

ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

Date of Meeting	Tuesday, 7 th March 2023
Report Subject	Capacity Review at Flintshire County Council Cemeteries
Cabinet Member	Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Streetscene and Regional Transport Strategy
Report Author	Chief Officer, Streetscene & Transportation
Type of Report	Operational

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of the forward work programme, the Environment & Economy Overview & Scrutiny Committee requested a report on the capacity of the county's cemeteries, whilst also seeking an update on a number of ongoing capital projects and services provided by Bereavement Services.

Over the recent years, there has been an increasing risk and challenge around the capacity within the existing cemeteries and the availability of future burial space, particularly at Hawarden (No. 2) cemetery and Buckley cemetery. Without action being taken to address these shortages, deceased residents may no longer be able to be buried in their local cemetery with other family members and loved ones.

Additionally, a motion was proposed to the Climate Change Committee on 25th January 2023 for the Council to consider alternatives to traditional burials and cremation, such as columbaria* as an option for the deceased. A recommendation was made by the Climate Change Committee to Cabinet and the Scrutiny Committee that the Council should seek to expand its current suite of bereavement and burial services for the deceased to include columbaria in the short term, whilst also exploring the viability of other environmentally friendly bereavement options, such as resomation**, in the longer term.

The purpose of this report is to provide an update to members on the existing burial capacity within Flintshire cemeteries and an overview of the options for reviewing and increasing this capacity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	That Scrutiny notes the current capacity levels at each of the county's cemeteries and supports the need to increase capacity at critical sites.
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2	That Scrutiny supports an application for additional capital funding for the progression of Hawarden No. 2 cemetery extension.
3	That Scrutiny supports proposals to provide additional burial capacity within Buckley Cemetery and approves the future submission of a capital funding application.
4	That Scrutiny approves the further exploration of alternative burial and cremation options as a means to support future cemetery capacity, subject to available funding.

REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING CURRENT CAPACITY LEVELS WITHIN FLINTSHIRE CEMETERIES
1.01	<p>Bereavement Services currently manage 15 cemeteries and 8 closed churchyards located throughout Flintshire. In addition, the service also has 2 gardens of remembrance located at Hawarden and Kelsterton, a dedicated child and baby memorial at Kelsterton cemetery and a woodland / natural burial area also located at Kelsterton Cemetery.</p> <p>Also located within the 15 cemeteries are approximately 300 memorial benches and 12 buildings of various sizes and usage, including the chapel located in Hawarden (No 1) Cemetery. Within the cemeteries, the council undertakes approximately 400 interments annually, both full body and cremated remains.</p>
1.02	<p>The management of cemeteries is, in the main, covered by the Local Authorities Cemetery Order 1977 (LACO). Whilst there is no statutory duty placed upon the authority to provide burial space for any specific community or religious group, should the council exercise its powers to provide burial space, a duty is then placed upon local authorities to maintain it in a good condition.</p> <p>For those residents of Flintshire who are unable to fund their own funeral, the authority does have a statutory duty under the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1974 to undertake the necessary funeral arrangements on behalf of the deceased and/or their family.</p>
1.03	<p>The current national trend indicates that 75% of all bereavements result in cremation compared to that of 25% for burial. However, in Flintshire, this trend is reversed, with 70% of all bereavements resulting in burials compared to only 30% opting for cremation. It is not known why the preference of Flintshire residents is different to that of the rest of the UK; however, this places a far greater demand for burial land within Flintshire than that required by other local authorities.</p>
1.04	<p>Over recent years, there has been an increasing risk and challenge around the capacity within the existing cemeteries and the availability of future burial space, particularly at Hawarden (No. 2) cemetery and Buckley cemetery. Without action being taken to address these shortages, local residents may no longer be able to be buried in their local cemetery with other family members and loved ones.</p>

1.05

The table below shows the current position with regard to the number of remaining full burial plots available at each of the county's cemeteries. An estimated equivalent number of years remaining has also been included for reference, which is based on the current rate of usage.

Cemetery	Remaining Available Plots	Current Annual Average Demand	Estimated No. of Years Remaining (based on average Year demand)
Buckley	20	5	4
Hawarden No.2	200	46	4
Bagillt	110	7	16
Flint - London Road	653	31	21
Holywell	304	12	25
Hope - Bryn y Grog	310	12	26
Rhewl	214	3	71
Kelsterton	1864	12	155
Treuddyn	385	2	193
Greenfield No. 2	1026	4	257
TOTAL	5107	134	38

Please Note: Greenfield No.1, Hawarden No.1, Hope Old, Northop Road, Flint and Bryn Road, Connah's Quay are now all closed for new burials.

1.06

As can be seen from the above table, the remaining burial capacity at both Hawarden No. 2 and Buckley cemeteries is now at a critical level with only four years of capacity at each cemetery.

Hawarden No. 2 is Flintshire's main cemetery with approximately 33% of all annual interments being undertaken at the cemetery.

Given the above, two separate projects aimed at providing additional capacity at each of the above locations are currently progressing and an update has been provided in this report for information.

In 2018 / 2019, Cabinet committed to retain cemetery provision in existing locations (or as close to as possible) rather than moving to a "centralised" cemetery to ensure that families could continue to be buried in the in the same location as previous family members and to minimise any further distress to bereaved families at this extremely sensitive and difficult time.

1.07

Hawarden No.2 Cemetery

Initial stages of the proposed extension to Hawarden No.2 Cemetery are progressing. However, unfortunately all land owned by FCC within the proximity of Hawarden No. 2 cemetery has been ruled out on the grounds of environmental / conservation concerns. A section of land located to the rear of the former Registrar's Office had initially been identified, however, all efforts to progress this have proven unsuccessful.

As a result, we are currently exploring the alternative option of acquiring a section of land in private ownership. Whilst negotiations with the landowner commenced a number of years ago, it has since been established that formal negotiations (including a formal offer of purchase) have yet to be pursued, and hence, it is not possible to establish, at this stage in the process, the likelihood of an agreeable solution being found or the timescales.

	<p>To progress discussions with the landowner, specialist consultants have been appointed and are in the process of completing outline design proposals, which will accurately detail the land take required. In addition, a series of 'at distance' ecological surveys have also been instigated, which will provide the council with the information required for a potential change of use and legal advice has been provided on the appropriate procurement process.</p> <p>A meeting with the private landowners will be planned in the next couple of months, once designs and surveys have been completed.</p> <p>We currently have a capital budget allocation remaining of £250k for this project. However, this may need to be revisited due to the recent increases in industry market costs and required procurement approach. It has not been possible to quantify any potential increase in costs at this moment in time; however, this is currently being investigated and established as part of the consultant's brief.</p>
1.08	<p><u>Buckley Cemetery – utilisation of currently unsuitable land:</u> Capacity at Buckley cemetery is also at a critical stage with only four years of capacity remaining given current usage rates. Unfortunately, there is no option for extension at the current cemetery on Elfed Drive, Buckley due to the surrounding residential developments.</p> <p>However, within the existing cemetery there is an area of low-lying land that has yet to be utilised for burials, but ground investigations have found that the shallow water table in this area means that the area is very wet and heavily waterlogged in the winter months, which makes it unsuitable and dangerous for grave excavation.</p> <p>Further investigations have commenced for the installation of a system of below ground, sealed pre-cast concrete burial chambers or a system of interlocking composite chambers into this area. With this solution, the current low levels would be raised, and a system of paths constructed around the "chambers". The area in question would have the chambers installed "en-masse," which, depending on the final design, could have the potential to accommodate up to 100 grave spaces, giving a minimum of 15 years' additional capacity.</p> <p>By installing the chambers during the summer months, the previous risk of grave collapse (due to saturation) is greatly reduced, and the system of paths would allow each grave to be dug by machine located on the paths.</p> <p>An initial outline cost of approx. £180k has since been obtained, which would include ground level raising, retaining wall construction, installation of the chamber system, installation of footpaths and localised drainage connecting to an existing soakaway. This proposal would be a considerably cheaper option than the cost of establishing a new cemetery in the Buckley area (if suitable land could be identified).</p>
1.09	<p><u>Local Churchyards</u> All local churches have minimal capacity left within their churchyards, which is leading to a greater demand and increased burial rates within FCC's cemeteries. This is most evident in Buckley where Bistre Church now has only two grave spaces remaining. We have therefore seen an increased demand for reserved graves at Buckley as a direct consequence.</p>

	<p>This has led to a temporary hold on the pre-purchasing of grave spaces being put in place to ensure that we have sufficient burial space available until an extension is completed / approved at Buckley. Demand for burial space is generally increasing across the county with an increase of approximately 15% above the historic average being recorded over the last 3 years.</p>
1.10	<p>Whilst the existing approach very much focuses on traditional burial methods, we also have to be mindful of alternative solutions, which could assist with easing current pressures and constraints associated with the requirement for burial land. It is also worth exploring options that offer improved environmental benefits.</p>
1.11	<p>A motion was proposed to the Climate Change Committee on 25th January 2023 for the Council to consider alternatives to traditional burials and cremation, such as columbaria as an option for the deceased. A recommendation was made by the Climate Change Committee to Cabinet and the Environment & Economy Overview & Scrutiny Committee that the council should offer columbaria as an option for residents as part of its suite of bereavement and burial services. Additionally, the Committee recommended that the council explores the viability of offering other environmentally friendly burial options, such as resomation or natural/woodland burials, in the longer term.</p> <p>An overview of the various alternatives have therefore been referenced within this report for information.</p>
1.12	<p><u>Columbaria</u> Consideration could be given to the introduction of ‘Columbaria’ in Flintshire. Columbaria involves the above ground storage of cremated remains and would be best suited in areas where below ground interment may not be possible. Not only would this enable the use of previously unsuitable ground, it would also enable the prioritisation of suitable ground for traditional interments (full body). Ideally this could be considered as part of the increased capacity proposals for both Hawarden Cemetery (Flintshire’s main Cemetery) and Buckley cemetery. This would allow for potential demand to be understood before any further developments and financial commitment are made.</p>
1.13	<p><u>Resomation</u> Resomation could also be considered as an alternative to traditional cremation in Flintshire. Resomation is a process that utilises water rather than fire / gas and is often seen as a more environmentally friendly option to cremation due to the greatly reduced emission levels. The process is commonplace in the USA and, whilst a small number of local authorities in the UK have shown an interest in the process, the necessary permits and permission to run such an operation / facility in the UK are still a few years away.</p> <p>Notwithstanding the above, the council could place itself in the ideal position to consider the option in coming years, and continues to participate in the APSE Cemetery and Crematorium Network Group to remain current with industry developments. Whilst significant capital investment in the process would be required, it does have the potential to generate a revenue income stream in the longer term.</p>

1.14	<p>Natural Burial</p> <p>The process of a natural burial is more environmentally friendly than a traditional burial and only permits the use of ecologically friendly coffins and cut flowers with no plastic wrappings or packaging. In addition, memorials are not permitted on a natural burial grave; however, consideration is currently being given to sustainably-sourced wooden memorials.</p> <p>Flintshire currently has a natural burial area located within Kelsterton Cemetery. A small number of full body and cremated remains interments have already taken place within the area.</p> <p>Consideration could also be given to including a second natural burial area in the proposed Hawarden No. 2 extension (subject to progression of the land ownership discussions) along with increased promotion of the existing area.</p>
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2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
2.01	<p>We currently have a capital budget allocation remaining of £250k for this project. However, this may need to be revisited due to the recent increases in industry market costs and required procurement approach. It has not been possible to quantify any potential increase in costs at this moment in time; however, this is currently being investigated and established as part of the consultant's brief.</p>
2.02	<p>Capital funding in the region of £130k is required for the implementation of the required works in Buckley cemetery to increase the capacity as outlined in this report, subject to receiving support for the proposal.</p>
2.03	<p>Should any of the alternative options be favoured, a varying degree of investment would be required to support the implementation of additional facilities.</p>

3.00	IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT
3.01	<p>Given the current burial rates across the county, burial space is more than likely to be exhausted within the next 4 years at two of our main cemeteries. Should an agreed solution not be forthcoming, the impact would be that the Council will no longer be able to offer burial plots to Flintshire residents and future generations at these cemeteries, and residents would lose the option of affordable burial space. This could lead to a negative public perception should Flintshire run out of burial space and potential equalities impact, with residents unable to access the service or having to use privately owned cemeteries or cemeteries outside the area.</p>
3.02	<p>Extending the burial capacity at the council's cemeteries enables us to address the shortage of remaining burial space and is an opportunity to improve the quality of the bereavement services offered. It also aligns with the priorities in the Council Plan by delivering this service efficiently and maximising value for money for the tax payer. It would encourage more users to the cemetery and contribute to the council's priority of ensuring access to green spaces.</p>

3.03	To ensure that the local authority is compliant with Article 4(1) of LACO 1977, which requires that a local authority keeps any cemetery that they are responsible for in good order, including buildings and infrastructure. Therefore most day-to-day operations would need to continue in order to complete horticultural and housekeeping duties, not to mention the health and safety functions for a public open space and so costs would not significantly reduce, despite a cemetery being closed in the future.
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4.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED/CARRIED OUT
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4.01	Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Streetscene and Regional Transport Strategy
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4.02	Consultation to be undertaken with the local elected members within the wards of Hawarden No. 2 cemetery and Buckley cemetery following the Environment & Economy Overview & Scrutiny Committee to provide them with an update on the issues and progress to date, along with the options for increasing capacity.
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5.00	APPENDICES
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5.01	None
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6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
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6.01	None
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7.00	CONTACT OFFICER DETAILS
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7.01	Contact Officer: Anthony Stanford, Transportation Manager Telephone: 01352 E-mail: anthony.stanford@flintshire.gov.uk
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8.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
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8.01	<p>(1) Columbarium: a columbarium is an above ground piece of funerary architecture, which is made up of individual chambers that house cremated remains</p> <p>(2) Resomation: a resomation is sometimes referred to as 'water cremation' or alkaline hydrolysis. It involves the use of water and alkali at high temperatures and pressure to chemically reduce the body to liquid and white ash. The resulting ash is returned to relatives in the same way as the process for flame cremation. The excess fluid created during the process can then be used as fertiliser because of the high nutrient content.</p> <p>(3) Natural Burial: a natural burial is a more environmentally friendly option to that of a traditional burial which only permits the use of ecologically friendly coffins, no memorials and the use of cut flowers with no plastic wrappings or packaging.</p>
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- (4) **Flintshire Funeral Service:** a proposal for the council to work in partnership with a designated local funeral director to offer local residents an affordable low cost funeral package.
- (5) **Flintshire Memorial Repair Service:** a proposal to upskill the council's sextons to allow them to undertake any required memorial repairs for which a fee could be charged when undertaken for external requests. This would greatly benefit the ongoing memorial safety programme and allow unsafe memorials to be addressed in-house. Currently these repairs are all undertaken by external contractors.
- (6) **Grave Maintenance Service:** a proposal for the council to undertake a service that attends to a grave upon request of a family member. Three different levels of service could be offered (Gold, Silver and Bronze) for which varying fees would apply. The scope of the proposed service would include regular headstone cleaning, keeping the grave area tidy, supply and placement of flowers on the grave on anniversaries / annual events (Christmas, Easter, Mother's Day, Father's Day etc.) with regular photos being sent to the family member upon completion of works. This service would be offered in addition to our ongoing grounds maintenance service and would be targeted mainly towards those people who were no longer able to visit family graves either due to location or reasons of incapacity.
- (7) **Genealogy Service:** as part of the council's new cemetery management system, we will have the option to show all our burial records online via a link hosted on the council's website. This would allow members of the public to undertake their own genealogy searches with a small fee being applied for this service.