

Southwark Council Memorial Safety Policy

Introduction

Southwark Council ('the Council') owns and manages 3 cemeteries within the Borough:

- Camberwell New Cemetery
- Camberwell Old Cemetery
- Nunhead Cemetery

The Council has various legal responsibilities to do all that is reasonably practicable to ensure the health and safety of its employees, contractors and anyone else visiting the cemeteries.

This Memorial Safety Policy sets out the ways in which the Council will minimise the risks posed by cemetery memorials to people's health and safety. It is based upon published guidance:

- Managing the Safety of Burial Ground Memorials (Ministry of Justice January 2009).
- Management of Memorials (Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management May 2012).

New Memorials

The Council requires all new memorials to be installed to the current standards set by the National Association of Memorial Masons. These standards ensure that each memorial is correctly and safely installed and will increase the likelihood of it remaining safe.

This policy primarily relates to managing the risks posed by older memorials, which were not fixed to modern standards and which may become unstable over time due to various

factors, including deterioration of materials used and the security of joints between components.

Risk Assessment

“The risk of injury from a gravestone or other memorial which has become loose and unstable is very low”¹.

“Given the number of memorials and the number of visitors to burial grounds in any year, the risk of any injury is extremely low”.²

The Council subscribes to the expressed view of the Ministry of Justice that local authorities should adopt “sensible, proportionate and sensitive arrangements for managing gravestones”³.

The purpose of inspecting memorials is to assess the level of risk that they might pose to people in the cemeteries. This requires judgment and the key element of the assessment procedure employed by the Council is:

“Only when a memorial poses a significant risk, such as imminent collapse in a way that could lead to serious injury, does immediate action need to be taken to control the risk”⁴.

The Council will assess the level of risk posed by the many thousands of memorials in its cemeteries in a planned and systematic manner. This process will be undertaken by suitably trained Council employees, who will maintain detailed records of their risk assessments and any subsequent actions affecting each memorial.

¹ Managing the Safety of Burial Ground Memorials. Preface. Ministry of Justice 2009

² Ibid. Para. 1, Page 5.

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid. Summary

In view of the large numbers of memorials, the work will focus initially upon areas where there are highest numbers of visitors and then progress to the less-frequented areas of the cemeteries.

The risk assessment includes an initial visual check and recording of the features of each memorial. These include its type, size, the condition of foundations and joints, evidence of subsidence and leaning.

The visual assessment is helpful in highlighting any potential instability and is followed by a careful hand test.

“The hand check can be carried out by standing to one side of the memorial and applying a firm, bur steady pressure in different directions to determine to what degree if any the headstone is loose.

If some instability is detected following the hand test, a judgment must be made as to whether this movement is limited, or whether there is sufficient movement for the memorial to present a high risk to people’s health and safety.”⁵

Some older memorials are very large and constructed using several different components. A hand test may not be appropriate for such memorials, but the visual assessment is likely to identify any concerns requiring a further specialist assessment.

Notification

The Council will publish notices on its web site, at cemetery entrances and within each cemetery to inform visitors of the memorial safety programme. Notices will be periodically renewed and updated to ensure that the information provided is still current.

⁵ Managing the Safety of Burial Ground Memorials. Paras. 15 & 16. Ministry of Justice 2009

In addition to this general publicity, the Council will send a notification letter of its intention to assess a memorial to the last known address of any person who has purchased the right to place a memorial, or an additional inscription upon a memorial, in one of the Council's cemeteries within the last 30 years. i.e. since 1987.

The Council will notify the Diocese of Southwark of its intention to enact this policy in areas of its cemeteries that have been consecrated by a Bishop of the Church of England.

The Council will also notify the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and English Heritage of its intention to enact this policy in its cemeteries.

The Council will liaise as appropriate with the Diocese of Southwark, Commonwealth War Graves Commission and English Heritage to ensure that memorial inspections and remedial works to make memorials safe accord with any specific requirements that they may impose.

Actions to reduce risk

The Council will adopt a contingent approach to reducing the risk posed by unstable memorials.

Where any memorial is found to pose a high risk to public safety, the Council will take steps to reduce the risk depending upon the particular circumstances of each case. These steps may include:

- Attaching a warning sign to the memorial, which also requests the owner of the memorial to contact the Council.
- Erecting a cordon (barrier) around the area surrounding the memorial.
- Laying the memorial down on the grave, leaving the inscription legible.

In addition to these steps to control the immediate risk, the Council will seek to make contact with the owner of the memorial through:

- Writing to the owner of the memorial at their last known address.
- Publishing details of the memorial in its web site.
- Publishing details of the memorial on notices within the cemeteries.

The purpose of contacting the owner of the memorial is three-fold and is to:

- Advise them of the danger posed by their memorial.
- Inform them of any action that the Council has taken to reduce the risk.
- Request them to arrange for reinstatement of the memorial within 3 months by a memorial mason to the current standards published by the National Association of Memorial Masons.

Where the owner of a memorial found to pose a high risk to public safety cannot be contacted, or fails to arrange reinstatement of the memorial, the Council may itself take action to ensure that it is permanently safe.

Any warning notice and cordon will be removed and actions to make permanently safe will depend upon the particular memorial. Actions may include:

- Laying the memorial down on the grave leaving the inscription visible.
- Lowering the memorial so that it is still upright, but partially below ground level.
- Reinstating the memorial and seeking reimbursement of costs from the memorial owner.

The Council will maintain a rolling programme of inspection of memorials and making safe any found to pose a high risk to public safety. This will mean that every memorial is periodically re-inspected to ensure its continued safety.