

SCRUTINY PANEL A

Meeting held in the Committee Room, Council Offices, Urban Road, Kirkby-in-Ashfield,

on Tuesday, 10th January, 2017 at 6.30 pm

Present: Councillor Amanda Brown in the Chair;

Councillors Rachel Bissett, Ben Bradley,
Tony Brewer, Glenys Maxwell, Lauren Mitchell
and Helen-Ann Smith.

Officers Present: Lynn Cain, Sam Dennis, Joanne Hall and
Mike Joy.

SA.10 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary and Non-Disclosable Pecuniary/Other Interests

No declarations of interest were made.

SA.11 Minutes

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 10th November, 2016, be received and approved.

SA.12 Scrutiny Review of Cemeteries (Home-Made Kerb Sets)

The Chairman introduced the item and briefly summarised the business from the last meeting whereby Members were introduced to the new topic regarding home-made kerb sets within cemeteries.

The previous presentation had highlighted the problems surrounding the erection of home-made kerb sets within the Council's cemeteries and the impact this was having on maintenance staff and visitors alike. There had been a ban on the installation of such kerb sets since 2007 and this restriction was contained in the Cemetery Rules and Regulations Booklet that was currently handed out to any purchasers of burial plots.

However, over the past few years there had been a noticeable increase in kerb sets and these had often encroached on land beyond their allocated plots and caused ongoing difficulties for staff trying to maintain the grounds to an acceptable standard.

The Panel Members had recognised that this was a very sensitive topic and that any recommendations would need to be considered with care and attention. It had therefore been agreed at the last meeting that some

exploratory work would need to be undertaken by officers to enable Members to fully explore the options available to them.

At this point Sam Dennis, the Council's Service Lead for Waste and Environment and Joanne Hall, the Cemetery Development Officer, gave brief updates in relation to the recommendations arising from the last meeting of the Committee as follows:-

Council Installation of Kerb Sets – Costings

Officers were asked to undertake an initial evaluation exercise to ascertain potential costs for the Council to provide a service to install kerb sets on behalf of plot owners. To ensure all relevant health and safety regulations would be met, the installations would need to be undertaken by qualified stonemasons who generally work in pairs due to the heavy nature of the work involved.

To commission this installation work on an ad hoc basis would cost in the region of £2,000 to £2,500 per kerb-set and if a stonemason was recruited to the Authority, this would be in the region of £26,000 salary per year.

Purchase of Smaller Grass Trimmers

Officers were asked to investigate the possibility of equipping cemetery staff with smaller grass trimmers and gardening equipment to enable the grass to be better maintained in between graves. Having considered the proposal and taking into account good practice controls to eliminate or reduce vibration risk to employees, it became clear that purchasing smaller, more generic equipment would not be feasible. The equipment currently used by cemetery staff was of an industrial standard to allow for high usage with low vibration.

Feedback/Comments from Cemetery Visitors and Plot Owners

It was agreed at the last meeting that options could be considered for receiving feedback/views from visitors (local and out of district) to the Council's cemeteries in relation to the increasing presence of kerb sets and their impact, positive or negative, on the quality of the setting as a place of mourning and remembrance.

Having considered the possibility of ascertaining visitors' views in relation to the increasing presence of kerb sets within cemetery sites, officers were of the opinion that it would be insensitive to discuss such an emotive issue with grieving relatives and friends or visitors to the cemetery sites. From previous experience, it was also acknowledged that there would inevitably be responses 'for' and 'against' the presence of kerb sets and it would be impossible for the Council to show its allegiance to either view in relation to their contribution, or otherwise, to the grieving and mourning process of individuals.

The Chairman took the opportunity to remind the Panel that a site visit had been undertaken by officers and Members recently to view first-hand the problems being experienced in relation to the increasing presence of home-made kerb sets within the Council's cemetery sites.

A lengthy debate ensued whereby Members and officers discussed the following:-

- a suggestion to concrete in-between the burial plots of children's graves (particularly the paths) to ensure ease of future maintenance and thus relaxing the rules to allow kerb-sets to remain or be installed as appropriate;
- to concur that seeking visitors' views in relation to the impact of kerb sets would result in disparate results that would be difficult for the Council to analyse or interpret meaningfully;
- acknowledgement that any enforcement action to remove kerb sets from cemetery sites would need to be handled carefully and sensitively to minimise distress to relatives, friends or owners of burial plots;
- acknowledgement that the installation of kerb sets by the Council would not be cost effective and therefore the possibility for the work to be undertaken professionally (in accordance with strict guidelines) but remain the responsibility of the plot owner;
- the ongoing difficulties being experienced by cemetery staff to cut the grass satisfactorily in-between graves and the poor impression this ultimately creates in relation to the Council's perceived standards of care and maintenance of its cemetery sites;
- the problems associated with the 'digging out' of graves on plots flanked by graves with kerb sets (new and old) with mechanical digging equipment being unable to access the area safely to undertake the work required;
- the possibility for undertaking selective enforcement to remove kerb sets dependent on their size and level of hindrance to surrounding graves and burial plots;
- the problems associated with untended kerb sets falling into disrepair and decay and their impact on the cemetery site as a place of mourning and remembrance;
- the efforts undertaken by Council staff to contact owners/relatives of graves and kerb sets that have fallen into disrepair to request that the graves be tidied/repared as appropriate;
- the importance of having a clear policy with guidelines that can be easily followed and understood with any enforcement action being robust and consistent for all owners/relatives of graves and burial plots;
- the envisaged difficulties regarding enforcement of the ban for owners of kerb sets post 2007 whilst allowing kerb sets installed pre 2007 to remain in situ;
- the benefits of reiterating the requirements outlined in the Cemetery Rules and Regulations Booklet to relatives of the deceased, at a suitable time once the initial period of intense grief and mourning has passed, to enable the information to be more readily understood and taken on board as appropriate;

Following the discussion the Panel considered various recommendations to submit to Cabinet for consideration. The Chairman took the opportunity to thank Sam Dennis and Joanne Hall for their updates to the Panel and their contributions towards the review.

RESOLVED that

a) the following recommendations be submitted to the next available meeting of the Cabinet for consideration:-

1. the current Cemetery Rules and Regulations regarding the prevention of erection of home-made kerb sets within the Council's cemeteries, be upheld;
2. prior to any strict enforcement of the Council's cemetery regulations (in relation to the removal of home-made kerb sets), a targeted campaign be developed and undertaken by the Council's Communications Team to gradually raise the profile and awareness of the issue through recognised media outlets;
3. it be reiterated by the Council that the issue of enforcement action in relation to the removal of home-made kerb sets be dealt with sensitively and compassionately whilst liaising with grieving relatives and friends of deceased loved ones;
4. to investigate the possibility of including a variety of photos of home-made kerb sets within information packs given to purchasers of burial plots to highlight the problems associated with their deterioration and subsequent blight on the surroundings, their encroachment onto adjacent plots and the difficulties being experienced by staff endeavouring to maintain the site around them;
5. the current procedures undertaken by the Council to assist purchasers of burial plots and the support offered to funeral directors, be strengthened to ensure that guidance is clear regarding the prohibited erection of home-made kerb sets;
6. the development of a cemetery guide (small pamphlet size) to assist burial plot owners and grieving relatives/friends to understand the rules and restrictions as applied to Ashfield cemetery sites and to circulate as widely as possible to appropriate venues (i.e. funeral directors, churches, libraries, bereavement charities, community venues etc.);
7. an initial exercise be undertaken with the help of local community groups to consider the possibility of providing a memorial/reflection area or community garden within each of the Council's cemeteries to enable grieving relatives, friends and visitors to place items of remembrance for their loved ones.

b) to consider a minority recommendation from the Ashfield Independent Group as follows:-

1. the current Cemetery Rules and Regulations regarding the prevention of erection of home-made kerb sets within the Council's cemeteries, be amended to allow for the installation of home-made kerb sets in accordance with agreed criteria to be specified at a later date;
2. the Regulations be also amended to include a condition that should a home-made kerb set fall into disrepair, the Council have permission to remove it should all attempts to contact the owner of the burial plot to repair/reinstate the kerb set prove unsuccessful.

(During consideration of this item, Councillor Tony Brewer and Helen-Ann Smith entered the meeting at 6.37 p.m.)

The meeting closed at 7.34 pm

Chairman.