

Extract from minutes of -

PARKS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE

13th JANUARY, 2011

“Cemeteries and Crematorium Charges

(Ms J. Wilson, Business Support Manager, attended in connection with this item.)

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

1. Relevant Background Information

Members will be aware of the ongoing work to secure adequate burial/cremation provision to meet future needs. A number of decisions have been made by the Committee at its meetings in September and November 2010. The main decisions being:

- **the Nutts Corner site is not suitable as a potential site for a new cemetery;**
- **site visits to the Dundrod sites to be organised for the Committee prior to initiating site investigations ;**
- **a robust plan to be developed for the provision of additional crematorium facilities;**
- **further work including a feasibility study be Pundertaken to investigate the provision of facilities for natural burials;**
- **any land acquisition for burial be on a voluntary basis; and**
- **burial and cremation charges should be reviewed.**

There is a need to review the current charges for Bereavement Services to ensure that the operating costs are covered, provision is made to cover future capital investments and to ensure that charges reflect the market norms.

The charges for burial and cremation services are normally reviewed in January along with the Department's other fees and charges. A 5% increase has currently been allowed for in the draft 2011/12 estimates.

2. Key Issues

A study was undertaken to:

- identify the true costs of cemetery and crematorium services;
- review the current pricing options;
- benchmark against similar provision within the UK; and
- identify a series of pricing options and their financial implications.

An economic appraisal of a new crematorium facility was also undertaken by BDO to explore the options for the development of a new crematorium facility and to ensure value for money would be achieved in such a new facility. Options will be presented to committee in February 2011 for the provision of additional cremation facilities.

Findings

- In comparison to the rest of the UK, the Council was generally one of the least expensive for burial and cremation charges.
- In the UK the split of cremations verses burials differs from Northern Ireland: 18% cremations in NI ;72% in UK.
- Currently for Council residents burials are 440% more expensive than cremations. This provides an incentive for people to choose cremation over burials.
- Currently 30% of all burials are from non residents of Belfast.
- 59% of cremations are from non residents of Belfast.
- There are different charges for residents and non residents with the latter subsidising the former.
- The crematorium is currently working at a high level of capacity which is 56% greater than the average UK crematorium which is unsustainable.
- BDO recommend that the rates charged for cremations to local ratepayers, to those from other NI Councils and beyond are assessed to ensure that 'market rates' are in place or introduced.
- As the Council's crematorium facility is the second cheapest in the UK an increase in the cremation rates could assist with the private sectors' willingness to engage in the provision of cremation services.

Assessment of the financial pressures on the service has been analysed for both the crematorium and cemeteries as follows:

Capital pressures

Currently legislation is having an impact on the services provided by the crematorium and the cemeteries due to the requirements of the mercury abatement legislation and health and safety legislation regarding headstone safety. A pilot headstone safety project is currently underway in the City Cemetery and it is estimated that the project could cost up to £1m over the next 10 years. The 4 furnaces in the crematorium need re-bricked every 5 years and the cremators will need replaced in the next 10 years. Given these capital requirements, it is appropriate that users contribute to the future provision of these services and that a process is identified so that such contributions can be factored into the financing of future capital requirements.

Other cities are experiencing similar financial pressures. For example, burials in Scotland have recently seen a 70% price increase with a new burial in Glasgow increasing from £658 to £1079. A cremation in Glasgow has also increased this year from £348 to £521. The explanation given for these increases was that they were needed to provide for an upgraded crematorium for the city.

Revenue pressures

The maintenance of the grounds within cemeteries is being impacted on by the increased costs including supplies and fuel. The crematorium has felt the impact of the increased utility charges and with the 4 cremators working to full capacity pressure is on to ensure that they are adequately maintained to ensure business continuity.

3. Resource implications

Financial

The analysis of the current levels of demand and future projections indicate an increased demand on our burial and cremation services. To meet that demand investment is needed not only to maintain the current service but to address legislative issues such as headstone safety and mercury abatement.

Options to address the financial pressures on the services are as follows:

An assumption has been made that the Council will maintain a pricing structure for residents and non residents and this differential in pricing will be maintained and is reflected in the options.

Options

1. Do nothing - no price increases and continue to subsidise all of the bereavement services increasing costs; currently a net cost to the rate payer of £539,000 (excluding capital costs and internal charges.)
2. Agree that the price must cover the full cost for both services i.e. move to breakeven price (full cost) in a phased approach for residents. An increase of 5% has already been included in the draft revenue estimates for 2011/12.
3. Breakeven price plus a contribution: a) to grounds maintenance for burials and b) capital and grounds costs for burials and capital costs for cremation implemented in a phased approach for residents
4. Comparable market rate for crematorium/burial charges analysis phased for residents *

Proposed new grave minimum charge against each option

~Based on current average charge

Option 1 As is - no price increase	Option 2 Full cost	Option 3 Full cost plus contribution		Option 4 Comparable rate across UK*
		a) grounds maintenance costs	b) capital and grounds costs	
Resident £491	£516 5% increase	£761 55% increase	£1085 120% increase	£818 66% increase
Non Resident £1497	£1548 5% increase	£2283 52% increase	£3255 117% increase	£2454 64% increase

(local government average across UK)*

Proposed cremation minimum charge against each option

Option 1 As is - no price increase	Option 2 Full cost Phased over two years	Option 3 Full cost plus contribution to capital phased	Option 4 Comparable rate across UK*
Resident £198	£208 rising to £297 5% to 50% increase	£297 rising to £397 50% to 100% increase	£402 103% increase
Non Resident £397	£594 50% increase	£594 rising to £794 50% to 100% increase	£804 103% increase

Once an option is agreed the implementation of the new charges would have to be phased in over 2 years depending on the option agreed.

4. Equality and good relations implications

An equality impact assessment of the scale of charges within the service was previously carried out and all issues were addressed at that time. No changes have been made to the principles underpinning their rationale.

5. Recommendations

It is recommended that option 3a is agreed for the cemetery and option 3 for the crematorium charges for residents as a phased approach over two years. Non Resident charges should be increased automatically from 2011/12.

It is recommended that the Bereavement Service undertakes an analysis of the usage of the complex range of services as set out in the pricing schedule and puts forward a proposal for rationalising the range of services and the associated charges were relevant.

6. Decision Tracking

New pricing schedule implemented from 1 April 2011 with an in year uplift for the next 2 years as per the costing option attached and to be carried out by the Business Manager and reflected in the estimates going forward.”

After a lengthy discussion, it was

Moved by Councillor D. Browne,
Seconded by the Deputy Lord Mayor (Councillor Humphrey),

That the Committee agrees to adopt option 3b in respect of the provision of new graves and option 3 in relation to the proposed cremation minimum charge.

Amendment

Moved by Councillor Hartley,
Seconded by Councillor Maskey,

That the Committee agrees to adopt option 1 contained within the report in respect of the Council's cemeteries and crematorium charges.

On a vote by show of hands six members voted for the amendment and nine against and it was accordingly declared lost.

Further Amendment

Moved by Councillor Kyle,
Seconded by Councillor Mallon,

That the Committee agrees to adopt option 2 contained within the report in respect of the Council's cemeteries and crematorium charges.

On a vote by show of hands three Members voted for the amendment and thirteen against and it was accordingly declared lost. The original proposal standing in the name of Councillor D. Browne and seconded by the Deputy Lord Mayor (Councillor Humphrey) was thereupon put to the meeting when nine members voted for and seven against and it was accordingly declared carried."