



<u>Committee and date</u>
Communities Overview & Scrutiny Committee
10 th September 2018

<u>Item No</u>
Public

Burial capacity within Shropshire

Responsible Officer

Mark Foxall, Bereavement Services Manager

mark.foxall@shropshire.gov.uk

01743 255936

1. Summary

Local community concern has been expressed regarding the future provision of burial space to meet anticipated Shropshire need and also the lack of local provision for non christian burial space. This report examines these concern, sets out the current position for Shropshire Council and sets out finding from a recent cemetery survey of Shropshire town and parish councils.

2. Recommendation

That Scrutiny Committee consider the report and the estimated burial capacities that exist or are proposed and identify any future course of action or work programme required.

3. Opportunities and risks

Elements of the bereavement service are statutory and the council charges for the majority of bereavement services provided. Constant demand exists for the service. Municipal provision of bereavement services is long established since the creation of burials boards in the 1800's, local government is a trusted provider. The bereavement service is exposed to minor operational and legislative risk. Cemeteries should provide a fair mix of consecrated and unconsecrated areas to accommodate the needs of a mixed community in a fair and balanced way.

4. Financial Assessment

The council retain burial fees generated from the sale of the exclusive right of burial and interment fees at council occupied cemeteries. Due to constant demand for bereavement services revenue from provision is highly guaranteed, however rate of return is slow. It is therefore prudent to optimise existing bereavement estate assets. Providing burial space to all faiths and those of no faith broadens opportunity to generate revenue.

REPORT

5. Demand for and position of current burial provision offered by Shropshire Council

Shropshire Council own seven active, meaning available for burial, cemeteries in the central Shropshire area. Burial administration at all seven cemeteries is carried out by Dignity Ltd to whom the bereavement service is outsourced. Fees charged for burial rest with the party that occupy the cemetery and there is also a broader contract payment mechanism in place.

Around 100 to 150 burials take place at council owned cemetery each year but of these only 50 or so are interments into new graves, the remaining burials are second or third interments into existing graves. The majority of burials at council owned cemetery are in Shrewsbury with just a handful at its rural cemeteries each year. The below table includes detail of available burial capacity at council owned cemetery.

Table 1. Cemeteries and capacities

Cemetery and Occupier	How many new graves available	How long these might last (Estimate)	Capacity for non christian burial
Longden Road New section (Shrewsbury General Cemetery) SC	95 unused and created graves. Space for 200 graves to be created later this year. Space for 300 further graves to be developed in due course prior to need.	10 years.	Yes, in new sections that as yet are unconsecrated.
Longden Road Old section (SGC) SC	Not calculated. Limited space exists in small lawned areas around chapel to be viewed as emergency capacity only.	Not known.	Unlikely, further exploration of old burial records is required.
Emstrey Dignity	29 in Swift 90 section Further significant space exists but requires agreement of Dignity, investment to site and agreement from Environment Agency.	1-2 years. Depends on proportion developed if any.	Yes, Emstrey is unconsecrated.

Alberbury SC	124	60 years at present demand.	No area set aside.
Church Pulverbatch SC	55 Note – proposal is to extended cemetery onto adjoining SC land.	25 years at present demand. Extension possible to create 100 years plus capacity.	No area set aside in existing cemetery but will be created as part of extension.
Great Ness SC	111	25 years at present demand.	No area set aside.
Minsterley SC	9 Adjoining landowners have been approached to sell land, no interest at present.	1-3 years at present demand.	No area set aside.
Westbury SC	226	60 – 100 years at present demand.	No area set aside.
Mytton Oak Remembrance Park TBA	Not yet operational & requires further investment The site is 9 Ha in total. It was anticipated to provide burial capacity for 100 years.		Yes, if site can be developed and made operational.

Explanation to Table 1.

Longden Road Cemetery (New section) Had been closed to new graves since the re-opening of Emstrey Cemetery in 2009. A recent review identified around 70 unused graves within existing sections, these have been offered for burial since earlier this year and are meeting current demand.

Two sections of superfluous roads were removed earlier this year and this has yielded 31 new grave spaces. The public have generally welcomed this change as they can see effort to create new burial space where they have existing family buried. Further changes to soft landscaped areas agreed with the Portfolio Holder for Adult Services, Health and Social Housing and to be carried out later this year will create new burial space. A desktop survey suggests in the region of 500 spaces will be created by these changes providing up to 10 years burial capacity at predicted

demand. A portion of these new areas will be kept un-consecrated to provide space for non christian burial.

Old section – Small areas of unused lawn space exist around the chapel and WWI memorial. To be considered as emergency capacity only. Some limited potential may exist for 2nd or 3rd interment into unpurchased graves but this requires examination of each individual grave record.

Emstrey Dignity Ltd acquired the lease for Emstrey from Co Op Funeral Care in 2016 (see report to Cabinet of 13th July 2016) and will occupy Emstrey in tandem with providing agreed bereavement services until 2041.

New graves are currently only dug in the Swift 90 section of Emstrey and this area has just 29 new grave spaces remaining. New sections of the cemetery can currently only be developed for full coffin burial with the agreement of the Environment Agency and Dignity Ltd. Undeveloped space exists towards the north west of the site and in the Swallow section that lies to the south east of the site. To bring these area into use would require investment in engineered works and outflow treatment.

Alberbury Is a small rural cemetery that has sufficient space to meet anticipated need for 60 years at usual demand level predicted forwards. There is no scope to extend this cemetery.

Church Pulverbatch Is a small rural cemetery. Currently it has 55 new grave spaces available and meets low demand, however adjoining land of around 3 times the size of the current cemetery is owned by the council and is being considered for extension to the cemetery to provide capacity to meet Church Pulverbatch and Minsterley need. Space will be created here for non christian burial.

Great Ness Is a small rural cemetery that has sufficient space to meet anticipated need for 25 years at usual demand level predicted forwards. Un-developed land lies adjoining and within proximity but has not been investigated for purchase or development. Being undeveloped, some potential exists to purchase this land and develop for cemetery use. Should this happen it would provide opportunity to develop Christian and non christian burial areas.

Minsterley Is a small rural cemetery, it has little space available for new graves and is anticipated to reach capacity within 5 years. Discussion has taken place with owners of two separate parcels of adjoining agricultural land, however to date neither owner has shown willingness to sell land for future cemetery development. Currently the plan is to offer an extended Church Pulverbatch cemetery to meet the local and Minsterley area need.

Westbury Is a small rural cemetery that has sufficient space to meet anticipated need for 60 - 100 years at usual demand level predicted forwards. Adjoining land to the southern boundary is un-developed farm land but this has not yet been investigated for purchase or development.

Provision of burial space for non-Christian burials

There is provision of burial space for other faith groups or if of no faith at Shropshire Council cemeteries and new provision will be created at Longden Road cemetery. Low demand for other or no faith burial capacity has been the historic position but this trend is changing. It was envisioned that Mytton Oak Remembrance Park would provide the opportunity to broaden the burial type offer. However, at present full development of the remembrance park remains to be concluded whilst capacity exists at Emstrey and Longden Road cemeteries.

Results of a cemetery survey of Shropshire town and parish council's

The author of this report put together 10 questions to survey all Shropshire town and parish councils regarding their cemetery provision. The survey was kindly distributed by SALC to all 153 Shropshire town and parish councils. The author also presented the survey to a meeting of Town Council Clerks. The survey asked questions around what available capacity exists, what capacity there is for non christian burial and what future plans were being made. (Survey attached as Appendix 1).

28 responses were received and most of these were a nil return where that council did not provide any cemetery. 9 detailed responses were received and these suggested around a third had 10 years or less capacity, a further third had 10 to 50 years capacity, the remaining third had in excess of 50 years capacity. Only 2 responses suggested plans were being made to extend existing cemetery. Around half of the detailed responses stated un consecrated areas were available for burial.

It was stated that where a Parochial Church Council provides a churchyard or cemetery that is not closed by order; any resident of the parish, anyone on the electoral roll of the parish or anyone who passes away within the parish has the right to a burial within that churchyard or cemetery regardless of faith. However, note this must be a Church of England ministered burial service.

About Christian burial

Christian burials may take place in ground that is previously consecrated, consecrated by a Minister at the time of funeral or into ground that is unconsecrated. Generally, a coffin is used and this can be placed directly within a grave that is usually dug with an east/west orientation. It is common that more than one coffin may be interred within a grave although there is requirement on minimum separation distance between coffins. Cremated remains may also be interred within the same grave. There is no predetermined time between when the death occurs and when the burial takes place and it is customary to have some space of time to make the necessary funeral arrangement and for the benefit of ensuring those wishing to attend the funeral may do so.

Muslim funeral arrangement

Some variation can occur depending upon specific belief and regional custom. Generally, cremation is forbidden to muslims. Misunderstanding can exist around what a muslim burial requires. Some general requirement includes that muslim

burials take place as soon as possible after the death occurs and often within 24 hours. The body is often placed at right angles to Makkah [Mecca] so that the body, placed in the grave lying on its right side, faces Makkah.

The muslim faith requires that no soil should touch the body or shroud. Having a coffin achieves this and is often acceptable. Further measures can include the use of a premanufactured plastic burial chamber or construction of a brick lined chamber. Both these additional measures add to the cost of the burial and also cause delay due to the arrangement or installation. The desire to bury quickly often overrides the requirement to install a chamber.

Research for this report led the author to discuss the experience and practice of Telford & Wrekin Borough Council. T&WBC do provide a separate muslim burial section at its Wellington Cemetery, approximately 10 muslim burials are provided annually. In the last 6 years only 2 families have insisted on the creation of a brick lined chamber. In some cases a premanufactured plastic chamber has sufficed. However, it has become accepted practice to use only a coffin and not a chamber.

T&WBC has around 6 years capacity within the muslim section and around 15 years capacity for Wellington Cemetery generally. New cemetery space has been identified and allocated within the council's forward plan. Likely to provide for in the region of 50 years worth of burial space it will include space for muslim burial. T&WBC offer non Telford residents burial space regardless of faith, the cost for non residents is double that for residents. Shropshire Council provides a similar non resident offer and it is common practice throughout the sector to charge non residents a premium.

Recent communication with local muslim community

In early 2015 the council's bereavement service was approached by a representative of the Shropshire based muslim community. A request, backed by petition wished to secure many grave spaces together in a single block so that family members could be buried together. The council position agreed with the then Portfolio Holder was that the council cemeteries were open to all faiths and those of no faith for the purpose of burial and unconsecrated areas existed within the cemetery estate for this purpose. However due to the low level of available burial space known of at that time new graves were and continue to be sold only individually at the point of need and there is currently no opportunity to purchase or reserve blocks or groups of graves. This is currently the position regardless of chosen faith or if of no faith.

Provision by commercial sector

Shropshire has a number of 'green' burial grounds, south Shropshire is particularly well served having Ludford Meadows, Ludlow, Westhope near Craven Arms and the South Shropshire Remembrance Park at Rushbury. In the north of Shropshire is Fenns Meadow, Whitchurch, these are just the known sites and there may be more. All these burial site offer low environmental impact burials, often with no vertical headstone, these sites generally accept all faith groups or if of no faith for burial.

6. Conclusion

Around 10 years worth of burial capacity has been identified at Longden Road cemetery and it is also proposed to develop Church Pulverbatch cemetery to provide further capacity. Therefore, burial space exists at Shropshire Council cemeteries to meet the immediately foreseeable need. Unconsecrated areas exist to provide burial space for those of other faiths or if of no faith. Further, consecrated and unconsecrated space will be retained and will be created where possible as cemeteries are extended. This space will be provided in a fair, balanced and inclusive way.

Given the general limited availability of new burial space it is appropriate to continue to sell graves at the point of need and to not pre-sell or reserve blocks of graves. Offering burial space that meets the need of our mixed community will broaden opportunity to generate revenue from provision of bereavement services.

The creation and availability of new burial space at Longden Road Cemetery is a recent development. It has been communicated to local funeral directors who arrange the majority of funerals in the Shrewsbury area. Some communication has also been made with some local clergy. It is appropriate to continue to communicate this more widely and to local leaders of other faith groups.

Given the general limited availability of burial capacity and the time required to create new cemetery provision it is appropriate to continue to investigate conclusion of the Mytton Oak Remembrance Park; or identification of new land for cemetery development subject to cost and benefit.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Transfer of Emstrey Crematorium Contract – Cabinet item 13 - 13 th July 2016.
--

Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder)
--

Cllr Lee Chapman, Portfolio Holder for Adult Services, Health and Social Housing

Local Member

All

Conflicts of interest declared by members
--

Appendices

A. Shropshire Council enquiry regarding available burial capacity