

# **Tour guides say increased charges are “unfair”**

## **Self-employed tour guides working in Edinburgh have criticised an “unfair” hike in charges to take groups into cemeteries.**

The council has been urged to have a re-think over the scheme designed to raise money for the maintenance of graveyards which attract the most tourists – and consider replacing the soon-to-increase annual charge with a ‘per visitor’ fee.

This would make the cost of cemetery upkeep for operators proportionate to the level of footfall they bring in, independent guides have argued, as they blamed “mass tourism companies” for the council’s £86,000 bill to maintain footpaths in Canongate, Greyfriars and St Cuthbert’s cemeteries last year.

A petition calling on the local authority to engage with self-employed guides and explore changing the scheme has gathered over 350 signatures.

Currently, all operators which conduct cemetery tours must pay an annual £90 registration fee, which will rise to £150 from July following a decision taken by the culture and communities committee earlier this month.

In addition the council is introducing a £120 a year charge for each guide employed by an operator. Whilst this means bigger companies will soon pay more, independents have said this removes the ability for them to group together and share the cost.

Amy, a self-employed guide who leads French language ghost tours said as a result her registration fee will jump from £9 to £150 – an increase of over 1,500 per cent.

She told the LDRS: “For the last two years I have paid the same tax as a giant company, is it fair? It’s absolutely not honest to tell me that I have the same environmental impact that those herds.

“They’ve put this scheme on because the cemetery needs maintenance because of mass tourism, so why is it so unfair and why isn’t it per visitor?

“This tax is only going to go up. And it’s never going to be proportional to the real actual footprint we have in those places.

“My work to share the beauty of Edinburgh with the French is now in danger.”

Karine Savage, another independent operator based in the capital, said: “We are one guide, we take two or three people, sometimes ten to fifteen but it’s very rare, but many guides take 30.”

She said the council failed to adequately consult with self-employed guides or inform them of the fee increases – adding if she had known she would have raised her own prices for the summer season.

She added: “To me it’s just the way they are coming out with a plan that’s not been thought through very thoroughly and all the people who should have been involved haven’t been involved – [the problem] is the poor communication and management of the scheme.

“They implemented this during Covid – we had two years of no work, so we made hardly any money, and then this is hitting us.”

Ms Savage also said some guides could “boycott” the cemeteries due to the cost.

Registration fees raised just £3,785 for the council last year and donations from graveyard visitors brought in just over £2,000 – against £121,000 spent on managing and maintaining popular burial grounds, including £86,000 on footpath repairs and £34,000 employing a cemeteries officer.

The council said: “It is clear that the Edinburgh Tour Guide Registration Scheme has not provided the level of income anticipated to meet the cost of maintaining cemeteries, particularly those with the highest footfall.”

It said evidence has suggested some guides who are not registered “continue to try and operate in the cemeteries”.

Meanwhile a petition launched by the Small Tour Guides Association calling on the council to reconsider the scheme has gathered 355 signatures.

The Small Tour Guides Association said: “As micro companies, most of us don’t earn a lot. Actually, we barely make minimum wage as we need to make in six months enough income for the rest of the year.”

They urged the council to “make sure that taxes paid are proportional to the size and actual cemetery footprint of the business”.

They added: “Some bring 40+ people per tour six times a day, other micro businesses like ours bring on average four people with us.”

