

**Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting**

Improving Places Select Commission – 10 December 2024

**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 12<sup>th</sup> December 2023. The recommendations addressed in this report are those which are the responsibility of the Council.

**Recommendations**

1. That members note the content of this report.
2. That members note the separate annual update report from Dignity Funerals Limited.

**List of Appendices Included**

No appendices to this report included.

**Background Papers**

Report to Improving Places Select Commission "Annual Bereavement Service Report" dated 13<sup>th</sup> December 2023.

**Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel**

Name of Committee – Click here to enter a date.

Name of Committee – Click here to enter a date.

**Council Approval Required**

No

**Exempt from the Press and Public**

No

## Annual Bereavement Services Update

### 1. Background

- 1.1 This report provides updates on the progress made in relation to:
- Management of the Dignity contract,
  - Capital projects,
  - Disused cemetery chapels,
  - Council retained cemetery boundaries,
  - Digital autopsy contract with Digital Autopsy UK (previously iGene)
- 1.2 On 1<sup>st</sup> August 2008, the Council entered into a 35-year contractual agreement with Dignity Funerals Ltd (Dignity) for the provision of bereavement services for Rotherham. This partnership saw Dignity take on the responsibility for capital works and maintenance of the East Herringthorpe cemetery and crematorium along with the maintenance of the eight other municipal cemeteries located throughout the Borough. The Council retained cemetery chapels, associated buildings, and boundary walls on some cemetery sites.
- 1.3 On 16<sup>th</sup> September 2021, following a successful six-month pilot, the Council implemented a contract for Digital Autopsies, in conjunction with City of Doncaster Council and Coronial Services. The aim of the Digital Autopsy process is to improve efficiencies in the autopsy process and to improve the service which bereaved families receive.

### 2. Key Issues

#### 2.1 Updates on the Improving Places Select Commission recommendations from the meeting dated 12<sup>th</sup> December 2023

2.1.1 *Recommendation 1:* That the report be received, and the contents noted. **Resolved on 12/12/2023.**

2.1.2 *Recommendation 2:* That the annual report from Dignity Funerals Limited be received and the contents noted. **Resolved on 12/12/2023.**

2.1.3 *Recommendation 3:* That consideration be given as to how performance failure/financial penalty charges could be incorporated into future annual reports. **Information contained within this paper.**

2.1.4 *Recommendation 4:* That an update be provided on the programme of work on disused chapels, recognising that this was a longer-term piece of work. **Update addressed within this paper.**

2.1.5 *Recommendation 5:* That an updated and corrected version of the Annual Report be provided and circulated to all Members. **Dignity's recommendation to address.**

2.1.6 *Recommendation 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. **Resolved, circulated to members following IPSC in 2023.**

2.1.7 *Recommendation 7:* That consideration be given to including details of the customer satisfaction surveys within the annual report. **Dignity's recommendation to address.**

2.1.8 *Recommendation 8:* That religious awareness training be provided on an annual basis. **Ongoing through utilisation of both in house and external training.**

## 2.2 Dignity Contract Performance & Financial Penalties

2.2.1 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).

2.2.3 Monthly performance meetings take place to keep performance matters under regular discussion and where appropriate, matters escalated to the internal Council officers contract meeting or the Dignity/Council Project Liaison Group Meeting. 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.

2.2.4 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.

2.2.5 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.

2.2.6 The total value of the financial penalties for performance failures levied against Dignity per the contract mechanism in previous financial years is as follows:

- 2023/24 £218,550
- 2022/23 £328,290
- 2021/22 £178,935

2.2.7 Dignity and Bereavement Services alternate chairing the Muslim Bereavement Liaison Group. The Group meet every quarter, which provides an opportunity to meet with representatives of different community groups and organisations within the Muslim population of Rotherham.

2.2.8 Bereavement Services work with professional partners which include Dignity, on a range of different matters including overall death management 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.

2.2.9 Bereavement Services are working together with libraries to provide 'death cafes' at Rotherham Central Library once a month to provide a space for the public to go and speak about all things life, death, and life after loss. Bereavement Services are working with other professional partners across the bereavement sector to attend these events and discuss different matters with attendees. These will start on Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> January 2025 and will take place on the third Saturday of every month. Details of these death café events will be shared on the Council's digital communication platforms. This will also enable signposting to external events such as Dignity's Christmas Carol service, Remembrance Day service and public open days at the crematorium.

### 2.3 Bereavement Services Capital Works

2.3.1 In the 2023-24 financial year, the Council's Bereavement Services completed several capital projects, detailed below, with a combined investment value of £194,768.

- Maltby Cemetery lychgate - £25,160
- Maltby Cemetery perimeter fence - £47,037
- Greasbrough Lane Cemetery perimeter fence - £75,255
- High Street Cemetery works - £47,316

2.3.2 The independent review of existing provisions in bereavement services and cemetery standards in Rotherham for those of the Islamic faith is in the final stages of completion. Confirmation of the final investment in this project and the report will be circulated to committee members when available.

2.3.3 The restoration of the historic lychgate at Maltby cemetery was completed in August 2023 and has been well received by the local community. A newly installed perimeter fence was completed in April 2024 within the cemetery to stop unauthorised access from private gardens and dogs being allowed to roam free whilst the cemetery was closed.

2.3.4 At Greasbrough Lane cemetery in Rawmarsh, a perimeter fence was installed in February 2024 along the boundary of the cemetery adjacent with the old swimming baths site to improve security and prevent unauthorised access.

2.3.5 Significant works to improve the High Street cemetery site, also in Rawmarsh, completed in May 2024. These works were to repair a retaining wall at the bottom of the site, the repair of existing stone walls alongside the installation of a fence to improve safety along the bottom retaining wall and access improved at the existing pedestrian, 'A' frame gate.

### 2.4 Cemetery Chapels

- 2.4.1 The cemetery chapels are located at Moorgate, Masbrough, Haugh Road and Town Lane cemeteries. All are in a varying state of disrepair. During 2023/2024 Masbrough, Moorgate and Haugh Road chapels all had slate guards fitted to prevent slipping roof tiles.
- 2.4.2 The cemetery chapels working group has met several times in the last 12 months and as a result of these working group sessions, an options paper has been prepared for Cabinet to consider all options and available funding with the associated estimated costs involved for each chapel, including reference to work with any friends or community groups and external funding streams available.

## 2.5 Council Retained Cemetery Boundaries

- 2.5.1 Work carried out to boundary brick/stone wall at High Street Cemetery to repair a large crack and repoint. Total cost of £1,500.

## 2.6 Digital Autopsy Contract

- 2.6.1 Digital Autopsy means the conducting of a post-mortem in a computerised environment using digital tools. Because the cause of death can be established quickly, usually within 48 hours, the deceased's body can be released to families more quickly than the traditional invasive method. It is also less distressing for the grieving family than the traditional method.
- 2.6.2 To date, the Digital Autopsy service has been positively received by professionals and it is delivering faster decision-making on Coronial cases and significantly reducing the number of invasive post-mortems required. It is important to note that some deaths must be investigated by an invasive autopsy due to the circumstances surrounding the death so there will never be a 100% success rate in Digital Autopsy utilisation.
- 2.6.3 The management of the Digital Autopsy is overseen by the Superintendent Registrar & Bereavement Service Manager of RMBC in partnership with City of Doncaster Council representatives including the Senior Coroner for Doncaster and Rotherham jurisdiction.
- 2.6.4 The year-to-date performance statistics for the Digital Autopsy Service for Rotherham are;
- 79% of all deaths requiring autopsy were done digitally, without the need for an invasive autopsy examination being undertaken. A further 17% were resolved by combination of the digital scan and toxicology results and finally 4% required further investigation.
  - Pathologists are required to report the findings of an autopsy within 24 hours to the Coronial Service. The key performance target (KPT) for this is a target of 80%. The current achievement against this KPT is 98%.
  - The service provider is required to undertake the digital autopsy on a weekday as soon as possible but in any case, within 48 hours of

notification from the Coronial Service to the service provider. The current achievement against this KPT is 100%.

2.6.5 The existing digital autopsy contract comes to the end of its term on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025. The existing contract has consistently exceeded KPI targets, performing at a high level and delivering an excellent service to the deceased in their care requiring autopsy services.

2.6.6 City of Doncaster Council are the lead authority on the digital autopsy contract and are therefore leading on the procurement exercise for a new contract for this provision to commence from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2025 and are in regular discussions with Rotherham Bereavement Services during this procurement exercise.

### **3. Options considered and recommended proposal**

3.1 This is an update report. Members are asked to note progress made and comment on any issues arising.

### **4. Consultation on proposal**

4.1 This is an update report therefore this is no proposal for consultation.

### **5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision**

5.1 This report is for information only; no decision is requested.

### **6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications**

6.1 Details of the capital works undertaken on cemetery sites in 2023/24 are included within section 2.3. The value of these works totals £194,768 and were funded through Council capital funding. A proposed programme of works in respect of the cemetery chapels will be brought forward to Cabinet 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 There are no human resources implications arising from this report.

### **9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults**

9.1 This report has no specific implications in relation to Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults.

### **10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications**

10.1 There are no Equalities or Human Rights Implications identified in this report as it is an update report only.

## 11. Implications for CO<sub>2</sub> Emissions and Climate Change

11.1 This is an update report only and therefore carries no implications for this aspect.

## 12. Implications for Partners

12.1 This report introduces no additional implications for partners or other Directorates.

## 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 Contract Manager

Bal Nahal, Head of Legal, Registration & Bereavement Services

Approvals obtained on behalf of:

	Name	Date
Chief Executive		Click here to enter a date.
Strategic Director of Finance & Customer Services (S.151 Officer)	Named officer	Click here to enter a date.
Assistant Director of Legal Services (Monitoring Officer)	Named officer	Click here to enter a date.
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	Please select the relevant Strategic Director	Click here to enter a date.
Consultation undertaken with the relevant Cabinet Member	Please select the relevant Cabinet Member	Click here to enter a date.



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Services Contract Manager*

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