

CHESHAM CEMETERY AND ST MARY'S CLOSED CHURCHYARD

BEST VALUE SERVICE REVIEW



2003/04

CONTENTS

- 1. Introduction – p 3**
- 2. Current Service – pp 4 – 7**
- 3. Challenge Section – pp 8 – 12**
- 4. Consult Section – pp 13 – 17**
- 5. Compare Section – pp 18 - 21**
- 6. Compete Section – pp 22 – 23**
- 7. Improvement Measures – pp 24-25**
- 8. Five Year Action Plan – pp 26-27**
- 9. Appendices**

1. Introduction

For the Best Value service review of Chesham Cemetery and St. Mary's Closed Churchyard, Members endorsed the decision to use an external 'Challenge' Panel to work alongside the Council's officers and Members at the commencement of the review. It was considered that such an approach would result in a more rigorous examination of the Council's service.

The Review Panel has met on several occasions between September 2003 and March 2004 and has consisted of the following personnel:

- Bill Richards – Town Clerk, Chesham Town Council
- Cllr. Mrs Sharon McEwan - Councillor, Chesham Town Council
- Irene Brown – Administration Manager, Chesham Town Council
- Bob Ayres – Parks and Premises Manager, Chesham Town Council
- Des Knowles – Town Clerk, Amersham Town Council
- Maria Pontin – Friends of Chesham Cemetery
- Judy Ottaway - Friends of Chesham Cemetery
- Mohammad Zafar - Chesham Mosque
- Julie Gilder – Estates Officer, Chiltern District Council
- David Stowe – Estates and Building Technician, Chiltern District Council
- Dr Tim Yates – St Mary's Parish Church
- Terry Hurst – Beacon Funeral Services

While not all the Panel members have been able to attend all the meetings, the mixture of service providers, users and other local authority providers have played an important role in drawing together a coherent plan to develop 'continuous improvement' for the Cemetery and St. Mary's Churchyard and there has proved to be almost total unanimity in agreeing the proposed improvement measures.

2. The Current Service

i. Definition of Service

The Council's service objective is to provide and maintain a local Cemetery, Garden of Remembrance and Avenue of Remembrance for the residents of Chesham Town and Chartridge Parish Councils.

ii. What is the Service?

The Town Cemetery was created in 1858 and the first interment took place on 18 December 1858 in Section A. The Cemetery was managed by the Chartridge and Chesham Joint Burial Committee until Local Government Reorganisation in 1974 when ownership and management became the responsibility of Chesham Town Council.

The Cemetery is made up of various sections, i.e. for those of different faiths. There are Consecrated and Unconsecrated Sections. There are three entrances situated in Bellingdon Road, Berkhamstead Road and Alma Road.

Originally there were two Chapels, one Church of England (Bellingdon Road end) in the Consecrated part and the other a Nonconformist Chapel (Berkhamstead Road end) in the Unconsecrated part.

The Nonconformist Chapel was demolished in 1966 having been closed because of its deteriorating condition and no longer being used for services. The decision was taken to demolish it on grounds of safety following consultation with the Free Church Federal Council, the Church of England Authority and individual Ministers of local Churches, all of whom raised no objections to its demolition.

The Cemetery has expanded over the years to accommodate the town's needs. There are seven Sections comprised of Consecrated and Unconsecrated areas. Most of these are full, although many grave spaces do have the capacity to take further burials if requested by owners of the exclusive right of burial. To date 12,150 interments have taken place.

The 'top' part of the Cemetery is now in current use and is comprised of Sections H, J, K, M, N, NN, O and P with both consecrated and unconsecrated areas.

In 1987 a Garden of Remembrance was designed and laid out on what was the Berkhamstead Road Chapel and the first interment of ashes took place in August that year. The layout was designed to be uniform including the memorials which were to be of white Sicilian Marble 30cm x 30cm with simple inscriptions with limited lettering.

In 2001, as the Garden of Remembrance was becoming full, it was decided to create an Avenue of Remembrance at the Berkhamstead Road entrance and the first interment of ashes took place there in May 2002. Memorial tablets are permitted up to 53cm x 38cm, with sunken flower holders and a choice of colour, subject to approval by the Town Council.

If the main Cemetery is preferred, there are areas alongside some pathways for interment of cremated remains.

The gravedigging contract commenced on 1 January 1998 with a local provider and will be put out for re-tendering in 2003/04.

iii. **What are the Specific Aims of the Service?**

The specific aims of the service are to provide a well maintained and attractive burial ground for families to visit and remember their loved ones.

iv. **Cost and Unit Data**

Detailed below are the current charges with respect to the Cemetery:

INTERMENTS

The following fees include the digging of the grave.

For the interment, in a grave or a vault not exceeding a depth of 6ft (single) whether or not an exclusive right of burial has been granted. The body of a stillborn child and a child whose age at the time of death did not exceed seven years	£98.10
The body of a person whose age at the time of death exceeded seven years but did not exceed 16 years	£144.30
The body of a person whose age at the time of death exceeded 16 years	£203.60
For the interment in a grave or a vault at a depth of 7ft (double) whether or not an exclusive right of burial has been granted.	£218.10
For the interment of cremated remains in a grave	£55.75

PURCHASE OF EXCLUSIVE RIGHT OF BURIAL

For the exclusive right of burial in an earthen grave 9ft x 4ft	£156.00
For the exclusive right of burial of cremated remains, or for the body of a stillborn child in an earthen grave 3ft x 2ft	£54.45
For the exclusive right of burial in an earthen grave	

9ft x 4ft including the fee for selected site of grave, being a grave which already contains remains which the purchaser wishes to secure in that grave	£204.10
For the right to construct a vault or walled grave , including the exclusive right of burial	
9ft x 4ft	£210.90
9ft x 8ft	£424.40

HEADSTONES, TABLETS AND INSCRIPTIONS ON MONUMENTS

Inscriptions to be simple and reverent.

For the right to erect or place on a grave or vault –

A headstone not exceeding 4ft 6ins in height and with a base or on a plinth not exceeding 2ft 6ins x 1ft 3ins	£71.10
A recumbent tablet not exceeding 21ins x 15ins	£24.45
For each inscription after the first	£28.95
Kerbstones only at the discretion of the Town Council	£71.50

GARDEN OF REMEMBRANCE AND AVENUE OF REMEMBRANCE

Purchase of exclusive right of burial – cremated remains plot including the laying of a foundation slab (2ft x 2ft)	£42.10
Interment of cremated remains	£54.45
Memorials – The right to place a tablet on a plot in respect of which the exclusive right of burial has been granted	£21.45
For a second inscription after the first	£11.55

OTHER CHARGES

Scattering of ashes	£11.55
Hire of Chapel	£39.15
Fees for searches of register books by Town Council – half hour or part thereof	£6.30

v. Information

Copies of the Guide to Chesham Cemetery are available at the Town Hall and through Funeral Directors and Stonemasons.

Notice boards at the entrances to the Cemetery give information of opening and closing times and brief details of some regulations, i.e. No Cycling, No Ball Games, Please Drive Slowly, etc.

vi. **Other Items**

The Hearse House, situated by the Bellingdon Road entrance provides the source of power and water for use by the Maintenance staff and is used for storage purposes.

The two Cemetery Lodges are owned by the Town Council and are on short term let to Chiltern Hundreds Housing Association who manage the tenancies.

3. CHALLENGE

“Challenge” is central to Best Value. The basis consists of:

- Why the service is provided
- What the service provides
- How the service is provided

i. **Why the Service is Provided**

By virtue of the Local Government Act 1972, Section 214 (1), all parish councils are burial authorities. The Burials Act of 1852 and 1906 to provide burial grounds previously conferred these powers. The general powers and duties of burial authorities to provide and regulate cemeteries are currently derived from the Local Government Act 1972 and the Local Authorities' Cemeteries Order 1977, as amended by the Local Authorities Cemeteries (Amendment) Order 1986. **However, there is no legal obligation for a local authority to provide a burial ground.**

The rationale of the service, self-evidently, is to provide land for funeral directors and other similar services to bury the deceased from all faiths and denominations.

ACTION

The Challenge Panel accepts that as both a matter of law and as a general principle, a cemetery should be provided within the parish boundaries of Chesham.

ii. **What the Service Provides**

The service consists of a burial ground, Garden of Remembrance, Avenue of Remembrance and Chapel and seats for quiet contemplation.

The Cemetery is maintained by the Parks & Premises Maintenance Department who undertake the following:

- the Manager liaises with the gravedigger and Muslim representative;
- the Manager liaises with the grass cutting contractor who undertakes up to fourteen cuts per year in both the Cemetery and St. Mary's Churchyard;
- The Manager liaises with arboreal contractors for major tree works;
- The Manager liaises with building contractors for major repairs to walls, Chapel, Hearse House, roads and paths;
- emptying of litter bins and litter picking which is undertaken weekly and in conjunction with funerals due to take place;

- repairing and painting seats and supply and installation of additional ones;
- repairing pathways and roads;
- cleaning and maintenance of the Chapel;
- laying down of dangerous / broken memorials;
- periodic removal of excess chalk;
- planting and maintenance of flower beds;
- maintenance of notice boards;
- unlocking and locking of entrance gates;
- maintenance of fencing, hedging, walls and gates;
- removal of dead flowers;
- levelling of graves;
- topping up of sunken graves;
- grassing of graves following six month settlement after interment;
- liaising with stonemasons.
- attendance at funerals;
- carrying out some interment of cremated remains.

The Challenge Group's considerations encompassed reviewing whether all the above should continue to be provided by the Town Council and whether other services should be considered.

ACTION

There were none of the above that the Panel felt should be deleted though it was agreed that:

Operation of funerals on non-working days needed to be reviewed.

The Council's responsibility towards tackling anti-social behaviour in the cemetery needed to be included.

Particular issues such as grass-cutting, removal of dead flowers and removal of excess chalk needed greater scrutiny.

iii. **How the Service is Provided**

All arrangements for interments, including cremated remains, are made through the general office by telephone contact from Funeral Directors who are required to adhere to the following criteria:

- five days' notice of date and time to be given in order that the grave digging services can be booked, unless a bricked grave or vault is required, in which case seven days' notice must be given;
- to confirm whether a new exclusive right of burial is to be purchased or an existing right is being exercised. If there is an existing right, the Deed of Grant Number, Section and Grave space should be quoted so that confirmation can be made in through the Council's Burial Records;

- a Notice of Interment form (attached as **appendix 1**) to be completed and signed by the representative of the Funeral Company and the person arranging the funeral and delivered to the Town Hall, together with Certificate of Burial or Cremation issued by a Registrar and the appropriate fee, three days previous to any interment.

If requested, special arrangements will be made for interments in the Muslim Section on the giving of 24 hours' notice if all appropriate paperwork is presented to the general office and fee paid (the grave digging fee to be doubled for short notice or by arrangement with the gravedigger, if applicable).

On non-working days there is a procedure to inter babies or children in the Muslim Section, which involves the use of a pre-excavated, stock grave, with a locked cover. The backfilling is carried out by the mourners. A copy of the full procedure details is attached as **appendix 2**.

The Chapel is available to hire for a service prior to interment and will accommodate approximately 70 people. There is an electric organ, and a set of the Green Funeral Services books.

Arrangements can be made direct with families and this is common with cremated remains. The procedure for the arrangement is the same as with Funeral Directors.

Following contact by a Funeral Director the following actions are taken:

- office will liaise with the Parks & Premises Manager to book the gravedigger who will confirm as soon as possible;
- Office to advise Funeral Director of date and time on receipt of confirmation from gravedigger;
- A check made on the burial records;
- Written notification and map issued to Parks & Premises Manager who will identify the location of the grave if an exclusive right of burial exists in order to advise the gravedigger and to ensure there are no problems envisaged, i.e. a tree growing on the plot;
- If there is a memorial in place, the office will advise the Funeral Director to arrange its removal prior to interment and replacement following interment;
- Manager will allocate the space based on appropriate Section requested, dependent upon whether a single or double grave is required, (it is possible to liaise on particular grave spaces at the Council's discretion)
- A form of Notice of Interment of burial to be completed by the office (**appendix 3**)
- An Order and identification map faxed and posted to the gravedigger;
- Notification to the Parks & Premises Manager to clean and lay out the Chapel if booked for a service;
- The records to be completed, i.e. Register of Burials, Index, Register of Purchase Graves, Deed of Grant, Register of Graves;

- Entry on record of grave spaces which will need levelling and turfing following a six month settling period;
- Entry on record of location of interment of ashes in a grave.

Requests to erect memorials are made by Stonemasons on behalf of families. When a completed application form (**appendix 4**) is received it is accompanied by a fully dimensioned sketch and details of inscription required, which are checked for approval. If approved and upon receipt of the appropriate fee, a permit is issued.

A settlement time of at least six months is required before a permit can be actioned except for cremated remains plots when a tablet can be laid more or less immediately.

The Panel has considered the current arrangements.

- *Fundamentally, it can see no flaws in the current relationship between funeral directors and the Town Council on the arrangement of funerals upon notification. This satisfactory relationship from the user was confirmed by Mr Hurst of Beacon Funeral Services at the first Panel Meeting. However, in order to ensure all other funeral directors have no cause for complaint, they will be sent relevant questionnaires for analysis (see **Consultation** section).*
- *The Panel accepted that short notice interments in the Muslim section have presented some problems in the past, since the paperwork was not always forthcoming in time and it was agreed this needed to be considered further.*
- *The question of burials on non-working days was examined. It is apparent to the Panel that the current arrangements, whereby a burial at weekends is dependent on the Parks and Premises Manager being both available and willing to work voluntarily, is unacceptable and it was agreed that other Authorities' arrangements should be examined in light of this.*
- *Supply of stock graves for the Muslim community and potentially other faiths was also analysed. Currently, a child's stock grave is supplied but not adults. In the Panel's opinion this too needs to be addressed in an improvement plan.*
- *Literature on burial procedure was discussed, especially for those where English is a second language and it was agreed to consider further.*
- *The Panel, particularly representatives of the Friends of Chesham Cemetery, questioned whether the current service provided by the contractors who have the current contracts for both grave digging and the grass cutting maintenance was entirely satisfactory. It was noted that the existing contracts for both expired in the Summer of 2004 and new tenders were being drawn up ready for distribution (see **Compete** section).*
- *The Council was challenged on its responsibilities on Health and Safety and Risk Management within the cemetery and the St. Mary's churchyard and its approach to anti-social behaviour. Officers acknowledged a weakness, particularly on memorial and headstone safety and it was agreed that this needed to be a fundamental part of the improvement plan.*

ACTION

In challenging the service the Panel agreed that greater scrutiny needed to be given to:

considering in detail the possibility of outsourcing more of the service;
considering bringing the whole service back in house;
to addressing Health and Safety issues, and anti-social behaviour;
to rationalise and improve the service for minority ethnic groups,
particularly the Muslim community.

4. CONSULT

Consultation with service users, partners and the town residents is essential to run an effective service.

On-going consultation takes place at the meetings of the Friends of Chesham Cemetery, which now take place twice a year. However it was agreed by the Panel that greater consultation with all those connected with the service needed to be more fully consulted and these should be divided into appropriate categories:

i. The Bereaved

Aspects of consultation when dealing with a sensitive issue such as bereavement can be problematic. Following contacts with other Best Value Councils who have undergone Best Value Cemetery Reviews, it is apparent that it is common practice to contact only those relatives who have had relatives interred longer than six months previously. The rationale for this is to allow an appropriate amount of time for grieving before presenting them with potentially obtrusive paperwork. Accordingly, forms have been sent to all those who have had a relative interred at the cemetery between six months and two years previously.

The Questionnaire is listed as **appendix 5**

ii. Visitors

The cemetery is located centrally and it is accessed by many merely as a thoroughfare to get from one part of the town to the other. Currently it is not known how many people come to the cemetery to visit particular graves or the Garden of Remembrance or simply pass through. This in turn has implications for future security considerations. It is planned therefore that a weekend day and a weekday be earmarked in March and the questionnaire distribution (**appendix 6**) be undertaken by a mixture of Members, officers, possibly students in a paid capacity and volunteers from the 'Friends' Group. A similar questionnaire distribution will be undertaken by St. Mary's Church for the churchyard.

iii. Funeral Directors

The questionnaire attached as **appendix 7** has been sent to all the funeral directors and similar companies who have buried or cremated the deceased in the cemetery.

iv. Other Consultation

The Panel has agreed to also attempt to consult through the following methods:

- Devise item for 'Chiltern Chronicle' seeking views
- Devise item for 'Town Crier' seeking views
- Devise poster for Cemetery notice board seeking views
- Send Questionnaires to all local churches
- Approach the Chesham correspondent of 'Village Voice' with a view to inserting an item seeking views in the 'Chesham Examiner'.

ACTION

In considering the consultation process, the Panel agreed:

Consultation to be completed by 31st March 2004 and results and subsequent recommendations to be fed into the improvement plan.

Surveys to be sent to the bereaved six months after interment on an on-going basis as part of a continuous consultation procedure

The grass-cutting contractors to attend six-monthly meetings with officers and user representatives such as the Friends of Chesham Cemetery Group

CONSULTATION RESPONSE

i. The Bereaved

24 Questionnaires were returned by those people who had suffered bereavement and had relatives interred in Chesham Cemetery.

1. 54% rated the response from the Town Clerk's office information generally on cemetery matters as 'very good' or 'good' though a third of respondents didn't reply to this question.
2. 62% rated the response from the Town Clerk's office to requests for grave allocation as 'very good' or 'good' though again a third of respondents didn't reply to this question.
3. 54% rated the response from the Town Clerk's office to requests for applications for exclusive Rights of Burial as 'very good' or 'good'. 42% did not respond, presumably because it did not apply to them.
4. 66% rated the response from the Town Clerk's office to requests for costs and charges generally as 'very good' or 'good' with just under 30% not replying.
5. Two thirds of respondents reported that their enquiry was dealt with courteously, sympathetically and efficiently by the Town Clerk's office while one third gave no answer.
6. 71% of respondents rated the level of maintenance generally of the cemetery as 'very good' or 'good' with 29% rating it 'poor' or 'very poor'.
7. Considering the particular issues of maintenance, 83% scored the cleanliness as 'very good' or 'good', 92% scored the tidiness of the bushes and trees as 'very good' or 'good', 75% scored the grass cutting and condition of the grassed area as 'very good' or 'good' 8% believed both the grass-cutting and the overall maintenance to be 'very poor'.
8. Just over half the respondents considered the level of fees 'about right' while 38% declined to answer.
9. 33% thought the fees should be reviewed annually, 21% disagreed and 46% offered no opinion.

ii. Visitors to Cemetery

53 Questionnaires were completed by visitors who were surveyed by members of the Challenge Panel on one weekend and one weekday in March 2004.

1. The overwhelming reasons for the visit were to visit a grave (49%) or simply to walk through (41%)
2. 80% of those surveyed visited the cemetery once or more per week.
3. 64% rated personal safety in the cemetery as 'poor' or 'very poor'
4. 57% were happy with the signs in the cemetery while 30% were not.
5. 58% rated the cemetery overall as 'very good' or 'good' while 36% believed it to be 'poor' or 'very poor'
6. 53% of respondents rated the level of maintenance generally of the cemetery as 'very good' or 'good' with 38% rating it 'poor' or 'very poor'
7. Considering the particular issues of maintenance, 72% scored the cleanliness as 'very good' or 'good', 87% scored the tidiness of the bushes and trees as 'very good' or 'good', 49% scored the grass cutting and condition of the grassed area as 'very good' or 'good'

iii. Visitors to St Mary's Closed Churchyard

15 Questionnaires were returned by visitors who were issued with forms by the churchwardens in March 2004

1. The overwhelming reasons for the visit was simply to walk through (93%)
2. 80% of those surveyed visited the churchyard once or more per week.
3. 76% rated personal safety in the churchyard as 'poor' or 'very poor'
4. 93% were happy with the signs in the churchyard.
5. 93% rated the churchyard overall as 'very good' or 'good'
6. All the respondents rated the level of maintenance generally of the churchyard as 'very good' or 'good'
7. Considering the particular issues of maintenance, 100% scored the cleanliness as 'very good' or 'good', 93% scored the tidiness of the bushes and trees as 'very good' or 'good', 100% scored the grass cutting and condition of the grassed area as 'very good' or 'good'

iv. Undertakers, Stonemasons and Gravediggers

9 Questionnaires were returned by the Town Hall by undertakers, stonemasons and gravediggers who deal with the Council.

1. 8 rated the response from the Town Clerk's office to requests for grave allocation as 'very good' or 'good' and 1 didn't reply to this question.
2. 8 rated the response from the Town Clerk's office to requests for cemetery information generally as 'very good' or 'good' with 1 not replying.
3. All 9 rated the response from the Town Clerk's office to applications for approval of memorials and inscriptions as 'very good' or 'good'
4. 5 rated the response from the Town Clerk's office to requests for applications for exclusive right of burial as 'very good' or 'good' while for the other 4, it was not applicable.
5. 7 rated the response from the Town Clerk's office to requests to mark graves as 'very good' or 'good', I gave a 'poor' rating and 1 did not reply.
6. 7 rated the response from the Town Clerk's office to requests to costs and charges generally as 'very good' or 'good', 1 gave a 'poor' rating and 1 did not reply.
7. 7 rated the level of maintenance generally of the cemetery as 'very good' or 'good' with 1 rating it 'poor' and 1 did not reply.
8. 7 were happy with the signs in the cemetery while 1 was not and 1 did not reply.
9. 7 considered the level of fees 'about right' while 2 thought them 'too high'.
10. 5 thought the fees should be reviewed annually, 1 disagreed and 3 offered no opinion

The lists of all groups' suggestions to improving the service are to be found as appendix 8.

ANALYSIS

It is clear from the questionnaires that it is the visitors who have the biggest reservations both on the visual appearance and the perceived lack of security in the cemetery.

The grass-cutting receives an unacceptably 'poor' or 'very poor' rating (43%) from visitors. Interestingly however the same contractors cut the grass in St Mary's where all visitors rated the appearance as 'very good' or 'good.' Nevertheless, the rating is unacceptably low and one of the key improvement measures is the new tender specification ensuring that the level of the grass does not exceed a certain height all year round.

Perceived fears on the lack of security and anti-social behaviour is also high. Clearly the implementation of any major security initiative such as security fencing would have considerable cost implications but need to be investigated regardless.

The bereaved were generally happier with the level of maintenance in the cemetery and it could be argued that their views are more important than those people who merely use the cemetery as a walkway, not least because they are the ones paying the service though of course, the cemetery is subsidised generally by the Council Tax payers of the town. Few negative comments were received on the administration service offered by Town Hall staff. However some of the bereaved expressed concern on the policies on the removal of personalised artefacts, flowers etc from graves in grassed areas and further clarification on this is required by the Council.

St Mary's Closed Churchyard received a high satisfaction rating generally perhaps reflecting that, as a smaller area, is able to be maintained more effectively and consistently than the cemetery. The main concerns of these visitors were the perceived dangerous state of gravestones and mausoleum.

Finally, the responses from the undertakers, stone-masons and our grave-digger were generally favourable suggesting that the administration procedure requires little alteration.

5. COMPARE

The Panel's comparisons with other service providers were undertaken on two levels. The Panel decided to visit four local cemeteries to compare the services offered at these facilities, particularly in regard to the maintenance, and to adopt examples of good practice.

Comparison of charges has also been made with other service providers to ascertain whether our fees and charges are comparable to neighbouring authorities. It should be noted that while the Best Value 41 Group has discussed the devising of uniform performance indicators to benchmark against, no suitable P.I.s. which give a meaningful comparison have been agreed upon. However, 'Compare' is not only about external comparisons but also comparing in-house performance year-on-year and seeking continuous improvement. The Council operates its own local indicators that form part of the annual Best Value Performance Plan and are listed as **appendix 9**.

i. Site Visits

The Panel was particularly impressed with the visual state of **Stanley Hill Cemetery in Amersham**. It was noted that Amersham Town Council staff are responsible for all maintenance. Additionally, Stanley Hill appeared to have the perception of being fully staffed, its operatives were only on site 3 days a week in summer and only 2 days a week in winter. It was accepted nevertheless that maintenance was made easier by the fact that the cemetery is on a flat piece of ground unlike Chesham Cemetery. It also had a location unlikely to be a focus for anti-social behaviour. The Panel also found it constructive to learn from the Clerk at Amersham that the three Amersham cemeteries were subsidised by about 50% to balance income over expenditure but Stanley Hill itself needed no financial support as income almost matched expenditure.

The visit to **Great Missenden Cemetery** gave the Panel the opportunity to view a partnership arrangement between two local authorities with the Parish Council overseeing the burials and the District Council administering the maintenance. Both authorities were satisfied with the arrangements and the Panel was also impressed with the look of the Cemetery though again it was noted it was relatively flat and well away from centres of population. The Estates Officer reported that the contractors who cut the grass were flexible in their schedules and would respond to any request from the District Council to cut it at short notice. It was agreed that such a flexibility would be advantageous for the Chesham Cemetery and St. Mary's.

The **High Wycombe Cemetery** is a large urban cemetery and was of particular interest to the Panel because it received a number of requests for interments from the Muslim community. The cemetery provides two stock graves for the Muslims – one child and one adult. The cemetery uses the metal frame chamber type that requires four staff to be on duty to lower the lid onto the chamber after backfilling from relatives. The Panel did not consider that the Council had the resources to recommend such a facility but agreed the brick built chamber idea should be progressed.

It was also noted that, despite being in a high-density residential area, acts of vandalism were sparse, probably due to a combination of a high surround security fence and a regular staff presence on site. The grass-cutting was undertaken by external contractors and cuts were done 15-20 times a year. The District Council who operates the cemetery had secured sponsorship for this.

Burial rights are being reduced from a 99 year lease to 30 years and memorial rights are being renewed every ten years.

The Parish Council own and maintain the cemetery at **Chesham Bois**. It is the most similar to Chesham in that it is on a hill and therefore difficult to mow. Some of the gravestones seemed in a dangerous condition and the cemetery suffered from acts of vandalism. The contractors for the grass cutting were the same as those for Great Missenden and the Parish Council also employ a sexton to oversee the site.

The Panel drew the broad conclusions from the visits that:

- *While the quality of maintenance was somewhat dependent on the site the cemetery is located, it could be improved by having either a totally 'in-house' service or contractors who took a flexible approach to maintaining its appearance.*
- *Anti-social behaviour is likely to be reduced by a combination of secure fencing, and a 'visible presence'*
- *Health and safety, particularly in regard to headstone/monument structures, needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.*
- *A system appropriate to the limited resources available to the Town Council needed to be devised for Muslim burials rather than a metal chamber frame stock grave.*

ACTION

Following the site visits the Panel agreed that we should:

Seek quotations for secure fencing around the cemetery.

Invite contractors overseeing the Great Missenden cemetery grass-cutting to tender for the maintenance contract.

Further the project to install brick stock graves for the Muslim community.

Progress with the analysis of bringing service back 'in-house'.

ii. **Fees and Charges Comparison**

COMPARISON OF CEMETERY FEES

COUNCIL	PURCHASE ADULT	INTERMENT ADULT SINGLE DOUBLE	PURCHASE CREMATED REMAINS	INTERMENT CREMATED REMAINS	PURCHASE CHILD	INTERMENT CHILD	MEMORIALS HEADSTONE TABLET ADD'L INSCRIP
Chesham	£156.00	£203.60 £218.10	£42.10	£54.45	£54.45	£98.10 (up to 7) £144.30 (up to 16)	£71.10 £21.45 £28.95
High Wycombe	£220.00	£220.00 £220.00	£109.00	£83.00	£109.00	£0 up to age16	£110.00 £58.00 £0
Hemel Hempstead	£296.00	£210.00 £256.00	£118.00	£100.00	£150.00	£75.00	Included with Purchase of Exclusive Right £25.00 £21.00
Amersham	£151.00	£212.00 £271.00	£45.00	£59.00	£45.00	£59.00 (up to 1) £103.00 (1-16)	£110.00 £110.00 £30.00
Gt. Missenden	£295.00	£170.00 + £65.00	£95.00	£75.00	£295.00	£65.00 (1 month to age 12)	£120.00 £120.00 £60.00

The prices charged by local cemeteries were considered by the Panel. It was noted that the charge for a memorial was well below the market rate by around 30% and that should be amended accordingly.

ACTION

Following the review of fees and charges, the Panel agreed:

The Memorial price to be increased in line with other local authorities

6. COMPETE

In regard to the Cemetery, the 'compete' aspect can be defined as to '*show fair competition as a means of securing efficient and effective service*'. Currently, competition exists in regard to the grave digging and grass cutting services since both are put out to tender and open to fair competition. However some parts of the service are still operating 'in-house' and therefore the Panel was keen to see whether an organisation would be interested in running the service as a whole. It was agreed that expressions of interest be sought from another local authority and a commercial operator.

i. Chiltern District Council

As can be seen from the site visits, the District Council has worked in partnership with the Parish Council to operate Great Missenden Cemetery. Consequently it was considered appropriate to formally approach the District Council to enquire whether it would be interested in administrating all of the cemetery operations. With two District Council officers on the Challenge Panel, initial discussions suggest it is unlikely that, as a local authority, they would wish to operate the service with its limited opportunities for income generation. However, a formal letter has been sent seeking an expression of interest and should a positive response be received, the District Council will be then requested to put a formal proposal for future consideration.

ii. Private Operator

The Parks and Premises Manager had been advised that the cemetery in Aylesbury was managed exclusively by private operators, Wyevale, on behalf of Aylesbury Vale District Council. The Parks and Premises Manager then undertook a site visit in November 2003 to investigate further. His initial opinion of the service provided was favourable and therefore the company was invited to submit a draft budget for operating the service.

The Council currently operate its service, including administration recharges at around £27,000. Wyevale submitted an outline rate based on its bill and quantities at £16,800. However this figure was based on the cost of one burial. Having worked out the average number of burials per annum, a more accurate figure would be closer to £15,000 for maintenance and grass-cutting and £4,000 for grave-digging which is slightly higher than the Council's own costs for these services. Clearly too if the Council is still to be the first point of contact for funeral directors, an office administration charge would still be pertinent.

ACTION

In view of the above, the Panel agreed:

that the option of contracting out the whole service still merited consideration but a period of monitoring the current system and the contractors to be appointed following submissions of the new tenders should be undertaken first

The other aspect of competing is consideration of whether the Council wishes to compete for other contracts. It was unanimously agreed by the Panel that the current staffing structure or resources do not allow for such bids to be considered.

ACTION

The Panel agreed:

No further consideration should be given to the possibility of the Council bidding for external Cemetery contracts at the present time.

7. THE IMPROVEMENT MEASURES

Having rigorously considered the 4 'C's of Best Value and particularly the main issues pertinent to the Cemetery and St Mary's Churchyard, the Panel has, during its lively meetings, put forward a number of suggestions for an action plan designed to lead to continuous improvement. All of the below were debated and the Panel decided upon each whether they should be progressed and recommended to Council for adoption.

Maintenance and Management

PROPOSAL	RECOMMEND FOR ADOPTION ?
Improve grass-cutting per year by stipulating maximum height of grass in contract.	Yes – in tender document
Employ contractors to remove excess spoil in contract	Yes – in tender document
Employ contractors to maintain sunken graves in older section	Yes – subject to financial implications
Consider the financial options of bringing the service entirely 'in house' similar to the Amersham model.	Yes – but only after new contracts have had a chance to be established and analysed
Consider externalising the whole service	Yes – but as above.
Computerisation of burial records.	Yes - but low priority because of doubts on efficiency savings and high cost
Continue to offer burial service on non-working days	Yes – but traditional burials only. The Panel considered walled stock graves would have health and safety issues requiring more than once officer on duty.

Health and Safety/security

PROPOSAL	RECOMMEND FOR ADOPTION ?
Council to consider taking back the Lodge to house a cemetery/security operative.	Yes – but integral to the review of new contractors (above)
Liaise with CHHA to pay occupant a retainer to oversee security	No – considered too complicated in regard to possible insurance claims
Increase staffing levels for more 'presence' at the cemetery	No – financially unviable but could be an important role for possible new Police Community Support Officers
Consider issuing 10 year permits for graves	Yes
Join up with Amersham TC and Chiltern DC to devise and adopt a standard charter that Stone Masons would agree to sign up and adhere to.	Yes – after British or European Standard produced
Joint safety checks with Amersham T.C Chiltern	Yes

DC, St Mary's Churchyard on memorials/headstones	
Investigate the implications of closing two of the three entry gates effectively stopping the cemetery from being a public footpath.	No – legally contentious and unlikely to deter anti-social behaviour
Seek quotations on improving security fencing around the cemetery while being mindful of aesthetic considerations and the wishes of the bereaved	No – quotation received in excess of £70,000. Not financially viable
Seek to make cemetery an alcohol free zone.	Yes – liaise with Police

Equality of Access

PROPOSAL	RECOMMEND FOR ADOPTION ?
Install adult stock graves for Muslim burials	Yes – subject to financing
Consider translation of documentation into minority ethnic languages	Yes – add to guide 'copy available in the following languages' and liaise with BCC translation service
Consider the fairness of double fee charges for short notice burials.	Yes – need to devise a written policy
Agree short notice burials on non-working days for children and adults	Yes – but not for walled graves - see decision in Maintenance and Management
Undertake full disability audit on accessibility of cemetery and St Mary's in line with the DDA legislation	Yes

Consultation

PROPOSAL	RECOMMEND FOR ADOPTION ?
Develop website for more information and feedback on cemetery	Yes
Develop more liaison between grass cutters and user groups	Yes – six monthly meetings to be written into contracts
Undertake regular surveys on annual basis	Yes

Other

PROPOSAL	RECOMMEND FOR ADOPTION ?
Develop conservation plan for the cemetery	Yes – in partnership with BCC
Educate young people as to the importance of the Cemetery as a place for contemplation and quiet as a long-term aim	Yes – but to be delayed until Health and Safety check has been completed on memorials

8. FIVE YEAR ACTION PLAN

2004/05

- Improve grass-cutting per year by stipulating maximum height of grass
- Improve grave appearances by instructing contractors to remove excess spoil at Council's discretion.
- Join up with Amersham TC and Chiltern DC to devise and adopt a standard charter that Stone Masons would agree to sign up and adhere to
- Commence joint safety checks with Amersham T.C Chiltern DC, St Mary's Churchyard on memorials/headstones
- Install adult stock graves for Muslim burials subject to finance
- Translate documentation into minority ethnic languages
- Devise policy on double fee charges for short notice burials
- Develop website for more information and feedback on cemetery
- Develop more liaison between grass cutting contractors and user groups
- Work towards making the Cemetery an alcohol free zone
- Secure quotation from maintenance contractors to operate a service to maintain sunken graves.

2005/06

- Begin programme with other agencies to educate young people as to the importance of the Cemetery as a place for contemplation and quiet as a long-term aim
- Liaise with possible new Police Community Support Officers on visible patrolling of cemetery
- Develop conservation plan for the cemetery possibly in partnership with Buckinghamshire County Council
- Begin issuing 10 year permits for graves

2006/07

- Consider the financial options of bringing the service entirely 'in house' similar to the Amersham model following 2 year analysis of existing contracts
- Consider externalising the whole service following 2 year analysis of existing contracts
- Undertake large-scale random postal survey on the cemetery
- Continue to develop conservation plan with a view to instigating wild flower area
- Begin process of securing perimeter of cemetery
- Investigate computerisation of burial records in light of advancements on IT.

2007/08

- Continue process of securing perimeter of cemetery
- Review policy of locking and unlocking cemetery
- Upgrade all information and signage
- Review policy on out of hours burials
- Prepare new tenders for grass-cutting and grave digging taking account of on-going consultation.

2008/09

- Complete process of securing perimeter fence
- Undertake another major outside audit on safety of headstones/memorials
- Review all policies in light of next Best Value service review due.

APPENDICES

1. Notice of Interment form (undertakers)
2. Procedure for interments in the Muslim Section on non-working days
3. Notice of Interment form (office)
4. Memorial Application form
5. Questionnaire - Users
6. Questionnaire - Visitors
7. Questionnaire – Undertakers/Stonemasons/Gravedigger
8. All groups' suggestions for improvement of service
9. Performance Indicators

.....