

**STRATEGIC CEMETERIES AND CREMATORIUM
DEVELOPMENT WORKING GROUP**

Minutes of Meeting of 2nd April, 2025

Members Present: Alderman Rodgers (Chairperson); and
Councillors Black, Bower, Doherty,
Ferguson and Flynn.

In Attendance: Mrs S. Toland, Director of City Services;
Mr. S. McBride, City Protection Manager;
Mr. M. Patterson, Bereavement Services Manager;
Ms. S. Kalke, Client Manager (Property and Projects);
Mr. N. Brennan, Project Manager (Property and Projects); and
Mrs. L. McLornan, Committee Services Officer.

Apologies

No apologies were reported.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 15th January, 2025 were taken as read and signed as correct.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were recorded.

Bereavement Services Operational Update

The City Protection Manager provided the Working Group with an overview of the ongoing work within Bereavement Services.

He explained that the updated Bereavement Scale of Charges had been communicated to all stakeholders, including Funeral Directors and Health Trusts, which had commenced on 1st April, 2025.

The Members were reminded that, in August 2024, the Public Records Office NI (PRONI) had approached the Council to assist in the provision of burial and cremation records between 1922 and 1995 relating to eleven historical institutions. The City Protection Manager explained that the Council had established a data sharing agreement with PRONI under its duty to comply with the Inquiries Act 2005.

The Working Group was advised that bi-annual maintenance of the cremators would take place from 25th to 29th April and that had been communicated to Funeral Directors.

The Service had created front facing Customer Service Standards for Cemeteries which would be available through the Council website.

The Working Group was advised that the grass cutting programme had been restarted across all sites and that the service had invested in new equipment including lawnmowers and strimming equipment. Following complaints regarding weed control during 2024, maintenance schedules had been updated in advance of the current growing season.

The City Protection Manager advised that a burial authority could construct rules and regulations for the use of cemeteries under the Public Health Ireland Act 1878 Regulation 181. He explained that the Service was currently reviewing the existing cemetery rules and regulations and that targeted engagement sessions with relevant minority groups and service users had been carried out. Any proposed changes to the rules would be considered by CMT and brought to the Working Group before going out to consultation.

The Members were reminded that, in 2022, the Council had obtained Historic Environment Division (HED) funding to complete condition surveys in the four historic cemeteries which were currently closed and not open to the public. It was reported that the four graveyards had been added to Stage One of the Physical Programmes Department's Capital Programme as an emerging project. In addition, a project of work was ongoing to sympathetically repair 27 monuments within the Clifton Street Graveyard.

The Working Group was advised that three event organisers had received authorisation to continue walking tours of Friar's Bush Graveyard and officers had met with them to review the pilot tours and the terms and conditions of use.

In relation to some recent publicity around an unmarked famine graveyard on the Donegall Road, the Members were advised that the issue had been referred to the South Area Working Group in the first instance.

The Members were advised that the Commonwealth War Graves Commission had identified seven additional casualties from historic wars buried in the Council's cemeteries and they had requested permission to erect their standard casualty marker headstone at their own expense. It was reported that, as CWGC was a registered charity the Council did not apply its memorial application fee.

In response to a Member's question regarding the Council's tender process for the City Cemetery Visitor Centre, the Director of City Services explained that unfortunately no tenders were awarded and that officers were reviewing the feedback.

The Working Group thanked the officers for the update and:

- noted the updates which had been provided; and
- agreed to recommend that the People and Communities Committee would accept the request from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to mark an additional seven headstones.

Storm Éowyn - Cemeteries Update

The City Protection Manager provided the Working Group with an overview of the impact of the damage which had been caused to the Cemeteries by Storm Éowyn on Friday, 24th January, 2025.

The Members were reminded that a red weather warning had been issued by the Met Office and that the Council's Emergency Management Team had made the decision to postpone and reschedule all burials and cremations booked for that day.

The storm had caused widespread damage to buildings and trees across Northern Ireland, including the uprooting of many trees across the Council's Cemeteries.

The Working Group was advised that bereavement services staff had worked throughout the weekend of 25th and 26th January to ensure that all postponed funerals were completed within the following days. Roselawn and Dundonald cemeteries had been closed for public access for a period until all dangerous trees were made safe.

It was reported that Roselawn had lost 38 landscape trees and 87 memorial trees. Replacement trees had been purchased and were being planted as part of the memorial tree replacement programme. Dundonald Cemetery had lost around 30 large landscape trees with Knockbreda cemetery having lost one large tree. It had been necessary to employ the Council's tree surgery contractor for a prolonged period in Roselawn and Dundonald to clear roads and make trees safe for public access.

The City Protection Manager outlined that, across all of the Council's cemeteries, 41 headstones and monuments had been damaged, 32 of which had been caused by fallen trees. The Members were reminded that the maintenance of headstones and monuments was the responsibility of grave owners, however, given the circumstances, the Council had agreed to work with the grave owners on a voluntary basis to minimise the impact on families and loved ones. He explained that letters had been sent to the grave owners and, where contact had been established, officers would offer to meet and agree how the Council could sympathetically repair the graves. It was recommended that the Council would cover the cost of repairing all 41 headstones and monuments damaged by the storm, with an estimated cost of £70,000.

In response to Member's query as to whether the Council had insurance which would cover the costs of repairing the headstones, the Director of City Services explained that the issue had been raised at a Corporate Management Team meeting but that officers would double check.

In response to a further Member's point regarding the Closure of Dundonald Cemetery, the City Protection Manager outlined that, any future event which would cause the closure of a cemetery would also be communicated with clear signage at the entrance to the graveyard for those who did not use social media.

In response to a further Member's question, regarding the quality of the damaged headstones, the City Protection Manager outlined that officers would check each of them to ascertain if they had been made to the recommended standard. He reported that, ultimately, the onus was on the Funeral Directors and the sculptors to ensure they were of a good quality. However, he acknowledged that there was more to be done in terms of reaching the highest standard but that it was a resource intensive exercise.

The Working Group thanked the officers for the update and agreed to recommend that the People and Communities Committee would agree to the sympathetic repair and restoration of the 41 headstones and monuments which had been damaged by Storm Éowyn.

Burial Provision Update

The Director of City Services advised the Working Group that a Burial Provision Board had been set up at the request of the Strategic Director of City and Neighbourhood Services to provide oversight and direction on the provision of future burial land to fulfill the core statutory expectation, including the sampling, selection of, and capital procurement of suitable new land, and any land use planning and development process until such land was available for use by Belfast residents. The cross-Departmental Board, formed in November 2024, allowed for consideration of existing and new burial proposals and requirements on an estates, capital and operational basis, and met bimonthly.

The Working Group was advised that the key strands being overseen by the board included:

1. a stocktake of existing burial lands at Roselawn;
2. progressing currently undeveloped areas within Roselawn;
3. progressing the provision for burial of cremated remains; and
4. a future cemetery site.

The Director provided an overview of the stocktake of existing burial land at Roselawn. She explained that City and Neighbourhood Services had reviewed the number of grave plots that was considered necessary with the Department for pandemic provision. The experiences and lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic had illustrated that there was a need to reassess the reserve for such circumstances, balancing that with the duty the Council had on provision and future provision.

The Members were advised that Section Z had further areas to be developed for burial provision and that a consultant had been appointed to carry out the necessary investigations, in order to inform the extent of areas suitable for burials and, if not, then if suitable for cremated remains. An outline business case was also being developed for Section P within Roselawn for potential cremated remains burial provision.

The Director provided the Working Group with an update in regards to the expression of interest exercise in relation to new burial lands. She explained that discussions with developers and neighbouring Councils were ongoing in that regard.

After discussion, the Working Group agreed to undertake a site visit to a number of the potential sites.

The Working Group thanked the officers and noted the update which had been provided.

Chairperson