

## CABINET MEETING – 15 JUNE 2021

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY SHEET – PART I

**Title of Report:**

THE IMPROVEMENT OF BEREAVEMENT SERVICES

**Author(s):**

Executive Director of Neighbourhoods

**Purpose of Report:**

The purpose of this report is to provide Cabinet with an update of ongoing service developments within Bereavement Services and to seek Cabinet approval in relation to a number of decisions which support continued service development.

**Description of Decision:**

Cabinet is asked to:

- Approve the revised Cemetery and Crematorium Regulations and the implementation of obligatory conduct
- Approve the introduction of the Memorial Safety Policy
- Approve the introduction of new memorial locations, products and opportunities
- Authorise the extension of memorial benches and trees to all public areas
- Approve the development of a process for the management of historic memorials
- Authorise new fees and charges be introduced linked to service improvements

**Is the decision consistent with the Budget/Policy Framework?**

**If not, Council approval is required to change the Budget/Policy Framework**

**Suggested reason(s) for Decision:**

The services offered by Bereavement Services have been traditional and conventional to date. The proposed service improvements, new policies and Regulations will ensure the service delivers a more appropriate service whilst maintaining high standards.

**Alternative options to be considered and recommended to be rejected:**

1. The proposals relating to cemetery management and memorial safety testing respond to regulatory requirements and the effective running and maintenance of facilities and the meeting of health and safety requirements. As such no alternative options are proposed.
2. The option not to extend the memorial items, locations or opportunities and instead for the service to continue to deliver on its current offer. In doing so there would be a loss of potential revenue for the Council for service improvement, and residents would continue to have a limited range of memorial options. Resident feedback is clear that there is demand for increased opportunities therefore it would be inappropriate not to respond to this.

3. The option exists not to implement the proposed new fees and charges, but any increased fee income will help offer additional opportunities for residents and generate revenue to support service improvement.

**Impacts analysed;**

**Equality** ☒ **Privacy** ☒ **Sustainability** ☐ **Crime and Disorder** ☐

**Is the Decision consistent with the Council's co-operative values? Yes**

**Is this a "Key Decision" as defined in the Constitution? Yes**

**Is it included in the 28-day Notice of Decisions? Yes**

**REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NEIGHBOURHOODS**

**THE IMPROVEMENT OF BEREAVEMENT SERVICES**

**1. Purpose of the Report**

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**2. Description of Decision**

- 2.1** Cabinet is requested to:

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**3. Introduction/Background**

- 3.1** Bereavement Services is responsible for the operational delivery of burial and cremation services at Sunderland Crematorium and 10 operational cemeteries in Sunderland, as well as other associated services. As one of the busiest Bereavement Services in the north east of England the service typically carries out 400 burials and 2,500 cremations each year.
- 3.2** In 2019 investment of £25,000 was provided to enhance the building and improve the public areas of the crematorium. The Crematorium Chapel and Hall of Remembrance received internal repairs, were redecorated and Chapel benches were reupholstered. Since the completion of the improvements the service area has received many compliments relating to these enhancements as well as on the improved approach by the Bereavement Services team.

- 3.3 The introduction of an online music provider in March 2020 gave Funeral Directors (FD's) the ability to book and control service music directly. This improvement released a member of the Bereavement Services team to focus on welcoming and supporting visiting families and FDs during each service, which has proven invaluable during the pandemic in managing social distancing. Live web streaming of funeral services was introduced in May 2020 enabling family members and friends to view services remotely, this has been particularly important during the Covid 19 pandemic due to number restrictions with regards attendees. A paid for, web streaming offer will continue as an additional service option once business returns to normal.
- 3.4 In September 2020 the Book of Remembrance was published online via a web-based link providing the opportunity to view all entries virtually at any time. This was invaluable during lockdown.
- 3.5 In November 2020 Bereavement Services was formally inspected by the Federation of Burial and Cremation Authorities (FBCA). FBCA inspector's report and feedback was positive in relation to current and ongoing improvements with the service receiving an overall high rating of 96%.
- 3.6 An area of recommended improvement from FBCA inspection was the Bereavement Services web pages which were already under review. These were redesigned and launched in April 2021 with clear visual links to all elements of Bereavement Services including Bereavement support; What to do when someone dies; Fees and Charges; and information on each cemetery. The new Bereavement Services Webpages can be viewed at [Bereavement Services - Sunderland City Council](#). A copy of the webpages is attached at Appendix 1. The Bereavement Services brand was developed in conjunction with the new webpages and also launched in April 2021. A copy of the Bereavement Services brand is attached at Appendix 2.
- 3.7 Clearly significant service improvement has occurred over the last 18 months. It is essential that this programme of improvement activity continues to ensure we not only fulfil our legal and regulatory responsibilities but also that we achieve service excellence meeting Sunderland residents current and anticipated future needs.

#### **4. Improvement Proposals**

- 4.1 Proposals for continued improvement are set out in this section of the report. These include for the proper management of some of our most important spaces as well as opportunities to improve and expand the ways in which residents can remember their loved ones.
- 4.2 Local Cemetery and Crematorium Regulations
- 4.2.1 Section 3 of the Local Authority Cemeteries Order 1977 permits Local Authorities to set out management arrangements for the proper maintenance and upkeep of cemeteries.

Part 2 of The Cremation (England and Wales) Regulations 2008 requires burial authorities to take measures to ensure the proper maintenance and upkeep of all Crematoria.

- 4.2.2 To enable the proper management of the cemeteries and crematoria within Sunderland, the requirements are laid out in local Cemetery and Crematoria Regulations requiring clients, residents, visitors and service users to comply with specific conditions to enable the lawful and respectful use of the cemeteries and the Crematorium at all times.
  - 4.2.3 The regulations are attached at Appendix 3 and have been updated to reflect the current service standards as well as identifying the legal requirements outlined in the legislation.
  - 4.2.4 Once agreed, administration of the regulations is essential to the development of high standards in all areas of bereavement. In recent years the lack of regulation, or the adherence to regulation, has resulted in many areas becoming unmanageable as families adorn graves, cremated remains areas, trees and benches with memorabilia. Unused pre-purchased graves are surrounded by unauthorised fencing, paving and other markers leaving them inaccessible to machinery. Much of the cemetery provision in Sunderland is lawned however the installation of unauthorised kerb sets hinders maintenance. In line with Council requirements, the use of chemical weedkiller is to cease, and this necessitates unhindered access to lawned areas. Appendix 4 includes images demonstrating the current issues.
  - 4.2.5 Management of the regulations will be handled with care and respect. Enforcement will follow the Council's enforcement concordat and will attempt to work with the families concerned initially and avoid formal action, however in circumstances where action is required, the Council should be prepared to remove items to instil the requirements of the regulations. Management may be challenging in some historic sections and negotiations will be required with the owners of some burial plots to bring plots to the required standard, avoiding unnecessary hurt or upset as a result.
- 4.3 Memorial Safety Testing
- 4.3.1 Whilst the responsibility for general safety lies with the burial authority there are specific responsibilities relating to memorials that lie with both the owner of the memorial and the memorial mason responsible for installing it. The owner of the memorial is responsible for maintaining the memorial in a good condition and mason is responsible for installation to specific standards. The local authority is responsible for monitoring and reviewing each memorial at least once every 5 years.

- 4.3.2 In circumstances where memorials are assessed and require remedial works to make safe, the work must be undertaken with haste and as such, SCC should be prepared to undertake the work on behalf of, and at the request of the family and liaise with the mason directly to undertake the work. Charges for this service should be applied.
- 4.3.3 Guidelines developed for local authorities, to ensure that suitable inspection procedures to inspect memorials and take appropriate action for the safety of the public, have been adopted. Ministry of Justice memorial safety guidance entitled “Managing the Safety of Burial Ground Memorials”, which emphasises a proportional approach to any actions, based on the level of risk posed, has been used as the basis for the Sunderland policy, attached at Appendix 5, and submitted as part of this report for approval.
- 4.4 We have recently commenced some work to develop a web-based Digital Mapping portal for all cemeteries providing access to accurate cemetery maps displaying cemetery sections, grave locations and precise grave space information. Maps will have varying levels of information access to enable the publication of maps on a web portal for family members to access for investigation or research purposes.  
The system will also enable accurate work allocation direct to staff.

#### 4.5 Memorialisation

This refers to the process of preserving the memories of a deceased person in the form of a commemorative item. Within Sunderland, commemorative items are limited to a bench, tree, stone tablet or wall plaque which are available for sponsorship or display within a limited number of locations throughout the City, or an entry into the Book of Remembrance, displayed each day at Sunderland Crematorium. As a result of several enquiries regarding the availability of memorial benches, specifically at Sunderland seafront, a full review of all memorialisation opportunities has been undertaken to explore the possibility of extending the memorialisation offer in Sunderland, to provide a wider range in choice, locations and cost. Many of the memorial trees and benches sponsorships were sold some time ago and without a documented fixed term sponsorship agreement or any terms and conditions of sponsorship or sale.

- 4.5.1 Memorial Trees are available on a sponsorship basis for a term of 10 years. The tree remains the property of the Council along with the responsibility to replace where necessary. An extended sponsorship period of 10 years is available at the end of the initial sponsorship period and should this not be required the tree will be made available for other sponsorship opportunities. Of the 439 potentially available, 88% have lapsed sponsorship arrangements.

- 4.5.2 Memorial Benches are available on a 10 year sponsorship agreement. The seat remains the property and responsibility of Sunderland City Council who commit to regular maintenance and replacement where necessary. An extended sponsorship period of 10 years is available at the end of the initial sponsorship period and should this not be required the bench will become available for a pre-owned sponsorship or replaced entirely with a new one depending on condition. Memorial benches are currently the most popular memorial option available within Sunderland however of the 102 potentially available, 75% have lapsed sponsorship arrangements.
- 4.5.3 Internal Memorial plaques are available for display in the Hall of Remembrance at the Crematorium. The plaque may be leased for periods of 5 or 10 years with an option to renew for a further 5 or 10 year period. Bereavement Services system holds relevant information on all leases accordingly.
- 4.5.4 External Tablets are available on a fixed 10 year period with an option to renew for a further 5 year period. The tablet is the property of the purchaser following the end of the lease period and may be collected where the lease is not renewed.
- 4.5.5 As noted above the most popular memorialisation items are benches and trees however these are severely limited as a result of historic arrangements. Sponsors of trees and benches sold in excess of 10 years ago should be alerted to the current arrangements and new sponsorship terms introduced. This might release additional memorial items, including benches, for renewed sponsorship and enable a regular turnover of available memorials in popular spots. This decision, however, requires consideration given the lack of detail in the terms and conditions of the original sale and the sensitivities, and a process of numerous contact attempts and a delay in resale is proposed.

#### 4.6 Expanded Memorialisation Offer

Memorial options have advanced and developed in recent years with many local authorities taking advantage of more contemporary memorial options with a wide price range to meet every budget whilst maximising income. Example of the newer options include:

- Sanctum Panoramas and Barbicans (see Appendix 6)
- Ashes to Glasses. A range of jewellery incorporating the ash of a loved one
- Commemorative Urns and scatter tubes – for storage of cremated remains
- Memorial Cards – a keepsake and personalised version of the Book of Remembrance
- Cremated Remains above ground vaults

It should be noted that any commercial opportunity relating to memorialisation, sponsorship/ income generation will continue to be carried out in a respectful, dignified and tasteful way.

#### 4.7 Extending Sponsorship Locations

There is higher demand than supply of certain items, notably memorial benches and memorial trees. Ideally it should not be a case of overwhelming an area with either benches or trees, placement needs to be done in a thoughtful, considered and managed way. Conditional to the proper management of the memorial item according to the terms and conditions, our public areas may be enhanced with additional trees and benches which are well managed and well-kept because of the sponsorship in memory of a loved one. As such, all public benches and street or park trees should be considered for memorial sponsorship to extend the opportunity and provide high quality street furniture for public use, subject to the suitability of each location based upon public safety, appropriateness of application and other such factors as determined by the service area.

Additionally, there are some specific areas which could be better used both in the crematorium grounds and cemeteries and the Bereavement Services Manager should be tasked with ensuring these are effectively, and appropriately expanded.

#### 4.8 Cemetery Improvement Plans

4.8.1 To take account of the improvements described above, it is proposed that each cemetery develops an individual plan for improvement, developed in consultation with cemetery users, visitors, professional bodies, relevant Council departments, Ward Members, residents, and any other interested parties. Improvement Plans will be unique to each cemetery, but will all have key themes which will include:

- Implementation of the terms of the Regulations
- Improvements to cemetery infrastructure
- Enhancements to the appearance of each cemetery
- Development of volunteer opportunities including the establishment of "Friends of" groups
- Effective use of space available, potential memorialisation and sponsorship opportunities
- Occasions to seek funding for major improvement projects



4.8.2 The Cemetery Improvement Plan will be formally documented with accountable milestones and accountability to track and record improvements along with appropriate reporting.

#### 4.9 New Fees and Charges

4.9.1 Bereavement Services fees and charges are published annually and are increased in line with Council policy as part of the budget setting process. A copy of the current fees and charges are available at [Bereavement fees and charges - Sunderland City Council](#)

4.9.2 Several non-essential services are currently provided without charge. These include

scattering of ashes, grave searches and change of name on title deeds. Guidance received as part of the FBCA inspection indicated that it is normal practice to charge for non-essential services and it is proposed moving forward we do so with additional income being used to support service improvement. Additionally some other service offerings will be made available at a charge.

The proposed new fees and charges are as follows:

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| • Crematorium service overrun               | £140      |
| • Grave searches and changes to title deeds | £30       |
| • Memorial safety works in default          | £120      |
| • Scattering of Ashes                       | £30       |
| • Interment of Ashes under Turf             | £270      |
| • Burial of cremated remains in grave space | £1,050    |
| • Live-streaming of service                 | £30 - £50 |
| • Photo/video tributes during services      | £38 - £70 |

The fees are based upon existing fees and mirror comparable tasks and charges

4.10 As with any service improvement, review and evaluation is essential to continued improvement and maintenance of service excellence. As part of the development of the Bereavement Services webpages a private feedback opportunity will be available for all service users. In addition, opportunities to gather feedback through random customer requests will be considered and will offer ongoing sympathy to the Bereavement Services applicant and gracefully ask for feedback on how the service was received. The sensitivity required in the matter is wholly acknowledged however it is important to understand how the service is received by service users and where areas of further improvement can be focused. This feedback will be used to influence future service plans and priorities.

## **5. Reasons for the Decision**

- 5.1 The services offered by Bereavement Services have been in a process of review and improvements have been identified. The introduction of the proposed service improvements, new policies and Regulations will illustrate the progression of the service area.
- 5.2 Cemetery and Crematorium Regulations and Regulation Enforcements require annual review.
- 5.3 Provisions set out in Regulations to date have not been properly enforced, possibly due to concerns about negative impacts on bereaved families during difficult times, however the impact of the reluctance to enforce has led to operational difficulties in the current service provision and health and safety concerns.
- 5.4 Responsibility for the safety of Memorials within Local Authority managed and owned cemeteries lies with the Local Authority and places the responsibility on Local Authorities to inspect each memorial on a minimum frequency of 5 years. This requirement is not currently met.
- 5.5 The current memorialisation offer is limited and restricted by location and availability. The decision to increase the memorialisation offer to a wider range of locations and items will provide a great range of choice and options whilst generating an income to support service improvement. The management of historic sponsorships brings equity and enables a turnover in memorial availability in popular locations.
- 5.6 The recommended fees and charges are optional, consistent and appropriate and additional income will support service improvement.

## **6. Alternative Options**

- 6.1 The proposals offered in this report in relation to cemetery management and memorial safety testing respond to regulatory requirements and the effective running and maintenance of facilities and the meeting of health and safety requirements. As such no alternative options are proposed.
- 6.2 The options not to extend the memorial items, locations or opportunities and instead for the service to continue to deliver on its current offer. In doing so there would be a loss of potential revenue for the Council for service improvement and residents would continue to have a limited range of memorial options. Resident feedback is clear that there is demand for increased opportunities therefore it would be inappropriate not to respond to this
- 6.3 The option exists not to implement the proposed new fees and charges but any increased fee income will help offer additional opportunities for residents and generate revenue to support service improvement.

## **7. Impact Analysis**

- 7.1 **Equalities** – An Equality Impact Analysis has been completed and is attached at Appendix 7.
- 7.2 **Sustainability** – The recommendations will lead to an increase in the standards of maintenance across the department, a greater range of customer choice, and an overall improvement to service delivery in all areas of Bereavement Service.  
Furthermore, the decision on policy are a statutory duty and required by all burial Authorities.

## **8. Other Relevant Considerations / Consultations**

- 8.1 **Financial implications** - Any additional costs in relation to memorial safety testing will be funded from existing maintenance budgets and / or any additional income generated from the service improvements set out within the report.
- 8.3 **Reduction in Crime and Disorder** – N/A
- 8.4 **Employee Implications** – N/A
- 8.5 **Risk Analysis** – The adoption of the Memorial Safety Policy will provide a structure for the management of risk associated with cemetery memorials.
- 8.6 **Policy Implications** – The introduction of the Memorial Safety Policy and the Cemetery and Crematorium Regulations will be subject to annual review.
- 8.7 **Property Implications** – N/A
- 8.8 **Compatibility to European Convention on Human Rights** – N/A
- 8.9 **Legal Implications** – the proposed new cemetery and crematorium regulations and policies will help the Council discharge its statutory duty set out at part 2 of The Cremation (England and Wales) Regulations 2008, to take measures to ensure the proper maintenance and upkeep of all Crematoria.

The proposals are consistent with the Council's powers to set out management arrangements for the proper maintenance and upkeep of cemeteries, derived from section 3 of the Local Authority Cemeteries Order 1977.

## **9.0 List of Appendices**

**Appendix 1 – Copy of Bereavement Services webpages**

**Appendix 2 – Bereavement Services brand examples**

**Appendix 3 – Cemetery and Crematorium Regulations**

**Appendix 4 – Illustrative Photograph of cemetery**

**Appendix 5 -- Memorial Safety Policy**

**Appendix 6 – Memorial Illustrations**

**Appendix 7 – Impact Analysis**

Please view the appendices to this report which are available online at :-

<https://committees.sunderland.gov.uk/committees/cm5/Meetings/tabid/73/ctl/ViewMeetingPublic/mid/410/Meeting/10609/Committee/1953/Default.aspx>

## **10. Background papers**

Managing the /Safety of Burial Ground Memorials. (The Ministry of Justice) - attached link - [here](#)