



Report to Full Council: Memorial Safety at Rands Lane Burial Ground

Meeting date: 1st October 2026

Report author: Clerk to the Council

Purpose: To establish a clear, proportionate approach to memorial safety following the recent inspection programme and subsequent community concerns.

Public report: Yes

1. Recommendations

The Committee is asked to:

Note the outcome of the memorial safety inspections undertaken to date.

Confirm that memorial safety inspections should continue throughout Rands Lane Burial Ground using a documented, risk-based and proportionate procedure.

Approve the temporary suspension of further physical testing until the Council has adopted a memorial safety policy, communications plan and agreed working method.

Approve the proposed procedure set out in section 8, including advance publicity, reasonable efforts to contact registered owners, inspection by competent persons and proportionate action where a memorial presents an immediate danger.

Authorise the Clerk, in consultation with the Committee Chair, to agree a revised programme with S P Davis, subject to the existing contract and available budget.

Agree that memorials already laid down should remain in their current safe position pending contact from the owner and assessment by an appropriately qualified memorial mason.

Agree that reinstatement or repair must be undertaken by a suitably qualified and insured memorial mason in accordance with the Council's cemetery regulations and the applicable standard.

Approve the introduction of a rolling inspection programme, with the interval determined through risk assessment and normally not exceeding five years.

Request a further report detailing costs, progress, owner contacts, complaints and lessons learned before the next phase begins.

2. Purpose of the report

This report explains the Council's responsibilities for memorial safety at Rands Lane Burial Ground, records the work undertaken during 2026 and sets out a proposed approach for completing the overdue inspection programme.

The matter is sensitive because memorials are of considerable personal and emotional importance to bereaved families. The Council must balance this with its responsibility to protect visitors, employees, contractors and other users of the burial ground from foreseeable harm.

3. Background

Armthorpe Parish Council is responsible for the management of Rands Lane Burial Ground. Section 214 of the Local Government Act 1972 provides the statutory framework under which parish councils may act as burial authorities. The management of local authority cemeteries is also governed by the Local Authorities' Cemeteries Order 1977. [Legislation.gov.uk](https://legislation.gov.uk)

The burial ground contains graves dating from 1974. Council records indicate that no previous systematic memorial safety inspection programme has been undertaken. A formal inspection was therefore overdue.

Responsibility for maintaining an individual memorial generally rests with the owner of the relevant memorial rights. However, the Council retains responsibilities arising from its management of the burial ground, health and safety law, occupiers' liability and its general duty of care. Where a memorial presents a foreseeable danger, the Council must take reasonable and proportionate steps to manage the risk.

4. Appointment of a memorial mason

In June 2026, Council staff approached several qualified memorial masons based in the Doncaster area to obtain prices for inspecting memorials.

In July 2026, the Community Centre and General-Purpose Committee appointed S P Davis to undertake the work. It was not anticipated that such a significant number of memorials would be identified as unsafe, nor was the extent of the resulting impact on the community fully foreseen.

Once a commencement date had been agreed, notices publicising the inspection programme were displayed for six weeks at:

- Doncaster Road;
- three locations on Church Street;
- Armthorpe Community Centre; and
- Rands Lane Burial Ground.

5. Work undertaken

S P Davis began inspecting memorials in the oldest sections of the burial ground, which is section A.

During the initial inspection, a substantial number of memorials were assessed as unsafe. Notices containing contact details for S P Davis and the Parish Council office were placed on affected memorials to inform owners of the findings.

When the contractor returned the following day, all sixty safety notices had been removed without authorisation. The contractor contacted the Council office for instructions. The available immediate options were to replace the notices, with a risk that they would be removed again, or carefully lay down memorials considered to present a danger.

The Clerk authorised the second course of action to reduce the immediate risk to visitors and employees.

A number of members of the public contacted S P Davis, Council staff and Councillors to express concern or distress about the action taken. Staff explained the safety process and provided information about the next steps. Further work was then suspended on the Clerk's instruction pending a decision by the Council.

6. Current position

The inspection programme was subsequently paused to allow Council members to review the process and agree an appropriate way forward.

The position at the date of this report is:

- Memorials inspected: 294
- Memorials laid down: 156
- Memorials not laid down following inspection: 138
- Approximately 53% of the memorials inspected were therefore laid down following the contractor's assessment.

Parish Council staff have been provided with the S P Davis inspection reports for all memorials tested and will contact families to discuss and arrange the safe reinstatement of those memorials.

7. Communication with owners

Good practice is to publicise an inspection programme and make reasonable efforts to notify identifiable owners before work begins. Direct contact is difficult because Exclusive Rights of Burial records normally contain the address supplied when the right was purchased, and families do not always notify the Council when an owner dies or moves.

A review of the first 428 records found only 20 registered owners who were known still to reside at the recorded address. Writing to every historic address was therefore considered unlikely to provide an effective means of communication during the first phase.

Nevertheless, reasonable notification efforts should form part of the future procedure. These should include:

- notices at the entrance to the burial ground and in the burial ground noticeboard;
- information on the Council's website and social-media channels;
- notices on village boards and at the Community Centre;
- a press release or notice for local publications;
- advance notices in the sections scheduled for inspection;
- letters to owners where a reasonably reliable current address is held;
- liaison with local funeral directors and memorial masons;
- clear contact details for enquiries; and
- a reasonable period for families to update their information before testing begins.

8. Options for consideration

Option	Advantages	Disadvantages
1. Discontinue inspections	Avoids immediate distress and further complaints	Does not address known and foreseeable risks; leaves the Council without a defensible inspection programme.
2. Resume after adopting a revised policy and communications plan	Balances safety, legal responsibilities and sensitivity; creates a clear audit trail	Delays completion and requires staff time and possible additional expenditure
3. Commission an independent review before resuming	Provides external assurance about the testing method and actions already taken	Additional cost and delay; does not remove the need to complete inspections

Option two is recommended, with independent technical advice obtained if there is uncertainty about the inspection method, contractual requirements or the status of memorials already laid down.

9. Proposed procedure

Before inspections recommence, the Council should consider adopting the following procedure.

9.1 Preparation

The Council should:

- approve a written memorial safety policy;
- reconfirm that the contractor and individual inspectors are competent, appropriately trained and insured;
- agree the precise inspection method and record template;
- divide the burial ground into manageable phases;
- continue to photograph each memorial before inspection;
- confirm arrangements for complaints, enquiries and data protection; and
- publish the programme at least six weeks before each phase begins.

9.2 Inspection

Each memorial should receive an individual, documented assessment. Records should include:

- grave and section reference;
- date and time of inspection;
- inspector's name;
- approximate dimensions and type of memorial;
- visible defects;
- details of any controlled hand or instrument assessment;

- photographs before and after any intervention;
- risk classification;
- action taken and reasons; and
- date for review or follow-up.

9.3 Risk classification

Memorials should be placed into one of the following categories:

- No immediate action required: no material indication of instability or danger.
- Monitor: some defect or movement exists, but the memorial does not present an immediate danger.
- Repair required: the memorial is not considered an immediate danger, but the owner should arrange work within a specified period.
- Immediate danger: there is a foreseeable risk of the memorial falling and causing injury, requiring prompt temporary safety action.

9.4 Safety action

The least intrusive effective measure should be used. Depending on the circumstances, this may include:

- temporary warning signage;
- temporary barriers or restricted access;
- temporary support by an approved method;
- controlled lowering; or
- another measure recommended by a competent specialist.

Laying a memorial down will be avoided if wherever possible.

9.5 Follow-up

Where an owner can be identified, the Council will continue to explain:

- the inspection finding;
- the temporary action taken;
- the owner's responsibility for arranging repair;
- the requirement to use a suitably qualified and insured memorial mason;
- any required permit or authorisation;
- the timescale for action; and
- what will happen if no action is taken.

10. Memorials already laid down

The 156 memorials already laid down should remain stable and undisturbed until reviewed or reinstated by a competent memorial mason. Families should not attempt to raise or repair memorials themselves. Parish Council staff will continue to work towards contacting all families to notify them of the situation and provide them with guidance to reinstate the memorial.

The Council should ensure that:

- each affected memorial is accurately recorded and photographed;
- the reason for the original decision is documented;
- the surrounding area is checked for trip hazards or other residual risks;
- owners are contacted where reasonably practicable;
- information about reinstatement is made readily available; and
- any dispute about an individual assessment is referred for technical review.

The Council should not accept responsibility for permanent repair unless it has a specific legal or contractual obligation to do so. Any charging, contribution or hardship scheme would require a separate policy and budget decision.

11. Financial implications

Further costs may arise from:

- completion of the inspection contract;
- repeat visits caused by the suspension;
- replacement notices and improved signage;
- direct correspondence and publicity;
- independent technical advice;
- temporary barriers or supports;
- record digitisation;
- staff time; and
- legal or insurance advice.

A detailed financial schedule should be obtained before work recommences. Any expenditure must be met from an approved budget or authorised in accordance with the Council's financial regulations.

12. Legal and governance implications

The Council should maintain a clear audit trail showing that it has:

- identified and assessed foreseeable risks;
- appointed competent contractors;
- considered relevant legislation and sector guidance;
- taken proportionate action;
- communicated reasonably with affected families;
- recorded decisions and the reasons for them; and
- arranged periodic review.

13. Equality, community and reputational implications

The Council strongly recognises that bereavement, religion, belief, disability, age and language may affect how people receive and respond to communications about memorial safety. Information should therefore be clear, accessible and sensitive.

14. Data protection implications

Burial and Exclusive Rights of Burial records contain personal information. Contact details should be used only for legitimate Council purposes and handled in accordance with the Council's data-protection policies.

The Council should continue to update addresses when reliable information is received, retain evidence supporting inspection decisions and avoid displaying personal information on public notices.

15. Conclusion

The Council had reasonable grounds to begin a memorial safety inspection programme because no previous systematic testing was recorded and the burial ground contains memorials dating from 1974. The initial work has identified a substantial number of memorials requiring safety intervention.

The removal of the sixty notices and the public response demonstrate that the inspection programme needs a clearer policy, stronger communication and a more fully documented risk-based procedure. Discontinuing the programme would leave known risks unresolved.

The recommended course is therefore to adopt a formal memorial safety policy and communications plan, verify the inspection method, and then resume the work in managed phases. This approach will allow the Council to discharge its responsibilities while treating bereaved families and memorials with appropriate care and sensitivity.

17. Acknowledgement to members of the public

The Council recognises the distress and upset that the recent memorial safety checks and the temporary laying down of some memorials at Rands Lane Burial Ground have caused to families and friends of those interred there and offers its sincere apologies for any pain this has caused.

It is regrettable that memorials had to be laid down, and the Council understands how upsetting this is, but the priority has been to prevent harm while we determine the appropriate permanent solutions.

Moving forward the Council will increase publicity about planned inspection dates and will make every reasonable effort to contact memorial owners in advance, provide clear information about the process, and offer private appointments for families who wish to discuss specific memorials. The Council remains committed to completing the programme with sensitivity and transparency and invites anyone with concerns to contact Sarah Youngman at clerk@armthorpeparishcouncil.gov.uk or 01302 830543.