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**Coronavirus (COVID-19):
what you need to do**

Stay at home

- Only go outside for food, health reasons or work (but only if you cannot work from home)
- If you go out, stay 2 metres (6ft) away from other people at all times
- Wash your hands as soon as you get home

Do not meet others, even friends or family.

You can spread the virus even if you don't have symptoms.

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Environment
Agency

Guidance

Protecting groundwater when developing or expanding cemeteries during coronavirus

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Dealing with the exceptional circumstances of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic presents us all with a huge challenge. Protecting and improving the environment is still, however, the Environment Agency's primary aim.

This guidance is for local authorities or other cemetery operators. It covers proposals for the following during the coronavirus pandemic:

- developing new cemeteries
- expanding existing cemeteries

Expanding an existing cemetery means significantly increasing burial rates at an existing site, or extending the geographical area of a site, or both.

Environmental risks from increased burials

Like all developers and operators, those involved with cemeteries have a legal responsibility not to cause environmental pollution. If this happens, the Environment Agency will take appropriate action.

There is the potential for groundwater pollution caused by:

- large numbers of burials in a short time
- the cumulative effects of many burials over a longer period of time

If a large number of burials take place over a short period of time, the risk of groundwater pollution is generally higher.

If steps are not taken to mitigate these risks, increases in burials can present a risk to the environment. This is especially so in areas where the groundwater is either:

- vulnerable to pollution
- used locally as a source of drinking water

The Environment Agency encourages cemetery developers and operators to propose developments in [low risk groundwater areas](#) (wherever possible).

They should avoid development proposals that are a high risk to the environment. This follows published positions in [The Environment Agency's approach to groundwater protection](#) (Section L. Cemetery developments).

High risk cemeteries include proposed developments in a [Source Protection Zone 1 \(SPZ1\)](#), or 250m from a well, borehole or spring used to supply water for human consumption, whichever is the greater distance

To avoid groundwater pollution during the coronavirus pandemic, local authorities and other cemetery operators should also follow the Environment Agency's:

- [minimum groundwater protection](#) requirements for all burial sites
- advice and recommendations from any site specific [groundwater risk assessments](#) carried out on their behalf by the Environment Agency

When you do not need an environmental permit

During the coronavirus pandemic, local authorities or other cemetery operators do not need to apply for an environmental permit (under the Environmental Permitting (England & Wales) Regulations 2016) for:

- any proposed new cemetery development
- the expansion of an existing site

After the pandemic has ended, you will not need a permit if your site is either:

- in a [low risk groundwater area](#)
- not a high risk development and an Environment Agency agreed risk assessment shows you do not need active mitigation measures or burial controls at your site

Active mitigation measures to prevent pollution to the environment could include, for example:

- ongoing groundwater monitoring
- active groundwater drainage controls to facilitate burials

When you will need an environmental permit

After the pandemic has ended, you will need to apply for an environmental permit for your cemetery if either of these apply:

- it presents a [high risk to the environment](#)
- your site needs active mitigation measures or burial controls to protect the environment

Minimum groundwater protection requirements

The minimum groundwater protection requirements for all burial sites are as follows.

Requirement 1

No human burials should take place within:

- a groundwater [SPZ1](#)
- 10m of the nearest land drain
- 30m from the nearest watercourse (which includes ditches and open land drains which may run dry for part of the year) or any other surface water
- 50m of any well, spring or borehole, irrespective of its current use
- 250m of any well, spring or borehole where the water is intended for human consumption or used in food production
- areas identified as having karstic groundwater flow characteristics (following the groundwater risk assessment)

Requirement 2

No human burials should take place on land which is liable to flooding.

Requirement 3

The base of each grave should be at least 1m above the highest predicted annual groundwater level.

Requirement 4

There should be no standing water in graves when dug.

Requirement 5

Graves should not be dug in unaltered or unweathered bedrock. This is solid rock which can be buried or exposed at the earth's surface, and which has not been altered by physical or chemical reactions (or both), such as exposure to the weather.

Groundwater risk assessment

During the coronavirus pandemic, the Environment Agency will, where requested:

- carry out groundwater risk assessments for local authorities and other cemetery operators proposing to develop new or expanded cemeteries
- provide advice and recommendations to protect the water environment, and particularly groundwater, using the results of these risk assessments

Local authority or other cemetery operators should contact the Environment Agency's [national customer contact centre](#) to request a groundwater risk assessment. They will direct your request to your Environment Agency area groundwater and contaminated land team. These groundwater risk assessments will provide you with site specific advice about your proposal to develop a new cemetery or expand an existing one.

Groundwater risk assessments will be entirely desk based, and will not require any site visits from our operational staff.

To complete the groundwater risk assessment on your behalf, the Environment Agency may ask you for site specific

information in line with the procedures set out in [Cemeteries and burials: groundwater risk assessments](#).

The Environment Agency uses a risk-based approach when carrying out groundwater risk assessments. The risk for each site will depend on a number of factors, including:

- vulnerability and sensitivity of the underlying groundwater
- depth to the water table
- proximity of groundwater abstractions, particularly those used for drinking water or food production purposes
- proximity to watercourses and wetland habitats
- aquifer type and local hydrogeological conditions
- number and density of burials
- burial techniques employed

When you do not need a site specific risk assessment

You can ask us to carry out a groundwater risk assessment for any proposed development. But, for low risk groundwater areas you do not need an Environment Agency site specific risk assessment.

Low risk groundwater areas are defined as follows. The proposed development site is on any one of these:

- a principal aquifer and not within a groundwater [SPZ2](#) and the burial rate is less than 30 burials per annum
- a secondary A aquifer and the burial rate is less than 50 burials per annum
- a secondary B aquifer and the burial rate is less than 100 burials per annum
- unproductive strata

These aquifer types, and the term unproductive strata, are explained in the guidance [Protect groundwater and prevent groundwater pollution](#).

You also do not need an Environment Agency site specific groundwater risk assessment for your proposed development if all burials on site are of human ashes from crematoria.

You can view the Environment Agency's [SPZ](#) and Aquifer Designation areas on [MagicMap](#).

High risk developments

Carrying out the risk assessment will allow the Environment Agency to assess the suitability of a cemetery proposal from a groundwater protection perspective.

If we consider the development presents a high risk of pollution to groundwater then we will advise you to avoid carrying out such developments as far as possible.

High risk developments are those that present a significant risk of pollution to groundwater and need active mitigation measures to reduce that risk.

You may still proceed with a high risk development provided you do both of the following:

- have a groundwater risk assessment agreed with the Environment Agency
- can comply with any site specific requirements from the risk assessment that are needed to protect the environment

You will need to apply for an environmental permit once the coronavirus pandemic has ended.

If you cannot comply with this guidance

If you cannot comply with this guidance the Environment Agency may take appropriate enforcement action against you if you cause, are likely to cause, or knowingly permit groundwater pollution.

This guidance will be withdrawn on 31 October 2020 unless we extend it.

Contact the Environment Agency

General enquiries

National Customer Contact Centre
PO Box 544

Rotherham
S60 1BY

Email
enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk

Telephone
03708 506 506

Telephone from outside the UK (Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm GMT)
+44 (0) 114 282 5312

Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm.

Due to the impact of COVID-19 on our teams you may experience some delays in responses as most of our staff will be working from home. The best way to contact us is by email (enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk) rather than the postal address.

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