

## Finance & General Purposes Committee 16<sup>th</sup> August 2021

### Progress report on Cemetery Project and future work

#### 1. Purpose

To inform members of the progress on the work undertaken since the Cemetery Assistant was employed, 4 months ago and to set out what work now needs to be done with recommendations for taking this forward.

#### 2. Recommendations

- 2.1. To contract EDGE to input 4,000 of our 'Burial Book' and 'Grave Book' records. Cost £2000-3000 on the Epitaph system, EDGE are currently able to offer a start date in August and complete within 3 months. This will mean that there will be essential details for every burial and which plot each person is in/the names of each person within each plot.
- 2.2. To extend the Cemetery Assistant's Contract for a further 6 months to end in March 2022, to support and enable the completion of this work, managing the process, checking for accuracy, producing the maps, signage and other cemetery related work. To introduce the computer based system for the day-to-day management of the Cemetery. Combined with 2.1 is the most cost effective and efficient way forward.
- 2.3. Consider if further hourly-based staff resources could be usefully used to input further layers of information into Epitaph eg. document scanning, purchase details, uploading photographs, memorial records, purchase and maintenance. The additional layers of information would be beyond the 'brief of the project', but very useful for the ongoing maintenance of detailed records, production of helpful reports and be a single point of reference for all aspects of Cemetery Management. A further report could be brought back if this is required.
- 2.4. Consider a further report on signage and map boards at the Cemetery. Currently there are no visual indicators dividing the consecrated and unconsecrated sides of the Cemetery. Nor is it apparent where the sections (A, B & C) start and end, or which row is which.
- 2.5. To consider a further report on the Cemetery layout/space management. To include decisions about existing Garden of Remembrance (and new path), potential 2<sup>nd</sup> Garden of Remembrance and whether those new plots are agreed and can be mapped, whilst the mapping exercise is underway. Documents suggest that this is a requirement every 7 years and that the next anniversary is in 2021.

#### 3. Report

- 3.1. There has been considerable work in the early phase of the project in assessing its scope and remit. There was no Project Initiation Document (PID) setting out the details of the project. It is understood that the project's genesis was as the result of a number of historic problems, including a grave-digger

digging a grave in the wrong place. One of these incidents resulted in expense for the Council and the requirement of additional measures to ensure that particular problem did not occur again. The solution favoured at the time was a complete renumbering of the unconsecrated graves, with an estimated timescale of 4-5 years. Also, it has been found that knowledge and information about the Cemetery is currently fragmented and sometimes unknown and that the research on this project to date, has identified this. The Council will benefit from the accurate compilation and presentation of the information relating to the records and layout of the Cemetery.

- 3.2. Following a review of the project based on the work undertaken in the last few months, we have concluded that renumbering is not the best way forward. Primarily, it does not solve the problem it was actually intended to resolve. It would be too time consuming and costly (lengthening the project time scale to 4-5 years, rather than 12-18 months), could quite easily introduce errors and would bear no relation to the existing records. The existing records use prefixes to distinguish different graves with the same number, at the same time as providing an indication of their location in the graveyard. This is a tried and tested methodology and there is no reason to change it.
- 3.3. Closer study of the Epitaph system for recording the graves shows that once the data is entered, each grave, represented by a record on the screen, will have at least three, (and possibly more unique identifiers): the plot number and the burial number and the name of the person(s) buried. All visible at once without manually searching through different records. Minimising any errors at this stage.
- 3.4. It has been decided to start this process of data entry with the present day as this is of the most practical use to the Council now. Whilst the historical records are of interest to genealogists and historians, they are less relevant to the day-to-day running of the cemetery. It may still be possible to enter all of the 4413 records, however, for one person doing this it will still take years not months. Even if we only enter the most relevant records it is estimated it will take over two years with the current staff resources.
- 3.5. The first phase of the project has resulted in a good understanding of the issues, identified problems with the current plans, (the current draft map has many inaccuracies and is currently undergoing correction) and has given us a good understanding of the best way forward. Some data entry has already been completed as well and this work continues.
- 3.6. The rate of data entry can be significantly increased by buying the services of EDGE IT who have a team of people trained to do this from our records. The cost of entering all of the types of records necessary for the project (there are more that are of a purely historical interest that could be added later) is estimated at between £2000-£3000. It is difficult to be precise at this time as

some records are much less clear than others will take longer to decipher. Doing this will shorten the duration of the project by many months and may be able to deliver the end product in 12 months. It will also be more cost effective than employing someone for over two years.

3.7. It is proposed therefore that the Cemetery Assistants post be extended by a further 6 months to manage this work and ensure that the computer based system is used by the Council in the future. Currently the Cemetery Assistant's temporary contract expires on 21<sup>st</sup> September 2021. So we would extend it to March 2022.

3.8. The Epitaph database will be very useful for the future management of the cemetery, with its ability to 'search' under various criteria, produce reports, log purchase amounts and keep track of required tasks, such as headstone safety checks. The Local Authorities' Cemeteries Order 1977 S11 (2) & (8), outlines which fields of information are mandatory. Epitaph has further capabilities in terms of uploading documents/photos and maintaining wider details, which may be of interest going forward, but not necessarily for the purposes of this project.

Their method is to complete batches of 10 years and as they release each batch, the Cemetery Assistant check those records, whilst adding some further detail from other sources.

Ultimately, the electronic map will link with the individual plots and their details and a search for e.g. a name, will not only show that person's details, but also zoom in to whereabouts they are, in the Cemetery. There is an option to add a link button to the Council's own web page, allowing the public to access/search the records independently.

3.9. We are confident that this will help significantly in preventing errors. However no system of records can entirely eliminate human error. Those managing the cemetery and funeral directors/grave diggers will still have to follow the instructions given to them.

#### **4. Future requirements**

4.1. The Council is required to assess land needed for interments for the next 10 years/10-15 years/remaining land and any variation of land since 2017. This information is for the purpose of revaluation for non-domestic rates, which have already been submitted for this year. Also, it is a requirement for the Council to consider Cemetery space, every 7 years and that is due in 2021. Our records show that, on average, we have around 25 new records per year and those are a mix of burials, ashes interments and scattering of ashes. Actual numbers for the preceding 15 years can be provided separately, though the figures, already completed for the non-domestic rates questionnaire, may suffice.

4.2. There are large sections of the Cemetery that do not have headstones/memorials, so it can be difficult to gauge where a particular plot is (used but unmarked, or new/pre-purchased some time ago). Equally, with the current policy of people choosing an area they like, rather than being allocated the next available plot, it has proved difficult to be exact and in one case, where a grave was pre-purchased, by the time it was required, it was no longer wide enough.

4.3. There are Heritage Grants available for Cemeteries and so it may be possible to access funds for signage/visual aids. Our application may be helped if it included consideration of e.g. wildlife areas/Green Flag categories. The Cemetery Assistant is currently drafting a report on this. This work can be done whilst The Cemetery Assistant is still in post.

### **5. Conclusion**

5.1. The Cemetery Project was initiated to address problems that had arisen historically. In identifying the problems, it has been possible to establish relevant and proportionate resolutions, which form the basis of the recommendations within this report.

Lynn Tredell

Cemetery Assistant

Ross Willmott

Parish Manager

July 2021.