

Report to Leader of the Council

Subject: Council Service Changes Due to COVID-19 – Cemeteries

Date: 31 March 2020

Author: Acting Chief Executive

Wards Affected

All

Purpose

For the Leader of the Council to authorise, until further notice:

The introduction of temporary changes to the delivery of cemetery services during the Covid-19 pandemic in order to reduce the risk of infection to the public and staff.

Key Decision

This is a key decision as it is likely to have significant impact on residents living in two or more wards.

Recommendations

That the Leader of the Council:

- 1) Authorises, until further notice a restriction on the number of mourners attending each burial service to 15.
- 2) Authorises the temporarily suspension of the back filling of graves during the Covid-19 pandemic where appropriate in line with this report.
- 3) Delegates authority to the Director responsible for Cemeteries to restrict the number of burial services held per day at Carlton, Redhill and Gedling cemeteries should this become necessary, in line with this report.
- 4) Delegates authority to the Director responsible for Cemeteries, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, to close Cemeteries to the public save for those attending funerals or burial services, should this become necessary, in line with the report.

1 Background

1.1 Following on from the recent measures and resulting legislation introduced by government in relation to isolation and reduced social contact during the Covid -19 pandemic, the Council has had to make some very difficult decisions about the delivery of services and provision of facilities, in order to comply with government measures and in order to protect staff and residents.

1.2 The Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions)(England) Regulations 2020 ("the Regulations"), came into force last week and legalised requirements on certain businesses to close as well as providing clarity around social distancing measures and potential enforcement by the Police and Local Authorities where the Regulations are not complied with.

1.3 Specifically with reference to burials and cremations, the Regulations say as follows:

A person who is responsible for a crematorium or burial ground must ensure that, during the emergency period, the crematorium is closed to members of the public, except for funerals or burials.

1.4 In addition, the Regulations provide clarity around what gatherings are permitted, the Regulations provide:

During the emergency period, no person may participate in a gathering in a public place of more than two people except-

(a) Where all persons in the gathering are members of the same household

(b) Where the gathering is essential for work purposes

(c) To attend a funeral

1.5 In respect of attendees at funerals, the Regulations restrict attendees to the following:

(i) a member of the person's household

(ii) a close family member, or

if no-one within sub-paragraphs (i) or (ii) are attending, a friend;

- 1.6 The Council is working hard to try and maintain critical services but resource to deliver these services is limited. As well as following government regulations and guidance, the Council needs to ensure the delivery of cemetery services in a way that protects staff and the public as far as possible from the risk of infection from Covid-19.
- 1.7 In order to facilitate compliance with the Regulations in respect of social distancing, measures to restrict access to the public to Redhill, Carlton and Gedling cemeteries has been considered. At this time, there is no specific requirement to close burial grounds, only crematoriums. This may change over time and will need to be kept under review, but at present, closure of the cemeteries to the public is not considered necessary. Individuals visiting the cemeteries may wish to do so as part of their daily exercise which is permitted. The public should not however be congregating at cemeteries other than for burial services. During such gatherings, social distancing measures should still be maintained such as keeping 2 metres apart.
- 1.3 At the present time, the Council offers memorial services within Carlton and Redhill cemeteries for mourners, and a graveside internment at the burial site at all cemeteries. The resource which is utilised to continue to safely deliver memorial services within cemetery buildings, ensuring social distancing and hygiene requirements are maintained is at present, manageable. Even with restricted numbers of attendees, however, the building requires thorough cleansing between each service and suitable arrangements made to ensure mourners are kept apart. At the present time, the demand for the number of services being held inside the Cemetery buildings is sustainable with just 2 services booked a day. This gives sufficient time for thorough cleansing between services. However, as staffing levels may reduce, and the number of burials potentially increases, the provision of this facility for services inside the buildings will need to be monitored and kept under review, to ensure the numbers of ceremonies booked does not become unmanageable. Similarly if there is an increase in burial services required by the graveside, and this impacts on the ability to deliver the same level of services inside cemetery buildings this will need to be managed.
- 1.4 Whilst the regulations provide that householders, or close family members may attend funerals, this is not further defined. The number of close family members could vary hugely from family to family, so, in order to try and manage this, it is considered that some restriction on numbers of attendees at funerals should be made. Government have not provided a limit, but looking at other Authorities and how they have applied the guidance, fifteen is considered to be a reasonable number of attendees, but fewer wherever possible. Again, it is recognised that such restrictions will be deeply upsetting to families who would expect a larger number of attendees at funerals. The restriction is however a way to ensure that

immediate family members do get the opportunity to attend funerals wherever possible whilst reducing the likely risk of infection. Those attending funerals should comply with social distancing requirements and maintain a 2 metre separation from each other.

- 1.5 Currently, in accordance with some cultural and religious requirements, the Council permits family members to back-fill or cover over graves themselves using Council tools. This can be a lengthy process with mourners passing shovels between them to fill the grave. Whilst it is understood that this is a significant part of the burial process in some cultures and religions, the process itself poses significant risk of the transmission of infection between individuals and is not necessarily in the spirit of the measures required to maintain social distancing.

2 Proposal

- 2.1 It is proposed, having considered the Regulations and guidance that Carlton, Redhill and Gedling Cemeteries remain open to the public for the time being. It is proposed however that delegation be given to the Director responsible for Cemeteries, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, to take the decision to close cemeteries to the public, save for those attending funerals or burials, should this be necessary in the future.
- 2.2 It is proposed that in order to protect staff and the public and reduce the risk of infection during funeral services that the number of those attending funerals be restricted to 15. This is in line with other authorities and still enables a reasonable number of attendees and family members at burials whilst still in accordance with social distancing rules. Anyone who has symptoms of Covid-19 should be isolating and should not be in attendance at funerals and measures including distancing between those attending the funeral should be adhered to.
- 2.3 It is proposed that in order to protect public and staff from the risk of infection of Covid-19 during burial services that the usual tradition of backfilling of graves by family members be restricted. Whilst it is recognised that this will have a significant impact on some individuals it is a measure that is considered necessary to enable the protection of the public and staff and by extension, the continued operation of cemetery services. Wherever it is possible to safely allow backfilling without the use of equipment, this will be managed by cemetery staff.
- 2.3 Whilst it is proposed that these measures are approved until further notice, the Council will of course keep this situation under review. As part of this review it is proposed that a delegation be given to the Director responsible for Cemeteries to apply further restrictions to limit the number of funerals held at the Council's cemeteries. This delegation only to be exercised when these measures become necessary to protect the safety of the public

and staff.

3 Alternative Options

- 3.1 An alternative option is for operations to continue as at present. The Council has a responsibility to its residents to ensure that they remain healthy and safe, particularly whilst on Council premises. These measures, are considered absolutely necessary at the current time to reduce social contact in our cemeteries and to protect staff who deliver cemetery services.

4 Financial Implications

- 4.1 There are no significant financial implications arising from this report.

5 Equality Impact

- 5.1 There will be potentially negative impacts of these measures on a range of service users who fall within the protected characteristics of race and religion who may not have the opportunity to carry out burials in line with their culture or faith requirements. There may be positive impacts on those falling within the protected characteristics of disability and potentially age as the measures will reduce opportunities for social interaction and protect those vulnerable groups from the risk of infection. No further actions are recommended as a result of this equality impact review.

6 Appendices

- 6.1 None

6 Background Papers

- 6.1 No specific background papers have been identified but the Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020 and government guidance have been considered.

7 Reasons for Recommendations

- 7.1 To take proportionate action in relation to the current COVID-19 pandemic aimed at protecting staff and the residents of the Borough and to ensure that measures in respect of social distancing are supported as far as possible in our cemeteries.