

# **STRONGER COMMUNITIES & NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES SCRUTINY BOARD**

**16 MARCH 2021**

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## **STRONGER COMMUNITIES & NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES SCRUTINY BOARD**

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**(VIRTUAL MEETING)**

**MINUTES (EXTRACT)**

### **1. BEREAVEMENT SERVICES STRATEGY UPDATE**

In attendance: Mrs Alison McGrory (Assistant Director – Communities & Partnerships); Martyn Sargeant – (Head of Customer & Library Services); and Councillor Mrs A Rolf – Cabinet Member (Stronger & Safer Communities).

To Board received a detailed update from the Council's Head of Customer & Library Services on a number of key areas of work in relation to the Council's current Bereavement Services Strategy (2019-29) together with the provision of (and demand for) services within Solihull.

As a result of the report, the following questions and observations were noted:

- Eco-friendly funerals – were there any specific plans for Solihull? Officers highlighted the emerging technologies to support this aspect of the Service. These would be included within the continual development of the Service's business plan as possibilities for the future and in longer-term strategies to ensure funeral preference trends could be met.
- Woodland burials – what was our approach to this type of funeral and how might it contribute to new tree planting? Officers reported that Solihull had a woodland burial site (within private ownership) located near to the Borough boundary with Coventry and this was a popular funeral choice. Officers envisaged this funeral type to remain popular and future land availability was an important consideration in strategic planning over the longer-term. Members highlighted the importance of planning for alternative funeral provision, especially woodland burials, whereby new tree or shrub planting could be associated with a lasting memorial.
- Robin Hood Crematorium – would recent upgrades be used as a benchmark for future upgrades to Woodlands Crematorium? Officers advised that the buildings and facilities at each location had variations which meant that each site would be considered on its own merits. New technologies for funerals was continual, therefore, future upgrades and layout revisions to Woodlands Crematorium would be planned around the best use of new technology and the individual constraints and considerations of that particular site at the time of upgrade.
- Communication and information – Members acknowledged that funeral planning was a sensitive topic and welcomed initiatives that increased funeral choice and publicised the availability of those services. It was suggested that such initiatives should aim to encourage families to talk about funeral provision at an early stage and consider the environmental funeral choices available to them. Officers advised of recent work undertaken by the Competition Market Authority (CMA), their recent report on the openness of the funeral market and some new requirements that would be taking effect over the next 12 months, or so, regarding the availability of funeral information together with the introduction of a low-cost funeral choice.
- Competition Market Authority (CMA) - Members asked what progress had been made towards the implementation of the CMA recommendations? Officers advised that the recommendations made towards the provision of information and pricing was more of an issue for the funeral directors themselves and less of an issue for the local authority. Options for low-cost funerals were currently being considered and it

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was envisaged that a proposal would be forthcoming by the end of the year for consideration. Members welcomed the CMA recommendations and ensuing work streams.

- Greek Orthodox & Muslim burials – Members asked what capacity was being planned for funeral provision for these communities in our longer-term strategies and how we were addressing the challenges posed by water-logged ground for future land allocation? Officers reported that the future provision of burial space would look to cater for the whole community regardless of religion. Ongoing considerations at Widney Manor Cemetery was also reported regarding land availability and remediation works for water-logged ground on part of the site preventing its future use. The report also highlighted that further option papers would be presented to this scrutiny board in respect of Woodlands and Widney Manor Cemeteries in due course.
- Widney Manor Cemetery – Members highlighted a current issue which involved the use of a gazebo by a mourning family and requested further information. Officers advised that the issue was currently being sensitively investigated.
- Funeral provision for residents living within neighbouring authorities – Members sought further information as to why residents living outside the Borough chose to use Solihull's provision. Officers advised of a number of scenarios which attributed to this.

Councillor Mrs A Rolf – Cabinet Member (Stronger & Safer Communities) reiterated some of the considerations for the future upgrade of Woodlands Cemetery together with the content and recommendations of the Competitions Market Authority report, particularly the openness of pricing and funeral planning by families at an early stage; together with the importance of a future, low-cost, funeral option.

In conclusion, the Board welcomed the report and the ongoing work within the service area. Members also congratulated officers for the service provision maintained during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, particularly new ways of working such as virtual funeral services.

### RESOLVED

That, subject to the comments and views recorded in the preamble above, the Board **UNANIMOUSLY** made the following **RECOMMENDATIONS** to the **Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Safer & Stronger Communities**:

That, subject to the preamble above, the Board:

- (i) Endorses the work being undertaken to secure future service provision for the residents of Solihull and surrounding areas; and
- (ii) Welcomes the opportunity to consider future reports in respect of options for future service provision at Woodlands and Widney Manor Cemeteries in due course.