

IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION
Tuesday 16 December 2025

Present:- Councillor McKiernan (in the Chair); Councillors Ahmed, Allen, Jones, Keenan, Lelliott, Rashid, Sheppard, Taylor and Tinsley.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Adair, Mrs Kay Bacon, Beck, C. Carter and Mrs M. Jacques.

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

34. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 21 OCTOBER 2025

Resolved:- That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 21st October 2025 be approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

35. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Sheppard declared a personal interest in Minute No. 38 (Annual Bereavement Services Update) on the grounds of being the former Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member with responsibility for this Service within the last 12 months.

36. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

The Chair invited members of the public present to read out their questions.

(1) From Mr. A. Azam – regarding the Annual Bereavement Services Update. The following questions had been submitted in advance of the meeting via email.

Within the Council's Annual Report can the following points be clarified :

- Section 2.5 Is Valley View part of the long-term strategic expansion of Herringthorpe Cemetery Yes or No ?
- Section 2.0 Can the council confirm that a Pathologist is available to undertake a review of the report 5 days a week.
- Section 2.0 As part of the metrics can you add the following:
 - % Report reviewed and submitted to Coroner's Office the same day as autopsy undertaken for expedited requests.
 - % acceptance of report by Coroner's office
- SIP Point 1, sub 1.2 Can the Council Share a copy of this digital guidance.

- SIP Point 3, Sub 3.6 is not needed, we already have engagement with Dignity and formal meeting is what is required, with all parties.
- SIP Point 4, Sub 4.5, paperwork to be submitted by 3pm. As a SIP why can't we undertake burials 365 days a year, other councils provide this service. Outside of this SIP where is all of this documented?
- SIP Point 9, Sub 9.1 can you confirm correct dates when compared with Point 3 sub 3.1
- General SIP Why are certain tasks red when due date isn't until 31/12/2026?

The Chair advised Mr Azam that he would receive a formal written response to his questions but invited him to make any statement he wished to. Mr Azam took the opportunity to publicly thank Phil Horsfield, Assistant Director of Legal, Elections & Registration Services (Assistant Director) and Kim Phillips, Rotherham Business Leader, Dignity Funerals Limited (Dignity Business Leader) for their hard work and commitment in driving the Bereavement Service forward, which, Mr Azam felt, had greatly benefitted those within Muslim community who had suffered bereavements in the past year.

Mr Azam further went on to briefly summarise the issues raised within his questions and drew particular attention to the fact that there was already a "Friends of East Herringthorpe" group that the Muslim community worked with and that the separate Muslim "Friends of" group suggested at 3.6 of the Council's Key Improvement Recommendations was neither necessary nor desired. Similarly, Mr Azam felt it was unnecessary to label the quarterly "Muslim Bereavement Liaison Meetings" which take place as "Muslim", when all parties and communities joined together to discuss matters at these meetings.

Mr Azam further requested that an update be provided from Dignity with regard to the current status of Phase 2 of the expansion of the Muslim burial section within the East Herringthorpe cemetery.

Councillor Beresford, the Cabinet Member for Housing, thanked Mr Azam for his questions and confirmed that a written response to them would be provided by Bereavement Services.

37. 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.

38. ANNUAL BEREAVEMENT SERVICES UPDATE

At the Chair's invitation, Councillor Beresford, introduced the item and commented that Bereavement Services provided a vital service for all

residents of Rotherham, supporting residents through difficult times to say goodbye and remember their loved ones. Councillor Beresford explained that Members would hear from both parts of Bereavement Services – an update from Dignity who were responsible for operational delivery under a 35-year contract with the Council, and an update from the Council on management of the contract with Dignity Funerals Limited (Dignity) and the retained services and assets under Council control.

Councillor Beresford alerted Members that details of Dignity's fee increase for the year 2026-2027 had been expected in advance of the meeting but that this information had not been forthcoming. Councillor Beresford expressed disappointment at this delay and expected Members to request that this information be provided to them, once available.

Bal Nahal, Head of Legal Services (Head of Legal) provided a summary of the Council's Annual Bereavement Services Update Report and drew Members' attention to the following points of note:

- Dignity was required to provide annual assurance to the Council that key performance targets were being met and service improvements were being made. The Council held monthly meetings with Dignity and would escalate matters where necessary. A performance management framework was used to monitor performance which was updated after every meeting with Dignity and Members could request sight of this for visual insight into the Council's management of the contract with Dignity.
- Using this framework, financial penalties were levied to Dignity where there had been performance failures and in 2024-2025, a total of £107,580 of financial penalties were imposed on Dignity.
- The Council had been expecting to receive Dignity's draft schedule of fees for the forthcoming financial year by 1 December 2025 but had been informed that it would not be available until 31 December 2025. As it could not be presented to Members at this meeting, the Head of Legal suggested that a recommendation be made by Members for the confirmation of Dignity's fees to be brought back to the Improving Places Select Commission (IPSC).
- With regard to the proposed expansion of burial sites at Wath Cemetery, Dignity had previously assured the Council that work would commence once planning permission had been granted, which was in October 2023. However, works were still yet to commence. Dignity had confirmed that works were due to begin at the start of 2026 and the Head of Legal pointed out that the relevant planning permission would expire in October 2026.
- Dignity had a phased plan in place to develop increased availability of plots at East Herringthorpe Cemetery, and works were underway to extend the availability of the Muslim burial section.

- There were a number of disused cemetery chapels in varying state of disrepair within Council-retained cemeteries. The findings of an asset management review of these buildings would be added to a paper which would be presented to the Strategic Asset Management Board in the 2026-27 financial year. The Head of Legal confirmed that all buildings had been made safe under an ongoing programme to carry out any necessary safety works.
- Repairs and maintenance had been completed on several of the Council's retained cemetery assets, for example, on stone walls, fencing, gates and pillars. Surveys had also been carried out on other boundaries where significant weather wear had led to remedial works.
- The public mortuary contract with Rotherham District General Hospital was reported to be working well with no key performance issues. Quarterly meetings had taken place between Council officers, the Senior Coroner, pathology staff and NHS trust managers.
- The Digital Autopsy Contract, in partnership with City of Doncaster Council, was also reported to be working well with excellent performance against contractual indicators.
- The next meeting of the Muslim Bereavement Liaison Group was due to be held on 12 February 2026 and the Head of Legal confirmed that Mr Azam's comments with regard to the name of this group would be considered.

The Dignity Business Leader provided a summary of Dignity's Annual Report 2024-2025, and drew Members' attention to the following points of note:

- Works had been ongoing with architectural preparation for the proposed extension at Wath Cemetery and work on site was due to commence in early 2026, with a view to operational use commencing in summer 2026.
- Further to a request from the Chair at December 2024's IPSC meeting, further details of the types of funerals conducted had been provided within the Annual Report.
- An update was provided on the key performance targets (KPTs) which had been rated either amber or red at the end of the last reporting period (end of March 2025). Between April and November 2025, progress had been made on all these areas but there was no change in the Council's rating of them.

- Achievements over the past year were highlighted, including:- the award of Green Flag status for the East Herringthorpe cemetery; commencement of the initial stage of the Muslim burial extension; completion of the natural burial area at East Herringthorpe cemetery; progression of the Wath Cemetery extension which had provided a further 500 plots; continued investment in memorial options for bereaved families; continued customer engagement; increased availability of services over weekends; improvements to accessibility and wayfinding in cemeteries; introduction of feedback cards; a successful schedule of events and memorial/commemorative days; liaison with schools and the Armed Forces; partnership work with local funeral directors which had resulted in improvements to cemeteries and crematoria and the experience for bereaved families; and positive survey results from customers.
- The “Letters to Heaven” post boxes had been installed in all cemeteries prior to Christmas to support bereaved families to send messages to their loved ones.

The Chair invited members of IPSC to raise questions and queries on the Annual Bereavement Services Update and the Dignity Annual Report 2024-25 and in the ensuing question and answer session the following points were raised:-

The Chair asked Dignity to provide an indication of the level of fee increase the Council could expect under the contract. In response, Dignity's Operations Director, James Wintle (Operations Director), explained that Dignity had been conducting an annual benchmarking process before confirming the level of increase. Dignity had increased their fees twice under the contract within the last decade, with fees increasing by 13%. Over the same period, Dignity's costs had increased by 60%. Costs per cremation had increased by 70% which had had a significant impact on the profitability of the site. The Operations Director confirmed therefore, that there would be an increase in Dignity's fees for the upcoming year, but that the level of this increase was yet to be determined.

Councillor Allen referred to the tender process for the repairs to a retaining wall at Masbrough Cemetery, mentioned at 2.7.2 of the Annual Bereavement Services Update, and asked if there was a timescale for works to be started. The Head of Legal confirmed that work was due to commence in early 2026.

Further, Councillor Allen asked for confirmation of the timescale involved in the “usual procurement process” for repairs to a retaining wall at Moorgate Cemetery, mentioned at 2.7.3 of the Annual Bereavement Services Update. The Head of Legal confirmed that the tendering process usually took around 6 weeks so it was hoped that the works at Moorgate Cemetery could commence in February- March 2026 . Councillor Allen

commented that it would have been useful for this timescale information to have been available within the report.

Councillor Sheppard asked whether there were any plans to extend the provision of environmentally friendly burial sites more widely across the borough, which would reduce the distances that families need to travel. The Dignity Business Leader explained that it was difficult to ensure that every burial site complied with environmentally friendly requirements and legislation but confirmed that if the demand was proven, Dignity would look at what else could be provided.

Councillor Allen asked for more information on the options regarding the future use of disused cemetery chapels referred to in paragraph 6 of the Annual Bereavement Services Update. The Head of Legal responded that no detailed plans or timescales could be provided at this stage as there was a vast amount of work to be carried out. The Council wanted to consult with residents properly and would have to work within budgetary constraints.

The Chair asked whether these disused properties came under the responsibility of Bereavement Services. The Head of Legal confirmed that they did currently sit under Bereavement Services but that options were being considered for them to sit under the corporate landlord model under Facilities Management within the Council.

Councillor Allen referred to KPT 2.2 within Dignity's Annual Performance Report and asked whether Dignity had received the outstanding information they were waiting for from the Council's Asset Management team? The Head of Legal confirmed that Bereavement Services continued to chase the Asset Management team and understood that there were currently higher priority issues with other Council buildings.

With regard to the review of disused cemetery buildings, Councillor Lelliott recalled from their time as the relevant Cabinet Member, that reviews and surveys of these buildings had been undertaken by the Asset Management team. Councillor Lelliott expressed surprise that these buildings were still being reviewed and no works had been completed over this period of time. Councillor Lelliott further commented that the community had been surveyed in relation to these buildings and asked what they wished the future use of them to look like.

The Chair commented that the Asset Management team were in the process of conducting a wholescale review of all Council buildings and the Head of Legal confirmed that service would liaise with the relevant officers to obtain all relevant information.

Councillor Tinsley asked for more information regarding the customer feedback and complaints against Dignity that were upheld, in particular the types of complaints and what they related to. The Dignity Business Leader responded that the majority of the complaints were in respect of

burials and the upkeep of particular burial areas. A number of complaints had been made by relatives regarding adjacent burial plots, and such issues could be difficult to manage as different people have different standards and expectations with regard to upkeep. Dignity worked with families to maintain good working relationships and to avoid unnecessary upset. Figures for the total breakdown of complaints was not available at the meeting, but the Dignity Business Leader assured Members that this could be provided separately. Councillor Tinsley commented that this additional detail would be useful.

Councillor Tinsley further asked for clarification on what happened to the letters posted in the “Letters to Heaven” post boxes. The Dignity Business Leader confirmed there was a rigid process in place to shred and dispose of the letters appropriately and sensitively – the paper waste was composted and then reused within flower beds in the cemeteries with the aim of bringing back life.

With regard to memorial testing, Councillor Tinsley asked whether more issues with memorials had recently been identified or whether the numbers were part of an ongoing programme. The Dignity Business Leader confirmed that the memorials referred to had been identified as part of the ongoing programme, which had been running behind schedule and was now catching up, leading to some delayed reporting on memorial issues. If a memorial was deemed to be unsafe, families would be contacted and the options explained to them.

Councillor Allen referred to the KPTs with Dignity’s Annual Performance Report and sought reassurance that there was more documented detail behind the targets as they felt that some were not measurable from the information contained within the report. The Dignity Business Leader explained that the KPTs and the performance framework were provided by the Council and Dignity provided evidence to enable the Council to assess whether targets had been met. The Assistant Director assured Members that there were more documents and minutes of meetings behind the performance targets. These were not generally shared but could be provided to Members to assist their scrutiny if required.

Councillor Allen asked for clarification on the four “unrectified performance failures from previous APR years” referred to at 4.2 of Dignity’s Annual Performance Report. Had these now been rectified and if not, what could be done to ensure they were rectified? The Head of Legal explained that these were areas where the Council had imposed penalty charges on Dignity for repeated failures – for example, failing to re-seed certain areas of cemeteries for a number of years.

Dignity’s Operations Director provided further information on these outstanding issues and stated that 3 out of the 4 related to paths within cemeteries. Dignity were committed to getting paths repaired as soon as possible and work had already started at Wath Cemetery. Dignity was aiming to get all areas of outstanding work completed within the first

quarter of 2026. Councillor Allen commented that Members would be checking within next year's Annual Report from Dignity, that these works had been completed, as promised.

Councillor Keenan asked a question around the Bereavement Services "What to do after death – a practical guide" referred to at page 30 of the agenda pack. As there were a lot of residents who did not have access to digital formats, Councillor Keenan wanted to know when this guide would be made available and whether it would also be made in PDF format. The Head of Legal confirmed that some information was already available on the Council's website, and that the outstanding pieces of information were being worked on in conjunction with Rotherham District General Hospital and Rotherham Hospice. It was anticipated that all information would be available by the end of March 2026. Councillor Keenan asked if an abridged version of this information could be made available for distribution around faith and community groups and the Head of Legal confirmed that this could be done and that information could be shared within existing liaison meetings.

Councillor Tinsley asked whether there was a timeframe for knowing where the proposed new site for the Maltby cemetery expansion would be. The Head of Legal confirmed that service was aiming to get an options paper presented to the Asset Management Board in January 2026.

The Chair asked whether Rotherham had enough burial sites available for the foreseeable future? The Assistant Director provided reassurance that there were sufficient burial spaces to meet current need and that this was continually assessed as part of the Council's own performance monitoring. The Council would continue to work on forward planning with the aim of expanding available burial provision to meet its duties in this area.

The Chair thanked officers and representatives from Dignity for their input and Members for the questions asked.

Resolved:-

1. That the contents of the Annual Bereavement Services Update Report and appendices be noted;
2. That the update report from Dignity Funerals Limited and appendices be noted;
3. That the level of fee increase under the Council's contract with Dignity for the forthcoming financial year be confirmed to members of IPSC via an off-agenda briefing note once the information is available (anticipated by 31 December 2025);
4. That Dignity provide more detail on the numbers of complaints

received during the 2024-2025 period, including a breakdown of the types of complaint; and

5. That once work developing the information available on the Council website regarding the "What to do After Death - A Practical Guide" has been completed, Bereavement Services ensure that a PDF copy of all information is to be made available to those without IT access and for ease of dissemination around faith/community groups etc.

Councillor Sheppard declared a personal interest in Minute No. 38 (Annual Bereavement Services Update) on the grounds of being the former Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member with responsibility for this area within the last 12 months.

39. IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION - WORK PROGRAMME 2025 - 2026

The Governance Advisor introduced the work programme report and drew Members' attention to the following developments:

- **School Road Safety Review:**
Two further meetings of this Review group had taken place with officers in Highways at RMBC and an officer from Sheffield City Council, who had been involved in implementing a School Streets scheme. The group would be moving on to look at crossing patrol and enforcement and hoped to make contact with the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority.
- **Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) Workshop – 4 December 2025**
The ASB workshop had taken place on 4th December 2025 and was a very useful and insightful workshop which allowed Members the opportunity to ask questions of a number of Officers who worked within Housing across the borough.

The Housing team delivered a very informative presentation, covering topics such as: what does and doesn't constitute ASB; the legal position under the Council's tenancy agreement; what tools and powers were available to tackle ASB; and service KPI data and customer feedback. Input was also provided from the Community Protection Unit, which worked closely with Housing Officers on tackling ASB.

Members also took part in a breakout Case Study group session where Members and Officers worked together through real-life scenarios and were able to discuss the particular complexities of each case and valuable lessons learnt. Feedback from the session was that both Members and Officers found it very useful to consider each other's experiences and the session could be rolled

out further to wider Members.

- **Markets/Library Redevelopment Site Visit** (joint with OSMB)
This visit had been planned for 10 December 2025 but had to be rescheduled due to the timing of key works on site during that week which made visits impossible. It was hoped to reschedule this visit for the end of January/beginning of February 2026 and those IPSC members who were due to attend would report back on findings.
- **Municipal Year 2026-2027**
The Governance team were working to set dates for the calendar of meetings for the next municipal year (2026-2027) and it was felt that this would be a good opportunity to conduct a survey of IPSC Members as to the future timing of meetings. The Governance Advisor advised that a Microsoft Forms survey would be sent out to collate responses so that preferences could be considered when planning future meetings.

The Chair asked Members to consider as part of the survey, whether Members felt that IPSC were conducting effective scrutiny and also, whether a formal pre-meet should be structured into the meeting schedule. Councillor Lelliott commented that in her view, a pre-meet should take place to allow Members to get into the detail of the items prior to the meetings. However, Councillor Allen felt that pre-meets were not necessary and would not suit everyone's way of working when reviewing papers prior to meetings.

Councillor Lelliott commented that the schedule substantive item within the Work Programme on Children's Capital of Culture, should be undertaken as a full review of the programme. The Governance Advisor explained that the current plan was for the Improving Lives Select Commission to look at the impact on children and the legacy of the programme, and that the item scheduled to come to IPSC would be a review of the related events programme that had taken place within the town centre and across the Borough. Councillor Lelliott responded that she felt that the item should be a joint item in order that the programme could be considered as a whole.

Councillor Allen expressed surprise at the number of future items that were "To Be Confirmed" and also, were due to be covered via off-agenda means. Councillor Allen felt that items should be given confirmed dates as soon as possible and that if something was deemed suitable for IPSC to consider, it should come to a formal meeting.

The Governance Manager explained that some items on the Work Programme that were currently listed as off-agenda items were joint items with the Overview & Scrutiny Management Board - namely Waste Service Route Optimisation and the Street Safe

Team. It was possible that these items would develop into more substantive items for scheduling as more information became available following implementation.

Councillor Allen further commented that there should be more focus within the work programme on “Places” and what is happening in different places within the Borough. The Governance Advisor advised Members that an Agenda Planning meeting was due to take place the following day and asked Members to submit any topics they would want the Chair and Vice-Chair to consider.

Resolved:-

1. That the current work programme be noted;
2. That the Governance Advisor be authorised to make any required changes to the work programme in consultation with the Chair/Vice Chair, and would report any such changes back at the next meeting for endorsement;
3. That IPSC would consider scheduling more “place based” items on upcoming agendas, with Members asked to provide any suggested topics to the Chair. Vice Chair and Governance Advisor; and
4. That Members would respond to a survey to be circulated by the Governance Advisor asking for feedback on preferred days and timing of future IPSC meetings and proposed IPSC pre-meetings for the 2026-2027 municipal year.

40. URGENT BUSINESS

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