

Offenders put to work

✘ A new pilot project, which will see teams of low level offenders on community service being sent out to fix fallen cemetery headstones, was launched in Edinburgh today.

Under the initiative, gravestones will be repaired and fallen headstones will be returned to their original upright positions in a major clean-up operation by offenders who are being sent out to repay their debt to the community.

The pilot project will take place at Liberton Cemetery and is being organised by the City of Edinburgh Council's Bereavement and Public Health Service and Criminal Justice Social Work Service.

Paying tribute to the project, Justice Secretary Kenny MacAskill said:- "Cemeteries should be a place of quiet reflection, a place to pay your respects and to remember loved ones lost.

"Unfortunately, the scene at many cemeteries in Edinburgh, and more widely across Scotland, is one of fallen and broken headstones. That is unacceptable. It's a bugbear of many communities up and down the country, and this project will see action being taken to rectify it.

"The council and church workers do their best, but finding the resources and labour required to carry out these repairs is often a real struggle for many.

"We want to get these offenders out doing some hard work, carrying out tough manual labour to repay their dues to the community they've harmed, whilst delivering improvements which the community will benefit from.

"This is exactly the kind of initiative we want to see more of. City of Edinburgh Council are to be congratulated, but

this is a common problem for many communities across Scotland and I'm sure other local authorities may look at this and want to follow suit. These teams of community service workers can be utilised in many ways by Scotland's councils, and could also be used to clean graffiti from headstones or clear overgrown vegetation for example.

"We've seen low level offenders out clearing paths of snow and ice during last year's bad weather, we've seen them out renovating elderly care homes and we've seen them helping to clean up streets of litter. We'll now see them being put to more good use, bringing our cemeteries back to the standard people expect and this is a worthwhile project.

"The statistics are clear and show that short term prison sentences do not work for low level offenders. Three quarters of those given a short term prison term go on to reoffend within two years of getting out, whereas three out of five given a community based sentence do not. Community based sentences are proven to work, they actually stop offenders committing crime again in the future and we're increasingly seeing the benefits to be gained for the community by getting these offenders out doing some hard work rather than sitting for a couple of weeks in a prison cell."

Councillor Paul Edie, Community Safety Leader at the City of Edinburgh Council, said:

"Our team have been working hard to develop this exciting and important scheme within the local community, and they should be applauded. There are a number of gravestones in need of repair and this is a fantastic initiative to get low level offenders out to work, improving their skills whilst helping to improve the local community. Not only will this project make a real difference to the burial ground but the offenders will also be paying back the local community in a positive and constructive way."

Alan McKinney, a local resident, said:

“I am delighted that the City of Edinburgh Council has taken up this idea and its officials are to be congratulated for their constructive development of the initial proposal. I now sincerely hope that other Scottish councils will seriously examine the proposal which I circulated to all councils in 2009.”