

Councillors vote against banning dog walking in Edinburgh's cemeteries

Councillors have voted against banning dog walking in Edinburgh's cemeteries despite emotional pleas from mourners.

They voted 8-2 in favour of keeping existing rules, which state dogs are allowed but must be kept on leads, after officials said there was "insufficient evidence" to change them.

Tabling a motion in support of a ban, culture and communities convener Val Walker said she felt strongly cemeteries were "places of quiet and reflection" and not "spaces to walk dogs".

However the Labour administration failed to win over any other committee members, who backed a Conservative amendment to keep the status quo.

Conservative councillor Phil Doggart said only a "small number" of the city's 43 graveyards experienced issues with irresponsible owners letting dogs off leads to run around.

He added the council couldn't afford to have officers "paroling cemeteries 24/7 to ensure the rules are enforced".

Morningside resident Paul Irvine has led a campaign in support of reinstating a 'no dogs in cemeteries' rule previously in place, with exceptions for assistance dogs and those assisting

mourners.

His family were left distressed after people repeatedly allowed their dogs to disturb the grave of his son Xander, who tragically died after being struck by a car in 2020 aged three, in Morninside Cemetery. He said this included graves being urinated on and soft toys left for his son being destroyed.

Addressing councillors at the meeting on Thursday, he said: "Cemeteries are sacred ground. They have a core purpose must be respected above all else.

"We believe the public opinion view is the unnecessary presence of dogs being blatantly exercised in cemeteries is disrespectful to the bereaved and to a cemetery's core purpose.

"Almost everyone in the city lives no more than a 10 minute walk from a park or greenspace where it is protected for good."

Mr Irvine, whose petition gathered 2,110 signatures, added: "Just as it is socially unacceptable in modern times to litter the street, let your dog foul on the street and not clean up, to smoke indoors and to drink drive, we feel it is also socially unacceptable and arguably morally wrong to use cemeteries as a convenient walled dog exercise yard."

Monti Stramka – not her real name – started a petition against the proposed ban and collected 1,287 signatures.

She told councillors she was using a pseudonym to "protect my safety and identity from people who target dog walkers in cemeteries with hostile behaviours".

She said: "I'm a mourner and I visit my granddad with my dog because I believe my granddad would like this.

"I also visit with my dog as I have PTSD and severe anxiety

which my dog helps me with. If you ban dogs in cemeteries with or without exemptions I will effectively not be able to visit my loved ones. There are many other people like me who are mourners and want or need their dogs with them in a cemetery.

"There are many reasons people visit cemeteries and we see no reason why they shouldn't take a well behaved dog on a lead who causes no issues.

"Further, people with dogs may help deter unwanted behaviours in cemeteries."

Officials investigating compliance with the existing rules found that where dog owners are observed with their dog off-lead, "they are asked to adhere to the Cemetery Management Rules' and they generally comply with this request".

A report said: "Officers have identified that at Warriston and East Preston Street Cemeteries there appears to be less adherence to this rule, with certain individuals repeatedly letting their dogs off lead and becoming challenging when spoken to by officers. These individuals will be asked in the coming weeks not to return.

"Committee requested consideration of enforcing a 'no dogs' requirement in cemeteries. Whilst there are some issues, there is an insufficient evidence base to conclude that it would be proportionate to further tighten the rules."

Rory Scothorne from Edinburgh Tour Guides Association said some guides and visitors bring their dogs into the capital's historic city centre cemeteries.

"We have no real position on what role dogs or dog walkers play in the active cemeteries of the city," he said, "we just want to make sure our position on the historic cemeteries is recognised."

Friends of Dalry Cemetery founder Jakob Assarsson added: "Most

dog walkers adhere to the rules, as for those who don't our experience at Dalry has shown discarded needles, crime and vandalism, anti-social behaviour, human excrement and littering such as broken glass have all proved to be more serious issues than those caused by dogs."

Cllr Walker said: "The more I've listened to what was said here plus to people who have contacted me, the more strongly I feel tat cemeteries are places to remember those we have lost – they should be places of quiet and reflection.

"They were not created as spaces to walk dogs.

"I hoped the last time discussed this I really hoped we could find a middle way by asking people to keep their dogs on their leads, but the reality is this hasn't worked.

"I'm still hearing of instances when dogs have been allowed off the lead and times when people visiting graves have found dog faeces and urine. And if that is only a few times it is still too often."

Cllr Doggart said the challenge was "one group of mourners challenging another group of mourners".

He added: "This is an emotive issue.

"We have to separate ourselves from that emotion.

"What we're looking at is a small number of cemeteries in the city where there is a significant problem. A lot of the cemeteries we're talking about single figure instances. In a lot of those cases those people observing the cemeteries are observing the rules.

"Unfortunately we'll have a small number of people unable who if they are unable to control their dog, to clean up after any residual evidence of a dogs visit to an area that will happen inside and outside of cemeteries."

His motion which was passed by councillors proposed a “further period of monitoring” in the five cemeteries with the highest number of dogs observed – Grange, Warriston, Newington, Saughton, and Morningside.

It also requested that officers “increase promotional and educational activities in order to continue raising awareness of the recent rule changes in addition to working with cemetery-users”.

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter