**Memorial safety testing**

**Information on keeping our cemeteries safe places to visit**

We carry out safety testing of memorials (headstones) in our cemeteries and those closed churchyards which we have responsibility for maintaining.

These checks are undertaken by a trained officer roughly every five years which is in line with guidance issued by the Health & Safety Executive (HSE).

Testing is required as the Council has an obligation to provide and maintain safe cemeteries.  Tragically, there have been incidents in other areas of the country where children have been killed by falling memorials whilst playing in a cemetery. We need to ensure therefore that the memorials in our cemeteries and closed churchyards are not unsafe due to lack of maintenance or general deterioration.

The frequently asked questions we have produced should answer any questions you may have about the testing we undertake, and what happens if a memorial has been deemed unsafe.

**Frequently asked questions**

**Why is this work being carried out?**

The safety checks are undertaken to ensure that our cemeteries and those closed churchyards which we are responsible for are safe for our employees and visitors. These checks have been ongoing in our cemeteries on a regular basis for many years and will continue to be carried out to ensure our cemeteries and closed churchyards remain safe places.

**Who is responsible for keeping my memorial repaired and in a safe condition?**

You are.  The grave owner or their next of kin are responsible for the memorial and have a duty to keep the memorial repaired and in a safe condition.

**What do the safety tests involve and who will carry them out?**

Each headstone is given a visual check to assess the condition of the memorial.  It is then given a gentle 'push-test' to check that the stone is not in immediate danger of falling.  If the stone does not move or show signs of instability during the test it is passed as safe.  The checks are carried out by a trained officer who will make sure that the work is carried out carefully and with due respect.  Each memorial tested will be recorded to indicate that the safety check has been carried out.  The record will include the type and condition of the memorial and any action that was taken.

**What will you do with headstones that fail the test?**

Once a headstone is found to be unsafe the Council has a duty of care to make sure that it is made safe as soon as possible because the cemetery is a public place.  Headstones that are in immediate danger of collapse may be laid down or supported. Those that require work to make them safe will be marked with a notice explaining what to do next.  The grave owner has a responsibility to have works undertaken promptly to rectify the issue. Memorials will not be removed from the grave space as part of the testing. Where we have up to date contact details, we will write to grave owners as soon as possible to inform them.

**What should I do if my headstone / memorial has been lowered to the ground?**

Please contact cemeteries@ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk detailing the cemetery/churchyard where the memorial is that you are contacting us about.  We will discuss with you arrangements for re-erecting your memorial safely.

You should NEVER try to re-erect the memorial yourself; this could be very dangerous and may result in serious injury to yourself and/or to members of the public, as the repairs may not be up to the required National Association of Memorial Masons (NAMM) standards.

Please note: Only professional repairs to NAMM standards are permitted in High Peaks' cemeteries.

**If I have insurance cover on my memorial, will the costs of repair be covered?**

Please check with your monumental mason or insurer to find out if repair work is covered.

**My headstone has had a notice placed on it and I haven't been contacted first. Why?**

Our immediate priority is to make sure that all our cemeteries are safe places for the public to enter.

Every headstone failing the test will have a notice attached to it advising the owner what to do next - this also acts as a warning to members of the public so please leave the notice in place.  We will contact as many grave owners as possible whose memorials have failed the test.  If we have not written to you it may be because we do not have an up-to-date record of your contact details.

This is unfortunately a common occurrence, as many of the graves are very old and grave owners have moved from the address recorded in the burial records.

**Will my headstone be subject to further tests in the future?**

Yes, we will be carrying out similar tests at regular intervals in the future, at approximately every five years. Because of this we recommend that your memorial is insured and is regularly and professionally checked and maintained by your memorial stonemason to ensure it is safely maintained.

**Where can I get further information?**

The Council understands how upsetting it can be for families to see work being carried out on a memorial to a loved one and we want to help people deal with their unsafe memorials as quickly as possible.  Anyone who wants to talk about what is happening or needs information can contact cemeteries@ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk and we will try to resolve a problem as soon as possible.