

Tour guides will have to pay increased charges for visits to graveyard

Edinburgh tour guides will have to pay increased charges to the council to take groups into graveyards after an effort to bring in donations failed to raise enough cash.

The City of Edinburgh Council currently charges tour companies which visit cemeteries an annual £90 registration fee to meet the cost of “expensive ongoing conservation and maintenance” of city centre burial grounds which see significant footfall from ghost tours.

This will rise to £150 from July, whilst a yearly £120 charge for each individual guide will also be introduced in a bid to boost funds for the upkeep of Canongate, Greyfriars and St Cuthbert’s graveyards which the council said cost £86,000 last year.

Speaking at a meeting where the revised fees were approved, a councillor said the council was “subsiding private companies” under the existing arrangement.

The scheme was introduced in 2021 but the council said some evidence has suggested guides who are not registered “continue to try and operate in the cemeteries”.

To date, 53 organisations have registered with the scheme,

which includes 311 individual tour guides.

Registration fees for tour operators raised £3,785 last year and just over £2,000 came from donations, which guides are expected to encourage customers to make at contactless card machines in cemeteries, unless they decide to pay the council directly themselves at a rate of 50 pence per visitor they take in.

A report said: "Monitoring at Greyfriars Cemetery suggests that, despite it being a well visited location, tour guides are not highlighting the donation scheme to visitors.

"Around two million people visiting Greyfriars annually, making it the third most visited free to enter attraction in Scotland.

"The significant footfall in the city centre cemeteries causes wear and tear on pathways which were not designed to cope with the footfall.

"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 is therefore recommended that the Edinburgh Cemeteries Tour Guide Registration Scheme be revised, with an updated fee framework which requires an annual registration of each individual company of £150 and requires each individual guide to pay a registration fee of £120."

It is estimated the revised scheme will bring in around £45,000 a year for cemetery maintenance.

The changes were approved by the culture and communities committee, where the council's bereavement services operations manager Jane Matheson said engagement with operators found that "none of them are overly keen on fees of any kind".

She said: "I don't suspect we're ever going to get to a stage where we've got every tour company following the rules."

SNP councillor Amy McNeese-Mechan said: "When you look at these figures for capital and revenue expenditure, it's very glaring that we are subsidising private companies.

"At this point in time public money is going right into the profits of a few companies, it sounds like the larger ones and not the individual guides."

Ms Matheson said: "For me, even the fee that we're asking from them now is a very small contribution to what they're earning from their tours – you just have to look at their web pages to see the charge per person. I believe what we're asking from them is entirely reasonable."

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter.

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St Cuthbert's Parish Church