

Meeting date: 16 March 2021
Report to: Stronger Communities & Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Board



Subject/report title: Bereavement Services Strategy Update

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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 The Council's Bereavement Services Strategy covers the period from 2019 to 2029 and was the subject of previous scrutiny in 2018/19. This report provides an update on a number of key areas of work in relation to the Strategy and the provision of services in Solihull.

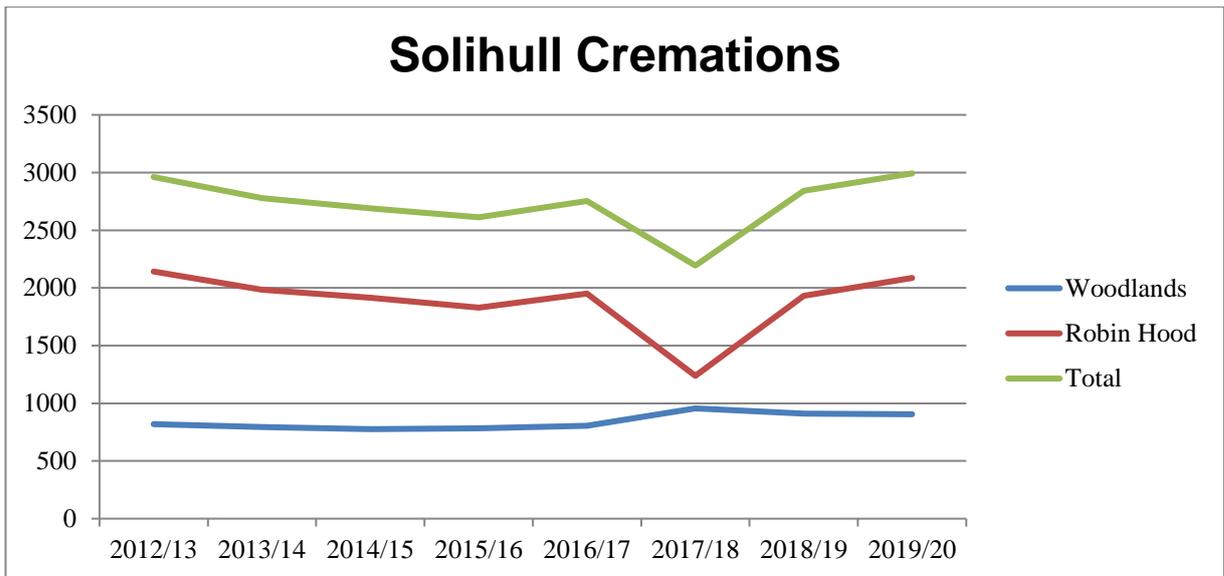
2. Decision(s) recommended

- 2.1 That the Board should endorse the work being undertaken to secure future service provision for the residents of Solihull and surrounding areas.

3. Matters for Consideration

Cremation Provision

- 3.1 Demand for cremations has remained fairly consistent over the last decade (+/-10%, which is often due to seasonal fluctuations). The graph below shows the number of cremations undertaken since 2012. NB: the dip in 2017/18 was due to the closure of Robin Hood for refurbishment.



3.2 Based on population projections and analysis of death management trends, there is an expected increase in demand for cremation over the coming years. In anticipation of this, the crematorium at Robin Hood Cemetery was refurbished 2017, ensuring service provision for the next two decades and providing facilities to handle outsize coffins.

3.3 The cremation equipment at Woodlands Cemetery is reaching the end of its working life and will need to be replaced in 2023/24. There is only one cremator and this, together with the configuration of the chapel, significantly limits capacity. The council remains committed to service provision in the north of the borough, which is important to local residents and was supported by the Scrutiny Board when it reviewed the strategy previously. Therefore, as part of a wider review of Woodlands, consideration will be given to either or both of installing additional cremation capacity and refurbishing the chapel. In the more immediate future, options are being prepared to undertake some cosmetic improvements to the chapel, in order to maintain a pleasant environment for mourners.

Environmental Considerations

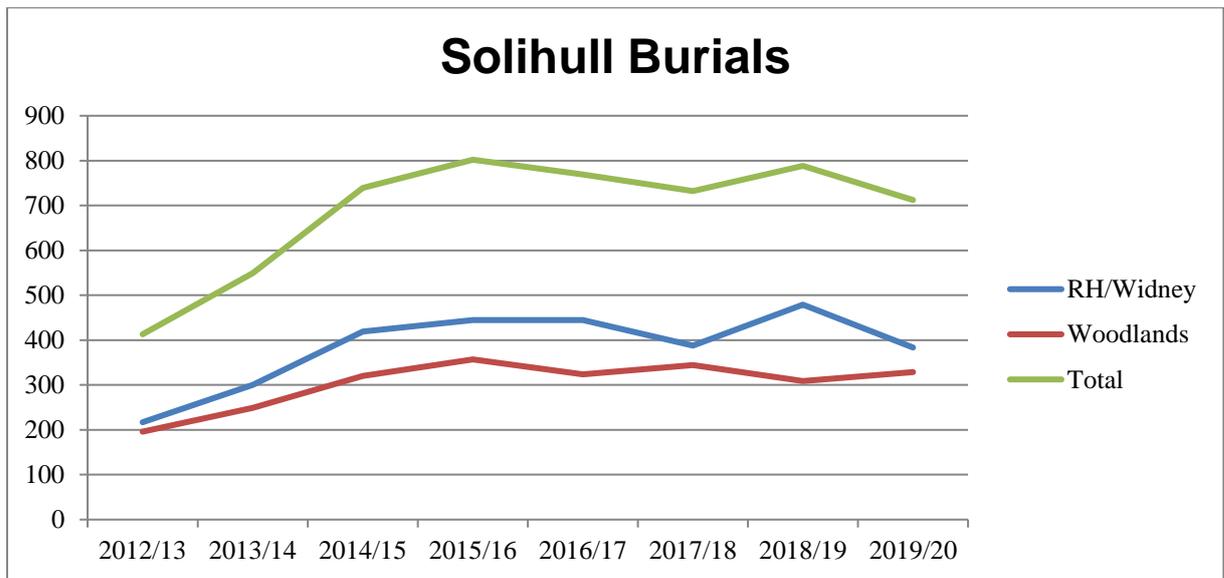
3.4 The funeral market has advanced since the Council considered its Strategy in 2018, particularly in addressing the environmental impact of burials and cremations.

3.5 Whilst demand has remained broadly consistent for both cremations and burials, it is worth noting the development of alternatives, which are likely to have an impact on future service provision. Heightened focus on environmental issues particularly has seen a growth in demand for eco-friendly funerals, including biodegradable ashes urns, alternative materials for coffins, etc. More significantly, there is a growing interest in alternative methods, such as woodland funerals. In the United States, a pilot project has identified an effective mechanism for body composting (which has now been legalised in Washington State), and there are also options for water cremation ('resomation'), a process pioneered by a UK company, and cryogenics, which is being operated in Dublin.

- 3.6 One option, therefore, would be for the installation of an environmentally-friendly alternative to the traditional fire-based cremation, enabling the council to offer eco-funerals. This will be taken into account in the preparation of options appraisals and the eventual business case for Woodlands.

Burial Provision

- 3.7 After significant growth in the first half of the decade, demand for burials has remained broadly steady. There was a decline in 2017/18, following the council's decision to stop offering the purchase of graves for future use at Woodlands (in order to more effectively manage limited remaining supply). The graph below shows the number of burials undertaken at the Council's facilities since 2012.



- 3.8 The primary concern for burials is the lack of long-term supply. Availability at Robin Hood is effectively exhausted, and availability at Woodlands is projected to run out within the next three to five years. At the time of preparing the 2019-29 Strategy, availability at Widney Manor was projected to last for another 15-20 years. This was based on the groundwater analysis undertaken as part of the original extension project in 2010. However, more recent analysis of groundwater conditions means much of the expected burial space will not be available without remediation works. Consequently, availability across the council's sites is expected to run out within the next five years.
- 3.9 In light of this, two projects are underway to explore options to secure burial provision over the longer term:
- At Woodlands, to consider an extension of the site to provide additional burial space. This could, potentially, include provision for woodland burial as part of the environmental considerations outlined above.
 - At Widney Manor, feasibility works to look at options for remediation of the site to recover some of the space lost as a result of the groundwater conditions.

Provision For Specific Communities

- 3.10 The Council makes specific burial provision for particular communities to cater for religious and social needs. This includes, for example, specific sections for Muslim and Greek Orthodox at Widney Manor. Notwithstanding the capacity pressure identified above, there is sufficient projected availability to meet the needs of these communities over the medium term.
- 3.11 Although demand for Muslim burials remains relatively low, the Council is seeing increased enquiries from neighbouring areas, particularly Birmingham, for burials in Solihull. Based on demand over recent years, there is currently sufficient adult burial space for the next three years and child burial space for the next eight to ten years. Additional adult space will be developed this summer, along with concrete chambers to cater for the Shia community. If the ground at Widney Manor can be successfully remediated, this will ensure ongoing burial provision for the whole Muslim community for the medium to long term.

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

- 4.1 The development of the Council's Bereavement Services Strategy considered a range of options and was underpinned by a commitment to service provision for the residents of Solihull, ensuring access in different parts of the borough. The options appraisal for Woodlands will include a number of options as part of developing a business case, and the feasibility work at Widney Manor will assess the viability of reclaiming land, which can then be compared with alternative options.

5. Reasons for recommending preferred option

This report provides an update to the Scrutiny Board on the existing Strategy. Further, more detailed, options papers will be available in respect of both Woodlands and Widney Manor in due course.

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. 5. Improve Solihull's air quality. 6. Reduce Solihull's net carbon emissions.	Although there are no firm proposals in this report to offer eco-funerals, the preferred option does provide scope to incorporate

	<p>this as detailed plans are prepared.</p> <p>Maintaining services within the borough will also minimise the possibility of an increased carbon footprint from longer journeys to more remote facilities.</p>
<p>People and Communities:</p> <p>7. Take action to improve life chances in our most disadvantaged communities.</p> <p>8. Enable communities to thrive.</p> <p>9. Sustainable, quality, affordable provision for adults & children with complex needs.</p>	n/a

6.2 Consultation and Scrutiny:

6.2.1 This report forms part of ongoing scrutiny of delivery of the agreed strategy.

6.3 Financial implications:

6.3.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report.

6.3.2 The costs of the feasibility works and analysis outlined above will be funded from the Bereavement Services reserve.

6.4 Legal Implications:

6.4.1 There are no legal implications arising from this report.

6.5 Risk Implications:

6.5.1 The loss of cremation and burial facilities in the north of the borough, and the general loss of burial space, are identified as risks as part of the Council's risk management approach. The options outlined in this report are part of the risk mitigation strategy to enable the Council to address the service loss risk.

6.6 Equality implications:

6.6.1 There are no equalities implications arising from this report in itself, but an equality impact assessment will be prepared in respect of both the Widney Manor and Woodlands projects. The proposals will also support the Council's fulfilment of its public sector equality duty to eliminate discrimination, by securing provision of dedicated burial areas for all faith groups, avoiding any indirect indiscriminatio arising from requiring residents to arrange funerals to be held further afield.

7. List of appendices referred to

7.1 None

8. Background papers used to compile this report

Report to Cabinet Member for Stronger and Safer Communities on 29 May 2019 - *Review of Bereavement Services 10 Year Strategy*.

9. List of other relevant documents

Not applicable