soiled by the excavation works;
- Make good any damage caused by the excavation process to the surrounding area(s);
- Ensure that open graves are not left unattended unless the grave is covered with strong grave boards or planks.

The Funeral Service

- Check the grave at regular intervals to ensure that the grave has not collapsed and is clear of any visible water;
- Remove any flooding using an approved pump and surface drainage pipe;
- Promptly carry out reinstatement following collapse and draining of water to ensure that the funeral can take place at the appointed time.
- Thirty minutes before the funeral cortege is due to arrive remove the grave boards/planks, and dress the floor of the grave with grass cuttings, greenery or sawdust;
- Supply clean synthetic grass mats and drape them 1000mm in to the grave completely over spoil heaps and completely over grave boards extending 1000mm on the remaining three sides
- Place coffin lowering webs of synthetic material and strong varnished wooden struts across the grave in readiness to accept the coffin
- Leave the graveside as the cortege approaches and wait at a discreet distance until instructed to commence backfilling, or until required to carry out additional work instructed by the Authority.

Backfilling

- Manually backfill the grave after the mourners have left the cemetery. However, subject to religious rite or personal preference, Veolia may commence backfilling before the family have left or with the assistance of the mourners if instructed to do so.
- Remove the webbs, struts and grave mats;
- Break down large clods of earth before use to ensure damage to the coffin does not occur;
- Firm down the soil at every 600mm depth to minimise future settlement, unless instructed not to do so by WBC.
- Fill the last 150mm of the grave with top soil saved from the excavation;
- Ensure the grave is level with adjacent ground levels or instructed height
- Remove all timbers and shoring systems and store them in the cemetery stores
- Place floral tributes on the grave;
- Remove all excess spoil and deliver to the stock pile in the depot.

It is highly unlikely that this amount of work could be undertaken in a 3 hour time slot considering the sensitivity that has to be exercised when waiting for mourners to leave the burial site, and so it is our opinion that a minimum 6 hour shift would be required to undertake a funeral from start to finish.

It is worth noting at this point that the demand for the service may not be for both days on every weekend and bank holiday. This could potentially mean that operatives could be being paid to be on duty in the cemetery, but with no internment (and therefore revenue) to perform. A solution to this could be to pay a retainer to the employees to ensure their availability and if a funeral is booked they come to the cemetery and then are paid the full hourly rate of pay. This solution would still however require an increase in the total number of operatives on the service.

Operational Challenges – Mechanical Resource contingency

Veolia operates one excavator for cemetery and burial operations. Although this equipment is relatively new and so quite reliable, there is the possibility that it could break down and that the funeral could not go ahead as the grave would not be dug. This risk is quite minimal during the week as our internal workshop is operating to undertake repair and in the event the breakdown could not be repaired hire shops are open and available so we would be likely to obtain a replacement excavator within a few hours.

During the weekend and bank holidays our workshop team are on call in case of vehicular breakdown, but will be much slower to react and will not be able to access suppliers and replacement parts to potentially complete a repair. The plant hire centres will also generally be closed meaning replacement equipment would not be accessible and the funeral may need to be postponed which would not reflect well on both WBC and Veolia's reputation.

Operational Challenges – Management and Administration

In order to offer funerals at the weekend or over bank holidays, and particularly those that are of Muslim origin that may require a circa 24 hour internment it is necessary for WBC to have the ability to take phone calls and bookings as well as notifying Veolia of the funeral and managing the payment process. Currently the WBC Cemetery Manager works Monday to Friday and would not have the scope in their current working arrangements to manage the weekend requirements. Additional management time and systems would need to be implemented in order to administrate the weekend work load.

4. Summary

To summarise this paper, Veolia are willing to assist WBC in ensuring that the satisfaction levels within the community relating to the cemetery service remain high and that wherever possible we help achieve and surpass local stakeholder's expectations.

The challenge of trying to introduce a weekend and bank holiday burial service within the cemetery would be less challenging for a larger borough with a larger workforce as there would be more capacity for weekend working via overtime. With such a small pool of employees to draw from the challenge for WBC and Veolia collectively is to find a balance of available human resource that does not incur enormous cost (that could hopefully be balanced by the revenue received from the service) to the partnership contract.

Further discussion and exploration is required to try and find the most advantageous solution, but for the meantime the most basic of challenges and risks have been highlighted. Once the cemetery review recommendations and political drivers are known, this will determine what further work will be required.