

Managing the safety of burial ground memorials

Information has been sent to us by the Ministry of Justice on managing the safety of burial ground memorials, which may be of interest to parishes.

Burial operators should use a sensible approach when assessing the safety of memorial stones and the risks they pose to the public. Toppling of stones should be used a last resort if serious injury is imminent.

Families must be contacted, and where that is not possible, a notice should be placed on a memorial stone that requires immediate repair.

Download document from the MoJ: [Managing the safety of burial ground memorials](#)

Memorial safety guidance: q&a

Q Why has this guidance been issued?

A A joint letter was sent to burial authorities in March 2007 to encourage them to take a proportionate and sensitive approach to managing the risks presented by their memorials. Burial professionals subsequently asked for more detailed, practical, guidance on the action that should be taken. The guidance has been compiled with the assistance of relevant representative bodies.

Q What difference will it make?

A The guidance makes clear that it is not necessary to use mechanical measuring instruments to assess memorial stability, that not every gravestone that appears to be unstable presents a danger, and that it should not normally be necessary to stake memorials or lay them down to avoid injury to visitors or those working in a cemetery. The guidance encourages priority to be given to memorials with evident signs of defects which are liable to cause an accident.

Q Will topple testing be banned?

A No. It is for each burial ground operator to decide how best to discharge their responsibilities, but the guidance makes clear that the use of such equipment is not necessary and unlikely to achieve any more than a visual inspection and, where appropriate, testing the memorial by hand.

Q Will cemetery staff be trained to assess their memorials?

A Experienced cemetery staff, familiar with working with memorials and other health and safety risks within their cemeteries, should be able to assess their memorials without additional training and, with care, undertake hand testing in most cases. Whether additional training may be required is a matter for the cemetery manager. Larger and more elaborate memorials are likely to be best left to memorial masons or other suitably qualified persons to assess.

Q Will the guidance put specialist assessment firms out of business?

A That is not the purpose of the guidance. It is entirely a matter for cemetery managers, and their councils, to decide how best to manage the risk of unstable memorials. The guidance does not exclude the use of contractors, but it does aim to dispel misunderstandings about what is likely to meet the requirements of health and safety legislation, having regard to the very low risk of injury.

Q Will compliance with the guidance satisfy the burial ground operators' insurers?

A Representatives from the insurance industry have been consulted in the preparation of the guidance and have indicated that they support the advice it contains.

Q When will memorials be reinstated? Who will be responsible?

A We would expect all memorials identified as a risk to be repaired and reinstated as soon as possible. Responsibility for this work will depend on the facts and circumstances of each case. Where the memorial has been badly installed, responsibility may lie with the memorial mason. Where a memorial has failed over the passage of time, the families who own the memorials, if they can be contacted, may agree to bear all or most of the cost of repair. In other cases, the burial ground operator is likely to meet the costs.

Q What should I do if I believe that the memorial on my family grave has been laid down or supported unnecessarily?

A Any queries should be addressed to the relevant cemetery authorities.

Q Does the Government intend to compensate families or burial ground operators?

A No. The Government has never recommended wholesale testing of memorials, nor staking them or laying them down as the normal way of making them safe.

Q Why have some burial ground operators been so insensitive?

A The risk of injury from an unstable memorial is very low, but there have been a small number of accidents, and a very small proportion of these have resulted in deaths. Burial ground operators need to manage this risk, but in some cases they have sought to eliminate all risk of an accident occurring. This is not what health and safety legislation requires.

Many operators have gone to great lengths to bring to the attention of the public the steps they were taking to assess their memorials and to deal with any found to be dangerous. In some cases, however, the publicity has not been effective with the result that families and others visiting the burial ground were not aware of the work that had been undertaken.