

New Cemetery for High Wycombe – Feasibility study

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Wards affected: All town wards and Hazlemere

RECOMMENDATION TO COMMITTEE

To note that initial feasibility work indicates that the new Cemetery may cost £1,963,332.

Reason for Recommendation

The Committee is asked to note the estimated funding requirement. The Committee is being alerted to it at this stage as the Committee is setting its budget at this meeting. A firm budget request will be brought to the March meeting of the Committee.

Corporate Implications

In its capacity as a designated burial authority under S214 of the Local Government Act 1972 the Council has power to provide and maintain cemeteries inside or outside its area.

Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 places a duty (“the public sector equality duty”) on the Council, in the exercise of its functions to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act; to advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not; and to foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not. One of the protected characteristics is religion or belief.

An Equalities Impact Assessment describing steps taken to comply with this duty has been completed and is available at <https://www.wycombe.gov.uk/uploads/public/documents/Community/Equality-impact-assessments/Community/Equality-impact-assessment-Cemetery-feasibility-study.pdf>

Executive Summary

The current Cemetery will be full for some types of burials within 18 months to 2 years. Following an extensive site options appraisal the Committee therefore agreed to fund feasibility work to develop a new Cemetery at the Queensway site in Hazlemere. Following completion of this work the Committee is asked to note that a request for funding will follow in March to enable the project to proceed.

The March report will be accompanied by a brief presentation on the feasibility study to Members of the Committee.

Sustainable Community Strategy / Council Priorities - Implications

Place and People Corporate Strategy priorities – High Wycombe residents expect to be able to be buried locally. This will not be possible for some residents in the near future. The Council has a legal duty to be able to bury the dead. While the Council could meet this by paying non-resident fees only for public health funerals in surrounding cemeteries this will not satisfactorily meet the reasonable expectations of residents.

Background and Issues

Following the decision in 2015/16 by the Committee to fund feasibility work into bringing the WDC owned land at Queensway into use as a cemetery ALD were commissioned to design and cost a preliminary scheme.

This work was completed in December 2016. Officers are concerned that the initial budget of £1,963,322 is substantial and is arranging a value engineering workshop with ALD, who have indicated that savings may be possible that do not impact on the quality of the end product. Officers are conscious that the Cemetery will exist for the foreseeable future; even when it becomes full the Council will continue to maintain it and therefore materials have to be capable of lasting for a long time.

Officers would have preferred to bring the design work to the Committee ahead of a discussion about budget but the work has coincided with the financial planning cycle and therefore this matter is being brought to the Committee's attention now with a detailed report following in March.

The initial costs have been validated by an independent quantity surveyor and are summarised in the exempt appendix. This information is confidential as the Council will tender for works in the future.

The current cost cannot be met from one year but this may not delay implementation of the Cemetery if undertaken in phases. At this stage phases have not been defined but it is likely that areas of most immediate need for child and Muslim burials can be included in the first phase. What has not been identified is how much of the supporting infrastructure can be funded in a first phase. Supporting infrastructure includes the Cemetery wide path and road network, entrance and car parking, office/reception/toilet block, site compound, columbaria etc.

Detail on phasing and value engineering findings will be brought to the Committee for discussion in March 2017.

Options

The Committee has two options. The comprehensive site options appraisal has identified that Queensway is the most suitable and cost effective option. The Committee can note the potential level of funding required for the project to proceed.

The Committee can decide to wait until the 2018/19 budget cycle before reserving funding. Given that the project is likely to be implemented in 2 to 3 phases this would mean that the Cemetery could not be brought into full use until 2020/21 or 2021/22. It is anticipated that child and Muslim burials could commence approximately 18 months after project initiation. If the project cannot be started until

April 2018 then burials could commence in October 2019. There is 18-24 months of space available for child burials at the current rate of use, which means the Snowdrop Garden will be full at some time between mid 2018 and early 2019.

While space can be created in the current Cemetery for Muslim burials the costs of readying made up ground for chambered burials is high and moving these at an early stage to the new Cemetery should result in more affordable burials for the town's residents requiring a chambered burial. There is 18 months of space available for chambered burials at the current rate of use, which means the Muslim section will be full in mid 2018.

The second option is not to proceed. Residents who belong to the Church of England could continue to be buried for the foreseeable future as there is a significant area of pre-consecrated ground for this faith. Other burials would gradually cease and residents would need to seek burial in other cemeteries around the District or elsewhere. It is likely that this will fail to meet the Council's duty under the Equality Act 2010 as displaced burials will attract non-resident fees, which are significantly higher. It will not be equitable to provide a service for one faith group alone.

Conclusions

The Committee is asked to note the current funding requirement for the project. At this stage the Committee is not being asked to green light the project as further work is required. It is recognised that the 2017/18 financial decision making cycle does not fit with the timescales for deciding to proceed with the project and therefore this report has been provided to update the Committee. Waiting to start the project in 2018/19 risks there being insufficient funding to start phase one and risks suspension of child and Muslim burial services for High Wycombe residents, which is likely to be unacceptable.

Next Steps

To bring back to the Committee in March the results of the feasibility study and the phasing proposal.

In terms of the project once phasing has been identified and agreed the following work would follow. All timescales are indicative estimates only.

- Finalise the design (April 2017)
- Develop the Planning Application, including any consultation, ecological and other survey work (September 2017)
- Submit/obtain Planning Permission (November 2017)
- Tender for phase one of site infrastructure works (twin track – contract award in December 2017)
- Works on site (commence in February/March 2018)
- Open up eastern end of the new Cemetery (October 2018)

Background Papers

Previous reports to the Committee on site options appraisal and the feasibility budget.