

Date **29 September 2022**

The Maintenance and Security of Council Run Cemeteries

Ward(s) **All**

Portfolio(s) **Cllr Perry** – Deputy Leader of the Council and Resilient
Communities

1. Aim

- 1.1. Our cemeteries offer an important service to our residents. They are places that have different meaning to different people and cultures and provide a place of peace, remembrance, and reflection. Our cemeteries connect our communities to the past and often help them look to the future.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. Members are requested to:
- 2.1.1. Note the current and proposed approaches with respect to maintenance, security, and community engagement.
- 2.1.2. Provide comments and views on the current service provision and the proposals set out in this report.
- 2.1.3. Advise how the bereavement services team can support and work with elected members in communicating and building awareness of the opportunities for volunteers to become more involved at the borough's cemeteries.

3. Know

- 3.1. The council manage eight cemeteries across the borough:
- Bentley Cemetery, Wolverhampton Road West
 - Bloxwich Cemetery, Field Road, Bloxwich
 - James Bridge Cemetery, Cemetery Road, Darlaston
 - North Walsall Cemetery, Saddleworth Road, Bloxwich
 - Ryecroft Cemetery, Coalpool Lane
 - Streetly Cemetery and Crematorium, Little Hardwick Road, Streetly
 - Willenhall Lawn Cemetery, Bentley Lane, Willenhall
 - Wood Street Cemetery, Wood Street, Willenhall

3.2. The availability and provision in respect to graves and cremated remains plots varies from site to site. However, the maintenance standards and approach to securing our sites is broadly the same across all eight locations.

Grounds Maintenance

3.3. Routine grounds maintenance is carried out by a team of 12 operational staff across the eight cemetery sites. The current regime is set out below:

Grass cutting	Every 3-5 weeks as a minimum and as often as weekly during the growing season.
Weed spraying	Twice-yearly
Hedge cutting	Annually
Road sweeping	Every 3 months

3.4. Maintenance of the roads and pathways in cemeteries is currently carried out on a reactive basis and, unless safety critical, is usually subject to a successful bid for capital funding. This is being reviewed with a view to introducing an element of routine asset management, in line with our successful approach to highway maintenance.

Grave Maintenance

3.5. Memorials on graves remain the property of the owner of the exclusive right of burial and it is that owner who is responsible for ensuring that memorial is maintained in a safe condition. Therefore, the council do not routinely maintain individual memorials. However, cemetery staff carry out the routine maintenance activities listed below.

3.5.1. Where the soil on a grave in one of our lawn sections has sunk, arrangements will be made for the grave to be topped up and seeded free of charge, as soon as convenient. The maintenance team will then continue to mow and maintain the grassed area.

3.5.2. Floral tributes can be displayed on cremation plots for 6 days, and burial plots for 14 days after the date of an interment. After this period the flowers are carefully removed and disposed of. Additionally, seasonal tributes are carefully removed from the cemeteries and crematorium in the first week of February.

3.5.3. In most instances, memorials of a set size can be placed at the head end of the grave space and small items of memorabilia, such as vases, can be placed immediately in front of the headstone. Where items impede access to a grave or affect maintenance, the council reserve the right to carefully move these items to an appropriate position. Should items become broken and potentially dangerous, they may be removed.

- 3.6. The council do not generally remove any items from baby graves, regardless of condition, due to the particularly sensitive nature of this kind of bereavement. In the coming weeks, staff will be contacting a small number of deed owners where tributes are showing significant signs of deterioration and seeking permission to carefully remove severely damaged items. Items will be retained for a period, should the deed owner wish to have them returned.
- 3.7. In the next 12 months, bereavement services will be carrying out a review of the council's rules and regulations in respect of cemeteries and crematorium with a view to ensuring that they remain balanced, proportionate and meet the needs of our communities and visitors.

Site Security

- 3.8. The council recognise the importance of visitors to our cemeteries feeling safe and reassured that their loved ones' memorials are protected, as far as is reasonably practicable, from vandalism and antisocial behaviour.
- 3.9. Security measures vary from location to location based on the size and layout of the site and, the risk of antisocial behaviour. Whilst it is important that we provide reasonable levels of security, this needs to be balanced with creating pleasant surroundings that offer visitors a place to reflect. All the sites are fenced and gated with the exception of Wood Street.
- 3.10. The council's cemeteries are open for set hours between 7:30am and 8.30am, 7 days a week throughout the year. Opening hours vary depending on the time of year. Patrol officers work evenings and weekend to ensure that the seven gated sites are opened in the morning and that those cemeteries are safely closed to visitors at night, in accordance with the published opening hours. On occasion, a site may be open past the published admittance time to, for example, accommodate a later burial, and work patterns are adjusted to meet with these requirements.
- 3.11. All sites, apart from Wood Street Cemetery, are staffed for all or part of the day, generally between 8am and 4pm. The Maintenance staff who work in our cemeteries are trained to offer advice to visitors, bereaved families and key partners such as funeral directors.
- 3.12. There is a careful balance to strike with CCTV. The council need to be sensitive to visitors' desire for privacy and remote surveillance could be viewed as an invasion of that privacy. However, CCTV can act as an effective deterrent for anti-social behaviour and a source of reassurance to visitors. Improved fencing and defensive planting may be a more appropriate approach.
- 3.13. Where CCTV is considered to be an appropriate provision, consideration needs to be given to the availability of a power supply, lighting, coverage and the associated cost and disruption arising during installation and future maintenance.

- 3.14. Although most of the council's cemetery sites are enclosed by fencing, the type and standard of fencing varies. Boundary treatments range from 4' (1.2m) bow top fencing to 7' (2.1m) anti climb fencing. Again, there is a careful balance to strike between securing the cemetery and creating a pleasant environment for remembrance. In some instance, the boundary treatment is prescribed in the cemeteries planning permission¹ in order to preserve the visual appearance of the site.
- 3.15. Across the seven locations with fencing, the age and quality of fencing is varied and there have been instances of vandalism and damage reported to the council.

Community Engagement

- 3.16. For many communities, cemeteries are an integral part of their surroundings. They are place that represents their past and links it to their present and future. They also provide valuable green space, access to the natural environment and a place for quiet contemplation.
- 3.17. The council's customer access management (CAM) workstream is reviewing all service areas across the organisation to consider how we improve our offer to our residents and communities. In addition to improving the way people can access our services, we know that there are members of our communities who are keen to support and volunteer in the borough's cemeteries.
- 3.18. The National Federation of Cemetery Friends represents groups of volunteers interested in conserving cemeteries large and small. The "Cemetery Friends" give their time assisting with maintenance, providing guided walks and supporting open days and special events. Nationally, some groups have restored memorials and chapels.
- 3.19. Associate members include trusts, councils, and organisations who manage cemeteries and burials.

Financial Implications

- 3.20. Once collated, a programme of capital investment will be submitted to Strategic Investment Board for consideration prior to any Cabinet decision (where appropriate).

Climate Implications

- 3.21. Our cemeteries provide refuges for a range of insects, small mammals and plants. They also provide a valuable area of green space in which can offer benefit the health and wellbeing of the surrounding communities.

¹ Planning permission is required (a) if the fence height including trellis exceeds 2 metres (6.56ft) above ground level and (b) if your fence height is higher than 1 metre (3.28ft) and next to a highway used by vehicles or the pedestrian footpath.

- 3.22. As opportunities for investment are identified and maintenance is programmed, there will be a need to strike a balance between practicality, cost, aesthetics and supporting the council's ambitions with respect to biodiversity and carbon reduction.

Reducing Inequalities

- 3.23. Bereavement affects all section of society and it is important that the council's cemeteries offer an environment that is managed and maintained to a standard that is accessible and safe.
- 3.24. Both the programme of capital investment and the approach to engaging communities at our cemeteries will be subject to equality impact screens and detailed assessments as required.

4. Decide

- 4.1. The council's cemeteries are a valuable asset that serve the residents, visitors and wildlife of the borough. However, local concerns from residents in Willenhall have brought in to focus the need to invest in maintenance, review security measures, embrace community spirit and ensure these assets meet the future needs of the borough.

5. Respond

- 5.1. The bereavement services team will review the site security and outstanding repairs across all eight council run sites. A proposed programme of work will be collated to include short term investment in infrastructure improvements and longer-term routine maintenance schedules.
- 5.2. Once collated, the capital project will be consideration by Strategic Investment Board and submitted for Cabinet approval if the value and/or proposals necessitate a Cabinet decision.
- 5.3. Within the next 12 months, a review of the cemetery and crematorium rules and regulations will be carried out and any propose changes presented to Cabinet for consideration.
- 5.4. The bereavement services team will explore the opportunity to become an associate of the National Federation of Cemetery Friends and how best to encourage community engagement with the scheme.

6. Review

- 6.1. The proposed programme of capital investments will include a set of targets against which progress can be measured, including a measure of community satisfaction with the maintenance and security being provided in our cemeteries.

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