

Minutes of the Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee held at 7pm on Tuesday 27th August, 2024, in the Council Chamber, Corby Cube, Corby, Northants, NN17 1QB.

**Present: -**

Councillor Graham Lawman (Chair)

Councillor Melanie Coleman

Councillor Emily Fedorowycz

Councillor Zoe McGhee

Councillor Macaulay Nichol

Councillor Mark Pengelly

Councillor Lee Wilkes

**Officers:**

George Candler, Executive Director of Place & Economy (Deputy Chief Executive)

Jonathan Waterworth, Assistant Director of Assets and Environment?

Iain Smith, Assistant Director Regulatory Services

Sam Diamond, Head of Trading Standards and Bereavement Services

Jayne Blanchard, Warren Hill Senior Administrator

Carol Mundy, Senior Democratic Services Officer (Committee and Members)

Emma Robinson, Democratic Services Assistant.

Also, in attendance – Councillor Harriet Pentland, Executive Member

The chair welcomed members and officers, along with the viewing public to the meeting.

**56 Apologies for absence**

**Resolved** to note that apologies were received from Councillor Carter and Shacklock.

**57 Members' Declarations of Interest (if any)**

**Resolved** that no declarations were made.

**58 Notification of requests to address the meeting (if any)**

**Resolved** that no notifications to address the meeting had been received.

**59 Minutes of the meeting held on 30 April 2024**

The minutes of the meeting held on 30 April were received.

There was one query over a comment within the minutes in relation to the withdrawal of E-Bikes and whether this was the case. It was confirmed that this had been raised at the meeting as in certain locations they had been removed.

With this clarification it was proposed by Councillor Wilkes and seconded by Councillor Fedorowycz that the minutes be approved. On being put to the vote the motion was declared carried.

**Resolved** that the minutes of the meeting held on 30 April 2024 be signed and approved as an accurate record.

## 60 Minutes of the additional meeting held on 21 May 2024

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 May 2024 were received.

It was proposed by Councillor Wilkes and seconded by Councillor Nichol that the minutes be approved. On being put to the vote the motion was declared carried.

**Resolved** that the minutes of the meeting held on 21 May 2024 be signed and approved as an accurate record.

## 61 Extension of Burial Reservation Policy

The circulated report of the Assistant Director of Regulatory Services, Iain Smith, was received by the Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee to propose the introduction of a North Northamptonshire Burial Reservation Policy which would apply to all North Northamptonshire owned and operated cemetery grounds.

Also, in attendance was Sam Diamond, Head of Trading Standards and Bereavement Services and Jayne Blanchard, Bereavement Services Manager to support Mr Smith.

The report detailed that there was currently one burial reservation policy in place in the former Kettering Borough Council area and the introduction of a new policy would apply to all North Northamptonshire owned and operated cemetery grounds, levelling out the fees and access to burial spaces to all members of the community.

A public consultation was taking place, and comments received, along with the comments of the committee, would help to frame the draft proposal.

Appended to the report was the proposed Burial Reservation Policy.

Mrs Diamond explained how historically multiple plot reservations had been made at various cemeteries which had resulted in there being a lack of spaces for future burial places in some locations. It was noted that several spaces had been reserved by the same families, resulting in whole rows being reserved many years ago which were not occupied.

The intention of introducing the policy was to level out access to burial spaces to enable all members of the community to have the opportunity to purchase a space to ensure there is accessibility for all.

The report referred to the 13 cemeteries managed by NNC, located in Corby, Kettering and Wellingborough. Across the locations there were 1,501 reserved grave spaces and 2,500 available plots. Further details of the locations and numbers in each area were contained within the report.

The report also informed committee that reservations had been suspended at Shire Lodge due to the lack of available space.

The burial reservation policy in place in Kettering gives the exclusive right of burial for 99 years. This means that whilst a resident does not own the land, they do have the right, during the 99-year period to say who can be buried in the plot and cremated remains could also be put in the grave space. Fees are payable to reserve a space and upon interment an additional fee would be payable.

Due to the lack of a reservation policy in other areas of North Northamptonshire, families had been able to reserve multiple burial plots, and this had resulted in randomly spaced plots being empty for many years, with other plots nearby having been sold, causing a consequential problem when using machinery to dig out an adjacent plot later.

The new policy would allow only residents of North Northamptonshire to reserve a burial plot and there would be a limit of one burial plot to be purchased per person, with a fee charged, currently proposed to be £2513 for 99 years. This would enable cemetery spaces to be managed and maintained. Details of various alternative options and costings were contained within the report.

The Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee thanked officers for the report and commented as follows:

- Concern was expressed over the relatively small number of places available due to previous reservations in some locations. It was noted that there was an extension to Shire Lodge Cemetery in Corby and that there was potentially an area at Stanton Cross to be set aside as a burial ground.
- It was noted that not all members of the community, who had previously purchased a plot, still wished to be buried and it was considered prudent to write to all plot holders to see if they wished to retain the plot or whether they would be prepared to sell the plot back to the council. Officers clarified that they had details of those who had purchased graves as a Deed of Grant would have been issued and records were kept for each area.
- Confirmation was sought on what the monies paid for a plot would be used for. Officers clarified that the fee paid would be for the exclusive right of burial, and future maintenance of the plot for the relevant period, including grass cutting and keeping the cemetery neat and tidy, the cost and time period for the plot offered could be on a sliding scale of fees i.e. 99 years, 50 years, 25 years, it was noted that whilst lower time periods were more affordable this would result in higher administrative costs.
- The issue of affordability was raised as many residents would not be able to pay the fee to reserve a space, and this was considered unfair. A request was made as to whether concessions could be introduced in relation to the timescale for the payment of fees, or whether a payment plan could be introduced, as the cost could be prohibitive, it was also asked if the fee could be means tested on salary and disposable income.
- With regard to the purchase of a double plot, officers clarified that only one fee would be payable for the purchase of the plot, but that an interment fee for each person would be paid.
- Officers commented that consideration around payment plans had not been looked at, and whilst this could be considered, it would result in additional administration costs.
- Members were keen for the consultation to be widely publicised to ensure that residents had their say on this matter.
- It was generally considered that it was good to harmonise the fees across North Northamptonshire.
- Officers were asked if they had information on the mortality rate in the county, so there was an indication of the number of years that there would be availability in the cemeteries. Officers did not have the information to hand.

- The need for Green Burial plots was referenced and Mr Smith clarified that this would be the subject of a separate report to be presented to a future Executive Advisory Panels.
- It was noted that the new extension at Shire Lodge had 2,900 plots which were expected to last for up to 20 years. It was also noted that at this location there was an issue with the digging of graves to a double depth due to the clay soil. If a husband and wife wished to be buried together, they would reserve two adjacent plots with no financial detriment.
- Some members considered that the introduction of a payment option was essential as well as offering less well-off residents a cheaper alternative, as the costs were prohibitive for most people.
- Other members felt that it would be unfair for fees to be means tested, as though on the surface someone may have a good income or pension, they may have more outgoings than another person, resulting in less disposable income.
- A suggestion was made that the term of the exclusive right be for a period of 75 years with a reduced fee as this was a long enough period for exclusive right of burial.

Following the debate members concluded that the cost of purchasing a burial plot outright was high and further investigations needed to be considered over how residents could be helped by way of payment options.

Councillor McGhee suggested that a payment plan based on affordability be investigated. Other members felt that a payment plan would not be appropriate and that payment options would be better, with the potential to spread the cost to make it more affordable.

It was agreed that the policy be extended across all North Northamptonshire Cemeteries, that it be consulted on and that the policy include the option for exclusive burial rights of 75 years at a reduced fee.

**Resolved** that the Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee recommends that officers investigate and include the following in the report to Executive:

- That the Burial Reservation Policy 2024 be extended across all working cemeteries and be consulted on;
- That families, who had previously reserved plots, be given the opportunity to return such plot if they no longer required it, with 75% of the purchase price originally paid, being refunded, and the remaining 25% being retained as an administration fee;
- That consideration be given to the reservation period for each plot being for a period of 75 years, at a lower fee;
- That payment options be explored, for the purchase of a burial plot, to enable families to spread the cost and ensure affordability.

## **62 Application of lawn cemetery regulations to the new extension at Shire Lodge Cemetery**

The circulated report of the Assistant Director of Regulatory Services, Iain Smith, was received by the Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee to discuss the proposal to apply the Lawn Cemetery Regulations to the new cemetery extension at North Northamptonshire Council's Shire Lodge Cemetery in Corby.

The Lawn Cemetery Regulations were appended to the report.

The report detailed that currently there was a mix of memorial types permitted across the existing cemetery, resulting in a disjointed appearance, which was not aesthetically pleasing, or practical to manage.

In the original part of the cemetery and older extension there were kerb sets, borders and railings delineating the grave areas. Families place mementoes and tributes within this border. On occasion, however, items can be misplaced by weather conditions, wildlife and other visitors, and this causes distress and maintenance and litter issues.

The new extension was proposed to be a lawn cemetery which would allow a memorial, compliant with the regulations, to be placed in a headstone border only and the rest of the grave plot to be laid to lawn. This would give improved access to all grave plots, allowing careful maintenance of the area and contributing to a peaceful, orderly and respectful environment.

Due to the substance of the soil in the extension, it would not be possible to dig anything other than a single depth grave.

It was also proposed that the opening hours of the cemetery be aligned with others in North Northamptonshire for the safety of users so there would be summer and winter opening hours to take into consideration the hours of darkness.

Members discussed the proposed Shire Lodge Cemetery Regulations and made some observations:

- A question was asked over why consideration had not been given to a green burial option and that a recommendation that there would be benefits to the environment of it being a green burial site and that this option should be explored further before it was presented to the Executive.
- Officers clarified that this site had been developed over many years, under the former council, and that there were several constraints with the site and a green burial site would not be suited to this site. The site was designed as a lawn cemetery and there would be better future options for a green burial site going forward.
- Committee agreed that the regulations should be implemented and that to make it a lawn cemetery would have many benefits to the community as it would look neater and more respectful and would be easier to maintain.
- A member asked if faith groups had been consulted. Officers confirmed that they had been.
- Regarding the opening times, it was considered that this needed to be highly publicised, as it was known that some people paid daily visits to graves after their working day and the proposed opening hours may cause them upset. Officers confirmed there would plenty of publicity around the new hours.
- Members thanked officers for the report and regulations and considered that it was important to ensure that the proposed regulations took into consideration users' comments and feedback and that these form part of the report to the Executive.
- Officers clarified that a separate report on green burials would be presented to an EAP. A member requested that if this could not become a green burial site that encouragement be given to headstones being of natural stone and that the planting of flowers be encouraged as a living memory. The chair cautioned that this was a lawn cemetery, and that consideration would need to be given to what was planted. Officers confirmed that work was ongoing with grounds maintenance about what would be suitable.

**Resolved** that Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee recommends that a report, considering the consultation responses, on the regulations for the new extension to Shire Lodge Cemetery be submitted to the Executive and that the committee:

- (i) notes and welcomes the information that a report on the provision of green burials will be presented to a future EAP;
- (ii) agrees that the extension area at Shire Lodge Cemetery be a Lawn Cemetery;
- (iii) agrees the digging of new graves will be to a single depth;
- (iv) agree that the opening hours be standardised to match cemeteries across North Northamptonshire.
- (v) agrees the proposed Lawn Cemetery Regulations relating to the new Shire Lodge Extension.

(Councillor Fedorowycz abstained from voting on the recommendation).

### **63 Tree Planting Strategy**

The circulated report of the Assistant Director Assets and Environment, Jonathan Waterworth, was received by the Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee to provide a summary of the work that has taken place toward the completion of the draft Tree Planting Strategy.

Councillor Pentland as Executive member was also present at the meeting.

Appended to the report was the draft Tree Planting Strategy.

The report detailed that in July 2021 the council declared a climate and environment emergency, recognising the need for action to enhance, protect and prevent further decline to the local environment. The benefits of canopy cover are well known, with public support for tree planting schemes increasing buy in, benefiting long-term sustainability of the tree stock. Since vesting day approximately 20,000 trees have been planted across the council's estate, with 1200 having been removed, contributing to the preservation of existing tree canopy coverage.

The council has used available resources to increase canopy cover upon public land, alongside increasing cover on private land through engagement and support with home and landowners, businesses and new developments, with the support of the Local Plan and Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

Trees provide a myriad of benefits to the local and wider environment and within the urban environment they provide shade, absorb pollutants and lessen the impact of noise pollution and risk of flooding through rainwater interception. They also provide a desirable environment and essential habitat and resource for wildlife.

The report detailed the current government target to increase coverage across the UK by 2050 to 17% with NNC's current coverage being 10.55%. The report also detailed the issues with some of the current stock including pests and disease and prolonged periods of drought and excessive rain which result in a detrimental impact upon the health of the tree, resulting in premature losses.

The aim of the strategy is to enhance the treescape to make it more sustainable and resilient to pests and disease, with the most prevalent threat being Ash Die Back, which is predicted to force the removal of 80% of the species within the UK. Proactive steps have already been taken through surveying and cataloguing stock, with a programme of

monitoring and removal to lessen the impact of further infection to trees taking place. Understorey planting is also happening to ensure the impact of predicted future removals of established Ash is reduced.

A formal Tree Planting Strategy will ensure there is a consistent, sustainable and viable solution to achieve a 6.45% increase in canopy cover by 2050. This will be achieved by standard tree planting, woodland and whips style planting and natural regeneration of strategic sites across NNC assets and land in private ownership. This will enable the council to achieve the corporate goal of providing a green sustainable environment and highlights the five key objectives of increasing canopy cover, increasing biodiversity, improving tree planting and aftercare, improving biosecurity and involving the community.

The strategy will also ensure that the tree canopy is protected and enhanced, increasing canopy from 10.55% to 17% by 2050. Funds will be required to carry out tree planting programs each year through to 2050, and any revenue budget will need to be considered as part of budget setting to fund approximately 300-700 trees which are required to achieve the 6.45% increase in canopy cover along with maintenance.

The strategy also recognises the Plant Passport System for any imported specimens and will only work with suppliers who are registered through the Plant Health Portal.

Aftercare and recording of tree data would also be undertaken. Details of how the canopy would be increased via standard planting, woodland planting and whips and natural regeneration were provided in the report.

Consultation is taking place with council departments and service areas who manage trees on council land, feedback from such consultation and comments from the scrutiny committee will be considered by the Executive.

The chair thanked Mr Waterworth for his report and opened it for debate by the committee.

Members commented as follows:

- Reference was made to engagement and it was considered that there needed to be more engagement with members, ward councillors and parish and town councils. A request was made that reference to this be added to 4.22 of the strategy. Councillor Pentland confirmed that engagement was vitally important and that liaising with parish and town councils would be added.
- It was considered important that the right species be planted in the right area.
- It was commented that in some areas the planting of hedgerow was better for the environment, particularly on the highway to assist with capturing pollutants. More emphasis would be placed on this.
- The importance of protecting and maintaining the existing canopy was of great importance.
- Reference was made to East Leigh Council who had a bold ambition to plant a tree for every resident and it was suggested that this be considered.
- Encouragement was required for community groups and individuals to plant trees in their gardens or in community areas.
- Bio-diversity needed to be considered when planting.
- Community Orchards should be encouraged, and partner numbers should be included in the allocations for NNC.
- It was a positive to note that tree wardens will be encouraged to attend meetings to advise on tree maintenance, aftercare and monitoring of tree health.

- The overall objectives as detailed in the report were welcomed and supported by the committee.
- The establishment of a tree nursery to support local biodiversity was welcomed, to enable a source of native trees to be grown to replenish NNC stocks and for local communities, businesses and individuals to purchase accessible and cost-effective trees. It was commented that there was already a Nursery located next to Swanspool Pavilion in Wellingborough that could be brought back into use.
- Planting of the right tree in the right location was raised with suggestions that certain trees not be planted on highway verges, and that consideration to the eventual size being appropriate in residential locations.
- Congratulations were extended to officers for the ongoing work.

**Resolved** that Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee:

- (i) Notes the positive impact of the council's tree planting programmes to date and the steps towards increasing canopy cover through funded activities;
- (ii) The tree strategy, with the inclusion of community involvement with parish and town councils, be recommended for adoption by the Executive.

## **64 Surplus Asset Disposal**

The circulated report of the Senior Asset Manager was presented to the Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee by the Assistant Director Highways and Waste, Jonathan Waterworth.

The report was brought before committee to consider the disposal of underutilised assets which had been deemed to be surplus to requirements following review by the Asset Management Review Group. The assets had been declared surplus as no alternative use could be identified for them.

The report noted that capital receipts were an important funding source for the capital programme and the sale of surplus assets would provide funding for capital projects making it more cost effective than financing through borrowing.

There were two sites recommended for disposal as follows:

- Irthlingborough Chippings store located on the A6, formerly acquired by Northamptonshire County Council, and used to store chippings for surface dressing on roads. The service no longer required the store for service delivery and no other services had a need for the land and it was therefore recommended for disposal.
- The second site was Beech Close Elderly Persons Home, Desborough, the building had developed several structural and other issues including a leaking roof, failing central heating and inadequate fire compartmentation and it was not compliant with the Care Quality Commission requirement that each bedroom had ensuite bathroom facilities. The home had been closed on 1 April 2023.

Several council service teams, including housing, education and the Children's Trust had viewed the building and deemed that it was not suitable for service delivery.

Both sites had been through the adopted council Disposal Policy and had been confirmed as being underutilised and surplus for progression and were recommended



to sell on the open market. Beech Close would be expected to achieve a capital receipt in the region of £1m and the Irthlingborough site in the region of £50k.

It was noted that the sites currently incur revenue holding costs, including security, safety inspections, business rates and reactive repairs and do not generate any revenue.

The chair thanked Mr Waterworth for the report and referenced each site individually.

The committee agreed that the Irthlingborough Chippings Store was surplus to requirements and should be disposed of.

Regarding the Beech Close site, the following comments were made:

- The committee considered that there was insufficient information provided in the report as to why services considered the site unsuitable and financially unviable.
- It was considered that there was an urgent need for children's homes and that committee would find it useful to know why the Children's Trust did not feel this was an affordable and suitable site.
- It was also considered that the site could provide affordable accommodation, with a communal area, suitable for single person accommodation.
- Costs of demolishing the current building would have been useful.
- A query over the statement that disposal would reduce the council's carbon footprint was raised.
- The general feeling was that, due to the change of government, since the Asset Management Review Group had considered this matter there was a need to find out if funding and support to build new council homes would be forthcoming and that the property should be retained awaiting the October budget and a formal request should be submitted to ask if funding would be available.
- It was commented that capital receipts were being used to buy council houses and it would be more beneficial to build our own homes on land we owned.
- It was considered important to retain and invest for the future.

Mr Waterworth responded to some of the items referenced above and explained that the housing team had not considered this to be a suitable site or viable for them to develop. Information from the government was awaited. The figures within the report were an estimate to enable the report to be presented so were only a guide.

In conclusion the committee concurred that the Executive write to government, in liaison with local MPs, to request financial support to enable the building of council houses on this site; should the government not be prepared to give its support then consideration would be given to future disposal. Officers informed committee that Homes England could also be approached for support.

Regarding the presentation of future reports on disposal of assets, the committee concluded that it would prefer to be notified via a written briefing note and be given the opportunity to request the chair of the Scrutiny Management Board to add a report to the workplan to enable disposal to be discussed further, in the event that it was a large or controversial site.

**Resolved** that Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee recommend to the Executive:

- (i) That the site known as Irthlingborough Chippings Store be disposed of, as it is surplus to requirements;
- (ii) regarding Beech Close, the Executive be requested to write to the new government, with the support of MPs, to request financial support to enable the building of new council homes on this site, instead of disposing of it at the current time;
- (iii) that information on the disposal of surplus assets be reported to members via a written member briefing note, and should a site be considered contentious or debatable, that members ask the chair of the Scrutiny Management Board, if a report could be added to the workplan to be presented to committee.

**65 Place and Environment Scrutiny Draft Work Plan - For information only**

The circulated workplan for Place and Environment Scrutiny committee was received to note.

Members referenced the need to scrutinise the highways contract in the future.

**Resolved** that the forward workplan for Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee be noted.

**66 Close of meeting**

**Resolved** that there being no other business the chair closed the meeting at 9.45pm.

Chair.....

Date.....