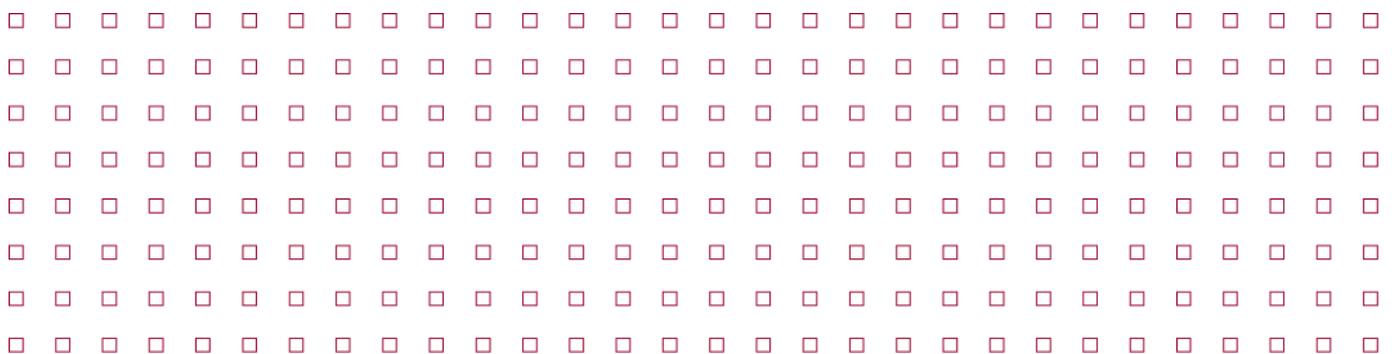




Natural burial grounds

Guidance for operators

2009





Ministry of
JUSTICE

Natural burial grounds

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This information is also available on the Ministry of Justice website:
www.justice.gov.uk

Contents

Introduction	1
The legislative background	3
Providing information for the public	12
Information for users of natural burial grounds	15
Acknowledgements	16
Useful sources of information	17

Introduction

The interest in and demand for natural burial has grown in recent years as an alternative option for people concerned about the potential environmental impacts of modern funerals.

This booklet is aimed at current and potential operators or managers of natural burial grounds in England and Wales.

It provides information and advice to help ensure that operators:

- are familiar with the legal and regulatory framework governing natural burial
- can provide a high quality service for bereaved people and the wider community.

What is a natural burial?

Natural burial is a term used to describe the burial of human remains where the burial area creates habitat for wildlife or preserves existing habitats (woodland, species rich meadows, orchards, etc), sustainably managed farmland, in-situ or adjacent aquatic habitats or improves and creates new habitats which are rich in wildlife (flora and fauna). Where a funeral precedes such burial, it would typically seek to minimise environmental impact.

The terms 'green burial', 'green funeral' and 'woodland burial' are also sometimes used.

Interest in natural death has grown as people have become increasingly concerned about the emissions and fuel-use associated with cremation, the use of stone for memorials (often shipped considerable distances from overseas quarries), or the use of formaldehyde for embalming, which has an adverse effect upon groundwater.

A brief history of natural burial grounds in England and Wales

The concept of woodland burial was first raised by Ken West, the then manager of Carlisle Cemetery in Cumbria, in 1989. This led, in 1993, to Carlisle City Council opening the first natural burial ground in the UK in a woodland site on an unused part of the municipal cemetery. Other local councils soon took up the idea in response to this growing demand.

The premise was straightforward and innovative. Opening a natural burial ground near to an urban area provides three benefits. It:

- provides additional burial space
- satisfies a growing demand for environmentally friendly funerals
- provides new amenity green space for the community.

As more people considered natural burial and demand grew, more stand-alone sites were developed by private companies.

In 1994 the Natural Death Centre charity set up the Association of Natural Burial Grounds (ANBG) to promote the movement in both the public and private sectors. It has produced a professional code of practice and provides advice and support to ANBG members. Operators may choose to join the ANBG but the association does not inspect or approve members.

By the late 1990s many local authorities had provided municipal natural burial areas and a range of operators such as charities and not-for-profit groups, natural burial operating companies and landowners (most often farmers) have set up private sites.

There are now over 220 natural burial grounds in the UK – from the Scottish Highlands to the west coast of Cornwall. Many more are at varying stages in the planning process.

Demand for natural burial would appear to be increasing although there is variation between different regions. People born between 1946 and 1964 (the 'baby boomers') are generally recognised as the first major generational group to take environmental issues seriously on a wide scale and they are now at the stage of life when they lose their parents or partners, or plan for their own funerals. Environmentally-friendly funeral provision is not only a logical extension of an environmentally-aware lifestyle, but also has broad appeal as an alternative to a conventional cemetery.

The legislative background

All burial ground operators **must** be familiar with legislation which applies to their sites, such as:

- burial law
- ecclesiastical law
- authority for burial
- health and safety
- contract and employment
- planning regulations
- environmental and wildlife law.

The following provides an overview of the key regulations and requirements.

Burial law

Most burial law is directed at particular types of burial grounds and various burial authorities who own the burial grounds for example:

- municipal cemeteries are covered by the Local Authorities' Cemeteries Order 1977 (LACO) as amended
- Church of England churchyards are covered by various ecclesiastical Measures (although the law relating to churchyards is mostly common law)
- privately owned cemeteries may also be subject to private Acts of Parliament
- privately owned natural burial grounds are not covered by the LACO provisions and are largely unregulated.

Even where burial grounds are not subject to site-specific legislation, there may be other legislation which regulates what the burial ground operator may or must do, e.g. all burial authorities must keep a register of burials.

Ecclesiastical law

Burial ground operators with a natural burial ground on land consecrated according to the rites of the Church of England must be familiar with the relevant aspects of ecclesiastical law.

Such areas are subject to the jurisdiction of the diocesan bishop, and that no work may be carried out there without proper authority. The diocesan consistory court grants authority by means of a 'faculty'.

Faculties typically regulate the use and maintenance of gravestones, walls and fences as well as the protection of human remains.

Where ground is consecrated, burial ground operators should consult the local diocesan registrar if major works such as exhumation or levelling of gravestones are planned.

Authority for burial

Before a burial takes place, the deceased person's representative (usually a family member) must provide the operator with authority for the burial. This will normally consist of a certificate from the Registrar of Births and Deaths or the coroner's burial order.

In the case of a death overseas, the Registrar may issue a certificate of non-liability to register ('white form') which will include authority to bury. There is no provision in law to issue this certificate if a child was stillborn abroad.

If there is no Registrar's certificate or coroner's order operators may accept a declaration that the certificate or order has been issued. A Registrar may also issue a duplicate certificate.

There is no legally prescribed time between notifying the burial authority and conducting the burial. However, operators will need to take account of the legal documentation required and this should be made clear to the public and funeral directors.

Operators must notify the Registrar of the date and place of the burial, no later than 96 hours after it has taken place.

Burial of tissue

There is no specific legal provision for authority to bury parts of bodies, including blocks and slides made from tissue and organs removed for examination. Nor is there any legal provision for the burial of foetal remains under 24 weeks.

The Ministry of Justice takes the view that burial site operators may decide for themselves whether to accept such material, having regard to practicalities.

Key issues will be whether blocks and slides are adequately documented or present an environmental hazard. Operators may need to obtain either an exhumation licence or a faculty if the intention is to place the tissue inside a person's coffin in an existing grave.

Re-burials

From time to time, operators may receive a request to re-bury remains which have been exhumed from other burial grounds.

There is no legal requirement for a fresh certificate from the Registrar of Births and Deaths. Operators should, however, ask to see an exhumation licence issued under the 1857 Burial Act or directions issued under any other burial legislation which prescribes how the remains are to be reinterred.

If these documents cannot be provided, operators should satisfy themselves that the remains have not been exhumed or acquired unlawfully or that there is any need to report the matter to a coroner or the police.

Grave depth

Burials in a municipal cemetery must normally be at a minimum depth of three feet from the top of the coffin to the natural soil level. Where the soil is considered to be of suitable character, however, coffins of perishable materials may be placed at a reduced depth, though never less than two feet below the level of any ground adjoining the grave.

Natural burial ground operators are recommended to follow this regulation.

Burial registers

The Registration of Burials Act 1864 requires all cemeteries not otherwise subject to a legal requirement to do so to keep a register of burials. Such registers need to be kept in accordance with the provisions of the Parochial Registers and Records Measure 1978 as amended by the Church of England (Miscellaneous Provisions) Measure 1992. This Act therefore applies to natural burial grounds. The Local Authorities (Amendment) Order 1986 in addition allows the maintenance of register of burials on computer.

A standard burial register can be obtained from the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK). More information is available from their website www.spck.org.uk. It is strongly advised that a duplicate copy of the register is kept offsite as well.

Data protection

Burial registers are not subject to the Data Protection Acts 1994 and 1998 to the extent that they do not contain information other than that relating to deceased persons.

If, however, operators hold information about living and identifiable individuals, for example where a record is kept of those who have been sold plots in advance, that information will be subject to the Data Protection Acts and should be handled accordingly.

If operators retain this information for core business purposes only, i.e. for administration and records relating to the burial ground, operators do not need to register as a data controller, provided that users are informed that these records will be maintained.

If in any doubt, operators should check with the Notification Department at the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) at www.ico.gov.uk.

The register of burials and records of disinterments in municipal cemeteries should at all reasonable times be available for consultation by any person free of charge.

Disability legislation

Under the Disability Discrimination Acts of 1995 and 2005, it is unlawful for service providers to treat disabled people less favourably than other people for a reason related to their disability.

All service providers have to make 'reasonable adjustments' to the way they deliver their services so that disabled people can use them.

Part 3 of the 1995 Act applies to all publicly accessible places including burial sites. It is good practice, therefore, for burial ground operators to carry out an access audit and make reasonable alterations to remove any physical barriers to goods or services for people with disabilities. In this context, disability covers people who not only have hearing or sight impediments but can also include people with certain illnesses.

With regard to wheelchair users, paths in the burial ground need not have a hard surface but they must not have unmanageable bumps or holes.

Examples of reasonable adjustments include:

- installing an induction loop in buildings for people who are hearing impaired
- giving the option to make arrangements by email as well as by phone
- providing disability awareness training for staff who have contact with the public
- installing a ramp at the entrance to a building instead of, or as well as, steps.

For more detailed guidance contact the appropriate local authority or visit:
www.equalityhumanrights.com

Operators may also wish to refer to the English Heritage publication "Easy Access to Historic Landscapes". This publication is available on their website: www.english-heritage.org.uk.

Burial and memorial rights

Operators should determine what rights of burial and memorial to convey to users of their site.

These may include the right to:

- re-open the grave if there is space for more than one burial
- place or erect a memorial
- visit the grave
- transfer any burial rights by deed or will.

Operators should set out the terms of burial rights in a contract with the purchaser or bereaved family when they buy the plot.

Burial ground plans

In a traditional cemetery it is comparatively easy to identify a grave by its position in a burial grid or plan. In many natural burial grounds this is not possible as the grave locations may not conform to any a pre-defined burial plan and the natural setting with trees and shrubs will change over time.

In these circumstances, it is recommended that all burial ground operators should put in place ways to identify the location of graves with accuracy. This may be essential where, for example, an exhumation is required.

This could be done by:

- surveying each plot and recording the coordinates and locations on a digital plan
- using a Radio Frequency identification (RFID) system that uses devices attached to memorials or pegged into the ground that transmit data to an RFID receiver
- using fixed markers (in cases where graves locations do not conform to any pre-defined pattern three markers may be required to locate a grave by triangulation).

Some burial grounds will permit more permanent markers for the graves such as a stone tablet, metal or ceramic markers. If these are used, operators are recommended to have a back-up system in case the markers are moved or lost. A back-up system for locating the grave will be necessary if wooden memorials are used to mark graves.

A copy of the plan should always be kept offsite.

Exhumation

Under the 1857 Burial Act it is an offence to remove buried human remains without either:

- a licence from the Secretary of State for Justice if the remains are buried in non-consecrated ground
- a faculty if the remains are buried in ground consecrated according to the rites of the Church of England.

The Ministry of Justice takes the view that a licence is required for **any** kind of removal or disturbance, including relocating coffins in the same grave or correcting a burial made in the wrong grave.

The MoJ will normally be prepared to issue a licence if an application is made for personal reasons and if all relevant consents have been given by, for example, the next of kin and the burial grave owner. An application form for a MoJ licence can be obtained by emailing coroners@justice.gsi.gov.uk or telephoning 0203 334 6390.

Burial in consecrated land is understood to be regarded by the Church of England as permanent. Applications for a faculty to authorise exhumation are granted only in special circumstances.

Operators should also be aware of the coroner's power to order the exhumation of a body. The need for such an order may arise if the coroner believes a post-mortem examination to be necessary for the purposes of investigation of the death or criminal proceedings in connection with that death or a connected death.

Financial legislation

If operators require advance payments for funerals, they must conform to the requirements of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Regulated Activities) Order 2001. Operators may wish to establish a trust fund to administer advance payments.

Operators should have a defined plan for allowances for future financial commitments. The simplest format is to create a sinking fund into which is directed a proportion of plot sales income.

Circumstances will vary but, as a guideline, the Association of Natural Burial Grounds have negotiated an agreement with the Valuation Office Agency (Practice Note 2: 2005: Revaluation 2005: Natural burial grounds) which suggests 20 per cent of plot sales income being treated in this way, dropping to 15 per cent when the site has been open for eleven years.

Operators may wish to set up a trust fund and arrange for the burial site to be taken over when full by, for example, a wildlife charity. It should be noted that the pre-need sale of burial plots is not covered by the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Regulated Activities) Order 2001 (Chapter XIV - Funeral Plan Contracts). Operators may wish to protect a proportion of such funds by a trust fund.

For more information, see www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2001/20010544.

Environmental and ecological aims

Operators should provide a clear statement for users which identifies the environmental and ecological aims of the burial ground and whether the site is new or conserves and/or enhances an existing setting.

In preparing such a statement, account should be taken of the existing environmental and ecological value of the site and the surrounding area.

Operators can determine this by commissioning a full environmental and ecological survey by a qualified ecologist, e.g. a member of the Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (IEEM).

The statement should also set out how the burial site will achieve the stated aims, e.g. how the site design, memorialisation and short, medium and long-term management strategies will contribute to protecting and enhancing the environmental and ecological value of the site.

For example, if the aim is to create native woodland, the objective might be to provide an approved list of species and guidance on plant specification, planting and management. Some species, notably bats, badgers, great crested newts and nesting birds (amongst others) have statutory protection. Management operations can result in disturbance to the species which is a criminal offence. For more information on wildlife protection visit: www.defra.gov.uk.

Where the aim is to create woodland, the objective might be to allow a more permissive approach to tree selection for memorialisation, with the emphasis on the use of native species.

Operators should be aware that the design and maintenance of the site should reflect local countryside character and enhance the landscape. Historically cemeteries have boundaries to keep the site secure and such issues should be considered at the design stage.

Features and areas of historic or wildlife interest can be designated and carry conservation protection measures. Such designations can include local nature reserves, ancient semi-natural woodland, conservation areas, scheduled monuments, listed buildings, registered parks and gardens, and registered battlefields. Individual or group of trees may also be protected by Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs) and tree felling is regulated by the Forestry Commission. Operators need to be aware of such designations, regulations and consent requirements to avoid risk of prosecution. There can be a wide range of statutory bodies with responsibilities for different aspects of environmental management which operators will need to be aware of. More information is available via the Government's www.planningportal.gov.uk and www.magic.gov.uk (Multi-Agency Geographic Information for the Countryside).

Health and safety legislation

Operators must be aware of and follow all relevant health and safety legislation and take appropriate steps to mitigate significant health and safety risks arising from the management of their burial ground.

Typical risks include:

- excavation of graves, with the risk to both gravediggers and the public
- health hazards associated with the exhumation of human remains
- unstable tombstones and other memorials
- building, site and horticultural maintenance (especially the management of trees) and the use of machinery.

For more information on all aspects of health and safety law, visit www.businesslink.gov.uk

Contract and employment legislation

Operators may need to outsource goods and services in the running of the site and should therefore be familiar with contract law, good procurement practices and requirements of best value.

Similarly, if operators employ staff they must be familiar with relevant legislation relating to the recruitment, employment, training and treatment of staff.

The scope of the training will depend on, amongst other things, the nature of the burial ground, the services offered and the extent of outsourcing of, for example, responsibility for grave-digging and ground maintenance.

For more information on employment law, visit:

www.justice.gov.uk/whatwedo/burials.htm

www.businesslink.gov.uk

Access rights

Whatever the long-term land management plans are, natural burial ground operators should bear in mind that for many people the site will be an emotional as well as a physical landscape. Bereaved people will expect access for visits and so operators must ensure that they are informed of rights of access and any restrictions. Natural England have published a [guide](#) "By All Reasonable Means" designed to help countryside and urban greenspace managers and landowners improve accessibility of their sites, routes and facilities. A copy of the guide is available at www.naturalengland.org.uk

Where the site is within a municipal cemetery, the cemetery's existing regulations will apply. If operators run a private natural burial site they should consider what visiting hours are feasible and practical.

Public rights of way

Operators should be mindful that some potential and existing burial grounds are traversed by extant public rights of way. Unauthorised diversion or the stopping up of these, either deliberately or inadvertently can result in enforcement action being taken against a landowner. Operators should be aware of existing rights of way crossing their land and the measures they must take to preserve these.

Concerns have been raised about access to privately owned natural burial grounds following a change of ownership. Operators may wish to consider the provisions of Section 16 of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000. This enables a landowner to voluntarily dedicate land for public access. If a dedication is made it creates an irrevocable right of access over the land which binds subsequent landowners and offers some assurance to the bereaved of continuing long term access. Land that is dedicated in this way is exempted from certain provisions of the Occupiers Liability Acts, by virtue of Section 13 of the CRoW Act.

Faith groups and burial rites

Operators of natural burial grounds should welcome enquiries about their policies and operations from any faith group.

Facilities

Operators have discretion to decide what facilities should be provided on site for users.

Operators may wish to provide facilities for the care of the deceased prior to the funeral, function rooms and catering etc. Or they may just want to provide somewhere for simple shelter from the elements or prefer to keep all infrastructure and man-made structures to a minimum.

Clear, accessible signage should always be provided on the site.

Site maintenance

Operators need to plan and manage how they will maintain the burial areas, access paths, tracks, car parks, buildings and infrastructure, to ensure that all buildings and infrastructure are safe and in good repair. The management of all environmental features should be carried out sensitively so as to maximise the biodiversity of the site and its overall environmental quality.

Providing information for the public

In order to help users (funeral directors, local religious organisations, the public and especially bereaved people) make an informed choice when selecting a type of funeral and burial ground, operators should provide clear and accessible information.

We recommend that operators provide an information sheet or booklet describing in full the service provided. Page 15 of this guidance shows the type of information that could be included.

The following list (while not exhaustive) provides some standard topics that should be covered.

Access rights to the grave

- the period of grave (rights) ownership and details on whether the right can be transferred/extended in the future
- the operator's legal interest in the land and what long-term arrangements are in place for the future of the burial ground
- what provision is made to ensure people with disabilities have access to services.

Bereavement Services

- information for bereaved people on how to deal, understand and cope with their loss of a loved one. Such information can be obtained from organisations such as Cruse Bereavement Care at www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk.

Burial procedure

- care of the deceased person before burial and whether they can be embalmed
- types of coffins to be used, e.g. biodegradable materials such as wood, cardboard, shrouds, wicker, bamboo and similar
- how family and friends can be involved in the funeral.

Complaints procedure and handling

Operators should plan both to deal with complaints and to learn from them. Complaints are most likely to arise from:

- disagreement with the burial authority's policy, e.g. the level of fees or site maintenance regime
- or where things go wrong, e.g. booking the wrong day for the funeral or allegations of rude or insensitive behaviour by staff.

Operators should ensure that they provide users with readily available information about how to complain, and that complaints procedures are not unduly bureaucratic.

Complaint handling is most effective if the complaint can be made locally and quickly, with the local manager empowered to deal, without delay, with the majority of the complaints which can be anticipated.

Complaint procedures should include provision for complaints to be escalated if necessary. For private cemeteries, the normal route will be to the General Manager and on to the Operations Manager or Director.

For authorities who are signatories to the Charter for the Bereaved, reference can be made to the charter organiser who can provide an independent investigation and report. It should be borne in mind that local authority cemeteries are subject to their own authority's complaints procedures.

Environmental policy

Information on:

- the environmental benefits anticipated for the scheme over a period of no less than 100 years
- the current and future size of the site
- where trees, shrubs or other plants are sourced and whether these are 'native'
- use of herbicides, chemicals, fertilisers, baits and any other substance that might impact on the environment
- land management, e.g. frequencies of mowing, replacement of dead trees, when tree planting will take place, ultimate tree cover, pest controls, water features, protection of historic and archaeological features e.g. veteran trees
- waste and litter disposal from the site and whether green waste is composted
- support and/or advice of local wildlife trusts, or other agencies involved in conservation and the environment.

Exhumation

- Operators should make clear whether or not they are prepared to allow remains, once buried, to be exhumed from their ground.

Management

- information on the burial ground management, directors, trustees, managing body or similar, with relevant qualifications given and membership of the Association of Natural Burial Grounds, the Federation of Burial and Cremation Authorities, the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management or equivalent organisation.

Memorials

- what can be placed on the grave by mourners, e.g. real or artificial flowers, plants from a prescribed list, personal items such as toys or mementoes
- whether any form of individual grave memorial or marker is allowed and if so, details on the position, size, inscription and materials permitted, and ongoing maintenance arrangements.

Pricing policy

- itemised price lists for the various services provided
- methods of payment accepted
- any administrative charges for, eg, a change of mind.

Records

- what details are kept on file, why and for what period of time, and where such records are to be found
- what burial plans and records are held, the arrangements for public access to them, and any fees payable.

Site maintenance

- How the burial ground will be maintained and if this will impact on memorials set up, access to graves, and how the landscape character may change, e.g. through selective thinning of trees, which may impact on a tree planted especially individual memorial trees.
- Operators should make it clear that the site is managed for wildlife and visitors and grave owners should expect presentation and experience to be different to conventional cemeteries.

Information for users of natural burial grounds

It is recommended that each burial ground should have clear published information and policies on a number of issues. Below is a list of the most usual subjects that the public will require information on in order for them to make a proper decision:

1. **Description of the site** (topography)
2. **Location** (including directions or a map on how to locate the cemetery and details of any public transport links)
3. **Site Owner** (including information on whether the site is freehold or leasehold. If the latter also state how long the lease runs for)
4. **Site Operator** (including contact details)
5. **Type of plots available** (including plot options, cremation options, whether or not plots can be purchased in advance)
6. **Burial rights** (including time limits)
7. **Pets** (including where they can be buried and licences required)
8. **Gravedigging** (including contact details, options for families)
9. **Embalming** (including whether embalmed bodies are acceptable for burial, level and types of chemicals permitted)
10. **Memorials** (including types available, suppliers, term of years, approved designs, tree planting schemes, memorial books, websites, benches)
11. **On site facilities** (including car parking, shelter, rooms, chapels, toilets, mortuary facilities, what is and is not provided)
12. **Funeral services** (including options available)
13. **Coffins** (including types of materials allowed in their construction)
14. **Details of the future of the site, its maintenance and management**

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Ken West, formerly cemetery manager at Croydon Borough Council

Useful sources of information

Ministry of Justice policy and publications for burial ground managers

www.justice.gov.uk/whatwedo/burials.htm

General guidance on running a business

www.businesslink.gov.uk

Association of Natural Burial Grounds

In The Hill House
Watley Lane
Winchester, SO21 1QX

T: 0871 288 2098

E: contact@naturaldeath.org.uk

www.naturaldeath.org.uk

Association of Burial Authorities

Waterloo House
155 Upper Street
London N1 1RA

T: 020 7288 2522

F: 020 7288 2533

E: aba@burials.org.uk

www.burials.org.uk

English Heritage

1 Waterhouse Square
138 - 142 Holborn
London

EC1N 2ST

T: 020 7973 3000

F: 020 7973 3001

www.english-heritage.org.uk

Equality and Human Rights Commission

www.equalityhumanrights.com

Federation of Burial and Cremation Authorities

41 Salisbury Road
Carshalton
Surrey
SM5 3HA

T: 020 8669 4521

F: 020 8669 4521

E: fbcasec@tiscali.co.uk

www.fbca.org.uk

Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management

City of London Cemetery
Aldersbrook Road
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T: 020 8989 4661

F: 020 8989 6112

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www.iccm.uk.com

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Natural England

1 East Parade
Sheffield
S1 2ET
T: 0114 241 8920
F: 0114 241 8921
www.naturalengland.org.uk

National Federation of Funeral Directors

618 Warwick Road
Solihull
West Midlands
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T: 0845 230 1343
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National Society of Allied & Independent Funeral Directors

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3 Bullfields
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F: 01279 726 300
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