

Memorial Headstone Testing Procedure



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Purpose

- To inform people about our testing programme, why and how we carry out testing, and what happens if there is a problem with a headstone.

Background information

The council is responsible for 46 cemeteries and 98 closed churchyards, with over 79,276 headstones and memorials.

Some of these are in a poor condition and have the potential to cause danger.

The following parties have responsibility for memorial safety in council cemeteries:

- Durham County Council has health and safety responsibilities to its employees, contractors and visitors to cemeteries (Section 2 & 3: Health and Safety at Work Act 1974). It also places a legal duty on the council to assess the risks from cemetery structures and work activities and ensure that the risks are controlled. (The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999)
- A monumental mason has the responsibility to work in accordance with the council's conditions and specifications for memorials as laid down in the Cemeteries' Rules.
- An owner, the Deed Holder or successor in title of a memorial, has the responsibility to maintain it so as not to present a hazard.

Members of the public who see an unsafe headstone/memorial may notify Bereavement Services so that an inspection, followed by appropriate action, can be carried out.

Historically, health and safety concerns in cemeteries have focused on the risks arising from grave digging. In recent years, there has been increasing attention on the stability of memorials and the risks they present to cemetery staff and visitors.

In July 2000, a six year old child died as a result of a collapsed headstone in a Harrogate cemetery. This highlighted the risk and liability councils face in cemetery management.

Duties

Primary responsibility for health and safety in council owned cemeteries lie with Durham County Council as the burial authority in control of cemeteries. Durham County Council is required to control the risks associated with any cemetery for which they have responsibility.

Whilst Durham County Council has overall responsibility for the safety of the cemeteries, including risks from unstable memorials, it does not own the memorials. The owner of the memorial will be the grave owner. In many cases there is no identifiable owner.

Frequency

An inspection programme has been drawn up and is in place for all cemeteries/closed churchyards. This is a '5 year rolling programme approach' which the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) describe as 'reasonable'.

Notification and signage

We will endeavour to help families understand when the testing will take place and how it will happen. This will be done in various ways including:

- Signage will be on display within the cemetery. It will provide details of what is happening and, closer to the time, will detail when the testing will occur and provide the opportunity to observe if families wish.



- The local clergy, where appropriate, will be informed of what is going to happen.
- Local County Councillors will also be informed.
- The council's website will provide information about how testing is carried out.

Examples - different types and styles of memorials



Lawn Memorial



Ledger - Flat



Ledger - Shaped



Books and Rests



Kerb Sets



Headstone and Kerbset



Cross



Table Memorials



Pinnacles/Obelisk



Monolith



Footstones



Foot Plaque

Non exhaustive memorial descriptions

LAWN MEMORIALS

- This is a headstone and base set onto a foundation. The bottom joint has proved the downfall of the Lawn Memorial. It is also a joint prone to water penetration because the container and drainage holes pass through the joint, which is often at ground level.

LEDGER

- This is a flat slab on the ground. It can have a curved, peon or flat top.

MONOLITH

- This is a single piece memorial set directly into the ground. This construction relies on the stability of the ground to keep the headstone upright.

BOOKS / PLAQUES

- This is a book or plaque on rests, mounted on a base. These memorials rely on good rests and few dowels.

KERB SET

- Kerbs sometimes have posts or vases incorporated in the surround of the grave space. If kerbs are loose they should be placed within the grave space for safety.

HEADSTONE AND KERBS

- The headstone and kerbs should be doveled or cramped together. Cover slabs fitting inside the kerbs sometimes rest on bricks and rely on the kerbs to keep it all together. Cover slabs on top of the kerbs may not have any means of keeping them in place or may not have any sort of central support. There may be chippings inside the grave space, but do not rely on the chip bed or the cover slab having any strength.

TABLE AND CHEST MEMORIALS

- This is a structure built with inscription panels on the sides, usually with a flat or shaped top.

CROSSES AND FIGURES

- This can be a 'stand-alone' unit, or on a full grave memorial. When on stepped bases, all levels should be doveled together. In older construction, the lower bases may not be doveled. A single tapered block is called a 'die'.

PINNACLE

- This memorial is tapered to a point and has a small bottom joint for its height and is difficult to handle.

OBELISK

- This usually sits central on the grave and consists of a base(s) with an inscription block. It is square on section, often tapered with a capping stone. On top of the cap is often an urn or cross. If the structure moves out of level

then the capping stone is at risk of sliding off. These caps sometimes weigh a quarter of a ton or more.

FOOTSTONES

- This is a piece of stone, usually set at the bottom or foot of the grave. Occasionally, in the past, a marker stone was installed soon after the burial. Later the headstone was erected as a monolith and the marker stone became the foot stone. Sometimes kerbs followed as finances became available. Railings were originally erected to keep sheep and goats from eating the plants in the grave space. The animals were used to keep the grass down.

Testing process

- All staff carrying out inspections have been trained by the National Association of Memorial Masons training sessions and have passed the City & Guilds Certificate of Competence for the safety inspection and assessment of memorial qualification.
- We will apply a proportionate approach to testing in each cemetery which will mean that any book, rest or footstone less, than 18 inches in height, will not be tested.
- Memorial inspections are recorded to identify surname of first burial and date. The memorial is measured for height, width and thickness; type of material; joints and cracks; lean per metre; foundations and physical test.
- A visual test will be carried out first to consider if there are signs that the memorial is showing evidence of damage or if the joints are giving way (cracks). It will also consider if the foundations are undermined/ unstable or have signs of recent movement. It may also assess the presence of vegetation that may cause structural damage to worsen.
- After the visual inspection, a gentle hand push test is used to identify any movement between components. A pressure up to 25kg may be applied; however it is unlikely that the hand test will achieve this pressure. This test pressure of 25kg is advised in the latest version of BS8415.
- The inspection will normally be carried out by two members of staff. One staff member will be the 'Inspector' who will be inspecting the memorial: pointing out any shortfalls and feeding this information to the second member of staff. The second member of staff will then input the received data into the hand held computer.
- The testing will result in one of two categories:
 1. Category 1 'UNSAFE' Action required.
 2. Category 2 'SAFE' No action required (revisit in 5 years).
- Where a memorial is classified as 'unsafe', immediate action will be taken and the memorial will be carefully staked and banded to make it safe. Only when absolutely necessary will a memorial be laid flat. At the same time a notice will be attached to inform anyone of the reason for staking and who to contact for further information
- After this, the information is passed to the Bereavement Service office for contact to be made with the grave owner.

The following pictures help demonstrate the steps described above:



Example of staff carrying out a visual check of a memorial.



Example of staff carrying out a gentle hand pressure test up to 25kg.



Example of a warning tape notice and banding attached to an unsafe memorial.



Example of a memorial which has been double staked with warning tape and a notice affixed to advise of the unsafe memorial.



Example of an unsafe memorial laid flat in between existing kerb sets.



Example of an unsafe memorial, with no dowels, laid flat on the existing grave space.



Example of an unsafe memorial laid flat on the head of the kerbset.

Proportionate approach to testing

- This focusses on larger/heavier headstones and those that pose greater risk. However, testing of footstones is refrained.

(See picture below).



Headstone failures

Action

- Memorials found to be 'in immediate danger of falling' will be carefully staked and banded in accordance with the training given; lying flat only when absolutely necessary. No fixing of notices to the headstones themselves.

Notification

- Contact with the last known grave owner will be made, if the information held is less than 30 years old. (We will not write to anyone where the information is older than this, because we have no way of knowing if the owner has since died themselves and would not wish to distress relatives in this respect).
- Additional notification will give owners of memorials that have been temporarily supported or laid flat, 3 or 6 months, in which to carry out repairs. Should no repairs be made, the council will consider the final action in respect of those memorials that have been temporarily supported.
- Whether the memorial is pocketed (inlay) or laid down will be dependent on the size and condition of the memorial and availability of lifting equipment. Pocketing will allow for memorials to remain upright allowing a continuation of the uniformity. This measure can be reversed if at some point a relative wishes to have the memorial reinstated to its original position.