



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MUNICIPAL YEAR 2017/18

FINANCE & PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

23rd OCTOBER 2017

REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, PUBLIC HEALTH & PROTECTION

Agenda Item No. 4

Bereavement Fees & Charges for War Veterans and Service Men & Women

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 At the meeting of the Finance & Performance Scrutiny Committee held on 24th July, consideration was given to the Committee's Work Programme which included the following Notice of Motion considered by Council on the 30th November, 2016 :-

*"As part of the Council's commitment to support the Armed Forces Community and as part of the review of fees and charges, this Council will **in principle, adopt after a further report outlining details for the cessation of burial or cremation fees charged for the funerals of veterans and service men and women**".*

- 1.2 It was agreed at the Council meeting (Minute No.80 (2016/17) refers) to adopt the Notice of Motion as amended (in bold) and that a Working Group be established to assist in drawing up the criteria to be used and for the findings there from, be reported to a future meeting of the Council.
- 1.3 The Notice of Motion being placed on this Committee's Work Programme, as a result of the matter being referred to by Councillor Jarman at the meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on the 10th July, when it was agreed that in view of the time period that has lapsed, the Notice of Motion be dealt with by Members of the Finance & Performance Scrutiny Committee.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 It is recommended that Scrutiny Members consider the following matters:
- Scrutinise the information provided in the report;
 - Consider the criteria that should be applied when identifying war veterans and service men and women;
 - Consider whether to waive all or some of the fees and charges;

- Consider whether the proposal should apply to residents only or to residents and non residents;
- Consider whether this should be an All-Wales approach.

2.2 Subject to 2.1, Members consider a pilot approach to introducing this policy with a review after twelve months, and

2.3 Subject to 2.1 and 2.2, Members request the Service Director for Public Health & Protection to report the recommendations of the committee to Cabinet.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 This Council has committed to the Armed Forces Covenant and actively supports the armed forces community in Rhondda Cynon Taf. This generally takes the form of:

- Assistance with finding appropriate housing and amending policies to ensure access routes into housing and accommodation provision is fair for those from the Armed Forces Community;
- Support in respect of health;
- Resettlement and Transition assistance;
- Assistance with financial and life skills etc;
- Free Leisure Centre membership for all serving and reserve personnel;
- Discounted Leisure Centre membership for families of both serving and veteran services personnel.

3.2 The Council does not currently provide any financial assistance or waive fees in respect of the cremation or burial of war veterans or service men and women. Enquiries suggest that there does not appear to be any local authority within England or Wales that provides this type of assistance, although it is at the Council's discretion to apply a fee or waive them for the services it provides.

3.3 A veteran of the British Armed Forces is defined by the UK Government as any person of any age, who has served in the Armed Forces. There are limitations in the available data at a national and local level in respect of veterans. It has not been possible to definitively identify the size of the Armed Forces community and their location within a defined geographic area.

3.4 However, figures shown in the Annual Population Survey 2015, state there are 149,000 veterans residing within Wales. Unfortunately, these figures are not broken down by local authority. 5.8% of all UK veterans reside in Wales, although this figure is believed to be an underestimate.

3.5 War pensions and Armed Forces pensions are not a reliable source of information for proof that someone is a veteran. Not all veterans are in receipt of a pension and war pensions are not common. Some veterans may hold a British Veterans recognition card. However, there is a charge for this card so it is possible that not all veterans would be card holders.

- 3.6 To formally establish if somebody is a veteran, the Authority would need to contact the Army, RAF or Navy Disclosure Service. The response time to verify this information is approximately 40 days, therefore, not being timely for someone making funeral arrangements.
- 3.7 All veterans are issued with a veterans badge and proof of service is required for this. Again this is something not all veterans would necessarily hold.
- 3.8 The UK government fund a funeral for anyone who lost their lives whilst they were in active military service. However, currently this Authority would make a charge for the cremation/interment element of the funeral. Furthermore, consideration must also be given to veterans who move outside of the Rhondda Cynon Taf geographic area for care or to be cared for by family members and whether any waiver of the fees should also be applied to non residents.

4 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 There is currently no accurate way of determining the numbers of veterans of service men and women resident in the County Borough or the number of services the Council provides to veterans as this information is not collected. Therefore, it is not possible to determine, with any accuracy, the financial implications should the Council decide to waive its fees for war veterans and service men and women.
- 4.2 The Council apply a range of fees and charges associated with burial and cremation. The main fees and charges are presented at Table I.

Table I - Bereavement Fees & Charges

Cremation fee	£670
Purchase of exclusive right of burial in a cremated remain plot	£256
Interment in a cremated remain plot	£238
For the exclusive right of burial in a grave for two interments	£519
For the exclusive right of burial in grave for 3 interments	£557
For the interment of a person who has attained their 16 th birthday	£519
To place a memorial headstone on an earthen grave or cremation plot	£256

- 4.3 Members may wish to consider whether to waive all or some of the fees.

5 ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

- 5.1 Bereavement is an emotional and challenging time for relatives of the deceased. The Council would not wish to add to the burden of a grieving family so any procedure that applies to war veterans and service men and women should be as simple and straightforward as possible.

- 5.2 It will be neither practical nor appropriate to make extensive enquiries into the service history of the deceased. However, it will still be necessary to ascertain with a reasonable degree of certainty that the individual does indeed fall within the definition of a veteran. The simplest way of doing this would be to include a simple question in the non statutory documents provided by the funeral director asking whether the individual had served in the armed forces and if so for the family to provide evidence of service. The Council could then give discretion to a Senior Officer within Bereavement Services to waive the fees if they are satisfied that the definition of veteran is met.
- 5.3 Members may wish to consider whether to apply this policy to all fees and charges or to the main fees only. For example, the Council may decide to waive the cremation fee and interment fees for both cremation and burials but still apply the fees for exclusive rights of burial and other supplementary fees. Alternatively, the Council may decide to waive all fees and charges, including exclusive rights of burial, irrespective of the size of the plot to be purchased.
- 5.4 The Council has recently harmonised its fees and charges for residents and non residents, removing the additional charges previously applied to non residents. If the Council were to remove the fees entirely for war veterans, Members may wish to consider doing so for residents of Rhondda Cynon Taf only. Ideally, an all-Wales approach would be preferable and Members may wish to consider making representations to Welsh Government requesting that such an approach be explored.
- 5.5 The Council does not directly receive its fees and charges from the family of the deceased but through the funeral director. The Council would need to ensure that the reduction in cost is passed on to the family.

6. CONCLUSION

- 6.1 The Council is committed to the Armed Forces Covenant and to supporting the armed forces community in Rhondda Cynon Taf. The adoption of a policy whereby bereavement fees and charges are not applied to war veterans or service men and women would be a clear demonstration of this commitment.
- 6.2 There would be a need to develop clear eligibility criteria and procedures that are both simple to apply and ensure the fair and appropriate application of this policy. Although, as set out in the report, there are challenges to establishing these; they are not insurmountable and with the assistance of the agencies and charities that already support veterans and service men and women, it should be possible to implement this policy in Rhondda Cynon Taf.
- 6.3 Members may also wish to consider whether there should be an all-Wales approach to this issue along the lines currently being explored by Welsh Government in respect of child burial fees.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

AS AMENDED BY

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

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Background Paper:

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