

TITLE	Burial Capacity - Update January 2021
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 19 January 2021
WARD	None Specific;
LEAD OFFICER	Assistant Director Housing & Place Commissioning Nigel Bailey

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

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

RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee note the update.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

The Council does not have a statutory duty to provide cemeteries but we do have a duty to maintain any sites under our control in a fit and proper state. However 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.

Current Position & Trends

The Council currently operates two cemeteries – Shinfield and St Sebastians. Shinfield Cemetery is located in Spencers Wood and in March 2020 had approximately 1,200 full burial plots including an area dedicated for Muslim burials and St Sebastians Cemetery is in Wokingham Without and had approximately 1,000 plots. Of these plots approximately 200 were vacant with the majority (150) being at Shinfield.

Both cemeteries have had works done to them over the past year with an additional 30+ plots being created for Muslim burials at Shinfield and additional space cleared for around 350 new plots at St Sebastians.

The intention is for WBC to continue as a Burial Authority with the grounds maintained to the current high standard within the existing ground maintenance contract.

In addition to the two Council sites there are around 20 further burial sites spread across the Borough. Most of these 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). Our recent update survey suggested there are a total of around 450 vacant burial plots on the other non-WBC owned cemeteries and proposals, in particular at Mays lane, for the creation of a further 400+ burial plots.

In recent years cremations have been the chosen approach for around 80% of all deaths nationally with burials accounting for about 20% - at this stage it is too early to say if the current pandemic will change this. However there is some evidence of a growing environmental backlash against 'standard' cremations. There is also a growing demand for other options such as 'green' or 'woodland' burials, memorial tree planting and

benches and 'strewing areas' (such as the recently completed strewing area in Shinfield Cemetery).

In our 2 cemeteries in 2019 there were 21 full burials (includes both new and reopenings) and 10 cremated ashes) with 24 full burials and 13 cremated ashes burials in 2020.

Feedback from our survey suggests approximately 50-60 full new burials taking place across Wokingham annually which, based on current provision would suggest sufficient capacity for the next 17-20 years without any additional provision. Should the extension at Mays Lane be progressed and approved then, on current demand, that overall capacity should be sufficient for around 24-28 years.

We are also currently progressing an options appraisal and business case for building our 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.

We have recently commissioned an updated market appraisal on the proposal which is expected to be completed by February allowing the final business case to be completed in early Spring for consideration.

Future Additional Capacity

Additional WBC Burial Capacity

Following the decision not to pursue the purchase of land adjacent to Ruscombe church the identified budget was transferred to fund additional capacity at St Sebastians. Those works completed in late autumn 2020, clearing land around the boundary of the cemetery and creating space for around 350 additional burial plots.

Specialist Provision

Recognising the shortage of Muslim burial plots across the Borough, works were carried out at Shinfield cemetery in early summer 2020 to provide around 30-40 additional full burial plots. There are also approximately 25 Muslim burial plots vacant at Mays Lane in Earley.

The Council were also recently approached by a family requesting a burial space for their father who was of the Baha'i faith as they were not aware of any such provision within the Borough. Both Bracknell and Reading cemeteries do provide for this faith but, as is standard practice across all local authorities, a surcharge would be levied if the family lived outside the Borough.

Having just completed the works at St Sebastian's, we have been able to offer the community a small area exclusively for Baha'i burials in the cemetery with the first burial taking place on 24th December.

We are also reviewing the provision of a number of additional burial vaults at St Sebastians to meet demand in particular from the Borough's Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities

Other Additional Capacity

Colleagues at Earley Town Council have also been looking at potentially extending Mays Lane cemetery to provide around 400 new full burial plots and 1,400 plots for cremated remains as well as additional specialist provision for Muslim burials, children and unconsecrated plots.

Overall Burial Capacity

The creation of additional full burial plot capacity at both Shinfield and St Sebastians gives a total vacant plot provision of around 500 in the Council's 2 cemeteries. We are also aware from our recent survey update of the other 20 cemeteries in the Borough of a further 450 available full burial plots.

This suggests a current overall available capacity of around 1,000 full burial plots across the Borough. Set against the approximately 50-60 full burials we understand from our survey took place in 2019 this suggests we have sufficient capacity for around a further 17-20 years. Were the extension to Mays Lane cemetery be realised than that capacity could rise to approximately 24-28 years.

New Crematorium in the Borough

We are also currently progressing an options appraisal and business case for building our 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.

We have recently commissioned an updated market appraisal on the proposal which is expected to be completed by February allowing the final business case to be completed in early Spring for consideration.

That business case will be based on addressing the 3 key aims of the project which are to:

- serve the existing and future needs and requirements of Wokingham Borough residents
- capitalise on the existing and future demand for inclusive eco-friendly cremation/funeral options within the Borough and surrounding areas
- generate a long term and sustainable return on investment whilst providing a competitive rate for the service user

The business case will consider the most appropriate, deliverable and viable size and location for a crematorium as well as more details on the potential nature and unique selling point of the proposed service provision and operating models.

If approved it is hoped to secure detailed planning later in 2021 with majority of construction taking place during 2022 and the new facility opening in early 2023.

A budget of £6.225m for the overall project has been approved in the current Medium Term Financial Plan.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

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

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision
None

Cross-Council Implications
No decision

Public Sector Equality Duty
Not applicable – information report only

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2
N/A

List of Background Papers
None

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