

ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

Date of Meeting	Tuesday 17 October 2017
Report Subject	Bereavement Services
Cabinet Member	Cabinet Member for Streetscene and Countryside
Report Author	Chief Officer for Streetscene and Transportation
Type of Report	Strategic

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bereavement Services currently manage 15 Cemeteries and 8 Closed Churchyards located throughout Flintshire. Within these Cemeteries the Council undertakes approximately 400 interments annually, both full body and cremated remains. The service is staffed by 2 full time officers (Bereavement Services Manager and Bereavement Services Officer) and 6 Streetscene Operatives who undertake the cemetery maintenance and grave digging operations. The service also manages a team of 6 seasonal operatives who undertake grass cutting duties during the season (April to October).

Within the cemeteries, the service has 2 Gardens of Remembrance located at Hawarden and Kelsterton and has recently established a woodland burial area and dedicated child / baby memorial at Kelsterton Cemetery. The service is responsible for approximately 17,500 memorials of varying shapes and sizes, approximately 400m² of shrub and flower beds, 140,000m² of grass to be mowed, 100,000m of strimming around memorials, 4500m of hedging, 450 trees, 250 memorial benches and 12 buildings of various sizes and uses, including the chapel located in Hawarden No 1 Cemetery.

There are a number of future challenges and risks facing the service that need addressing and this report sets out proposals to deal with these. These being:

- Memorial safety
- Increasing grounds maintenance costs
- The increasing number of Public Health Burials
- Future Burial Space in Council owned cemeteries

Child Burial Fees have also recently been brought into the public domain, and Welsh Government are now in the process of writing a Memorandum of

Understanding (MoU) to standardise child burial and associated fees across Wales. Subsequently, the service is seeking a recommendation to cabinet to sign up to this MoU.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1.	That Scrutiny recommends Cabinet approves the changes to the current inspection and management arrangement for memorials within Council owned cemeteries.
2.	That Scrutiny recommends Cabinet approves plans to investigate partnership agreements with local communities to deliver grounds maintenance for cemeteries and closed churchyards.
3.	That Scrutiny recommends Cabinet approves the new arrangements for house searches, in respect of Public Health burials.
4.	That Scrutiny notes the current capacity within the Council owned cemeteries.
5.	That Scrutiny recommends Cabinet approves the adoption of the Memorandum of Understanding being developed by Welsh Government to standardise Child Burial Fees across Wales.

REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING THE BACKGROUND TO THE BURIAL STRATEGY																																
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1.02	The management of cemeteries is in the main covered by the Local Authorities Cemetery Order 1977 (LACO) The Authority also has a statutory duty under the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1974 to undertake the funeral arrangements for those residents of Flintshire who are unable to fund their own funeral.
1.03	As members of the Association of Public Service Excellence (APSE) Performance Network for Cemeteries and Crematoria, the service is bench marked against other similar Authorities on key performance indicators. Our performance compared to those in our peer group for 2015 / 2016 financial year shows the service to be expensive but improving and moving forward in the right direction.
1.04	<p><u>Memorial Safety Policy</u></p> <p>Flintshire County Council currently undertake Memorial Safety inspections in all 15 of its Cemeteries on a rolling three year programme. The current programme does not include memorials within closed churchyards but this situation has been addressed and all memorials in these locations will in future be inspected at the same frequency, with the initial inspection completed at all churchyards by 1st April 2018. The current practice does also not address those memorials that fail the inspection and are never repaired as a registered grave owner cannot be traced.</p>
1.05	In these circumstances, the memorial has two wooden stakes placed behind it and is strapped to these stakes. The memorial is then subject to ongoing inspection and re staking when required, which all has an associated cost. The proposed policy would seek to use an alternate form of metal fabricated support, which would not rot, and then if after a set period (12 months) the registered grave owner had not been traced or come forward, the memorial would be laid flat in the body of the grave, with the grave being levelled etc. and any associated broken kerb sets or memorial items removed from the Cemetery.
1.06	This arrangement will improve the safety of the Councils cemeteries, reducing ongoing inspection costs and make grounds maintenance easier and more efficient.
1.07	<p><u>Grounds Maintenance</u></p> <p>The service is responsible for approximately 17,500 memorials of varying shapes and sizes, approximately 400m² of shrub and flower beds, 140,000m² of grass to be mowed, 100,000m of strimming around memorials, 4500m of hedging, 450 trees, 250 memorial benches and 12 buildings of various sizes and uses, including the chapel located in Hawarden No 1 Cemetery.</p>
1.08	When visiting the Councils cemeteries and closed church yards the public rightly expect the grounds to be well presented and when this is not the case we are subject to criticism. Grounds maintenance is one of the largest costs incurred by the service and we need to explore ways to manage these costs in the future with increasing pressure on budgets. The current cost of maintaining the grounds across all of the cemeteries and closed churchyards is £124,085 (total) = £112,827 (cemeteries) and

	£11,258 (closed churchyards).
1.09	<p>There are two ways in which the Council can reduce this cost:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reduce the standard – (currently 16 cuts in total per season, 14 during the growing season and 1 prior to Christmas, 1 prior to Mothering Sunday if ground conditions allow). Or 2. Investigate the possibility of Community Volunteer groups taking on the maintenance responsibility at particular sites. <p>Reducing the standard would not be popular and is not being considered at this stage however faced with this approach in future years, local groups may be prepared to take on the responsibility - with our support. It is proposed that we look to develop a policy of working more closely with the local communities by establishing local volunteer groups to undertake maintenance works within the cemeteries.</p>
1.10	<p><u>Public Health burials</u></p> <p>Under the terms of the Public Health Act (Control of Diseases) 1984 (Section 46) Flintshire County Council has a statutory duty to undertake the funeral arrangements for those residents of Flintshire who are unable to finance it themselves or have no relatives able or willing to make the arrangements. On average we arrange up to 8 funerals of this nature each year at an average cost of £1,500 to include Funeral Director disbursements and FRCC Investigation Costs to the Council, the trend is increasing annually.</p>
1.11	<p>As part of these duties Flintshire have powers to attempt to recover all costs incurred from the estate of the deceased. To assist with this function officers from Bereavement Services currently undertake property searches in an attempt to try to ascertain any personal and or financial information contained within the property. Whilst processes are in place to protect the staff and corroborate and record any information found or removed, it is felt that this risk is unacceptably high for those officers concerned, in terms of the potential allegations that could be put forward following the search.</p>
1.12	<p>It is therefore proposed that the current policy be amended to ensure that when this process is undertaken, a suitable, independent person from outside of the Streetscene and Transportation Portfolio is also present at the property searches with the Flintshire County Council Bereavement officer. It is proposed that the independent officer comes from Legal or Internal Audit services.</p>
1.13	<p><u>Burial space</u></p> <p>Appendix 1 provides the estimated time (in years) that all of the Council cemeteries have left in relation to burial space. In particular the cemeteries at Hope with only 4 years and Hawarden with 5, have the least amount of existing burial space. Buckley Cemetery is the third in line with 9 years of capacity available.</p>

1.14	As land negotiations and purchase can be a lengthy process consideration now needs to be given to look at the possibility of extending the cemeteries in Hope and Hawarden into adjacent agricultural land. There is no such option at Buckley as there is no adjacent land to develop so alternative sites would need to be explored in the Buckley area. This work will under taken by the Council's Asset Team and will be the subject of a further report before any extension is taken forward.
1.15	Clearly the purchase of additional land, creation of infrastructure and the extensive ground investigation works required would involve significant investment from capital funds. However the investment would secure future income from burial fees applied, which would be lost should extensions not be provided.
1.16	<u>Child Burial Fees</u> Welsh Government are currently working with all Welsh Local Authorities to standardise Child Burial Fees in Wales, through the development of a Memorandum of Understanding. Flintshire County Council currently do not charge for a child / baby funeral for someone up to the age of 16 in a dedicated Child Grave.
1.17	The MoU would standardise the age to 18 years of age and also ensure that no fee is applied to burials in child graves across Wales. It will also determine a consistent approach to burials of children in graves that will subsequently be used by the parents in such terms as whether the Exclusive Rights of Burial fee is applied and the Interment fee and also what fees are applied in terms of other services such as Memorials.
1.18	It is recommended that we adopt of the Memorandum of Understanding being proposed by Welsh Government to standardise Child Burial Fees across Wales.

2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
2.01	Staff from the Bereavement Service, supplemented by Technical Officers from Streetscene and Transportation will undertake the memorial inspections.
2.02	Capital funding would be required to purchase land and develop new burial sites.

3.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED / CARRIED OUT
3.01	The registered grave owner, surviving family members or friends of the interred would be informed of the condition of any memorial found to be in a dangerous condition. In the event that records are not held regarding ownership, a notice will be attached to the memorial for a period of 1 year following the inspection, asking the owner or person responsible for the memorial to make contact with the Council or to make the memorial safe.

4.00	RISK MANAGEMENT
4.01	Approval of the recommendations made within this report will assist the Bereavement Services in managing and reducing the level of risk associated with this highly sensitive service.
4.02	Development of the Bereavement Strategy will also ensure that the service remains fit for purpose and is always able to meet the needs of the ever changing local demographic and is able to provide its services to a multi faith community ensuring we meet our equality targets. Also through the promotion of the natural burial option in our woodland burial option we are also addressing our responsibilities towards protecting the environment.
4.03	One of the main operational risks to the service is Health and Safety. By their nature cemeteries can be dangerous places to visit, through the development of a more robust Memorial Safety Policy and Closed Churchyard Policy, these risks to staff and visitors to the cemeteries will be reduced through improved maintenance and management.

5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	Appendix 1 – Burial Space

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	<p>Flintshire County Council – Internal Audit Report – Bereavement Services</p> <p>Contact Officer: Jan Harty, Senior Auditor, Flintshire CC</p> <p>Telephone: 01352 702234</p> <p>E-mail: jan.harty@flintshire.gov.uk</p>

7.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
7.01	<p>Exclusive Rights of Burial (EROB):- Purchased by the Registered Grave Owner at the time of first interment in a grave or when the grave is purchased for future use. EROB give burials rights in a grave plot for 100 years currently.</p> <p>Closed Churchyard:- A churchyard which is owned by the Church which has been closed to all burials under order and passed to the Local Authority to manage in terms of grounds maintenance, memorial safety, and boundaries</p> <p>Memorandum of Understanding (MoU):- Formal agreement between two or more parties. Not legally binding</p>

