

Report to	-	Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date	-	11 September 2017
Report of the	-	Executive Director of Business Operations
Subject	-	Cemetery Provision and Charging Structure

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**Recommendation:** It be **RESOLVED:** That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends to Cabinet that Officers continue to monitor cemeteries income and report as part of the regular fees and charges report any significant changes in demand for future consideration.

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**Service Manager: Brenda Mason**

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## Introduction

1. Following a reduction in the income generated by Cemetery Services in 2016/17 Overview and Scrutiny were tasked by Cabinet with reviewing cemetery provision and the charging structure (Minute CB16/58 refers).

## Overview of Service Provision

2. Rother District Council provides land for burial services at Bexhill and Rye cemeteries. Both sites have recently been extended to provide facilities for a minimum of a further 100 years. Provision outside of the Council's control and ownership also exists within a number of open churchyards and cemeteries across the District.
3. The Council does not offer a cremation service; this is provided by neighbouring authorities at Eastbourne (Hide Hollow), Tunbridge Wells (Benhall Mill Road) and Hastings (The Ridge). Wealden District Council is currently constructing a crematorium south of Horam (Appendix 1 location map).
4. The Council has a statutory duty to arrange for the burial or cremation of the body of any person found deceased in its area where it appears that no other suitable arrangements will be made. However there is no statutory provision to provide cemeteries or crematoria.

## Findings

5. The current charges associated with interments within the cemeteries at Bexhill and Rye cover the costs of the services provided. This includes contractor, grounds maintenance and administration costs.
6. In recent years the number of interments has dropped, along with the number of exclusive rights of burial granted and this has had an impact on total income for the service (Appendix 2 – Figures 1, 2 & 3).

7. Officers reported to Cabinet in December 2016 (Minute CB16/58 refers) that although there are a number of contributory factors in the drop in income, there is a concern that the level of charges could be a consideration, particularly when compared with those made by other authorities (Appendix 3).
8. In conjunction with consultation with local funeral directors, officers have established that the demand for interments for both ashes and full burials has marginally reduced on a national basis. The costs of an interment, including those charges made by the directors themselves, are a contributory factor. However it was also recognised that there were other reasons that have had an effect. These include the move towards what is seen as more ethical choices such as woodland, green and natural burials alongside a more transient population where families seek alternatives to traditional interments.
9. Funeral directors have however confirmed that within Rother there is a continued demand for ashes interments and full burials in our cemeteries. This demand has the potential to increase as the population of Rother grows and the projected death rate increases.
10. For the first quarter of 2017/18 monitoring has shown a rise in income compared to the same period 2015/16 and 2016/17 (Appendix 2, Figure 4).
11. The public are able to purchase exclusive rights of burial for 50 years. In the first four months of 2017 the number of rights purchased was 21; this is a significant rise on the same period in 2016 where only 10 were purchased (Appendix 2, Figure 5).
12. Within the last fifteen years officers have commissioned a number of feasibility studies in relation to the creation of a crematorium within the District, the last in 2012/13. The findings of these studies found that the capital investment required would be in the region of £3,500,000 dependent on the purchase price of the land, size of the buildings, the number of cremators and the facilities offered, with a minimum payback period of 30 years. The conclusion of these studies showed that due to the close proximity of established services there was not a sufficient business case for the Council to develop and operate its own crematorium.

## **Recommendations**

13. The recent increase in grant fees and interments demonstrates that the policy of restricting fee rises in the last two years may be having a positive impact. However this short timescale does not provide conclusive data. It is therefore recommended that the monitoring of income continues and any significant changes reported to Cabinet as part of the regular fees and charges report.
14. Members may consider a further feasibility study to explore the potential income generation from a crematorium within the District. It should be noted that it is unlikely that any further studies would provide a different outcome to those previously undertaken. This would be even more evident when the crematorium in Wealden completes and for this reason is not recommended at this stage.

## **Conclusion**

15. The annual income from the cemeteries service is likely to continue to fluctuate due to a variety of factors including changes in habits and traditions of local families, the health and life expectancy of residents, abnormal weather such as heat waves and prolonged cold spells and the numbers of people living in the District. The most recent data shows an increase in the demand for services which, if continues, will bring income back within budget. Through continued monitoring, appropriately managed charges and dedicated officers that ensure facilities offered by the Council are in excellent order, the provision should continue to provide an income sufficient to maintain services.

Dr Anthony Leonard  
Executive Director of Business Operations

## **Risk Assessment Statement**

There are financial and reputational risks associated with the setting of cemetery service charges. The Council's policy is to recover the costs of providing services where permitted and, where appropriate, make provision for additional income. Future cemetery fees and charges proposals will take into account demand and other local providers' charges to protect the current income levels.