



Subject:	General Maintenance Program at Roselawn Cemetery
Date:	12 th October 2021
Reporting Officer:	Siobhan Toland, Director of City Services
Contact Officer:	Michael Patterson, Bereavement Services Manager

Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some time in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

Call-in	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues
1.1	The purpose of this report is to update Members on the current challenges around maintaining Roselawn Cemetery and to make recommendations going forwards
2.0	Recommendations
2.1	The Committee is asked to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Note the update
3.0	Main report

3.1	<p>The site at Roselawn Cemetery is the largest and busiest cemetery in Northern Ireland with a 268 acre site containing woodland, 4 lakes as well as grave and memorial tree sections. Aside from fields which are let out yearly to farmers – there are no areas of grass in Roselawn which can be cut with large machinery. Roselawn has approximately 39,000 family graves, 5,500 new unused graves and 14,000 memorial trees, and these all need to be cut around with small ride-on and pedestrian machines. Roselawn has 2 Cemetery Supervisors and 12 Cemetery Operatives who are responsible for all burials and estates management duties. Due to the pandemic there are 4 additional temporary staff employed at this site. In general, the upkeep of Roselawn is to a high standard and the site maintains its Green Flag status every year. This is evidenced by the thousands of visitors to the site every year who do not make complaints.</p> <p><i>Summer Duties</i></p>
3.2	<p>From mid- February to the end of October the grass in all the grave sections and the lawned memorial tree areas is cut every two weeks. The Council does not lift any cut grass and it is left to mulch into the ground. All flower beds are dug over, rotavated and replaced with summer plants. As it is not possible to mechanically cut around the headstones/memorials on the 39,000 used graves and therefore, these are required to be manually sprayed with weedkiller and this is usually done 3 times every summer with pedestrian knapsack sprayers. In compliance with the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985 we cannot cut any hedges before the end of August. After this staff cut the small landscape hedges within the cemetery. The large roadside boundary hedges are cut by a contractor in October and which for the above reasons cannot be done earlier. Every Saturday morning a large street sweeper cleans all the vehicular roads throughout Roselawn, however this is too large for the small pedestrian grave paths.</p> <p><i>The number of burials</i></p>
3.3	<p>It is usual during summer months for the number of burials to decrease across all our cemeteries. This means that the cemeteries workforce can be directed to grounds maintenance duties. During the summer of 2020 we conducted 27% more burials than the average for the past three years. During the summer of 2021 we conducted 32% more burials than the average of summers 2017/18/19. As Roselawn is the only Belfast City Council cemetery with new graves, most of the burials are conducted there. The labour requirement for most burials is three-fold, firstly for the gravedigging and the committal, then for topping up and pressing the soil on the grave after a couple of weeks, and then for final dressing and grass seed planting. These labour demands take place over 8 weeks</p>

and are dependent on weather conditions. The increase in burial numbers this summer has meant that the Roselawn cemetery staff were much less available to carry out grounds maintenance duties.

Staff protection measures

3.4 The burial procedure involves reducing the 2m social distancing guidance and putting in place mitigating controls around protection from Covid. As an infection control measure, the Council ceased the practice of family and Funeral Directors from being involved directly in the coffin lowering procedure and this is done solely by Council staff. Hence for the above reasons more of the cemetery staff are needed at each burial to carry this safe system of work out, and ultimately cemetery staff have been committed to burials for much of their working day.

Weather conditions

3.5 This summer the weather has been hot, humid and interspaced by wet days. These conditions are ideal for extreme vegetation growth. The grass in Roselawn grew excessively between fortnightly cuts and so the cut grass (risings) were very visible throughout the cemetery. The cut grass then gets dragged onto grave paths and was an unsightly problem this summer. These weather conditions were also ideal for the propagation of Rosebay Willowherb which is now apparent in many sites across the city. In Roselawn there was an infestation of this weed between many of the 39, 000 headstones by July. Due to the high burial operational workload the second application of chemical weed control in July was not early enough and this resulted in the weed going brown but not dying back throughout the site. The weed spraying work requires a special license (PA6) which not all cemetery staff have as this is a specialised skill. At the start of August, the tall brown weeds had become an unsightly problem through most of the grave sections. The fortnightly grass cutting regime was maintained as a priority across the entire site. However, because the grass was growing excessively between cuts, this appeared to be an additional problem. Another result of the hot damp conditions was that undergrowth proliferated throughout some of the memorial tree barked copse sections. Between June and August Roselawn received 20 complaints regarding grounds maintenance and the general condition of the site. There was also negative publicity on social media. With the high number of burials taking place, it was operationally difficult to commit the required staff

	<p>numbers to rectify the above problems in a timely manner but members should be assured that staff have been doing all they can to try and address this.</p>
3.6	<p><i>Steps taken</i></p> <p>To remove the Rosebay Willowherb it was necessary to trim or hand weed 43,500 graves. This was very labour intensive. In September some staff were moved from other cemeteries to trim or hand weed on a daily basis. In addition, it was agreed to seek additional support to tackle the issues and a contractor was employed for 3 days to assist with strimming weeds. By the 17th of September all 43,500 graves and the required sections of barked memorial tree copses had been strimmed and/or hand weeded and most of the work was done by our staff.</p>
3.7	<p>It is clearly important to conduct all estates management work at the required seasonal time, however in cemeteries burial work takes priority and if the burial workload is high it may be necessary to find staff from other sites. It is also proposed that we explore the cost of procuring a mechanical brush to fit on a small tractor which would allow us to sweep the narrow grave paths.</p>
3.8	<p><u>Financial & Resource Implications</u></p> <p>All costs are within operational budgets</p>
3.9	<p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>There are no equality or good relations issues</p>
4.0	Appendices – Documents Attached
	None