

Culture & Neighbourhood Scrutiny Commission

Burial Strategy Update

Date of Commission meeting: 24th October 2023

Lead director: Sean Atterbury, Director of Neighbourhood &
Environmental Services

Useful information

- Ward(s) affected: All
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- Report version number: v1

1. Summary

- 1.1 This report summarises the Burial Strategy Update slide presentation appended.
- 1.2 Action has been taken to mitigate the pressure on burial space following increased demand from the coronavirus pandemic and the reducing availability of burial space in the council's cemeteries.

2. Recommendations to scrutiny

- 2.1 That the Culture and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Commission note the contents of the report and presentation.
- 2.2 That the Culture and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Commission review and comment on the delivery of the burial strategy.

3. Background

- 3.1 The council is a burial authority by virtue of the Local Government Act 1972.
- 3.2 The provision of burial space is a discretionary service, and the council has no statutory duty to provide cemeteries.
- 3.3 In 2022 the council undertook 1,031 burials, in addition to 1,826 cremations.
- 3.4 The coronavirus pandemic led to a significant increase in demand for burial space. A re-evaluation of the demand for burial space, and options to mitigate the increased demand, has been carried out.
- 3.5 As a result of changing population demographics and the different funeral needs of faith communities, it was forecasted that the existing dedicated burial space for Muslim communities would reach capacity in 2025, and by 2033 for all other communities.
- 3.6 Action has been taken to mitigate the increased pressures on Muslim burial space, and the general availability of new graves, by rebalancing the allocation of burial space in our cemeteries and the introduction of a new policy on the sale of graves.
- 3.7 As a result of the mitigating action taken the overall availability of burial space is now forecasted to reach capacity by 2030-31 for all communities.
- 3.8 Additional space has been allocated for Muslim burials at Saffron Hill Cemetery providing an additional 800 graves to meet burial needs.

- 3.9 There has been a significant increase in recent years of graves being purchased in reserve (without a burial) for future use. The purchase of graves in reserve reduces the short-term availability of graves for immediate burial (point of need).
- 3.10 Engagement with faith communities was undertaken through a series of focus groups to inform a change of policy in relation to the purchase of graves in reserve, following which an Equality Impact Assessment was completed.
- 3.11 The focus groups recognised the pressures on existing burial space and supported a change of policy to stop the sale of graves unless required for an immediate burial. Many other local authorities have already ceased the sale of graves in reserve.
- 3.12 Stopping the sale of graves in reserve has increased the short-term availability of burial space to meet immediate burial needs.
- 3.13 To meet future burial needs a new cemetery will need to be built to provide additional burial space.
- 3.14 Work to identify a location for a new cemetery has been started by Estates and Building Services, working with Bereavement Services and Planning. This involves conducting desktop assessments of site availability, Local Plan designations, Planning constraints, Environment Agency restrictions and ground suitability surveys. This work is ongoing.
- 3.15 A meeting has taken place between council officers and representatives from Muslim organisations who have expressed interest in self-building a Muslim cemetery.
- 3.16 An evaluation of the organisations plans for a new cemetery highlighted that none of the organisations had yet acquired a site or had secured funding in place. While these organisations are unlikely to provide any additional burial space in the short-term, they may potentially provide some longer-term capacity if they secure a site and build a new cemetery
- 3.17 It is recognised that there is a growing shortage of burial space across the UK, and that legislation related to burials and cremations is outdated and not fit for purpose. The Law Commission for England and Wales has commenced a review of all legislation related to the disposal of the deceased.
- 3.18 National bereavement sector organisations are lobbying for a change in legislation to allow the re-use of old graves for new burials.

4. Background information and other papers:

N/A

5. Summary of appendices:

Appendix A – Burial Strategy update slide presentation

6. Is this a private report (If so, please indicate the reasons and state why it is not in the public interest to be dealt with publicly)?

No

7. Is this a “key decision”? If so, why?

No