

UPDATE ON CEMETERY SITE OPTIONS

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Wards affected: All High Wycombe Town Wards

PROPOSED RECOMMENDATION TO CABINET

To agree Queensway as the preferred location for the new cemetery and to seek approval from Cabinet to allocate £20,000, from the Special Expenses reserves, to fund necessary feasibility work.

Corporate Implications

1. A Local Authority has the statutory power to acquire and maintain burial grounds and cemeteries under the Open Spaces Act 1906. It also has the power to provide and contribute to the expenses of maintaining cemeteries under section 214 of Local Government Act 1972. If burials in the town ceased, the crematorium or cemeteries outside the town could be used as the Council is obliged to pay for these costs in the event of a public health funeral.
2. The estimated cost of a feasibility study is £20,000. This would be funded from Special Expenses reserves. Queensway is owned by WDC and was previously purchased from Hazlemere Parish Council for a sum of £100,000. Estates have re-assessed the value of this land and it is still at £100,000 due to restriction and planning constraints. This constitutes the opportunity cost of using this site.
3. Queensway is surrounded by a ransom strip. The larger part of this is owned by three parish councils, the smaller part by Hazlemere Parish Council. The Council has permission in the associated legal agreement to access over the ransom strip if it is using Queensway for a park and ride or as public open space. WDC was able to agree an exception with Hazlemere Parish Council in order to develop allotments on a small part of the site. This Parish Council is on record as supporting the development of a cemetery on the site. However the restrictions should be noted as accessing the cemetery via Queensway may not be the optimal solution, there being another possible access point at the Golf Club end of the site. Site access would be part of the feasibility work.

Executive Summary

4. On 4 March 2014 a report went to High Wycombe Town Committee on site options for an additional cemetery. The report sought the Committee's views on suggested sites for officers to assess for use as an additional cemetery for High Wycombe. The findings were reported to the Committee in June 2014, and the Committee added a further site to those shortlisted for assessment and valuations. This work was reported to the Committee in September 2014 and subsequently Cabinet requested additional feedback from Planning and Estates. This information has been included in this report and it is now recommended that a feasibility study is undertaken for a new cemetery to be located at Queensway

Background and Issues

5. At its meeting of 10 June 2014 High Wycombe Town Committee considered a report on possible sites for a new cemetery. The Committee recommended to Cabinet that further investigations be undertaken in relation to the Abbey Barn land south of the M40, Terriers Farm, Coates Lane and Hillbottom Road (added at the meeting and subsequently rejected due to flood risk), to include consultation with Parish Councils on the potential for shared costs and an assessment of land availability and likely cost.
6. The results of these investigations were reported to the Committee in September 2014 and they requested some additional investigations and feedback and this is detailed below.
7. As requested the Estates Team has approached the landowners of the three sites not in Council ownership to determine whether there is a willingness to sell and at what price. This information along with the opportunity cost of the Council owned Queensway is provided in the table below:

Site	Response from landowner
Abbey Barn land south of M40	The landowner has ruled out the idea of fitting a cemetery on their site
Coates Lane	The National Trust have confirmed they would not be able to accommodate a cemetery on this site
Terriers	The developer has considered this request but is unable to accommodate a cemetery on this site
Queensway 4.2ha	£0 – already owned by the Council (Opportunity cost of £100,000)

8. The feedback from colleagues in Planning is detailed below in this report.

Feedback from Planning

9. This feedback from Planning investigates the suitability of 4 sites from a planning policy perspective. Both Abbey Barn South and Abbey Barn land south of the M40 have been included in this assessment as it is unclear which site is referred to in the above resolution.

Site assessments from Planning

Field on Coates Lane – key issues

10. Access: Any development on the site would require adequate vehicular access provision. There may be conflicting interest with parking for Hughenden Estates.
11. AONB: The site is in the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and in a very sensitive location in the landscape, close to the Hughenden Historic Park and Garden and beneath the Disraeli monument. Any development on the site would need to preserve the setting of the AONB. Impact on landscape/townscape will need to be very carefully considered, given its sensitive location, as well as impacts on the future public enjoyment of the area, and other less sensitive sites in landscape terms are being considered.
12. Green Belt: Impact on the openness of the Green Belt will need to be considered, although depending on the nature of any ancillary development a cemetery use could be a use that would be appropriate development in the Green Belt.
13. Flooding: The roads recorded by Risk Management Agencies during the Winter 2013-14 to have flooded in the vicinity of High Wycombe include Bottom Road, Bradenham Road, Clayfields, Coates Lane, Coombe Lane, Curzon Avenue, Desborough Park Road, London Road, Manor Gardens, Manor Road, Penn Road, Ralphs Retreat, and Valley Road, as a combination of fluvial, groundwater and surface water flooding ; A site specific risk assessment should be done to ensure there is no risk of surface run off /groundwater flooding as this could lead to a) emergency access issues; b) water contamination.
14. Ownership: The land is in the National Trust ownership. Most of the trust's ownership is inalienable¹ and cannot be compulsorily purchased using the Council's CPO powers. Whilst not strictly a planning issue, this could be a fundamental constraint.
15. Recommendation from Planning: That discussions with the National Trust could be pursued but the land may be inalienable and in that case could not be purchased. In the event that the site is purchased, flooding issues, Green Belt and AONB impacts, will need very careful consideration. But overall this site is considered too sensitive given its particular landscape setting.

¹ The National Trust has the unique statutory power to declare land inalienable - such land cannot be voluntarily sold, mortgaged or compulsorily purchased against the Trust's wishes without special parliamentary procedure.

Land south of the M40 – key issues

16. Access: Any development on the site would require adequate vehicular access provision
17. Archaeological Notification Site: Part of the site is an archaeological notification site. Any planning applicant would need to consult Buckinghamshire County archaeology services and the Buckinghamshire Historic Environment Records.
18. Green Belt: The site is in the Green Belt. Cemeteries are recognised as not inappropriate. Care should be taken to ensure that the proposal doesn't impact on the openness of the Green Belt and has regards to other Green Belt policies.
19. "Junction 3A": As part of the Local Plan options consultation, the site was identified as part of the area of search for land for business development associated with the possible Junction 3A. The evidence gathering work on this option would need to be explored further before it is known whether this would impact on the option of locating a cemetery in this location.
20. Landscape: Impact on landscape/ townscape need to be carefully considered. The site is adjacent to the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and any development on the site would need to preserve its setting.
21. Recommendation from Planning: At this stage, the use of this site as a cemetery is an option. Issues around archaeology would need to be resolved, adequate access provided and the scheme would have to be sympathetic with the Green Belt and AONB. However before further progress can be made on this option, the options around a possible Junction 3A need to be explored further to see whether it is likely to progress and whether it would affect this site.

Abbey Barn South – key issues

22. Access: Any development on the site would require adequate vehicular access provision
23. Landscape: Impact on adjacent landscape/ townscape will need to be carefully considered.
24. Reserve Site status: Abbey Barn South was one of the 5 sites reserved for future development in the adopted Core Strategy. Cabinet agreed on 20 October 2014 to release these sites for development to contribute towards the Council's 5 year housing land supply, and the detailed planning of these sites be taken forward with public involvement. The Council will be committing important resources towards development briefs for each site, engaging with developers and the local community and this is likely to be followed soon after by planning applications.
25. Trees: There is a protected historic woodland ride on site which will need to be preserved. The proximity of the trees and the potential tree roots will make it

difficult to create burial spaces and in any event this area is likely to provide an ideal opportunity to provide open space for the benefit of residents of the new development and the wider area.

26. Recommendation from Planning: The use of this site (even in part) as a cemetery would compromise the comprehensive delivery of the Abbey Barn Reserve site for residential development (or mixed use residential/ business). The site has now been released for development, and a development brief will be prepared for the site shortly. This site should not be considered further.

Terriers Farm – key issues

27. Access: Any development on the site would require adequate vehicular access provision
28. AONB: Impact on landscape/ townscape will need to be carefully considered. The site is adjacent to the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and any development on the site would need to preserve its setting.
29. Flooding: Surface water flooding has been recorded on part of the site. A site specific risk assessment should be done to ensure there is no risk of surface run off flooding as this could lead to a) emergency access issues; b) water contamination.
30. Reserve Site status: Terriers Farm was one of the 5 sites reserved for future development in the adopted Core Strategy. Cabinet agreed on 20 October 2014 to release these sites for development to contribute towards the Council's 5 year housing land supply, and the detailed planning of these sites be taken forward with public involvement. The Council will be committing important resources towards development briefs for each site, engaging with developers and the local community and this is likely to be followed soon after by planning applications.
31. The Local Plan consultation earlier this year and other earlier concept plans for the development of this site have suggested retaining the three small fields nearest Hazlemere Recreation Ground free of development. Whilst theoretically these could accommodate a cemetery, this area was identified to provide appropriate open space to serve the residents of the new development, and may also provide the opportunity to provide additional playing pitches linked to Hazlemere Recreation Ground, if appropriate. As such cemetery use is not considered appropriate for this area.
32. Recommendation from Planning: The use of this site (even in part) as a cemetery would compromise the comprehensive delivery of the Terriers Farm Reserve site for residential development. The site has now been released for development, and a development brief will be prepared for the site shortly. This site should not be considered further.

Additional Comment with regard to Sites in the Green Belt (ie land off Coates Lane, land south of the M40)

33. As part of the ongoing work on the Local Plan, work to assess whether the Green Belt around the District is fulfilling the nationally prescribed Green Belt purposes is likely to take place during next year. Members should be aware that land could be identified out of this exercise that may have development potential for other uses.

Comment with regard the Queensway site

34. Planning's original comments on the Queensway site were as follows:

The site is in AONB and Green Belt and any development should preserve the AONB's special character, appearance or natural beauty of the landscape.

Conclusions from Planning

35. The following are the three conclusions from Planning:

- a The Abbey Barn site south of the M40 has some potential, but will need further archaeological investigations with the County Council (HER), and more fundamentally should not be pursued until there is more certainty over the Junction 3A option.
- b The Coates Lane option is not favoured because of its landscape sensitivity and ownership issues may prevent this from coming forward in any event (National Trust land).
- c With regards to Abbey Barn South and Terriers Farm the use of any of these sites (or part of) as a cemetery would compromise their comprehensive delivery for residential development (or mixed use). The sites, reserved in the Council's Plans for future housing growth, have been released by Cabinet on 20 October 2014 to contribute to the District's housing supply. The Council is looking at producing development briefs to guide these and planning applications are likely to follow soon after. These options should not be pursued.

Capacity at the current High Wycombe Town Cemetery

36. The remaining space at the current cemetery has been reviewed. The Snow Drop Garden (dedicated area for child burials), based on recent burial rates, which have doubled over the last year, will be full in approximately three to four years. Based on the current burial rates space for non Church of England burials will be full in approximately eight to ten years, and space for Church of England burials will last approximately 15 – 18 years.
37. There is some capacity to bury children in gaps across the cemetery which could extend burials for a further couple of years but this will not provide a dedicated area, suitably tailored.

38. The Church of England has been approached to determine whether the previously consecrated areas in the cemetery could be de-consecrated making them available for all burial types, and they have confirmed they will not allow this to happen. Therefore there is a need to have open a new Cemetery by 2018/19 at the latest.

Feasibility Study

39. The next stage is to undertake feasibility works, which will consist of:
- a geological survey to establish the underlying ground conditions, including water courses, underground services and suitability for burials. This is a large site and the estimated cost is £12k; and
 - to develop a costed layout plan, including pedestrian and vehicle access, a small office/toilet building, access from the highway, parking, seating and layout of sections and gardens. This work is estimated to cost £8k.

This work could include partnership work with the Grange Area Trust Queensway project group if the Committee is supportive of a combined Tranquil Park/Cemetery scheme.

Options

40. There are two options to consider

Option 1 – Carry out detailed feasibility work at Queensway.

- The advantage of this option is that it is WDC land and could be developed as a cemetery quickly and for least cost. Feasibility work has a cost implication (estimated cost is £20,000, funded from Special Expenses reserves) because of the need to engage consultants to carry out the work and to fully price the project. The actual costs of bringing the Cemetery into use will be estimated as part of the feasibility work.

Option 2 – Do nothing

- This option has no financial implications. As a statutory burial authority the Council has a duty to bury while there is capacity in a cemetery, but we do not have to provide a cemetery. The Council could instead pay for public health funerals in other councils' cemeteries at the non-resident rate. However not being able to bury residents within the town is likely to result in negative feedback and publicity.

Conclusions

41. A site for a new cemetery is becoming an increased priority and the Queensway site is the only available and affordable site option at this point in time. Feasibility work is necessary to ensure that the site is indeed suitable for a cemetery, and to design the cemetery in sufficient detail so as to develop a reliable cost estimate.

Next Steps

42. Once the recommendation has been agreed by Cabinet the next step is to appoint consultants to undertake the geological survey, design and costing work for the Queensway site.

Background Papers

Cemetery Site Option Appraisal Reports to High Wycombe Town Committee – 4 March 2014, 10 June 2014, 16 September 2014.

Cemetery Site Option Appraisal Reports to Cabinet – 16 June 2014 and 22 September 2014.