

**Edinburgh Tour Guides Association**  
**Deputation to CEC Culture and Communities Committee 29.2.24**

We, the Edinburgh Tour Guides Association, are very grateful for the opportunity to introduce ourselves to councillors and give our views on the Cemetery Tour Licensing Scheme.

We are a new organisation formed by the self-employed guides who make up the majority of regular guides in the old town of Edinburgh, including the Kirkyard, most of whom - in the absence of co-ordination from employers or (until this year) an umbrella association - have not been properly represented in the consultation on the Licensing Scheme.

We currently have a membership of 50, and we are growing fast, already covering approximately a quarter of the self-employed guides covered by the scheme. We have a ratified, democratic constitution and an elected executive committee, and our regular general meetings offer a forum for guides to raise concerns and co-ordinate our activities. We believe that our association offers an invaluable means of co-operation between guides and Councillors and Council Officials.

We would like to indicate our support for 'Option 1', as recommended by Regulatory Services report: the continuation of this year's permit scheme with an inflationary uplift in fees. We would also like to express our desire to work closely and continuously with the Council in ensuring that this scheme works as effectively as possible to protect the historic spaces that we love.

**Who we are**

The Edinburgh Tour Guides Association is a new association for a very old tradition here in Edinburgh. For centuries, people have been showing visitors around, telling them about the history, folklore and culture of the city, giving them tips on where to go and what to do.

The old name for us was "cadies". These were guides, street-messengers and errand-boys who knew the town back-to-front and were first in line to assist visitors with whatever they needed. They were an invaluable part of Edinburgh's culture and renown, and even its governance and safety - "the tutelary guardians of the city," as one visitor put it in the 1770s.

Today, we're called Tour Guides, but we still understand our role as one of stewardship and assistance. And we are mostly, like the cadies of old, both precarious and independent, trying to promote and support our home.

Most of the tour guides you see around town are not employed by big companies - we are usually self-employed, often working six or even seven days a week, and often struggling through the seasonal ebbs and flows of the tourist industry.

That precarity and independence causes problems for us - it makes it harder for us to work together, to co-ordinate, and to be represented in the policy process. So we formed this association, not only to ensure that independent guides in Edinburgh have a voice in meetings like this; but also, crucially, to ensure that we can co-ordinate our activities, share information, and find ways of collectively contributing to the city we love.

We are aware that there is a body called the Scottish Tourist Guides Association, but to get yourself represented by them you need around £8000 and a spare two years to get your blue badge, which makes it very difficult for freelance guides limited by finance or time to find representation and support. So we needed something genuinely accessible.

We want to be clear that the Edinburgh Tour Guides Association is not just a resource for freelance guides; one of our fundamental objectives is to be a resource for the Council, conservation bodies and anybody else with an interest in the city's past, present and future.

We know this city incredibly well because we guide people around it full-time, day and night. We can connect you to what is happening across Edinburgh's most historic sites, we understand the flow of tourists through those spaces, and we are best placed to ensure that freelance guides, who can be hard to reach and co-ordinate, are co-operating amongst ourselves and with others to make tourism in this city sustainable, informed and respectful.

### **Cemetery Licensing Scheme**

That goes for the cemeteries as well. The council's consultation process over the permit scheme was very welcome, and some of us managed to attend every meeting. But we were concerned throughout that most freelance guides were not in attendance, and had no employer or association to ensure that they were heard from.

We want to be clear that we support Regulatory Services' recommendation to continue with the present permit scheme - Option 1 in the report - which has worked well so far and deserves the chance to find its feet. Many of our members had a good relationship with Charlotte, until recently the enforcement officer, who we would regularly consult for advice, and we appreciated her efforts in dealing with unlicensed guides when they did appear.

But we also want to emphasise that the views of most guides who use the Kirkyard have not been heard thus far, and the criticisms of the scheme found in this report largely reflect the views of far less regular users of the Kirkyard.

The big thing that we sought to address in those meetings is a representation of guides - especially guides who regularly take tours into the Kirkyard - as the problem.

To be clear, we are happy to pay the fee and wear our permit, we love the kirkyard and we want to see it protected. We are as keen as anyone to see the regulation of commercial activity in there, and we know that costs money.

While we all pay council tax, we're also happy to contribute a bit extra through the permit fees for the maintenance of certain parts of the Kirkyard that help us to do our jobs; the protective surfacing on Tom Riddle's grave, for example, is clearly necessary for guides taking Harry Potter tours around, where it is challenging to keep a whole group on the narrow path next to a prime photo spot. We're glad that our permit fees are contributing to that, and we see from the report that they raised around £50,000 this year.

Yet we also see ourselves as stewards of the Kirkyard and its history, not just commercial operators. Part of our job is keeping groups on the path, off the gravestones and out of others' way.

And we see what happens when tourists don't have guides. Look at the grave of Ann Potter, for example. She has nothing to do with Harry Potter, but there's a trail of erosion across the grass towards her grave. It's not tour guides taking them there, it's free-roaming tourists who have seen it online.

The same goes for the considerable erosion along the desire line that leads from Tom Riddle's grave up the hill towards the path. Since the permit scheme was introduced, a new path has been put in there, and we're delighted to see our fees going towards protecting that ground. But until then, we saw, every day, unaccompanied tourists wandering over that ground despite clear signs of erosion while we led our groups back round on the hard path.

We're yet to be presented with clear evidence that tour guides actually create an increase in footfall to the kirkyard that outweighs the stewardship we provide once we're in there.

We take groups in because we love the history and the folklore in there, but also because that is where tourists want to go. If you Google 'things to do in Edinburgh', whether it's for history, Harry Potter, ghost stories or a very loyal dog, you'll see Greyfriars coming up on those websites.

What we are doing in practice is providing vital supervision for that flood of visitors, doing our best to keep their impact to a minimum and giving them genuinely local, informed perspectives on those stories, which we would all prefer to travel bloggers or TikTokers who visited for a weekend.

There is one particularly important aspect of the report in front of you that we want to address. There is a distinction throughout between "individual guides" and "operators" or "companies". This binary thinking has been amplified in the press recently, with references to "big commercial operators" in Greyfriars.

If you look at page 2 of the report, point 3.4, it says that tours are "often organised by companies employing individual tour guides, although some guides used by the companies are self-employed". On page 3, however, point 4.1, the breakdown of Tour Guide Registrations shows that 104 come from Employees, and 239 come from Operators. That suggests that the majority of "operators" are in fact individual self-employed guides, who must pay £150 for our permits rather than the £120 for employees.

### **Future co-operation with Edinburgh Council**

Our association reflects the fact that most self-employed guides are not just random free agents working for themselves. In forming this association we have been able to draw on the close, networked nature of the guiding community, centred on the royal mile, in which we chat to each other, give each other advice, and try to make sure everyone knows what the rules are and how to follow them.

That includes both formal and informal rules, inside and outside the Kirkyard, including best practice for using space on public thoroughfares, keeping out of people's way, sticking to the rules in the Kirkyard and so on.

This kind of induction work is especially important when it comes to new freelance guides, who sometimes begin work through one of the big guiding platforms like Airbnb without anyone on the ground to show them the ropes. Our members are usually the first to notice an unfamiliar face on the high street, and through our association we want to ensure that they're brought up to speed as quickly as possible.

Our association's goal is to develop those networks, but also to connect them to the council, conservation bodies and so on, so that we can co-operate on making sure that, on the one hand, tourism here is sustainable, informed and accessible; and on the other, that all freelance guides have respect, security and independence in our work.

In conclusion, we are here primarily to comment on the Greyfriars licensing scheme, for which we support Option 1 as suggested in this report: a continuation of the current permit system plus the inflationary uplift in fees. But we are also here to introduce ourselves, and to make that first connection in what can hopefully be a close, co-operative relationship between freelance guides and the Council. Thank you for your time.

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