

**ENVIRONMENT AND ATTRACTIVE CITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE  
15 MARCH 2010**

**PROVISION AND MANAGEMENT OF CEMETERIES**

**Report of the Director of City Services**

**Strategic Priorities: Attractive and Inclusive City and Prosperous City  
Corporate Performance Objectives CI01**

**1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

- 1.1 To advise Members of the current position with regards to provision and capacity of burial space within the City's cemeteries.

**2. DECISION**

- 2.1 Members are request to note the report for information.

**3. BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 In setting its work programme for 2009/10, the Committee requested an update report on the provision and management of cemeteries in the city and the major issues facing the service.
- 3.2 The Council provides Bereavement Services via the Sunderland Crematorium and 10 Municipal Cemeteries within the city boundaries. The preferred method of disposal is cremation. In 2008/09 a total of 2393 (78%) clients chose this option. A further 656 (22%) clients chose to have their loved ones buried. The burial figure also includes the interment of cremated remains.
- 3.3 The death rate within the City over the last 4 years appears to be fairly constant at around 3000 per year.

**4. CEMETERY PROVISION, USAGE AND CAPACITY**

- 4.1 There are currently 10 municipal cemeteries within the City. The Council also provides grave digging services at 3 churchyards.
- 4.2 It is estimated there are approximately 7,100 grave spaces remaining in the existing cemeteries. The council provided 380 new graves in 2009 therefore based on this rate of usage there is sufficient burial space for at least 18 years. Details of current estimates are shown in Table 1 below:-

**Table 1  
Municipal Cemeteries - Estimated  
space 2009**

Cemetery	Acreage	Area m2	New Graves available	Usage grave/year	Life (years)
Sunderland	26.5	10725	800	54	14.8
Bishopwearmouth	86	34804	2390	89	26.9
Mere Knolls	28	11332	770	43	17.9
Southwick	15	6071	1250	45	27.8
Ryhope	6	2428	160	14	11.4
Castletown	3	1214	320	10	32.0
Houghton	7	2833	510	38	13.4
Hetton	6	2428	500	17	29.4
Washington	5	2024	0	60	0.0
Easington Lane	3.8	1538	430	10	43.0

- 4.3 Whilst overall there is sufficient burial space within the city there are specific areas of concern. The cemetery located in Washington Village has no new graves available for purchase. There are significant numbers of reserved graves where the Exclusive Right of Burial has been purchased by a resident for their future use. Whilst these graves are currently empty, burials can only be carried with the permission of the purchaser.
- 4.4 There are a number of graves available in Harraton Churchyard, however the availability of these graves is controlled by the Church of England.
- 4.5 An extensive search for suitable land on which to site a new cemetery in the Washington area has been unsuccessful. A number of potential sites have been investigated, but have been found unsuitable for use as burial ground. In the majority of cases this was due to the area's industrial and mining heritage.
- 4.6 Two areas of land have been reserved for use future use as burial grounds. These are adjoining Sunderland (Grangetown) Cemetery (1 Hectare) and Ryhope Cemetery (0.5 Hectare). Based on 1600 graves per Hectare, this would provide space for 2400 graves which at the current rate of usage would extend the availability of burial for a further 6 years.
- 4.7 Including the areas identified in (4.6) and based on current usage there is sufficient space within the city to provide burial services for approximately 25 years.

## **5 Cemetery Roads and Footpaths**

- 5.1 Concerns have been raised about the deteriorating condition of the paths and roadways in some of the city's cemeteries. Property Services have carried out survey work in Sunderland, Bishopwearmouth, Houghton and Hetton Cemeteries. Orders have been placed with Northumbrian Roads to carry out substantial repairs by the end of the current financial year.
- 5.2 Repairs to the pathways at other sites such as Mere Knolls and Southwick Cemeteries will be carried out when funding has been identified.

## **6 Memorial Safety**

- 6.1 Following release of the Ombudsman's report on this subject, the guidelines for memorial safety testing have been reviewed. The testing regime is now to be based on an assessment of the risk presented by a memorial, taking into account its size, construction and the probability of visitors being present in the area.
- 6.2 The initial testing was carried out 5 years ago. The guidelines suggest that memorials are tested on a 5 yearly basis, therefore re-testing of the memorials is due to commence later this year.
- 6.3 The preferred method for dealing with an unstable memorials involved 'pocketing' i.e. partially burying the headstone in a vertical position with as much of the inscription visible as possible. Memorials were only laid down where pocketing was impractical.
- 6.4 This method of stabilisation has given rise to very few complaints, and should ensure that the memorial remains stable long to medium term, hence it is predicted that the number of unstable memorials identified during re-testing will be very small.

## **7. Recommendation**

- 7.1 Members are asked to consider the evidence received.