1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The proposed Glasgow Airport Rail Link (GARL) by the Scottish Passenger Transport Executive (SPTE) is planned to cut across the existing St James playing fields in Paisley, Renfrewshire. The north east corner of this playing field is adjacent to an 1832 burial pit for cholera victims. Concerns were raised that the proposed GARL works would interfere with this burial site, and the following briefing note provides clarification of the situation.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 In 1832 a burial site was located at the north east corner of what was later to become St James Park, for the burial of victims of a cholera pandemic which arrived in Paisley in that year. 446 people were recorded as having died in that outbreak, and the majority were buried within this site at St James facing numbers 172 to 176 Greenock Road.

2.2 The site lay undisturbed until the construction of the St James Interchange for the M8 motorway in the 1990's, and was probably partially built over by the new road leading from Glasgow Airport to the St James roundabout. A memorial plaque was erected at the vehicle entrance to St James Park to commemorate the victims.

2.3 The remainder of St James Park consists of 22 grass league sized football pitches, with a changing pavilion. The actual burial site remained unmarked.

2.4 On the 24th January 2005, David Leask of the Evening Times contacted Renfrewshire Council with a question related to the proposed airport rail link. He understood that hundreds of bodies from an 1830's cholera outbreak, were buried under the St James playing fields and would be disturbed by the proposed airport rail link being promoted by SPT. The issue seemed to revolve around a pylon upright for a section of a proposed rail bridge where the rail link would cross the M8. We were asked our views on this, and in particular the implication in terms of what effect that might have in ultimately granting planning permission for such a route which would involve disruption to those remains.

2.5 The initial view from Planning and Transport was that this matter wouldn't impact on planning considerations and indeed given that GARL was subject of a Private Bill, formal planning permission was not required.

2.6 The press release issued to the Evening Times on the 25th January 2005 was as follows: A Renfrewshire Council spokesperson said: "We are aware of the possibility that there were mass burials of cholera victims under or near the playing fields at St James in the last century although we aren't certain of their exact location. Also, the figure may not have been as high as 800. It's
still early days in terms of considering proposals for an airport rail link and we cannot really comment further until a route is finalised.”

3. CURRENT SITUATION

3.1 As part of the ground investigation works required for the potential rail link, Faber Maunsell (FM), were appointed by SPTE to carry site survey works. Initially these works were agreed in principle to include suitable locations for two borehole survey sites, and three cone pressure test sites. There were no trial pits required. One of the proposed borehole surveys was to be located at the north east corner of the site, close to where the cholera victims were likely to be buried.

3.2 In order to clarify the situation prior to any works commencing, advice was given by the Environmental Services Department (ES) to the effect that RC would expect any contractor working on this site to carry out a risk assessment and to take appropriate health and safety precautions. In addition they should also advise RC should any human remains be uncovered during the excavations.

3.3 On 3rd February 2005 Roderick D. House, a Consultant in Environmental Health from Health Protection Scotland, was contacted by ES seeking clarification regarding potential cholera contamination at this site. He responded as follows:

“Have looked into your problem and can find no link to suggest there would be a risk to the contractors if a body was exposed

As you are aware Transmission is through contaminated food and or water and person to person spread is highly unlikely even within current cases therefore the likelihood of such an occurrence from bodies interred 170 years ago is non existent.

Secondly all the literature refers to the bacteria surviving outside humans in an aquatic setting with opinion that it could survive in some type of aquatic life but I found no reference to it surviving in the environment in general.

As with any exhumation accidental or otherwise individuals should be properly protected with overalls gloves etc and the excavation disinfected before infilling as a matter of course.

I trust the above satisfies your enquiry and will assist in your future deliberations”

When RC received similar enquiries in the past, they checked with SCIEH and the Health Board as to the potential risk of infection from the remains. RC officers were assured that there was virtually no risk of organisms such as cholera surviving this length of time in buried human remains.
3.4 Following a site visit on 4th February 2005, when officers from the ES and the Planning and Transport Department (P&T), met with Engineers from FM, information was passed to FM showing the 1830’s location map of the cholera pit. Although the map bore little resemblance to the mapping features of 2005, FM were of the view that they could superimpose the 1830’s map onto the 2005 layout. This would give as near an exact position of the cholera pit as could be obtained without excavation. In addition the specification to allow drilling rigs to cross the football fields was agreed, with a considerable level of protection being required for the playing surface. All copies of available documentation regarding the cholera pit were handed over to FM, including a code of practice used by ES in the cemeteries service for precautions required when handling human remains.

3.5 From the ES point of view we were in agreement for the site survey to go ahead as outlined above, and a letter was issued to the contractor allowing access following the 4 February 2005 site meeting.

3.6 The site investigation contractor entered the site on Monday 4 April 2005. At that time FM succeeded in superimposing the cholera pit map from the 1830’s onto a modern layout, and were able to confirm to ES that they would not require to build over the location of the burial ground. Therefore, the advice accepted by the Council is that on the basis of available mapped information the project will not disturb the cholera pit.

3.7 On 6th April 2005 background information to the memorial plaque for the plague victims at St James Park and the associated history was passed to SPTE by RC.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1 RC were aware prior to the SPTE GARL project coming on site at St James Park that a cholera burial pit from 1832 was located at the north east corner of the site. Following several meetings with both SPTE and their consultants FM, in early 2005, which included a full exchange of available information regarding the burial ground, it was determined by FM that the GARL works would not require construction works on the burial ground. Against this background it is understood that no detailed site survey work (ie test bores) were carried out in the immediate vicinity of the graves.

4.2 Several maps are attached as appendices, as follows;

A) From 1846 showing the area used for the pit, but with no specific burial ground markings.

B) From 1945 showing an aerial picture of the park and the pit, but again with no specific marking of the burial area.

C) From 1993 showing the location (shown as 3) indicating the location of the pit.

D) From 2006 GIS showing the present layout of St James Park
4.2 The situation will be kept under review as the project progresses. SPT and Faber Maunsell can provide details showing the mapped relationship between the proposed viaduct/bridge and the likely location of the cholera pit.