

PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT	AGENDA ITEM No.
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TITLE OF REPORT: Cemetery Capacity within North Herts

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF LEISURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES
 PORTFOLIO HOLDERS: COUNCILLOR MR P BURT

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

To inform the 5 Area Committee's of the current situation regarding burial capacity within the District's Cemeteries and to consult regarding the proposed policies as discussed at Cabinet on the 28th September 2010.

2. FORWARD PLAN

2.1 This report contains a recommendation on a key decision that was first notified to the public in the Forward Plan in April 2010 as part of the Greenspace Strategy amendments.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 Cabinet on the 28th September 2010 agreed

1. to adopt Wilbury Hills Cemetery as a district wide facility
2. to encourage and promote its use as a district wide facility

In addition the proposed Policy for Cemeteries, in respect of the consideration and implementation of controls that will provide longevity in the existing cemeteries in the towns of Royston, Baldock and Hitchin, be referred for consultation to the Area Committees.

3.2 The District Council currently manages cemeteries in the following locations –

- Royston – two sites either side of Melbourne Road
- Baldock
- Letchworth – Icknield Way and Wilbury Hills
- Hitchin
- Knebworth

3.3 As identified within the Cemeteries and Closed Churchyards Action Plan associated with the Greenspace Strategy the question of the long term capacity of the existing facilities in Royston, Baldock and Hitchin was highlighted.

3.4 Since approval of the Greenspace Strategy a survey has been completed to provide an estimate of the timescales involved until the above sites are full. To summarise Baldock and Royston has approximately 10 years whilst Hitchin has 6 years capacity before they are full. The findings of the survey can be found at appendix 1.

4. KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- 4.1 The survey highlights the problems that are currently facing the burials service. St John's Cemetery at Hitchin has the lowest capacity at present but this could be increase with the removal of six cedar trees. This is followed by similar situations at Royston and then Baldock. It is important to note that the estimates of the remaining capacities at each location are only estimates according to current burial rates.
- 4.2 Wilbury Hills Cemetery has enough capacity for the whole District for more than 100 years and has the potential to fore fill the statutory obligations placed upon the District Council as a burial authority. Wilbury Hills is located on a bus route and is easily accessible from Baldock and Hitchin and Cabinet have agreed that this cemetery will now meet the needs of the whole District.
- 4.3 Initial investigations have lead Officers to the conclusion that there is no obviously available alternative sites in Baldock and Hitchin. However in Royston there is a land locked plot of poorly maintained land adjacent to the Melbourn Road East Cemetery that could provide the potential for an extension similar to that as seen at the Melbourn Road West Cemetery. An option for Hitchin would be to relocate the football pitch at St John's and use the vacated land into which to extend the adjacent cemetery. Unfortunately all these options involve both capital and revenue investment, which in the current financial climate of austerity making procurement of these resources very unlikely.
- 4.4 The increasing demands on land for housing or agriculture due to an increasing population is making it difficult to identify suitable alternative locations that are affordable in the current climate of austerity. The option to re use burial grounds is not a legal option outside London at present and would need a considerable shift in public opinion and investment in administration to be successful.
- 4.5 Cabinet have agreed that controls should be introduced to increase the longevity of local cemeteries. Officers are considering policies, regarding pricing and the restriction of internments where capacity is a concern. The three policies will encourage greater use of Wilbury Hills Cemetery and restrict the use of the local cemeteries to the interment of ashes only. Consideration is being given to differential charging and substantially increasing charges to further assist in these controls and to more fully recover costs bearing in mind the current financial climate.

Therefore the policies proposed are as follows –

	Policy	Implications
1	Land Allocation for NHDC Cemeteries The Council shall provide a District wide Cemetery to meet the residents needs for the next 100 years, this shall be provided at Wilbury Hills, Letchworth. The Council shall not provide additional land for any of its other cemeteries regardless of any capacity issues at any individual location.	Reduces the capital and possible revenue demands in future years. Already agreed by Cabinet on the 28 th September 2010
2	Improve the longevity of the Councils other open cemeteries The Council shall only provide for full burials at Wilbury Hills Cemetery whilst meeting its previous obligations in terms of prepaid, full and family graves at all other locations. To provide a differential charging policy that will	Interment of ashes only at the council's other open cemeteries will significantly increase their operational life and creating significant price differentials between Wilbury Hills and other cemeteries should have a similar effect. Additionally these increases in

	Policy	Implications
	encourage greater use of Wilbury Hills Cemetery.	will reduce the net subsidy to improve the overall financial position for the Council.
3	Concessionary charges For individuals who are under the age of 18yrs a 50% reduction in fees will apply.	Currently, there are no charges for any individual under the age of 18 and this policy would introduce a charge.

- 4.6 The current policy of charging double fees for residents from outside the District should also remain.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Within the terms of reference for Area Committees is the remit "To provide local input into centrally determined specifications for all services".
- 5.2 As a burial authority under section 214 Local Government Act 1972 the District Council has a statutory duty to provide facilities for the burial of the dead on behalf of the community it serves. However there is no stipulation that this duty has to be delivered locally or centrally.
- 5.3 There are no specific Legal Implications whilst officers continue to investigate the future provision of burial services, although further legal consideration may be necessary once the detail of the proposals are confirmed.

6. FINANCIAL RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Any acquisition of land or expansion of the existing cemeteries footprint will entail capital investment and as a consequence long term revenue implications to maintain the new facilities

7. RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 Political risks could be associated to the general concern of local residents once historic or traditional burial sites are closed and families are required to visit the deceased at another site.

8 HUMAN RESOURCE AND EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The Council incorporates the statutory equalities duties which apply to all its activities into policies and services as appropriate, as set out in the Council's Corporate Equality Strategy. We also recognise that in our society, groups and individuals continue to be unfairly discriminated against and we acknowledge our responsibilities to actively promote good community relations, equality of opportunity and combat discrimination in all its forms.
- 8.2 During the development and consideration of service and budget planning options the impact of equality of access and outcomes should be considered.

9. CONSULTATION WITH EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS AND WARD MEMBERS

9.1 None at present

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

10.1 That the Area Committee's forward recommendations / comments to the next meeting of Cabinet.

11. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

11.1 To ensure that a consistent and highly valued burial service is delivered to the residents of North Herts in the future.

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Appendix 1

Burial Capacity in North Herts

	Historical Totals 2005 - 2009						
	New	Reopen					
Baldock	69	45	13.8	Lawn Section B (Consecrated)	72	5.14 Years	
				Lawn Section C (Un consecrated)	72	5.14 Years	10.28 Years
Royston	44	15	8.8	Lawn Section A (Consecrated)	76	8.63 Years	
				Lawn Section R/C (Un consecrated)	20	2.27 Years	10.9 Years
Hitchin	191	108	38.2	Lawn Section C (Un consecrated)	39	1. 1 Years	
				Lawn Section D (Consecrated)	20	0.5 Years	
				Lawn Section D Extension (Consecrated)	77	2 Years	
				Lawn Section H (Consecrated)	98	2.5 Years	6.1 Years

Note - At Hitchin Cemetery a line of Cedar Trees could be removed to create an additional 84 graves or 2.2 years capacity