

Stability Testing – 29th September 2020

A

Introduction

Following the decision of the Burial Committee to commission Northumberland County Council (NCC) to carry out stability testing of the memorials in Ovingham Cemetery, the work was carried out between 3rd and 6th August 2020.

It is important to note that whilst Wylam Parish Council – Ovingham Joint Burial Committee has overall responsibility for the safety of the cemetery it does not own the memorials. These are owned by the grave owner and in many cases it will not be possible to identify them.

The results of the testing have been provided to the Committee in the form of an Excel spreadsheet detailing the overall position with a more detailed analysis of the memorials requiring attention. A plan of the Cemetery identifying the 'Sections' is attached together with an example of the report provided for each of the memorials that failed the testing.

Results

In summary a total of 978 memorials were identified in the Cemetery and tested, the results being as follows:

Memorials Tested	978
Fails	87
Lawn Memorial Fails	51
Memorials over 4ft Fails	34
Memorials over 8ft requiring further inspection	2
Red Fails (assess for repair or make safe)	4
No of red fails repaired or made safe	0
Amber Fails (assess for repair or make safe)	83
Memorial Mason Repair Completed	1
Recommended Memorial Mason Repair	16
Recommended Make Safe Lawn Memorial	47
Recommended Lawn Memorial Bonded	38
Recommended Lawn Memorial Metal stakes	9
Recommended Make Safe Memorial over 4ft	23

The Clerk will talk through these results in detail but in essence the cemetery was broken down into 6 sections (as per the plan circulated) then each of the failed memorials was identified by 'zone' i.e. Zone 1 – up to 3 rows from a footpath, zone 2 – 4-8 rows from a footpath and zone 3 – centre, greater than 8 rows from a footpath.

One repair was completed whilst testing was being carried out as the large memorial was at risk of falling and was too dangerous to leave. There was a risk that the memorial would have cracked had it fallen hence an urgent repair was carried out by a memorial mason. The cost of this (£150.00 + VAT) was included within the overall invoice for the stability testing.

Where a memorial has failed then warning signs have been inserted at the base of the memorial and in some instances warning tape has also been applied.

You will see that 16 memorials are recommended for repair by a memorial mason with another 47 recommended for a temporary repair to make them safe. NCC have provided details of the masons that they use so that they can be contacted for quotes.

It is estimated that the cost of each of these repairs could be in the region of £150.00 - £400.00 giving a total cost for the 16 memorials requiring a mason repair of £2,400 - £6,400 if the Committee has to meet the cost.

The temporary make safe work should be carried out as soon as possible and can be carried out by Northumberland County Council with approximate costs being as follows:

Repair	Unit Cost	No. of Memorials	Total Cost (Approx.)
Make Safe	£15.00-£40.00	70	£1050 - £2,800

Once temporary make safe work has been carried out, annual inspection of these memorials would be required to ensure that the memorial remained in a safe condition. The costs of this would be approximately £70.00. The NCC Officer pointed out that in some instances a make safe repair would be sufficient provided that it was checked each year to ensure it did not deteriorate.

In the meantime attempts should be made to identify the grave owners to inform them of the fact that their memorial has failed the stability testing programme and requires a permanent repair as it is they who are responsible for the safety of the memorial. The usual process is only to go back 25 to 30 years to identify owners as beyond this they may also have since died, and distress could be caused to relatives.

A time limit should be imposed on this process to ensure that memorials can be permanently repaired as soon as possible and are not left in a dangerous condition. Members may wish to consider how long this should be e.g. 3 months? In the event that owners are either not willing or not able to meet the cost then the cost would need to be borne by the Burial Committee as we have a duty of care to ensure safety in the Cemetery.

Clearly if the Burial Committee is faced with meeting the cost of repairs then the financial implications will be significant. As an example 87 permanent repairs could cost in the region of £13,000 - £35,000 as a worst case scenario. That said some costs may be borne by owners and some memorials may require nothing more than a make safe which may last a number of years and it may then be removed from the fail category. It would then be retested as part of the rolling overall testing programme.

Information is being obtained from Prudhoe Town Council who have been through this process e.g. wording of letters to families/deed holders, timescales for action by deed holders, annual budgetary implications, repair programme etc.

Of the 87 fails 83 were 'amber' with 4 in the 'red' category requiring urgent attention. Since then a further 2 memorials have been placed in the red category meaning that 6 now require action. Details of these memorials have been obtained and the Clerk will work to identify owners if possible and report back as a matter of urgency with proposed actions.

Overall Testing Programme

In terms of an overall stability testing programme it is recommended by the Health and Safety Executive that this should be done every 5 years but NCC work on a 4 year programme. A 4 year programme ensures that if there is a slight delay on the timescale it is still carried out within the 5 year period.

Recommendations:

1. NCC be commissioned to carry out temporary make safe work as identified in the stability testing report findings. This ensures that the Committee meets its duty of care in terms of health and safety.
2. Work be carried out to identify the owners of the 6 memorials in the 'red' category and a report be prepared as a matter of urgency on proposed action, costs etc.
3. Attempts be made to contact grave owners going back 25-30 years with a time limit being set for repairs to be carried out. Once this time period has elapsed a further report will be brought back to the committee identifying the number of memorials involved, the category of repair required and the approximate cost implications.
4. The required programme of work be ordered so that the newer sections of the Cemetery are tackled first i.e. 3 & 6, then 2 & 5 (middle) then 1 & 4 (back). In addition, within these sections priority be given to zone 1 then 2 then 3.
5. Consideration be given to identifying a specific annual budget allocation for memorial repairs based on forecasts evolving from the work identified above.
6. A decision is made on whether an overall testing programme be carried out every 4 or 5 years.

Marie Moore
23.09.20