

Pollution Potential of Cemeteries

Draft Guidance

A cemetery or other form of burial ground (e.g. a “green” site) may have the potential to cause pollution of the environment. The investigation of such sites has been found to be limited, but it is likely that the main receptor for contaminants will be the water environment, and in particular, groundwater.

The need for new burial grounds can be an emotive subject amongst local residents. This will often result in concerns being raised that are disproportionate to the real environmental risks. In determining new planning applications for such proposals, the Local Planning Authority will seek the views of the Environment Agency as a statutory consultee for such matters.

Historically the response to such proposals by the Agency and its predecessors may not always have been consistent either Nationally or Regionally. This may be due, in part, to the lack of a single decision-making framework. However, more significantly there has been limited investigation and research into cemeteries and, as a consequence, it has been difficult to assess the potential impact on the environment.

This project has been carried out to provide guidance which will enable Environment Agency staff to adopt a consistent approach when assessing the risks associated with the development of human or animal burial grounds. The guidance is directed principally at the potential risk to groundwater resources, but account is taken also of possible impact on surface waters, soils and the atmosphere.

The main objectives of this study were therefore:

to review critically published research and case studies related to the potential environmental threat posed by cemeteries and to identify and quantify the actual risks of pollution illustrated, where possible, by reference to published cases;

to collect, collate, compare and review the approaches currently employed by each Region of the Environment Agency in the assessment of proposals for the extension of existing, or development of new cemeteries;

to identify, and describe in detail, those factors which require consideration when assessing the potential impact of a cemetery and to provide guidance on assessing their relative importance on a site specific basis.

Chapter 1 of the Technical Report summarises the legal responsibilities and the current procedures adopted by the Agency. Chapter 2 summarises the findings of the literature review and of communications with interested parties. Chapter 3 expands on the characteristics of cemeteries as a source of pollution. Chapter 4 discusses attenuation of contaminants in pathways from burial sites. Chapter 5 provides guidance on the

assessment of risk from cemeteries, with Chapter 6 giving the Conclusions and Recommendations.

The Technical Report is intended to provide guidance to Agency staff when considering development proposals for new or existing cemeteries. Through the use of this document a consistent, risk based approach, will be adopted nationally by the Agency. It is envisaged that the report will also be of use to local authorities, parish councils and other parties interested in developing and planning future burial sites. In this respect early consultation with the local Environment Agency office is advisable.

This R&D Technical Summary relates to information from project P2-024 contained in the following output:

R&D Technical Report P223: Pollution Potential of Cemeteries - Draft Guidance

R&D Project Record P2/024/1: Pollution Potential of Cemeteries

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Copies of the final report are available internally from Regional Libraries and externally from the Environment Agency's R&D Dissemination Centre, c/o WRc plc (Tel: 01793 865012 fax: 01793 514562).

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