

# Scottish Borders Council submission of 23 December 2022

## PE1941/X: Stop the destruction of headstones within community cemeteries

Thank you for your recent invitation to share the practices at Scottish Borders Council when considering the issue of Memorial stability within our burial grounds. I must apologise but due to unforeseen circumstances we have been delayed in providing our response to the Committee.

SBC takes its responsibilities seriously when it comes to appropriate safety standards in our 155 burial grounds. We are in the fifth year of a five year programme of testing and consider our approach to have ensured that we meet the obligations placed on us in managing our burial grounds safely.

We have though faced challenges and as your enquiry seeks our feedback on some of those challenges I offer you the following by way of response.

From the outset our aim was ensure that we had significant communications and awareness within our communities in advance of commencing testing at a site. We are unable to contact all lair holders, or their heritor's as our records are sometimes incomplete/unavailable or not up to date with the most recent contact details. In trying to contact lair owners we would have been unable to effectively. And so our approach was to do the following;-

- *Staging of open days/demonstrations for elected members community Councils prior to the commencement of the programme, to explain the reasoning behind the programme and to demonstrate our methods of making safe*
- *Press releases and awareness raising across all communities at the commencement of the programme, including producing leaflets and using signage at Council call centres and buildings where the public came into contact with the Council*
- *Raising awareness through signage being placed at all entrances in each affected cemetery at least 28 days in advance of testing*

- *Awareness raising via Email contact with stakeholders such as elected members, community Councils and churches*
- *Updated webpages with Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) containing details and information to enable lair holders to be able to liaise with the Council should they have any concerns observations or feedback*
- *Social media posts*

We have occasionally received concerns and negative feedback, and when we have we have opened ourselves up to scrutiny and criticisms which we have tried our best to respond to fully and speedily.

In regards to allowing interested parties to provide us feedback and to take action to respond to such feedback. We believe we are very approachable and when approached try to respond helpfully and transparently to ensure that people's views are heard and addressed, whilst maintaining the aim of our programme which is to ensure the safe use of our burial grounds.

On the understanding that we recognise the impact moving a memorial can have on families/communities our approach to making safe starts from the premise that if we can maintain a memorial upright whilst maintaining its safety we will do so, principally using the process of socketing, thereafter we have in some isolated instances repaired where it was practical to do so, and finally we may then take the action of laying a memorial flat, inscription uppermost. We don't usually erect a cordon as this is impractical and not a deterrent/guarantee of safety whilst the memorial remains unstable.

Furthermore, we have suspended our programme having recently received some negative feedback as a result of lying flat a number of memorials in a burial ground. At the behest of Members we are now in the process of reviewing our approach to testing and making safe with a view to relaunching a new Council Policy and revised approach in 2023, along with updated communications. Our expectations are this will enable the Council to complete the programme of testing entirely, and initiate an approach re-erecting previously laid flat memorials, subject to funding and clarifications of some legal matters regarding future liabilities for the Council. If successful we will be refocussing our efforts and approach going forward.

I hope this response is informative and am happy to be contacted to discuss further should you require.