

Aberdeenshire Council submission of 22 December 2022

PE1941/U: Stop the destruction of headstones within community cemeteries

I refer to email of 23 November 2022 to our Chief Executive regarding the above which has been passed to me to respond.

I am happy to provide within this response an outline of our position and procedures on the matter of the maintenance of memorials within our burial grounds.

Aberdeenshire Council has in excess of 220 burial grounds under its management and control, all of which are regularly inspected by Council staff and frequently visited by members of the public. Whilst ownership and maintenance responsibilities for memorials sits with individual lair holders, the Council has a duty of care to ensure these are safe places to work in and visit. To this end all memorials within our burial grounds are inspected for stability/safety and any remedial action required is carried out.

Inspections are carried out by all operational Technical Officers or on occasions other levels of staff that will have completed the National Association of Monumental Masons (NAMM) Safety Inspection & Assessment of Memorials (SIAM) course and hold the City and Guilds NPTC Certificate of Competence for the Safety Inspection and Assessment of Memorials. However any staff working in or visiting burial grounds will report any memorials that have cracks, gaps, leaning or other defects to their line manager as soon as possible.

We aim to inspect all memorials in burial grounds on a five year programme, during which process the stability/safety status of each will be recorded.

Burial grounds to be inspected will be prioritised based of the level or risk, higher levels of risk include but are not limited to:

- Burial Grounds with an active church

- Location where there is likely to be a higher footfall e.g. adjacent to a play area
- Burial Grounds used as a thoroughfare
- Burial Grounds on the Historic Kirkyards trail
- Burial Grounds containing a war memorial or commonwealth war graves
- Burial Grounds with much older sections within their curtilage

Prior to commencing inspections Technical Officers will refer to the risk assessment procedure LS021 on Memorial Safety and Stability Inspection and will carry out an on-site risk assessment.

They use the following Risk Categories;

- Memorials under 1 metre high showing any of the above defects are to be classed as Low Risk
- Memorials between 1 metre and 1.5 metres showing any of the above defects are to be classed as a Medium Risk
- Memorials over 1.5 metres and memorials of a substantial size and weight showing any of the above defects are to be classed as High Risk
- Memorials over 1 metre that are significantly unstable and likely to fall if leant on or minor pressure applied, should be classed as Very High risk requiring immediate attention/action

Any memorials that are lying down or lying securely against a wall pose little or no risk and are therefore have a 'no' risk value.

The inspection will then recommend that we carry out action relative to the risk level identified:

Memorials identified as A. low risk:

- Programme re-inspection in 5 years

Memorials identified as B. medium risk:

- Programme re inspection in one or 3 years

Memorials identified as C. high risk:

- Issue purchase order to nominated memorial stabilisation mason

Memorials identified as D. very high risk:

- Must receive immediate action before leaving the burial ground

Where a memorial is found to be in such poor condition it cannot be left in situ without any remedial work taking place (D-Very High Risk) either:

- Contact the nominated memorial mason to stabilise/make safe the memorial immediately
- Fence off the memorial area including the area where the memorial would fall, erect appropriate warning notice(s), attach contact request notice on memorial.
- Where a number of memorials are affected fence off the whole area, including area where memorials would fall, erect notices as above risk assess an appointment system to accompany visitors wishing to visit a memorial in the vicinity. Cease maintenance of the area until rectified, risk assessment required before any interment requests are confirmed. Inform Corporate Communications.
- Close the burial ground, procedure as above. Cease maintenance until rectified, risk assessment required before any interment requests are confirmed.
- Photograph memorial face, arrange enough staff, with suitable equipment (A frame or digger with sling), to lay the memorial flat. Ensure an onsite risk assessment is completed before work commences.
- Consider photographing memorial face then lifting and burying memorial 50% deep behind the foundation.

The above approach is a well-established one and any changes to our position as a Council would have to pass through formal processes that would involve public engagement and elected member decision.

We do have a challenge associated with contacting lair holders as we rely on lair holders notifying us of change of address. Whilst we also hold the original lair holders address we do not know who to contact in the event of their death. We intend to start posting notices on memorial stones identified as in need of attention with our contact details, the hope being visitors to the lair will contact us and we will advise to contact a mason for rectification.

I trust that this information is of use in your consideration of the issues raised in the petition.