

REPORT TO: Executive Board

DATE: 21 September 2017

REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director – Enterprise, Community & Resources

SUBJECT: Halton Residents’ Funeral

PORTFOLIO: Environmental Services

WARD(S): Borough-wide

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 The purpose of this report is to seek approval to set up and to operate a Halton Residents’ Funeral package as described in the body of the report.

2. RECOMMENDATION: That Executive Board agrees to the setting up of a Halton Residents’ Funeral offer, as per section 4 of the report.

3. SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Background

3.1 The average cost of a funeral is currently £3,481 compared to £1,815 in 2005. Costs are expected to continue to rise in the coming years.

3.2 Following the death of a loved one, people are naturally deeply distressed. They face making financial decisions about funeral arrangements and may make choices that are not affordable out of respect for the person who has died. People on low incomes are increasingly finding that the death of a loved one plunges them into serious and long term debt, as they have little or no savings.

3.3 Some financial funding for families on low incomes is made by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) but it does not cover the whole funeral cost. Such payments are available to people on certain qualifying benefits such as Jobseeker’s Allowance and Income Support.

Public Health Funerals

3.4 As an Authority, we provide Public Health Funerals, for individuals who have no known family to pay for the funeral or for cases where no one can (or will) pay for the funeral. The deceased is given a simple, respectful funeral, either cremation at Widnes Crematorium or burial in a ‘public’ grave’ in Widnes or Runcorn Cemetery.

- 3.5 Whilst some of these funerals are carried out because the deceased has no living relatives there has been an increase in Public Health funerals being carried out because the family simply cannot afford the funeral after being given an estimate by a funeral director. Unfortunately, many families want to avoid the stigma attached to Public Health funerals, hence ending up in debt in order to pay for what they consider to be a 'decent' funeral.
- 3.6 We pride ourselves in Halton on our provision of such funerals, taking the utmost care and respect for the deceased. We often receive compliments from people attending these services. These funerals come at a cost to the Council when the deceased has no funds to pay for them. Even when money is recovered it is often very little and does not cover all costs.

Residents' Funerals

- 3.7 Neighbouring authorities such as St Helens and Wigan already provide 'residents' or 'municipal' funeral options for residents of their Boroughs, and the number of families accessing these services is on the increase year after year.
- 3.8 Councils have created residents' funerals in an effort to tackle funeral poverty. They have generally done so via a third party provider (a funeral director) who has been appointed to operate the service following competitive tender. The residents' funerals provide a dignified and reasonable cost alternative to what is offered in the marketplace.
- 3.9 The councils who have introduced residents' funerals have done so as they believe that access to a dignified funeral, without getting into crippling debt, is a basic human right. It is unacceptable that a bereaved family, trying to come to terms with the loss of a loved one, should go through the stress of worrying about how they can afford to pay for a funeral. Many people end up with expensive credit card or payday loan debts, or need to borrow from friends or apply to charities to pay for the funeral.
- 3.10 The Wigan Council residents' funeral has been the most successful locally. The current cost of a Wigan Residents Funeral is £1,892.83 for a cremation and £1,938.83 for a burial, making them almost 50% cheaper than the average cost of a funeral. Figures for the last three years speak for themselves:

Year 1

16 burials carried out, saving residents a total of £24,960.00
38 cremations carried out, saving residents a total of £61,142.00

Year 2

13 burials carried out, saving residents £28,433.21
109 cremations carried out, saving residents £154,362.53

Year 3

33 burials carried out, saving residents £69,477.44

135 cremations carried out, saving residents £189,159.95

Wigan have also increased their own revenue as funerals that had once gone to a private crematorium are now coming to them.

4. THE HALTON RESIDENTS' FUNERAL

4.1 The idea is to provide a reasonably priced dignified funeral service, which would be indistinguishable from any other funeral service.

4.2 Following the Wigan model we would go out to tender via the Chest to find a funeral director who would be willing to provide a Halton Resident funeral for us. The best tender in terms of low price and quality would be awarded the contract. The successful bidder would have to provide an office within the Borough, if they didn't have one here already.

4.3 The Halton Residents Funeral would be available to residents of the Borough. It would be available to any resident who wanted to purchase it regardless of means. For a fixed price an individual purchasing a Halton Residents Funeral the following would be included:

- Collection of the deceased from any location in the Borough or from Whiston or Warrington hospitals.
- Dressing of the deceased. Viewing of deceased at Chapel of Rest (*restrictions apply to latter – Based upon funeral directors operation. This would come out in the tender offers*)
- Provision of a suitable oak (or similar) finished coffin with handles and an engraved nameplate.
- The funeral directors professional fees for making all necessary arrangements for the funeral service including provision of all appropriate staff and facilities to ensure that the funeral service proceeds with dignity.
- Transportation of the deceased in a hearse from the funeral home to the funeral service and one following limousine.
- A funeral service of 30 minutes in the Widnes Crematorium chapel or a graveside ceremony at Runcorn cemetery.
- Cremation at Widnes Crematorium or burial at Runcorn, Widnes or Peel House cemeteries. Cremated remains would be scattered without attendance in the garden of remembrance at either Widnes or Runcorn cemeteries (*families would be free to make alternative arrangements with regards to ashes should they wish*).

4.4 The Halton Residents Funeral would be promoted through placing articles in the local press and the creation of a dedicated webpage on the Council's website. Information leaflets would also be displayed in Direct Link shops and at libraries. The webpages relating to Halton's cemeteries and crematorium would have to be updated and a new page created. This would require marketing and ICT resources.

4.5 An 'after funeral' function option could also be made available. This would include catering and would be held at the Select Security Stadium.

5. FINANCIAL AND RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

5.1 There are no negative financial implications for the council. It is possible that extra revenue would be generated through Runcorn residents using Widnes Crematorium (*for cremation services over 90% of Runcorn residents use Warrington Borough Councils crematorium at Walton Lea*).

6. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

6.1 There are no policy implications as a result of this report.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

7.1 Children and Young People in Halton

None identified

7.2 Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton

None identified

7.3 A Healthy Halton

The Halton Residents' Funeral would provide a more affordable option for low income families. This would take some of the stress out of the bereavement process which could reduce stress and anxiety. Funeral Poverty would be relieved.

7.4 A Safer Halton

None identified

7.5 Halton's Urban Renewal

None identified.

8. RISK ANALYSIS

None identified

9. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

9.1 There are no equality and diversity issues.

10. REASON(S) FOR DECISION

10.1 To help to alleviate funeral poverty within the Borough.

11. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

11.1 The council could simply do nothing and leave the delivery of this type of service to the market. If that option was taken prices for funerals would continue to rise putting more residents into debt.

12. IMPLEMENTATION DATE

12.1 January 2018.

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

None under the meaning of the Act.