



REGENERATION AND ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 30TH OCTOBER 2012

SUBJECT: GRAVE PERSONALISATION

REPORT BY: CHIEF EXECUTIVE

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To report the results of a further consultation exercise with members of the public as requested by the Regeneration and Environment Scrutiny Committee.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 A report was considered by the Regeneration and Environment Scrutiny Committee on the 17th July 2012. Members resolved that further consultation should be undertaken on grave personalisation and the results reported back to the Committee.

3. LINKS TO STRATEGY

- 3.1 The Community and Leisure Services aim in its Service Improvement Plan for 2012/13 in relation to bereavement services is:

“To provide a customer focused, sensitively delivered bereavement service and to achieve excellent standards in cemetery management and maintenance”.

4. THE REPORT

- 4.1 A cross party Task and Finish Group considered a variety of issues facing the Authority's bereavement service. Cabinet endorsed their unanimous recommendations on the 28th October 2008.
- 4.2 In order for members to put this issue into context, to date, the Authority has returned 454 grave spaces to the lawn principle across some municipal cemeteries. In total there are circa 9,500 graves that are “Lawned” across the 6 cemeteries where the policy has been implemented to date. Of the grave owners consulted at Bedwellty Cemetery, there are still 0.78% of graves that still do not comply with the existing lawn policy.
- 4.3 A series of public meetings were held and officers provided appropriate information to members, some of which were in attendance. Officers met with the MP, AM and relevant elected members on the 30th March. Subsequently, officers met with the public on an individual basis on the 20th April to work towards a resolution.
- 4.4 A further consultation meeting with the public took place on the 20th September along with the Cabinet Member and appropriate officers.

- 4.5 A compromise was put forward by the Authority for consideration by members of the public. A period of grieving (one year for new graves) was suggested following which edgings, chippings etc would need to be removed from grave spaces and the plot returned to the lawn principle. This compromise was strongly opposed and unanimously rejected by members of the public at the meeting.
- 4.6 At the meeting, attendees were advised that the Authority is designing a children's section, which will include a Columbaria, which will allow bereaved families to purchase/inscribe commemorative plaques. It is likely this will be completed by March 2013.
- 4.7 Members of the public expressed a wish to have an "opt out" option whereby they can undertake grounds maintenance themselves while retaining personalised items on the grave. If at any time the plot falls into disrepair, maintenance responsibilities would revert to the Council.
- 4.8 There are distinct advantages and disadvantages of the "opt out" scheme proposed by the members of the public viz: -

Advantages

- Slightly reduce maintenance costs/obligations for the Authority;
- Would clearly appease a small number of bereaved families;
- Allows bereaved families to freely express their grief.

Disadvantages

- Inconsistency of maintenance standards;
 - Increased insurance and health and safety liabilities;
 - Inconsistency of approach across all municipal cemeteries;
 - Impedes access to other graves;
 - Impedes the re-opening of neighbouring graves.
- 4.9 Other queries raised by the members of the public were the Authority's membership of the "Charter for the Bereaved". As Charter members, the Authority agrees to provide certain "rights". The choice of graves i.e. traditional, lawn and natural being one. Whilst all these choices of graves are not available at Bedwellty Cemetery, they are provided within other cemeteries managed by the Council. This is deemed to be compliant in terms of the Charter.
- 4.10 The use of ride-on grass cutting machinery within the cemetery was also raised as an issue. It has been confirmed that only pedestrian grass cutting machinery is used.

5. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 An Eqla is not needed because this issue has been previously considered by the Council (Cabinet 28th October 2008).

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Although difficult to quantify, there are additional maintenance costs when grave spaces are personalised, which results in increased resources.

7. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 There are no personnel implications associated with this report.

8. CONCLUSIONS

- 8.1 To date, the Authority has successfully returned graves to the lawn principle at several municipal cemeteries and this has been accepted by the holders of the Exclusive Rights of Burial.
- 8.2 The enforcement of the existing Lawn Cemetery Policy enables the Authority to maintain its cemeteries in an efficient manner whilst protecting against any potential insurance claims.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 Members are asked to endorse the Council's existing lawn cemetery policy.

Author: Michael Headington, Principal Officer: Outdoor Facilities and Bereavement Services

Consultees: Anthony O'Sullivan, Chief Executive
Mark S. Williams, Head of Community and Leisure Services
Councillor David Poole, Cabinet Member for Community and Leisure Services
Councillor Tudor Davies, Chairman, Regeneration and Environment Scrutiny Committee
Councillor Elizabeth Aldworth, Vice Chairman, Regeneration and Environment Scrutiny Committee
Councillor John Bevan, Chairman, Task and Finish Group