

Fairmile Cemetery Benches Statement

4th SEPTEMBER 2020

Summary

Benches are not, and will not be, banned from the cemetery. Where a bench is in good condition, and a suitable place can be found, we will work with the family to keep it. A bench will not be removed until we have tried to contact the family, and the decision has been approved by the Council's Recreation & Amenities Committee. We did not communicate the process as clearly as we should have, and we are sorry for the upset it has caused.

Full Statement

The Town Council is responsible for the Fairmile cemetery. This includes selling burial plots; arranging burials; approving memorials; and maintaining the grounds and chapels. We have a duty to make sure it is well looked after, and a pleasant and peaceful place for friends and families to remember those who've passed.

We've been aware that over the years commemorative benches have appeared in the cemetery. Whilst they were no doubt put in with the best intentions, many of them have been placed without consulting with the Town Council. This is important, so we can ensure the benches are of a good quality; well-maintained; insured against theft, damage, and injury; and are securely installed in a suitable location.

Over the past twenty years, almost thirty benches have appeared in the Fairmile cemetery. Of those, six have been put on plots owned by other families; three are sadly broken; and seven will likely need repairing in the near future. Of the remainder, many have not been maintained since they were put in. Most of the benches have also not been fixed to the ground, and earlier this year a bench was stolen.

Memorial benches should be an enduring, fitting tribute to the person's memory, and it is saddening to see benches fall into disrepair, become unsafe, or stolen, and it can also be distressing for both families when a bench needs to be moved, because it had been put on someone else's grave plot.

It is clear that something needs to be done to ensure the benches that are there are safe to use, in a suitable place, and that, in the future, families work with the Town Council to make sure any benches put in will be a lasting memorial that can be safely enjoyed by all visitors to the cemetery.

A new memorial bench and tree policy was adopted by the Council earlier this year, ensuring we don't have these issues arise in future. However, the issue of the current benches remained.

Given the varying conditions of the benches, we felt it fairest that all families be treated equally. As the majority of benches had been put in place without the Council consent, we did not have contact details for the owners, and so a notice was placed on each bench, giving three months' notice to owners to remove the bench, or to contact the Council if they wished to discuss it. Whilst our intention was to keep the message clear and simple, in hindsight, the wording of the notice should have been better. We realise that it has caused distress to families, for which I am sorry.

Where families have called the Town Council, I'm pleased to say that our Cemetery Manager has dealt with each issue sensitively and sympathetically. She has made it clear that we will review each bench on a case-by-case basis, and where the bench is in a good condition we will work with them to try and keep it in the cemetery in an appropriate place.

Where the Cemetery Manager, Parks Manager, and Town Clerk believe that a bench needs to be moved or removed, we will bring these recommendations to the Recreation & Amenities Committee for the oversight and approval of councillors.

Where a bench is in a poor condition, families will be offered the opportunity to buy a replacement bench, and the details of this are set out in our new memorial bench and tree policy. Families may have a variety of options depending on their budget and what would be in keeping with the area, and they only pay for the cost and installation of the bench plus a small amount for to cover the Council's costs for maintaining and insuring the bench.

Memorial benches and trees are provided at cost, and the Council do not make any profit. The Council also does not make any profit from the Fairmile cemetery, but rather is currently investing a large amount to improve it, with a project to renovate the two chapels and create a new columbarium for the benefit of the local community.

Throughout the project, our intentions have been to try to prevent sensitive and distressing issues from arising in the future. However, we realise that in the process, it has caused worry and upset to the families. I am very sorry for this, and hope that the families now have peace of mind, knowing that we will work with them to protect and respect the memories of their loved ones with lasting and fitting memorials.



Sheridan Jacklin-Edward
Town Clerk