

BLACKBURN WITH DARWEN BOROUGH COUNCIL

PLACE Overview and Scrutiny Committee

15 March 2021

Focus of the Committee – Cemeteries, Burials and Cremations

The Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee has been looking at the Council response to the pandemic and its role in recovery. The committee wish to look at cemeteries, burials and cremations and consider and discuss responses to the following questions:

1. What issues has the service had to address with increased demand for burials in the last year and how have these been overcome?

The service had to prepare sufficient graves in preparation for increased burial numbers, by pre-digging graves and keeping on top of these, to accommodate rises in death rates across the borough.

The service also had to work within Government legislation that saw restrictions on access to cemeteries and crematoriums with areas being closed, such as the crematoria for all but cremation services, plus cemeteries initially also, aside from services. Signage and communications had to be provided. The Government legislation periodically changed during the pandemic and cemetery access was eventually provided for those wishing to pay their respect to loved ones, but crematoriums remain closed to all but cremation services.

Further Government restrictions on numbers attending both burials and cremations have changed periodically over the last 12 months, with the current restrictions allowing 22 mourners in the crematorium and 30 mourners at burials, to enable social distancing to be maintained. Face coverings are also mandatory for those who do not have any underlying conditions in the crematorium, with the council providing them free to those who do not bring them.

A screened lectern in the crematorium was provided to enable the clergy and officiates to deliver their services safely behind a clear screen in the chapel.

Restrictions on touching the caskets in the crematorium was introduced, to make sure that potential Covid transmission to council staff was minimised.

The Council also introduced webcasting of cremation services early April 2020, which has been positively welcomed. This has also been supplemented by additional music and video memorials being made available for cremation services.

We have also relaxed the restrictions on filming in cemeteries, to enable burial services to be provided by family members – webcasting of burials is not possible due to the lack of Wi-Fi availability at gravesides.

Occasional breaches of numbers attending funerals has occurred, with these incidents reported directly to the Police, who are responsible for enforcing the legislation relating to gatherings. Where these incidents occur, the Council also writes to the funeral organisers, including funeral directors, requiring them to ensure the applicable number attending is maintained.

Lighting has been provided for burials during the darker evenings in winter, to ensure numbers being buried each day are maximised.

A temporary toilet facility has been hired, with regular cleaning taking place during the pandemic, given that during high numbers of funerals, there is limited access to toilet facilities.

2. What is the current capacity remaining in the boroughs cemeteries and how long have we left at current cemeteries before we reach capacity?

Depending on the death rate, the capacity for new graves could be 5 to 7 years at Pleasington Cemetery and c.2 years at Darwen East Cemetery. It must be noted that there are also many family plots including pre-purchased graves at both sites with additional grave spaces for those family members.

3. If we need additional burial space where do we go next, how do we identify potential sites and how long would it take to bring these into service for burials?

Work is already underway to identify new burial space within the borough, with the Council's Growth team looking at this via the Local Plan development. A shortlist of sites has been identified for further desk top analysis, from which, preferred sites will be taken to have onsite testing and evaluation, to ensure that the land is suited to multiple depth graves.

The sites will be finalised later this year, from which planning applications will be sought and then contracts let for the development of the sites. It is expected that new sites would be available to receive burials from 2023.

4. Have we been able to keep up with demand for cremations?

The service has introduced shift systems in the crematorium to deal with up to 14 cremations a day at peak times to meet the increasing demand for cremations.

More staff were trained last year to provide cremations. Cremation numbers have periodically peaked in line with the death rate across the borough, but thankfully are presently back to usual levels.

The cremator relining has been an issue that needed completing, as it is due every 6 years, which coincided with late summer 2020. To ensure we were able to provide timely cremations during the pandemic, we could only have one cremator relined thus far, the second cremator is to be relined from 17th March 2021.

Cemeteries and Crematorium Staff

The Cemeteries and Crematorium staff have been amazing throughout the pandemic. The health and wellbeing of these staff has been paramount, with support provided, new risk assessments and safe working practices introduced, including staff social distancing, wearing face coverings, having access to support and counselling services. Thankfully, we have also been able to secure the opportunity for the cemeteries and crematoria staff to have the Covid vaccination.