

Meeting date: 23rd February 2021
Report to: Cabinet Member for Stronger and Safer Communities



Subject/report title: Widney Manor Cemetery

Report from: Alison McGrory – Assistant Director Communities & Partnerships

Report author/lead contact officer: Martyn Sargeant – Head of Customer Services
Julie Williams, Operational Support Manager, Bereavement Services

Wards affected:

All Wards | Bickenhill | Blythe | Castle Bromwich | Chelmsley Wood |
 Dorridge/Hockley Heath | Elmdon | Kingshurst/Fordbridge | Knowle |
 Lyndon | Meriden | Olton | Shirley East | Shirley South |
 Shirley West | Silhill | Smith's Wood | St Alphege

Public/private report: Public

Exempt by virtue of paragraph: N/A

1. Purpose of Report

1.1 To request Cabinet Member approval for the recommended option for environmental investigative works at Widney Manor Cemetery.

2. Decision(s) recommended

2.1 To approve the development of proposals for undertaking environmental remediation works at Widney Manor Cemetery.

3. Matters for Consideration

3.1 Widney Manor Cemetery, located in Bentley Heath, opened in 1992 and was extended in 2011. The area is both residential and rural in nature, with the cemetery bounded by open fields to the north, south and west. The extended area is bounded by residents of Four Ashes Road to the east. At the time of the extension, hedgerows and fencing were installed to screen residents from the cemetery.

3.2 The planning permission for the extension to the cemetery was supported by a ground water risk assessment. This analysis resulted in constraints being placed upon the planning permission due to the risk of water pollution which were identified by the Environment Agency.

- 3.3 The map at Appendix 1, illustrates the areas identified as suitable for burials. Area 1 is suitable for use for full burials at a depth to accommodate 2 burials per plot; Area 2 is potentially suitable for burials at a depth to accommodate 1 burial per plot, and Area 3 is unsuitable for burials due to shallow groundwater.
- 3.4 Further assessments were required to enable the discharge of the planning constraints. These assessments were carried out by BCL Consultant Hydrologists Ltd (BCL) a specialist hydrogeological and hydrological consultancy company.
- 3.5 The assessment identified higher groundwater levels than were indicated in the initial monitoring data presented for the planning permission. As a result the area that had been identified for burials was considerably reduced and therefore Solihull Council instructed BCL to develop options for bringing part or all of the site back to its intended use for burials.

4. What options have been considered and what is the evidence telling us about them?

- 4.1 There are 3 options to be considered.
- 4.2 The first option is to raise ground elevation levels by either regrading existing levels (raising Area 2 using materials from Area 3) or importation of external materials. The key risks associated with this approach are:
- 1) Planning consent would be required which would include a waste recovery plan and permit.
 - 2) The area would be classed as landfill which may impact on public perception of where their loved ones are being buried.
 - 3) Potentially disrupting activity from noise, dust and vehicle movement to current cemetery users. There may be disruption to normal services during this time
 - 4) Experience gained during the development of the extension has shown that residents of Four Ashes Road are likely to object to this option. This is because some of the ground raising would be at the bottom of their gardens which would mean an obstruction to the current landscape and greater impact with regards to the view of headstones. It may also have some limited impact on groundwater levels at the end of their gardens.

The main benefits of this approach are:

- 1) Potential to bring entire site back into use for burials.
- 2) Potential to receive infill materials from other SMBC developments.
- 3) Reliable and predictable method of overcoming shallow groundwater issues.
- 4) Preferred option of Environment Agency.

4.3 Option 2 would be to lower groundwater levels via gravity dewatering. The key risks associated with this approach are:

- 1) Potential benefits of this approach will not be fully understood until further investigations are undertaken and associated costs incurred.
- 2) Works may be onerous and of long duration.
- 3) Further investigations may have a detrimental impact upon existing options and burial space.

Benefits of Option 2 are:

- 1) Relatively acceptable from a planning and public perspective.
- 2) Quick to implement.
- 3) No significant visual impact upon the site.

4.4 The third option – Option 3 – combines the 2 previous approaches using ground raising and drainage across the site. This has the potential to allow double burials across Areas **2c** and 3, but would be less intrusive than Option 1, requiring less infill material and a shorter duration of works. However, this option is more complex and costly than the other options.

5. Reasons for recommending preferred option

5.1 Officers recommend Option 3, as this will allow us to bring as much of the area back into use for burials, while restricting the impact on local residents and the current landscape.

6. Implications and Considerations

6.1 State how the proposals in this report contribute to the priorities in the [Council Plan](#):

Priority:	Contribution:
Economy: 1. Revitalising our towns and local centres. 2. UK Central (UKC) and maximising the opportunities of HS2. 3. Increase the supply of housing, especially affordable and social housing.	N/A
Environment: 4. Enhance Solihull's natural environment.	N/A

<p>5. Improve Solihull's air quality. 6. Reduce Solihull's net carbon emissions.</p>	
<p>People and Communities: 7. Take action to improve life chances in our most disadvantaged communities. 8. Enable communities to thrive. 9. Sustainable, quality, affordable provision for adults & children with complex needs.</p>	<p>Improve Health and Wellbeing Build Stronger Communities</p>

6.2 Consultation and Scrutiny:

6.2.1 This report has not been viewed by Scrutiny Board.

6.2.2 A consultation exercise will be carried out with residents of Four Ashes Road

6.3 Financial implications:

6.3.1 Over the past 5 years, the number of graves bought at Widney Manor Cemetery is 536 of which 167 have been purchased in reserve for future use. The ratio of resident and non-resident purchase is 50:50. At the current fees, this would have generated an income of £1,747,360 over the 5 year period. There have been 310 interments and again, based on current fees and resident to non-resident ratio, this would have achieved £491,350 in income. Once the remaining 762 interments have been completed, then a further £1,207,770 of income can be anticipated, however, it should be noted that this income could be generated over many years.

6.3.2 If mitigating work is not undertaken then the current site will have approximately 6 years of land available for further double depth burials. This equates to 643 grave spaces. If we apply the same principles as were applied in 6.4.1, then this would generate £2,095,240 for the sale of the grave spaces and would allow for 1,286 interments. This has the potential to generate a further £1,018,540 once all interments are completed, which may be over a significant period; at this point the cemetery would then be closed.

6.3.3 If approval is obtained for the further investigation work then there is potential for the remaining site to be able to accommodate double depth burials. This has the potential to expand the working capabilities of the site for a further 10 years and provide a further 1,072 grave spaces. Again, based upon today's current prices and predictions, that would generate income of £3,494,720 in grave sales over the 10 year period and once all interments are completed a further £1,699,120.

6.3.4 It should be noted that the above figures would increase year on year once the annual inflation increases are applied.

- 6.3.5 It is anticipated that these investigative works will be funded from Bereavement Services Reserves.
- 6.3.6 There are financial implications for the further investigation, planning permission and acquiring the appropriate permits for each of the options. The approximate costs are:

Option 1 £42,916 to £48,416

Option 2 £31,612 to £45,462

Option 3 £50,402 to £65,462

6.4 Legal implications:

- 6.4.1 The potential planning implications are outlined in the body of the report

6.5 Risk implications:

- 6.5.1 The Corporate Risk Management approach has been followed.

6.6 Equality implications:

- 6.6.1 Although an equality impact assessment is not required for this proposal, as it simply underlines the council's commitment to continued use of the Widney Manor site, an informal appraisal has indicated that there would be benefits to the BAME community, specifically Muslims, as Widney Manor accommodates Solihull's dedicated Muslim burial area.

7. List of appendices referred to

- 7.1 Appendix 1 – Map of current burial restrictions at Widney Manor Cemetery
- 7.2 Appendix 2 – BCL Hydro report on the development of options for burials at Widney Manor.

8. Background papers used to compile this report

- 8.1 Bereavement Services Policy 2019

9. List of other relevant documents

- 9.1 N/A