

Place Select Committee

Scrutiny Review of Burial Provision

**Final Report
May 2021**

Place Select Committee
Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council
Municipal Buildings
Church Road
Stockton-on-Tees
TS18 1LD

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Select Committee – Membership

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Councillor Louise Baldock (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Pauline Beall
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Councillor Mohammed Javed
Councillor Maurice Perry
Councillor Hilary Vickers
Councillor Alan Watson
Councillor William Woodhead MBE

Acknowledgments

The Committee would like to thank the following people for contributing to its work:

Cllr Ross Patterson
Cllr Andrew Sherris
Cllr Mike Smith
Cllr Bob Cook
Jamie McCann, Director of Community Services and Transport, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council
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Ally Buckton, Cemeteries and Crematorium Manager/Crematorium Registrar, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council
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Foreword

On behalf of the Place Select Committee, we are pleased to present the final report and recommendations following our scrutiny review of Burial Provision.

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council has a statutory responsibility to provide suitable burial provision and additional provision is needed imminently to maintain the level of service to residents at present. This review was conducted to document the current levels of burial provision and to investigate future burial provision requirements across the Borough.

Our findings and recommendations identify the need for a new burial site in the central or western areas of the Borough with more than 100 years of provision that is accessible by public transport. The Committee also recognised that options for an additional, smaller site in the south of Borough should be considered.

Finally, we would like to extend our thanks to all the Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council Officers for their contributions during the review.



Councillor Chris Barlow
Chair
Place Select Committee



Councillor Louise Baldock
Vice Chair
Place Select Committee

Original Brief

Which of our strategic corporate objectives does this topic address?

Whilst the provision of burial space does not naturally fit into any single area within the Council Plan, it is a service which, at some point, will be accessed by almost every family in the Borough.

What are the main issues and overall aim of this review?

Whilst there has been a reduction in burial demand since the crematorium opened, it is far too early to say whether this trend will continue in the future. It is important to review the Council's existing provision to ensure that SBC are not left in a position where the Council are unable to respond to requests for burial provision. Whilst life capacity for all sites will be determined as part of any scrutiny review, the area of greatest pressures is in Durham Road, Stockton where around 5 years of capacity remains.

Any new site would need to be identified, constructed and be allowed to settle before it is ready for new interments. To provide context, the Durham Road extension required 4 years of settlement following its completion before it was deemed ready for new interments.

The main aims of this review were:

- To recognise the importance of ensuring that SBC provide sufficient burial space within the Borough
- To understand the impact on the Council if SBC fail to provide the appropriate choice to residents
- The allocation of appropriate resources to ensure that any demand is met and is delivered in a timely manner

The Committee will undertake the following key lines of enquiry:

- What are the current levels of provision (including the interment of cremated remains) in each cemetery across the Borough? (Mapping provision)
- What impact has the Covid-19 pandemic had on burial provision and forecasting?
- What are the impacts of the opening of the Stockton Crematorium on burial provision?
- How will SBC ensure there are local provisions for all residents, including faith communities/communities of interest, across the Borough up to 2050?
- What opportunities are there to expand provision in existing/open SBC cemeteries? Do new burial sites need to be identified? If so, in which areas of the Borough should additional provision be prioritised? Should any new provision be provided in sections in accordance with the Durham Road Cemetery extension pilot?
- What are the estimated costs of the identified options?

Who will the Committee be trying to influence as part of its work?

Cabinet, Council.

Expected duration of review and key milestones:

6 months (reporting to Cabinet in May 2021)

Approve scope and project plan – Nov 2020

Receive evidence – December 2020 – February 2021

Draft recommendations – March 2021

Final report – April 2021

Report to Cabinet – May 2021

What information do we need?

Existing information (background information, existing reports, legislation, central government documents, etc.):

Stockton-on-Tees Local Plan 2020-2023. Background information. Existing reports.

Who can provide us with further relevant evidence? (Cabinet Member, officer, service user, general public, expert witness, etc.)

SBC Officers

What specific areas do we want them to cover when they give evidence?

- Background information
- Burial provision and forecasting data
- Evidence from Stockton Crematorium's Manager
- Feedback on grave personalisation scheme
- Estimated costs and potential locations of new sites

Executive Summary

The main aims of this review were to recognise the importance of ensuring that Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) provides sufficient burial space within the Borough and to understand the impact on the Council if SBC were unable to provide the appropriate choice to residents. The review also focussed on the allocation of appropriate resources to ensure that any future demand was met and was delivered in a timely manner.

Members were asked to review the provision of burial space within the Borough to ensure that sufficient capacity remained to serve all areas within the Borough and to review any links with future demand associated with both the increasing size of the Borough and the addition of the new crematorium.

The Select Committee's key findings were as follows:

- The Council has a statutory responsibility to provide suitable burial provision and this is currently provided through Thornaby, Billingham, and Durham Road, Stockton Cemeteries.
- Thornaby Cemetery currently has around 72 years of burial provision remaining and around 20 years of Muslim burial provision. Billingham currently has around 35 years of provision and Durham Road around 7-9 years.
- In its first year of operation, 1,116 cremations had taken place at Stockton-on-Tees Crematorium (23 September 2019 - 23 September 2020).
- For the financial year 2020-21, income from grave purchases, funerals and other associated income totalled approximately £432,000. For the same financial year, the approximate net cost to the Council after income for Bereavement Services and Cemeteries provision was £65,000.
- 80% of the Borough's residents opted for cremation and 20% of residents opted for burial. It would take several years before the true extent of residents' preference for cremation would become apparent.
- To maintain the service provided to residents, additional burial provision is needed, particularly in the central, western, and southern parts of the Borough. This is primarily due to provision running out in Durham Road and an increasing population in the south of the Borough.
- The preference was for two new cemeteries - one in the central/western area and a smaller site in the south. However, it was felt that the larger, more central site should be prioritised. The second site in the south could be obtained in partnership with Town/Parish Councils.
- Further surveys and investigations would need to take place at a new site/s. Any site would take an appropriate period of time to settle and to be suitable for burials to take place.
- A new site needs to be large enough to accommodate sufficient provision (eg. around 100 years plus) and it needs to be accessible via public transport.
- A site of around 7 Hectares would provide roughly 100 years of burial provision. This would take into account roads/paths etc.
- The Committee would prefer to place a site on land already owned by SBC. If not, funding would need to be sourced.

Conclusion

The Council currently provides suitable burial provision according to its statutory responsibility. However, in the near future additional burial provision will be needed to maintain this level of service to residents. This has largely resulted from the depletion of provision in Durham Road, Stockton, and an increasing population towards the south of the Borough.

The Committee supported the provision of a new burial site in the central or western areas of the Borough. The Committee also recognised that a site with more than 100 years provision was needed and any future site should be accessible by public transport. It was also acknowledged that consideration should be given to an additional, smaller site in the south of the Borough and that officers should consult with appropriate Ward Members and Town and Parish Councils on options for collaboration.

Recommendations

The Committee recommend that:

1. That a new burial site be provided that would meet the following criteria:
 - Located in the central or western areas of the Borough
 - Provision for more than 100 years
 - Accessible via public transport
 - Preferably land already owned by Stockton Borough Council
2. That officers undertake further surveys and investigations into potential sites to determine if they are suitable for burial provision.
3. That consideration is given to an additional, smaller burial site in the south of the Borough and that officers consult with the appropriate Ward Members and Town and Parish Councils to determine if this can be facilitated through collaboration.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 This report presents the outcomes of the Scrutiny Review of Burial Provision.

1.2 The main aims of this review were to recognise the importance of ensuring that Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) provides sufficient burial space within the Borough and to understand the impact on the Council if SBC were unable to provide the appropriate choice to residents. The review also focussed on the allocation of appropriate resources to ensure that any future demand was met and was delivered in a timely manner.

1.3 Members were asked to review the provision of burial space within the Borough to ensure that sufficient capacity remained to serve all areas within the Borough and to review any links with future demand associated with both the increasing size of the Borough and the addition of the new crematorium.

1.4 The Committee examined the following key lines of enquiry:

- What are the current levels of provision (including the internment of cremated remains) in each cemetery across the Borough? (Mapping provision)
- What impact has the Covid-19 pandemic had on burial provision and forecasting?
- What are the impacts of the opening of the Stockton Crematorium on burial provision?
- How will SBC ensure there are local provisions for all residents, including faith communities/communities of interest, across the Borough up to 2050?
- What opportunities are there to expand provision in existing/open SBC cemeteries? Do new burial sites need to be identified? If so, in which areas of the Borough should additional provision be prioritised? Should any new provision be provided in sections in accordance with the Durham Road Cemetery extension pilot?
- What are the estimated costs of the identified options?

1.5 The Committee has taken evidence from Council Officers.

2.0 Evidence

Background

2.1 Whilst the provision of burial space does not naturally fit into any single area within the Council Plan, it is a service which, at some point, will be accessed by almost every family in the Borough.

2.2 The Council has a statutory responsibility to provide suitable burial provision which is discharged through the provision of cemeteries in Billingham, Oxbridge, Durham Road, Thornaby and Eaglescliffe. Stockton Borough Council are also responsible for the maintenance of 9 closed churchyards within the Borough although these sites are not open for any new interments.

2.3 Of the current cemeteries, Preston and Oxbridge are closed for new grave purchases although they are still used for interments where graves have been purchased for one or more people. This leaves the only provision at the remaining 3 sites in Billingham, Thornaby and Durham Road.

2.4 Prior to the delivery of an extension in the Durham Road Cemetery, Stockton in 2015 (with new burials commencing in 2019) there was a significant risk of running out of burial provision in the central Stockton area. However, the new extension has current capacity of approximately 5 years of additional provision. Figures for all sites will be updated as part of the scrutiny review to determine a more definitive timescale as to when each of the SBC sites will reach maximum burial capacity.

2.5 The provision of burial space is clearly a very sensitive issue and the provision of burial space as a Borough needs to be considered alongside individual local need and choice of individual communities to be buried either close to existing family members or their place of residence. Stockton has on average of 2466 deaths per year over the past 5 years and around 80% of all deaths registered opt for cremation as opposed to burial, a statistic which mirrors national trends.

2.6 Prior to the opening of Stockton's Crematorium in September 2019, more than 90% of deaths more than 90% of deaths which would have been cremated would have been carried out at Teesside Crematorium in Middlesbrough. Based upon current levels of cremation numbers at the Stockton facility, it is apparent that most Stockton deaths are now being cremated at the Council's own facility.

2.7 The provision of this new facility could have an impact upon the balance between cremation vs burial in Stockton and early indications suggest that there has been an 18% decrease in burial numbers in Stockton since the facility was opened.

2.8 The provision of burial space is one of the most crucial and sensitive services that the Council provides. There can be significant social implications if the Council is unable to achieve sufficient levels of burial provision to ensure that families are able to bury in areas where they have a personal preference or a connection with.

2.9 Whilst SBC have successfully opened the new Crematorium which has provided a much-needed facility for the Borough's communities, it is now a timely opportunity to review existing provisions to ensure that SBC are also able to meet the needs of those residents who still wish to choose burial as opposed to cremation.

2.10 Whilst there has been a reduction in burial demand since the crematorium opened, it is far too early to say whether this trend will continue in the future. It is important to review the Council's existing provision to ensure that SBC are not left in a position where the Council are unable to respond to requests for burial provision. Whilst life capacity for all sites will be determined as part

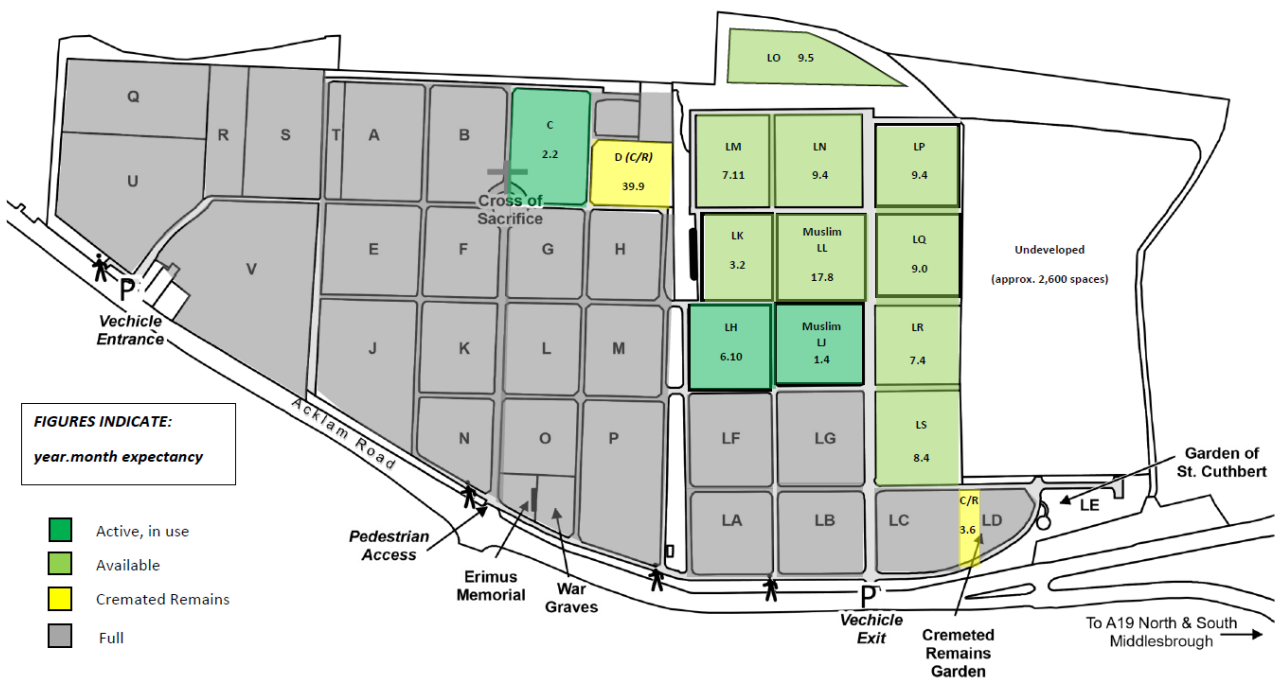
of any scrutiny review, the area of greatest pressures is in Durham Road where around 5 years of capacity remains.

2.11 Any new site would need to be identified, constructed and be allowed to settle before it is ready for new interments. To provide context, the Durham Road extension required 4 years of settlement following its completion before it was deemed ready for new interments.

Current Levels of Burial Provision

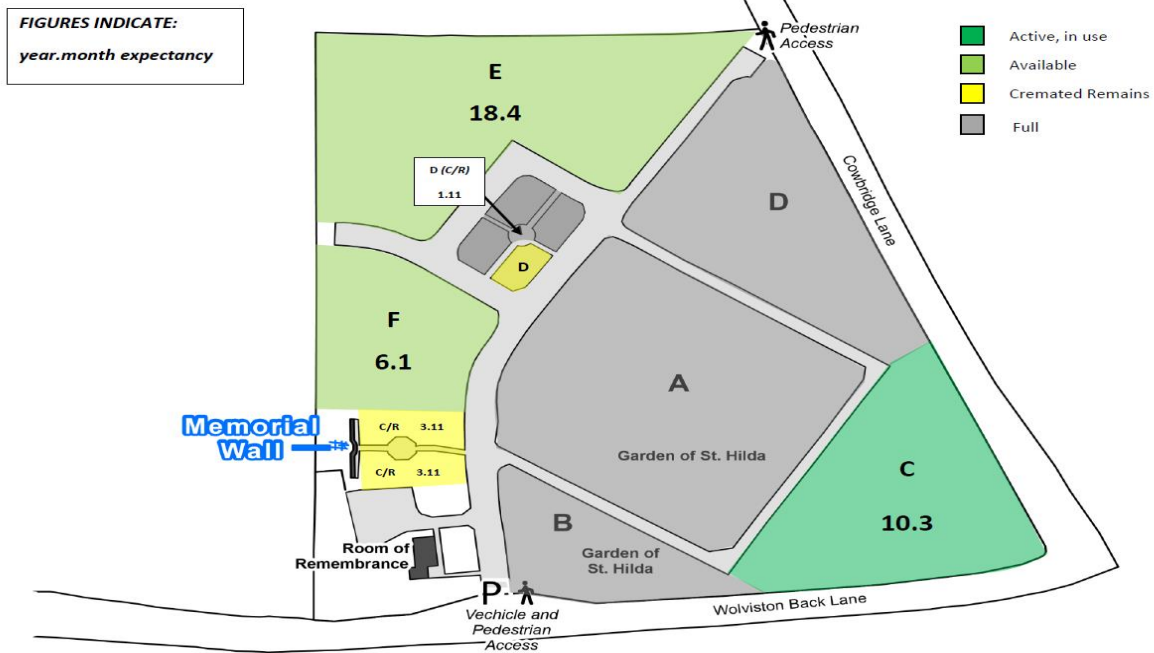
2.12 In December 2020, the Committee was presented with evidence on the current levels of burial provision across the Borough.

2.13 Thornaby Cemetery



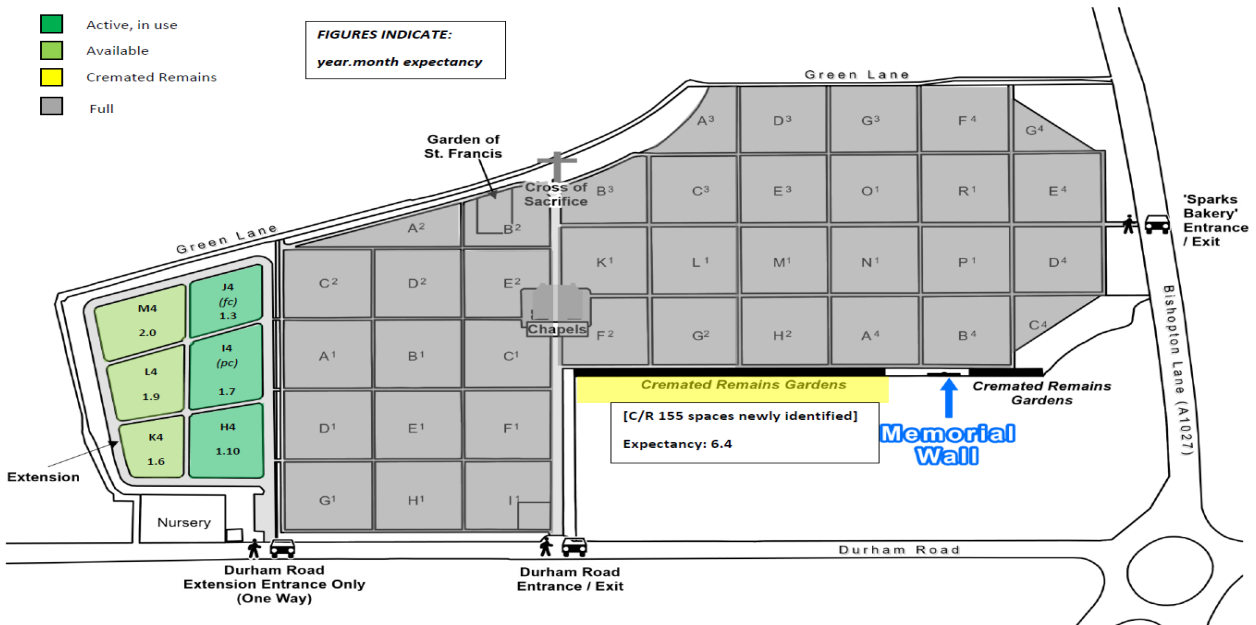
2.14 Thornaby Cemetery was the largest of the three sites. There were currently around 72 years of burial provision remaining and around 20 years of Muslim burial provision. Potential areas for future Muslim burial provision was also highlighted. At Thornaby, there was also undeveloped land that could be used in the future.

2.15 Billingham Cemetery



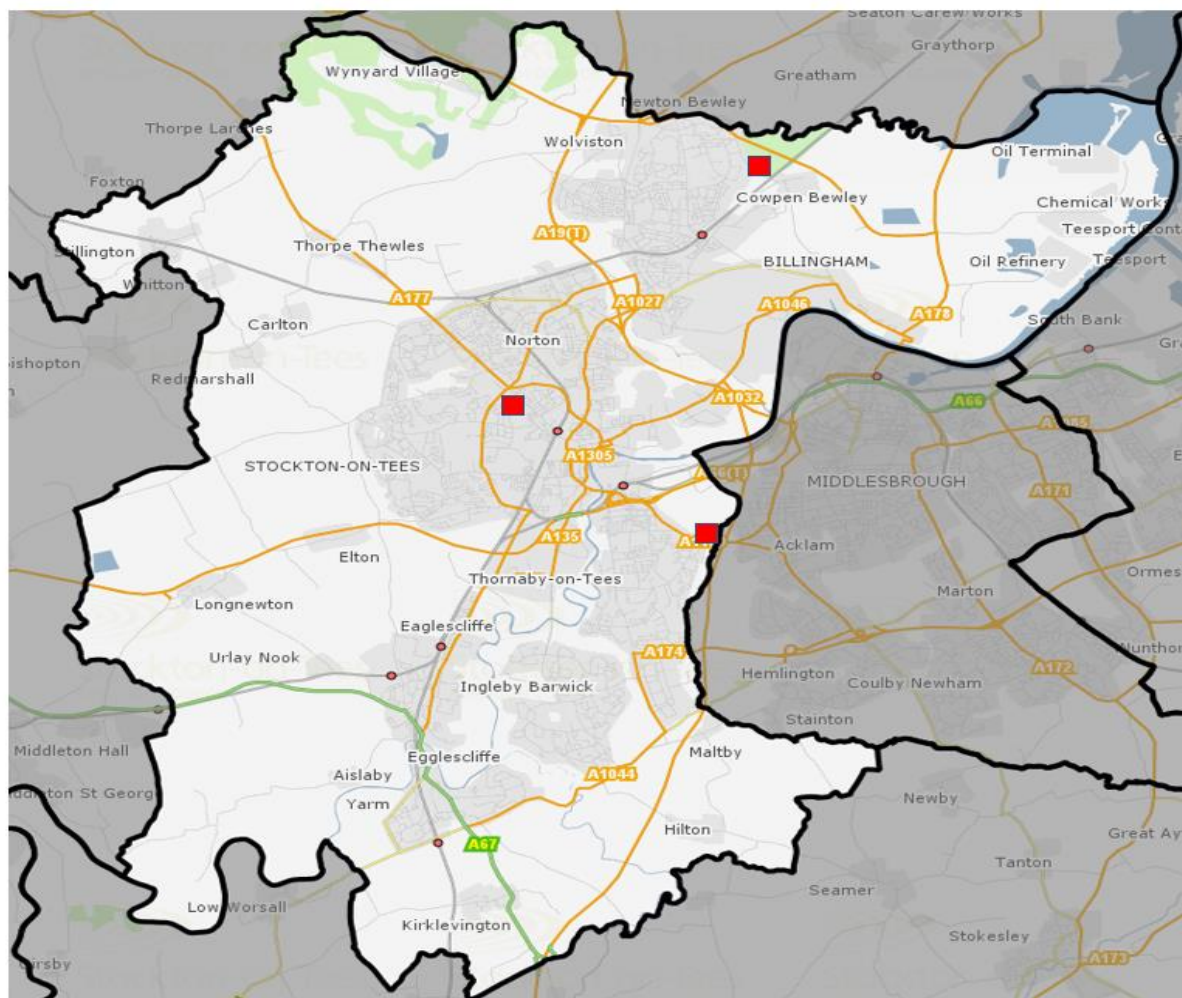
2.16 Billingham Cemetery was the northernmost site in the Borough. There were around 35 years of burial provision remaining. Billingham Cemetery was situated alongside a large wooded area and, if suggested or approved by Members, this could be used in the future to increase the land size of the cemetery.

2.17 Durham Road, Stockton Cemetery



2.18 Durham Road Cemetery was positioned in the central area of the Borough. Burial provision was only available in the area that had been recently extended and there were around 7-9 years of provision remaining. A pilot grave personalisation scheme was still underway at Durham Road Cemetery.

2.19 Current Cemetery Locations



2.20 The three red squares on the map indicate the location of open cemeteries: Billingham in the north; Durham Road, Stockton in the central area; Thornaby towards the south.

2.21 At present, 80% of residents opted for cremation and 20% of residents opted for burial. The true extent of residents' preference for cremation would not become apparent for several years.

2.22 Cremated remains needed to be buried on top of coffins because of the different depths required to inter cremated remains and coffins. Stockton Crematorium had above ground vaults and cremated remains could be scattered in the Garden of Remembrance.

2.23 Provision for the burial of cremated remains was around 43 years at Thornaby Cemetery, 9-10 years at Billingham Cemetery, and around 6 years at Durham Road Cemetery. In Durham Road Cemetery, this provision was in the traditional section, not in the extension, but sections within the extension had been identified for future provision. There were no options to further extend the site of Durham Road Cemetery. New options would have to be assessed for the central and western areas of the Borough. Oxbridge Cemetery was closed for solid purchases of graves. The provision for burial of cremated remains in Oxbridge Cemetery was around 29 years.

2.24 Chapels in Oxbridge and Durham Road cemeteries were utilised by the maintenance teams. Members requested further information on the new location of chapel benches. Officers provided an update to the Committee. Several decades ago, refurbishments of both chapels took place and it is believed that the benches were removed at this time. Despite officers pursuing enquiries throughout this review, they were unable to uncover the current location of these benches. The

Committee acknowledged this update and thanked officers for their efforts.

2.25 Local Authorities across the Tees Valley charged an individual a double fee for the purchase of burial plot if they lived outside of the Borough. Members would be provided with the figures for purchases by individuals outside of the Stockton Borough.

2.26 Members noted that there was a growing population in south Stockton (for example, in Yarm, Ingleby Barwick, and Eaglescliffe) and burial provision requirements in these localities needed to be considered. Members agreed that potential new sites needed to be considered. Any new sites would need to settle for an appropriate period of time. This needed to be considered when Members looked at the options for new/alternative sites and the Local Plan. Members were informed that they could contact the link officer with any suggestions or comments.

Stockton-on-Tees Crematorium Data

2.27 Image of Stockton-on-Tees Crematorium



2.28 Crematorium data

Number of cremations September 2019 – Feb 2020: 439

Number of cremations March 2020 – August 2020: 588

Total: 1,027

Vaults – 7

Scatterings – 182 (up to Dec 2020)

2.29 A total of 1,116 cremations had taken place between 23 September 2019 and 23 September 2020.

2.30 Above ground vaults could accommodate two sets of cremated remains per vault and a memorial plaque could be attached to the front of a vault.

2.31 Families could request to scatter cremated remains within the grounds of the crematorium.

Potential Options for a New Burial Site/s

2.32 In January 2021, the Committee received evidence on potential options for a new burial site/s.

2.33 Research on best practice for cemetery provision had been undertaken. There was only a small amount of guidance on restrictions and regulations. Key advice included ensuring that a new site was not located near rivers or high-water tables. Legislation for burial provision was included in the 1852 Burial Act. New burial provision options would have to adhere to current planning regulations.

2.34 Specialist evaluations on a new burial site would include taking soil samples and assessing transport links. Initial work would take six to ten weeks to complete. If a site was deemed suitable, more in-depth investigations could take place.

2.35 The size of a site, accessibility, and location within the Borough were all considered to be important factors. Any site would need an appropriate period of time to settle before burials could take place. This needed to be considered when looking at sites near potential housing developments as this might improve transport links to a new cemetery.

2.36 Data on deceased residents who had been cremated at Stockton Crematorium were held by Bereavement Services, but it would require a large amount of officer time to analyse if residents were from the north or south of the Borough.

2.37 Members highlighted that Yarm Town Council had approached a landowner in the past regarding additional burial land and had not received a response to their query.

2.38 Several Members supported provision in the southern area of the Borough. It was noted that an SBC owned site would be preferable to reduce Council expenditure on a new site. Joint working with Town Councils and Parish Councils was suggested as a means of sharing costs. Members also suggested that crematoriums or cemeteries do not necessarily deter people from purchasing houses nearby.

2.39 In February 2021, Members received further information on potential sites.

2.40 There was no provision for a new cemetery or cemeteries in the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP).

2.41 Members were informed that landowners are willing to wait to receive a higher payment for their land. Therefore, landowners might not sell land at the arable land value and this was the reasoning for quoting costs based on residential land values. Also, landowners might not be willing to sell off sections of their land.

2.42 Land on the site of Stockton-on-Tees Crematorium was not suitable for full internments and this was discovered at the beginning of the Crematorium project.

2.43 Changes in population and the physical landscape across the Borough could not be predicted for the next 100 years or more. Members supported the long-term plan of providing two new burial sites for the Borough's residents, however, this was dependent on funding and Cabinet approval. This would be a larger site in the central and western area of the Borough and a smaller site in the south of the Borough.

3.0 Key Findings

3.1 The Council has a statutory responsibility to provide suitable burial provision and this is currently provided through Thornaby, Billingham, and Durham Road, Stockton Cemeteries.

3.2 Thornaby Cemetery currently has around 72 years of burial provision remaining and around 20 years of Muslim burial provision. Billingham currently has around 35 years of provision and Durham Road around 7-9 years.

3.3 In its first year of operation, 1,116 cremations had taken place at Stockton-on-Tees Crematorium (23 September 2019 - 23 September 2020).

3.4 For the financial year 2020-21, income from grave purchases, funerals and other associated income totalled approximately £432,000. For the same financial year, the approximate net cost to the Council after income for Bereavement Services and Cemeteries provision was £65,000.

3.5 80% of the Borough's residents opted for cremation and 20% of residents opted for burial. It would take several years before the true extent of residents' preference for cremation would become apparent.

3.6 To maintain the service provided to residents, additional burial provision is needed, particularly in the central, western, and southern parts of the Borough. This is primarily due to provision running out in Durham Road and an increasing population in the south of the Borough.

3.7 The preference was for two new cemeteries - one in the central/western area and a smaller site in the south. However, it was felt that the larger, more central site should be prioritised. The second site in the south could be obtained in partnership with Town/Parish Councils.

3.8 Further surveys and investigations would need to take place at a new site/s. Any site would take an appropriate period of time to settle and to be suitable for burials to take place.

3.9 A new site needs to be large enough to accommodate sufficient provision (eg. around 100 years plus) and it needs to be accessible via public transport.

3.10 A site of around 7 Hectares would provide roughly 100 years of burial provision. This would take into account roads/paths etc.

3.11 The Committee would prefer to place a site on land already owned by SBC. If not, funding would need to be sourced.

Conclusion

The Council currently provides suitable burial provision according to its statutory responsibility. However, in the near future additional burial provision will be needed to maintain this level of service to residents. This has largely resulted from the depletion of provision in Durham Road, Stockton, and an increasing population towards the south of the Borough.

The Committee supported the provision of a new burial site in the central or western area of the Borough. The Committee also recognised that a site with more than 100 years provision was

needed and any future site should be accessible by public transport. It was also acknowledged that consideration should be given to an additional, smaller site in the south of the Borough and that officers should consult with appropriate Ward Members and Town and Parish Councils on options for collaboration.

Recommendations

The Committee recommend that:

1. That a new burial site be provided that would meet the following criteria:
 - Located in the central or western area of the Borough
 - Provision for more than 100 years
 - Accessible via public transport
 - Preferably land already owned by Stockton Borough Council
2. That officers undertake further surveys and investigations into potential sites to determine if they are suitable for burial provision.
3. That consideration is given to an additional, smaller burial site in the south of the Borough and that officers consult with the appropriate Ward Members and Town and Parish Councils to determine if this can be facilitated through collaboration.