



Are your headstones and memorials safe?



ARE YOUR HEADSTONES AND MEMORIALS SAFE?

Our beautiful New Zealand cemeteries are special places that we hold dear and are often central to our communities. We entrust our loved ones to them and take our families along to visit and remember, in places that often have the best rose gardens in the community, lovingly tended by council staff, contractors and volunteers.

Cemeteries should be safe places to visit and unfortunately this has not always proved to be the case. In May 2015 an 8-year-old boy was tragically killed by a falling gravestone in the UK, and the [UK government report](#) into managing the safety of burial ground memorials states that 'over the last 30 years, eight people have been killed when a memorial has fallen on them.'

Whilst the risk of this taking place is extremely low when compared to the number of memorials in cemeteries around the country, it remains a risk that cemetery operators need to consider in their management approach and health and safety management. Parks and recreation consultancy Xyst was recently asked by the Gore District Council to research best practice around headstone and memorial inspections, develop an inspection process and undertake a comprehensive inspection of all memorials in the district cemeteries.

Undertaking inspections

The first aspect to consider is what issues to look for and what type of memorials require a condition inspection.

Modern memorials are well made and robust, with strong adhesive and strengthening rods between the foundations of the memorial and its different components/sections preventing it from falling and are often low in height. Many cemetery operators have guidelines for the type of memorial they will consider in their sites and have often decided upon a consistent size that is low and safe. So, usually no need to look at all of the most recently installed memorials.

That leaves the older memorials, they come in all shapes, sizes and some are up to 4m in height. Many now have defects that have become apparent over time and are simple to spot and record by a professional team and hopefully simple to rectify.

The high memorials often have different sections only held together by gravity (no internal strengthening rods) as the original adhesive/cement has failed. Others have a plaster coating that also held the different sections together which has also failed. In some cases, the ground supporting the memorial is subject to subsidence causing a memorial to lean and potentially be at risk of falling. The concrete capping across the grave can also fail if this has happened, leaving cavities to be maintained.

Others are affected by what is around them; trees and large bushes can push into a memorial causing failure. Also, those memorials with no internal strengthening rods can become loose and wobble when touched. Obviously, any of these defects caused by age and fair wear and tear have the potential to create risk.

Cemetery memorials remain in the ownership of the family, and most are well cared for over time. However, in older cemeteries and communities this is sometimes difficult to manage with no relatives remaining in the community and the memorials have the potential to fall into disrepair. Once information is available on the condition of your memorial portfolio in all of your cemeteries, the work of making sites safe starts: seeking contact with families and making decisions on those memorials that might need to be financed in a different way to keep the community safe.

Our inspection regime recommends inspecting all memorials over 500mm in height and looks at any cracks at the joints, stability and condition of the foundations, any vegetation present that may cause damage and any movement in the components of the memorial. We then apply a standard condition rating and make a recommendation as to whether the memorial is safe and describe any risk. Inspections are undertaken using an electronic inspection form and a summary report highlighting all findings is then supplied to the client.

It is recommended that you continue with an ongoing cycle of inspections every three years to ensure the condition of your portfolio and any associated risk is well understood and managed proactively.

Onsite inspections need to be conducted in a discrete and professional manner showing the sites the respect they deserve. Our recent experience has led to a series of successful inspections in Gore providing the client with assurance over the safety of its memorials for staff and visitors and improved information on the condition of memorials in the district's cemeteries.

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Gallery



Figure 1 - Plaster covered memorial showing signs of failure and weak joints that move. Upright memorial components loose.



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Figure 2 - Memorial on a lean due to grave cut subsidence



Figure 3 - Grave cut subsidence and memorial on a lean as a result



Figure 5 - Vegetation causing memorial to lean/require maintenance



Figure 6 - adhesive on joints has failed causing a loose memorial



Figure 7 - Adhesive on joints failed and cracked base, memorial loose

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Figure 8 - Loose joint material causing memorial to wobble on base



Figure 9 - Memorial joints loose/wobble and memorials have shifted on their base due to adhesive failure and lack of internal supporting rods



Figure 10 - Memorial adhesive failed between each component



Figure 11 - Joint failure causing memorial to fall.