

National Cremation Investigation Chief Executive's Statement

It cannot be overestimated how much anguish and hurt parents have experienced due to past practices at Aberdeen Crematorium and on behalf of Aberdeen City Council, I apologise unreservedly to those parents who did not receive their baby's ashes, and to the relatives affected by the practice ended in 2012 of placing baby coffins in the cremator alongside adult coffins.

The loss of a baby is devastating for parents and their families and we are deeply sorry for the extra distress our past actions have caused.

On the 9th of June 2014, as Lord Bonomy's Infant Cremation Commission was almost at the end of its investigation, I received a serious anonymous allegation regarding practices at Aberdeen Crematorium relating to the joint cremation of babies and adults. Within 24 hours, the Council advised the Commission about the allegation and the fact that I therefore had to reconsider the findings of the Council's independent audit of the Crematorium which had been published in 2013.

In light of the allegation, I asked the public, media and elected members to allow me the time required to undertake a thorough investigation.

Eight days later on the 17th of June, Lord Bonomy's Infant Cremation Commission report was published and the Scottish Government announced the establishment of national investigation team, led by Dame Elish Angiolini. I as Chief Executive (Designate) confirmed that the Council would cooperate fully with Dame Elish and her investigation team.

On the 29th July 2014, in response to questioning on whether Aberdeen City Council's own investigation was ongoing or whether it was on hold pending the outcome of the Scottish Government investigation, I clarified it would be part of the national investigation to reduce unnecessary anxiety to parents and to avoid duplication of the national investigation. I asked Dame Elish to consider the anonymous allegation I had received as part of her investigation.

Dame Elish's report has been published today and I will be taking a fully considered response to the reports' findings to the City Council after the recess, but I can state now that I fully concur with Dame Elish's view that some of past practices at Aberdeen Crematorium were abhorrent and unethical. Many of the report's recommendations are directed specifically at Chief Executives and I also state now that I will personally ensure that I and my senior management team address each recommendation and ensure that all necessary actions are taken in Aberdeen.

Since the anonymous allegation was received in 2014, Aberdeen City Council has put in place several actions to help ensure better practices and culture at the city's Crematorium.

I can also confirm that my management team has been addressing a number of these matters since Lord Bonomy's report was published, and we are taking full responsibility for the effective management of the Crematorium.

Management arrangements have been reviewed and oversight of Crematorium practices has been improved with a new manager taking responsibility for all Crematorium and Bereavement Services, giving a much more joined-up approach.

We have new practices and procedures in place including how we train staff and will look further at the Investigation's recommendations to see what else can be done.

I confirm that I and my team fully accept Dame Elish's recommendation that:

"The most senior level of management at Aberdeen must provide strong leadership and now take full responsibility for the effective management of the crematorium.

It must also ensure that immediate and appropriate training takes place and that effective and ethical practices are maintained. This relates not only to a change of working practices but to an assurance that the culture of the organisation and the knowledge and understanding is such as to prevent any future abuse of the trust of those families who have placed the remains of their loved ones in their care."

We will work hard to ensure that this trust can be regained.

As the report states, the person in the Crematorium Manager role during the period of historic practice, was dismissed by Aberdeen City Council. Two other members of staff, who liaised with Lord Bonomy's inquiry were subject to an internal investigation. They co-operated fully with the internal investigation and subsequently no action was taken.

Whilst Aberdeen City Council accepts full responsibility, senior management placed reliance on an individual who had an established reputation and all appropriate qualifications. The decision by senior management of the time to place reliance on the audit undertaken by the Council's External Auditor

sought to provide some independent re-assurance. However, whilst the scope of the audit matched that of the equivalent audit undertaken at Mortonhall, it is clear that neither the scope of the audit, nor the type of the auditor used, was appropriate to the particular circumstances.

It is clear from the national investigation report that the culture within the team was one where historic working practices were not challenged. I am grateful to staff, trade union colleagues and the new management, who have worked together to change both the working practices and the culture in Aberdeen Crematorium.

As Chief Executive of Aberdeen City Council, I view it as my personal responsibility to create the right atmosphere of trust, openness and transparency across the organisation and have been focused on doing that since taking up my post in July 2014. It is incumbent upon me to reflect on the findings of the national investigation and consider whether there is any further action I need to take.

It is important that I restore the public's confidence and trust in the Crematorium. Families and friends have the right to expect the highest standards from Aberdeen City Council when dealing with their loved ones and I fully appreciate that many people will feel hurt and aggrieved by our past actions.

In August 2015, the Federation of Burial and Cremation Authorities (an independent industry organisation of which ACC is a member) carried out an audit of procedures with particular attention to be paid to the cremation of infants and foetal remains to ensure these met all best practice guidelines and codes of practice.

The audit report states that "The FBCA is satisfied that Aberdeen City Council is making every effort to present an excellent service to the bereaved."

An Internal Audit of Aberdeen Crematorium was carried out in December 2015 to ensure that the new practices implemented as a result of Lord Bonomy's recommendations were working as intended. The report states that "the Service has taken relevant and timely actions to address the concerns raised by Lord Bonomy's report".

The Scottish Government has this morning confirmed its acceptance in full of all the recommendations contained in the Investigation's report. I and my senior management team will work closely and openly with the Inspector of Crematoria and the Infant Cremation Committee as the recommendations are implemented.

The people who are foremost in our minds are of course the parents and families who have been affected by what happened in the past. Following the anonymous allegation, I created a dedicated helpline for any families affected and I have opened a helpline again today to support such families – the telephone number is 01224 522255.

It is of course right that a memorial for the families affected by the issues covered in this national investigation should be erected. We have been in contact with Sands, the national stillbirth and neonatal charity, and there will be a full consultation with families to agree on a fitting memorial.

27/6/16