

<b>REPORT TO:</b>		Cabinet	
<b>DATE:</b>		21 June 2023	
<b>PORTFOLIO:</b>		Councillor Steven Smithson - Deputy Leader of the Council, Environmental Services	
<b>REPORT AUTHOR:</b>		Craig Haraben (Head of Environmental Services)	
<b>TITLE OF REPORT:</b>		Introduction of a weekend burial service	
<b>EXEMPT REPORT (Local Government Act 1972, Schedule 12A)</b>	<b>No</b>	Not applicable	
<b>KEY DECISION:</b>	<b>No</b>	If yes, date of publication:	

## 1. **Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 To inform Cabinet about the proposal to introduce a weekend burial service and to request funding to implement the introduction of a weekend burial service

## 2. **Recommendations**

- 2.1 That Cabinet notes the report
- 2.2 That Cabinet agrees to enter into an agreement with a contractor to deliver a weekend burial service for an initial two year period.
- 2.3 That Cabinet supports the introduction of a weekend burial service and allocates £16,500 from the Council's budget for 2023/24 to fund the service for the remainder of the current financial year.
- 2.4 That Cabinet notes the requirement to allocate £21,800 to fund the weekend burial service from the Council's 2024/25 revenue budget, subject to approval of the Council's budget for 2024/25.
- 2.5 That Cabinet agrees to increase the savings targets required within the 2023/24 & 2024/25 budgets to fund these budget increases within the approved budget resource.
- 2.6 That Cabinet delegates authority to the Head of Environmental Services, following consultation with the Portfolio Holder and Executive Director (Legal and Democratic Service) to take all reasonable steps to implement the weekend burial service, including entering into any necessary agreements with the contractor, finalising a call

out protocol and agreeing any minor amendments to the new service should anything arise once the service is implemented.

### **3. Reasons for Recommendations and Background**

- 3.1 The Council as burial authority has a duty to provide cemeteries in the Borough for residents to be buried. Currently the Council has four cemeteries in Accrington, Church, Rishton and Great Harwood which take coffin burials, albeit Great Harwood is full for new graves and any coffin burials are undertaken via re-opening family graves.
- 3.2 The Council via the Cemetery Service undertakes approximately 125 coffin burials per year across the Boroughs four cemeteries. Within the Cemetery Service fees and charges there is a cost to the customer to dig a grave for a coffin burial in one of the Council's cemeteries. Also
- 3.3 The majority of coffin burials are undertaken during normal working hours (Monday to Friday). There are some requests for burials at weekends, however as staff are not contracted to routinely work weekends any burials at weekends are undertaken if staff are available to work overtime. This does mean there are times when staff are not available to work overtime and in such circumstances the burial cannot take place at weekends. Management have had discussions with existing cemetery staff about how the Council could safely and reliably provide weekend burials by amending rotas and other working arrangements, however it has not been possible to find an agreeable way forward.
- 3.4 In addition, in some religions (e.g. Islam and Judaism) there is a religious requirement that people are buried as soon as possible after the bereavement. Having no formal working arrangements in place for weekends means that if a bereavement takes place in the Muslim community on a Friday afternoon or over the weekend, a burial cannot usually be facilitated until the following Monday (or Tuesday if a bank holiday weekend).
- 3.5 To ensure Hyndburn residents have the opportunity to hold burials at weekend if they wish to the Council carried out a tender exercise seeking a contractor with suitable skills and equipment who could be available on call at weekends to undertake burials. The tender exercise has been completed, with the outcome that a suitable contractor has been identified. If Cabinet adopt the weekend burial service customers will be able to routinely book a burial for weekends or bank holidays (excluding Christmas day and New Years day). For short notice burials customers will be able to ring an on call number between 8am and 11am on Saturdays, Sundays and bank holidays (excluding Christmas day and New Year's day) to book a burial for that afternoon. After 11am customers will need to ring the following day to book a burial.
- 3.6 There is a cost to having a contractor on call for weekends and bank holidays of £20,000 per annum. In addition to this cost each time the contractor is called out to dig a grave for a burial there is a further charge of £800 per grave. There is a surcharge of £500 to the customer to have a burial at weekend or on bank holidays in one of the Boroughs cemeteries. In the absence of any service data relating to the number of burials which take place at weekends and bank holidays, it is estimated there will be

six weekend/bank holiday burials per year, however this may change dependent on death rates.

- 3.7 This means that the estimated surcharge income relating to weekend and bank holiday burials is £3,000 and the cost of providing the service is estimated at £24,800. As this work is currently not budgeted for Cabinet will need to approve funding the difference of £21,800 per annum or part thereof for this proposed new service, should they agree to take it forward.
- 3.8 As it is unclear currently what the demand for this service will be, it is proposed that the service will need to be reviewed annually for the first few years of its operation, so that the budget requirement and the fee's payable by customers can be reviewed and adjusted as necessary.
- 3.9 The registrars service work weekends, so necessary registration paperwork can be accessed for any short notice burials at weekends. As such, this should not be a barrier to facilitating weekend burials and will not generate additional costs for the Council.
- 3.10 The funding for the increase in costs in 2023/24 and 2024/25 would require a small increase in the current savings target approved for 2023/2024 of £16,500 and £21,800 to be added to any future savings targets for 2024/25, subject to requirements as part of the full Council budget approval for 2024/2025.

#### **4. Alternative Options considered and Reasons for Rejection**

- 4.1 The Council could continue not providing a reliable weekend burial service. This has been rejected as residents in Hyndburn have requested this service and it does allow the Council to facilitate short notice burials when there are bereavements at weekends and there is a religious requirement for a burial as soon as possible after the bereavement. Weekend burials are available already at other local authorities within Lancashire (such as Blackburn with Darwen, Preston, Burnley, Lancaster and Pendle) and this service is coming to be expected as part of the standard service offered by burial authorities to enable appropriate provision for all citizens.
- 4.2 Another option would be for the Council to employ additional staff or introduce changes to the contractual terms of current staff without agreement. This has been rejected as cemetery staff already work Monday to Friday with occasional overtime and a minimum two members of staff are needed to safely undertake this type of work. The option proposed in this report is considered a more reliable and economical option, which can be reviewed in the longer term.
- 4.3 The Council could increase the £500 surcharge for weekend and bank holidays burials to recover some or all of the cost of providing this service, but this was discounted by the Portfolio Holder until there is more data available relating to the demand for this service.

#### **5. Consultations**

5.1 The subject of weekend burials has been discussed with Cemetery Service staff, the portfolio holder, ward councillors and members of the Hyndburn Muslim funeral committee.

**6. Implications**

<p><b>Financial implications (including any future financial commitments for the Council)</b></p>	<p>The estimated revenue cost of this proposed new service is £24,800 per annum (minus £3,000 in estimated surcharge income). As this proposed new service is currently unbudgeted for if Cabinet agree to take this proposal forward it will require pro rata funding of £16,500 for the current financial year. If the service continues in future years the full cost of providing the service will be £21,800 per annum and this cost will need to be accommodated within future budgets as an additional item. These additional costs can be met from the increase in the current and future savings targets in the budget.</p>
<p><b>Legal and human rights implications</b></p>	<p>The Councils Contract Procedure Rules were followed to identify a suitable contractor to undertake weekend burials.</p> <p>It is proposed that the Council will enter into an agreement with the proposed contractor, for an initial period of two years, as the tender price was provided on the basis of an initial two year appointment.</p>
<p><b>Assessment of risk</b></p>	<p>For weekend burials the contractor will be responsible for safely digging the grave and the funeral directors (or other funeral directing organisation) will be responsible for the management of the funeral and behaviour of funeral attendees.</p> <p>That being the case the prospective contractor has supplied all relevant risk assessments to undertake burials in Council cemeteries. In addition any funeral director or other funeral directing organisation wishing to hold a funeral at weekends in a Council cemetery will be required to provide appropriate risk assessments before any weekend burial can take place.</p>

<b>Equality and diversity implications</b> <i>A <a href="#">Customer First Analysis</a> should be completed</i>	See attached
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**7. Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985:  
List of Background Papers**

7.1 There are no background papers for this report

**8. Freedom of Information**

8.1 The report does not contain exempt information under the Local Government Act 1972, Schedule 12A and all information can be disclosed under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.