

**IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION
Tuesday 12 December 2023**

Present:- Councillor Wyatt (in the Chair); Councillors Atkin, Aveyard, Barley, Bennett-Sylvester, C Carter, Ellis, Havard and Jones.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Alam, Andrews, McNeely and Yasseen.

The webcast of the Council Meeting can be viewed at:-
<https://rotherham.public-i.tv/core/portal/home>

38. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 24 OCTOBER 2023

Resolved:- That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 24th October, 2023 be approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

39. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest to report.

40. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

There were a number of questions from members of the public. The Cabinet Member with responsibility was unable to attend the meeting so responses to the questions below would be provided in writing.

The Chair authorised the reading of the following questions from Mr. Azam so they could be recorded in readiness for a written response.

Question 1 – With regards to Section 2.2 of the public report could the Cabinet Member confirm the total amount Dignity had been fined for the financial year 2022/23? This appeared to be missing from the report and it would be in the public's interests if this could be included to see what Dignity have been fined for the last financial year.

Question 2 - In Section 2.3 of the report in the financial year 2021-22 Dignity were fined a total of £350k with allocation of £150k for various works. Could the Cabinet Member provide a breakdown of how the £150k had been spent and what additional funding was being sought? Reading the report it appeared that a meeting had been requested about additional funding, but it was difficult to decipher how this funding had been spent.

Question 3 – Within the Dignity Report at Section 4.2 could the Cabinet Member provide a breakdown of how the £250k additional capital investment had been spent in the Muslim Section? Whilst there had been some additional investment to improve footpaths and resolve the water issues and to the land graves themselves, it would be interesting to see

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how funding had been spent. The way the report was written also appeared to suggest the Muslim Community had been given special treatment with additional spend. This did not seem fair so needed to be recorded accordingly.

Question 4 – With regards to the Annual Report : SIP 4, the thirty-five year plan stated that Dignity have not produced this report yet the RAG status was green in the five year plan which was submitted to the Council on 1st October, 2023. Could the Cabinet Member please state why this had not been made available? The Leader had also written to the group represented and had confirmed this would be presented to Scrutiny to ensure it was reviewed.

Question 5 – With regards to the Annual Report : SIP 9 this refers to talking with and liaising with faith leaders, but it does not go into detail as to what was being asked of those faith leaders or why the RAG status was amber.

With regards to the annual report and projects for 2024/25 within the Muslim section this replicates from a previous report with seventy-three vaults being installed. If the report is correct with the potential projects during 2024/25 on landscaping there needed to be detail on how this was to be done.

For clarification it appears operational matters were the responsibility of Dignity, but the Council was responsible for landscaping matters. The report does indicate the Council had approved the approach to be taken, so why was this the case and why was the Muslim Community not informed.

Question 6 – It was requested that identification of all graves be undertaken within the next year, along with improvements behind the gable wall for infant graves, improvements to the waterlogged graves which remained unresolved and for aesthetically refuse bins to be provided at the Crematorium and Cemetery. It was not a pleasant sight for visitors to see over full metal bins when driving into the site.

The Chair also authorised the reading of the following two questions from Ms. Yousaf so they could be recorded in readiness for a written response.

Question 1 – With reference to the Public Report for Annual Bereavement Services and particularly Section 2.3.2 whilst it was understood as to the history involved could the Cabinet Member please provide clear timescales as to when the review for Islamic burials was likely to happen in 2024.

Question 2 – With reference to the Five Year Service Development Plan and in particular the renovation of old office block whilst the Florist and Café were mentioned, would this also incorporate prayer facilities and a public toilet which was much needed.

The Chair authorised a further question from the floor which confirmed the community were awaiting on the annexe to the graveyard and approval from Planning, but asked if there was a back up plan if approval was not given as the graveyard was quickly running out of space for burials and what immediate action could be taken as there was no alternative.

41. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

The Chair advised that there were no items of business on the agenda that would require the exclusion of the press or public from the meeting.

42. ANNUAL BEREAVEMENT SERVICES REPORT

Consideration was given to the Annual Bereavement Services Report presented by Bal Nahal, Head of Legal, Registration and Bereavement Services, which provided an update on the Council's Bereavement Services management of the contract between the Council and Dignity Funerals Limited.

The report was last presented to Scrutiny in December 2022 and today's annual report provided a further update and progress in relation to the management of the Dignity contract, capital projects, disused cemetery and chapels council, retained cemetery boundaries, digital autopsy contract and death management.

The Commission were asked to note the thirty-five-year contractual agreement with Dignity Funerals which the Council entered into in 2008. The partnership saw Dignity take on the responsibility for capital works and maintenance of the East Herringthorpe Cemetery and Crematorium, along with maintenance of the eight other municipal cemeteries located through the borough.

Dignity Funerals Ltd. were also required to provide annual assurances to make sure they were undertaking their duties in accordance with the contract and meeting the key performance targets and service improvements. This was monitored through regular meetings with the Council.

The Council also had a contract with digital autopsies in conjunction with Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council.

The key issues from the last Improving Places meeting and the recommendations were highlighted. From the recommendations an all member session was convened on 23rd March 2023 and it was also suggested that Bereavement Services and Dignity worked together to better demonstrate how equalities duties were adhered to.

An update was provided in terms of progress made in relation to Bereavement Services and it was noted that meetings took place with

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Dignity on a regular basis in relation to performance indicators.

It was also noted that in March 2023, Cabinet granted approval for Capital Works to several Council retained assets in the cemeteries. Further approval was still required for additional capital allocation due to changes in costs of materials and labour since the estimations were made. An outline was provided on the current progress on capital works and estimated dates of completion.

The Council also retained responsibility for some cemetery chapels, some of which were in a state of disrepair requiring future capital investment. This was outlined within the report.

Furthermore, in relation to cemetery boundaries, further works have been undertaken - again fully detailed within the report.

The digital autopsy contract, which initially began as a pilot, had been running successfully. This was a much better way of performing digital autopsies without causing too much distress for families through having an invasive autopsy. This contract was being managed and performance was on target.

In terms of Death Management, the Council's response to the COVID emergency was well documented and various work streams were arranged as a result; one of which was death management. In addition, mortuary capacity had also improved. Death management figures were now back on track and close to what they were before the COVID pandemic.

With regards to religious awareness training the majority of relevant staff within the Council, Dignity and Glendale have had religious awareness training. There had also been training for some coronial and mortuary staff.

The Chair invited Mr. Richard Shepherd, Business Leader – Rotherham Crematorium and Cemeteries, to provide an update on progress and on the annual report submitted. He provided a brief summary of his involvement with the contract and partnership working to date.

It was apparent from the historic charges and failings that things needed to improve and work was now taking place to ensure there was engagement with communities and to the overall experience with Dignity.

Dignity was a privately allowed owned company which now allowed for swift adaptability and increased investment opportunities.

Dignity was also in the process of investing a further £1.5 million into new cremator equipment which would ensure that Rotherham was equipped well beyond the current contract, but also ensuring best practice for environmental issues and reducing the carbon footprint.

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At the start of his involvement there were around twenty contractual failures that were RAG rated in red, which have been worked upon and improved significantly. There were currently around eight outstanding that were still being worked upon and would be reflected in next year's annual report.

Dignity have continued to invest heavily in new pathways and infrastructure at many of the sites within the borough. The positive feedback from community groups was very encouraging and there were still three sites remaining to be completed in the new year with a further £300,000 investment earmarked.

This would ensure that Masbrough, Wath and Moorgate would receive the same level of care that the other cemeteries have.

The report also highlighted the ongoing improvement works within the Muslim section at East Herringthorpe and personal thanks were offered to the Muslim community for their close partnership working.

There was still work to be done on landscaping and further pathways, but the area was much improved compared to how it looked only a few years ago. With working with the community grave covers were now in place that allowed for graves to be prepared in advance which negated any of the traditional issues with short notice burials in the past. These provisions have been welcomed and other local authorities were looking to replicate this same provision.

Discussions were further required around the existing land and expansion for East Herringthorpe. The thirty-five year plan provided an overview of the capacity and health of the cemetery sites currently. This document would assist and guide the Council with decision making around future cemetery expansions for generations to come.

In terms of the ongoing cemetery expansions, Wath received permission to proceed with building of the new section, something that was much needed for the community of Wath and work would commence to prepare the site as soon as possible after the Christmas period.

East Herringthorpe is still going through the planning process, but hopefully this will follow suit shortly, given all the needs are met.

An overview was provided on how Dignity engaged with and actively chaired meetings with local friends' groups which had helped with community feedback and ideas. There had also been active organisation and support with local events including the one hundred year anniversary of the miners' disaster at Maltby, unveiling of a new plaque for Charles John Stoddart with John Healey, M.P, the Christmas memorial service, a celebration of Eid by decorating the main reception area and the great turnout for the remembrance service back in November. This list was not

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exhaustive, but provided some insight into how Dignity was actively engaged in the community with future events planned for next year as well.

A survey had also been introduced to allow visitors to fill in and provide their feedback on the service provision and improvements. This would be available online and via QR code on the notice boards. It was hoped this would lead to even more inclusion and allow Dignity to focus on what the community actually needs and wants to see from the provision going forward.

Complaints have also seen a dramatic decline and an open-door policy was in operation for anyone who wished to make contact. Working with partners, Glendale have improved overall maintenance and the impression for visitors. There had been many improvements over the last six months, but there was still more to do.

A new natural burial ground had also been introduced at Greasbrough Lane Cemetery, but with limited success with planting at the time. This was redressed with meadow seed and towards the back end of the year it became a beautiful area attracting wildlife. There were further plans in spring to improve the area further.

The last six months had seen many improvements and there was more to do, but it was hoped the Council and communities would observe the inroads and improvements being made with the investment and commitment to providing the best service and all those involved were thanked for their support.

The Chair invited questions, but first read a question submitted by Councillor Yasseen which referred to previous concerns raised about Rotherham Bereavement Services, adherence to the statutory equality duty and how it was disheartening to note that the documents for this meeting, specifically the Annual Bereavement Services Report lacked the equality screening assessment form. Additionally, there was a notable absence of equality information from Dignity so asked if insights could be provided into the reasons for these omissions?

The Governance Adviser confirmed that an equality screening/impact assessment form was not always required for Scrutiny reports so this would be fed back to Councillor Yasseen.

The Commission did note from the report reference to Dignity submitting an Equalities Impact Assessment in February, 2023 and an update on this was requested as it did form part of one of the recommendations and could be what Councillor Yasseen was referring to in her question.

It was noted that the information provided in February, 2023 was Dignity's Equalities Policy and in response to the question raised this addressed all concerns and was in accordance with the Council's equalities policy. As a

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private company Dignity were entitled to have their own policies, but the one submitted was in accordance and in collaboration with the Council.

A number of questions were raised about the report and these included the management of the Dignity contract and how it continued to levy a number of financial penalty charges. It was asked how many there were and the reasons for them.

Officers did not have this information to hand but were happy to provide a full breakdown in writing to the Commission with a list of all performance targets and where a financial charge was imposed when those targets were not met within a set timeframe.

The Commission whilst noting the progress made in the last six months since the new appointment, expressed some concern that the contract with the Council had still been in operation for the last fifteen years where a number of financial penalty charges have been levied. It would be unreasonable to judge purely on the last six months when the contract had obviously been failing. From the information within the report, the RAG ratings still listed in red appeared to total eleven and not eight as suggested.

The Representative from Dignity confirmed that the eight RAG ratings outstanding were the most up-to-date position following the monthly meeting this morning since the report was written as the fire risk assessment and online survey as previously reported were now rated as green.

Whilst the improving position was noted some Members expressed their disappointment that information had not been shared sooner.

The Commission in noting Dignity's performance failures believed it fundamentally important that detail on the financial penalties that have been charged should be included in all future reports presented and insisted this be actioned.

The Chair on behalf of the Commission commended the excellent working with the friends' group and how crucial this was moving forward, along with ensuring the disused cemetery chapels were repaired. In addition, the progress with the Digital Autopsy service was positively received and was significantly reducing the number of invasive post-mortems required.

Further questions were raised about waterlogged graves and flooding in the Muslim section and whilst it was understood some work had been undertaken over the summer to hopefully resolve the concerns the weather in summer was very much different to that in winter. On this basis an update was requested on current performance, whether any issues remain given that the community still raises concern and when it was likely these would be complete.

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The Representative from Dignity confirmed the drainage put in place was having to cope with one of the wettest periods of rainfall and was inspected by Glendale on a daily basis and by Dignity on a weekly basis. Work was ongoing with the community to raise any areas of concern. It would appear that the works to date had improved the situation and whilst there was still further work to be completed, any further areas of concern would be rectified.

Further reference was made to the five-year plan which was welcomed and in particular the works to Wath Cemetery which, it was hoped, would be complete this year. Whilst it was noted that Wath Cemetery had now received expansion approval by the Planning Board, the plan set out on Page 62 was not the same plan that received approval following residents' concerns and it was suggested that some collaboration take place to ensure the correct plan was available for public inspection.

The Representative of Dignity would ensure this was corrected and confirmed the team carrying out the works to the pathways were on track to carry out works shortly and as a priority.

The Commission did express some concerns that some of the issues being picked up by Members were not being picked up at the relevant performance monitoring meetings.

Further discussion ensued on the capital projects and the delay for the independent review of the Muslim burial provision, and why no explanation had been provided as to why it was rearranged for next year. The Commission were advised that the consultant who was employed to undertake the review was unable to carry out the piece of work and a suitably qualified replacement was being sought. The review would then take place during 2024 on the whole of Bereavement Service and not just on the Muslim section.

The Commission were also concerned about references in the report to the completion of works by the end of March 2024 and suggested that as part of recommendations an update report be provided as soon as possible after that date.

Further information was also sought on the national issue of disused cemetery chapels and how their fundamental purpose had changed. Whilst there were plans in Rotherham for some to be repaired, perhaps there needed to be further investigation about their future use or whether it was false economy to repair when they were no longer of any purpose.

The Representative from Dignity confirmed the responsibility for the maintenance of cemetery chapels lay with the Council and whilst some in other authorities had been brought back into use, there were still some restrictions with buildings being listed as historical monuments, such as the one at Moorgate. Their future use would be subject to further approval and discussion.

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The Commission noted the listing of the Moorgate Chapel, but whilst further funding was needed for disused chapels, discussions on their future use would need to be recognised. The report did indicate a working group had been established to put together a rolling programme of works, it was unclear when this would be concluded or when this would be presented to this Commission or the Cabinet Member.

It was pointed out that the work on this had commenced, but it was uncertain on the timeframe. It was important to ensure that further deterioration did not occur and safety was maintained. There were many examples across the country where these types of buildings had been used within communities.

The Commission listened carefully to Councillor Jones where he described the concerns within his own Ward with some of the chapels and the works that had taken place. He also referred to a discussion he had had a number of years ago about bringing back into use and re-establishing ready made areas which were dismissed, but he pointed out it was the friends' groups that could draw down external funding to bring these beautiful buildings back into use. The working group should be looking at these kind of issues and making sure they were talking to the right people. Officers agreed to take this information away and investigate further.

Further information was also sought on the religious awareness training and how there would be further sessions, but it was unclear how often this would take place. Officers in noting the concerns were in agreement for this to take place annually if this was recommended.

The Commission acknowledged that whilst there appeared to be some negative feedback on the report, they commended many aspects and in particular the Digital Autopsy Service and its introduction. The Chair advised the Commission that the whole of the Bereavement Service needed to be considered, whilst taking account of the client side.

It was also pointed out that there were still some areas in the borough where burials were not provided by Parish Councils or via the Dignity contract and these were St. Margaret's at Swinton and St. Thomas' at Kilnhurst who did not receive funding for the services they provided.

Resolved:- (1) That the report be received and the contents noted.

(2) That the annual report from Dignity Funerals Limited be received and the contents noted.

(3) That consideration be given as to how performance failure/financial penalty charges could be incorporated into future annual reports.

(4) That an update be provided on the programme of work on disused

chapels, recognising that this was a longer-term piece of work.

(5) That an updated and corrected version of the Annual Report be provided and circulated to all Members.

(6) That a full breakdown be provided with a list of all performance targets and where a financial charge was imposed when those targets were not met within a set timeframe.

(7) That consideration be given to including details of the customer satisfaction surveys within the annual report.

(8) That religious awareness training be provided on an annual basis.

43. ROAD SAFETY AND CUMWELL LANE UPDATE

Simon Moss Assistant Director for Planning, Regeneration and Transport, supported by Richard Jackson, Head of Highways, Andrew Lee, Service Manager for Traffic and Road Safety, and Matthew Reynolds, Head of Transportation Infrastructure, provided further information on the post-scheme appraisal of the road safety intervention measures approved for implementation along Kingsforth Lane and Cumwell Lane during the 2022/23 fiscal year, following concerns raised about the safety of road users.

Background information was provided on the road improvements following the two fatal collisions in the winter of 2021/22. In May 2022 there was a petition presented requesting road safety improvements and then in the Summer of 2022 there were several improvement measures introduced on Kingsforth Lane and Cumwell Lane.

In December 2022 there was a further update to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board which recommended an update to this meeting post scheme improvements.

Following an annual evaluation of the improvements some speed surveys have been undertaken (details within the report) along with summaries of three collisions recorded. Based on the latest information available there was no indication that an Average Speed Camera system would have directly prevented the three collisions reported since 1st September 2022 given the recorded contributory factors.

Discussion ensued on the speed survey results and the apparent lack of confidence in the data and whether the improvements to date had had the desired effect for reducing speed. Further information was available to indicate that there were updated methods for conducting speed surveys which were easier, simpler and much more cost effective and whether these would be used in the future.

Representatives from Transportation were confident in the data analysis

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and the reporting of speed. The reasons referred to were aimed at explaining why there were some increases in speeds in the early mornings or late at night and whether these were directly as a result of the new measures in place possibly giving confidence for some drivers. The roadworks in the area meant that measurements were not taken from one site, but the service were always willing to improve the methods for collecting and evaluating data.

The after survey was undertaken in June, 2023 so it was suggested this be done again in February, 2024 to give a like-for-like comparison in terms of tube survey analysis industry standard and was probably right for this kind of location which were highlighted for specific risk.

Within the service's suite of analytical tools it had a piece of software which used transponder data from cars giving more real-time information. This was on a link basis over a longer and longer stretch. This was why it was important that a like-for-like comparison was undertaken.

In terms of why speeds may have increased the £150,000 interventions (which were a substantial part of the budget) which were put in place were about making the road conditions suitable for drivers. The improvements mean drivers may be less likely to take risks and whilst there had been no huge reduction in speed, the accident record was showing that improvements were positive.

The service preferred to do a full appraisal on a road safety scheme, but data was usually taken over three years and not just one, so this was something that would be picked up as part of the usual activity around road safety statutory requirements across the borough.

Reference was made to the petition that had resulted in the referral to the Overview and Scrutiny Management board and what response had been sent to the lead petitioner.

Representatives from Transportation did not have the information and would provide the response in due course.

It was noted, however, the petition as submitted was calling for improvements following accidents in that area which resulted in substantial improvements being made in the summer of 2022 which were in the report.

The Commission also expressed their disappointment that data showed that despite the huge improvements in this area to reduce speed, speeds had not reduced that much and there was a slight increase in speeds later in the evening which was bizarre. The reasons for this were not clear or determined and for this reason the decision to revisit the survey in February, 2024 was welcomed and not just going with industry standards, especially now further development was taking place on Cumwell Lane

Representatives from Transportation confirmed the February, 2024 count to ensure a like for like scenario and whilst speed did go up during the summer months, it was anticipated that the more inclement weather in February would slow drivers further.

The developments on Cumwell Lane had led to more measures being implemented with no waiting restrictions, a shared use pathway protecting pedestrians. As part of the general assessment of whether the scheme had achieved what it was aimed to do, the service would be doing the February survey and then also going back for the three-year analysis. This would then be routinely picked up in day-to-day activity.

The Chair thanked Representatives from Transportation for the update on the measures carried out on this section of road.

Resolved:- That the report be received and the measures implemented noted.

44. SOCIAL FRONTIERS IN ROTHERHAM WEST AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY

The Chair welcomed representatives from Sheffield University and Rotherham United Community Trust, Dr. Aneta Piekut, Prof. Gwilym Pryce, Dr. Zanib Rasool and Dr. Henry Staples, to give a presentation on an international piece of work centred around the social frontiers in Rotherham West and their impacts on the community.

The presentation and discussion provided information:-

- About the Project.
- Social Frontiers in Rotherham West (2011 Census).
- Case Study Data in Rotherham West.
- Physical Barriers overlapping Social frontiers.
- Social Frontiers in Rotherham West.
- Participated Created Map.
- Impacts on Safety, Mobility and Socialising.
- Scarcity of social and community infrastructure.
- The few places to meet and socialise.
- Tensions related to the scarcity of social and community infrastructure.
- Unequal distribution of resources.
- Lack of infrastructure for all communities.
- The importance and limits of community encouragers/leaders.
- Important of community encouragers/leaders.
- Support is not systematic.
- A vibrant and initiative taking community.
- Community organisations and initiatives in Rotherham West.
- Rotherham Plan 2025 – Building Stronger Communities.
- Blurring the Edges – Video.
- Recommendations.
- Organisations involved in the project.

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The Commission welcomed the presentation and information shared and recommended that the Blurring the Edges be shared and viewed more widely.

Discussion/comments were made and a question and answer session ensued and the following issues were raised and discussed:-

- Recognition of the physical barriers and cultural divisions.
- Impact and influence on decision making.
- Historic background to the work, communities involved and previous funding arrangements.
- Mismatch for funding communities.
- Reintegration of communities and links.
- Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Use of Ward budgets.
- Valuable research and ongoing work to do.
- Referral of the project to the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority.
- Infrastructure funding.
- Referral to Neighbourhoods.
- Alternative ways of bringing communities together.

The Chair thanked all those involved with the presentation and the awareness raised and recommended the video be shared more widely for viewing.

Resolved:- (1) That the presentation be received and the contents noted.

(2) That the project details be referred to the Mayoral Combined Authority, Cabinet Member for Social inclusion and officers in Neighbourhoods.

45. WORK PROGRAMME

Consideration was given to the Work Programme circulated with the agenda.

The Chair advised there were only two meetings left this municipal year and work was already ongoing with two outstanding reviews.

Reference was made to the recent Council Meeting where it was agreed that Improving Places would be recommended to look at undertaking a review into school crossing patrols and safety outside school gates. This would be an in depth piece of work that may not be scheduled within this municipal year.

The Work Programme as set out in the agenda papers detailed items scheduled for the February and March meetings which would be include in due course.

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Resolved:- (1) That the Work Programme be received and the contents noted.

(2) That consideration be given to scheduling the review into school crossing patrols and safety outside school gates at the earliest opportunity.

46. URGENT BUSINESS

The Chair advised that there were no urgent items of business requiring the Commission's consideration.

47. DATE AND TIME OF THE NEXT MEETING

Resolved:- That the next meeting of the Improving Places Select Commission will take place on Tuesday, 6th February, 2024 commencing at 1.30 p.m.