



Belfast City Council

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| Report to: | Parks and Leisure Committee |
| Subject: | Natural Burials |
| Date: | 11 November 2010 |
| Reporting Officer: | Andrew Hassard, Director of Parks and Leisure |
| Contact Officer: | Claire Sullivan, Policy and Business Development Officer |

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to:

- (i) provide Members with information on natural burials;
- (ii) seek the Committee's approval to further investigate natural burials at Roselawn and develop a feasibility study; and
- (iii) seek the Committee's approval to procure technical engineering and feasibility study consultancy support.

Relevant Background Information

Members will be aware that the Cemeteries Working Group on 9th August 2010 recommended that further work was undertaken to investigate the possibility of a natural (woodland) burial site and that this was agreed at the Parks and Leisure Committee on 16 September 2010.

Members will be aware that a member of the public has recently sent a letter to Councillors asking that the Council consider providing the option of natural burials (also known as woodland burials) and that the Council's decision to agree to investigate the possibility of a natural burial site has received media coverage. The Council has also received emails of support for the provision of natural burials from The Woodland Trust and Friends of Earth Northern Ireland.

Natural burial is 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 a Natural Death Centre which established the Association of Natural Burial Grounds in 1994. The Association 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 usually 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 cuts flowers would be accepted but without any wrappings or ribbons nor as an arrangement in a container.

Key Issues

Development of natural burial ground at Roselawn

One of the options open to the Council is to develop a natural burial ground within the site at Roselawn. Roselawn Cemetery is the largest (268 acres) and busiest cemetery in Northern Ireland, carrying out 840 burials in 2009. The Council purchased an additional 10 acres in the 1980s and more recently a further 28 acres. This land is collectively called Section Y and plans are currently being drawn up to develop this as new burial ground.

Within this area provision could be made for a natural burial ground which is currently pasture/meadow green fields with mature trees and hedgerows. Tests could be carried out to determine if there is a particular area that is unsuitable for 'traditional' burial but could be used for a single depth natural burial thus maximising the use of this new land.

To comply with the Department of the Environment legislation, the ground that is selected at Roselawn Cemetery for a natural burial ground must not be located within certain distances of specific types of water; these are

- at least 10 metres from any 'dry' ditch or field drain
- at least 30 metres from any spring or any running or standing water
- at least 50 metres from any well, borehole or spring that supplies water for use.

The Council currently operate a woodland copse at the Roselawn site for cremated remains. This is an area of birch trees underplanted with naturalising bulbs such as bluebells and wood anemones which has been planned to specifically create a traditional woodland environment and to encourage fauna and wildlife. Chemical weed control is not used and in order to keep this area as natural as possible no floral tributes, plaques or any form of memorialisation can be left in the woodland copse. Cremated remains may be buried (poured into the ground or buried in a biodegradable urn) or scattered in the woodland copse. This area has been in operation since 1993 and to date 157 cremated remains have been laid to rest in this area.

Use of a private provider

In the period since the issue of natural burials was brought to the Cemeteries Working Group (August 2010), a natural burial ground has been opened in Co Wexford by The Green Graveyard Company Limited. This company is based in Co Donegal and it is currently exploring options to open a natural burial ground in Northern Ireland. The owner has expressed an interest in operating a natural burial ground on behalf of the council although no formal discussions have taken

place. If the Council were to pursue this option it would only be workable at a new site which was used exclusively for natural burials.

Next steps

It is recommended that the next step in this process is a feasibility study which will investigate the options of providing a natural burial ground at the Roselawn site. Due to the specialised nature of this topic it is recommended that the Council become a provisional member of the Association of Natural Burial Grounds to avail of their knowledge and experience. It may also be necessary to commission external support for the feasibility study and officers will endeavour to keep this to the minimum level.

It is proposed that the feasibility study will examine a range of issues related to natural burials including:

Demand for Natural Burials

Work needs to be undertaken to assess the potential demand for natural burial in Belfast. The Natural Death Centre estimate that 4% of all burials in Great Britain are natural burials and that there is a 30% growth per annum.

Impact on other provision

We will be required to assess the potential impact that providing the option of a natural burial will have on our traditional burial service and cremation and the implications that providing single use graves will have on our future burial land requirements.

Location of Natural Burial Ground

Further boreholes tests need to be undertaken within the Roselawn site to determine the rock profile and soil conditions. This will allow us to identify areas that are not suitable for traditional burials but in which we could bury one body thus maximising the use of land. Technical engineering support will be required for this element.

Costs and charges

An initial search via the internet of the charges for natural burial grounds elsewhere show that these range from £450 for a single plot to £5000 for a double plot. All of the sites looked at had an additional charge for grave digging. The charges for the new natural burial ground in Co Wexford range from €715.05 for a single plot to €2497 for a family plot. We do not currently have any information on the costs of providing natural burials and further work needs to be carried out to determine these costs and what the Council should charge for this service.

Size of plots

Another issue that needs to be considered as part of the development of the feasibility study is whether the council wishes to provide single, double or larger plots. The practice elsewhere varies with some sites providing only single plots while others also provide the option of a double plot. Initial investigations would suggest that the natural burial ground in Co Wexford is the only site to provide plots for 3 and 4 people.

Terms and conditions

As part of the development of a feasibility study terms and conditions will be

drawn up, these will include conditions relating to what is permissible on graves and the types of coffins that we will allow for this type of burial. These will be based on guidance from the Association of Natural Burial Grounds and best practice from other natural burial grounds.

Other issues may arise through the process and these will be addressed in the feasibility study.

Resource Implications

Financial

Technical engineering support - it is estimated this will be in the region of £20,000.

Feasibility study support - it is estimated that this will be in the region of £10,000 and will include the £75 membership fee for the Association of Natural Burial Grounds.

Human Resources

The feasibility study will be met through existing resources.

Asset and Other Implications

N/A

Recommendations

The Committee is asked to:

- (i) agree that council officers further investigate the feasibility of providing a natural burial ground at Roselawn and produce a feasibility study; and
- (ii) agree that council officers procure technical engineering and feasibility study consultancy support as required.

Decision Tracking

A detailed feasibility study for the provision of natural burials at Roselawn will be brought to Committee in March 2011 by the Policy and Business Officer.