



# Report to High Wycombe Town Committee

**Date:** 28<sup>h</sup> July 2021

**Title:** Update report on Penn Road Cemetery, Hazlemere, High Wycombe

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## Recommendations:

- a) That the Committee note and comment on the content of the report
- b) That the Committee agree the formation of a working group to review the types of burial provision that should be available at the Penn Road cemetery and report back to the Committee at their meeting of the 21<sup>st</sup> September 2021.

## 1. Background

In 2017 Wycombe District Council approved the allocation of Special Expenses Reserve funding for the development of a new cemetery at Queensway, High Wycombe following referral from the High Wycombe Town Committee. The new Penn Road cemetery was completed and handed over to Buckinghamshire Council on the 27<sup>th</sup> November 2020. Whilst the cemetery is now complete from a build perspective there are a number of key decisions and operational factors that need to be addressed before the cemetery can open for burials. These include enabling the soft landscaping works to settle and the grass on the site to grow, agreeing the type of burials, designated sections and plotting the grave positions across the site, agreeing new fees and charges and agreeing the cemetery rules and regulations. In addition the Council must ensure that the maintenance and grave-digging activity on the site is covered by the grounds maintenance contract which is due to operate from the 1<sup>st</sup> January 2022. Given these factors it is proposed that a suitable opening date for the cemetery would be the 4<sup>th</sup> April 2022.

## 2. Main content of report

- 2.1 On the 25<sup>th</sup> September 2012 a report was presented to High Wycombe Town Committee which reviewed the available burial space at High Wycombe Cemetery. It identified that there was, at that time, capacity for new burials at the cemetery for a

further 20 – 25 years. While this gave the cemetery a reasonable mid-term future it was considered timely to consider the potential options available for providing additional burial land for the town. It was noted that in some specific designated sections of the cemetery available burial capacity was lower, in particular in the areas designated for Muslim burials and child burials provision, whilst in other designated areas capacity was higher e.g. for the burial of cremated remains.

2.2 In 2017 Wycombe District Council approved the allocation of Special Expenses Reserve funding for the development of a new cemetery at Queensway, High Wycombe following referral from the High Wycombe Town Committee. The new Penn Road cemetery was completed and handed over to Buckinghamshire Council on the 27<sup>th</sup> November 2020. Any maintenance and repairs required on the site are currently covered by the construction contractor under a 12 month defects liability period which will come to an end in December 2021. Provision for the maintenance of the cemetery and grave-digging has been made within the specification for the new grounds maintenance contract for the Wycombe area which will operate from the 1<sup>st</sup> January 2022. The award of the contract will inform the recommended fees and charges for the new cemetery. Information on the award of the new contract, including the cost of the provision of a Monday to Sunday burial service, will be provided to the Committee at the meeting on the 21<sup>st</sup> September 2021.

### **2.3 Types of Burial provision**

High Wycombe Cemetery offers the following types of burial:

- Interment – single or double depth
- Interment in a concrete chamber
- Interment of cremated remains

2.3.1 The Committee has yet to make a decision on the type of burial that should be provided at Penn Road Cemetery. This decision must be taken before further decisions on fees and charges and Rules and Regulations for the cemetery can be taken. Officer recommendation is that an officer and member working group is formed to review types of burial that should be offered at the Cemetery with a view to finalising the proposal by the 31<sup>st</sup> August 2021, and providing this information to the Committee at the next meeting on the 21<sup>st</sup> September 2021.

2.3.2 Specifically the working group will need to consider whether interments in concrete chambers should be permitted in the Penn Road Cemetery. Concrete chambers have been extensively used for Muslim burial provision at High Wycombe Cemetery at the request of the Muslim community, for religious reasons and because of the made up ground, which is terraced and on a steep gradient in the area designated

for Muslim burials. Given the environmental impact of using concrete chambers, the additional costs to users of the cemetery as well as the increased space required, the working group should consider whether this is a burial type that the Committee wish to continue to offer, or whether there are suitable alternatives that could be used. It is suggested that Officers undertake a benchmarking exercise of other local area cemeteries and the provision of burial types for consideration by the Committee alongside the findings of the working group.

- 2.3.3 In addition the working group should also consider whether there should be restrictions on the use of some types of coffins within the cemetery e.g. metal coffins, and whether the cemetery should make provision for the scattering of cremated remains and for shroud burials.

Consideration will also need to be given to the following:

#### 2.4 **Fees and charges**

Officers are dependent on the Committee agreeing the types of burial that will be provided at the Cemetery, as well as on the pricing structure within the new grounds maintenance contract, before appropriate fees and charges can be calculated. Fees and charges will also need to reflect possible pre-purchase options for plots, columbarium pricing and leasing arrangements and the subsidisation of child burials (given the Government now provide support for child funeral costs through the Children's Funeral Fund for England which enables a burial authority to claim for the fees charged for a burial). It is likely that the recommendation of the proposed fees for approval will come forward to the Committee at the meeting of the 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2021. Once the Committee have recommended the proposed fees and charges for approval these will then be brought forward to Cabinet as an Executive decision.

#### 2.5 **Cemetery Rules and Regulations**

The formation of Buckinghamshire Council has brought together responsibility for the operation of a number of cemeteries across the Council area. The Service is currently working to bring together the management of the cemeteries service into a single team which will create more resilience within the service and should deliver a more consistent experience for users and customers across Buckinghamshire. Cemeteries operated by Buckinghamshire Council currently operate to legacy council cemetery rules and regulations. Officers will seek to harmonise, as far as possible, the Penn Road Cemetery Rules and Regulations with those in place for other cemeteries operated by the Council, recognising that there will need to be site specific requirements for each cemetery.

- 2.5.1 Officers are dependent on the Committee agreeing the types of burial that will be provided at the Cemetery to enable the setting of the new rules and regulations. Given this it is likely that the recommendation of the rules and regulations for Penn

Road Cemetery for approval will come forward to the Committee at the meeting of the 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2021. Once the Committee have recommended the proposed rules and regulations for approval these will then be brought forward to Cabinet as an Executive decision.

### **3. Next steps and review**

- July/August 2021 - Member/officer working group formed to review types of burial provision
- 31<sup>st</sup> August 2021 - final proposal on burial types from working group
- 21<sup>st</sup> September 2021 - Feedback to Committee on recommended types of burial
- 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2021 – proposed Cemetery fees and charges provided to Committee for recommendation to approve
- 23<sup>rd</sup> November – proposed Cemetery Rules and Regulations provided to Committee for recommendation to approve
- December/January (date TBC) Cabinet decision to approve new fees and charges and cemetery Rules and Regulations

### **4. Other options considered**

N/A – activities are required to enable opening of Penn Road Cemetery and ensure sufficient burial provision for the future

### **5. Legal and financial implications**

Cemetery fees should cover the costs of the provision of the service on a full cost recovery model basis. Cemetery Rules and Regulations must be in place prior to operation to ensure that it operates in accordance with legislative and council requirements. These cemetery fees and related costs will be incorporated into the budget setting process for 2022/23 and beyond.

### **6. Corporate implications**

- 6.1 Improving the environment – the recommended approach is that the Council move away from the use of concrete burial chambers and seek to use more sustainable and environmentally friendly burial types. Benchmarking will assist with the review of burial options available and appropriate to the cemetery.
- 6.2 Property – input is required as part of fee setting to ensure that ongoing land depreciation and maintenance costs over time are factored in to cost recovery.

6.3 HR – N/A

6.4 Climate change – as above

6.5 Sustainability – as above

6.6 Data – N/A

6.7 Value for money – as above

**Key documents:** none

