

## CHIGWELL PARISH COUNCIL - GRAVE DIGGING POLICY

Reviewed by Finance & Governance      January 2025

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### Overview

Chigwell Parish Council is committed to ensuring a high standard of grave digging while upholding safety and dignity throughout the process. This policy covers all aspects of grave preparation, including the period after the interment when soil settling occurs, ensuring ongoing maintenance of the grave to the highest standards.

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### 1. Grave Digging – General Guidelines

#### **Training**

All staff involved in grave digging operations should undergo appropriate internal and/or external training. Any untrained personnel should be closely supervised by a qualified individual.

**It is recommended that the gravedigger receives training under the Cemetery Operatives Training Scheme provided by the ICCM.**

Appropriate safety footwear and hard hat must always be worn when working in an excavation.

Graves left unattended for any reason must be securely boarded over to prevent any accidental falls. If mechanical shoring equipment includes a lockable cover for security, it must be used.

A ladder must be used for entry and egress from a grave. On **NO ACCOUNT** must a gravedigger climb out of a grave by treading on any part of the shoring.

A ladder must remain in place during whenever the operative is in the grave to ensure a safe emergency exit is available (**Confined Spaces Regulations 1997**)

#### **Grave Preparation**

Once excavation is complete, graves should be covered with imitation grass matting, ensuring no folds or gaps that could cause tripping hazards.

Walkboards must be placed across the grave, supported at both ends to carry the weight of pallbearers and the coffin.

Graves should be dug centrally within the marked grave space to prevent the risk of collapse, as uneven soil walls can lead to instability.

Any nearby memorials that could pose a risk must be moved to a safe location temporarily and returned after the interment. It is recommended to notify memorial owners in advance to explain

the temporary relocation for safety purposes.

Protective eyewear should be worn where necessary, and care should be taken when using picks near shoring equipment to avoid damage to struts or other safety structures.

### **Health and Safety**

**The ICCM recommends that a second person is in attendance whenever work is being carried out in an excavation of depth greater than 3' (0.91m) in order to comply with the requirements of the Confined Spaces Regulations 1997 and the Manual Handling Regulations 1992.**

All tools and equipment required for the excavation should be readily available before work begins. Shoring should be integrated as digging progresses, especially once the excavation reaches the depth of the shoring panels or timber.

**Hydraulic equipment must be regularly inspected and serviced by a qualified professional to ensure compliance with safety standards (Provision and use of Work Equipment Regulations 1998)**

### **DEFECTIVE UNITS MUST NOT BE USED**

Any defective equipment must be immediately removed from use.

Shoring timbers, struts, and other safety components should be checked for wear and tear before each use.

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## **2. Pre-Excavation Preparation**

### **Site Safety**

It is extremely important that the gravedigger follows the advice contained within this Code to ensure a safe working environment for all Cemetery operatives/visitors when excavating a grave, including themselves.

It is important that the gravedigger is trained to be able to safely assess the working site, including memorials, assess the risk, record the assessment accurately, follow an approved reporting process and understand the range of options available for making the area safe for all who will use it.

The gravedigger must adhere to safety protocols by assessing the excavation site for potential hazards and ensuring that the surrounding area is secure. A full risk assessment should be conducted, covering the following:

1. Safe and easy access for the operative and equipment
2. Safety for those attending the burial service
3. Hazards around the grave site, including memorials, vegetation, and surrounding structures
4. Protective measures for the excavation and nearby memorials

### **Risk Assessment Considerations**

Before beginning work, it is essential to evaluate potential risks, such as:

- Ground conditions, particularly wet or slippery areas, and the potential for trip hazards.
- The condition and placement of memorials, ensuring they do not pose a danger.
- Correct grave placement and measurement, as improper positioning could compromise the grave's safety.
- Any structures nearby that may need extra support to prevent collapse due to excavation.

The above risk assessment information is for guidance purposes only, lists are not to be considered all-inclusive but indicative of the types of risks that should be considered. Further guidance may be sought from the Clerk who is ultimately responsible for health and safety for Chigwell Parish Council as the Burial Authority. In the absence of the Clerk further advice can be sought from the Open Spaces Supervisor and/or the Registrar.

### **Locating and Marking Graves**

Graves must be identified using an official grave plan.

All graves must be dug centrally within their respective grave spaces for the following reasons:

- If grave is not dug centrally within its respective grave space one of the walls separating the adjacent grave will be of a narrower width and will increase the risk of collapse of that particular side of the grave.
- When reopening a grave that was previously dug out of centre the risk of collapse is increased.
- When a memorial is erected centrally on a grave that was dug out of centre the risk of the memorial subsiding and tilting is increased which in turn increases the risk of the memorial becoming unstable and a danger in its own right.

For guidance on measuring and marking graves, see Appendix 2.

### **Work Platforms and Walkboards**

Walkboards must be laid on both sides of the grave, supported securely at both ends to distribute the weight of the workers.

Walkboards should remain in place from before excavation until after the backfilling process is completed.

A work platform may also be used by replacing the head and foot supports with longer boards to create a stable platform for workers.

### **Soil Box Use**

A soil box should be used to contain excavated material, positioned no closer than 2 feet (0.61 meters) from the grave edge to prevent collapse risks. Consideration should be given to increasing the distance of the box from the edge of the grave where unfavourable ground conditions exist..

The soil in the box should be sloped (battered) away from the grave so as to reduce the weight at the side nearest to the grave. A front board can be placed across the front of the box to stop soil, stones, etc from rolling off the soil stack and onto any operative who may be working in the grave.

It is advisable to estimate and remove excess soil from the grave (ie soil that would remain after

backfilling is completed) before the soil box is used. This action will keep the amount of soil placed in the box to a minimum and will reduce pressure within the box and subsequently the risk of the box collapsing.

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### 3. Excavation and Ground Support

#### **Preparation and Equipment**

Before digging commences, all necessary tools and equipment are available in close proximity to the grave. The amount of shoring needed should be assessed according to required depends on factors such as soil type, weather, and the depth of the excavation and depth of shoring timbers/hydraulic units. Proper assessment of these factors is essential for safe digging.

Shoring equipment should be inspected before use, and any damaged or worn components must be replaced or discarded to ensure worker safety.

#### **Machine Excavation**

Only individuals who are authorised and excavator operator trained should be allowed to operate grave-digging machinery.

The machine operator must ensure that no one is within the radius of the machine's boom or bucket.

When operating machinery within the Cemetery, operators must exercise caution, treat the roads and grounds respectfully, and avoid damaging the environment.

When not in use, the machine should be parked on solid ground, ensuring it does not obstruct traffic or pedestrian paths. The boom should be lowered, with the bucket resting on the ground. On tracked machines the blade must be in the down position whenever the vehicle is parked. The ignition key should be removed.

The operator must position the machine carefully for digging, ensuring stabilisers/legs are placed as far from the grave as possible. Using purpose-built bearers under stabilisers can help distribute the machine's weight.

While digging, the blade of tracked machines should remain in the down position at all times.

Before starting excavation, the machine must be level to ensure vertical sides of the grave. Uneven positioning may cause one side of the grave to be under dug, leading to improperly dug graves which will increase the risk of collapse. The machine's legs/stabilisers should be used to adjust its position.

Exhaust fumes from the machine's engine can accumulate in the bottom of the grave. Where possible, machines should be positioned downwind to reduce the risk of fume accumulation, especially on still days when the risk is increased. **(Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations)**

The operative must be cautious when excavating a grave with shoring in place to avoid damaging the equipment with the bucket. Striking or dislodging shoring increases the risk of grave collapse and could endanger the gravedigger who will need to address the issue.

Machines must be operated in compliance with the manufacturer's instructions and undergo regular servicing by a qualified technician. The operative should be trained to perform pre-start checks and routine maintenance to ensure the machine's safety and reliability.

Both the employer and operative are legally required to ensure the vehicle is safe to operate under H&S legislation and complies with relevant statutory roadworthiness requirements if used on a public highway.

When operating within the Cemetery, the operative must be cautious, respect the grounds, and adhere to speed limits. The driver must hold the appropriate license if operating on public roads.

### **Hand Excavation**

Shoring must be implemented as excavation progresses to prevent the grave's sides from collapsing. The required shoring will depend on the soil type and weather conditions.

During wet weather, extra care must be taken and it is advisable to close shore graves to full depth.

After excavation, the gravedigger must ensure the grave's sides are vertical, the bottom is level, and the shoring units are level.

**The ICCM recommends that a second person be present whenever the excavation depth exceeds 3 feet (0.91 meters) to comply with the Confined Spaces Regulations 1997. This person should be able to alert the gravedigger, raise an alarm in an emergency, and initiate emergency procedures.**

### **Dealing with Ground Water**

If water accumulates in the grave, it should be removed before interment. A motorised pump is preferred, as it allows for the water to be removed without requiring a worker to enter the grave. The hose can be lowered from ground level.

If water collection is anticipated, a sump pit can be dug at the grave's bottom, drawing water towards it and helping keep the rest of the grave dry.

The hose from the pump can be placed in the sump pit and as water is pumped out of the pit the remaining water in the grave will be drawn towards the pit thus leaving the greater part of the bottom of the grave dry.

When hand digging a sump pit can be kept open at one end with the gravedigger working away from it. This action will assist in reducing the amount of mud created on the bottom of the grave.

When machine digging a sump pit can be dug when final hand levelling off the bottom of the grave is carried out.

When using a petrol-driven pump, no one should be in the grave while the pump is operating due to the risk of exhaust fumes collecting in the confined space (exhaust fumes are heavier than air). The pump should be placed as far from the grave as possible and ideally positioned downwind.

Water should be pumped into a nearby soakaway or sewer. If foul odours are detected, digging must stop. The Open Spaces Supervisor and the Clerk must be notified immediately and appropriate disinfectant should be used if necessary. The Local Authorities Cemeteries Order 1977 prohibits the removal of offensive soil.

### **Lifting Equipment (Lifting Operations and Lifting Equipment Regulations 1998)**

In hand-dug graves, lifting equipment like a winch and bucket may be needed to avoid the risk of falling debris as the required depth is approached. The bucket is lowered into the grave and filled by the gravedigger, with a second person operating the winch.

The lifting equipment should be set up securely at one end of the grave, allowing the gravedigger to work safely at the other end. To minimise the risk of injury, the gravedigger can exit the grave before the lifting begins and return after the empty bucket is lowered back into the grave.

**A hard hat must be worn by the gravedigger working in the grave.**

The lifting equipment operator should swing the bucket as far clear of the grave as possible and rest it before detaching the rope or hook. Ideally, the filled bucket should be emptied onto the back of the soil box to minimise the risk of debris falling on the gravedigger.

### **Dumper Trucks**

Dumper trucks should undergo regular servicing and maintenance by a suitably qualified person.

The dumper truck should be checked daily by the driver, who should report any faults. Both the employer and driver are legally required to ensure the vehicle is not only safe to operate under H&S legislation and complies with relevant statutory roadworthiness requirements if used on a public highway.

The driver must ensure the dumper truck is not overloaded to avoid compromising handling and steering. The load should not obstruct the driver's all round view.

When operating within the Cemetery, drivers must be cautious, respect the grounds, and adhere to speed limits. The driver must hold the appropriate license if operating on public roads.

When using the dumper truck to remove spoil, great care should be taken when positioning the truck, ensuring it is parked as far away as possible from the grave so as to minimise the risk of collapse of the grave caused by the weight or vibration of the machine. No one should be in the grave when the dumper is being manoeuvred, filled with soil or driven away.

A stop block can be placed at a pre-determined distance from the excavation to prevent the dumper truck from getting too close to the grave, reducing the risk of accidents from driver error or mechanical failure.

**Further information on the safe use of dumpers is available from the HSE at: [HSE publications](#)**

### **Ground Support**

The procedures for handling different soil types are outlined in this section and can be adjusted based on local risk assessments. Walkboards should be placed before excavation starts and remain until backfilling is complete.

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## **4. Preparation for Interment**

Before preparing the grave, the surrounding area should be checked for safe and unobstructed access for funeral staff and mourners, with any trip hazards removed. Walkboards must be stable and adjusted as needed to prevent a trip hazard to pall bearers carrying the coffin during the funeral.

Grass matting can be draped inside the grave to cover the shoring and walls, ensuring it does not create trip hazards. Torn or damaged matting must not be used.

Two putlogs should be placed across the grave for the coffin prior to committal. Putlogs should be 4'6" X 4" (1.37m x 102mm x 102mm) and of good quality knot free planed timber.

The distance between the putlogs should be no less than 3'6" (1.07m)., with two lowering webbings then put in place. Care must be taken to ensure that sufficient webbing is placed on either side of the grave to enable each pallbearer to lower the coffin to the bottom of the grave.c Webbings must be checked for damage before each burial. Frayed or damaged webbings must not be used and should be cut down to prevent future use.

If there may be insufficient space to the side of the grave for the pallbearers to safely carry the coffin and place it on putlogs directly, a board covered with matting can be placed at the grave's head or foot for the coffin. Two putlogs are placed across the board so that the coffin can be rested down with no risk of pallbearers trapping fingers. The lowering webbings are also placed across the board. At the appropriate time during the committal service the pallbearers can lift the coffin using the webbings and walk along the walkboards and safely lower the coffin into the grave.

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## 5. Backfilling

Backfilling should occur as soon as mourners leave and must be completed on the same day. Webbings and mats must be removed before backfilling starts, and walkboards should remain in place to prevent people from stepping on unprotected grave edges.

Backfill material must be tamped and compacted in layers no deeper than 150mm so that a compacted density of 90 percent shall result, using soil free from large lumps to reduce future settlement.

**The grave is to be finished with a tidy mound of soil, covered with saved (and if necessary, imported) turfs to leave an immaculate finish.**

The importance of this action cannot be stressed highly enough as the reduction of instances where the bereaved may be confronted with sunken graves is imperative. It will also subsequently reduce the risk of the memorial tilting and thereby becoming unstable.

Monitoring of the condition of the backfilled grave is to be carried out weekly within the first month and thereafter at regular intervals (at least monthly). Remedial work must be undertaken immediately if there is soil settlement leading to an untidy, uneven or sunken surface and/or if the turves show signs of drought or die-back. The responsibility for monitoring and maintenance rests with the gravedigger.

### Protection of the Coffin

To prevent damage to the coffin from the impact of large flints, pieces of rock or lumps of clay, a timber board should be placed in the grave, helping to deflect backfill material and protect the coffin from heavy impacts.

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## 6. Mourner Participation

Some ethnic and religious groups require carrying out the backfilling of the grave themselves.

There is a conflict between health and safety and customer care in this situation and it is for the Parish Council to assess the risk involved and decide whether to permit mourners to backfill.

If mourners participation in backfilling is permitted, the Open Spaces Supervisor, the Registrar and the Clerk must assess the risks and ensure that appropriate safety measures are in place including stopping backfilling at the relevant stages in order that the gravedigger can remove shoring equipment.

Collaboration with funeral directors is crucial to managing the health and safety of all involved.

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## 7. Others Working in the Cemetery

### **Funeral Directors**

**Whilst the Parish Council and the Funeral Director will combine to serve the same client it is important to also combine in the interest of health and safety**

Funeral Directors should provide their risk assessments, safe systems of work and staff training information together with a copy of their public liability insurance certificates when appropriate

### **Appointed Gravedigger**

The Parish Council may appoint a contracted gravedigger for operations in Chigwell Cemetery if the Council's own qualified gravedigger is not available. The gravedigger must comply with this policy, and no other gravediggers are allowed unless authorised by the Council. The contractor will liaise with the Council over management and disposal of additional spoil in a satisfactory manner.

The contractor will ensure that double depth graves are dug to a standard depth for the first burial to ensure that there is sufficient space for the second burial in the future.

The contractor will ensure that all new graves are aligned so that Memorial stones, when installed, will be in a straight line along the row.

The contractor is responsible for adhering to the standards and liaising with the Council on spoil management.

### **Contractors and Others Working in the Cemetery**

All contractors must comply with health and safety regulations, providing relevant documentation, including risk assessments, safe systems of work/method statements, COSHH assessments, training records where relevant and insurance certificates **before** starting work at the cemetery **(Health and Safety at Work Act 1974)**

This policy aims to create a safe, secure, and respectful environment for both workers and visitors, ensuring that all aspects of grave preparation meet the highest safety and quality standards.