

Report of the Strategic Director, Place to the meeting of Executive to be held on 7th March 2023

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Subject:

Bereavement Services Strategy Update

Summary statement:

This report provides a progress update on delivery of the Council's Bereavement Services Strategy and seeks approval for further projects and the required corporate capital funding.

EQUALITY & DIVERSITY:

The Bereavement Services Strategy aims to deliver the objectives of the Council's Organisational Equalities Culture by ensuring services are well run, fit for purpose, and fair and inclusive in their approach. The Strategy recognises and supports equality of opportunity between different groups, particularly religious in nature, through provision of relevant, accessible and in some cases bespoke services.

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Portfolio:

Healthy People and Places

Overview & Scrutiny Area:

Regeneration and Environment

1. SUMMARY

This report provides a progress update on delivery of the Councils Bereavement Services Strategy and seeks approval for further projects and the required corporate capital funding.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2.1 Bereavement Services Strategy - Delivery Plan

Crematoria

The Bereavement Strategy was adopted in late 2016 and identifies the challenges facing the Service. It provides clear direction, enabling the Council to focus its resources and finances (capital and revenue), on delivering a sustainable, future bereavement service.

The strategy focusses on the improvements required to deliver a comprehensive service to the public including, at its core, the need for an investment programme to deliver infrastructure thus mitigating any future disruption to bereavement services in the Bradford district.

The major element of the strategy relates to investment at the Councils three crematoria.

- Scholemoor was created in 1905 and is the only purpose built crematorium in the district.
- All buildings are over 100 years old.
- The three existing sites are constrained in terms of facilities, future capacity and provide access challenges.
- The existing six cremators are over 25 years old, have exceeded the manufacturers stated working-life and do not meet the current air quality emission requirements set by DEFRA.

The adopted strategy and associated delivery plan included the refurbishment of Oakworth Crematorium and the construction of two new crematoria, to replace the existing facilities at Nab Wood and Scholemoor.

Cemeteries

The Strategy highlighted the requirement for additional burial capacity in the medium term to ensure that satisfactory burial services continue to be provided to the Muslim community via a longstanding partnership with the Bradford Council for Mosques. This is particularly important in the south of the district where more than two thirds of the annual number of new burial plots are required.

The overall success and deliverability of the plan to deliver new cemeteries is dependent on a number of key factors. For simplicity, the overall project has been split into three phases all of which have different delivery timescales:

Phase 1

Extension of the existing Muslim burial ground at Scholemoor cemetery to provide immediate additional capacity.

Phase 2

Additional burial plots delivered through further interventions including:

- the extension of Bowling cemetery – outline' planning approval to proceed has been secured and the project is subject to final funding approval.
- the establishment of a new cemetery, likely to be on Council owned land
- the acquisition of land to allow further and larger cemeteries to be established.

Phase 3

Development of a major new cemetery to deliver long term capacity beyond 2050. This will require further planning consents and funding approval.

2.2 Governance Timeline

Executive November 2016 – Adoption of the Bereavement Services Strategy

Executive July 2018 – Approved appointment of external specialists Rex Procter & Partners to assist with the crematoria investment delivery plan. Also delegated approval to upgrade the crematory at Oakworth Crematorium.

Executive June 2019 – Approved the revised and increased cost estimate for the refurbishment of Oakworth crematorium at £2.75m.

Regeneration & Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee (REOS) July 2019
Considered and noted the intent to let contracts for the refurbishment of Oakworth Crematorium and also to procure 5 cremators (estimated £3.5m).

Executive November 2019 - Delegated approval to build Heaton crematorium at a cost of £9.1m subject to land acquisition and planning permission

Executive January 2020 - Delegated approval for Bierley crematorium at a cost of £10.3m subject to land acquisition and planning permission together with all necessary action to negotiate the acquisition of the required land.

REOS December 2020 - Considered and noted the intentions to enter into a contract for the construction of Heaton crematorium.

Executive October 2021 – Delegated approval to award the contract for the construction of Heaton Crematorium.

Executive February 2022 – Delegated approval to progress with the delivery of the Crematoria Investment Plan within a revised overall programme budget of £29.7m.

REOS July 2022 - Considered and noted the intention to tender the construction of a new crematorium at Bierley at a value in excess of £2m.

3 DELIVERY PLAN PROGRESS

Crematoria

Oakworth Crematorium has been successfully refurbished in line with the strategy by Bradford contractor Bermar. The building has been significantly extended to accommodate the new cremator and ancillary filter equipment whilst retaining the existing but refurbished service hall/chapel. The crematorium was re-opened in March 2022 and funeral activity has now returned to levels similar to those before closure.

The first of the two new crematoria, at Heaton, is approaching the end of the construction phase and is due to open in June 2023. This will replace Nab Wood Crematorium and the projected final costs are currently within the budget estimate.

Following planning approval for a revised access road configuration, acquisition of the necessary land in Bierley is now subject to final stages of the legal process. This will allow the second new crematorium facility to be established, providing a replacement for Scholemoor Crematorium. It is currently intended that construction will proceed in summer 2023, subject to final sign off which will be sought once detailed costings are finalised.

Cemeteries

Phase 1 works were completed in 2020 with the successful extension of the Muslim burial ground at Scholemoor cemetery. The Council also engaged specialists CDS (Cemetery Development Solutions) to assist with the identification, assessment and development of further burial capacity.

Phase 2 work, to date, has identified the remaining undeveloped land at Bowling Cemetery as suitable to provide half of the capacity required within this phase. The cost for provision of the new necessary access infrastructure, site levelling and associated drainage is initially estimated at £2.38m.

Following recent planning approval relating to use of the land, final design details can now be agreed allowing a detailed planning application to be submitted. Subject to approval of this planning consent and also the required capital budget, it is intended that works will start on site in Autumn 2023 with an intended completion date of Spring 2024.

A number of other potential sites are under active investigation to complete Phase 2. These will be brought forward for consideration once detailed assessments and examinations of the sites has been completed.

4. FINANCIAL & RESOURCE APPRAISAL

4.1 Crematoria Investment Plan

The capital programme currently includes adequate funding for the crematoria investment programme subject to final costs for Heaton and Bierley crematoria.

Financial analysis for previous Executive reports had been undertaken for the required £29.6m investment required to deliver the entire programme and ensure that the service prudential borrowing requirement of £7m could be managed within the service, without creating significant pressure on existing revenue budgets.

An initial review of the total investment programme costs has already been presented to Executive in early 2022 however, continued and unprecedented inflation costs mean that the revised estimate may still not be sufficient.

4.2 Cemetery Investment Plan

The extension of Scholemoor cemetery cost c. £750,000 and was funded through a provision of £1m within the capital programme. This was allocated when the Bereavement Services Strategy was first adopted.

Phase 2 of the cemetery delivery plan will cost an estimated £5.98m and will need to be included in the Councils capital programme incrementally over the next 2 years.

Careful consideration has been given by the Project Appraisal Group (PAG) to determine the source and extent of capital funding required for Phase 2 of the programme.

It was noted that there is already a requirement for the Service to fund an element of prudential borrowing to deliver the crematoria programme. Furthermore, Phase 2 of the Cemetery delivery plan seeks to provide additional capacity simply to maintain, rather than increase, activity levels resulting in no change to income profiling. Given these facts, it was determined that the service revenue budget was not in a position to accommodate any further borrowing charges.

The intention is then to use corporate capital to fund Phase 2 of the delivery plan with Bowling Cemetery extension to be specifically included in the capital programme at £2.38m for 2023/24. The remaining two projects will be included as reserve schemes to be activated by specific Executive or delegated approval together with further consideration of scheme details and costs by PAG when known.

5. RISK MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE ISSUES

- 5.1** There is a need to provide additional burial grounds to ensure that the partnership arrangement with the Bradford Council for Mosques can continue to deliver funerals according to the faith and culture of the Muslim community.

- 5.2** Recent legislation has introduced relatively stringent technical requirements for the development of new cemeteries in addition to those required through the planning process. This could mean it now takes up to two years to assess, investigate, monitor and obtain the necessary approvals for future sites. The recommendations within this report are therefore based on the need to commit funding now, in order to allow these projects to be developed.

6. LEGAL APPRAISAL

- 6.1** The Cremation Act 1902 provides for a local authority to own and operate cemeteries and crematoria and charge such fees as they see fit. In addition to this, the legislation extends to statutory requirements for keeping registers for burial and cremation together with site plans.
- 6.2** The Cremation (England & Wales) Regulations 2008 also requires that a cremation authority must ensure that a crematorium is maintained in good working order.
- 6.3** Further, the cremation of human remains is also governed by the Environmental Protection legislation with regard to emissions from cremator operation. The level of emissions must be recorded to allow annual certification by the local Environmental Health office. Crematoria across England & Wales have been required to abate emissions of Mercury by 50% (of 2003 levels) since 31st December 2012.

7. OTHER IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Sustainability Implications

The strategy will deliver the most sustainable service achievable over a 20 year period and beyond through a programme of capital investment.

The new crematoria have been designed to include energy reduction and recovery systems together with more efficient cremators to reduce both fuel use and subsequent carbon footprint.

Extended or new cemeteries will provide opportunities for biodiversity gain over and above replacement of any essential loss of biodiversity.

7.2 Greenhouse Gas Emissions Impacts

Five of the six Council cremators currently fail to comply with DEFRA's air quality emission requirements as they are not fitted with mercury abatement equipment.

The strategy, when implemented in full, will include mercury filtration equipment to all cremators to meet DEFRA's air quality regulations. The cremators will also be market leading through the use of using nitrous oxide (NOx) abatement technology.

7.3 Community Safety Implications

There are no known Community Safety Implications arising from this report.

7.4 Human Rights Act Implications

There are no known Human Rights Implications arising from this report.

7.5 Trade Union Implications

There are no significant staffing implications arising from this report although the Trade Unions will be consulted as required through the Council's IR Framework.

7.6 Ward Implications

Projects within the delivery plans are taking place across the district. Ward Members have been involved with the project team throughout both consultation and delivery stages.

7.7 Implications for Children and Young People

There are no known corporate parenting implications arising from this report.

7.8 Issues Arising from Privacy Impact Assessment

Implementation of the Bereavement Service strategy will not affect the current and compliant processes in place to ensure privacy of personal data in accordance with the legislation in place.

8. NOT FOR PUBLICATION DOCUMENTS

None

9. OPTIONS

Commentary

9.1 There are extremely limited options for significant burial activity within the District other than that provided by the Council. Therefore, given the level of activity, the Council remains committed to directly facilitate the availability of a sustainable burial service to its communities.

9.2 There is diminishing burial capacity within the Muslim Burial Ground at Scholemoor and no known suitable existing space within 'south of district' cemeteries other than Bowling.

9.3 It is also highly unlikely that the Council could provide the level of service currently provided to the Muslim community through use of its internal resources alone, a partnership approach is preferred. However, should a Council-only approach be pursued, further engagement with the community over the permitted and preferred protocol of the burial process will be necessary.

Summary Option Statements

- 9.4** Not to progress with the Phase 2 Cemetery Delivery Plan – this will mean that there will be insufficient capacity for future Muslim burials.
- 9.5** To progress with the Phase 2 Cemetery Delivery Plan to provide additional burial capacity.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

That Executive approves the following recommendations -

- 10.1** Implementation of Phase 2 of the Bereavement Service's Cemetery Delivery Plan at an estimated cost of £5.98m to be funded within the Council's corporate capital programme.
- 10.2** To progress with the extension of Bowling Cemetery at an estimated cost of £2.38m as the first project within Phase 2 of the Cemetery Delivery Plan.
- 10.3** Delegation of approval of spend to the Strategic Director, Place in consultation with the S151 officer to deliver the first new cemetery as the second project within Phase 2 of the Cemetery Delivery Plan subject only to further review by PAG.
- 10.4** Instruct the Strategic Director Corporate Services to commence preliminary negotiations for the acquisition of sites identified for possible development as major cemeteries.
- 10.5** That Executive receives a further update report on the Bereavement Strategy delivery plans, to include details and options for the development of a major cemetery and to approve acquisition of the necessary land.
- 10.6** Welcomes and supports the progress made to date on delivering the crematoria investment programme within the Council's Bereavement Services Strategy.

11. APPENDICES

None

12. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Bereavement Services Strategy 2016-2031