

The dead are reclaiming the earth

Your allotment could be at risk as many councils have less than six years' burial capacity left, reports **Kaya Burgess**

Allotments, golf courses, sports pitches and farmland around the UK are destined to be reclaimed by councils to bury the dead, a *Times* investigation has found, as figures show the pandemic has worsened the country's cemetery space crisis.

The government has said it is looking into action to alleviate the problem and may consider changing the law around burials as data compiled by *The Times* show that one in four local authorities have ten years or less before their existing council-owned cemeteries are full to capacity, while almost one in six have five years or less.

The 259 councils that responded had at least 42,451 burials last year, an 11 per cent increase on 2019. Some councils, including the Orkney Islands, said they had been forced to suspend the reservation of graves for future use "as a result of the pandemic", while Blackburn with Darwen council said it was reviewing its burial space "due to the increases in deaths" caused by Covid.

The councils surveyed by *The Times* run 2,187 active cemeteries and maintain a further 1,150 that are already full. Councils have a median of 25 years of space left, falling to 15 years for the ten largest cities.

Lambeth council in London said it had "between six and nine months" before running out of graves, while Oxford city council and the royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea said they would run out next year. Nine councils said they had no empty graves and many had space only in family plots.

As their graveyards reach capacity, councils must find land that can be used for new or extended cemetery space.

The Times found that 54 per cent of councils had prepared by earmarking tracts of council-owned land for grave plots. In many cases, this land was chosen decades ago and had been leased for other uses until it was needed.

Ealing council has just two years of burial space left and has identified allotments as possible cemetery space, while one resident of Upton-upon-Severn in Worcestershire said his allotment of ten years had already been bulldozed to make way for grave space.

A pitch-and-putt golf course near the Easthampstead Park Cemetery in Wokingham is being "investigated for its suitability as a potential cemetery", according to Bracknell Forest council, which has two years of burial space left.

At least 13 allotment sites, two golf courses, five sports pitches and 56 areas of farmland have been earmarked for graves among councils that replied.



'Graves are creeping towards us'

Case study

Nick West tended his allotment for more than a decade before the land was taken to extend a cemetery. "I really miss it," he said (Kaya Burgess writes).

In 2019 West, 77, began a petition to save the allotments by the Rectory Road cemetery in Upton-upon-Severn, Worcestershire, but Upton town council said it bought the land in 1888 for burial space and now needed it to use over the next 50 years.

"Since then, they've demolished all those allotments and made a nice job of grassing it over and demolishing the sheds," said West, above, a retired shopkeeper, who was offered another allotment but it flooded.

In Abergavenny, the allotments by Llanfoist cemetery are destined for the same fate within seven years. Malcolm Davies, 72, chairman of the allotment association, said: "None of us had a clue. But we found [the site] was purchased as part of the original cemetery in 1891 and has been a 'temporary' allotment site since 1917." Monmouthshire council has promised to find them new allotments.

Diane Appleyard of the National Allotment Society said it was "quite

likely" that most allotment holders would be unaware of whether their site was earmarked for graves.

Canterbury council has 25 years before running out of burial space, but allotments by Whitstable Cemetery will make way for graves when the time comes. Kenneth Crowley, chairman of the local allotment association, said: "If you've been on site for a few years you will have noticed the graves are slowly but surely creeping towards you."

How to secure a plot

- Those choosing between burial and cremation may find their choice made for them by a lack of local graves or may choose a more futuristic send-off.
- To secure a burial place, you may need to buy a plot from your council or have an existing family plot with space. English residents can request a plot in a local Anglican churchyard, while some councils now rely on private enterprises for burials.
- Eco-friendly burials of biodegradable coffins in unmarked graves in natural settings are growing in popularity. You can also choose a burial site on your own land if it is not too close to water sources.
- The Law Commission is drawing up laws to allow "new methods of disposal" to be more widely used. Experts said that "resomation", where the body is dissolved in an alkaline solution to leave an ash-like residue that can be kept or scattered, may grow in popularity.

has said that Britain's burial laws are "outdated, piecemeal and complex" and "unfit for modern needs" and is looking into changes.

Cremations first overtook burials in Britain in 1968 and the UK now has one of the highest rates of cremation in the world at 77.8 per cent, up from 71.5 per cent in 2000, but this is likely to plateau. In 2019 some 134,000 people chose to be buried. Muslim, Jewish and Orthodox Christian teachings call for believers to be buried.

The Muslim section of the council-run Handsworth cemetery in Birmingham was declared full in November last year while Mohamed Omer of the Gardens of Peace Muslim burial charity said he expected an "acute shortage of burial space" within four to five years.

Government estimates show 77 per cent of burials take place in council-owned cemeteries though they make up only 21 per cent of all cemeteries in England and Wales. About 70 per cent are Anglican churchyards, which were estimated to have 25 years of space left in 2007. The church said parishes found "ad hoc solutions locally" when they needed to extend their space.

Dr Julie Rugg, an expert at York University, said burial space was "a big problem for smaller councils" and said councils often found they had to use their cemetery land "more intensively", adding: "They have to use land that used to be car parks or allotments or even use space between graves or adding soil on top of graves."

Check how much burial space your council has using our interactive tool at thetimes.co.uk



Whitstable and Easthampstead Park cemeteries are growing quickly

CHRIS GORMAN FOR THE TIMES; DOWNSHIRE GOLF COMPLEX

Councils can apply for a licence to re-use very old graves, reburying old remains more deeply to allow for new burials above if no relatives object. They must apply for a licence for every such burial.

A Ministry of Justice spokesman said: "We are considering whether action may be needed to address this sensitive issue. Any changes in this area, including legislation, would need careful consideration." The Law Commission

Antarctic seals reveal damage of melting 'doomsday' glaciers

Rhys Blakely Science Correspondent

Three intrepid elephant seals have given scientists new insights into how the melting of its "doomsday" glaciers is transforming the Antarctic.

A study from the University of East Anglia is the first to map how the water that melts from beneath the continent's floating ice shelves behaves during the winter. The shelves play a critical role in buttressing the Antarctic ice sheet — slowing the flow of its grounded ice into the region's Amundsen Sea.

The study reveals that more meltwater from the Pine Island Glacier, one of the region's largest, is reaching the surface of the surrounding sea than was known. This is transforming the local climate in ways yet to be incorporated in forecasting models.

The work used data collected by three wild elephant seals who were fitted with devices to track how deep they travelled underwater, how salty the water was and its temperature.

The seals, which can spend 90 minutes underwater at depths of up to

1,500m, reveal a world all but inaccessible to scientists for ten months of the year. During the long Antarctic winter there is no visible light. "No human has ever been here in winter," Yixi Zheng, who led the study, said.

Meltwater is warmer and fresher than the sea, and has a "fingerprint", Zheng said. From the seal data, she and her colleagues were able to show that meltwater gathers in two distinct layers, one in the upper 250 metres, the second at 450 metres deep, joined by scattered meltwater-rich columns.

The relatively buoyant meltwater carries heat that enlarges the patches of open water not covered by ice found at the edge of the glacier. The opening up of these "polynyas" is likely to have knock-on effects, altering the transfer of heat and carbon dioxide between the sea and the air.

The study also shows how the movement of meltwater from the base of the glacier transfers nutrients, such as iron, into the sea.

The iron would have been stripped from the land over which the glacier

travelled during the course of centuries. Its introduction into the sea is likely to fuel the growth of algae, providing food for other creatures and further altering the ecology of the region.

"Normally we think that the melting of glaciers can only change the sea level. Now we are finding that the melting of glaciers is actually changing the climate systems in many different ways," Zheng said.

"What I'd say to a layman is that we still know very little about this very threatening thing."