

REVIEW OF BURIAL SERVICE PROVISION

08/09/2026

GENERAL PUBLIC SERVICES AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT COMMITTEE

PART I

REVIEW OF BURIAL SERVICE PROVISION AND FAITH BURIAL REQUIREMENTS (ADE)

1 Summary

- 1.1 At its meeting of the General Public Services and Community Engagement Committee, Members requested a review of burial service provision within the district, specifically to consider whether same-day, 24-hour, weekend and out-of-hours burials could be facilitated where required by faith communities.
- 1.2 The review included public engagement, consultation with stakeholders and benchmarking with neighbouring authorities. It also considered operational, staffing, cemetery capacity and health and safety implications associated with the provision of enhanced burial services.
- 1.3 The review found that whilst officers seek to accommodate burial requests wherever reasonably practicable, the Council's current staffing resources, operational arrangements, site constraints and health and safety requirements mean that same-day, 24-hour, weekend and out-of-hours burials cannot be routinely guaranteed.

2 Recommendation

- 2.1 That Members:
- 2.2 Note the findings of the review into burial service provision.
- 2.3 Note the findings of the public engagement exercise undertaken through the Have Your Say Three Rivers platform.
- 2.4 Note the findings of the benchmarking exercise undertaken with neighbouring authorities.
- 2.5 Note the operational, staffing, cemetery capacity and health and safety constraints affecting burial provision at Woodcock Hill Cemetery.
- 2.6 Support the continuation of the current burial service arrangements whilst officers continue to work with funeral directors, faith leaders and bereaved families to accommodate burial requests wherever reasonably practicable.
- 2.7 Note that any future enhancement to service provision, including routine weekend, same-day or out-of-hours burials, would require additional staffing resources, revised operational arrangements and consideration through the Council's budget-setting process.

Report prepared by:

Sarah Holohan, Bereavement Officer / Jennie Probert Environmental Services Manager

3 Details

3.1 Background

Bereavement Services provides burial services across the Council's cemetery sites, including Woodcock Hill Cemetery, which accommodates traditional burials, Muslim burials, woodland burials and ashes interments.

Whilst burial services are an important community service, they are not a statutory function of local government. The Council therefore seeks to balance service provision against available resources and wider statutory responsibilities.

This review was commissioned following a resolution of the General Public Services and Community Engagement Committee requesting officers to consider whether same-day, 24-hour, weekend and out-of-hours burials could be facilitated.

3.2 Public Engagement

A public engagement exercise was undertaken through the Have Your Say Three Rivers platform between 11 May 2026 and 19 June 2026.

The consultation was promoted through:

- Posters displayed at Council cemeteries;
- Local funeral directors;
- BW Foundation;
- Three Rivers Equalities Forum;
- Partnership Newsletter;
- Council website;
- Council social media channels; and
- Members' Information Bulletin.

The engagement generated:

- 175 visits;
- 143 aware visitors;
- 28 informed visitors;
- 26 engaged visitors;
- 26 completed survey responses.

3.2.1 Key Findings from the Consultation

- The full report of responses is attached as Appendix A. Of the 26 responses received, the majority indicated satisfaction with the Council's current burial service arrangements.
- 100% of respondents answered Q3, in relation to burials being carried out in accordance with their wishes or beliefs. It is clear that for many communities a short time period between death and burial is preferred. These respondents encouraged the Council to continuing responding to these requests as reasonably practica, with all but one stating they were happy with the current burial arrangements.
- Officers do work and will continue to work with funeral directors, faith leaders and bereaved families to accommodate urgent burial requests wherever reasonably practicable.

3.3 Operational Review Findings

- The review identified a number of operational constraints affecting service delivery, including:
- Limited staffing resources, with only two trained operatives available to undertake grave digging duties;
- Competing service demands placed upon Grounds Maintenance staff;
- Limited availability of staff for routine weekend working;
- Cemetery capacity and operational constraints at Woodcock Hill Cemetery;
- Health and safety concerns associated with ground movement and grave stability due to the soil composition of the site.

3.3.1 Faith and other Communities Burial Requirements

The review recognised that certain faith and other communities may seek burial within 24 hours of death. Officers regularly work with funeral directors and bereaved families to accommodate such requests wherever reasonably practicable. However, the Council, like all other cemetery providers, cannot guarantee burial within a specific timescale due to staffing availability, existing bookings, operational considerations, soil conditions and health and safety requirements.

3.3.2 Benchmarking

A benchmarking exercise was undertaken with neighbouring authorities contacted. Responses received are included as Appendix B.

The review found that restrictions relating to weekend burials, out-of-hours burials and staffing availability are common across Hertfordshire and elsewhere. The majority of authorities are unable to routinely provide same-day or 24-hour burial services.

3.3.3 Key findings

Of the authorities that responded:

- Most do not routinely offer out-of-hours burials.
- Most do not offer bank holiday burials.
- Several authorities rely on contracted grave diggers or pre-prepared graves to facilitate urgent burials. This is not a feasible option at Woodcock Hill due to the nature of the soil composition.
- All authorities reported operational or staffing constraints affecting service flexibility.

3.3.4 With Local Government Reorganisation and the move to a Unitary Authority it is worth noting that Hertsmere Borough Council provides the same service as Three Rivers. Whilst Watford Borough Council do make provision for weekend burial this is provided by an external contractor at additional cost.

4 Options and Reasons for Recommendations

Officers considered the following options:

4.1 Option 1 – Maintain Current Arrangements (Recommended)

Continue with existing burial service arrangements; seeking to accommodate burial requests wherever reasonably practicable.

This option is recommended because:

- Current staffing levels do not support guaranteed same-day, 24-hour, weekend or out-of-hours burials;
- Health and safety and Ground considerations at the Woodcock Hill Cemetery restrict the ability to leave graves open unattended and require grave digging to be undertaken and overseen by staff familiar with the site and its ground conditions;
- Benchmarking demonstrates that similar operational restrictions exist across neighbouring authorities;
- The approach represents the most sustainable use of existing resources.

4.2 Option 2 – Introduce Enhanced Burial Provision

Provide routine weekend, same-day and out-of-hours burial services.

This option is not recommended at this time because:

- Additional operational staff would be required;
- Alternative working arrangements would need to be introduced;
- Additional budget provision would be necessary;
- Recruitment and retention challenges may affect service delivery;

- Site restrictions and soil composition preclude use of external contractors.

5 Policy/Budget Reference and Implications

- 5.1 The recommendations in this report are within the Council's agreed policy and budgets as no changes are proposed to the current service provision.

6 Financial Implications

- 6.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from the recommendations contained within this report.

- 6.2 Any future enhancement to burial service provision, including routine weekend or out-of-hours burials, would require additional staffing resources and would be subject to future budget approval.

7 Legal Implications

- 7.1 There are no specific legal implications arising from the recommendations contained within this report.

8 Equal Opportunities Implications

- 8.1 An EQIA has been undertaken as is attached as Appendix C to this report. The review recognises the importance of timely burial provision to certain faith groups. Officers will continue to work with bereaved families and faith representatives to accommodate burial requests wherever reasonably practicable.

9 Staffing Implications

- 9.1 Current staffing levels do not support routine same-day, 24-hour, weekend or out-of-hours burials. Any service enhancement would require additional staffing resources.

10 Environmental, Community Safety, Public Health, Customer Services Centre and Communications and Website Implications

- 10.1 None specific to this report.

11 Risk and Health & Safety Implications

- 11.1 The subject of this report is covered by the Waste and Environment service plan(s). Any risks resulting from this report will be included in the risk register and, if necessary, managed within this/these plan(s).

Nature of Risk	Consequence	Suggested Control Measures	Response (tolerate, treat, terminate, transfer)	Risk Rating (combination of likelihood and impact)
Insufficient staffing resources	Delays in burial provision	Prioritisation of workload and use of existing resources	Treat	6
Cemetery capacity constraints	Reduced flexibility in burial scheduling	Careful planning and site management	Treat	6
Ground instability and grave collapse	Injury to staff, contractors or visitors	Site monitoring, risk assessments and controlled burial operations	Treat	8
Increased demand for urgent burials	Service pressures and customer dissatisfaction	Continued liaison with funeral directors and faith groups	Treat	6

11.2 The above risks are scored using the matrix below. The Council has determined its aversion to risk and is prepared to tolerate risks where the combination of impact and likelihood scores 6 or less.

Very Likely Likelihood Remote	Low 4	High 8	Very High 12	Very High 16
	Low 3	Medium 6	High 9	Very High 12
	Low 2	Low 4	Medium 6	High 8
	Low 1	Low 2	Low 3	Low 4
Impact Low -----> Unacceptable				

Impact Score

- 4 (Catastrophic)
- 3 (Critical)
- 2 (Significant)
- 1 (Marginal)

Likelihood Score

- 4 (Very Likely (≥80%))
- 3 (Likely (21-79%))
- 2 (Unlikely (6-20%))
- 1 (Remote (≤5%))

11.3 In the officers' opinion none of the new risks above, were they to come about, would seriously prejudice the achievement of the Strategic Plan and are therefore operational risks. The effectiveness of the management of operational risks is reviewed by the Audit Committee annually

11.4 Data Quality

Data sources:

- Have Your Say Three Rivers consultation data.
- Benchmarking responses from neighbouring authorities.
- Operational records held by Bereavement Services.

Data checked by:

Jennie Probert, Environmental Services Manager.

1	Poor	
2	Sufficient	X
3	High	

APPENDICES

Appendix A – Full Engagement Report

Appendix B – Responses from Other Authorities

Appendix C - EQIA

