

Councillor Saghir Alam – Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, Community Safety and Finance

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25th January 2024

Mr Arshad Azam
Via email:

Dear Mr Azam

Questions raised at Improving Places – 12th December 2023

Thank you for the questions raised at Improving Places which I am pleased to provide a response as follows:

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.

Dignity have been invoiced for £328,290 of contractual charges during the financial year 22/23.

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.

Additional Capital Funding was required due to the initial £148k Capital Works being based on initial survey estimates, with actual bids coming in much higher due to fluctuating market and material costs. This additional funding has now been approved and will be allocated as follows:

Project	Works to be undertaken	Costs
Maltby Cemetery Lych Gate	Restoration and repair of the historic lychgate at the entrance to the cemetery. Specialist contractors required. This work was completed in July 2023.	£25,160

Maltby Cemetery Perimeter	<p>Perimeter fence to be installed along the three internal boundaries of the cemetery to improve security and prevent unauthorised access from neighbouring properties.</p> <p>Work to commence 29th January 2024. Estimated completion date of 23rd February 2024.</p>	£47,038
Greasbrough Lane Cemetery Perimeter Fence	<p>Along the top perimeter of the cemetery that abuts the site of the old swimming baths, a perimeter fence is to be installed to improve security and restrict unauthorised access into the cemetery.</p> <p>Successful contractor appointed. Works to commence asap.</p>	£67,498
All Cemeteries	<p>Benches will be installed in each cemetery across the Borough – subject to consultation with the Friends Groups. Granite benches procured from Dignity are to be used to be in keeping with the rest of the cemetery furniture.</p> <p>Discussions being held with Dignity.</p>	£10,000 (per orig. est.)
East Herringthorpe Cemetery	<p>Installation of a Qibla stone in the Muslim section – this will be a compass design pointing to the Qibla.</p> <p>After recent discussions with the community, this project will be discontinued.</p>	£10,000 (per orig. est.)
Independent Expert Report	<p>Bereavement Services will commission an independent expert report on the bereavement facilities available in Rotherham. Plus, associated community work.</p> <p>Bereavements services are seeking a suitably qualified person to do this review as the initial independent reviewer advised they were no longer able to undertake the review.</p>	£20,000 (per orig. est.)
High Street Cemetery	<p>Assessment of retaining wall, installation of new perimeter fence, installation of new path, repairs to existing stone walls.</p> <p>Works commenced in October 2023. Final stages being completed with installation of new path.</p>	£53,590
	Contingency	£5,560
	Total	£238,846
	Additional spend	£90,846

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 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.

Dignity's commitment to all in the community and the service provision is paramount. They act accordingly and would not wish to appear to favour one section over another. Investments and improvements are continually and fairly made across all sites. Kindly highlighted within the question, Dignity have invested in key areas within the Muslim section to raise standards for all and are committed to continuing this in 2024. Dignity would be happy to meet to discuss any concerns around the allocation of investments so far.

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.

At the time of the IPSC the 35 year strategic plan was still in draft form. This plan will be made publicly available by the end of January 2024, when Dignity will be able to share operational planning implications and answer questions from the community.

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.

SI9 clearly states “Improved working with Faith leaders to provide reasonable adjustments and engagements during religious festivals”. Dignity have successfully made contact with a number of religious leaders across Rotherham to draw up a calendar of religious festivals including any additional considerations that might be required during those periods. A further requirement of the SI is for Dignity to regularly attend the Faith Leaders periodic meetings chaired by Bereavement Services. This SI will turn green when this has been achieved.

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.

This is duly noted, and Dignity would be happy to meet and discuss any concerns about ongoing improvement works that Dignity have planned for the Muslim section in 2024/25. They intend to work closely with the community during this time.

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.

Dignity are responsible for all operational matters including any landscaping of the cemetery sites. In reference to the Muslim section at East Herringthorpe, the Council had been consulted over the time scales involved in the landscaping required there due to contractual charges being applied and not over the planning.

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.

Dignity is committed to continual improvements within all our cemeteries and crematoria facilities. They have met on several occasions and been open with members of the community. In which they have discussed their phased plans to improve the site. Dignity welcomes all suggestions and are committed to the continuation of improvement works already implemented.

Question 7 – 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.

No date has yet been arranged so cannot indicate when it is likely to take place at this stage. Bereavements services are seeking a suitably qualified person to do this review as the initial independent reviewer advised they were no longer able to undertake the review.

Question 8 – 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.

In conjunction with the 5-year plan proposal. Dignity have also recently identified an alternative option, which is also being explored away from the old office block. It will better utilise the space available and one that will serve the communities of Rotherham that visit East Herringthorpe. It will also help negate any traffic flow issues. Initial discussions and concepts have been discussed with RMBC and we intend to move this forward given public backing. Public toilets are available during opening hours in the waiting room area of the Crematorium for all visitors.

Question 9 - 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.

Dignity's 35 Year Strategic Plan and subsequent operational considerations, which will be made publicly available at the end of January, will address these concerns.

I hope you find this information helpful.

Yours sincerely



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Boston Castle Ward
Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, Community Safety and Finance