

MINUTES

Community Services Scrutiny Panel

5th June 2007

Present: Councillors Howarth (in the Chair), Crooks, Laverick, Lightley, Mavin, Moderate, Robinson, D Smith and Young.

Also Present: Councillors Lodge, Marsden and Wilkes.

Peter Lee - Street Scene Technical Officer
Chris Tomlinson - Environmental Services Manager
Michael Hurlow - Heritage & Design Manager

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for Absence were received from Councillors Norman and Walton.

2. Overview of Current Projects and Pending Reviews

For the benefit of new Members of the Panel, the Chairman gave a brief update on Scrutiny topics which had recently been completed, and those which would be due for review in the following months. These included Gypsy & Traveller Sites, Council House Repairs, Council Garages, the Playing Pitch Strategy and Homelessness.

It was noted that Council House Repairs was not due for review until January 2008, to allow for the introduction of the new Northgate Housing Management System on June/July 2007. Some concerns were raised about this, and the Chairman indicated that she would contact Property Services to establish whether it would be possible for an update to be provided, prior to the full review being carried out.

3. Minutes

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 14th March 2007 were confirmed as a correct record.

4. Scrutiny of Graveyards

Peter Lee, Street Scene Technical Officer, Chris Tomlinson, Environmental Services Manager and Michael Hurlow, Heritage and Design Manager were in attendance for further discussions on the Scrutiny topic.

Members were advised that a closed churchyard generally meant one which had been closed for burials by an Order in Council under the Burial Act. If a churchyard had simply been disused for a long period of time, it did not make it a closed churchyard.

Churchyards could be closed where there was insufficient space to dig further graves, continued use would be a risk to public health or stopping further burials would prevent nuisance.

When an Order in Council was made, parish and district councils were notified and could object to the closure if they felt there was sufficient space for additional graves, or because the closure was being applied for to avoid the cost of repairing and maintaining the churchyard.

Once an Order had been granted, maintenance responsibilities remained with the Parochial Church Council. They could then serve written notice on the parish council to transfer responsibility onto them, and the parish council can in turn serve notice on the district council. The Parochial Church Council had to ensure that all walls and fences were in good condition before handover.

Maintenance responsibilities included grass, shrubs and trees, and particularly health and safety aspects. Headstones were the responsibility of family and heirs but the council had to prevent dangers to churchyard users.

The City Council was responsible for the maintenance of a number of closed churchyards across the District. In some cases responsibility was shared with the parish council.

General maintenance included grass cutting and visits took place every 10-14 days throughout the summer. Headstones at most closed churchyards were treated with herbicides around the base to control grass growth.

Vandalism or damage was reported by maintenance personnel. Litter collection did not regularly take place, but it was removed as it accumulated or interfered with maintenance.

Heritage and Design, together with the Council's Health & Safety Officer organised safety inspections of headstones, and details of this procedure were circulated.

Environmental Services had budgets for grass cutting and some general maintenance works. Work identified as a result of inspections would be paid for from capital works funding.

The War Graves Commission was responsible for the care of the graves of people who died while serving with Commonwealth forces during the First and Second World Wars. They were responsible for over 170,000 graves and memorials. Inspectors from the Commission checked war graves regularly, and had agreements with local authorities, private contractors to carry out routine horticultural works. The City Council received the sum of £5.00 per year per grave to carry out this work, while the Commission's own staff cleaned and replaced official war pattern headstones and other major works.

Works to graves with inscriptions between 1914 and 1947 had to be reported to the War Graves Commission to verify whether the headstone constituted a war grave. If the memorial proved to be a war grave, the Council would carry out no works to it, but would report its condition to the Commission who would arrange for any works to be carried out.

Note: *Councillor Robinson left the Meeting at 6.45pm*

It was agreed that for the next meeting on this topic, the Panel wished to consider the following:-

- Biodiversity areas in churchyards
- Additional information on war graves
- Sites where alternative maintenance programmes could be considered
- Figures on the number of headstones requiring repairs and maintenance
- The possibility of inviting a representative from the Diocese to a future meeting.

The Chairman thanked the officers for an excellent presentation and for answering Members' questions.

5. Any Other Business

There was no other business for consideration.

The Meeting terminated at 6.55 pm