



Belfast City Council

Report to: Parks and Leisure Committee

Subject: **Update on Digitisation of Cemeteries Records Project**

Date: 15th October, 2009

Reporting Officer: Andrew Hassard, Director of Parks and Leisure, ext 3400

Contact Officer: Margaret Tomlinson, Cemetery Archive Project Manager, Ext 2472

Relevant Background Information

The Committee will be aware that since June 2005 a project has been underway to capture in digital form the records of the Cemeteries Office dating back to 1869. This has been a corporately funded project under the direction of the Director of Corporate Services involving employees from the Cemeteries Office; ISB; and the Records Management Unit, Chief Executive's Department.

As Members will be aware the Director of Corporate Services is shortly leaving the Council and, before the project is handed over to Parks and Leisure it was thought that it would be helpful for the Committee to receive an update on the considerable progress achieved and a re-assurance that the project is scheduled to be completed on time and to budget.

Key Issues

Project information

This project was initiated, with considerable support from a number of key Members, to address the problems arising from the quickly deteriorating physical condition of the older burial and cremation records held by the Council. Kept for many years in a basement of the City Hall for reasons of security and to be easily accessible for the daily checks required for this important public service, the binding and pages of the books were reaching a point where some of the older ones were at significant risk of loss if they continued to be handled. Several successive soakings over the years as the basement was subject to flooding had not helped. As a first step the records were moved out of the basement to a newly created temporary storage area on the second floor while a team involving the relevant services was

established to address the issue.

At that stage some corporate funding was available to supplement the departmental resource and it was decided to undertake three strands of work

1. to create a high-quality digital record all of the data contained in the records of grants of burial, burial and cremation orders. This would permit the Cemeteries Office's employees to access the records in future without handling them and therefore protect the physical condition of the books as well as improving the efficiency of accessing the information;
2. concurrently to develop in-house a new record-keeping database compatible with the format of the information being digitised – this would enable the complete record stretching over 140 years to be in a single accessible source; and
3. as these continue to be administrative records of the Council which cannot be transferred to the Public Record Office for Northern Ireland, to create a greatly improved storage facility within the City Hall basements given the opportunity to do this was available in the context of the refurbishment of the building. This would give the Council, now and in the future, a confidence that these records are being cared for properly and effectively.

Current project successes

I am pleased to advise the Committee that all three strands have been successfully progressed and the overall aims for these important Council records are being achieved.

- a. Despite the original scanning company going into voluntary liquidation during the project, we successfully negotiated for another company to take on the work at no additional cost. By 31 March 2010 we will have created a high quality database of approximately half a million individual records at a cost of approx. £270,000. I will have a sample of the quality of the scanning work for Members to view at the meeting.
- b. Records relating to Cemeteries/Crematorium are being scanned at present in order to preserve an image of the relevant documents. Full data capture of the information held on these images is also taking place. Since February 2004 Cemeteries Office staff has been keying newly created information relating to Roselawn/City of Belfast Crematorium directly to the Cemeteries/Crematorium database in preparation for full data capture of all records. With effect from April 2010 this will provide the Council with a seamless record pertinent to all burials/cremations from mid 1869 to the present day.
- c. The new storage area in the basement will provide a temperature and humidity controlled environment suitable to the longer-term storage of these and subsequent paper records for the Cemeteries staff. It is not done to a full archival specification as that is not the statutory role of the Council but it is vastly better than anything previously created by this organisation and reflects the importance of these records (similar improvements have been made for the storage of the Council's legal records). So as not to delay the digitisation project the cemetery records will not be moved from their current temporary location in a

another council building until the project is completed.

Future use of information

Consideration is currently being given on how best to use these records and a report will be brought before the Committee on this issue in due course.

Continuing project governance arrangements

In terms of management of the project between the date on which the Director of Corporate Services leaves and its anticipated completion, I will agree who will chair the cross-departmental project board and report directly to me. I will bring a final report to the Committee by June 2010 at which time the Committee may wish to consider how the achievement of this task can be recognised and communicated to the public, bearing in mind that public accessibility to the database is within legislative constraints.

Resource Implications

The resources for this project are in place and it will be delivered within budget.

Recommendations

The Committee is recommended to:

1. note the progress to date and that the project is expected to be completed on time and to budget;
2. acknowledge the work of the cross-departmental project board and the staff currently involved in the data capture which will be over almost 5 years when the project is completed; and
3. agree the proposed arrangements for the management and reporting on the project in the future.

Decision tracking

The Director of Parks and Leisure will bring a further report to the Committee in May or June, 2010

BLANK PAGE