

Public Report
Improving Places Select Commission

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting

Improving Places Select Commission – 10 June 2025

Report Title

Independent Equalities Review of Bereavement Services Provision

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

An Independent Equalities Review of Bereavement Services Provision was commissioned to assess the end-to-end bereavement support and burial services for the Muslim community in Rotherham. This encompasses the roles of statutory and community voluntary agencies before, during, and after bereavement.

This report provides a position statement on each of the recommendations contained within the review.

Recommendations

That Members:

1. Note the Independent Equalities Review of Bereavement Services Provision.
2. Note the contents of this report.
3. Request that Officers produce an action plan to track the Council's progress in relation to actions against the Independent Report.

List of Appendices Included

Appendix 1 - Independent Equalities Review of Bereavement Services Provision

Background Papers

Minutes of Improving Places Select Commission, Tuesday 10 December 2024

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel

None

Council Approval Required

No

Exempt from the Press and Public

No

Independent Equalities Review of Bereavement Services Provision Update

1. Background

- 1.1 The independent review of the burial provision for the Muslim community of Rotherham, was commissioned by Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council to gain a deeper understanding of the practicalities and challenges for each stage of the end of life journey of a person and the contribution of statutory and community voluntary agencies before, during and post bereavement processes end to end, and how services can build on existing practices to improve the offering.
- 1.2 Kaushar Tai, the specialist consultant commissioned to carry out the review, was asked to identify the need to learn from examples of good practice, explore areas for improvement, and make key recommendations across all areas of services in Rotherham to ensure good practice is implemented wherever possible and practical to do so.
- 1.3 This report addresses each of the proposed recommendations highlighted within the review and provides a position statement on the current position with these across the board.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Key Improvement Recommendations for Authorities in Bereavement Services, Cemetery Management, and Burial Practices

2.2 Streamline Processes

- 2.2.1 *Simplify bureaucratic requirements and consider necessary accommodations for religious practices to expedite burials, particularly for communities that require timely burial. The new Medical Examiner system creates procedural bottlenecks impacting burial timelines for religious communities. Address these challenges through flexible General Practitioner-Medical Examiner collaboration, especially during weekends and after hours. Establish quick review pathways are crucial steps to minimise delays and supporting timely service delivery.*
- 2.2.2 The Council's Superintendent Registrar and Bereavement Service Manager has attended a process mapping event hosted by Rotherham Hospital on 16th August 2024. This looked at all aspects from palliative care right through to burial. Work is ongoing by the working group formed to improve processes and ensure it is efficient, sympathetic to ensure timely burial. The Working Group includes representatives of the Community to enable them to directly shape the approach taken by the ME to these issues.
- 2.2.3 The Medical Examiner service is very responsive to faith requirements and ensures expedited service for timely burial. It should be noted that occasionally a death may need to be referred into HM Coroner and that this is a statutory requirement, but cases where faiths require an urgent burial are expedited. This is also supported by the pathologist where autopsy is needed and the Registration Service for issuing burial forms and registering the death.

2.2.4 The Chaplaincy Service at Rotherham Hospital are leading on work to review potential procedural bottlenecks following the mapping event that took place in August 2024 and continues to liaise with Registration and Bereavement Services as and when appropriate to progress different elements of this work. A guide will be produced for families which sets out the end-to-end process and what people can expect to happen in each stage and what they need to do. The Council will look to signpost and enable access to this Guide.

2.3 Enhance Cultural Competency

2.3.1 *Implement targeted training programmes to deepen understanding of Islamic and other cultural bereavement customs. This will enhance confidence within faith communities that service provision by the authorities is based on a genuine desire to be culturally sensitive.*

2.3.2 All professional bodies undertake mandatory Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) training on a regular basis. Additional training which builds on from the EDI training for professionals in Bereavement Services is ongoing.

2.3.3 Islamic Awareness Training sessions were commissioned for staff members in 2022. These were conducted by Aksaa, Management and training consultants, and were hosted by Ridge Road Mosque in Rotherham.

2.3.4 The workshops enabled participants to have a good grounding in the Islamic faith and Muslim cultural practices relating to death and the bereavement process, covering the following topics:

- A better understanding of the basic beliefs & practices of Islam
- Understanding Islam versus culture and traditions
- The meaning of Sharia Law? Understanding the status of women in Islam
- What actually happens inside a Mosque?
- The process of death and dying in Islam and the bereavement process
- Issues relating to washing, shrouding, prayer, mourning, burial, etc.
- Observation of the afternoon prayer - live.

2.3.5 The workshops were attended by staff from Registrars, Bereavement Services, Legal Services, Communities, Dignity, Glendale, and other faith leaders and proved to be valuable to all present.

2.3.6 Dignity staff completed Cultural Competency Training at the Tassibee Centre on 9th October 2024, this course was facilitated by Kaushar Tai and included a visit to the local mosque. The visit to the mosque was supported by community members, and positive feedback was received from them regarding the exchange of knowledge and understanding. Dignity will ensure that front line staff undertake an annual visit, subject to the community being able to facilitate, to ensure all staff have a current understanding of need and cultural sensitivities.

2.4 Establish Open Communication Channels

- 2.4.1 *Facilitate regular dialogue between local authorities and the Muslim community to foster trust, promote understanding, and support effective cooperation around burial practices.*
- 2.4.2 The Council has regular Cabinet, Council and Improving Places meetings throughout the calendar year which is a formal environment in which questions from any member of the public can be submitted and answered publicly during the meeting. These are available for the public to attend in person, via live stream and are accessible after the event in the form of minutes and recordings on the Council website.
- 2.4.3 Muslim Bereavement Liaison Meetings held regularly, alternately chaired by Dignity and the Council. Partner agencies including Medical Examiner Service, Registration Service, Dignity, Bereavement Services, Communities and Coronial service are invited to attend to encourage collaborative working. The last meeting was held on 15th May 2025 with the next meeting arranged for 7th August 2025.
- 2.4.4 Dignity has an open-door policy to all cemetery users and feedback is shared with the Council at least monthly. The Council has an online form for enquiries with customers often emailing Bereavement Services directly, these are addressed promptly with customer contact being made to enable dialogue.
- 2.4.5 The Council will continue with this community engagement process.

2.5 Ensure Religious and Cultural Sensitivity Compliance

- 2.5.1 *Burial services must adhere to the Equality 2010 Act's mandate to respect religious customs, such as expedited burials for Muslims and Jews. Delays or failure to accommodate timely burials may contravene legal requirements for honouring religious practices.*
- 2.5.2 The Medical Examiner Service ensures deaths that occur where an expedited burial is required, are prioritised for scrutiny to ensure these are done quickly and sensitively to ensure the burial is not unnecessarily delayed. They also provide an out of hours on call service for expedited burials. This runs weekends and bank holidays 9am till 10am each day. There is no service on Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Christmas Day, Boxing Day or New Years Day.
- 2.5.3 The Coronial Services liaises directly with the Medical Examiner on any referrals needed. Where a postmortem examination is required by His Majesty's Coroner, there are Digital Autopsy facilities available which help reduce the number of invasive autopsies needed which encompasses cultural sensitivities and the urgency is supported by the pathologist.

- 2.5.4 The Council's Registration Service prioritises cases where an expedited burial is required. During office hours this is accommodated as soon as reasonably possible around pre-existing birth, death and still-birth, marriage and civil partnership registrations. The service operates an out of hours on call service to issue the 'Green form' for the burial to proceed, this is all done electronically on receipt of the Medical Examiner's paperwork.
- 2.5.5 This allows the burial to proceed without waiting for the Registration to be completed. It should be noted this service is only available for burials taking place within England and Wales. This operates on the same days as the Medical Examiner service 9am to 11am in October to March and 9am to 1pm April to September.
- 2.5.6 Dignity accommodations for Muslim burials include:
- Two lined graves always prepared for imminent burial
 - Out of hours provision 362 days per year, no burials undertaken Good Friday, Easter Sunday or Christmas Day.
 - Evening burial available up to 18:30 if unable to take place any earlier due to any delays. These are not to be used routinely but as a back-up.
 - Glendale accommodates family or community back filling grave if requested.
 - Glendale and Dignity staff officiate burial and assist with traffic management due to large attendance numbers.
- 2.6 Accessibility for People with Disabilities
- 2.6.1 *Ensure burial services are fully accessible by incorporating features like wheelchair access and adequate support for individuals with disabilities, facilitating equal access to all aspects of bereavement services.*
- 2.6.2 Disability access and accommodations in place within different professional building settings. Hearing loops, braille/ audio guidance available.
- 2.6.3 Disability access and accommodations at the Muslim section at East Herringthorpe cemetery include disabled parking, recently tarmacked footpaths to help with wheelchair and walker access and a handrail installed on the sloping access path from the main drive.
- 2.7 Uphold Non-Discrimination and Fair Pricing Standards
- 2.7.1 *Burial service providers need to avoid discrimination based on race, religion, or other protected characteristics. Additional fee imposed based on these factors, would contravene equality principles. Need to ensure equitable access and fair pricing for all community members.*
- 2.7.2 Dignity is contractually obliged to provide the Council with annual benchmarking data on fees set each year which reflect a breakdown of all fees across the four South Yorkshire authorities. The current

benchmarking data and proposed pricing is under ongoing negotiation between Dignity and the Council.

2.7.3 Burials for babies and children are undertaken free of charge in conjunction with the Children's Funeral Fund which is in place nationally.

2.7.4 Previous charges by Dignity for burials undertaken out of hours were removed from the pricing structure and reimbursements made to individuals who had paid this fee.

2.8 Provide Reasonable Accommodations

2.8.1 *Make reasonable accommodations for religious needs, such as offering burial services outside standard hours. This aligns with the Equality Act's inclusivity goals and recognises the diverse requirements of the Muslim and Jewish communities.*

2.8.2 All accommodations currently in place have been addressed at Section 2.5 of this report.

2.9 **Specific Recommendations for Faith-Based Burial Protocols**

2.10 Develop and Disseminate Faith-Sensitive Burial Guidelines

2.10.1 *Create a clear, inclusive policy on managing faith-based burials, addressing the specific needs of Muslim, Jewish, and other religious communities, with particular attention to expedited burial requirements. Highlight customised service provision for diverse communities through online and printed literature. Attend or host regular events and information sessions within community settings.*

2.10.2 Mapping event referred to at Section 2.2.2 has enabled all involved to understand the full process and interdependencies across all services and stakeholders. Work is ongoing to ensure publicly available guidance is available alongside work to develop and improve existing policies or processes to ensure best practice.

2.10.3 Within the Registration and Bereavement Services, existing guidance available for staff and information available to the public will be reviewed to ensure consistency and alignment with the guide being produced following the mapping events.

2.11 Review of Fees and Community Maintenance Proposals

2.11.1 *Reassess burial fees in response to community feedback on pricing concerns and explore options for delegating cemetery maintenance work to community organisations, particularly for tasks where cultural sensitivity is paramount.*

2.11.2 This has been addressed at Section 2.7 Further updates will be provided upon conclusion of the ongoing contract negotiations between Dignity and the Council.

2.12 Infrastructure Improvements

2.12.1 *Address water drainage issues with sustainable measures to prevent water pooling and regression.*

2.12.2 Working with the Community and Dignity the drainage systems have been upgraded to ensure that the systems in place meet these requirements and there is ongoing assurance that the drainage to be used will continue to ensure waste is drained away as quickly as possible.

2.13 Foster Collaborative Relationships

2.13.1 *Currently, the Bereavement Services consult with the Muslim Liaison Group which meets regularly to discuss issues concerning Services provided in Rotherham. This needs to continue.*

2.13.2 Meetings scheduled in 2025 on the following dates:
20th February – 10:00-11:30 Town Hall
15th May – 10:00-11:30 Town Hall
7th August – 10:00-11:30 Town Hall
13th November – 10:00-11:30 Town Hall

2.13.3 These alternates between Dignity and Council to chair.

2.13.4 As mentioned throughout this report partner agencies will continue to be invited and encouraged to attend to promote collaborative working.

2.13.5 Attention will be given to promoting community attendance at this meeting.

2.13.6 Dignity alternate chairing the MBLM with the Council to cover all operational aspects of the site. Dignity have offered to widen the scope on particular issues – nonviable fetuses and baby graves as an example, with discussion with TASSIBEE, a charity organisation aiming to increase the capacity and opportunities for Mirpuri and Punjabi Asian women in Rotherham, to discuss their views on burial requirements. In addition, Dignity have had several meetings with the Muslim Chaplain Team Leader at Rotherham Hospital to discuss and take forward options which will maximise burial space without compromising religious requirements.

2.14 Car Park Management for Accessibility

2.14.1 *Collaborate with the Rotherham Muslim Burial Council to improve car park management, ensuring adequate space for disabled parking and sufficient capacity during peak times.*

- 2.14.2 Like all memorial services, attendance numbers can vary, and a process has been implemented to ensure the impact of the volume of vehicles in the cemetery is managed to accommodate the attendees at Muslim burials along with other users of the site. As most Muslim burials are arranged at short notice, it is not possible to limit other services (cremations or burials) which have been planned for several weeks. This is a multi-cultural cemetery and crematorium site, and all activities need to be considered.
- 2.14.3 To ensure access is not blocked along the main driveway for a hearse and funeral cars to attend the crematorium, the Rotherham Muslim Burial Council, Dignity and Glendale work collaboratively during a Muslim burial to redirect the often-large amounts of traffic to keep the site open. Further work between parties will continue to ensure that traffic management is working effectively, efficiently and safely for the good of all attending the cemetery, crematorium or surrounding area.
- 2.15 **Key Improvement Recommendations for Managing the Muslim Section of Rotherham Cemetery**
- 2.16 Headstone Restoration
- 2.16.1 *Locate and reinstate missing headstones, including those on infant graves.*
- 2.16.2 Dignity have been working with the community to ensure the location of all baby graves are clearly identified as such, to prevent any disrespect caused by unknowingly walking across them. Currently these graves do not have headstones installed, as part of the families wishes, and therefore an agreement on the process of identifying them needs to be concluded to ensure all affected families are included in the discussions.
- 2.17 Digital Mapping
- 2.17.1 *Provide a digital map of grave locations accessible to bereaved families.*
- 2.17.2 All families can request the location of a grave to be identified and a map detailing their loved one's grave can be provided. This can be requested in person and staff can offer assistance in locating the grave or submissions can be made by telephone, post or email. The map will only show the requested grave plot and won't give detail on any surrounding graves. This is currently provided by an in-house mapping system.
- 2.18 Respectful Groundskeeping
- 2.18.1 *Avoid overgrown grass around graves. This is seen as culturally insensitive. Ensure ground maintenance does not soil headstones.*
- 2.18.2 Dignity and Glendale are aware of the need to ensure all areas of all cemeteries are maintained effectively, with the upmost respect to all

deceased and families who visit, this includes those buried in the Muslim section.

- 2.18.3 Grass maintenance at East Herringthorpe during the growing season is undertaken weekly. The maintenance program consists of open areas and lawn sections being cut with ride-on grass mowers and the use of strimmers where needed around edging/obstacles.
- 2.18.4 On lawned sections where access is limited, the agreed method is to trim walking in a straight line with the right shoulder to the headstones/memorials as the petrol strimmer's flick the grass cuttings to the left, therefore avoiding memorials as much as possible.
- 2.18.5 The areas of the cemetery which are populated with memorial kerbs and DIY kerbs are strimmed around and the memorials are blown gently with a petrol blower. To avoid the memorials being soiled with grass, limitations are placed on wet weather maintenance where possible. However, early morning is the prime time for maintenance to ensure respect for services and visitors and therefore morning dew can be an issue. Pathways are always cleared of any grass cuttings using a petrol blower following the cutting activities and if maintenance needs to be carried out in wet weather, then more focus will be placed on memorial blowing.
- 2.18.6 Within the new section, several Muslim families have requested white stone for the surrounding areas to the plot in place of grass. Dignity have accommodated all requests from families.
- 2.19 Future Burial Space
- 2.19.1 *Proactively identify and secure land to accommodate future burials, given the limited remaining cemetery space.*
- 2.19.2 Ongoing contractual discussions between the Council and Dignity are working on addressing this concern and the Council remains committed to the public that burial space will not run out.
- 2.19.3 The estimated burial capacity remaining in the existing Muslim burial section is as follows:

Type of Interment	Number of Plots Available	Operational Years Available	Years & Months	RAG Rating
Lined Graves	46	1.8	1 Years 10 Months	Red
Earthen Graves	18	2.4	2 Years 5 Months	Red
Baby Graves	43	2.2	2 Years 2 Months	Red
Baby Graves NVF	33	1.7	1 Years 9 Months	Red

- 2.20 Grave Spacing and Safety
- 2.20.1 *Maintain adequate space between graves for safety and compliance with health standards.*
- 2.20.2 The current spacing between the precast tombs in the newer section was agreed via consultation with the community to maximise the number of

available plots. Plans for extended grave spacing in new areas will ensure standardisation of spacing is undertaken.

2.21 Pathways and Accessibility

2.21.1 *Construct paved pathways to graves to prevent muddy areas and ensure disabled access. Add any additional taps where necessary for those who have to do ablution at the site.*

2.21.2 Pathway and disabled access covered at Section 2.6.

2.21.3 Further update on this recommendation to be provided in December 2025.

2.22 Community Management Feasibility

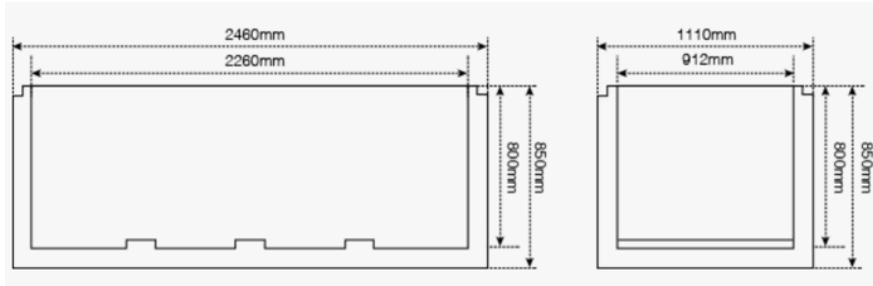
2.22.1 *Explore options for community-managed burial sites, with a focus on cultural alignment and autonomy.*

2.22.2 Further update on this recommendation to be provided in December 2025.

2.23 Standardised Grave Dimensions

2.23.1 *Implement consistent standards for grave sizes across the cemetery. This can be done on future burial sites.*

2.23.2 Precast concrete chambers are all the same size and measure:



2.23.3 Earthen burial plots for full adult interment measure: 1930mm by 610mm.

2.23.4 Earthen burial plots for a baby or non-viable foetus measure: Baby – 610mm by 205mm, NVF – 254mm by 203mm.

2.23.5 Information to be included clearly on dimensions in future burial site plans.

2.24 Visitor Seating

2.24.1 *Install seating areas for bereaved families who frequent the cemetery.*

- 2.24.2 Memorial benches are available to purchase through the Dignity office. This is the standard offering for benches across all nine municipal cemeteries in Rotherham.
- 2.25 **Key Improvement Recommendations for Rotherham Muslim Burial Council Representatives**
- 2.26 Strengthen Partnerships
- 2.26.1 *Partner with relevant authorities to streamline bereavement processes for the Muslim community, ensuring an efficient and respectful experience from registration to burial.*
- 2.26.2 Members are involved in workshops on mapping the bereavement process for Muslims. This is led by the Chaplaincy service at Rotherham Hospital.
- 2.26.3 There will be continued engagement through attending the Bereavement Liaison Group Meetings.
- 2.27 Standardisation and Community Education
- 2.27.1 *Educate the community on the new Medical Examiner System and clarify any procedural delays due to regulatory changes.*
- 2.27.2 A letter was prepared and shared with the burial council, wider community and death management professionals across Rotherham from the Superintendent Registrar, H.M. Senior Coroner and Lead Medical Examiner in August 2024. Positive feedback was noted on this from a member of the burial council during the IPSC meeting on 10th December 2024.
- 2.27.3 Community engagement sessions to promote new guidance document after process mapping related works and guidance document produced completed, this project is being led by the Chaplaincy Service at Rotherham hospital with collaboration from all key death management stakeholders. The Council's services continue to support this work and will assist in facilitating engagement events alongside members of the Burial Council Group who have been involved in the work.
- 2.28 Foster Collaborative Relationships
- 2.28.1 *Strengthen communication and collaboration between the Rotherham Muslim Burial Council, local authorities, and relevant service providers to enhance service delivery and resolve issues efficiently.*
- 2.28.2 Maintain ongoing, proactive collaboration with all key stakeholders in death management services and encourage attendance at Rotherham Muslim Bereavement Liaison Meeting.
- 2.29 Collaborate in developing healthy relationships between stakeholders
- 2.29.1 *Explore the potential of engaging justice system partners and the community to use cemeteries, community buildings, places of worship,*

and green space around community assets for restorative justice projects.

- 2.29.2 The Council will discuss with existing partners such as Probation and Youth Reparation services and facilitate contact between members of the Burial Council and justice system partners to explore this recommendation and set up wider working relationships.

3. Options considered and recommended proposal.

- 3.1 Members are asked to note progress made and comment on any issues arising.
- 3.2 Bereavement Services will develop an Action Plan to be shared with the annual performance report in December 2025 to address progress against recommendations made. This will be a working document.
- 3.3 Bereavement Services will also continue to work with professional partners and community members to fully explore the best practice recommendations made in this review and implement any best practice from these.

4. Consultation on proposal

- 4.1 This is not a proposal, however, the recommendations made will be discussed with relevant stakeholders as appropriate and periodic formal updates shared with the IPSC.

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 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. The cost of the independent review; £15k, has been contained within the approved revenue budget for the Service.

7. Legal Advice and Implications

- 7.1 The Equality Act 2010 prohibits discrimination in the provision of services, including those services referred to within this report, and ensures that service providers make reasonable adjustments for individuals with disabilities. This means that organisations including the Council and their contractors referred to above, when providing bereavement services must treat all individuals fairly and equally, regardless of their protected characteristics (age, disability, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy, and maternity).
- 7.2 This report sets out how the Council's compliance with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 is being further strengthened by reference to the

recommendations within the Independent Equalities Review of Bereavement Services.

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 The Equalities and Human Rights Implications are detailed within the Independent Report

11. Implications for CO₂ 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 carries recommendations for good practice for Council and partner agencies, the Council will work collaboratively with partner agencies to address these.

13. Risks and Mitigation

13.1 No risk associated with this report as it serves as a regular update only.

Accountable Officer(s)

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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Report Author: Ashleigh Wilford, Superintendent Registrar & Bereavement Services Manager

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