



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Parks and Leisure Committee
Subject:	Update on Acquisition of Land for Burials
Date:	15th October 2009
Reporting Officer:	Andrew Hassard, Director of Parks and Leisure Ciaran Quigley, Director of Legal Services
Contact Officer:	Emer Boyle, Policy and Business Development Manager Claire Conroy, Policy and Business Development Officer

Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to:

- (i) provide Members with an update on the burials land acquisition project;
- (ii) outline some early indicative results from Tier 3 tests at the Nutts Corner site and the potential implications of these;
- (iii) seek Committee approval to consult with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) regarding the report on the Tier 3 tests at the Nutts Corner site; and
- (iv) seek Committee authority to revisit the planning assumptions for the new cemetery site.

Relevant Background Information

Members will be aware that there is an ongoing project to select a site for a new cemetery for Belfast and that update reports are brought to Committee on a bi-monthly basis, the last of which was in June 2009.

The background to the project is:

- BCC originally commenced a search for new lands for burials in 1999 - 2001 following the appointment of DTZ Piedad Consultants;
- The DTZ report recommended two large sites, one at Hightown and one at Drumbeg;
- In September 2005 BCC appointed Ferguson McIlveen (now Scott Wilson) to re-visit the search for suitable sites in order to provide the Council with a robust case for BCC in the probable event of a public inquiry;
- In March 2006 Scott Wilson produced a Stage 1 report which proposed a new methodology for the revised study;
- In May 2007 Scott Wilson produced a Stage 2 report which gave a shortlist of 4 sites – Lisleen, Drumbeg B, Nutts Corner and Hightown;

Current Council Policy Position

The current Council policy with regard to the acquisition of lands for new cemetery provision was most recently defined by the Parks and Leisure Committee at its meeting on 15 November 2007 when the Committee agreed the following recommendations:

- (i) Lisleen and Nutts Corner sites are selected as the Council's preferred sites and that Drumbeg and Hightown are no longer in the shortlist (within the context of the Council developing one large cemetery);
- (ii) the Council proceeds to a Tier 3 risk assessment at both Lisleen and Nutts Corner;
- (iii) in the meantime, discussions take place with the Environment and Heritage Service (now the Northern Ireland Environment Agency) to receive feedback on the collated hydro-geological reports and to ascertain Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) views in respect of the feasibility of developing each site; and
- (iv) further discussions with neighbouring councils take place on the issues of mutual concern with regard to the provision of burial space both at present and in the future.

Since late 2007 the Council has been progressing the project with regard to the two shortlisted sites, Lisleen and Nutts Corner.

Current Position

The most recent developments in the project are summarised below:

- the Council's consultants developed a detailed specification outlining the extent and cost associated with the Tier 3 tests and Scott Wilson were appointed during the period April – May 2008 as the lead consultants for the Tier 3 tests;
- In the period from June – September 2008 the masterplan designs for each of the two shortlisted sites were developed to enable the planning for the Tier 3 tests to take place and to allow for modelling and analysis of soil and rainfall data to occur;
- In December 2008 a letter was sent to landowners affected by the testing and a newsletter was produced and sent to all potentially affected landowners in both the Nutts Corner and Lisleen areas;
- An update letter and a copy of the newsletter was also sent to the Chief Executives of Antrim and Castlereagh Borough Councils, the Chairman of the Ulster Farmers Union, Belfast City Council's Party Group Leaders and Members of the Parks and Leisure Committee;
- All the boreholes and window samples have been in place since February and the extraction of "samples" is ongoing;
- A water feature survey and a topographical survey were undertaken at both sites during the period June - July 2009;
- An update newsletter was sent to all landowners at both sites in July and the Director spoke with the Chief Executive of Antrim and the acting Chief Executive of Castlereagh Borough Councils to update them.

Following on from a meeting on 26 May 2009 where the consultants outlined initial findings at Lisleen and Nutts Corner, it was agreed initial "data modelling"

would be carried out at the Nutts Corner site based on the samples collected to date and the findings of the water feature and topographical surveys. A report would then be submitted to the Council giving more detailed findings and a fuller indication of the suitability of this site. The implications of these findings are outlined below.

If it were the case that the Council was to change its policy from the provision of one large site to consider.

Key Issues

The conclusions of the interim Tier 3 assessment at the Nutts Corner site demonstrate that at least part of the site is unsuitable for the proposed development in its current form.

- Soil thickness – areas of the site that are less than 2.7m would not be capable of accommodating the proposed graves and areas where the depth is between 2.7m and 3.7m thick are not recommended for use as burial sites. Approximately 64% of the site has a soil depth of under 3.7m. The remaining 36% of the site has a soil depth of between 3.7m and 4.5m and this would be suitable for use in terms of soil thickness.
- Groundwater depth – the depth across the majority of the site is less than 2.7m meaning that most graves would be below the water table. Whilst this does not automatically make the site unsuitable it is likely that some if not the majority of graves would need to be pumped prior to burial.
- Contaminant modelling – the modelling has shown that whilst the majority of potential pollutants will be below water quality standards at the selected compliance points, ammonia and formaldehyde are predicted to be at concentrations above them.

The 36% of the site considered suitable for development in terms of soil thickness is situated in the south eastern portion of the site and this coincides with the area where groundwater is at its deepest. If the development of the site was limited to this portion then this would allow increased dilution and dispersion of contaminants prior to their arrival at potential receptors due to the additional distance travelled.

The consultants have recommended that the interim report on the Tier 3 tests at the Nutts Corner site be discussed with the NIEA. This will allow the Council to update them on the process, test the methodology we have used and ascertain their views on the potential issues with the site. Scott Wilson has advised us that the NIEA have never assessed a proposal such as this before and therefore are unsure of how long the timescale for a response will be.

While the report indicates that the majority of the site at Nutts Corner is unsuitable for the proposed development in its current form, if the council's policy were to change to the development of a number of smaller cemeteries, then the south eastern proportion of the site, 36% of the total site may be suitable for development subject to the issues of groundwater being resolved.

Communications

An update newsletter will be sent to all landowners at both sites in late November/early December and the Director will speak with the Chief Executives of Antrim and Castlereagh Borough Councils to update them.

Review of planning assumptions

Since the inception of this project there have been changes which will have impacted on the assumptions that were made around our requirements for a new cemetery site. These include the expansion at Roselawn and the increase in the number of cremations taking place. To allow the members to properly reconsider its policy on cemetery provision given the information on the Nutts corner site and the final Tier 3 reports for both sites at Lisleen and Nutts Corner

Resource Implications

Financial

There is provision of £13.9 M in the Council's capital programme for new cemetery provision for Belfast City Council. The forecast cost for the Tier 3 phase is approximately £150K and was previously approved by Committee.

Human Resources

There are no human resource implications at this stage.

Asset and Other Implications

None at this stage although the final phases of the project will inevitably increase the Council's land ownership and associated liabilities.

Recommendations

The Committee is asked to;

- i. note the contents of the report;
- ii. grant approval to consult with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) regarding the report on the Tier 3 tests at the Nutts Corner site; and grant approval for the planning assumptions for the new cemetery site to be revisited

Decision Tracking

The next update report will be brought to Committee in November.

Key to Abbreviations

NIEA - Northern Ireland Environment Agency
EHS - Environment and Heritage Service