

Letter regarding cemeteries and churchyards

I've read an article in about the consultation surrounding changing the current arrangements for the local precept (and associated subsidy) and introducing a local charge. This could add transparency and provide a fairer distribution of charges. However, the parishes elect parish councillors to decide the level of the precept necessary to provide local services. The consultation doesn't make it clear what mechanism will exist for Tonbridge residents to decide on local services - and there should be something. And it will only be a good thing if the right things are included in the "borough" and "local" provisions.

Specifically, I want to comment on the proposal to make cemeteries and churchyards part of the local charge as I am something of an expert on this area of work. I have over 25 years of experience in cemeteries and crematorium senior management with various authorities In addition, I am a former Director of the Institute of Cemeteries and Crematorium Management which oversees the standards within the industry, professional training of Bereavement Services staff and advises the government on national strategy and legislation for this vital work.

Your consultation makes the distinction between local parks and country parks. You should make the same distinction between churchyards and cemeteries, where one is local and the other is a strategic resource. You should fund the cemetery services and Tonbridge Cemetery (and any future cemetery land) from the borough-wide taxation. Tonbridge Cemetery may be located in Tonbridge but it has a borough wide benefit.

I support the inclusion of the closed churchyards within the local charge. If a parish chooses to 'close' the churchyard, the local authority has no choice but to assume responsibility for the maintenance of the churchyard, even if burials still regularly take place in that churchyard. Virtually every parish will have a churchyard which their community is paying for. If the community has transferred responsibility for the maintenance to the local authority, it is fair that they should meet the associated costs. In most local authorities the maintenance of closed churchyards is carried out by the parks department (even if the cemeteries team's expertise is required to undertake the mandatory memorial safety inspections) so it could easily be grouped as "local parks and churchyards".

However, the provision and maintenance of municipal cemeteries should be treated as a strategic resource. Municipal cemeteries, since their inception in the 1850s, serve not only their immediate parish but the wider community as it's impractical to provide cemeteries in multiple parishes. Whilst there is no statutory requirement to provide burial land, it is an essential service with public health implications if there are not adequate facilities for the disposal of the dead and it is illegal to cremate someone against their wishes. It cannot be left to the "discretion" of a specific wards within the borough whether to provide cemetery services. Indeed, there is an argument that rather than being financed at the borough council level that they should be planned and resourced at the County or regional level to ensure a reasonable distribution throughout the geographic area without over or under provision. With many municipal (primarily Victorian cemeteries) reaching capacity, it is a major concern that this could

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result in a situation where there is no provision of burial land. The need for regional planning and provision of cemeteries, as a statutory service, was a major focus of the 2004 consultation into "Burial Law and Policy in the 21st Century: The need for a sensitive and sustainable approach".

My understanding is that Tonbridge Cemetery, which is the only cemetery (or crematorium) facility within the Council boundaries, currently has something like 15 years burial land provision. Given the 5 year average development timescales, the authority will need to start the work to extend the cemetery within 10 years. The capital costs of providing new burial ground will be extremely expensive given the increased environmental and grey water legislation - probably beyond the costs which could reasonably be met purely by the residents of Tonbridge.

What will happen if whoever sets the local charge for Tonbridge decides that they cannot afford to extend the cemetery? Instead, the capital costs should be met by the wider community of Tonbridge and Malling and not just Tonbridge residents to ensure that there is a local burial facility.

The majority of the running costs of cemeteries is the maintenance of the cemetery where there is a statutory obligation to maintain the cemetery to a good standard in perpetuity. However, the majority of this expense is on graves which were sold in perpetuity between 1858 and 1977, and therefore no income is any longer received. These graves have been used by the wider community and the whole community should pay for the ongoing maintenance.

Until now, the cemetery service has been subsidised from our Council Tax and as such all the residents of Tonbridge and Malling qualify for cemetery fees which are half the fees payable by non-residents. If the funding of Tonbridge Cemetery is to be levied purely on Tonbridge residents, presumably only Tonbridge residents would qualify for resident fees making the costs of burial prohibitive for many non-Tonbridge residents. If residents who live outside of Tonbridge want to bury their loved ones in another authority and can afford the associated double fees, that is their choice. But there should be at least one affordable facility which they can access within the borough.

As a resident of, and someone whose relatives all want to be cremated, it is perhaps to my personal disadvantage to argue that the residents of should be contributing to the provision and maintenance of Tonbridge Cemetery. However, there has already been one Select Committee report which branded the chronic under resourcing of the country's cemeteries as a "shame on all the nation". It would be to be a shame on all of us if we no longer contributed to maintaining the resting place of many of our community, or to ensuring that there is an affordable option for those residents who wish to be buried.

Please continue to fund the cemetery service from within the borough wide element of taxation.