

CHIGWELL PARISH COUNCIL CLERK'S REPORT TO ANNUAL COUNCIL MEETING

Meeting Date: 25 June 2026

Members are advised that this report contains three matters requiring a formal decision of Full Council (points 1,2 and 3).

1. Planning Committee Membership – Governance Update (Decision Required)

At the Annual Meeting held on 21 May 2026, a matter arose regarding membership of the Planning Committee. As part of that discussion, Full Council requested that the Clerk review the Council's existing policy and procedure relating to Planning Committee membership, to ensure clarity, consistency, and alignment with current governance requirements.

This report is therefore presented as a review of governance arrangements, rather than relating to any individual councillor.

Following research and informal advice from the Monitoring Officer at Epping Forest District Council, the position can be summarised as follows:

- The Monitoring Officer has confirmed that her formal remit does not extend to matters of parish council governance; however, informal guidance has been provided.
- A councillor's profession or background does not in itself prevent appointment to a Planning Committee, unless the Council has introduced specific restrictions within its own Standing Orders or Terms of Reference.
- The statutory framework (Localism Act 2011) requires councillors to declare Disclosable Pecuniary Interests (DPIs) and other relevant interests, and to withdraw from discussion and voting where required.
- Where such interests arise (including from professional activity), this may limit a councillor's ability to participate in certain items of business and may require consideration on a case-by-case basis.
- In practice, many parish councils rely on the declaration and management of interests, rather than restricting membership in advance.

Current Position at Chigwell Parish Council

The Council's current Planning Committee Terms of Reference include additional local provisions which restrict eligibility for membership. These include:

- A 5-year exclusion where a councillor has submitted certain types of planning applications
- Extension of this exclusion to employers, shareholdings, and close family connections

These provisions go beyond the statutory requirements and the framework set out within the Council's Standing Orders, which instead provide for:

- Declaration of interests
- Withdrawal from meetings where required
- Recording of such interests and withdrawals in the minutes

Governance Considerations

In reviewing the current arrangements, the following considerations are relevant:

- Compliance with the Localism Act 2011 and the Council's Code of Conduct
- Consistency between the Council's Standing Orders and Terms of Reference
- Transparency and the maintenance of public confidence in planning decisions
- Whether the current restrictions remain proportionate and necessary
- The practical implications of managing conflicts through declarations and withdrawal, particularly where this may limit participation in some cases

Options for Council

The Council has two principal governance options:

Option 1 – Maintain Current Arrangements

Retain the existing Terms of Reference, including the current eligibility restrictions on Planning Committee membership.

Implications:

- Continues the established approach of restricting membership based on defined planning-related criteria
- Provides a high level of upfront assurance regarding perceived conflicts
- Maintains a more restrictive framework than that set out in Standing Orders

Option 2 – Revise Terms of Reference (Full Membership with Managed Interests)

Amend the Planning Committee Terms of Reference to provide that:

- All Parish Councillors are members of the Planning Committee; and
- Conflicts of interest are managed through compliance with the Code of Conduct, including declaration, withdrawal, and (where applicable) dispensations

This approach reflects the framework already established within the Council's Standing Orders and is consistent with common practice across parish councils.

This would rely on:

- The Register of Interests
- Declarations made at each meeting
- Withdrawal from discussion and voting where required
- Appropriate recording of interests in the minutes

Additional safeguards (recommended):

- Strengthened wording within the Terms of Reference regarding interests and conduct
- Reference to Monitoring Officer (informal) guidance where appropriate
- Ongoing or refresher planning training for councillors

Implementation

If Council is minded to revise the Terms of Reference, it is proposed that:

Authority be delegated to the Clerk to review and draft revised wording for the Membership section of the Planning Committee Terms of Reference, ensuring alignment with Standing Orders, legislation, and best practice, for approval by Full Council.

Recommendation

That Full Council:

1. Notes the outcome of the Clerk’s review following the Annual Meeting;
2. Determines whether to:
 - (a) retain the current Terms of Reference; or
 - (b) adopt a revised approach whereby all Parish Councillors are members of the Planning Committee, with strengthened provisions for the declaration and management of interests; and
3. If Option 2 is preferred, delegates authority to the Clerk to prepare revised Terms of Reference for formal adoption.

2. Open Spaces Staffing and Grave Digging Capacity (Decision Required)

Upcoming annual leave within the Open Spaces Team is scheduled as follows:

- 26 June to 3 July – Victoria Hall pathway works (fire escape / DDA compliance)
- 20 July to 4 August – Operative 1
- 14 August to 21 August – Operative 2

Grave digging requires two trained operatives, creating a single point of operational risk during periods of reduced staffing. This presents a potential inability to meet burial demand and maintain service delivery.

Recommendation for Decision:

That Full Council approves the allocation of a £5,000 contingency sum, to be transferred

from Cost Code 222 (Apprentice – budget £14,566.15) to Cost Code 148 (Sub-Contractor Costs). This will enable the engagement of external grave-digging contractors where required, ensuring continuity of service and safeguarding the Council's reputation.

Officers will continue to review longer-term options to strengthen operational resilience, including workforce planning, fee structures, and the potential for partial or full outsourcing arrangements.

3. Weed Management – Hard Surfaces (Decision Required)

The Open Spaces Team has requested that Full Council reviews the current biodiversity and herbicide policy, which currently prohibits the use of glyphosate.

Hard surface areas, including cemetery roadways and Victory Hall car parks, are experiencing significant weed growth. Existing alternatives—such as manual removal, strimming, and burning—are resource-intensive and present operational limitations.

The Clerk has inspected the affected areas, and three formal complaints have been received regarding the condition of weeds within the cemetery.

Recommendation for Decision:

That Full Council considers a controlled and limited use of herbicide on hard surfaces, subject to appropriate risk assessment and environmental controls, in order to maintain required standards while balancing environmental considerations.

This approach is consistent with practices adopted by other local authorities, including Epping Forest District Council.

4. Income Generation – Locker Quest (Update Only)

The Clerk has engaged with Locker Quest, a provider that installs and manages parcel lockers, to explore opportunities for introducing facilities at Chigwell Parish Council premises. Options include Amazon, Evri, and Post Office lockers.

Indicative income for each installation is estimated between £750–£1,000 per annum. Most units are self-sufficient through solar power; however, Evri units require an electrical connection. A site survey is currently being arranged to assess feasibility.

5. Vehicle Activated Sign (Update Only)

A formal application has now been submitted to Essex County Council Highways for the installation of a Vehicle Activated Sign on existing street lighting infrastructure.

Progress has been delayed due to extended discussions regarding permissions, ensuring alignment with wider traffic management proposals on the main road, and staff availability at Essex County Council. The matter is now progressing.

6. Cemetery Administration Relocation and Service Demand (Update Only)

The relocation of cemetery administration to the main Parish Office, combined with improved engagement with funeral directors and enhanced telephony arrangements, has resulted in a noticeable uplift in cemetery-related enquiries and revenue.

This increased accessibility has also highlighted a number of historic administrative inefficiencies. For example, incorrect burial times were communicated on two occasions within the past week, leading to operational inefficiencies for the Open Spaces Team.

Officers are working collaboratively to address these issues whilst maintaining service delivery. In particular, I wish to recognise the contribution of the RFO, administrative staff, caretaker and Open Spaces operatives, who have demonstrated professionalism and flexibility during the temporary absence of the Registrar.

Due to this absence, additional working hours have been required to manage ongoing operations and legacy administrative matters. This is likely to result in accrued Time Off in Lieu (TOIL) and potential overtime costs.

Operational improvements have also been introduced, including clearer road priority signage and safety notices advising visitors when funerals are taking place and car parks have reached capacity, contributing to improved health and safety management on site.

The Clerk has also undertaken further professional development through the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management (ICCM), strengthening knowledge in areas including Exclusive Rights of Burial, probate processes, and statutory declarations.

7. Overview of the Cemetery Action Plan (Update Only)

Following the ICCM audit in October 2025, Chigwell Cemetery was confirmed as a well-maintained and valued community asset. However, several significant compliance, safety and governance improvements are required.

The key risks identified include:

- Absence of a formal memorial safety inspection programme
- Gaps in staff training to national standards
- Lack of cemetery-specific policies and risk management frameworks
- Reliance on manual and inconsistent record systems

The action plan is structured on a risk-based approach:

- 0–3 months (Immediate Priority): Focus on safety and compliance, including memorial inspections, staff training, and development of a health and safety framework.
- 3–6 months: Strengthening systems, governance, and records through digital systems, policy adoption, and register reconciliation.

- 6–12 months: Ensuring long-term sustainability through administrative standardisation and development of income-generating opportunities.

Delivery will be overseen by the Clerk, with operational implementation supported by officers and reported monthly to Full Council.

This represents a structured, risk-led programme to ensure compliance, protect public safety, and secure the long-term sustainability of the cemetery service.

8. Memorial Safety Programme (Update Only)

A pilot phase of the memorial safety programme has been undertaken. To date, 25 memorials have been inspected, of which 8 failed safety testing. Despite notifications being issued, only one grave owner has responded.

A draft Memorial Safety Policy has been prepared and will be subject to internal consultation prior to submission to the Finance and Governance Committee.

A key challenge is the management of memorials where owners cannot be identified or fail to respond. ICCM guidance supports the establishment of a dedicated budget to enable burial authorities to make memorials safe where required.

It is estimated that approximately 600 memorials may require intervention. If, for example, 50% of owners do not respond, this could result in intervention for approximately 300 memorials.

An alternative option is to lay down unsafe memorials; however, this approach may:

- Create additional trip hazards
- Impact grounds maintenance
- Lead to negative public perception, as seen in other authorities

Establishing a dedicated budget would allow for safe and managed intervention, with costs potentially recoverable where ownership can later be established.

It should also be noted that ICCM guidance advises that permit fees should not be charged for memorial safety remedial works, as these are undertaken in the public interest.

This work will be further supported through the ongoing review and redrafting of Cemetery Regulations.

9. Update – Retaining Wall (Limes Avenue) & Victory Hall Stage

Officers are currently in the process of obtaining three quotations for both:

Retaining wall works at Limes Avenue (boundary with the allotments), noting ongoing uncertainty regarding ownership between agencies. Interim safety measures (cones, tape

and signage) have been repeatedly removed or displaced, which continues to present a concern.

Plastering works to the rear stage wall at Victory Hall, where the wall is cracked, plaster has deteriorated, and daylight is visible through sections. A full replaster is required, following which the caretaker will repaint the wall.

Regular users of Victory Hall have been advised of the situation.

Once quotations are received, a further report will be brought back to Full Council. However, depending on urgency, particularly in respect of health and safety, operational expenditure may be considered to ensure timely remedy.

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