

Place Select Committee

Scrutiny Review of Muslim and Faith Burial Services

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.