

**Report of: Interim Leisure and Cultural Services Business Manager**

**To: Executive Board**

**Date: 3 December 2007**

**Item No:**

**Title of Report : Options to Provide Weekend Burials**



### **Summary and Recommendations**

 **Purpose of report:** Currently the Cemeteries Service does not provide a weekend burial service and the Council has an ambition to provide such service in the future. The report highlights options and associated costs of providing this service.



**Key Decision:** Yes

**Portfolio Holder:** Councillor Caroline van Zyl



**Committee Responsibility:** Environment

**Wards Affected:** All

**Report Approved by:** Chris Kaye, Financial and Asset Management  
Jeremy Thomas, Legal and Democratic Services



**Policy Framework:** Improving Environments where we live and work

**Recommendation(s):** That Executive Board approves Option 1, to provide a short notice weekend burial service.

### **Introduction**



1. The Cemetery Service currently does not operate a weekend burial service. There are several different community groups around the City that have identified a need, for religious observance purposes, for the Council to provide weekend burials.
2. The Council has the ambition to provide a weekend burial service for these groups and made provision in the 2007/08 budget of £10k per annum to assist its introduction. The Council has reviewed a number of

options to provide the service and this report details the most workable options with associated costs.

## **Background**

3. The Cemetery Service currently consists of a Cemeteries Manager/Registrar, Deputy Cemeteries Manager, Team Supervisor, Team Chargehand and four Cemetery Operatives. The Cemeteries Service staff are contracted to work a 37-hour week Monday to Friday from the hours 7.30am to 3.30pm.
4. There are four Council cemeteries; at Botley, Headington, Rose Hill and Wolvercote.
5. In considering the possible provision of weekend burials the Cemetery Service undertook an Equalities Impact Assessment. This is a requirement where Local Authorities are making a decision about service provision, offering value for money based on need. The conclusion of the Equalities Impact Assessment was that should a weekend burial service be offered, the Council should not prescribe access nor restrict any section or group of the community from accessing the service.
6. The Cemetery Service has also undertaken a benchmarking exercise with other local authorities that provide a weekend burial service to ascertain good practice. The options considered in this report have taken into account the outcomes of this exercise.
7. The benchmarking exercise highlighted that a proportion of the local authorities providing a weekend burial service charged extra for providing the service at weekends. The increased charge was to cover the increased costs of labour working at weekends. The local authorities that do not charge extra for a weekend burial service are regretting not introducing it from the outset and are subsequently seeking to levy charges in the future.
8. Feedback from local funeral directors indicates that weekend burials could become a favourable option and in fact is likely to become a normal occurrence rather than an infrequent happening. There have also been several enquiries from funeral directors outside the county following publicity about a weekend burial service in Oxford. As a result of this and the fact that the future demand of the service is an unknown it is proposed that the service be reviewed prior to budget setting process in 2008/09.
9. An unintended consequence of providing such a service could be the high use of the rapidly dwindling burial space in Oxford, which would bring forward the requirement for new cemetery space.

## Options and Implications

### 10. Option 1: *Provide a short notice weekend burial service*

To provide a short notice burial service whereby a short notice booking for the Saturday or Bank Holiday Monday can be made between 8am – 10am on Saturday and also on the Bank Holiday Monday during the same time slot. This service would be advertised and all bookings for same day burials would have to be confirmed during that time slot or have been requested on the preceding Friday afternoon. The service be able to accommodate two burials on the Saturday.

### 11. Option 2: *Provide a full service 7 days per week to include all weekends and public holidays*

This option involves negotiations with existing staff and unions to change contracts to enable staff to work a shift pattern to provide the service seven days a week. This is expected to be popular across the population and this could lead to a significant increase in overall interments.

### 12. Option 3: *Provide a burial service at weekends and public holidays using external contractors to undertake the grave digging and placing the Registrar and Deputies on call-out and standby.*

This option involves the award of a contract to an external provider to provide the grave digging service at weekends and would also require the Registrar and Deputy Registrar to be placed on a call-out and standby rota. An additional registrar would need to be employed to ensure that hours worked are within the EU working directive specification.

## Financial Implications

13. Option 1: The short notice burial service can be funded within the current approved budget. The cost would be within the £10k because no more than three staff would be required to be on standby for a period of 2hrs per week, and 4 hours on Bank Holiday weekends.

14. Option 2: To provide a 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year burial service it is estimated that the start up cost would be £95-100K which would cover recruitment of 3 additional staff, pay, training and additional equipment plus annual salary costs of 81K. The popularity of this proposal could increase the pressure on existing burial space and bring forward the need for a significant capital outlay for which there is currently no provision.

15. Option 3: The cost for a contractor to be on standby is £260/day and then the additional cost per day to dig a grave and back fill. The cost to cover call-out and standby for the Registrar and Deputy is £466.18 Per weekend. The cost to employ an additional registrar is 29K. The cost to undertake one burial would be £290 per burial. This cost would be offset by the increased revenue charge for the burial.

16. The cost of the options outlined above would be partially offset by the income received from undertaking the burials but it is not possible to predict the likely incomes, as the demand for the service is an unknown

### **Legal Implications**

17. There are no legal implications with regard to providing the weekend burial service by any of the three options identified.

### **Staffing Implications**

18: Option 1: The existing staff would be placed on a call-out and standby basis. This would have to be negotiated with the staff and also the unions before the system can be implemented, as this does not form the basis of their existing contract.

19. Option 2: This option would require additional staff and equipment to cover the weekends and holiday periods. As a minimum an additional Registrar would be required, supported by a further 2 operatives. These staff would require training and an additional excavator might also need to be procured to cope with the additional digging requirements. The additional staff would be required to work Fri to Sun each week. The contracts of existing staff would also need to be amended to allow for leave and sickness cover for the weekend staff. There could be significant difficulties recruiting additional staff to work a Fri-Sun, 52 weeks per year regime, which would include all public holidays.

20. Option 3: The unions would have to be informed of the decision to use external contractors and the Registrar and Deputy would have to be negotiated with to change the contracts to enable them to undertake call and standby duties.

### **Recommendation**

21. That the Board approves Option 1, to provide a short notice weekend burial service.

**Report Author:** John Wade, Parks Manager  
Tel: 01865 467255

**Background papers:** Equalities Impact Assessment