

Report For:	Cabinet
Date of Meeting:	Cabinet 8 July 2019
Part:	Part 1 - Open



SUMMARY	
Title of Report:	REFERRAL FROM THE HIGH WYCOMBE TOWN COMMITTEE - HIGH WYCOMBE CEMETERY MUSLIM BURIAL VAULTS
Cabinet Member: Officer Contact: Direct Dial: Email:	Councillor Graham Peart Sue Drummond 01494 421820 Sue.drummond@wycombe.gov.uk
Wards affected:	All wards
Reason for the Decision:	Purchase and installation of additional burial vaults to be made use of by Wycombe's Muslim community is needed because the Cemetery service will run out of available vaults by September 2019. Purchasing additional vaults enables the existing service to continue uninterrupted while the new Cemetery project is implemented. The alternative would be to move to standard earth burials until the new Cemetery is open for burials.
Proposed Decision:	<p>That:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) the release of £44,880 for 66 additional burial vaults from the Special Expenses Account be approved; (ii) the release of £76,500 for works to install an additional terrace from the Special Expenses Account be approved; and (iii) delegated authority be given to the Head of Housing, Environment and Community Services, in consultation with the Head of Finance and Commercial and the Chairman of the High Wycombe Town Committee, to make amendments to fees and charges relating to new concrete chambers for Muslim burials

<p>Sustainable Community Strategy/Council Priorities - Implications</p>	<p>Risk: The provision of concrete burial vaults fits within the Cohesive and Strong Communities theme of the Sustainable Community Strategy by meeting the specific requirements of Wycombe's Muslim residents.</p> <p>Equalities: This project enables the Cemetery to continue to provide burial spaces that meet the requirements of Muslim residents. As well as other legislation covering the duties and powers of burial authorities, the provisions of the Equalities Act 2010 has to be considered in all decisions including provision of burial spaces and making amendments to fees and charges.</p> <p>Health & Safety: None</p>
<p>Monitoring Officer/ S.151 Officer Comments</p>	<p>Monitoring Officer: The Council, is designated as a burial authority under Section 214 of the Local Government Act 1972, and it is also authorised by that provision and the Local Authorities Cemeteries Order 1972 (as amended) to charge such fees as it thinks proper. In fixing fees, it may take account of the fact that costs in connection with High Wycombe town cemetery are designated as Special Expenses.</p> <p>S.151 Officer: Any costs associated with this project will be met from the Special Expenses Account for the High Wycombe Town Area. At the end of 2018/19 the special reserves balance is £1,096k. There are therefore sufficient funds available to meet the projected costs of this scheme pending full cost recovery through increased fees and charges.</p>
<p>Consultees:</p>	<p>The proposed vaults have been discussed and agreed with the Chairman of Wycombe Islamic Mission Mosque Committee and with the HWTC Task and Finish Group of 2018.</p> <p>This report was referred to the High Wycombe Town Committee meeting of 11/6/19 who agreed with the recommendations.</p>
<p>Options:</p>	<p>There are two options.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Option one – install a new area of vaults. The capital cost of new vaults would need to be borne out of Special Expenses and the cost would be recouped by income received for vault burials.

	<p>2. Option two – cease to provide vault burials, in which case earth burials will be the only option This lack of alternative would mean that the Council failed to meet the needs of the local Muslim community</p>
Next Steps:	Following Cabinet approval, to proceed with implementation as the current supply of burial vaults is anticipated to be exhausted within the next few months.
Background Papers:	High Wycombe Town Committee minutes to its meetings of 13 September 2016 (agenda item 5, title: 'Next Phase of Concrete Burial Chambers', minute number 11) and 11 June 2019 (agenda item 6, title: 'High Wycombe Cemetery Muslim Burial Vaults', minute number 5).
Abbreviations:	HWTC – High Wycombe Town Committee

Appendices to this report are as follows: None

Detailed Report

Executive Summary

1. In 2011 the Council resolved to fund the installation of concrete burial chambers, following requests from Muslim community representatives. These chambers were identified by them as more suitable for Islamic burial practices than the metal frames supplied by the Council up to that date.
2. The new vaults are deeper and will be installed as previously, i.e. grave spaces laid out head to foot with a 1m path along the foot of the grave and 450mm gaps between graves for access around as a minimum.

Background and Issues

3. The Town Committee established a Member Task and Finish Group 2016-2018 to review the Muslim burial vaults the Council was using because concerns had been raised by representatives from Wycombe Islamic Mission. The main concern was that the vaults were not deep enough. The following vaults have since been purchased and appear to meet the majority of Muslim residents' requirements. These chambers will be sourced again.

Greenacre (Gem Precast) 4ft Chamber

4. The anticipated measurements when the chambers are constructed are 2460mm long and 1110mm wide externally, internally measurements are to be confirmed but should be in the region of 2260mm long and 912mm wide.
5. The chamber would be 1220 mm (4ft') deep and bottomless.

6. Pricing is subject to the numbers ordered and installed as follows:

£700.00 +vat each for 1-30 chambers installed

£680.00 +vat each for 31-75 chambers installed

£670.00 +vat each for 76-150 chambers installed

7. Concrete burial chambers are widely used elsewhere and these now meet the most up to date requirements of local Muslims of a Pakistani heritage. Wycombe Islamic Mission informed the Council that ‘the usage of concrete chambers for Muslim burials is the current practice in other graveyards around the country...’, and is ‘in accordance with the wishes of local Muslims and in compliance with Islamic teachings’.
8. The current cost (2019/20) of interment in a burial chamber is £1762. This includes £680 for the cost of the chamber installation and £333 for the cost to the contractor and WDC staffing costs. This part of the fee is reviewed by the Committee on an annual basis. In addition, for any new grave burial in the cemetery there is a Right of Burial charge which is currently £749. The total cost of a current burial in a chamber is therefore £1762 for residents of High Wycombe town.
9. It should be noted that, due to the high number of reservations and the limited number of vaults available, reservations have had to be suspended so that the Cemetery has a sufficient stock of vaults for actual burials. 52 vaults were installed last year and, of those used so far, 26% are unavailable for use because they have been reserved. The vaults are funded by generating income from their sale and transferring income to a reserve – reservation prevents the vaults from generating sufficient income to pay for the next tranche and results in the Cemetery holding vacant vaults while incurring costs to provide new tranches. In a cemetery that has a rapidly dwindling supply of land available for concrete chambers, sufficient vaults cannot be provided to allow for one quarter to be taken out of use.
10. The recommendations made to Cabinet in this report were referred to the High Wycombe Town Committee meeting of 11 June 2019 for their consideration as recommendations to Cabinet.
11. That HWTC meeting agreed with the recommendations commending officers on the extensive work they had carried out over the period since 2011 to provide reasonably priced and suitable burial vaults.
12. Given that featuring this item on the next published Cabinet Forward Plan would not result in a decision ahead of the 16 September 2019 Cabinet meeting, which would be too late and jeopardise the continuing provision of the service. Agreement of the Chairman of the Improvement & Review Commission Councillor Ron Gaffney to the inclusion of this item without the statutory 28 clear days’ notice of a decision-making body’s intention to make a key decision, has been obtained, as per Regulation 11 of the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings & Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012.