



# **BURIAL GROUNDS STRATEGY**

**TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE  
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## **Burial Grounds Strategy**

### **1 Introduction**

- 1.1 Aberdeenshire Council aims to provide a first class burial service to the public by a wide range of procedures and processes. As part of the Best Value Review of Burial Grounds, many elements have already been implemented and standardised across Aberdeenshire, principally the Standards of Service.
- 1.2 The Council has 211 Cemeteries and Burial Grounds under its control, both in terms of management and maintenance responsibilities. Of the 211, some 35 are classed as closed for new burials.
- 1.3 The Council has a legal responsibility to provide and maintain cemeteries and burial grounds under the Burial Grounds (Scotland) Act 1855, Church of Scotland Act 1925 and the Local Government Act 1973. This generates the need for a strategy to allow effective control, management and future development of the sites.
- 1.4 Aberdeenshire Cemeteries and Burial Grounds fulfil an important role for the public and the strategy must recognise this and include the ability to take account of changing and evolving burial service needs.
- 1.5 This Strategy considers the long term needs and aims of the Burial Service provided to the residents of Aberdeenshire Council, taking due regard for Environmental issues and the wishes and requirements of users and addresses the method of administration of the burial service.
- 1.6 Many urban types of Council do have dedicated sections of cemeteries for Ethnic burials because of the influx of Ethnic minorities for the readily available work and lower cost housing. Aberdeenshire does not apparently have this influx and due to information from the Census being some 4 years old, requirements cannot be quantified at this time but the information gained from Burial Clerks, Registrars and Undertakers will be monitored

(Definitions - The term 'Cemetery' refers to a burial ground other than a churchyard and 'closed' refers to a cemetery or burial ground where no further interments are carried out).

## **2 Vision**

- 2.1 It is widely recognised that Burial Grounds and Cemeteries play an important part in resident's lives. This is to be reflected in the policies standards and maintenance to ensure that the publics' long term needs and requirements are satisfied.
- 2.2 To provide a Burial Grounds service which is sympathetic to and meets the needs of the bereaved and the wider community of Aberdeenshire for both the short and longer term
- 2.3 To ensure that Aberdeenshire has a continuing supply of burial grounds which matches the level of future demand from the public
- 2.4 To develop facilities that reflect the various religions, beliefs and secular lifestyles within the population of Aberdeenshire.
- 2.5 To improve public access to those cemeteries which are of local and national historic importance and also to improve opportunities for public commemoration and genealogical research.
- 2.6 To provide standards that exceed legal requirements wherever possible based on customer expectations.
- 2.7 To provide electronic service delivery via the Council's web site for enquiries, funeral arrangements and payment of fees.
- 2.8 To provide reasonable access to forms of human remains disposal other than conventional burial.

### **3 Strategic Aims & Objectives**

To ensure a quality service to the public through the careful and sympathetic management of burial grounds and cemeteries.

To ensure that the Burial Service provided is of high quality and consistent across the Council and accessible to all members of the public. This will address the provision of all types of burial (green and traditional burials and cremation) and consider the cultural needs of burial for minority groups within Aberdeenshire.

To develop a series of Policies and procedures that will guide the providers and users of the Service and provide a stable operating framework for the future.

To develop a schedule for prioritising the upgrading and conservation of historic burial grounds, in conjunction with colleagues in Planning and Environmental Services (P&ES).

To develop a policy and guidelines for future provision of a burial site at any given location within Aberdeenshire

To ensure that the public's long term needs and requirements are satisfied in relation to new or extended burial grounds. This will be achieved through local consultation with members of the public and local elected members

To analyse in detail the burial statistics on an annual basis to determine a use pattern of all burial grounds and cemeteries

To provide a well organised and dignified burial service by responding promptly and sensitively to the needs of the bereaved, by striving to meet the following: -

- The needs of all faiths, religions and secular lifestyles in a responsive manner to the requirements of every individual.
- Provide a safe and attractive environment for burial.
- Offer a service that is operated in accordance with the relevant statutory legislation
- Maintain accurate record keeping and provide access to information and advice for the bereaved
- Provide professional and high standards throughout bereavement services by working closely with funeral directors, memorial masons and other organisations

To introduce a Service User Pledge (Appendix A) related to best practice.

3.10 To introduce a Bereavement Information Leaflet (Appendix B) and produce it in other languages as required.

3.11 To investigate and evaluate Burial Ground Administration software packages in conjunction with Personnel & ICT colleagues.

- 3.12 To continue to seek feedback from users of the service and the annual undertakers forum. From this improvements will be developed and implemented.
- 3.13 To investigate further with Law and Administration the options of administering the burial service in a manner that provides best value to the residents of Aberdeenshire and all users of the service.

## **4 Implementation Proposals**

### **4.1 Provision of New Burial Grounds - Cemeteries and extensions**

- 4.1.1 To introduce the application of a distance measurement from a settlement to influence the requirement or priority for a cemetery. The potential requirement for new burial grounds will also take into consideration the requirements of the local population, the age range of individual communities, the size of the population and the possible increase in growth of that particular area to determine the correct location for a cemetery or extension. This may not be within that particular local area, but in a more suitable location within easy travelling distance.

(The present method of identifying the need for an extension to a cemetery is to calculate the lifespan of the site and when there is 5 years of burial left, instigate the purchase of appropriate land adjacent to the cemetery ready for development and use at the end of the 5-year period).

- 4.1.2 Following the analysis of the information detailed in 4.1.1 and where possible the provision of new burial grounds will be developed on the basis that a burial ground is available (including private sites) within easy travelling distance not exceeding a 10 mile radius and within 48 hours of notification.
- 4.1.3 In accordance with the specific service objectives for Transportation and Infrastructure within Aberdeenshire Councils' race equality scheme include the development and future provision of the burial service for all ethnic groups.
- 4.1.4 To designate areas as required within nominated burial grounds to comply with religious beliefs and cultural requirements where necessary (Appendix C).
- 4.1.5 To review the practice of initially consecrating new burial grounds on completion. When a new cemetery is developed, it has been the practise to consecrate the ground by representatives of the Church of Scotland, Episcopalian Church and the Roman Catholic Church. In order to comply with the beliefs of other religions the burial ground could be zoned for consecration by representatives of each major religious belief or the entire burial ground be left unconsecrated with allowance for this being made in the funeral service. Local views and consultations will form an integral part of this review.
- 4.1.6 To ensure all religions, beliefs and secular lifestyles are able to receive appropriate services at relevant times where appropriate and practicable.
- 4.1.7 To develop a system to record the religious or ethnic group to which the deceased belonged.

4.1.8 To provide improved training for all burial service related staff in awareness of burial service procedures or traditions, which may differ greatly within different cultures and religions.

## **4.2 Woodland/Green Burial sites**

4.2.1 To introduce in accordance with Aberdeenshire Council's Green Policy – the provision of woodland/green burial sites.

4.2.2 To introduce the application of a distance measurement from a settlement to influence the requirement or priority for a woodland/green burial site. This would offer a more environmentally friendly option within the burial service. This method of internment is becoming more popular and within the Aberdeenshire area, there are at present only two private suppliers of this facility (Fyvie & Alford)

4.2.3 The provision of sustainable Woodland/Green Burial sites will be developed on the basis that a burial facility (including private sites) is available within a 30-mile radius and within 48 hours of notification.

4.2.4 Woodland/green burial sites may form part of a designated area within nominated conventional new or existing burial grounds, or to create a new burial facility specifically for woodland/green burials within Aberdeenshire.

4.2.5 To develop policy guidelines on procedures, charges and maintenance regimes for woodland/green burial sites.

4.2.6 Principles for provision of burial sites or contribution towards sites will be established for housing developments. This will be carried out in consultation with the Planning Gain Coordinator.

## **4.3 Cremation**

4.3.1 To introduce the application of a distance measurement from a settlement to determine the possible requirement or priority for the provision of a crematorium

4.3.2 The provision of a crematorium will be considered on the basis that a cremation facility is available within a 60 mile radius and within 48 hours of notification. Aberdeen City Council operates a Crematorium at Hazelhead, Aberdeen and the privately operated Moray Crematorium is located at Clochan, Buckie. All of Aberdeenshire is therefore covered by these facilities. Nevertheless it is felt that consideration should be given to the provision of an Aberdeenshire facility which would need to be situated in a central area to meet the suggested criteria.

- 4.3.3 Initial investigations and discussions with the Property Section of Transportation and Infrastructure Service have been held to establish if the Council has any suitable land for the siting of a crematorium facility. However land currently under the ownership of Aberdeenshire Council was initially deemed unsuitable for this purpose. In discussions, it was suggested that this type of development would be classed as a 'Bad Neighbour' development in any area or location chosen.
- 4.3.4 To further investigate the practical implications of providing a crematorium for Aberdeenshire by means of a feasibility study. It is recommended that a specialist in crematoria be engaged to offer both technical, practical and outline costing advice.
- 4.3.5 Consultation will be carried out with the residents of Aberdeenshire to gauge how well used a crematorium facility would be and to dispel concerns over the 'bad neighbour' effect of the construction of this facility. The Planning Service will also be consulted and information gathered on any restrictions that may apply.
- 4.3.6 During discussions with Undertakers, it has become apparent that there is a longer period of time from the death of a person to the actual cremation as opposed to a far shorter time span for burial. This is mainly due to the restricted through put in the cremators.
- 4.3.7 To enter into discussions with Aberdeen City Council with a view to cost sharing an extension to their existing site at Hazelhead, and establish the ongoing maintenance costs of operation. Whilst this would not provide a cremation facility in Aberdeenshire it may assist with waiting times for services and could provide reduced fees for residents of Aberdeenshire.
- 4.3.8 National statistics indicate a growing preference for cremation over burials although this is not as apparent in Aberdeenshire as elsewhere in Scotland. This is to be investigated following requests from funeral directors due to increasing difficulties in arranging cremations and to address difficulties experienced in acquiring suitable land for burial ground within Aberdeenshire.

#### **4.4 Promession**

- 4.4.1 To investigate the implications of providing access to this form of disposal. Promession is a way of taking care of human remains with dignity in order to make mulching possible. An important part of the solution is to remove that which is least important; the water that makes up 70 percent of a normal-sized body. Technically speaking, this is done using an entirely closed individual process in which the remains are freeze-dried in liquid nitrogen. This makes the body very brittle, and vibration of specific amplitude transforms it into an organic powder that is then introduced into a vacuum chamber where the water is evaporated away. The now dry powder then passes through a metal separator where any surgical spare parts and mercury are removed. In a similar way, the powder can be disinfected if required. The remains are now ready to be laid in a biodegradable (mulchable) coffin.

4.4.2 Promession is a process, which is, growing in popularity in Scandinavian countries as it reduces environmental impact on some of our most important resources; water, air and soil.

#### **4.5 Indigent death**

4.5.1 To review current practice and develop a revised procedure which meets legal requirements and is consistent with neighbouring Authorities. Aberdeenshire Council is required by law to bury all indigent persons who die within the Council's boundaries.

4.5.2 To make reasonable attempts to recover the costs of providing a funeral service from the deceased's estate.

#### **4.6 Exhumations**

4.6.1 To provide an exhumation service in a sympathetic and dignified manner. The normal practice for an exhumation to take place is for an individual to petition the Sheriff Court for permission to remove the remains. The petitioner must give the reasons for the exhumation, which can be many and varied. Once the court receives the petition, the burying authority will be contacted to give their views on the practicalities and whether it is feasible to carry out the operation. Environmental Health Officers are also contacted for a statement on public health issues.

4.6.2 All exhumation sites will have a risk assessment carried out prior to the work being carried out, as a generic assessment will not satisfy all sites, conditions or length of time the coffin has been buried. This will incorporate the grave digging risk assessment and other relevant health and safety documents.

#### **4.7 Existing Cemeteries and Burial Grounds**

##### **4.7.1. Maintenance Regimes**

4.7.2 Maintenance regimes to suit the location and site will be developed. Presently maintenance is the same in most cemeteries, which may not always be appropriate. This will be addressed by introducing maintenance standards to meet the needs of the particular cemetery.

4.7.3 Environmental management regimes for 'closed' burial sites with the aim of encouraging species rich flora by reduced or different maintenance methods will be established with consultation with the environmental team and will involve considerable consultation with the public, as at present, the current wish is to maintain all burial sites to a high standard. It may be possible to dedicate areas of individual sites in this manner. It is proposed to identify at least 6 'closed' burial grounds to trial this maintenance regime.

4.7.4 Maintenance regimes for Woodland/green burial site will be developed.

4.7.5 To publish detailed burial service standards.

## **4.8 Physical Assets**

- 4.8.1 An Asset Management system for all sites to establish the condition of structures, memorials and general asset details will be adopted. From this process, a programme of development, conservation, renovation or repair can be established within budget constraints since it is important that physical assets are recorded and maintained well to avoid an atmosphere of neglect. The ability to repair vandalism and deal with other problems is essential to convey that a programme of good care and management is in operation.
- 4.8.2 Work will be undertaken in conjunction with officers from the Built Heritage section of Planning and Environmental Services to preserve and improve historic features through grant application. This funding can come from bodies such as Historic Scotland, the Public Parks Initiative and Lottery funding.
- 4.8.3 Liaison will take place with Environmental groups with regard to maintenance management and methods.
- 4.8.4 All memorials in burial sites in the Council's control will be surveyed for stability and condition over a five-year programme and a maintenance plan established to deal with relevant Health and Safety issues. All high-risk unstable memorials have been identified and remedial works to reduce the risk are nearing completion.

Note: - It is the responsibility of the lair holder to maintain and repair memorials on their lair. In England and Wales, Local Authorities are empowered by the Local Authorities Cemeteries Order 1977, to repair monuments and Memorials and then re charge the lair holders whereas in Scotland, Local Authorities operate under the Burial Grounds (Scotland) Act of 1855 which does not give them this power. Many Scottish Authorities use the Local Authorities Act of 1977 as a best practice model.

- 4.8.5 To ensure regular inspection of the structures in all burial grounds. Aberdeenshire Council in addition to being landowners, have a general responsibility for safety in cemeteries and burial grounds.

## **5 Administration of Burials**

- 5.1 Administration procedures and staffing levels required to carry out this function are presently split between Landscape Services staff (Burial Clerk) and Law and Administration Registrars. This was reviewed as part of the Landscape Best Value Review. At that time it was decided to make no changes due to ongoing review of Law & Administration and the changes to some of the marriage legislation.

- 5.2 Registrars operate in all Areas of the Council, with 12 full time offices and 4 part time offices providing registration of births, and deaths and conducting civil marriages. At the majority of these offices, the Registrar also acts as Burial Clerk on behalf of Landscape Services. The area's covered by this method are Banff & Buchan, Buchan, Kincardine & Mearns, north Formartine and north Marr. Whilst in Garioch, south Marr and south Formartine (former GDC Area) the function of Burial Clerk is carried out by a dedicated staff member of Support Services working for Landscape Services.
- 5.3 To reconvene discussions with Law & Administration to further consider the possibility of a consistent approach for all of Aberdeenshire. Part of Aberdeenshire's aims, is to bring the Services of the Council nearer to its customers for easier access for all. In many areas this has been achieved with Registrars operating in all of the major settlements, providing the full service of Registration and Burial Clerk duties.
- 5.4 The potential of computer software for recording of burials and burial ground details has been investigated, there are a number of systems that are considered suitable. Consultation with Law & Administration colleagues to select the most appropriate system is required.
- 5.5 Service User Pledges highlight peoples rights with regard to the bereavement process and are a commitment to improving the service by setting standards that can be expected which can then be used as a measure for judging the quality of the services provided. These have been developed in response to the Citizen's Charter Initiative.

## **6 Conclusion**

- 6.1 The overall aim of the Burial Grounds Strategy is to ensure that the highest quality service can be provided consistent with the available resources whilst incorporating appropriate provision for cultural diversity.
- 6.2 Burial Grounds & Cemeteries form part of Aberdeenshire Council's open spaces and as such offer areas of peace and tranquillity for times of quiet reflection and remembrance as well as a resting place for many families loved ones.