
CEMETERY HEADSTONE SAFETY PROJECT - CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1** Whilst Argyll and Bute Council own burial grounds and have a duty of care to all those visiting the site, headstones and memorials are the property of registered lair holders.
- 1.2** To support our duty of care responsibilities, the Streetscene Service is undertaking a survey of all memorials in burial grounds throughout Argyll and Bute. This survey will update previous survey work and assess recently installed stones and those which have been standing for many years.
- 1.3** The survey, which should be complete by the end of August 2010, will provide essential information regarding the condition and risks associated with burial grounds and will inform future service asset management planning.
- 1.4** It is likely that this survey will identify a number of potentially unsafe (loose) headstones and this paper sets out the proposed approach towards managing this sensitive and important issue and minimising risk to cemetery visitors.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1** Members approve the proposals for treatment of headstones as summarised in Paragraph 3 of this paper.
- 2.2** Members approve the proposals outlined within Paragraph 3 regarding contact with memorial masons who do not follow the procedure for fixing stones as laid down in the Argyll and Bute Council management rules for Cemeteries, requesting that they put right at their expense stones shown to be inadequately fixed.
- 2.3** Members approve proposals outlined within Paragraph 3 regarding contact with registered lair holders where their memorials are found to be unsatisfactorily fixed; requesting that they take steps, at their expense, to have stones re-fixed to the correct, approved standard.

3. DETAIL

- 3.1** The Council has a duty of care to ensure that all areas open to public access, are in a safe condition. In 1997, following an earlier survey, works to set down dangerous headstones took place with rectification work lasting for several years. This resulted in over 9000 stones being laid flat as they were deemed unstable. This was both visually upsetting to the public and disruptive to efficient maintenance of cemeteries and the process was generally criticised for lack of information being provided to the public.

3.2 CONTACT WITH LAIR HOLDERS AND MEMORIAL MASONS.

It is proposed that the following process should be adopted to clarify roles and responsibilities and to effectively communicate with lair holders and memorial masons during and after the survey:

- Upon completion of this survey the findings will be assessed and summarised to provide a definitive location list of dangerous headstones.
- The Streetscene Service will advertise a suite of information (brochures, notices, etc) within Council offices which will clearly define the roles and responsibilities of Argyll and Bute Council, individual lair holders and memorial masons. This information will be available by September 2010.
- Where dangerous headstones have been identified, lair holders and memorial masons will be informed of the position and where appropriate, requested to rectify defective fixings at their expense.
- In the short term, taking into account the Council's duty of care requirements, dangerous headstones will be laid flat to prevent injury to cemetery visitors. Memorial masons and lair holders will be advised of this. In extreme cases, depending on stability of the headstone, this may be carried out prior to contacting lair holders.
- Lair holders will be advised they should contact the Area Streetscene Manager for advice on the problems with their memorial and details of how they should proceed to rectify defects.
- Where stones have been shown to be incorrectly installed by memorial masons lair holders may have recourse through law and can seek advice from Trading Standards and the Citizens Advice Bureau.
- Where large numbers of dangerous headstones exist on one site, the most cost effective way of dealing with this could be closure of that area or burial ground, with access being limited to those making advance appointments until re-erection takes place.

3.3 TESTING AND OPTIONS FOR STONES FOUND TO BE UNSAFE OR INCORRECTLY FIXED.

- **Test Method:** The criteria to determine safety is detailed in BS 8415:2005 Section 8.
 - This test consists of a visual check of the stone noting type, general condition, style, size and age. A physical test is carried out where the operative stands to one side of the stone, places a hand on the stone at no higher than shoulder height, and applies a steady pressure. If the stone is loose at this stage, a note is taken as to whether pins are present between the base of the stone and the plinth and foundation.
 - The presence of pins may suggest that the stone is not in immediate danger of falling over however the pins should be checked to ensure they meet the prescribed specification.
 - If required a pressure test using a calibrated tester can be carried out to verify the pressure required to topple a stone already noted to be fixed incorrectly i.e. without the use of pins. This pressure test will only be used to illustrate and verify the pressure required to push over unsecured stones.
- ◆ **Immediate Danger:** The easiest and mostly widely recognised method of limiting risk of injury from an unsafe memorial is to lay it flat. A risk assessment of the stone will be carried out and recorded. Headstones will be laid flat where this is seen as the best way to eliminate risk.

- ◆ **Removal of stones from Lairs:** Headstones will not be removed and stored as this provides issues regarding possible damage to stones and the lack of suitable storage space in many burial grounds.
- ◆ **Re-fixing of Headstones:** As the responsibility for headstones lies with the owner, Argyll and Bute Council will not undertake to re-fix or re-erect any stone identified as unsafe. As noted above – contact will be made with lair holder and/or memorial mason.
- ◆ **Stones erected between 10 - 30 years ago:** Where dangerous headstones are between 10 and 30 years old, steps will be taken to contact registered lair holders. This is less likely to provide a direct response and in these cases the council may opt to undertake repairs at their expense if this proves the most effective way to control a safety risk, although currently there is no budget allocation for this. A 30 year period covers a reasonable time for at least one generation to pass and for the transfer of lair holder details to have been neglected.

3.4 OLDER STONES AND THOSE OF HISTORICAL AND HERITAGE VALUE

- ◆ Advice has been sought from Historic Scotland regarding laying older stones flat on a suitably prepared gravel bed. This would make these larger and older stones safe, at the same time continuing to mark graves and maintain the inscriptions for future reference. This method is not approved by Historic Scotland for stones with Scheduled Monument or Listed Building designation.
- ◆ Stones in this category would only be laid flat in areas where no further burials could take place. This is proposed for old cemeteries where large numbers of large, heavy stones are present.

3.5 FUTURE ASSET MANAGEMENT

- ◆ Facilitation of a burial service is a statutory requirement and ensuring that sufficient burial space is provided in strategic locations is an ongoing process. The aging memorials in burial grounds will continue to present safety issues therefore it is prudent to recommend regular assessment of headstone condition.
- ◆ The process for verifying standards of work carried out by memorial masons must be robust to ensure that all stones erected in burial grounds meet or exceed the minimum standard required. A guide to the action that will be taken should work be found unsatisfactory is being developed and brought to the attention of memorial masons and lair holders.
- ◆ Headstone stability, along with other structural elements in cemeteries such as walls and buildings, will be brought into this department's asset management plan to determine appropriate long term maintenance requirements and ensure continued public safety.

4. SUMMARY

- 4.1** As this project and the resultant safety actions taken may cause distress or misunderstanding, it is important that this survey work and the actions arising from it are clearly presented to all that may be affected. There will be notification in burial grounds, local offices, Argyll and Bute Council's web page, to funeral directors, memorial masons, lair holders and elected members.
- 4.2** There is currently no budget provision for re-erection of dangerous headstones which are laid flat during this process. Headstones are the responsibility of lair holders and correct installation is that of monumental masons, hence the proposal they rectify any defects at their expense.

5. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- ◆ BS 8415: 2005 Monuments within Burial Grounds and memorial sites -Specification
- ◆ National Association of Memorial Masons Code of Working Practice
- ◆ Institute of Cemetery and Cremation Management ICCM Installation, Inspection and Maintenance of Memorials, includes sample survey form.
- ◆ Argyll and Bute Council Cemetery Rules Revised 2004.
- ◆ Argyll and Bute Council Safe System of Work for lowering and re-erection of headstones.

6. IMPLICATIONS

6.1	Policy	Development of Departmental Asset Management Plan, Cemetery Management Rules
6.2	Financial	Resources required for re-erection project to continue, initially sought from lair holders and memorial masons. Resource required for investigation of large stones and subsequent repair programme.
6.3	Personnel	Additional staff trained to inspect stones. Transfer of right of burial training for administrative staff.
6.4	Equalities Impact Assessment	None
6.5	Legal	Argyll and Bute Council duty of care.

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