



**Briefing 17/18 April 2017**

## **Unauthorised memorabilia on graves and crematoria grounds**

To: All Chief Executives, Main Contacts and APSE Contacts in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

### **Key Issues:**

There has been a growing number of enquiries from APSE members regarding the placing of unauthorised memorabilia on graves and within crematoria grounds.

APSE has therefore produced a briefing note based on local authority responses received regarding this problem, namely:

1. The types of council policies on unauthorised memorabilia on graves/crematoria grounds
2. The different information made available by local authorities to the public on unauthorised memorabilia (e.g. web pages, leaflets, notice boards in cemetery/crematoria grounds)?
3. How local authorities are dealing with the persistent placing of unauthorised memorabilia?
4. Possible solutions to the problem of preventing unauthorised memorabilia.

### **1.0 Introduction**

A local authority member recently asked APSE to circulate a query to our membership with a series of questions on unauthorised memorabilia on graves and crematoria grounds. The issues raised have been highlighted previously by a number of different local authorities and it was therefore felt that a short briefing note may be useful to highlight the variety of responses received by APSE regarding these issues.

While APSE understands that the burial of loved ones is a very emotive issue, the placement of unauthorised memorabilia creates a series of issues for local authorities including issues with grass cutting and grounds maintenance as well as health and safety issues for stonemasons and coffin bearers.

Types of unauthorised memorabilia or changes made to the appearance of graves or to areas within crematoria grounds by relatives, have included: placing of curb edgings, solar lighting, flags, balloons, wind chimes, lanterns, soft toys, statues, photographs, football

scarves, wooden crosses, windmills, plastic flowers, gnomes and even the deceased favourite cans of beer.

The removal of these items not only cause distress for relatives, but can also lead to negative publicity for the council and even on occasion have caused staff to have to directly deal with angry relatives.

## **2.0 Policies and approaches**

### **Council policies on unauthorised memorabilia on graves/crematoria grounds**

Most local authorities either have a specific policy on unauthorised memorabilia, or it is contained within their wider cemetery management rules. The policy is typically issued with the purchase of an Exclusive Right of Burial. Also a copy of the policy is usually available on the Council's website and in some cases also available in leaflet form and on noticeboards in cemetery/crematoria grounds. Unfortunately many councils have commented that these are "either ignored or not even read".

Many local authorities make local funeral directors aware of their unauthorised memorabilia policy in order that too can also inform their customers about this unacceptable practice

However within the policies there are wide differences regarding what is and is not acceptable regarding memorabilia, i.e. which items were allowed and which items were considered unauthorised, for example:

- The use of solar lights have a mixed reception amongst local authorities.
- There were different approaches regarding whether there was a blanket ban on all memorabilia, or whether memorabilia was acceptable if it met certain criteria (e.g. as long as it was kept within the headstone border, as long as they don't encroach upon other grave spaces, that live planting is in suitable pots or containers, that memorabilia is kept in good repair by the owners)
- Whether personal planting of flowers was permitted (and whether they are required to be seasonal flowers)

However in spite of these differences, most policies disallowed the use of kerbing, fencing and bordering on the grounds that it interfered with the ease of maintenance.

One local authority supplied APSE with a copy of its cemetery regulations and within them there was a 'statement of understanding' required to be signed by the applicant for a grave deed, confirming they have read and understood the regulations including the policy on unauthorised memorabilia. This approach allows the council to remove unauthorised items but, it is worth noting that not all unauthorised memorabilia is necessarily placed by the grave owner.

## **Dealing with the persistent placing of unauthorised memorabilia.**

Local authorities have a variety of different approaches to the persistent placing of unauthorised memorabilia, with some being more lenient than others.

The process is typically:

1. Sending a letter to the grave owner informing them of their infringement of the cemetery's management rules, and giving them a set period of time for removing the items themselves (around 2 to 4 weeks)
2. If the items have not been removed within the given time period then the council will remove them and place them into storage on-site for a set period of time (around 1 and 3 months).
3. If the items have not been collected after the defined time period, then the items will be disposed of.

Variations to this approach include:

- the council removing the items immediately without notice
- a notice placed at the grave site detailing the offence in addition to the letter
- enclosing a photograph of the offending items with the original letter

Interestingly, some local authorities reported instances where they do not take consistent action against the persistent placing of unauthorised memorabilia, choosing only to take action if they receive a complaint. This lack of a consistent approach, is often found in older cemeteries, where possibly fewer people visit and the problem is therefore rare. Also several local authorities have sited that the leaving of memorabilia in older cemeteries has historically been accepted. Comments from local authorities have included: from cemeteries staff included:

- "Very difficult to deal with unauthorised memorabilia particularly in the older parts of cemeteries where historically it has been turned a blind eye to. We have a new cemetery where we are a lot keener on enforcing and it seems to be working so far"
- "In new cemeteries where this issue does not exist i.e. allowing unauthorised memorabilia, when anything appears, the lair holder is written to and given a timescale to remove. If not removed staff will remove and place into storage for collection"

## **Lack of political/senior management support to address unauthorised memorabilia**

A lack of support by politicians and senior management is another common reason why the rules on unauthorised memorabilia are not consistently applied.

Comments on this fact have included:

- "Unfortunately at the moment we do not do anything about persistent placing of unauthorised items. We did try to remove them once, but got no political support for this approach, so we just warn people now"

- “When we have asked grave owners to remove some of the unauthorised memorabilia the response is generally angry and defiant, and normally leads to councillors or senior managers getting involved who would prefer that we didn’t take any action”

### **Negative press attracted by enforcement of policy**

Local authority officers have shed some interesting views on enforcing the removal of unauthorised memorabilia:

- “I think unless a firm line is taken by the whole hierarchy within the authority, the rules are implemented without exception, and everyone is aware and willing to accept that there will be some negative feedback and publicity resulting from this, then nothing is going to happen to change the situation.”
- “We have recently tried to enforce the rules by sending a letter which gives the grave owner 28 days to remove the items. This has however caused unrest and the Council received a petition of several thousand signatures requiring the rules to be reviewed.”

## **3.0 Issues for local authorities caused by unauthorised memorabilia**

The placement of unauthorised memorabilia causes a number of issues for local authorities who are already under tight budget constraints.

### **Maintenance**

Unauthorised memorabilia can make cemetery/crematoria maintenance difficult, and this has been highlighted more than once by local authorities who have responded to network queries in the past.

“The persistent placing of unauthorised memorabilia is burdensome on the cemetery staff who have to deal with clearing the memorabilia and subsequent complaints. However, the alternative of allowing it or ignoring it is not manageable and would have a detrimental impact on the presentation of the cemetery and increase maintenance problems and costs”

### **Health and safety**

Local authorities have often identified a potential risk of tripping for coffin bearers during funerals at lawn cemeteries, due to the possibility of the ever increasing number of objects that could be placed outside of the accepted grave boundaries.

There is also a health and safety concern for masons, as the presence of unauthorised memorabilia will increase the distance that heavy stones have to be carried.

One regular comment regarding memorabilia has been that:

- “The grounds staff cannot use strimming machines against this type of material as it will shatter then become a hazard to other visitors particularly those people that kneel on the grass.”

## Staff time dedicated to dealing with the issue

There is also the issue of staff time being dedicated to dealing with unauthorised memorabilia in terms of dealing with complaints from adjacent grave owners, writing letters in order to offending contact grave owners, collecting and storing items, increased unnecessary time spent on maintenance (as a result of the presence of these items), and in some cases dealing challenges from the media, councillors and senior managers.

## 4.0 APSE Comment

APSE would recommend considering the following approaches in the management of unauthorised memorabilia on graves:

- Make sure that any changes to policies are subject to appropriate consultations and agreed with residents, users of the cemetery and local councillors
- Create a designated area for memorials and memorabilia, where possible, so that those who wish to place them in cemeteries/crematoria have a managed area to leave them in
- Offer appropriate and affordable memorial services directly from the council, this allows for control over the types of memorials and ensures residents have options in how they'd like their loved ones to be remembered (this may include memorial walls, trees, benches, gardens of remembrance, memorial roses, etc.)
- Include a 'statement of understanding' that is required to be completed as part of the purchase of an Exclusive Right of Burial, so relatives are aware of what is considered acceptable regarding memorabilia (although obviously this would not prevent the placement of unauthorised memorabilia by anyone other than the grave owner)
- Make your policy available in a variety of formats (web pages, leaflets, noticeboards)
- Apply the rules **consistently** across the local authority without exception if you want to have an equitable approach to unauthorised memorabilia.
- Accept that there is likely to be some amount of negative press directed at the council for enforcing the removal of unauthorised memorabilia.

APSE runs a regular national [Cemeteries and Crematoria advisory group](#) which is free to attend for APSE members. These are informal meetings that allow local authorities to share best practice and to network with colleagues from other areas. The next meeting of the group is on 7<sup>th</sup> June 2017 in Manchester.

APSE also hosts an annual event on Cemeteries and Crematoria which is taking place on 20<sup>th</sup> April 2017 in Leicestershire (view the programme [here](#)).

APSE also benchmarks information on local authority cemetery and crematoria services through our [Performance Networks service](#). This includes a range of different indicators on topics such as net costs, income from disposals, hectares of maintained land, burials per FTE staff, cost of service per head of population, etc. A full list of indicators is available [here](#).

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