

**REPORT TO:** Urban Renewal Policy & Performance Board  
**DATE:** 15 September 2010  
**REPORTING OFFICER:** Strategic Director, Adults & Community  
**SUBJECT:** Halton Cemeteries  
**WARD(S)** Borough-wide

**1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

- 1.1 To consider revisions to the council's policy on memorial safety testing in the light of new guidance issued by The Ministry of Justice.
- 1.2 To assess a partnership approach with Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council for the use of Widnes crematorium by Knowsley residents.
- 1.3 To update members on the progress in developing new cemetery space in Halton.
- 1.4 To consider the provision of a fixed price funeral service to Halton residents in conjunction with local funeral directors.

**2.0 RECOMMENDATION:**

**That members of the Board:**

**i) Comment on the:**

- **revised draft memorial safety policy;**
- **principle of a partnership agreement with Knowsley for the provision of cremation services;**
- **policy allowing the pre purchase of graves;**
- **proposed fixed price funeral option to Halton residents.**

**ii) Note the progress on the establishment of new cemetery space.**

**3.0 MEMORIAL SAFETY TESTING**

- 3.1 The council, as the owner of the cemeteries has a duty to ensure that the memorials (headstones) are safe and do not pose a risk to the public or employees. The Ministry of Justice produce safety

standards and The Institute of Cemeteries and Crematorium Management (ICCM) produce guidelines on the practical application of these standards. All memorials in Halton are safety tested on a 5 year rolling programme.

3.2 Memorial safety testing is carried out by Bereavement Services staff that are trained in these duties. On 17<sup>th</sup> June 2010 Halton hosted a national training day run by the ICCM on the implementation of the new guidelines.

3.3 Since the introduction of memorial safety testing in 1998 all cemeteries across the country have experienced complaints from the families/grave owners. These complaints occur where the grave owners dispute the findings of a safety test and any action then taken to render them safe. The Ministry of Justice has responded to this and has issued new guidance that gives greater freedom for authorities to determine whether memorials pose a risk. The Council's revised policy is attached as Appendix 1.

3.4 Memorial safety testing in consecrated areas of the Council's cemeteries is subject to certain restrictions and require the Council to obtain special authorisations (known as faculties) from the Church of England authorities. These faculties often contain conditions which are impractical for the Council to comply with. Where conflicts arise between the various duties of the Council health and safety considerations override all other matters. It is recommended that this policy be endorsed.

#### 4.0 **Crematorium – partnership with Knowsley**

4.1 The crematorium in Widnes is used predominantly by Widnes residents. Runcorn residents almost exclusively use Walton Lea. The issue of access routes to the Widnes Crematorium and potential delays on the Runcorn-Widnes bridge are thought to be major factors in this. As a consequence the crematorium has significant spare capacity.

4.2 Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council does not operate a crematorium. They rely on neighbouring authorities, but would like to offer this service to Knowsley residents. Initial discussions have favoured the establishment of a partnership agreement with Knowsley that would promote Widnes Crematorium to Knowsley residents. Such an agreement would offer a service improvement to Knowsley residents whilst improving the usage and return from the Widnes crematorium for Halton (currently Knowsley residents have to pay an "out of Borough" charge when using neighbouring Crematoria, whereas Widnes Crematorium do not impose an additional charge to non-residents of Halton Borough).

4.3 Although only initial discussions have taken place the potential of any agreement to benefit both parties exists and could progress to a

formal sharing of facilities.

## 5.0 **NEW CEMETERY SPACE**

- 5.1 Both Widnes and Runcorn cemeteries have space for approximately a further 6 years of burials. In March 2009 The Executive Board resolved to continue to provide burial space in both Runcorn and Widnes.
- 5.2 For Runcorn the existing cemetery is to be extended onto vacant land, in the council's ownership, adjacent to the existing cemetery. This project is well advanced. A feasibility study, ground investigation, topographical survey and cost planning have been undertaken. The project is now moving into the design and planning approval stage. Budgetary provision (£330,000) has been made to undertake this work that will provide a further 10 years of burial space.
- 5.3 Provision of further burial space in Widnes is more complex as the council does not own adjoining vacant land that could be used for this purpose. The Executive Board resolved that Widnes cemetery would be extended onto the adjacent garden centre site or a new cemetery built if this option did not provide value for money.
- 5.4 A feasibility study has been carried out on the extension option. This has included the identification of land values, the design and costing of a civil engineering scheme to integrate the site with the existing cemetery, rights of way diversion, contamination and planning issues. There is therefore confidence around the practicality and costs involved in extending the cemetery onto this site. However, the council does not own this land and there are businesses based on this site that would need to be relocated or extinguished. It is anticipated that a compulsory purchase order would be required to acquire this site. No approach has therefore been made to the current owners until or unless a firm decision is made to pursue the extension option.
- 5.5 The extension to Widnes cemetery would offer a further 12 years of burial space. The cost estimate in the Executive report of March 2009 indicated a cost of £2.1M. This figure is of the right order but the work undertaken to date indicates that this is likely to be a minimum figure. The joint officer working group, now being led by the Environment and Economy Directorate, who have undertaken this work, have concluded that this offers poor value for money.
- 5.6 At the same time other potential sites in Widnes that could host a new cemetery and provide 60 years of burial space have been investigated. As part of this work sites both privately owned and within the ownership of the Council have been considered.

5.7 Although no conclusion has yet been reached it is hoped to present to Members a detailed assessment of the options available shortly.

#### 6.0 **PRE PURCHASED GRAVES**

6.1 Both Runcorn and Widnes cemeteries have approximately 6 years of burial space remaining. As the burial space is seen to reduce an increasing number of comments and enquiries are being made to Bereavement Services staff about the diminishing grave space. At the moment the council does not restrict when a grave can be purchased or how many. There is concern that as grave space is seen to decline there could be an acceleration in the pre purchasing of graves that would further reduce the remaining years left at each site.

6.2 It is recommended that to provide continuity of burial space the pre purchasing of graves is temporarily suspended pending the establishment of new cemetery space in both Runcorn and Widnes.

#### 7.0 **MUNICIPAL FUNERAL SERVICE**

7.1 In order to offer a new funeral service Bereavement Services are seeking to liaise with local funeral directors with the aim of offering a low cost, but dignified funeral service to local residents. This would enable families to have a simple, "no frills" funeral package for an all inclusive price (to be negotiated). The price would include: collection of the deceased within the Borough's boundary (during business hours), provision of Chapel of Rest (during business hours), simple coffin, motor hearse, clergy fees, cremation/burial fees and the use of the Crematorium chapel. Limousines, church services, press notices, floral tributes, and embalming will not be included.

#### 8.0 **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

8.1 Contained within the report.

#### 9.0 **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 None

#### 10.0 **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES**

10.1 **Children & Young People in Halton**

None identified.

10.2 **Employment, Learning & Skills in Halton**

Reduced cost of funerals to provide a more equitable charging structure.

10.3 **A Healthy Halton**

Cemetery development will offer continuity of burial space in Halton.

10.4 **A Safer Halton**

Partnership arrangements offer the opportunity for improved value for money.

10.5 **Halton's Urban Renewal**

The provision of a new cemetery in Widnes will require the allocation of approximately 5.5 hectares of land. There is an opportunity cost associated with this land use.

11.0 **RISK ANALYSIS**

11.1 If the right to pre purchase grave space is not suspended then there is a risk that there will be not being continuity of burials in Widnes.

12.0 **EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

12.1 The provision of basic low cost funeral services shall make burials accessible to those suffering financial disadvantage.

**LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

None