

**Minutes of the Regeneration and Sustainable Communities Overview and
Scrutiny Committee
11 March 2008**

117. Memorial Safety

The Chairman welcomed the Director of Operations, Alison Broom, the Environmental Services Manager, Malcolm Wells and the Facility Management Officer, Tim Jefferson to the meeting. Ms Broom advised the Committee that progress was ongoing to ensure the safety of memorials in Maidstone Cemetery, however work would not begin on memorials in closed churchyards until this was complete. The estimated completion date of all testing and associated reinstatements was March 2009. Members were informed that the recommendation within the Overview and Scrutiny "Memorial Safety" Report, to produce and publicise a list of memorials that had failed safety tests, had not been implemented due to pressures of other work and that all known grave owners had been contacted directly.

The Committee noted that the grave owner held the exclusive right to the grave and the right to determine who else could be buried there, and was also the person responsible for its upkeep. There were approximately 17,000 Owners of Graves in Maidstone. The Local Government Ombudsman stressed the importance of contacting the owner of Graves individually where a memorial failed a safety test. However, difficulties had arisen as the onus was on the grave owner and the grave owner's family to advise when the owner either moves address or dies. There are no other procedures in place to ensure the maintenance of up to date records. Members were advised that it would be difficult to determine which Mason to contact for each memorial in order to request historic contact details.

A Councillor requested an accurate cost estimate for the work to be carried out in closed churchyards but was advised that it was impractical to do so as the exact number of memorials in the Cemetery was unclear. Records only recorded the number of burials, rather than the number of memorials and site visits were consequently required to determine the number of memorials and their stability. The exact number of memorials in the closed churchyards was known, however, it could not be determined whether any reinstatement work was necessary as there was a wide variety of memorials which required different methods of reinstatement. An accurate cost projection therefore could not be produced prior to individual assessment.

Members were advised that the headstones that had failed tests were initially laid down to reduce risk until reinstatement work was carried out. This had been the case for many of the older grave stones. The Committee was advised that the existence of conservation orders in any of the graveyards was unknown and Members recommended this be researched.

Mr Wells explained to the Committee that memorials were constructed to a specific industry standard. However, the recent large volume of work had been required due to the non-delivery of inspections in previous years. A five year rolling programme of inspections would commence following the completion of current assessments and failure rates were expected to fall to less than one per cent compared to the current 42% failure rate. The five year rolling programme was considered by the industry to be good practice. Members suggested that the rolling programme be reduced to seven or eight years to reduce costs, however resolved that the potential increase in risk may lead to the increased insurance costs. Members requested that the implications to insurance be researched.

Mr Jefferson advised the Committee that, dependant on the length of the grave lease, the re-use of graves or use of un-used burial space had been considered in the United Kingdom. A Member queried whether attempts had been made to follow a number of European Countries to remove bodies and was advised that it was not necessary in Maidstone as over the last ten years there has been a demand of 150-160 burials per year and 11,000 grave spaces were currently available.

Members noted that the report raised concerns with regard to young people using cemeteries as play areas. Mr Jefferson advised the Committee that posters had been produced by the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management and given to schools to discourage young people from playing in Cemeteries, but no further work had since taken place. The Committee agreed that further action should be taken to educate young people to stop playing in cemeteries.

Members were advised that 3300 of the existing 16,000 memorials in Maidstone Cemetery still required testing. The hard work that had been undertaken to progress the memorial safety work thus far was recognised and the Committee congratulated the team. The Committee resolved to review the progress of the Memorial safety work in 6 months time.

Resolved: That

- a) Further work be undertaken to discourage young people from playing in cemeteries;
- b) Research be undertaken to establish whether any conservation orders existed in Maidstone cemeteries;
- c) Research be conducted on the implications to the cost of insurance in reducing the rolling programme of inspections to 7-8 years;
- d) An update on the Memorial Safety work be received in 6 months; and
- e) The Memorial Safety team be congratulated on their progress.