



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Party Group Briefings
Subject:	Acquisition of land for burials for Belfast City Council
Date:	August 2010
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Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to:

- (i) update Members on the project to acquire lands for burials for Belfast City Council;
- (ii) ask Members to agree to the recommendations of the Cemeteries Working Group and that these be brought to the Parks and Leisure Committee for consideration; and
- (iii) ask Members for any additional views they have on this issue.

Relevant Background Information

The review of the cemetery provision in Belfast dates back more than nine years with the original DTZ Piedad consultant's report being presented in 2001. This recommended two large sites; one at Hightown and another at Drumbeg.

In September 2005 the council appointed Ferguson McIlveen (now Scott Wilson) to re-visit the search for suitable sites in order to provide the council with a robust case in the event of a public enquiry. Scott Wilson prepared a new methodology which resulted in the council looking for a site of 168 acres (68 hectares). A long list of sites was established within a list of pre-determined criteria and in May 2007 a shortlist of four sites was agreed at:

- Hightown
- Nutts corner
- Drumbeg
- Lisleen

This list was shortened to the two most viable sites following initial site investigation which indicated the presence of rock close to the surface at most

of the Hightown site and that Drumbeg was too sandy to allow for the digging of graves.

The Environment Agency has published guidance on the assessment of cemetery developments. This provides a framework for the appraisal of risks posed by cemetery developments. Following discussion with the Planning Service and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, it was agreed to carry out a tier 3 risk assessment at the Lisleen and Nutts Corner sites. This assessment required detailed site investigations over a 12 month period followed by modelling against an outline cemetery layout design.

There have been a number of developments since this project started, ie:

- Acquisition of additional land at Roselawn which provides additional burial space for a period in excess of thirty years at current burial rates.
- The increasing shift in the trend towards cremation with total burials down from 1900 in 1996 to 1300 in 2008 and cremations up from 2050 to 2600 over the same period.
- The crematorium is now operating close to maximum capacity.

Given these changes together with the interim indications of the Tier 3 assessment for the site at Nutts Corner, which that indicated that two thirds of the site was unsuitable for development as a cemetery in its current form, and the exclusion of any consideration of cremation in the original policy, the Parks and Leisure Committee agreed to:

- Review the planning assumptions.
- Reassess the requirements for a new cemetery on the revised assumptions.
- Invite expressions of interest from land owners with potential sites not identified in the original long list of sites identified by the consultants;
- Compile a long list of potential sites using the new site requirements and rank order them with a specific weighting applied to sites serving the North and West of the city.
- Undertake an economic appraisal into options for further crematorium provision in the city.

The final draft report for the Tier 3 tests at Lisleen, the draft interim report for Nutts Corner, the final report on the Review of Burial Capacity and the final draft economic appraisal for a new crematorium facility have now been received and the key findings are detailed below.

Key Issues

Tier 3 tests

The Tier 3 tests suggest that the ground conditions at Lisleen would provide one of the best potential cemetery sites in the wider Belfast area although if it were to be selected as the new burial ground for Belfast, work would have to be carried out to put in place a management system to minimise the impact on the water environment in the area. Discussions would have to take place with the

Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) to determine their position.

An interim report on the Tier 3 tests at the Nutts Corner site indicated that the majority of the site at Nutts Corner was unsuitable for the proposed development in its current form but that 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.

The interim report also suggested that there is the potential that the area to the east of the current boundary of the proposed site may be similar to the eastern part of the site and therefore suitable for development as a cemetery. Intrusive investigation of this land would be required in order to demonstrate this, and further assessment carried out, particularly with regard to any alternative receptors that may become relevant.

The final Tier 3 report for the Nutts Corner site is currently being produced by the consultants but they have advised us that it is considered unlikely that the additional data will change the conclusions drawn in the interim report.

Review of Burial Capacity

Scott Wilson were commissioned to undertake a review of burial capacity to determine the minimum size of a new burial site required to service the residents of Belfast over a period of 50 years. Following this exercise, expressions of interest were sought from landowners who would have a site of a suitable size for a new burial ground which would service the residents from the North and West of the city. The third stage of the project was to score the sites identified from the request for Expressions of Interest and the original long list of 12 sites (Scott Wilson 2007 Stage 2 report) and recommend which if any sites may be suitable for future testing as a new burial ground for the residents of Belfast.

To determine the size of site required up to date data was combined with a number of other factors including:

- the recent acquisition of additional burial land at Roselawn to provide additional capacity;
- the availability of a small number of remaining graves in Council cemeteries; and
- an apparent decline in burial rates in the Greater Belfast Area.

This study did not take into account the potential impact of additional crematorium provision.

Based on this information it is now recommended that the area for our new cemetery site should be 72 acres (29 hectares) to provide sufficient burial capacity for a 50 year period. This compares to the previous study which suggested a site of 168 acres (68 hectares).

The advertisement requesting expressions of interest resulted in correspondence from one landowner with land in a potentially suitable area (Dundrod 'B'). This site was added to the original long list of sites established in

the Scott Wilson 2007 Stage 2 report to create a new long list.

The scoring criteria used in the original exercise were revised to reflect the need for a much smaller site than in the original study. The criteria for accessibility from City Centre was changed so that those sites located to the North and the West of the city received a 5 point bonus. All other scoring criteria remained the same.

The search area has remained consistent with the original study and in the original sites that were larger than 72 acres, a site of this size was selected to ensure the scoring remains fair.

The main difference in the outcome from the original scoring is that Drumbeg B has dropped out of the top 4 and is replaced by the site at Dundrod 'A'. In relation to the top 3 sites, the original report found that Hightown appeared to show considerable areas of near surface rock; the Tier 3 tests at Nutts Corner have shown rock close to the surface and high groundwater levels; the Tier 3 tests confirm Lisleen to be suitable.

The report recommends therefore that the Dundrod sites would be the most appropriate sites for further detailed assessment. No other sites on the long list serving the north and west would be considered suitable for detailed testing.

Economic Appraisal of a New Crematorium Facility

BDO were commissioned to carry out an economic appraisal to explore the various options for the development of new crematorium facilities for the Belfast City Council area. The economic appraisal sought to:

- determine the most appropriate option for new crematorium facilities within Belfast; and
- ensure that value for money is being achieved in the provision of new crematorium facilities.

The economic appraisal considered a number of options as outlined below:

Option 1: Do nothing.

Option 2: Refurbishment and extension of the current Roselawn Crematorium facility.

Option 3a: Demolishing of existing crematorium and creation of a new crematorium at Roselawn.

Option 3b: Demolishing of existing crematorium and creation of a new crematorium at Roselawn (inc. mezzanine floor).

Option 4a: Continuation of the Roselawn Crematorium (in its current capacity) and creation of a new crematorium (with 1 chapel and all supporting crematorium facilities) at another site in Belfast.

Option 4b: Continuation of the Roselawn Crematorium (in its current capacity) and creation of a new crematorium (with 1 chapel and all supporting crematorium facilities) at another site in Belfast (inc. mezzanine floor).

The options were all appraised in relation to both monetary and non-monetary indicators and option 2 was identified by the consultant as the preferred option.

Option two is based on refurbishment and extension at the current Roselawn Crematorium facility. The report noted that full market testing has not been undertaken in respect of the private sector and made the following recommendations:

- The appraisal team would recommend that prior to undertaking any decision to fund the preferred option; BCC undertakes a review of the marketplace (and a call for expressions of interest) to identify other potential providers of cremation facilities in BCC and NI.
- In the event that the Council decide to develop a crematorium at a site other than Roselawn, the appraisal team recommends early implementation of site searches by the Council, in consultation with the Planning Service, to identify an appropriate site for new crematorium facilities. Moreover, any land acquisition would be subject to planning permission.
- There should be an assessment by the Council of the rates charged for cremations, to local ratepayers, to those from other NI Councils, and beyond, to ensure that market rates are in place, or are introduced. This will also impact upon the private sectors' willingness to engage in this service.
- Further market testing could be undertaken to the options for financing the project and the service.

Summary of findings

Based on all the pieces of work we now know that:

- If the council proceeds with the original approach of cemetery only provision, a site of 72 acres will be sufficient to meet the council's burial needs.
- The site at Lisleen is suitable for burial provision.
- Applying a weighting for sites which would serve the North and West of the city resulted in the two sites at Dundrod coming to the top of the rank order. However no site investigations have been carried out on either site. One of these sites came forward through the expressions of interest approach.
- There are a number of options available for the development of additional crematorium facilities. Based on current trends, additional facilities would impact on the requirement for additional burial land.

Natural Burials

Members will be aware that a member of the public has recently sent a letter to Councillors asking that the Council consider the providing the option of natural burials (also known as woodland burials). Natural burials are when the body of the deceased is returned to the earth to recycle naturally in an environmentally sustainable way. The first natural burial site opened in the UK in 1993 and there are now over 250 around the UK, although there are currently none in Northern Ireland. There is an Association of Natural Burial Grounds which has a code of conduct for members including requirements around flora and fauna conservation, the use of biodegradable coffins and financial matters.

In a natural burial area graves are dug to a single depth and the body (preferably not embalmed) is buried in a bio-degradable coffin. Following an interment, the ground would be allowed to settle and would then be grassed over and a small native species tree planted in it. The area would over time become a woodland, under planted with wild flowers and would be managed for

the benefit of wildlife. The area would not have the appearance of a traditional cemetery although irregular winding paths are included to allow for visitor access. Graves are marked with a wooden marker and no other form of marker or memorial would be allowed. Fresh cut flowers would be accepted but without any wrappings or ribbons nor as an arrangement in a container.

Further work is required to investigate the suitability of providing this type of burial at Roselawn and consideration could be given to it in the development of the new section which is currently being planned.

Options

With the new information now available there are a number of options open to the council to consider:

1. Stay with the original approach and agreed to acquire and develop all or part of the site at Lisleen.
2. Given that the priority for new cemetery provision is in the North and West of the city, agree to commence site investigations into the two Dundrod sites to assess their suitability with a view to acquisition and development.
3. Abandon the current process to acquire a new cemetery and rely on the existing provision at Roselawn supplemented with additional crematorium provision in the city.
4. Option three as above but agree to commence site investigations into the Dundrod sites to assess their suitability with a view to acquisition and land banking to meet future cemetery needs.

Meeting of the Cemeteries Working Group

Following a discussion around the options for going forward the Cemeteries Working Group proposed:

1. That the issue of providing additional crematorium facilities needs to be addressed and work needs to be undertaken to identify what is required, where it would be located and the options for financing it.
2. That abandoning the current process to acquire a new cemetery and rely solely on the existing provision at Roselawn was not a feasible option.
3. That further consideration is given to tests at the Dundrod sites, to assess their suitability as cemetery sites, and that legal advice is sought on the implications of keeping Lisleen as an option while these are ongoing.
4. That further work should be taken to investigate the provision of natural burials.
5. That burial and cremation charges should be reviewed.

Resource Implications

Financial

There is provision of £13.9m in the Council's capital programme for new cemetery provision for Belfast City Council.

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

Members are asked to:

- i. agree to the recommendations of the Cemeteries Working Group and that these be brought to the Parks and Leisure Committee for consideration.

Decision Tracking

A report outlining the recommendations of the Cemeteries Working Group and the view from the Party Group Briefings will be brought to the Parks and Leisure Committee in September 2010.