



Scrutiny Review of Muslim and Faith Burials

Place Select Committee, October 2025

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Foreword

[Add in]

Cllr Jim Beall, Chair



Councillor Jim Beall
Chair – Place Select Committee



Councillor Steve Nelson
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Original Brief

Which of our strategic corporate objectives does this topic address?

While the provision of the Councils burial service does not naturally fit into any single area within the Stockton-on-Tees Plan, it is a service which, at some point, may be accessed by the whole community. It will also indirectly address the following sections of the Plan:

Priority three – A great place to live, work, and visit, an environment that is well looked after, with outdoor spaces to enjoy and connect local amenities: Our open spaces will be attractive and accessible, including public realm in our town centre, as well as our parks, cemeteries, nature reserves and other grounds.

Priority five – A sustainable Council: We will ensure our council is financially sustainable and manages our assets effectively to enhance their local impact. We will be a well-run council across areas of our business and continue to improve outcomes for communities.

Transformation - Powering Our Future - We will improve the way we work and deliver efficient, effective and value for money services within available financial resources.

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

The Council have a statutory responsibility to provide suitable burial provision which is discharged through the provision of cemeteries in Billingham, Oxbridge, Durham Road, Thornaby and Egglecliffe.

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 offer sufficient levels of burial provision to ensure that families are able to choose a grave space in geographical areas where they have a personal preference or with which they have a local connection.

There are also different religious rituals related to burial, and for some faiths the use of burial chambers/vaults are preferred. The provision/choice of the type of burial shows that as a local authority we are listening to our communities and endeavouring to provide a better and improving service.

The scrutiny review aims to understand the need, as well as the associated financial and operational requirements, for the provision of a burial chambers/vaults within the boroughs cemeteries as an alternative option to the standard grave plot.

The Committee will undertake the following key lines of enquiry:

- What options are currently available for burials?
- What is the demand for burial chambers/vaults?
- What types of burial chambers/vaults are available?
- What are the space and other requirements for burial chambers/vaults?
- What are the costs associated with burial chambers/vaults?

- Which cemeteries in the borough would be able to accommodate burial chambers/vaults?
- What are the operational requirements of providing chambers/vaults on the service?

Provide an initial view as to how this review could lead to efficiencies, improvements and/or transformation:

Burial services can include same day requests for the burial to take place following a death and providing a number of burial chambers/vaults that are available as soon as notified could offer an alternative appropriate burial option. However, the cost of initial construction of the chambers, extra space required, and operational impacts will need to be reflected in the cost to the family purchasing the grave plots.

The review will therefore explore the requirements, cost, and demand for burial chambers/vault to ascertain whether it is a viable option to extend choice for our communities.

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1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1. This report presents the findings and recommendations of the Place Select Committee's Scrutiny review of Muslim and Faith Burial provisions in Stockton-on-Tees Borough. The review aimed to assess the need from faith communities, the financial implications, and the operational requirements for the provision of burial chambers/vaults as an alternative to the standard grave plots. In addition, the review has considered the extension to the timing of burials.
- 1.2. The Council has a statutory duty to provide suitable burial provision, and this is discharged through the provision of cemeteries in Billingham, Oxbridge, Durham Road, Thornaby and Egglescliffe. There are closed Jewish and Muslim sections within Oxbridge Cemetery, and two Muslim sections within Thornaby Cemetery with a 10-year capacity.
- 1.3. The 2021 Census showed that the 3.4% of the Borough's population identified as Muslim, and that while there were residents that identified as Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jewish and religions other than Christian, this was less than 2% of the population. In the Muslim and Jewish faith burials are custom. Cremation is preferred by Hindu Sikh and Buddhist faiths, while both burial and cremation are widely accepted practices within the Christian faith, which 51.1% of Borough's population identified as. Between January 2020 and December 2024 there had been:
 - 0 Jewish burials
 - 85 Muslim burials
 - 233 Roman Catholic burials
 - 380 Church of England Burials
 - 1,666 burials where faith was unknown
- 1.4. Requests can be made for burials to take place on the same day and on a weekend, and the team work with funeral directors to ensure this happens. While it is usually the Muslim community that request a same day burial, a person of any faith can make this request. Staff shifts are 8am – 4pm and they have other operational duties to maintain grounds during their shift. Burials take place between 9.30am – 2.45pm March to October and 9.30am – 2pm November to February, and the only days burials do not take place are Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Years Day. Paperwork needs to be received by 11am on a Saturday for same day burial and 5pm on a Saturday for a Sunday burial. Requests have been received for later funerals, and these are considered but dependent on staff accepting overtime to conduct the burial. To extend the timing for burials on a permanent basis will require an operational review to ensure it is feasible.
- 1.5. Issues with settlement of graves is universal across all sections of all cemeteries, and soil must be topped up on newly buried graves in every section. The water table is low in the Borough and the climate and terrain means the burial team work up to the point of burial to ensure water is pumped out of plots but, once the grave is filled, water will find its way back. Investment has taken place in new sections of the Borough's cemeteries to improve drainage; however, as it cannot be carried out on established sections, the older Muslim section in Thornaby does not have the new drainage system.
- 1.6. The Committee received evidence from two local funeral directors that conduct burials for the Muslim Community within the Borough, along with faith leaders from several Mosques both within the Borough and neighbouring Middlesbrough. It is custom for burials to take place within 24 hours

of the death, and the body touches the ground when buried. Family members will fill the burial plots themselves, and while there is no requirement in Islam for chambers/rings, these are a preference for some branches of the religion. Concerns were raised with both the use of chambers/rings creating problems with plots being filled with water and the extra cost being passed on to a family, putting extra pressure on them at a time they are experiencing grief. It is felt by some of the representatives who attended that there is not a demand in the community they serve for burial chambers/rings.

- 1.7. Members also heard opposing views that there is a demand for burial chambers and the preferred option of those advocating for chamber is concrete burials rings, which allows for the body to still touch the ground. Those proposing concrete burial rings believe the extra cost is affordable for families and that the wooden frames currently used are not fit for purpose as they have a tendency to collapse due to the water levels in the ground. It was added that it is their belief a burial ring is a way to uphold respect for the deceased which is a priority for burial in Islam.
- 1.8. Both funeral directors requested that the timing for burials be extended past 2.30pm to assist in arranging funerals on the same day.
- 1.9. As noted above, wooden frames are currently offered by the Council. These are low cost but lack durability. The purchase of Right of Burial costs is £1,030 plus £790 for the burial fee with the wooden frame provided in the fee. Other options include:
 - Concrete Vaults which can be pre-installed. These are durable but expensive, costing approximately £20,000 for 16 vaults, and have drainage issues with the likelihood of the chamber filling with water.
 - Concrete Burial Rings which have four sides and a lid but no bottom. They are the preferred option for those who are requesting burial chamber and are pre-installed. There are still drainage issues, with the water coming into the chamber from underneath the ring, however, they pose less of an issue for drainage than vaults. Burial rings are costly to install, with an estimated £21,280 for 16 rings or £14,740 for 10 rings.
 - Plastic Chambers, which are affordable at £450 a chamber but less resilient.
- 1.10. Costs for burial chambers and rings could increase burial fees significantly, with weekend surcharges further raising costs. The preferred option of concrete burial rings will increase the fee to an estimated £3,150 or £3,294 if buried on a weekend if 16 rings are installed, or an estimated £3,700-£3,844 if 10 rings are installed. They will need to be installed in rows with appropriate drainage and are not able to be fitted in any existing pre-paid plot. The rings will assist with settlement as the earth is only settling on a concrete slab lid, however it is not possible to make the plots watertight due to the low water table, climate and terrain.
- 1.11. Middlesbrough Borough Council (BC) installed burial chambers approximately 25 years ago but there had been no demand for these. Approximately three years ago they took the decision to use the burial chambers, at no extra cost for families, for weekend burials only with no option of a regular burial plot, to enable them to respond to requests quickly. In this time 12 of the 38 chambers have been used. Middlesbrough BC have faced issues with the chambers collecting water and have broken out the bottom of the chambers to change them to rings. They have also received comments that the chambers are too close together and therefore have skipped chambers to create more space between burial plots. Middlesbrough BC have received requests to revert to using non-chamber burial plots.
- 1.12. The Council's CIPFA neighbours who also offer burial chambers in their cemeteries have been contacted to share their experience and Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC) and

Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC) responded. Both Councils have a larger Muslim community to SBC and therefore carry out more Muslim burials. Almost half of all Muslim graves in Rotherham MBC have used burial chambers, with only a minority of earthen graves being chosen. Tameside MBC have vaults available to install in any of their eight cemeteries, however only one vault has been installed in the last 12 months, on the family's request. Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC), who also have a larger Muslim population, has been contacted following community leaders raising them as an example. They have used a variety of chambers including breeze block vaults and concrete vaults/rings. Due to funding, they are now considering self-install shells. They also offer a wooden shoring option too.

- 1.13. The Committee, therefore, recognises the need for a balanced approach that respects cultural and religious practices while ensuring financial and operational sustainability. The recommendations focus on extending burial provision by offering a small number of burial rings as an optional service for those who prefer them, while maintaining traditional soil burials as the standard option. Rings are recommended rather than chambers as, although issues with drainage and settlement cannot be eliminated in the Borough's cemeteries, these possess less of an issue than chamber would. The Committee believe that further investigation into the feasibility and benefit that would be added by extending burial hours, as requested by contributors to the review, is required by officers.
- 1.14. By implementing this measure, the Council can enhance its burial services, demonstrating sensitivity to the Borough's diverse communities while maintaining financial and operational efficiency.

Recommendations

- 1.15. The Committee recommends that:
 1. To extend choice within the Borough's burial provision, a minimum of 10 concrete burial rings with the appropriate drainage are installed in the Muslim section of Thornaby cemetery. This should be an optional offer at an additional cost to those purchasing the plot. The number of burial rings installed may be extended if there is a greater demand for pre-purchasing these.
 2. Officers carry out a further review of the operational feasibility of extending burial hours.

2.0 Introduction

- 2.1. This report outlines the findings and recommendations of the Place Select Committee's scrutiny review of Muslim and Faith Burial.
- 2.2. The Council has a statutory duty to provide suitable burial provision, and this is discharged through the provision of cemeteries in Billingham, Oxbridge, Durham Road, Thornaby and Egglescliffe. The review aimed to understand the need, as well as the associated financial and operational requirements, for the provision of burial chambers/vaults within the Boroughs cemeteries as an alternative option to the standard grave plot. Consideration was also given to the extension to the timing of burials.
- 2.3. The Committee undertook the following key lines of enquiry:
 - What options are currently available for burials?
 - What is the demand for burial chambers/vaults?
 - What types of burial chambers/vaults are available?
 - What are the space and other requirements for burial chambers/vaults?
 - What are the cost associated with burial chambers/vaults?
 - Which cemeteries in the borough would be able to accommodate burial chambers/vaults?
 - What are the operational requirements of providing chambers/vaults on the service?
- 2.4. Contributions were sought and subsequently received from Bereavement Services at Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC), as well as the two local Funeral Directors that carry out Muslim burials in the Borough, North East Muslim Funeral Services and Thornaby Funeral Services. Local Faith leaders shared their views with the Committee, namely representatives from Ali Mrtaza, Farooq e Azam, Usman e Ghani, Abu Bakr and Maryam Mosques, and Darlington Hebrew Congregation Reform Synagogue. A representative from Bowesfield Residents Association also provided their views. Evidence was received from four Local Authorities that have installed burial chambers/vaults, Middlesbrough Borough Council, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council, Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council, and Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council.

3.0 Background

- 3.1 The provision of burial space is one of the most essential and sensitive services that the Council provides. There can be significant social implications if the Council is not able to offer sufficient levels of burial provision to ensure that families can choose a grave space in geographical areas where they have a personal preference or a local connection with.
- 3.2 Oxbridge Cemetery has Jewish and Muslim section which are now closed, and no further plots are available to purchase. There are two Muslim sections in Thornaby Cemetery, with a 10-year capacity. There are other sections within Thornaby that have not yet been identified for usage.

- 3.3 There are different religious rituals related to burial, and for some faiths the use of burial chambers/vaults are preferred. Currently there are no burial chambers provided within the Borough's cemeteries.
- 3.4 The provision/choice of the type of burial shows that the Council is listening to communities and endeavouring to provide a better and improving service.
- 3.5 The data from the 2021 Census showed the number of people in the Borough who identified with a religion as follows:

Religion	count	%
All usual residents	196,595	100.0
Christian	100,420	51.1
No religion	76,840	39.1
Muslim	6,675	3.4
Hindu	811	0.4
Sikh	782	0.4
Buddhist	532	0.3
Other religion	550	0.3
Jewish	61	0.0

- 3.6 In the Muslim and Jewish faith burials are custom. However, cremation is preferred by the Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist faith. Both burial and cremation are widely accepted practices within the Christian faith.
- 3.7 The following information provided a background to the review:
 - Place Select Committee Scrutiny Review of Burial Provision 2021 [Final report](#)

4.0 Evidence

Current Provision

- 4.1. As noted in paragraph 2.2, there are five cemeteries in the borough:
 - Durham Road
 - Thornaby
 - Oxbridge
 - Billingham
 - Egglescliffe
- 4.2. The lifespans of the cemeteries are outlined in the table below, with Thornaby Cemetery having the longest lifespan of 70 years including a 10-year lifespan for the Muslim sections, Billingham having 27 years, and Durham Road 5 years. Both Oxbridge and Egglescliffe are closed, which means there are no burial plots available for purchase.

	Durham Road	Thornaby Cemetery	Oxbridge Cemetery	Billingham	Egglescliffe
Full size Multi faith	5 years	70 years	0 years	27 Years	0 years
Muslim	N/A	10 years	0 Years	N/A	N/A
Jewish	N/A	N/A	0 Years	N/A	N/A
Cremated Remains Sections	4 years	51 years	27 years	13 years	0 years

- 4.3. Once a death has been registered, requests can be made for the burial to take place on the same day. The team work with the funeral director to ensure that this happens and it is rare that a same day burial cannot be carried out. Request for burials can be received on weekends and if the registration of death and fully completed paperwork are received prior to 11am on a Saturday, the team will try to get it organised that day. The request and paperwork need to be received by 5pm on Saturday for the burial to take place on a Sunday. The only days that burials do not take place are:
- Good Friday
 - Easter Sunday
 - Christmas Day
 - Boxing Day
 - New Years Day
- 4.4. While it is usually the Muslim community that request a same day burial, a person of any faith can make this request.
- 4.5. Burials take place between 9.30am – 2.45pm March to October and 9.30am – 2pm November to February. Staff shifts are 8am – 4pm and they have other operational duties to maintain grounds during their shift. A small number of requests are received for burials to take place later in the day, which can be for various reasons including allowing time for family and friends from outside of the area to travel to the funeral or to work around prayer times. The requests are considered when received and the outcome reliant on staff agreeing to work overtime. There have been occasions when these requests have been granted. To extend the timing for burials on a permanent basis will require an operational review to ensure it is feasible and may include the need to consult on staff shift patterns.
- 4.6. For some Muslim burials, the plot is filled by the family, and staff will back fill once family have left the cemetery to ensure it has been filled to the correct level.

- 4.7. Issues with settlement of graves is universal across all sections of all cemeteries, and soil must be topped up on newly buried graves in every section. The burial team work up to the point of burial to ensure water is taken out of plots but, once the grave is filled, water will find its way back. Investment has taken place in new sections of the Borough's cemeteries to improve drainage however, as it cannot be carried out on established sections, the older Muslim section in Thornaby cemetery does not have the new drainage system, only the new section.
- 4.8. The faith of the deceased for the majority of burials carried out each year is unknown. Of those burials where faith has been indicated, the biggest faith is Church of England followed by Roman Catholic and Muslim. There have been no Jewish burials since 2020. The number of burials carried out each year since 2020 is outlined below:

Year	Muslim	Jewish	Roman Catholic	Church of England	Unknown	Total
2020	18	0	81	133	283	515
2021	19	0	65	108	296	488
2022	25	0	54	72	352	503
2023	12	0	19	35	381	447
2024	11	0	14	32	354	411

From January 2025 – September 2025 there had been 11 Muslim burials carried out.

Faith and Community Leaders

- 4.9. Evidence was received from local Imams and Chairs from several Mosques within the area, along with the Chair of Bowesfield Residents Association, who explained the rituals and requirement for burial in their faith. The Mosques represented were Abu Bakr Mosque, Ali Mrtaza Mosque, Farooq e Azam Mosque, Maryam Mosque, and Usman e Ghani Mosque.
- 4.10. It is custom for burials to take place within 24 hours of the death if possible. The body will be taken to the Mosque to be prepared for burial. It is a requirement in the Muslim faith that the body touches the ground when buried and in some countries the body is placed directly into a grave in just a burial shroud. However, in this country, the body is usually placed in a casket before being buried facing Mecca. Family members will fill the burial plot themselves. Burial chambers/rings are a preference for some branches of Islam and not a requirement in Muslim faith.
- 4.11. Members heard from some faith leaders the belief that burial chambers are not necessary for a Muslim funeral and members of the community they serve will prefer their casket to be placed in a standard soil/earthen plot. While no offence will be caused to the community by offering choice, there is concern that the extra cost of chambers will be passed on to families at a time they are

vulnerable due to grief. It was also highlighted that there are people who choose not to bury their family members in Middlesbrough as they do not wish them to be buried in the chambers which Middlesbrough Borough Council use for weekend burials.

- 4.12. Members also heard the opposing view that there is a demand within communities for burial rings and there are people who will be happy to pay extra for these, including people who have already pre-purchased plots. Those advocating for burial chambers believe that rings and chambers are a way to uphold respect for the body of the deceased, treating the body if it is scared, which is a priority in Islam. They have visited different cemeteries across the country and believe that concrete rings with a lid, which have been used in Walsall, are preferable. Also, there are concerns that the Wooden Burial Frames currently used are collapsing due to the water levels in the ground at Thornaby cemetery, and the need to top up the soil on the grave due to subsidence.
- 4.13. Darlington Hebrew Congregation (DHC) Reform Synagogue, the nearest Synagogue to Stockton-on-Tees, was contacted to ascertain the requirements for burial in the Jewish faith and which cemeteries the local Jewish community are choosing. The DHC informed that in Jewish burials the body is placed in a simple pine coffin wearing a white shroud, arms by the side of the body, and guarded by devoted Jews from the moment of death until the body can be buried which should take place as soon as possible after death, usually within 24 hours. When the coffin is placed in the ground, the family of the deceased will shovel the soil on top of the coffin, and the other Jewish men and women usually wait to put some soil on the coffin.
- 4.14. As noted in paragraph 4.8, there have been no Jewish burials in the Borough for the since 2020. The DHC stated that Jewish burials take place in Darlington simply due to this being where the Synagogue is based and, to their knowledge, there are no issues with the cemeteries in the Stockton-on-Tees Borough.

Funeral Directors

- 4.15. The Committee received evidence from the two local funeral directors that serve the Muslim Community, Thornaby Funeral Services and North East Muslim Funeral Services.
- 4.16. Several legal requirements and necessary safeguards need to be adhered to before the body of the deceased can be released for burial, and these include sign off by a Medical Examiner as well as a doctor if the death occurs in a hospital. Both funeral directors contact bereavement services and registrars as soon as they are informed of a death to ensure they can carry out the burials as soon as the body is released.
- 4.17. While one Director advised that in their experience it was a minority of Muslims who wish to be buried in burial chambers, the other Director believe that there is a demand in the community for burial rings and that families would be willing to pay the extra cost (highlighted in paragraph 4.26).
- 4.18. A concern was raised with drainage, explaining that due to the climate and terrain in local cemeteries, concrete burial chambers will fill with water. Concrete burial rings will also pose an issue as the water will come from underneath the ring and fill the burial area, acting as a well. It was suggested that the issues of drainage would deter some people from purchasing burial chambers/rings.

- 4.19. It was asserted that the current wooden frames used, as outlined in paragraph 4.23, are not adequate due to the clay-based terrain in local cemeteries retaining water in winter. The frame can collapse when soil is placed on top causing distress to those present and there have been issues with subsidence. They therefore suggest that concrete rings in pre-dug plots be installed, which allows for the casket to touch the ground, as an option for those who wish to purchase these to alleviate these issues.
- 4.20. The gaps in plots in the Muslim section of Thornaby cemetery was highlighted and suggested that these are pre-purchased plots families that cannot use due to the access needed to dig the plot requiring more time. The families buy new plots to ensure their loved one is buried within the 24 hours and the pre-purchased plot remains empty. It was believed that, if burial rings are installed and pre-purchased, there will be no issues with access for digging as the plot is already dug.
- 4.21. In addition, both Funeral Directors highlighted that while it is often possible when a person dies in the morning to hold a burial by 2.45pm the same day, sometimes the paperwork cannot be completed in time. They therefore requested that burial times are extended past the current 2.45pm timeframe to assist in arranging funerals on the same day.

Vault Options

- 4.22. Members received information on the type of vaults that are available on the market.
- 4.23. **Wooden frames** are currently offered by SBC, introduced during Covid and their use has continued. The frames are built to size, the casket placed inside, and the lid placed on top before the burial plot being filled. The cost for this option is £1,030 plus £790 for the burial fee.

Pro's	Con's
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Already in use • Can be made to fit all sizes of coffin • Low cost 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to be constructed and fitted on day of interment • Lack resilience of other materials



- 4.24. **Concrete burial vaults** are connected and installed in advance ready for purchasing. The lid is removed for the casket to be placed in, replaced, and the burial plot filled. The estimated cost of

these is £20,000 for a minimum order of 16 vaults. If the cost is passed on to the family, it could increase the fee to an estimated £3,150.

Pro's	Con's
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Once installed means digging is not required on the day of interment Lids in sections so easy to remove 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Need prior installation Initial capital cost to purchase and install Solid bottom so can act as water tank May require pumping out of any water before interment



4.25. **Concrete burial rings**, that have four sides and a lid, are also installed in advance and could need a bigger plot to chambers as they are not connected. The lid is removed for the casket to be placed in then replaced and the burial plot filled. As there is no bottom to the ring, drainage of water is less of an issue than a vault and will assist with settlement as the soil is settling on the lid of the ring. If installed, they will be done so in rows with the appropriate drainage. It will not be possible to install in existing plots due to the drainage and surrounding space required for the installation equipment. Residents who have an existing pre-paid plot and wish to have a burial ring would need to be reimbursed for their plot, at the price that they paid, and purchase a new plot.

Pro's	Con's
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Once installed means digging is not required on the day of interment Ring is not sealed at bottom, so water is not trapped Lids in sections so easy to remove 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Need prior installation Initial capital cost to purchase and install

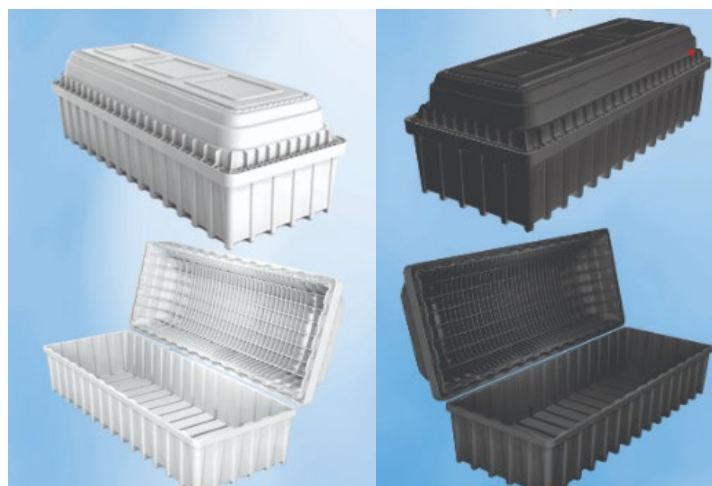
4.26. The estimated capital cost for installation of concrete burial rings is £21,280 to install 16 rings or £14,740 to install 10 rings. This will increase the estimated cost to the family to either £3,150 or £3,294, depending on the number of rings that are pre-installed. This estimated cost will rise to £3,700/£3,844 with the weekend surcharge. A breakdown of costs is outlined below:

Price for customers	
Right of Burial 100 Year Lease (Plot)	£1,030
Concrete Ring <small>(Proposed cost of ring if 16 preinstalled)</small>	£1,330
Concrete Ring <small>(Proposed cost of ring if 10 preinstalled)</small>	£1,474
Burial Fee	£790
Weekend Interment Surcharge	£550



4.27. **Plastic burial chambers** are not as sturdy but a cheaper option at £450 per unit.

Pro's	Con's
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low cost • Easy to store • Not as resilient as other options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Still requires digging of grave • Requires storage



Other Local Authorities Experience of Providing Burial Chambers

- 4.28. Middlesbrough Borough Council carry out approximately 60 Muslim burials per year. They had installed 38 concrete burial chambers approximately 25 years ago. These were left largely unused until approximately three years ago when the decision was made to use them at a weekend to enable the service to respond more quickly to requests for burial. All weekend burials take place in a burial chamber, with no options for a non-chamber burial, and at no extra cost to the family.
- 4.29. On re-examining the chambers, they were found to have held water and mud. To help with drainage the bottom of the concrete chambers were broken out to create burial rings. Chambers have been left un-used between burials following comments from the families that the burial plots were too close together.
- 4.30. By June 2025, 12 concrete burial chambers had been used, and requests received to revert to using non-chamber burial plots.
- 4.31. The Council's CIPFA neighbours who also offer burial chambers in their cemeteries have been contacted to share their experience of providing this service, and responses received from Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC), and Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC). Both councils have a larger Muslim community than SBC and therefore carrying out more Muslim burials. Almost half of all Muslim graves in Rotherham MBC over a 10-year period have used burial chambers, with only a minority of earthen graves being chosen and the remainder of the graves being baby earthen graves. They charge more for burial chambers to cover purchase and installation cost and install multiple chambers and drainage at a time to minimise ground disturbance. Tameside MBC have vaults available to install in any of their eight cemeteries, however only one vault has been installed in the last 12 months, on the family's request, and this was in one of the two Muslim sections. While they have not received any formal requests to install further burial vaults, they are discussing the need for pre-installing these.
- 4.32. Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC) was contacted following community leaders recommending the chambers they used. Walsall MBC, who also have a larger Muslim population, informed that they traditionally used a basic four post frame with horizontal beams to hold wooden slats. Following requests, breeze block vaults were installed, however the company employed to install these withdrew the offer. In 2022, 48 vaults/rings were installed, and the last one was recently used. Walsall MBC are now considering self-install shells options, resin shells that drop

over the coffin or concrete shells that coffins are dropped into. They are still offering the wooden shoring option too.

5.0 Conclusion

- 5.1. The review highlights the importance of providing burial options that respect the diverse needs of the community. It underlines the Council's statutory duty to ensure sufficient burial provision while addressing the specific requirements of faith communities, particularly the Muslim community whose faith forbids cremation.
- 5.2. All burials in the Borough are conducted in standard soil plots, with wooden frames being used for Muslim burials. Some faith leaders and funeral directors have expressed concerns about the durability of wooden frames, particularly the impact of water levels in burial plots have on the frames.
- 5.3. Evidence from local faith leaders and funeral directors revealed differing opinions on the demand for burial chambers. Some believe burial chambers and rings uphold respect for the deceased and are worth the additional cost, while others argue that traditional soil burials are sufficient and aligned with Islamic customs. Those who oppose burial chambers and rings also raise the associated cost and drainage issues.
- 5.4. The introduction of concrete burial rings, the preferred option among those advocating for chambers, would require upfront investment with costs passed on to families thereby increasing burial fees substantially. The Committee were assured by contributors that there were members of the Muslim community willing to pay the extra cost and therefore will be able to recoup the investment made. Operational challenges such as drainage need to be addressed, and therefore the new section of Thornaby cemetery where work has already taken place to improve drainage is believed to be the most suitable location. Extending burial hours to accommodate same day request and family needs has also been considered, however would require staff consultation and operational changes. These requests are currently determined on an ad hoc basis dependent on staff availability due to the infrequency of not being able to accommodate a same day burial in the operational times.
- 5.5. The experiences from Middlesbrough BC, the only neighbouring Local Authority that offer burial chambers, showed that they have faced issues with water retention, spacing, and low usage rates. While the Council's CIPFA neighbours, Rotherham and Tameside MBC's, have seen demand for chambers, they have much bigger Muslim communities.
- 5.6. The Committee, therefore, recognises the need for a balanced approach that respects cultural and religious practices while ensuring financial and operational sustainability. The recommendation focuses on extending burial provision by offering a small number of burial rings as an optional service for those who prefer them, while maintaining traditional soil burials as the standard option. Rings are recommended rather than chambers as, although issues with drainage and settlement cannot be eliminated in the Borough's cemeteries, these pose less of an issue than chambers would, as well as being the preferred option for those advocating for burial chambers. The

Committee believe that further investigation into the feasibility and benefit that would be added by extending burial hours, as requested by contributors to the review, is required by officers.

- 5.7. By implementing these measures, the Council can enhance its burial services, demonstrating sensitivity to the Borough's diverse communities while maintaining financial and operational efficiency.

Recommendations

- 5.8. The Committee recommends that:

1. To extend choice within the Borough's burial provision, a minimum of 10 concrete burial rings with the appropriate drainage are installed in the Muslim section of Thornaby cemetery. This should be an optional offer at an additional cost to those purchasing the plot, and the number of burial rings installed may be extended if there is greater demand for pre-purchasing these.
2. Officers carry out a further review of the operational feasibility of extending burial hours.

Glossary of Terms

BC	Borough Council
DHC	Darlington Hebrew Congregation
MBC	Metropolitan Borough Council
SBC	Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council
CIPFA	Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy

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