

# **Sandy Town Council**



## **Summary of notes taken at a public meeting about Sandy Cemetery Burial Regulations held on 11 September 2014 commencing at 7.30 pm in the Jenkins Pavilion**

**Chairman of meeting was Cllr Julia Holmes, Deputy Mayor of Shefford Town Council**

**Present – Cllr Will Jackson, Mayor of Sandy and Mrs V McFarlane (note-taker) and 36 others who signed the attendance register.**

The Chairman (JH) welcomed everyone and asked people to sign the signing-in sheet. She explained that she has come from Shefford in order to act impartially as an 'outsider' to the situation, but also with some understanding of the issues of concern. Shefford TC had a cemetery with similar concerns.

JH then went on to appeal to the public to try to leave their emotions outside in order that we can move forward with these issues. She understood that this may be difficult and she was not being insensitive but hoped that people agreed and understood that this would be the best way to move things on. It would also mean that everyone who wanted to speak would hopefully get a chance to do so. JH asked if that sounded reasonable.

JH explained that the printed notes included the agenda for the evening. At the end of the evening, JH would attempt to summarise what had been discussed and outline the next steps.

Asked, by show of hands, how many people were hoping to speak during the meeting, 11 or 12 people put their hands up. JH noted two hours available and asked speakers to be concise. If a point had already been made, then please start by saying something along the lines of "as has already been mentioned" so that same point was not repeated.

JH asked if that was OK. One member of public (MoP) objected saying Chairman was trying to stifle debate. JH confirmed there was no intention to stifle the meeting but she had said this so that everyone had the chance to speak to make it as fair as possible. If you have something new to say, then please say it. I will give you every opportunity I can to make a positive contribution to the meeting.

MoP: People should be able to raise complaints in the way they wish. How is that unreasonable?

JH: We only have two hours. That may not be long enough. If there are matters that haven't been dealt with, a second meeting could potentially be called.

MoP, Willington:

Following on from the last meeting, firstly, what happens if someone hasn't got a headstone? Can they still put flowers there? Also, my headstone has been damaged. I was told I would be contacted within 14 days. The headstone has been chipped – I imagine by the strimmer. It will only get worse.

Mayor (WJ): One flower container is allowed by the headstone.

MoP: Why are the flower pots being moved away from the headstones? If ok to put flowers by a cross, then why not by a headstone?

WJ: There is no problem with flowers in the cemetery. If the vase is solid or concrete, it is not a problem – on the plinth of the headstone or at the head of the cross.

MoP: It was the way it was done. If on the plinth, it shouldn't make a difference. Everyone should have got one (a laminated notice)

JH: Wherever it was placed, there was a misunderstanding

MoP: We have received no apology

JH: (reading from printed notes, under 'Enforcement Activity') "All members of the staff team involved are sorry to have caused distress etc..." So, there has been a public apology

MoP: The staff apologising is not the issue. They were only doing what they were instructed to do by Sandy Town Council. The councillors should apologise, not the staff

JH: It has been recorded that you would like a public apology

MoP: I served for 27 years as a councillor. I agree with what has just been said. The councillors have not been mentioned. When I served as a councillor, the councillors were also accountable. After a reasonable period of time, mourners were written to and a compromise agreement reached. If the issue had been dealt with in that way, we wouldn't be here. Sandy Town councillors have abdicated responsibility. Here, regulation 32 makes Sandy Town Council responsible for rectifying damage.

My parents' gravestone had marks on it. I was told to rub dirt into the gravestone. I find this disgusting and disgraceful. I have made a complaint about the Clerk. I have received no apology. I am now being victimised by Sandy Town Council. It's a disgrace.

JH: The complaint is being dealt with by the Complaints Committee

JG: I did not make a complaint. I asked them to properly clean the gravestone. It still hasn't been done. It is part of an on-going campaign against me personally. It has three distinct marks on it. No other gravestones are marked like this. Why hasn't it been rectified by their staff?

MoP: My gravestone is also chipped and I have had the same response – to cover it up by using dirt.

MoP: The staff use tractors at the cemetery and clip the gravestones. We have seen them do it. They want to get the job done as quickly as possible. They should be sacked.

MoP: Sandy Town Council has got a history of causing misery to mourners.

MoP: I had a candle on my plot and the Council threw it in the bin.

MoP: If you've got no money a wooden cross goes on an unmarked grave.

MoP: The Town Councillors are miserable specimens of humanity.

JH: – issued a reminder to leave emotions at the door. We gain nothing if we start mud-slinging. We are in danger of losing sight of the purpose of the meeting.

MoP: Item number 7 says the Council carry out regular checks of monuments and other structures. What does it mean by “the Council?”

WJ: Checks are carried out by the groundstaff to see that everything is secure

MoP: Suggest that the council looks at more than just the gravestones. The tap at the entrance to the cemetery is a mess. It is at a very low level. It is short sighted to come up with things like trinkets etc.

There is a mush of soil at the entrance. There are also beer cans and cigarette ends. I understand that staff can't do anything about that. But the staff are not coming back and saying anything.

MoP: My dad is buried in Sandy. He lived in Bedford. We picked the cemetery in Sandy because it is beautiful and peaceful. I can't afford a headstone. I have a wooden cross. I had plants either side that were ripped out. This is no different to having a vase of flowers. I am now too scared to put anything there. It is too upsetting.

JH: Make a note to check. Can people put plants in the ground?

MoP: We are getting mixed messages. For one person, it's not a problem. For another, it is. We are not being allowed to mourn.

MoP: Why, if ornaments and trinkets are actually on the headstone, have they got to be removed? In the Chronicle, her father's grave was pictured with an angel on it. It is doing no harm and is fixed down properly. I have paid for that plot. Can we get an edging to put around the plot and then put what we want there?

MoP: It is the Clerk's duty to make an appointment to see people and point out the regulations. When I went to get my plot, was dismissed with “pick a number. Here's your plot. Goodbye” You got a piece of paper – like doing the lottery.

WJ: There is a lack of space. We use follow-on procedures. You now can't purchase a plot. Once a new cemetery is open, it may be different. The cemetery is in the planning stage at the moment – soil testing etc.

MoP: Once the cemetery is full, where is it going to be? Surely it is common sense to prepare, people have been kicked off allotment?

WJ: There are enough spaces at the moment

JH: The process that any town council has to go through is very long-winded and tedious. It is a planning matter. In Shefford we often feel powerless because it seems like nothing is happening. Suggest that the Town Council could publicise in some way as the steps it is taking and maybe get CBC to comment.

MoP: What will Council do if ground is no good for burials?

WJ: The ground is ok

MoP: You could keep the public informed through the Chronicle. Could be done in a general manner

MoP: In 2004 my mum was buried at the age of 48. This was two years before his first child was born. The cemetery plot is the only connection his kids have to 'Nanny Chris'. Shelf made by his dad for trinkets to put on plot. Can you please tell us what are we not actually allowed and why not? We have nothing around the headstone. Dad cuts grass around the stone and keeps it really neat. The next grave is in a very poor state and poorly maintained. There is no reason to leave a card if everything on it is fine. Will the stuff be removed from the headstone or are we allowed to maintain and then take away ornaments as we see fit? If they are not impeding the cutting of the grass, why can't we leave ornaments there? If things get broken, so be it. We have had stuff stolen. Some was removed and chucked in the shed. Will this all happen again? Want to know if it safe to leave on headstone.

MoP: I have got a birdhouse and other things on gravestone. Everything is secured in concrete. The only of danger is the strimmer. Will it be replaced?

JH: The findings will be published.

MoP: What difference is a pot or an ornament?

WJ: At the moment the regulations do say that trinkets etc are not allowed. This has been in place for many years. That's why we're listening to what you want

MoP: The ornaments mean a lot to us but not to you. You make rules and then changes.

WJ: You won't get an answer tonight

JH: The Council has to give consideration to your questions. You will get answers, even though you may not like the answers, but not tonight.

MoP: Can you give us a reason why we can't have trinkets on gravestones. I have them on Nan and granddad's grave and they look beautiful. Please tell us why.

MoP: Why are you doing this now – why all of a sudden? My daughter died 16 years ago. This hasn't happened before. Why are you suddenly asking to take them all off?

MoP: I am recent to Sandy cemetery. My son died aged 19 – four years ago. I paid £3000 for the headstone. It is now covered in pit holes due to the strimmer. It is getting worse. I have a four year old granddaughter who wants to put teddies/trinkets on her dad's grave. This means something to her – not flowers. You have no respect. The headstone is ruined. The trinkets are out of the way and not doing any harm. When my son died, I was so distressed I didn't know or take in what the rules and regulations were

JH: We do need more clarification about what's acceptable

MoP: Why were cards only placed in certain sections? Some plots had ornaments but there were no cards placed there.

Some have had four or five cards and some have had none.

JH: It is never the intention of a town council to get at its residents.

MoP: My 13 year old son has ADHD and Asperger's. He doesn't understand why he can't put something down. I need to tell him why and I don't know what to say

JH: Would it be easier if there was nothing there at all?

MoP: No. He puts trinkets on Billy Carter's grave. He has got worse and gone backwards since this all happened. Please give us an answer

JH: There will be answers

MoP: He has been buried for less than 12 months. He was at a special needs school. The kids don't understand why they can't put anything on headstone.

JH: Could there be a liaison between the school, STC and others to help them cope with bereavement?

MoP: stated that JH should have attended the cemetery before she came here tonight. Some gravestones are awful and some are kept beautifully by loved ones

JH: Didn't go deliberately as she didn't want to be swayed by her own perception of what she saw. Repeated that she is here as an individual to impartially run the meeting

MoP: You haven't got our knowledge or perception of what's happening, you should have gone.

JH: You are entitled to your view. My decision was not to go there and that made it easier to be impartial

MoP: The Guide for Burial ground is 13 pages long. People responsible should know exactly what the rules should be. He has got legal advisors looking at it – anything not being done, will bring it up and it should not be swept under the carpet. Have already found things wrong. Once it is all looked at, I will expect action. Better for experts to see it. Will be given to the Clerk, the Mayor etc. STC not known to be exact on things

MoP: On front of the regulations is a picture of cemetery chapel. A few years ago there was a meeting where STC wanted to demolish the chapel. It is still there because of opposition. The Council are complimented on the condition of the chapel. As we walked to the graveside, there were distinct trip hazards. There is an oversight of the condition of the cemetery area. When I was a councillor there was an Open Spaces sub-committee to look at these spaces. It appears that the Policy Finance & Resource committee has little time to deal with open spaces. The committee for Open Spaces needs to be re-established.

WJ: We are hoping to do all the paths at some point

JG: You have accepted responsibility if someone has an accident

The path from the gateway is very difficult for wheelchairs users etc to us. It needs repairing now.

MoP: How long ago is it since the path was repaired? Why weren't any cards put on any of the Mayor's relatives' graves? For the people who have moved away from the area, how do they know what's going on, when they turn up for anniversaries etc?

Do you not think it would have been better to have called a meeting once you knew all the answers to these questions? You are wasting our time. It has taken two months to get this far.

JH: Getting a meeting takes time. The Council needs to be sure it has covered as much as possible before it can give answers

MoP: This has been going on for three years. That's enough time to get answers

MoP: We have had stuff taken – that is stealing. Only started happening when all this kicked off

MoP: My grandson loves putting things on graves. Can you tell us when we'll find out the answers?

JH: Asked for a date. The Town Clerk responded that the notes from this meeting would be presented to Council on 22 September. The council might refer the matter to a committee or a sub-committee and that decision would be considered on 22 September. May be referred to sub committee

MoP: Will we get another card put on the gravestone?

Town Clerk: No enforcement activity will be pursued until the Council has decided on what to do about the regulations

MoP: Why are we not allowed to put kerbing around the plot? If everyone had a kerb, you would just need to strim – with a guard, and everyone would care for their own graves. We paid for the ground but we are not allowed to do what we want. In Biggleswade they are allowed put kerbing around the plot. Things less likely to get broken or damaged.

JH: Would be helpful to see how it is applied

MoP: Different cemeteries have different regulations. They don't all operate in the same way.

MoP: In Willington, only allowed one flower pot and in Hitchin, can have anything at all.

A resident stated: Chris Butterfield said "I am all for sensible decorations of the graves", which goes against what cards said

JH: It seems there are mixed messages. It would help to know where you stand. It needs to be clear

MoP: I spoke to Mayor – he said it was all OK to put things on the plinth

MoP: So why remove the windmills? They help keep the moles away which is a good thing. Then with strimming with a guard, there shouldn't be a problem. You need proper equipment.

The headstone is damaged again – will take legal proceedings.

JH: Any new concerns?

MoP: someone asked me to ask you – Will there be a special section where people can have trinkets etc?

MoP: I used to work at the cemetery. It is suggested that it is going to be a lawn cemetery. Why change regulations behind people's backs

JH: Solar lights haven't been around that long. Things do change

MoP: Hope the Council takes on board people's views and has complete agreement. I had to pay more as not a Sandy resident. Need fair treatment. If we don't have a headstone and so no plinth how can we put items on graves?

MoP: If crosses were removed and taken away. Difficult then to find graves. It needs something to identify where plots are.

MoP: Nan's grave had concrete around it, but it disappeared. How can Council be allowed to do this?

MoP: Councillors forget what their job is. They are there to serve the community not cause distress. They should be up there answering questions.

### **JH: Summary of meeting:**

Thanked everyone for coming. There have been lots of different viewpoints. They have all been recorded. All the comments will be considered carefully. There are lots of on-going issues about equipment etc. These sorts of issues may be a little easier to answer.

Hope you get the chance to look at the comments. You can also go to Council meetings, or send correspondence in to the Council office. I hope that is going in the right direction.