

Operational Services Cabinet Committee

Thursday, 14 September 2023

7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr Emma Morley (Chair)
Cllr Lee Croxton (Vice-Chair)

Councillors: Derek Ashenden
 David Beattie
 Leslie Pearton
 Alan Ridgers
 Peter Scollard
 Ektaveen Thandi
 Alison Williams

Stuart Alford	Assistant Director (Operations)
Mark Lees	Regulatory Services Manager
Mary Bobby	Cemeteries and Allotments Manager
Emily Lane-Blackwell	Assistant Licensing Manager
Karen Gingles	Committee Services Officer (Minutes)

1. Apologies for Absence

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Adewale King and Cllr Williams attended as his substitute.

2. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday, 22 March 2023 were signed by the Chair.

3. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Presentation on Gravesend and Northfleet Cemeteries

Members were provided with a presentation on Gravesend and Northfleet Cemeteries.

The presentation can be viewed via the following link:

[democracy.gravesham.gov.uk/documents/b17420/Supplementary Document - Presentation on Gravesend Northfleet Cemeteries Thursday 14-Sep-2023 19.pdf?T=9](https://democracy.gravesham.gov.uk/documents/b17420/Supplementary_Document_-_Presentation_on_Gravesend_Northfleet_Cemeteries_Thursday_14-Sep-2023_19.pdf?T=9)

During the presentation the Cemeteries and Allotments Manager highlighted that:

- Gravesend Cemetery had been established as a cemetery in 1878 and designed by the architect Stephen Geary who designed Highgate Cemetery in London. Originally a pleasure garden, the front property, chapels and walls of Gravesend Cemetery were grade 2 listed.
- Members were informed of the Forget You Not Garden which is being created through rewilding at Gravesend Cemetery. The concept was to offer a calm space for bereaved visitors to reflect and also incorporate wildlife preservation. The garden will include benches inscribed with mindful quotes and a special post box. The Committee were informed that bereaved friends/family could send a letter by using the seed infused paper within the envelope to those they had lost. Loved ones would be sent an envelope, which contained a small piece of biodegradable paper infused with wildflower seeds. Once returned via the post box, these envelopes would then be buried in the gardens. As the entire envelope would be 100% biodegradable, the envelope would be planted in its entirety.
- Members were informed that the Forget you Not Garden currently had hedgehogs and the team were working with an organisation on the prospect of becoming a hedgehog release area.
- The Committee were updated that new passing bays had been introduced along the roads throughout Northfleet Cemetery to protect the grass, and to also allow for easy passing for those driving in the cemetery.
- New benches were being introduced at both cemeteries. The new benches were produced by sustainably sourced teak, guaranteed for 25 years and would not require further treatment. The benches could be purchased by loved ones and be engraved.
- The Committee were informed that there were some disused roads within Northfleet Cemetery that would be sown with grass seed and when required the area could accommodate 30-40 new graves.

The Chair thanked the Cemeteries and Allotments Manager for her presentation and invited Members to make comment:

- Members asked if the biodegradable seed envelopes would be available for both cemeteries and whether they would also be sent to loved ones of those who had passed away previously or going forward. The Cemeteries and Allotments Manager advised that the focus for the initiative was for Gravesend Cemetery initially, with the newly created garden. It was hoped in the future that there would also be a suitable area created within Northfleet Cemetery. Members were informed that the bereaved of those buried at Northfleet, would still receive an envelope, which they could choose to use at home or be planted on their loved ones grave at Northfleet cemetery if they wished. There were also plans in place to send envelopes to those who had lost family during Covid19.
- The Committee asked for more information regarding the engraving of the new benches and whether there was any control regarding the content of the inscriptions,

to avoid anything that would be deemed unsuitable. The Cemeteries and Allotments Manager advised that, as with current memorials, any text that was not in the English language would be interpreted to ensure it was appropriate, however pointed out that memorial inscriptions were not generally limited unless it was deemed offensive.

- The Committee welcomed the Forget You Not Garden and suggested having a community group to assist with the upkeep. The Cemeteries and Allotments Manager informed Members that there was a newly appointed Cemetery Supervisor, who had previously worked at Highgate Cemetery. He had plans to arrange such a group and was hoping to also involve schools and local groups such as Scouts and Brownies.
- Members felt that the rewilding idea was a positive concept in order to promote wildlife to the Cemetery and a great opportunity for the local community to get involved. The Cemeteries and Allotments Manager informed the Committee that going forward the ambition was to achieve a Green Flag accreditation for the cemetery, which would open the doors to future funding.
- The Committee queried what the overall, available burial space was in Gravesham's church graveyards. The Cemeteries and Allotments Manager advised she did not have statistics for this, however would investigate a general information figure for the borough and update the Committee at a later date.
- The Chair expressed interest in a tour of the Cemeteries. The Cemeteries and Allotments Manager offered to arrange a historic tour for the Committee plus to show future plans.
- Members queried whether the concept of over wilding had received any criticism from the public. The Cemeteries and Allotments Manager advised that there had been some negative comments, however once explained, especially in regard to the protected species, such as slow worms and hedgehogs on site, people became interested and supportive. It was noted that many compliments had been received also.
- The Committee queried how the wildlife within the garden would be promoted to encourage more public engagement. The Cemeteries and Allotments Manager updated that the project had a 5 year plan, which was currently in year one. The objective this year was to establish the type of wildlife attracted to the gardens. There were plans to hopefully include bat and bird boxes with the possibility of beehives. Members were informed that in year two, the Communications team would be assisting to provide information boards in the gardens, to explain what wildlife could be seen within the space.

The Committee commended the presentation and supported the initiative.

5. Pre-consultation report on the bi-annual taxi tariff review

The Committee was presented with the Review of Taxi Tariff. The purpose of the report was to present Members with the proposed consultation methodology relating to the previously agreed two-yearly review of the taxi tariff. Approval was sought from Committee regarding the proposed methodology of the consultation approach.

The Assistant Licensing Manager highlighted key points from the report:

- Members were informed that as the licensing authority, Gravesham was able to set a tariff for licensed Hackney Carriages operating within the borough. Members were advised that the 'flag' and the 'yardage' fees would be reviewed every two years. It was agreed in 2019 to alternate separate consultations of the 'flag' and the 'yardage'. As the 'flag' was last reviewed in September/October 2021, it was now time to consult on the 'yardage'.
- Gravesham Borough Council had chosen to set the tariff to represent the maximum that could be charged.
- Following collaboration with the Gravesham Taxi Association (GTA), six options were considered for the 'yardage', including one option proposed by the GTA as set out in section 2.1.6 of the report, which proposed to increase the tariff by 40p per mile, by increasing the yardage to 270.76 (2/13 of a mile) but also increasing the charge per 270.76 yard to 40p.

It was explained that because the meter clicked over at the beginning of the yardage, option 2.1.6 would provide a 20p higher fare, than an equivalent journey on option 2.1.4, for the first 135 yards of each 270 yards travelled.

- In relation to the 6-mile uplift, the Licensing Assistant Manager explained that there were two options presented to the GTA. Option one was to remove the uplift and option two was to keep the uplift at two nths above from the yardage. The GTA's preference was to keep the increase, so if the 'yardage' went to 20p every 135.38 (1/13 of a mile) then the six-mile uplift would change to 20p every 117.33 yards (1/15 of a mile). Members were advised that the GTA wanted to keep the uplift as they would receive a greater fare for longer journeys such as airport runs.
- The Assistant Licensing Manager outlined the proposed consultation methodology explaining that the licensing team wished to consult the Hackney Carriage drivers over a four week period to establish the preferred fare options (set out in the report appendix). Members were informed that although usual practice was to communicate online, the GTA had requested that paper forms could also be provided, as another method to cast handwritten responses on this consultation. It had been agreed with the Customer Services Manager, that a sealed ballot box could be placed in the reception area of the Civic Centre for the drivers to post their responses.

The Chair thanked the Assistant Licensing Manager for her report and invited Members to give their feedback.

- Members understood the need for paper responses as well as online, accommodating those who were not computer literate.
- The Committee were curious as to how many taxi drivers worked within the borough. The Assistant Licensing Manager advised that currently there were 135 Hackney Carriage drivers in Gravesham.

- Members queried if the new proposed yardage rates were competitive with that of Uber. The Assistant Licensing Manager advised that as Uber were a private organisation, they could set their rates to whatever they wished, so no comparison on this could be established. However, once the consultation information was returned and the rate determined, comparison could be made between Gravesham and the Hackney Carriage tariffs throughout the whole country. This information would be available in the Taxi Private Hire Magazine. The Assistant Licensing Manager offered to produce a comparison between Gravesham and the rest of the country, plus locally with Kent and Medway, and present to Committee at a later date.
- Members sought clarification regarding the purpose of the 6-mile uplift and whether this was because no additional fare could be gained on the way back from a long distance fare. The Regulatory Services Manager advised this was correct and also to cover fuel costs on the return journey.

The Committee noted the report and agreed the methodology of the consultation.

6. Corporate Register of Partnerships and Shared Working Arrangements - Operational Services Committee

Members were presented with the Corporate Register of Partnerships – July 2023. The purpose of the report was to inform Members of the Operational Services Committee of the Council's involvement in partnerships that were within the remit of the Committee.

The Regulatory Services Manager highlighted key points from the report and Members had their questions answered:

- Members were informed that Operational Services had two partnerships and one shared arrangement. The partnerships were the Kent & Medway Air Quality Partnership and Kent Resource Partnership (KRP) Members Board. The shared arrangement was the Licensing Shared Service between Gravesham and Medway.
- The Regulatory Services Manager informed Members that the Kent & Medway Air Quality partnership was now more of an officer group but historically a partnership. Although over the years the authority had moved away from the arrangement, partnership work was still carried out and therefore this partnership still remained on the register. The Committee were advised that the partnership supported the corporate objectives, including relation to climate change. Members were informed the referenced annual cost of £5605 +VAT, related to monitoring of air quality and the impressive website Kent Air.

The Committee highlighted that the name of the Lead Member was incorrectly printed within the appendix, for this particular partnership. Members were reassured this would be amended.

Members appreciated the financial cost of this partnership but expressed that for the sake of public health it was an important partnership to be part of.

- The Assistant Director (Operations) informed members of the Kent Resource Partnership (KRP) Members Board. He outlined that the partnership considered waste, recycling and fly tipping and highlighted its great importance, pointing out that

without the partnership there would be a significant cost to the tax payer. Members were informed that Gravesham contributed £15K per year towards the partnership budget, however gained countrywide communication, external funding and invaluable partnership with intelligence officers. Intelligence officers based within Kent Trading Standards worked with Local Authority Enforcement Officers to investigate fly tippers, gathering information with other local authorities leading to maximum penalties for criminals.

Members queried how Kent was performing in respect of waste and recycling figures. The Assistant Director (Operations) noted that as a county, Kent fell just under 50% of waste being recycled. Nationally the recycling stood at 45%. He went on to say that Kent had a small amount of landfill which was under 2%. This 2% was made up of mainly marine animals and asbestos.

- The Regulatory Service Manager updated Members on the Licensing Shared Service between Gravesham and Medway which was formed in January 2019. The Committee were informed that this was a Gravesham led shared service which had gone from strength to strength, having led the way digitally in terms of online applications and automation of licenses. In relation to cost implications, Members were advised that Medway Council paid 75% of all costs with Gravesham contributing 25%. These figures were based on staffing and number of licenses issued in each area. Both authorities kept 100% of their own income.

The Chair commended the service and based on its success, queried whether there was scope to take on more authorities. The Regulatory Service Manager advised that this idea had been spoken about and that informally the Gravesham shared service had a good reputation within Kent. However, he pointed out that the arrangement was not unique and other authorities used pools of officers to carry out shared functions.

Members reiterated the shared service was highly effective and a great success.

The Committee noted the report.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8:35pm