

CHIGWELL PARISH COUNCIL
OFFICER REPORT TO COMMUNITY SERVICES AND ASSETS COMMITTEE
CEMETERY ACTION PLAN PROGRESS AGAINST THE ICCM AUDIT

Date: 30 July 2026

1. Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update on the progress being made in response to the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management (ICCM) Audit undertaken in October 2025, to explain how actions have been prioritised, and to outline several emerging operational and strategic considerations identified during implementation.

2. Background

Members will be aware that concerns were raised regarding the management and operation of Chigwell Cemetery, resulting in an independent audit being commissioned through the ICCM in October 2025. The audit concluded that the cemetery is generally well maintained, professionally managed and provides a valued service to the community. However, several recommendations were made to strengthen governance, improve compliance arrangements, reduce operational risk and ensure the long-term sustainability of the service.

Several immediate actions were undertaken following receipt of the audit report. However, most of the recommendations were deferred pending the appointment of a permanent Clerk and Proper Officer due to the scale and complexity of the programme. Following my appointment, officers met in April to undertake a comprehensive review of the audit findings and develop a structured and prioritised response programme. This was followed by a series of task-and-finish meetings to determine the most appropriate delivery approach.

During this process it became apparent that a significant number of historic health and safety actions, some of which had remained outstanding for several years, would need to be addressed before wider audit recommendations could be progressed. These included risk assessments, operational procedures and traffic management arrangements. Consequently, a proportionate and risk-based approach to implementation has been adopted.

3. Prioritisation of the Improvement Programme

The audit generated a substantial number of recommendations. It was neither practical nor operationally sensible to attempt delivery simultaneously. Officers therefore undertook a threat and risk assessment to prioritise actions based upon statutory requirements, public safety, organisational risk and available resources.

Priority has been given to those matters presenting the greatest immediate risk to the Council and the public, namely:

- Memorial safety inspections and associated compliance requirements.
- Operational staff competency and training.
- Health and safety governance arrangements.
- Cemetery risk management processes.
- Site inspections and statutory compliance obligations.

Secondary priorities have focused on governance improvements, digital transformation, record reconciliation, policy development and longer-term service improvements.

Income generation opportunities and service development initiatives have intentionally been scheduled within the later phases of the improvement programme, as they do not present immediate health and safety, compliance, or statutory risks.

Notwithstanding this approach, it is pleasing to report that the cemetery's financial position has improved significantly over the past two months, with a sustained increase in burial activity and associated income. Officers have also observed a strengthening of relationships with local funeral directors, resulting in increased confidence in the service and a corresponding growth in business levels.

These improvements are directly linked to several operational reforms implemented by the Council, including the separation of administrative and operational functions, the introduction of improved telephony and customer contact arrangements, and the wider professionalisation of cemetery services. Collectively, these changes have enhanced customer service, improved responsiveness, and strengthened stakeholder confidence in the Council as a burial authority.

Whilst these measures were not introduced primarily as income-generation initiatives, they formed an important part of the wider improvement strategy. The resulting increase in service demand and associated revenue demonstrates that improvements in governance, service delivery and customer experience can also deliver positive financial outcomes for the Council. In practical terms, the cemetery has now moved into a financially positive position, representing a significant milestone for the service.

4. Current Progress

Cemetery Regulations and Governance

A significant milestone has now been achieved with the adoption of the Cemetery Regulations by Full Council.

This action effectively delivers the requirement for a comprehensive Cemetery Management Policy and provides a transparent governance framework covering cemetery operations, memorial management, rights of burial, public conduct, administration and operational procedures. The regulations are publicly available and will be managed as a controlled document with version control arrangements in place to ensure transparency and accountability whenever amendments are approved.

This completes a major element of the audit recommendation relating to governance and policy development.

Record Reconciliation and Digital Transformation

One of the most significant challenges identified during implementation has been the condition of the cemetery records.

As work has progressed, officers have identified substantial inconsistencies between paper records, deeds, registers and electronic records. These includes recent administrative inaccuracies relating to addresses, plot numbering, deed allocations and other historical record-keeping practices.

In addition, several historic anomalies have been identified and are being reviewed through the Council's established governance procedures.

The Responsible Financial Officer is leading a comprehensive reconciliation and standardisation exercise with support from other officers. The objective is to establish a single accurate source of truth for all burial records and ensure the integrity of future administration.

At the same time, the Council is making significantly greater use of the Scribe Cemetery Management System. Historically, the system appears to have been under-utilised, resulting in information being maintained across multiple locations and formats. Officers are now working towards a fully integrated digital approach whereby Scribe becomes the primary operational and administrative tool.

This work remains resource intensive due to the volume of historic data requiring verification and correction.

Lease Renewals and Income Protection

During the reconciliation process, officers have identified several historic renewal opportunities which had not previously been pursued.

As a result, a standardised renewal process has now been developed, including template correspondence and tracking arrangements. This work will both improve compliance and help secure future cemetery income streams through the consistent administration of renewal rights.

Memorial Safety Programme

Memorial safety inspections have commenced and are already highlighting the practical challenges faced by burial authorities nationally.

One of the principal issues identified is the accuracy of ownership records. In many cases ownership details have not been updated following deaths, changes in family circumstances

or changes of address, making it difficult to contact responsible parties when memorials require attention.

The practical consequence is that memorials requiring remedial works may need to be temporarily made safe whilst owners are traced and instructed to undertake repairs. Whilst necessary for public safety, this can temporarily affect the appearance of sections of the cemetery and may generate concerns from families visiting loved ones.

Furthermore, once contact has been established, there can often be considerable delays before stonemasons are able to undertake corrective works due to industry lead times and specialist contractor availability.

The memorial safety programme is therefore likely to inform a wider review of future service delivery, including consideration of whether specialist contractor support may offer operational and financial advantages.

5. Health and Safety Improvements

Alongside the audit recommendations, officers have implemented several operational improvements to strengthen day-to-day risk management.

These include:

- Pre-burial risk assessment procedures.
- Road closure and traffic management signage.
- "Burial Today" signage.
- Integration of cemetery risks into weekly management meetings.
- Enhanced operational monitoring arrangements.
- Development of supporting risk assessments and safe systems of work.

Although Cemetery Operatives Training Scheme (COTS) training remains scheduled for later this year, its future scope is being considered alongside a wider review of service delivery options, including whether grave excavation should continue to be undertaken in-house or be provided through specialist contractors.

Members should note that operational teams cannot undertake every activity simultaneously. Consequently, prioritisation of resources remains essential to ensure that statutory duties and risk-critical activities continue to be delivered effectively.

6. Emerging Strategic Issue: Cemetery Road Infrastructure

Whilst not specifically identified within the ICCM Audit Action Plan, officers have identified the condition of the cemetery roadway as a developing strategic concern.

As Members will be aware, the Local Authorities' Cemeteries Order 1977 requires burial authorities to maintain suitable access for funeral processions and burial activities. The cemetery roadway forms a critical part of that obligation.

The roadway is beginning to show signs of deterioration and officers consider that further condition assessment and future investment planning should now be considered.

Whilst a modest budget provision currently exists, Members may wish to consider whether future capital allocations should be prioritised towards road infrastructure ahead of certain discretionary projects.

For example, whilst proposals such as a columbarium may provide future income opportunities, their successful installation and ongoing operation would depend upon suitable vehicle access and load-bearing capacity. If the roadway continues to deteriorate, the delivery of such projects may become increasingly difficult.

Officers therefore consider the maintenance of cemetery infrastructure and access arrangements to be a core statutory responsibility of the Council as a burial authority rather than simply a discretionary improvement project.

It is also important to recognise that burial authorities operate within a regulated statutory framework and are subject to legal duties and oversight that do not necessarily apply to private sector cemetery operators.

7. Future Review

Officers intend to undertake a comprehensive strategic review of cemetery operations during 2026, with findings reported to Members in October 2026.

The review will consider:

- Cemetery fees and charges.
- Benchmarking against neighbouring burial authorities.
- Alternative service delivery and contracting arrangements.
- Future staffing requirements.
- The operational case for maintaining separate cemetery-based administration.
- Accommodation requirements for operational staff.
- Welfare facilities, including toilets and shower provision.
- Public convenience provision.
- Long-term sustainability and income generation opportunities.
- Asset maintenance requirements and future capital investment needs.

8. Conclusion

Significant progress has been made in establishing the governance, systems and operational controls required to respond to the ICCM Audit. However, implementation has also revealed

several historic issues relating to records, administration and operational processes that require correction before full compliance can be achieved.

The Council is therefore progressing a structured and risk-based programme focused first on public safety, statutory compliance and governance, before moving to longer-term service enhancement and sustainability measures.

Whilst progress may appear measured, officers remain of the view that addressing the underlying foundations of the service correctly now will deliver greater resilience, improved compliance and better value for residents in the longer term.

Recommendation

That the Community Services and Assets Committee:

1. Notes the contents of this report.
2. Notes the progress being made against the ICCM Audit Action Plan.
3. Notes the emerging strategic issues identified through implementation, particularly in relation to cemetery records, memorial safety and road infrastructure.
4. Supports the continued prioritisation of actions based upon risk, statutory compliance and available resources.
5. Notes that a comprehensive review of cemetery operations will be presented to Members during October 2026.

Prepared by:

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