

# House of Commons

## Bishop's Stortford Cemetery Bill

### 1. Petitioner information

In the box below, give the name and address of each individual, business or organisation submitting the petition. Please note that addresses here will be provided to the Bill's promoter (East Hertfordshire District Council) but will be redacted in the version of the petition published on the Parliamentary website.

Mrs Lorraine Middlebrook, Much Hadham, Hertfordshire,

In the box below, give a description of the petitioners. For example, "We are the owners/tenants of the addresses above"; "My company has offices at the address above"; "Our organisation represents the interests of..."; "We are the parish council of...".

I am the daughter of deceased Evelyn Russell, who was buried in New Cemetery, Bishop's Stortford on 30<sup>th</sup> May 2023. I am the daughter of George Russell (82 years), Evelyn's surviving husband who in joint owner of the grave space in New Cemetery with his wife Evelyn.

## 2. Objections to the Bishop's Stortford Cemetery Bill

In the box below, write your objections to the Bishop's Stortford Cemetery Bill and why your property or other interests are **directly and specially affected**. Please number each paragraph.

Only objections outlined in this petition can be presented when giving evidence to the Committee. You will not be entitled to be heard by the Committee on new matters not included in your written petition.

1. Bishop's Stortford is an expanded market town with one municipal burial facility. Since the census of 2021 there has been a steep rise in the population of the town. The District Plan of 2018 aimed to set out the strategy for the development of the local area covered by East Herts District Council (EHDC) and Bishop's Stortford Town Council (BSTC) for the time period of 2011 – 2033. There are numerous referrals to various housing developments and community facilities. I cannot identify within the strategic plan any direct reference or consideration regarding the community issue of severe lack of burial space at Bishop's Stortford Town Cemetery at this time. BSTC had the opportunity in this document to cite intentions with regard to burial provision, alongside other town councils. The 2018 strategic plan is surprisingly silent on this matter with regard to Bishop's Stortford. Given the projected figures for expansion in the area, statistics should have triggered a review of town cemetery capacity at this vital stage. The concept of grave re-use circumnavigates a failure to acknowledge that new municipal facilities were a priority that should have been placed higher on the local agenda. Five years later the application for a Private Bill to change arrangements at Bishop's Stortford cemetery is a matter of urgency. At what point was grave re-use generally discussed as a central policy idea without thinking to consider the wider general public? BSTC should be more accountable on this point. Members of the public rely on local councils to be observant and mindful as they examine the framework of planning strategy. I believe burial shortage was given low priority in the 2018 plan and this has led to pressure to consider plot re-use as a sustainable way forward. Monetising land appears to be the focus of priority and upkeep of the cemetery requires a funding solution above all other considerations.
2. The council may be missing out on an innovative opportunity to make a new cemetery that is fit for 21<sup>st</sup> century purpose. I note that 12 miles away in the nearby town of Buntingford, the provision of burial space was prioritised in the 2018 development plan and has been successfully completed (6.6 Buntingford development plan) Extensive development has also been taking place in Buntingford for a number of years, yet the council there seems to have taken a different view towards burial space and bereavement services. Within East Herts itself, we have evidence of another town council taking responsibility and accountability for future burial provision by providing a new cemetery. The principal town in the area seems to have ignored the need at the development plan stage and this illustrates disregard for community issues and demonstrates a complete lack of vision, when dealing with the sensitive issue of where we place our dead. In today's society, it is understandable that there will be different perspectives on this matter. However, turning the deceased out of their burial plots in a rural town area, is not an acceptable solution in my view.

3. EHDC say that re-usability and sustainability are at the heart of their proposals and the council are faced with no alternatives than to press forward with a grave re-use policy for the town cemetery, which forms the substance of the application for a Private Bill. EHDC and BSTC have put forward that the rights of those buried within the cemetery graves needs adjustment, so that a policy change can be employed to halt an imminent shortage of burial space and that all possible alternatives have been exhausted. Perhaps if EHDC had chosen to react earlier in the planning stage five years ago, they may have been able to gain valuable insight and genuine feedback from those directly affected. The people most affected by this decision making to re-use graves have been ignored.
4. EHDC have failed to inform those who own plots of their intentions to consider the policy of grave re-use. The circumstances in which my father found out that a Private Bill was being put forward for consideration was unacceptable. On visiting my mother's grave in early July (less than two months after her death) a camera crew were in the cemetery filming. My father made a simple enquiry as to the purpose of the camera crew's visit to the cemetery, to be told a Bill was being put forward for the re-use of graves. In 75 years remains would be removed to make way for grave re-use. Given the circumstances of his recent bereavement and the way in which this information was imparted, it was deeply upsetting and inappropriate. For this reason, I feel BSTC have caused unnecessary distress through their inability to contact families directly affected by their policy intentions.
5. Information and consultation were promoted to and focused on local faith groups and churches, suggesting these organisations have been privy to consultation, with minimal news coverage circulated through a local online newspaper. How informed are local people? Have the council sufficiently surveyed local people's views? A lack of responses from the general public does not mean that local people were sufficiently engaged with the proposals in the first instance.
6. My parents (plot owners) did not receive any correspondence, at any point in time during the "consultation period". The bill of sale does not refer to changes in policy. The removal of human remains without respectful consultation of the families involved, seems to promote an overriding stance that is insensitive and shows an extreme lack of compassion towards family's deceased relatives who are buried in both cemeteries.
7. It is my view that my mother would have been unhappy with the arrangement to re-use her burial space if she had been aware of this intention. My father is still alive and at 82 years old is distressed to realise that both himself and his wife may face the possibility of being turned out of their resting place at a point in the future to make way for other users. It is not a reassuring thought for an elderly person as they come to terms with their own bereavement and loss in the last years of their life. The situation at Bishop's Stortford Cemetery is complex, with matters referring to the status of burial rights and conditions of certain graves that are damaged by tree growth in the older area. There is ambiguity as to how future disposal of human remains would be carried out.

8. EHDC must hold appropriate records of burial ownership and it appears remiss of BSTC to avoid giving any information on the exploration of the idea of grave re-use to those who have already paid for plots. In my opinion this does not show considered balance and sensitivity towards local society.
9. EHDC have said that landowners were reluctant to come forward to sell land for the purposes of a cemetery. Four potential sites around Bishop's Stortford have been considered, yet all have been determined as unviable by BSTC and EHDC. An area has been identified for 14 allotments (with specific funding) and another area for a community centre. In evaluating the viability of sustainable projects within the town, there is an imbalance of applications that already have representation in town facilities.
10. A piece of land at Jenkins Lane appeared to be a potential plot for a new cemetery, enough to give speculation in a local news article. There is a confusing message being sent to the public about the availability of land for the potential use as a cemetery. Bishop's Stortford Community Orchard group, say the land they were offered by BSTC at Jenkins Lane has since been evaluated as not viable for the growing fruit on their website, due to varying levels of lead contamination. Bishop's Stortford Community Orchard group share information on their website that land owned by the council that was to be used as an orchard, may now be used as a "wooded area". Whether intentional or not, the message confusion that exists about available land, conveys a sense of resistance by BSTC to avoid the concept of the idea of a new cemetery, even where there may be potential. Given the high level of development now taking place within Bishop's Stortford, amendments for improved access and creation of appropriate ambiance would not be out of the question or an impossible target, especially if a wooded cemetery area were to be envisaged. With reference to contamination, BSTC clearly accepts the land is unacceptable for fruit, but appears to be open to the idea of a wooded area. On the point of cleaning up of land already owned by BSTC, it does not seem an impossible task. There is at least a decade in which decontamination could happen. All types of green spaces are considered to have ecological and sustainable value, including cemeteries. The addition of more cemetery space would be a balancing out of a lack of provision already apparent.
11. Bishop's Stortford Cemetery is not an inner London cemetery. Much discussion has centred around inner London cemetery policies. The area around Bishop's Stortford remains rural and the new housing developments have been promoted to the public coming into the area as having desirable rural characteristics. Whilst certain space saving practices could be adopted from inner city cemeteries, it is not surprising that a traditional small market town cemetery should be reaching full capacity by 2036. It has been 80 years since cemetery provision has required further consideration. The lack of priority given to the provision of burial space in the 2018 plan for the principal town, has compounded the problem and in essence is at some of the root of the crisis now faced. Given the town council has 10 more years (two five-year cycles) to find a solution, I feel there is still room for review and that grave re-use is not a compulsory choice that should automatically be adopted. Statistics state that 78.4% of the population in England and Wales choose cremation for themselves and their relatives when they die. The choice of burial should remain open in a way in which is respectful to the deceased and does not necessarily include the

re-use of graves in rural towns. If individual towns promote the use of Private Bills to forward individual burial policies, how will consistency be maintained throughout the country?

12. I would suggest that EHDC and BSTC look to the 2023/24 Cemetery of the Year in Kent. The Bluebell Cemetery is on a larger scale, containing woods and a variety of burial options. This cemetery upholds the principles of ecology, sustainability and clearly expresses a mission to be a burial ground of dignity and choice for the future. The cemetery website clearly indicates (in full) the fees and timescales that plots of all types are sold to the public. A wooded cemetery option for Bishop's Stortford would enable the preservation of land that clearly meets a sustainability target through careful stewardship of trees and plants. Using land already in council possession for burial provision could provide a new dignified space for the burial of all faiths and those who are more secular in their beliefs. It is this kind of innovation local councils should be striving to achieve in my view.
13. I ask EHDC and BSTC that they consider the option of a new cemetery more seriously to sustain the balance and the lack of extended provision in this area. Bishop's Stortford could herald a new era of burial concept in East Herts and join with Buntingford and other counties in valuing new burial space, rather than suggesting it is out of the question. The award-winning cemetery in Kent is an example of forward thinking and consideration. Looking to the past to solve the provision problems of the future is not putting best value into practice. It is at the heart of understanding compassion for our deceased, by employing creative solutions that bring together diversity, ecology and sustainability in which a new burial ground would offer our future generations a heritage to be proud of. It would also provide an area of natural beauty.
14. Appreciating and conserving heritage is also an important part of community interest. There are two small chapels at the Bishop's Stortford Cemetery. One of the chapels is used, the other is not as far as I know. Appropriate heritage funds are available for the restoration of existing cemetery buildings. Perhaps it may be appropriate that the opening up of the chapel not in use, could provide additional funds for the cemetery. The cemetery buildings could provide more added value and thus provide an income for cemetery upkeep potentially without grave re-use.
15. Convenience regarding location of the cemetery has changed, due to the extended size of Bishop's Stortford. What once would have been an easily reached location in a compact town, has now changed following the structure and planning arrangements implemented in the 2018 plan. It is only possible to identify if potential plot purchasers are concerned with the ability to reach the cemetery on foot by a thorough survey. In 21<sup>st</sup> century terms, I would suspect that this would not be a priority.
16. If lack of burial space is a national issue, then it is within politician's power to enforce a review of burial provision and land provision so that the 21<sup>st</sup> century begins with addressing how we respect the deceased in an effective and sensitive way. Individual Private Bills lay the foundation for repeated applications from town councils throughout England, thus creating variants in policy from town to town. The document CM 5281, The Government Reply to

the Eighth Report from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee Session 2000-2001 HC91 states that: "What has been said about lack of burial space, and lack of direction for the burial industry, is a matter for concern. Burial facilities have long been the responsibility of the local community, which is usually best placed to respond to demand and to determine the kind of facilities needed. But the subcommittee report suggests that delegation of responsibility can be taken only so far, and that there is a need to state, or re-state, the Government's central policies and to facilitate their delivery." If it is time for open debate on the matter of burial space and provision in the UK, it would be a welcome chance to examine fully the problems that have been debated and for an appropriate audit and review in open Parliament. For the reasons aforementioned, I wish to petition against the Bishop's Stortford Cemetery Bill.

### 3. What do you want to be done in response?

In the box below, tell us what you think should be done in response to your objections to the Bishop's Stortford Cemetery Bill. You do not have to complete this box if you do not want to.

You can include this information in your response to section 3 'Objections to the Bishop's Stortford Cemetery Bill' if you prefer. Please number each paragraph.

1. An official apology from BSTC to my father for the way in which he found out about this policy proposal.
2. To contact all living relatives and those families affected by the proposed policy and provide opportunity for their views via a survey.
3. To re-connect at a wider level with the general public about burial provision services in the area and to offer an extended survey online via a QR code.
4. There is a decade in which to address this matter of burial provision and I appeal to BSTC to go back to the drawing board and sincerely ask itself pertinent questions regarding burial space, the rights of the deceased and to think more innovatively about their burial services, as another local town has been able to demonstrate just under 12 miles away.
5. Other suggestions have been included in Section 3.