

Friends of Hawkhead Cemetery submission of 18 November 2022

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

I write on behalf of Friends of Hawkhead Cemetery (FOHC).

Friends of Hawkhead Cemetery was formed earlier this year with the aim of connecting people who are interested in improving the cemetery and engaging in productive discussion about what issues should be addressed.

We launched a public consultation survey, the results of which can be shared with the Committee upon request. . More than 500 people participated and 90% of respondents wanted Renfrewshire Council to reinstate the headstones within the cemetery, thus preserving respect for the dead, retaining culture and historical aspects and also the character of Hawkhead Cemetery.

We recognise that the council's primary responsibility is to ensure the health and safety of cemetery users, general public, staff and contractors. We also recognise that the council have no responsibility for the upkeep/repair/reinstatement of the headstones.

However, while welcoming a pro-active approach to memorial safety FOHC are alarmed at the methodology adopted by the council and question whether it is commensurate with the aims of either the Scottish Government or the council. FOHC acknowledge that it is an extremely sensitive situation ensuring the safety of the living whilst respecting those buried within the cemetery.

In the opening paragraphs of the council's own policy on memorial safety, which followed the guidance issued by the Scottish Government on this subject, the council references the tragic death of a child caused by a falling monument, the Ross memorial, in a Scottish cemetery and the subsequent Fatal Accident Inquiry.

FOHC would contend that Renfrewshire Council and many other Scottish local authorities require to urgently review their approach to

memorial safety. Larger memorials, the Ross memorial was just under 7ft in height and weighed approximately 2.4 tons, cannot be dealt with in the same way as smaller memorials. Within the determination issued by Sherriff Linda Ruxton, who led the FAI, particular emphasis is put on the need to differentiate between the size, safety, stability and construction of memorials.

Throughout October more than 100 headstones have been laid flat by employees of Renfrewshire Council within Hawkhead Cemetery. Hundreds of headstones throughout Renfrewshire's cemeteries have met a similar fate. This prompted FOHC to write to the council, the Provost, councillors and all the community councils within Renfrewshire Council asking them to reflect on the damage being done to the cemetery and whether we could ensure health and safety by introducing a different approach.

We believe that writing to lair holders in advance of the council's inspection of headstones would help remove a lot of the distress and anguish caused to relatives. Recent press articles from throughout Scotland strongly condemn the overzealous actions of laying flat, when in fact making safe on a temporary basis and agreement on repairs would result in a quicker, more cost effective solution. In effect a one-stop shop would reduce upset to relatives, whilst increasing safety for cemetery users, council employees and the other benefits previously mentioned.

Fixed price examinations of headstones could be agreed by the council with memorial masons. Families would be expected to fund the initial examination and any resultant repair costs.

FOHC would urge the Scottish Government to make available specified funds for selected programmes of renovation of unsafe memorials and to recognise the strength of the case for such funding. It needs to believe that further consideration should be given to the extent of the problem, the size of the commitment, and to exploring mechanisms which may provide an alternative to public funding by the use of lottery money, donations and crowdfunding. Access to funds should be conditional on the development of detailed management plans for the burial ground including future proofing and a prevention strategy.

In conclusion, this petition has raised important issues regarding the values which society attaches to cemeteries, both as worthy last resting

places for the deceased, and as environmental, historical and cultural amenities for the local community. There are inevitably tensions between the two requirements, health and safety against respect for the deceased. These tensions need to be managed and resolved.

May I wish you well in your consideration of a very sensitive subject.