

Agenda Item 11.

The report, as written, was intended for scrutiny at the March Committee. Annex A provides an updated position.

TITLE	Burial Plot Capacity - Update
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 22 June 2020
WARD	None specific
LEAD OFFICER	Director of Place & Growth, Chris Trill

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

To ensure there are sufficient burial plots available at WBC owned cemeteries to meet the current and projected demand.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee consider the report.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

At its meeting in January 2020 the Committee considered a report providing an overview of current burial plot capacity in Wokingham Borough Council-owned cemeteries and potential opportunities for additional provision.

The Committee requested a follow-up report to be brought to this meeting providing more information on overall burial plot capacity across the Borough including the provision of specific plots dedicated for Muslim burials.

A survey was sent out to all cemeteries within the Borough with the responses summarised in a table at Appendix 1. The returns show varying levels of remaining capacity however it is anticipated that (based on current demand) there should be sufficient burial plot capacity at a Borough-wide level in the short and medium term based on:

- the capacity reported from other cemeteries
- the additional capacity identified at Shinfield & St Sebastian's Cemeteries
- the possible development of a new WBC owned cemetery on land opposite the Church at Ruscombe
- the proposed extension at Mays Lane Cemetery
- the opportunity to provide additional burial plots as part of any new crematorium within the Borough

Following a survey and site visit to the Shinfield Road cemetery, opportunities have been identified to potentially provide around 60 additional Muslim burial plots on that site over the next few years. There may also be opportunities at Mays Lane and as part of any new crematorium to provide additional dedicated Muslim burial plots.

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Background

The report to this Committee in January highlighted that the Council does not have a statutory duty to provide cemeteries but it does have a duty to maintain any sites under its control in a fit and proper state. However it confirmed that the Local Authority is responsible for the burial or cremation of any person who dies within its boundaries and for whom no other funeral arrangements are being made. The report also stated that the Council intends to continue as a Burial Authority, operating and maintaining its own cemeteries.

Whilst cremations currently account for around 80% nationally trend predictions suggest an environmental backlash against 'standard' cremations. The report identified that this may open up a potential market for more eco-friendly cremations such as that proposed for a potential new facility in Wokingham Borough.

The report also identified a growing demand for other options such as 'green' or natural burial sites, including 'woodland' burials, memorial tree planting and benches and 'strewing areas' for cremated ashes.

Analysis of Issues

Current Provision

There are over 20 burial sites spread across the Borough with 2 operated by the Council. Most of the others are operated by the Diocese of Oxford with other individual sites owned and/or operated by town or parish councils. (eg Mays Lane Burial Ground which is owned by Early Town Council). The table in Appendix 1 gives the feedback of a recent survey into current capacity across all cemeteries in the Borough.

Current WBC Provision & Future Capacity

The Council currently operates two cemeteries – Shinfield and St Sebastians. Shinfield Cemetery is located in Spencers Wood and has 1,167 current plots including an area dedicated for Muslim burials. St Sebastians Cemetery is in Wokingham Without and has 644 current plots.

Both cemeteries are well maintained and recent improvements to Shinfield Cemetery have included the creation of a dedicated 'strewing' area for cremated ashes which is already proving popular.

Currently we have between 8-12 new burials per year across the 2 WBC owned cemeteries (9 in 2018/19) and, following a recent review of capacity, have identified 165 new potential plots between those cemeteries (148 additional lots in Shinfield and 17 in St Sebastians). However these are subject to ground conditions with particular concern around ground water levels in certain areas.

In addition the Council has been in discussions for a number of years with the Diocese of Oxford about purchasing an area of land in Ruscombe with the potential to provide a further 172 burial plots. Further investigative work is planned in 2020 to address

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concerns raised about water table levels before any final planning application is made prior to completing any purchase.

Finally the Council is considering options for building its own eco-friendly crematorium facility within the Borough. Not only would this serve the existing and future needs and requirements of the Borough's residents it would also allow us to offer a range of eco-friendly cremation and burial options to a wider population. Depending on final plans there may be opportunities to include some burial plots if required as well as woodland burials and strewing areas.

Other Future Provision

As highlighted in the table at Appendix 1 Earley Town Council have identified an area of land adjacent to the current cemetery that could be used to extend the cemetery and provide around 400 additional full burial plots and 1,400 new plots for cremated remains. There could also be additional specialist provision for Muslim burials and burial plots for children and babies.

The Town Council are proposing to fund the extension themselves through an increase in Council Tax precept.

Provision for Muslim Burials

At its January meeting the Committee raised a specific concern over the future capacity for dedicated plots for Muslim burials.

As a result further work has been done to investigate the opportunity to extend provision at WBC's Shinfield cemetery. It is thought that by removing a row of hedge plants within the cemetery boundary that around a further 60 plots could be created (these are in addition to the 148 new plots identified in the more general capacity survey). Costings are currently being sought for the removal of the hedge plants.

There may also be opportunities at Mays Lane and as part of any new crematorium to provide additional dedicated Muslim burial plots.

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FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council continues to face severe financial challenges over the coming years as a result of reductions to public sector funding and growing pressures in our statutory services. It is estimated that Wokingham Borough Council will be required to make budget reductions of approximately £20m over the next three years and all Executive decisions should be made in this context

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	£0	Yes	Not Applicable
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£0	Yes	Not Applicable
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£0	Yes	Not Applicable

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision
None relevant

Cross-Council Implications
None

Public Sector Equality Duty
Due regard has been given to WBC's duties under the Equality Act

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2
Not applicable

List of Background Papers
Appendix 1: Survey of Burial Plot Capacity

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