



Policy and Procedure for Headstone Testing

The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 requires all burial authorities to ensure that memorials are safe so that the potential for injury to those visiting and working in the cemetery is reduced. All headstones are owned by, and are the responsibility of, the grave owner(s) or their next of kin. However, regardless of ownership, Westwell Parish Council has the obligation of making a memorial safe if it is found to be in an unsafe condition both in the closed churchyard at St Mary's Westwell and Westwell Cemetery.

The risk of injury from a gravestone or other memorial which has become loose and unstable is very low and there is no requirement to routinely mechanically test memorials. However, burial authorities in England and Wales do have a general duty under the Local Authorities' Cemeteries Order 1977 (LACO) to maintain burial grounds in good order and as a responsible parish council, we need to do what is reasonably practicable to ensure that visitors and those working in burial grounds are not exposed to risks to their health and safety.

Westwell Parish Council will ensure that any action taken to manage memorials or other aspects of the burial ground is proportionate to the level of risk and undertaken in a sensitive way.

Before an inspection takes place, a notice will be displayed on the Parish Council Website and Parish noticeboards at least 30 days prior to an inspection taking place.

Members of the WPC Cemetery Working Group will risk assess and test memorials in accordance with the inspection and testing procedure as follows:

- a. Memorials up to 500mm full visual inspection and hand stress test
- b. Memorials 500-1500mm full visual inspection, primary hand stress test
- c. Memorials 1500-2500mm full visual inspection, primary hand stress test (noncomplex structures), review for more complex structures in line with (d) below
- d. Memorials over 2500mm and complex structures full visual inspection, note potential problems and consider cordon off, follow up inspection supported by a structural engineer and or/ qualified stonemason.

Note: The primary hand test is to test whether memorials can withstand a reasonable hand force, that replicates pulling or pushing against a memorial.

Each memorial will be categorised once inspected.

Category 1: immediate action will be taken to make the memorial safe. This may result in the memorial being carefully laid flat/rested to alleviate any risk of injury.

Category 2: the memorial is not an immediate danger but is not fully stable and will need to be monitored every 12 months to assess any further deterioration

Category 3: the memorial is found to be perfectly stable and will only need to be inspected in five years' time.

The clerk will maintain an electronic database of the test date, risk level (Category 1, 2 or 3), and re-test date.



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The council will endeavour to contact the last known grave owner, where records exist of every memorial that is less than 30 years old and will provide details of the assessed condition of the memorial and what action has been taken, or is required to be taken, to stabilise or make safe the memorial. Unfortunately, it will be inevitable that the council will try to make contact by letter with grave owner(s) who may have since passed away themselves.

Please accept the council's sincerest apologies if this should happen, as we certainly do not wish to upset anyone. We would appreciate it if you could let us know if this happens so that we can update our records. If you believe the information we hold in relation to a grave you own is incorrect, please contact us so we can check this for you. For those memorials deemed as category 1 and laid down, a notice will be attached to the grave to inform any relatives or visitors. This is in the event that the address held on our files is no longer valid and we have been unable to reach the owner or their next of kin via other communication methods.

Frequently asked questions

Who is responsible for memorial headstones?

All memorials are owned by, and are the responsibility of, the grave owner(s) or their next of kin. However, the council has the obligation of making a memorial safe if it is found to be in an unsafe condition. It is important to note, regardless of ownership, the council may take action as required to make the memorial safe.

Can I test my own memorial?

Under no circumstances should families test their own memorials as they may injure themselves or other members of the public. In addition, memorial stones may also be damaged. Westwell Parish Council cannot accept liability for anyone who injures themselves whilst attempting to inspect or test any memorial stone.

Who will carry out the inspections?

All inspections will be carried out by members of the WPC Cemetery Working Group.

Why are memorials failing?

The majority of older memorials are constructed from a single piece of stone, whereas more modern memorials are constructed from several sections that are joined together. The main reason for memorials becoming unstable is the failure of these joints.

Can I repair the memorial myself?

No. Work on memorials in cemeteries is only allowed to be done by cemetery accredited stonemasons.

Who is responsible for the cost of the repair?



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The responsibility for the cost of a repair or re-fixing of a memorial rests with the grave owner or their descendants. The work must be carried out by a memorial mason who undertakes the work to NAMMs or BRAMMs standards. This includes the installation of anchor pins to secure the base of the memorial and stainless steel dowels to secure bases of the memorial to headstone sections. This method of memorial installation is to ensure all memorials are safe and secure.

What if I cannot afford to pay?

The council will arrange for the memorial to be laid flat and, where appropriate, partially bury the memorial in the ground.

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