



Report to High Wycombe Town Committee

Date: 1st August 2024

Title: **Penn Road and High Wycombe Cemeteries – extended operational hours and proposed fees**

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Recommendations:

- (a) To agree the proposed extended operational hours subject to formal approval.
- (b) To agree the Cemetery Interment Fees from 9th September 2024 subject to formal approval.
- (c) To agree that the extended operational hours and fees will be reviewed six-months after implementation.

Reason for decision: To ensure cost recovery of an extended burial service in Penn Road and High Wycombe Cemeteries

1. Background

- 1.1 Penn Road and High Wycombe Cemeteries primarily serve the unparished area of High Wycombe with oversight given by High Wycombe Town Committee. Penn Road Cemetery opened in July 2022 when the Muslim Section in High Wycombe Cemetery reached capacity and provides both Muslim and Non-Denominational sections.
- 1.2 Burials are permitted to take place Monday to Saturday 10am - 3.30pm during British Summer Time and between 9am and 2pm during the rest of the year (excluding Bank or other Public Holidays).
- 1.3 It is a requirement of the Islamic faith that burial takes place as soon as possible after death and currently a short notice burial service is provided Monday to Saturday subject to statutory death certification documents being provided in accordance with agreed processes.

- 1.4 In January 2022 High Wycombe Town Committee considered the provision of an extended service, to include Sunday burials, and agreed that Officers would maintain a watching brief on the implementation of the planned changes to the NHS Medical Examiner Scheme and the provision models of all agencies involved in the death certification process as implementation of the scheme would facilitate provision of the death certification required for a Sunday/Bank Holiday burial to take place for some deaths.
- 1.5 The Medical Examiner Scheme will be implemented in England and Wales on 9th September 2024 and will include some out of hour (weekend) provision for issuing death certification documents for those deaths not requiring referral to the coroner.
- 1.6 In March 2024 High Wycombe Town Committee agreed to consider further extensions of the Cemeteries operating hours to include, Sunday burials and burials on 4 (non-religious) Bank Holidays and an extension of Monday – Friday burials times to include a 3 pm interment between November and January.
- 1.7 The non-religious Bank Holidays on which burial services are proposed to be provided are New Year’s Day, Early May Bank Holiday, Spring Bank Holiday, and Summer Bank Holiday. No interments will take place on religious Bank Holidays, for example, Easter Sunday, Christmas Day.
- 1.8 It is requested that the proposed Fee Schedule and extended operational hours are agreed.

2. Main content of Report

- 2.1 Penn Road and High Wycombe Cemeteries are funded through the Special Expenses Fund and operate on a cost recovery basis. Both sites are managed by the Cemeteries and Crematoria Service that sits within Neighbourhood Services.
- 2.2 Grave preparation in these cemeteries is undertaken by the Council’s Grounds Maintenance Contractor, Idverde, and proposed costs for Sunday/Bank Holiday Standby arrangements and Attendances for interments are contained in the Schedule of Rates. The existing contract contains sufficient flexibility within it so that no amendment is required to accommodate the recommended changes.

Administration of the cemeteries, and associated statutory documentation is undertaken by Cemetery Service team members and the current staffing structure is insufficient to provide a 7-day burial service. To accommodate a Sunday/Bank Holiday service members of the Crematoria and Cemeteries Service team will form a Sunday Standby and Attendance rota to work alongside the established Saturday rota.
- 2.4 The costs for providing Sunday/Bank Holiday Standby and Attendance are attached at Appendix 1.

- 2.5 A meeting of the High Wycombe Town Committee (HWTC) Sunday Burials Working Sub-group, on 12th June 2024, considered three fee options put forward by Officers and it was agreed that the costs should be distributed equally across the Interment fees using a method that did not increase some fees, such as the interment of cremated remains, disproportionately. Increasing all Interment fees by 20% achieves recovery of the costs and does not increase any individual fee disproportionately.
- 2.6 The current Penn Road and High Wycombe Cemetery 2024/25 Fees Schedule does not take account of the impact of the new proposals for extended burial hours and days. Therefore, a proposed revised Fee Schedule requires agreement to enable the extended operational hours to be implemented in September 2024 on a cost recovery basis.
- 2.7 The current fees for 2024-25 and the proposed fees are attached at Appendix 2.
- 2.8 The current operational hours of the Cemeteries are set out in the Cemetery Rules & Regulations, and these will require amendments following a six-month trial of the extended operational hours.

3. Other Options Considered

- 3.1 The Council could choose not to provide a Sunday / Bank Holiday Burial service. However, this is not recommended as it does not enhance or expand the service offering.
- 3.2 The Council has also considered alternative fee structures for Sunday Burials. Options to attribute the cost of providing this service to Sunday / Bank Holidays only, and also attributing the costs across all fees but with greater weighting for Weekends / Bank Holidays are not recommended as they posed a level of risk to the High Wycombe Town Committee Special Expenses Fund.
- 3.3 Similarly, an option to divide the increase in cost equally across all interment fees with the same fixed fee increase applied to each fee is not recommended due to the disproportionate impact of this charge on customers, for example, those interring cremated remains. The recommended option is a percentage increase across all interment fees and is more proportionate.

4. Legal and financial implications

- 4.1 The resource and contractual standby costs of providing extended operational hours are £23,743 p.a, for financial year 24/25. The attendance costs per interment are £550.00.

- 4.2 It is forecast that, based on an assumption of 6 Sunday/Bank Holiday interments and the average number of Monday – Saturday interments in the two previous financial years the proposed fees will generate additional income of £24,000 p.a. enabling the service to be delivered on a cost recovery basis.
- 4.3 If the assumed number of Sunday/Bank Holiday interments (6 p.a.), fail to take place there is a risk that the cost of providing the service will not be recovered and there will be a requirement for the shortfall to be met through the HWTC Special Expenses Fund.

5. Corporate implications

- 5.1 The extended operational hours will enable the service to meet the specific, short notice, burial requirements of the Islamic community in addition to offering an extended service to all faith and non-faith groups.
- 5.2 The council's agreed Standby, Overtime and Mileage rates will apply for those team members participating in the proposed rota and the proposed fee increase will ensure that the service continues to deliver burials in a way that provides value for money on a cost recovery basis.
- 5.3 An Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed and there is no personal data involved with the fee proposal.

6. Local councillors & community boards consultation & views

- 6.1 Consultation with Local Councillors, via High Wycombe Town Committee (HWTC), has been ongoing since July 2021 and at this time it was requested that Officers consider the provision of Sunday burials.
- 6.2 It was agreed at HWTC in July 2022 that Officers would maintain a watching brief on the extension and bedding in of the NHS Medical Examiners Service as this service would enable the death certification for some deaths to be made available on Sundays/Bank Holidays.
- 6.3 In March 2024 Officers updated HWTC on the confirmed implementation of the Medical Examiner Service, 9th September 2024, and it was agreed that a Sunday/Bank Holiday burial service would be provided from this date subject to fees being set for cost recovery.

7. Communication, engagement & further consultation

- 7.1 Once formally approved the published Fees and Charges schedule will be amended, circulated to local Funeral Directors and the Cemetery webpages updated.

8. Next steps and review

- 8.1 Subject to agreement at this Committee, the Fees Recommendations will be put to Key Decision to Buckinghamshire Council for approval.
- 8.2 Once approved the published Fees and Charges schedule will be amended, circulated to local Funeral Directors and the Cemetery webpages updated.
- 8.3 Interment numbers and income will be monitored, and the extended hours service provision reviewed after a period of six months.
- 8.4 Review and agree amended Cemetery Rules & Regulations following the six-month review.

9. Background papers

- 9.1 None

