

Public Report
Improving Places Select Commission

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting

Improving Places Select Commission – 16 December 2025

Report Title

Annual Bereavement Services Update

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?

No

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report

Judith Badger, Strategic Director of Finance and Customer Services

Report Author(s)

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Ward(s) Affected

Borough-Wide

Report Summary

This report provides an update on the Council's Bereavement Services cemetery chapels, digital autopsy contract, boundary and capital works and management of the contract between Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council and Dignity Funerals Limited, addressing recommendations made at Improving Places Select Committee on both 10th December 2024 and 10th June 2025.

The recommendations addressed in this report are those which are the responsibility of the Council.

Recommendations

That the Select Commission:-

1. Note the content of this report and appendices.
2. Note the content around Dignity fee increases for 2026/27; and
3. Note the separate annual update report from Dignity Funerals Limited.

List of Appendices Included

Appendix 1 Independent Review Action Plan

Background Papers

Improving Places Select Commission - Annual Bereavement Service Update Report 2024 dated 10.12.2024

Improving Places Select Commission Report on Independent Review of Muslim Provision dated 10th June 2025.

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel

No

Council Approval Required

No

Exempt from the Press and Public

No

Annual Bereavement Services Update

1. Background

- 1.1 This report provides an update on progress in the following areas:
- Dignity contract and financial penalties
 - Disused cemetery chapels
 - Council-retained cemetery boundaries
 - Public mortuary contract
 - Digital autopsy contract
- 1.2 On 1 August 2008, the Council entered into a 35-year contractual agreement with Dignity Funerals Ltd (Dignity) for the delivery of bereavement services across Rotherham. Under this arrangement, Dignity assumed responsibility for capital works and the ongoing maintenance of East Herringthorpe Cemetery and Crematorium, as well as the upkeep of eight other municipal cemeteries within the Borough.
- 1.3 The Council retained ownership and responsibility for certain assets, including cemetery chapels, associated buildings, and boundary walls at some sites.
- 1.4 In addition, the Council is legally required to provide public mortuary facilities. This service is delivered through a contract with the NHS and is located at Rotherham District General Hospital.
- 1.5 Following a successful six-month pilot in 2021, the Council introduced a contract for Digital Autopsy services, in partnership with City of Doncaster Council and Coronial Services. This contract was awarded on 26th March 2025.

2. Key Issues

- 2.1 Updates on the Improving Places Select Commission recommendations from the meetings dated 10th June 2025 and 10th December 2024.
- 2.2 That the findings of the independent report for those of the Islamic faith be provided for the next meeting.
- 2.2.1 This was presented to the IPSC on 10th June 2025, from which the following actions were required:
- That Officers produce an action plan to track the Council's progress in relation to actions against the Independent Report and that this be brought back to the Improving Places Select Commission to accompany the Bereavement Services Annual report. See the Action Plan at Appendix 1.
 - That data be provided on the number of religious burials each year. Dignity to provide this within the Operational Plan.

- That an article be included in the Neighbourhood newsletter about general burial processes. A short article to direct people to the Council's Bereavement Services website with up-to-date information on has been circulated.
- 2.3 That procurement details be shared on the outcome of the Digital Autopsy Contract.
- 2.3.1 On 28th March 2025, the City of Doncaster Council as lead authority, awarded the new Digital Autopsy contract with Advanced Visualisation Technologies Ltd trading as Digital Autopsy UK with the contract term being to 30th April 2028. An annual update on the performance of this contract is detailed at section 2.9 of this report.
- 2.4 **Annual Bereavement Service Updates**
- 2.4.1 **Dignity contract & financial penalties**
- 2.4.2 Dignity is contractually required to provide annual assurance to the Council that Key Performance Targets (KPTs) are being met and Service Improvements (SIs) are being made, this is documented each year by the production of an Annual Performance Report (APR).
- 2.4.3 Monthly performance meetings take place to keep performance matters under regular discussion and where appropriate, matters escalated. A performance management framework is used to monitor performance and updated following each meeting. This looks specifically at the KPTs and progress against in year Service Improvements Dignity have agreed to make.
- 2.4.4 By utilising the mechanisms in place within the contract for performance management, Bereavement Services continue to levy financial penalty charges to Dignity Funerals Ltd where performance failures have not been resolved within the rectification period as defined in the contract for the severity level of the failure.
- 2.4.5 In addition to monthly performance meetings, Bereavement Services regularly undertake cemetery inspections and scrutinise high priority matters closely, cemetery expansion proposals and burial capacity availability across the Borough.
- 2.4.6 The total value of the financial penalties for performance failures levied against Dignity per the contract mechanism in previous financial years is as follows:
 - 2024/25 £107,580
 - 2023/24 £218,550
 - 2022/23 £328,290
 - 2021/22 £178,935

- 2.4.7 Under the terms of the Council's contract with Dignity, the company is required to submit its draft schedule of fees and charges for the forthcoming financial year by 31 December. Although Dignity had agreed that a draft would be provided by 1 December 2025 for inclusion within this annual update, this has not been received and therefore could not be included in this report. In line with the contract, Dignity must meet with the Council within five working days of submission, no later than 8 January 2026, to agree the proposals or, if necessary, revise and resubmit within seven days of that meeting.

2.5 **Council Provision of Burial Land**

- 2.5.1 In line with the Dignity contract the Council remain liable for providing Dignity with land to be used for future burials. Dignity is required to develop the land into operational cemetery use.
- 2.5.2 The Council granted Planning Permission in October 2023 for the expansion of Wath Cemetery. Dignity assured the Council work would take place once planning had been granted, this did not come to fruition and as such the Council continue to press Dignity for progress against the development of this area to expand Wath Cemetery.
- 2.5.3 Bereavement Services have prepared and will present an options paper to consult and identify a preferred site for development into a new cemetery in Maltby. This is expected to place in January.
- 2.5.4 In respect of concerns previously raised regarding availability of land at East Herringthorpe, Bereavement Services confirms that Dignity has a phased plan in place and works underway to extend Muslim burial provision.
- 2.5.5 In respect of the larger expansion, land is already identified and included within the red line plans in the contract for Dignity to develop at East Herringthorpe.

2.6 **Disused Cemetery Chapels**

- 2.6.1 The cemetery chapels are located at Moorgate, Masbrough, Haugh Road and Town Lane cemeteries. All are in a varying state of disrepair.
- 2.6.2 The working group on cemetery chapels has had a significant amount of staff changes and so a thorough asset management review is being carried out. The findings will be added to a paper to Strategic Asset Management Board, for consideration. All options will be considered for the chapels including full restoration, continuity of wind and watertight measures remaining as is, turning to a managed ruin or full demolition. An up to date review and estimate of options is being carried out. This will enable consideration in 2026/27.

2.7 **Council Retained Cemetery Boundaries**

- 2.7.1 Since IPSC on the 10th of December 2024, Bereavement Services have carried out repairs and maintenance on several of the Council retained cemetery assets. This has included repairs to stone walls at High Street Cemetery, V Mesh Fencing repairs at Greasbrough Lane Cemetery, repairs to the main gates and pillars at Masbrough Cemetery and necessary maintenance works on the old toilet block at East Herringthorpe Cemetery.
- 2.7.2 Surveys have been conducted in relation to necessary repairs due to extensive weathering, to a large stone, retaining wall at Masbrough Cemetery and the tendering process for contractors is underway.
- 2.7.3 Surveys have been commissioned for necessary repairs to a large stone retaining wall at Moorgate Cemetery, which will commence early in 2026, submit to the usual procurement processes.

2.8 **Public Mortuary Contract**

- 2.8.1 The public mortuary contracted provision, based at Rotherham District General Hospital, is working well with no key performance issues identified.
- 2.8.2 This is performance managed in quarterly meetings chaired by Superintendent Registrar & Bereavement Service manager and attended by H.M Senior Coroner, Rotherham Mortuary Manager, Histopathology Discipline Lead and NHS Trust Contract Manager.
- 2.8.3 The last meeting was held on 11th November, and the previously agreed action to devise an appropriate performance management framework was in operation in draft form, which worked well.

2.9 **Digital Autopsy Contract**

- 2.9.1 As outlined at 2.3.1 of this report, a new contract is now in place for the provision of Digital Autopsy Services with Advanced Visualisation Technologies Ltd trading as Digital Autopsy UK until 30th April 2028.
- 2.9.2 The City of Doncaster Council are the authority we partner with to provide this service as we have a shared Coronial service. The split between the usage of Coronial and Digital Autopsy services is on average 56% Doncaster deaths and 44% Rotherham deaths.
- 2.9.3 The contract specifies Key Performance Indicators for the contractor to work by, and the performance against these is as follows:

KPI	Service Area	KPI Description	Target	Year To Date Performance
1.	Delivery	To deliver the requirements to the	N/A	Excellent

		satisfaction of the Council and Coroner		
2.	Reporting	Submission of daily and weekly data per the specification	Every 7 days	100%
3.	Timeliness	To carry out Digital Autopsy at the location on a working day as soon as possible, but in any case, within 48 hours of the Coroner having notified the provider.	80%	100%
4.	Timelines	To make the Digital Autopsy reports on the working day when the CT scan is conducted where possible, but in any case, within 24 hours of the CT scan being completed.	80%	99%

2.9.4 Having received benchmarking information from 4 other authorities from different parts of the country who use the same provider, Rotherham is joint second at 99% performance.

2.10 Other Useful Information

2.10.1 Bereavement Services work with other key stakeholders detailed below, on a range of different matters including:

- Leading Rotherham death management groups around the processes and systems in place for the bereaved and the deceased and managing high volumes of deaths during seasonal peaks in death rates;
- The Coronial service to promote good working relationships and alignment of priorities alongside ensuring best practices in place for our families;
- Addressing actions on the Independent Review Action Plan at Appendix 1;
- Hospice Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and improving the outcomes for all families and communities;
- Hospital teams: Medical Examiners, Mortuary and Chaplaincy
- Faith leaders;
- Community groups: Muslim Bereavement Liaison Groups, Friends Groups;
- South Yorkshire Local Authority Bereavement Services Meetings every quarter;
- Yorkshire and Humber Bereavement Services Regional Group meetings every quarter; and

- National Panel for Registration - deaths sub-group.

2.10.2 The Superintendent Registrar and Bereavement Service manager recently delivered the keynote speech at Rotherham Hospice's Interfaith Event on 12th November 2025 on death, dying and living life's wishes until the very end.

2.10.3 The most recent Muslim Bereavement Liaison Group meeting was held on Thursday 13th November 2025 at the Town Hall, the next one is scheduled for Thursday 12th February 2026 at the Town Hall.

3. Options Considered and Recommended Proposal

3.1 As this is an update report, members are to note the content of this report alongside Dignity's own reports.

3.2 Members are to note the expected fee increases from Dignity and the timescales involved in the process.

4. Consultation on Proposal

4.1 This is an update report therefore no consultation required.

5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

5.1 This report is to serve as an update only and no decision is requested.

6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

Details of the repair and survey works undertaken on cemetery sites in the last 12 months are included within section 2.7 above. The value of these works totals £23,292 and has been charged to the Bereavement Services revenue account. Papers in respect of options for the provision of a new cemetery at Maltby, and options regarding the future use of disused cemetery chapels, will be brought forward in due course.

7. Legal Advice and Implications

7.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from the Recommendations within this report.

8. Human Resources Advice and Implications

8.1 No Human Resource implications.

9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

9.1 No implications on the welfare of children, young people or vulnerable adults as this is an update report only.

10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

- 10.1 This is not a cabinet report, it is an update report only, and therefore no EIA is required.

11. Implications for CO₂ Emissions and Climate Change

- 11.1 This paper and its contents have no impact on emissions as it is an update report only therefore an Emissions Impact Assessment is not required.

12. Implications for Partners

- 12.1 No implications for partners, this report is to serve as an update to scrutiny only.

13. Risks and Mitigation

- 13.1 Risks relating to the Dignity Funerals Contractual Agreement are monitored via a performance management framework and Annual Performance Report.
- 13.2 Financial risks relating to the Dignity Funerals Contractual Agreement are monitored via the Council's annual review of the financial statement supplied by Dignity.

Accountable Officer(s)

Ashleigh Wilford, Superintendent Registrar & Bereavement Service Manager

Approvals obtained on behalf of:

	Name	Date
Chief Executive		Click here to enter a date.
Strategic Director of Finance & Customer Services (S.151 Officer)	Judith Badger	04/12/25
Assistant Director of Legal Services (Monitoring Officer)	Phillip Horsfield	04/12/25
Assistant Director of Human Resources (if appropriate)		Click here to enter a date.
Head of Human Resources (if appropriate)		Click here to enter a date.
The Strategic Director with responsibility for this report	Judith Badger, Strategic Director of Finance and Customer Services	04/12/25
Consultation undertaken with the relevant Cabinet Member	Cabinet Member for Housing -	05/12/25

	Councillor Beresford	
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Service Manager*

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