

Place Select Committee

A meeting of Place Select Committee was held on Monday 14th July 2025.

Present: Cllr Jim Beall (Chair), Cllr Robert Cook, Cllr Kevin Faulks, Cllr Stefan Houghton, Cllr Sufi Mubeen, Cllr David Reynard, Cllr Marilyn Surtees, Cllr Hilary Vickers and Cllr Sylvia Walmsley

Officers: Dale Rowbotham, Erin Evans, Darren Robinson (CESC) and Michelle Gunn (CS).

Also in attendance: Imam Sadiq Naeem (Ali Mrtaza Mosque), Imam Muhammad Anas Shah, Ishaq Mohammed (Farooq e Azam Mosque & Islamic Centre), Javed Iqbal (Usman e Ghani Mosque), Nassar Akhtar (Bowesfield Residents Association).

Apologies:

PLA/19/25 Evacuation Procedure

The Committee noted the evacuation and housekeeping procedure.

PLA/20/25 Declarations of Interest

There were no declaration of interests.

PLA/21/25 Minutes

AGREED the minutes of the meeting held on 9 June 2025 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

PLA/22/25 Scrutiny Review of Muslim and Faith Burial Services

The Committee received a presentation from Officers which recapped the information received during the review to date, including:

- Arrangements for burials, noting that weekend burials took place in “next in line” plots and not pre-paid plots.
- Burial numbers, with members reminded that there were between 400-500 burials a year, and approximately 2% of burials were for the Muslim community.
- The existing offer of Wooden Burial Frames, which the coffin was dropped into and a lid placed on before being covered with soil. This was introduced during the COVID period and had continued to be used as it gave flexibility and was easy to fit into the burial plot on the day.
- The experience of Middlesbrough Council who used concrete vaults for weekend burials. They had concrete vaults which had to be retro worked on to change into concrete rings due to drainage issues.
- A breakdown of the cost and requirements for concrete burial rings with a cover, which had been the requested type of vault. If these were installed, they would be in a pre-dug section with appropriate drainage to aid with the removal of water. It was noted that water would not be fully removed due to the water table in the area being low, and work would still be needed on the day of a burial. Capital costs were separated into the cost of installing 10 or 16 rings,

however the Committee were informed that the company providing the rings would prefer to install a section of 16 rings. The cost of the purchase of the burial rings would be passed on to those who wished to bury their family members in this type of plot.

The Committee also received verbal evidence from the Imams of Ali Mrtaza Mosque and Farooq e Azam Mosque and Islamic Centre, along with representatives of Usman e Ghani Mosque and Bowesfield Residents Association. They explained their issue with the current option for burial, the Wooden Burial Frames, was that the frames collapsed due to the water levels in the ground at Thornaby cemetery and subsequently needed to top up the soil on the grave weekly. It was noted that there had been instances where the frame collapsed during the burial. Several of the representatives attending had been to visit cemeteries in other areas that had burial vaults, including Walsall and Hallifax, and believed that concrete rings with a lid was the best option for burial.

The Imams explained the main priority for burial in Islam was to provide the respect that the deceased deserved, treating the body as sacred. It was acknowledged that people had different opinions on methods of burial, but Islam was not a rigid religion, and it was their belief that burying in a chamber or ring was a way to uphold respect for the deceased and thereby acting on the main principles of the religion.

It was suggested that people in the Muslim community the attendees represented were happy to pay the extra cost for a burial ring, and that there were people who had already pre-paid for a burial plot who would be keen to have a burial ring.

Members noted that the issues with settlement of graves was universal across all sections of all cemeteries, and soil had to be topped up on newly buried graves in every section. Officers explained that due to the water table in the area being almost ground level, the burial team worked up to the point of burial to ensure water was taken out of the plot, but once the grave was filled water would find its way back. Investment had taken place in new sections of the borough's cemeteries to improve drainage and therefore the time taken for the ground to settle. However, as it could not be carried out on established sections, the older Muslim section in Thornaby cemetery therefore did not have the new drainage system only the new section. The concrete rings would assist with the level of settlement as the soil was only setting on the concrete slab lid.

The Committee noted that they have heard from others in the community that they did not want to be buried in rings/chambers. It was questioned whether the representatives present were requesting all the new plots in the Muslim section to be burial rings, or if they thought there should be a choice of both rings and wooden frames. The Imams confirmed that they were happy with the option of the concrete burial rings, as they believed these were a better than the frames, however were not advocating for all plots to be burial rings and did not have a problem with providing people with a choice of both options.

It was questioned whether those who had pre-paid for the plot but wished to have a burial ring would be able to have this installed in the plot they originally bought or would they have to move to a new plot. Officers informed that rings could not be fitted in existing plots as they had to be installed in a row due to the drainage work needed, and the costs quoted were for rows of burials rings.

Members questioned why the wooden burial frame, which was introduced during COVID, was continuing to be used. Officers stated that previously families were placing board over the plot and therefore it had to be dug deeper to accommodate this. They had found that the wooden frames were good practice to continue with and did not have to be dug as deep.

Drawing the session to a close, the Chair thanked the representatives from Ali Mrtaza Mosque, Farooq e Azam Mosque and Islamic Centre, Usman e Ghani Mosque, and Bowesfield Residents Association for their contributions.

AGREED the information be noted.

PLA/23/25 Chair's Update and Select Committee Work Programme 2025-2026

Consideration was given to the Work Programme, and it was noted that the next meeting in September would be the informal session to review all evidence received.

AGREED that the Work Programme be noted.

Chair: