



Ministry of
JUSTICE

Burial Grounds

The results of a survey of burial grounds
in England and Wales

June 2007

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Introduction

In 2001, the Environment Sub-Committee of the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Select Committee identified in its eighth report¹ long-term problems with the provision and maintenance of burial space. The report further identified that there was little or no information readily available about the number, condition and operational status of the country's burial grounds, cemeteries and churchyards. In its response² to the Committee's report, the Government undertook to carry out a survey of burial grounds, and to conduct research into their management, in order to attempt to fill this information gap.

The Home Office, which at that time was the government department responsible for burial policy, commissioned research into the management of burial grounds, including training, planning and maintenance standards. This report³ was published in 2004.

In 2005, following a pilot exercise, the Home Office launched a survey with the objective of gathering information on every piece of land in England and Wales which is, or ever has been, used as a burial ground, and which is not now being used for any other purpose. The survey aimed to capture information on all burial grounds of any nature, ranging from fully-functioning modern cemeteries to centuries-old churchyards. Its purpose was to establish the identity, nature, location, operational status, capacity and management arrangements of every burial ground in England and Wales. This is the first time a survey of this type and scale has been undertaken.

Since that time, responsibility for burials policy passed from the Home Office to the Department for Constitutional Affairs and now lies with the Ministry of Justice. Information on some 9,700 burial grounds has been returned in response to the survey. This report presents the survey results. Statistics are shown for England and Wales as a whole, along with separate data for Wales and the nine Government Office Regions of England.

¹ HC 91-I Cemeteries.

² HC 91 Cemeteries – The Government's Reply to the Eighth Report from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, cm 5281.

³ Wilson B and Robson J, Cemeteries and their management, Home Office online report 1/04, see <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/rdsolr0104.pdf>.

Executive summary

A total of 9,747 burial grounds, cemeteries and churchyards in England and Wales responded to the survey. Of these, 21 per cent were identified as having a first- or second-tier local authority as the burial authority, 70 per cent operated under the Church of England or, in Wales, the Church in Wales, while the remaining 9 per cent includes those owned or managed by other faiths or charitable trusts, woodland cemeteries, and those where the burial authority could not be identified. [see *Table 1*]

Nearly three quarters of local authority burial grounds were open for burials in new graves, with 11 per cent completely closed to new burials and 12 per cent open only for new burials in existing graves. A lesser proportion (64 per cent) of Church of England⁴ burial grounds were open for new burials, while a little under 20 per cent were closed to new burials. Approximately two-thirds of local authority burial grounds located in predominantly major urban areas were open for new burials. [see *Tables 4, 5 and 6*]

For both Church of England and local authority burial grounds it was reported that, overall, approximately 80 per cent of land available for burials was already occupied by graves, with 20 per cent still unused. Twenty per cent of local authority burial land was occupied by graves over one hundred years old, compared to 36 per cent of Church of England burial land. [see *Tables 7 and 8*]

The median predicted time for unused burial land to be filled by new interments was, for those burial grounds that were still open to new burials, 30 years for local authority sites and 25 years for Church of England / Church in Wales locations. In England, burial grounds in mainly urban districts had a slightly lower median predicted period of time until unused land was expected to be filled by new burials than those in principally rural areas. These are aggregate results for England and Wales as a whole, so do not reflect the range of pressures on burial space at more local levels. [see *Tables 7, 8 and 9*]

⁴ Throughout this report, all references to "Church of England" include the Church in Wales unless specifically stated otherwise.

Methodology, coverage and data quality

Survey methodology

The aim of the survey was to identify and obtain information about any area of land that has been specifically set aside for interments. Since there were no central data on the locations of burial grounds in England and Wales, it was decided to post survey questionnaire forms to all Chief Executives of second-tier and unitary authorities in England and Wales, in other words district councils, London boroughs, other metropolitan boroughs and unitary authorities. These were all potentially burial authorities in their own right, and could be expected to be aware of other burial grounds in their area. The forms were then to be forwarded on to officials of first-tier and other authorities known to have responsibility for the management of burial grounds, cemeteries and any non-Church of England churchyards in their area. Following the initial distribution of forms, a further exercise was undertaken to confirm their receipt, and, where appropriate, their onward transmission. There was also some further spot-checking of the receipt and return of the forms. Forms were separately distributed to all clergy in the Church of England through their diocesan network. Separate arrangements were made by the Welsh Assembly for distribution of the questionnaires in Wales.

When the forms were returned, data cleansing was undertaken in order to, for example, correct any obvious response errors, data entry errors occurring when transferring the data into electronic format, and any duplicate returns. Geographical coding of addresses and other location information provided on the survey forms was carried out with support from officials at Communities and Local Government (CLG). MOJ would like to thank CLG colleagues for their assistance and guidance in this work.

Coverage and data quality

In total, over 9,700 unique survey questionnaire responses were received. However, as there is no comprehensive list of burial ground locations to compare the set of returned survey forms against, there is no reliable way of estimating the degree of coverage that has been achieved. The Wilson report (see footnote on page 3) estimated that there are between 16,000 and 18,000 Church of England burial grounds and nearly 2,000 Church in Wales burial grounds. Just under 7,000 survey returns were received from Church of England or Church in Wales sites, suggesting that coverage of these burial grounds could be approximately 35 to 40 per cent of the total.

The degree of coverage is less clear for those burial grounds where the burial authority is some tier of local authority. In London, about 120 survey forms were returned from cemeteries, whereas a report by the London Planning Advisory Committee in the mid-1990s⁵ suggested that, at the time, there were 147 cemeteries in the capital. That would suggest that the survey's coverage in that part of the country is high – although responses were not received from several boroughs and it is known that some responses have not been received for some sites. Elsewhere in England and Wales the coverage picture is less clear. Since either or both first- and second-tier local authorities may provide burial grounds in their areas, but neither are under an obligation to do so, the number

⁵ London Planning Advisory Committee, *Burial Space Needs in London*, 1997.

of local authority burial grounds cannot readily be predicted. However, a total of 1,900 survey forms were returned from areas (other than London) where the burial authority was a local authority.

Another possible indicator of coverage can be derived from the total number of burials taking place. Responses to the survey reported a total of close to 90,000 burials taking place in the financial year 2003/04. There are just over half a million deaths per year in England and Wales, with approximately 30 per cent of them resulting in burial⁶. This suggests that the number of burials in any given 12-month period is roughly 150,000. These figures suggest that the survey has covered somewhere in the region of 60 per cent of overall burial capacity – though not necessarily the same proportion of individual burial sites.

The survey has thus not been able to obtain data from every burial location in England and Wales, as originally intended. Although a significant amount of response chasing was undertaken, the outcome suggests that near-full coverage would only be likely to be achieved if provision of the data were a statutory obligation supported by a well-resourced communications effort including highly pro-active response chasing. Since coverage was not complete, the survey has a number of limitations and biases which should be borne in mind when interpreting the results. It seems probable that responses are more likely to have been received from burial grounds that are still open and actively managed, and that it is those that have been closed and not maintained for many years which will be more poorly represented among the respondents.

Nevertheless, with nearly 10,000 questionnaire responses received in total, the survey results form a significant repository of detailed data covering a large number of burial grounds across the England and Wales. The results appear to provide a good illustration of the wide range of types and size of burial grounds, their operational status, the pressures on burial space, and the different burial authority arrangements, at both a national and regional level.

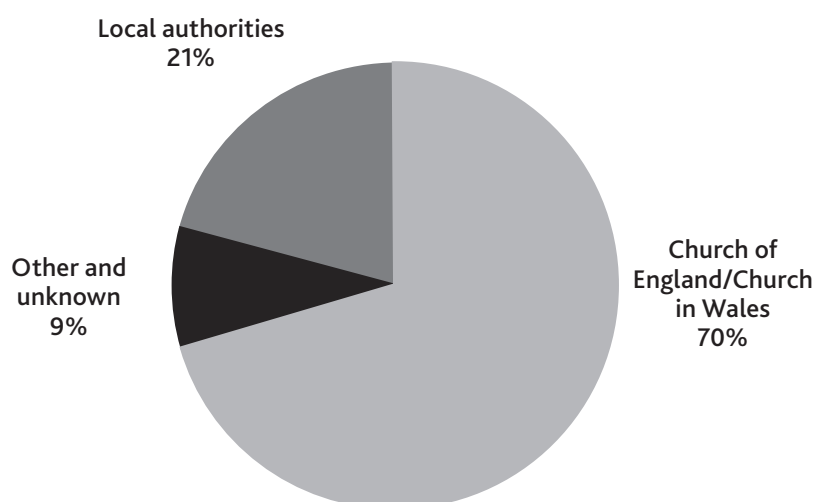
⁶ HC 902-I Constitutional Affairs Select Committee Eighth Report, 2006.

Commentary

Location, type and burial authorities [Table 1, Table 2 and Figure A]

Responses to the survey were received from a total of 9,747 burial grounds, cemeteries and churchyards in England and Wales. Of these, 2,031 (21 per cent) were identified as having a first- or second-tier local authority as the burial authority, be it parish, community or town councils, district councils, unitary authorities or, in London, borough councils. A further 6,840 (70 per cent) operated under the Church of England (or, in Wales, the Church in Wales). The remaining 876 (9 per cent) includes those owned or managed by other faiths or charitable trusts, natural burial grounds, commercial concerns, and those where ownership was not specified or clearly identifiable from the questionnaire response.

Figure A: Number of burial grounds by type of burial authority



Detailed geographic coding was undertaken, with the help of officials at Communities and Local Government, to provide accurate information on the location of burial grounds responding to the survey. For the ten regions of England and Wales, the total number of survey responses ranged from 1,522 in the South West to 330 in London. As has already been noted, it is difficult to know whether, or by how much, the different regional level of survey responses is a reflection of the true picture of the number of burial grounds across the country or rather the result of varying rates of survey coverage.

At a national level, churchyards were the most common type of burial ground, accounting for 7,316, or 75 per cent, of the total. A further 1,819 sites (19 per cent) were identified as cemeteries or other forms of burial ground. The remaining 6 per cent did not specify this on their survey form and could not be clearly identified as one or the other from the other information provided. A similar relative proportion of churchyards was also seen in most of the ten regions, although in London, the North East and Wales the proportion of churchyards was much lower at less than 60 per cent. Some 10 per cent of local authority sites were local authority-maintained churchyards.

Rural / urban classification of burial grounds [Table 3]

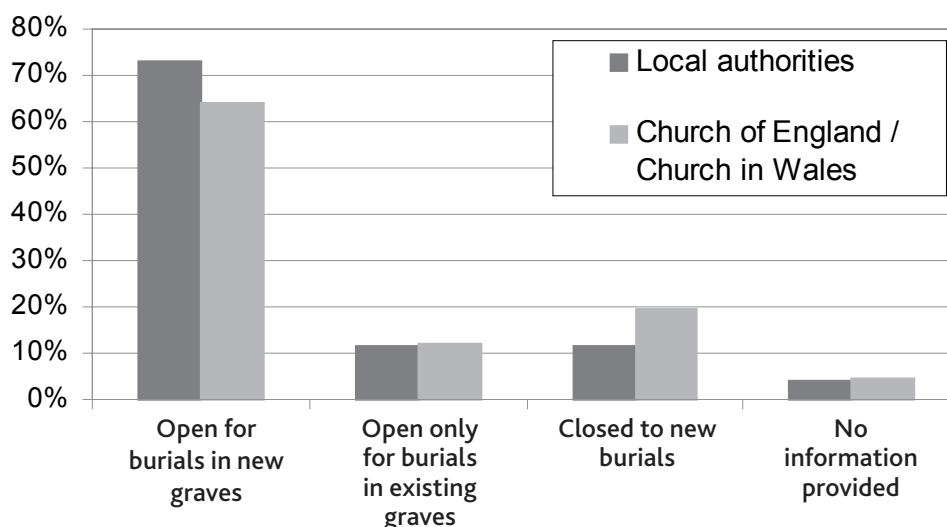
The geo-coded location information was used to estimate a rural / urban breakdown of burial grounds in England. Where possible, each burial ground was assigned one of six classifications of rurality. This was achieved by categorising the rurality of the local or unitary district within which each burial ground was located in accordance with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs’s (Defra) recommended method. (For more information, see Appendix A or the Defra website: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/ruralstats/rural-definition.htm>).

It should be noted, however, that it was not possible from the geo-coded information to identify a rurality category for over 40 per cent of burial grounds. This includes all burial grounds in Wales, which are not covered by the Defra classification. Of those burial grounds that could be assigned a rurality level, a third (33 per cent) were located within a “Rural-80” local or unitary authority district (that is, where at least 80 per cent of the population lives in rural settlements and larger market towns). Fifteen per cent were situated in a “Major Urban” area, defined as having either 100,000 people or 50 per cent of its population living in an urban area with a population of at least 750,000. Just under 60 per cent of those Church of England burial grounds that could be classified were in “Rural-50” or “Rural-80” areas, compared to 40 per cent of local authority sites.

Operational status [Tables 4 to 6 and Figure B]

Across England and Wales as a whole, nearly a quarter (23 per cent) of local authority burial grounds were either closed completely to new burials (11 per cent) or open only for burials in existing graves (12 per cent). Over 30 per cent of Church of England burial grounds reported that they were closed to burials in new graves (19 per cent) or permitting only burials in existing graves (12 per cent). Just under two-thirds (64 per cent) of Church of England burial grounds were open for new burials, compared to nearly three quarters (73 per cent) of local authority sites. Information on operational status was not provided by about 4 per cent of respondents.

Figure B: Operational status of local authority and Church of England / Church in Wales burial grounds



There was a significant degree of variation between the regions. In London, the survey results indicate that there is already considerable pressure on the existing burial space. Only half (50 per cent) of local authority burial grounds and fewer than a quarter (21 per cent) of Church of England burial grounds were open to burials in new graves. Forty-one per cent of Church of England sites in the capital were “full” and completely closed to new burials. In Wales, however, 73 per cent of Church in Wales burial grounds and 85 per cent of local authority sites reported that they were open to burials in new graves, with only a few per cent of locations completely closed. It should be noted that these figures present summary data for the burial grounds within each region as a whole, so do not indicate where much more acute pressure on burial land is being experienced on a more localised level.

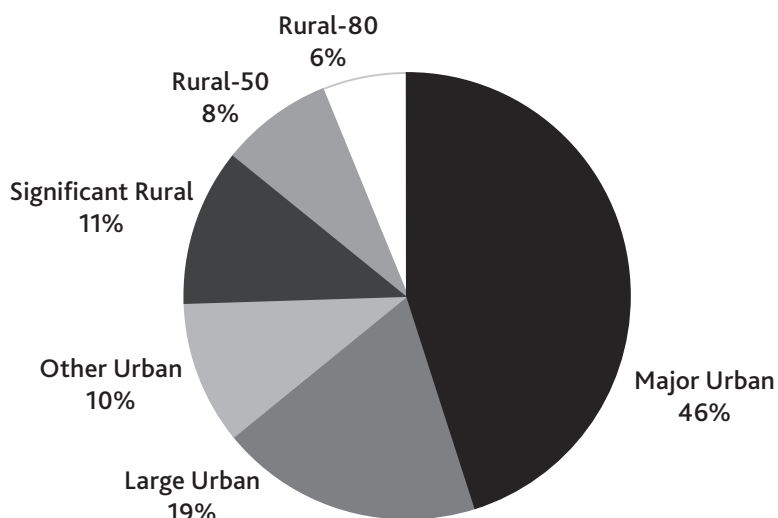
A much smaller proportion of Church of England burial grounds in predominantly urban areas were open to new burials than those in mainly rural districts. Around 40 per cent of Church of England burial grounds in districts classified as urban were open to new burials, while around 30 per cent were closed to new burials. By contrast, approximately 70 per cent of Church of England burial grounds in rural districts were open to new burials with about 17 per cent closed. Sixty-one per cent of local authority burial grounds in “Major Urban” districts were open for new burials, a lower proportion than in the other five rural / urban classifications.

Area usable for burials [Tables 7 to 9, Figure C and Figure D]

Many burial grounds include areas set aside for the interment of cremated remains. The information on the area of burial grounds still available for use for burials presented in this section and the predicted future period of operation of burial grounds in the following section, relates specifically to burial plots and land set aside for burials, not to areas set aside for cremation.

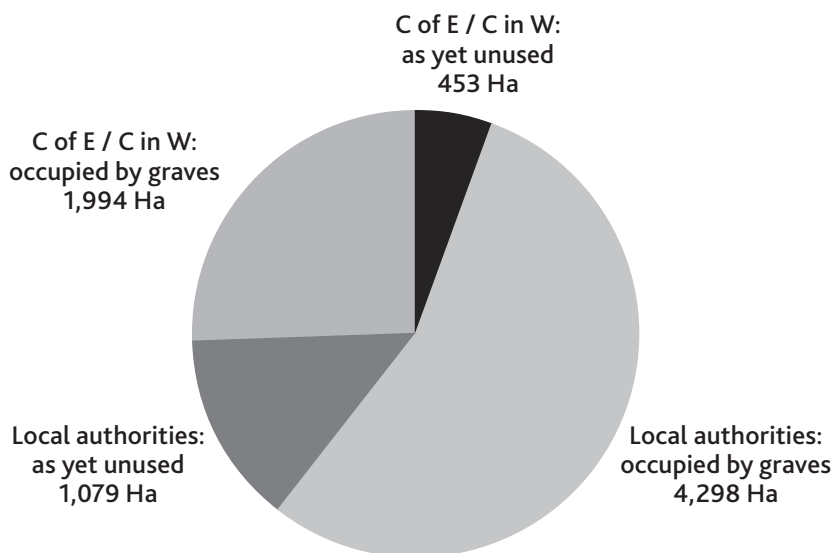
Some 1,757 of the 2,031 local authority burial grounds responding to the survey gave details of the area of burial land at the site. These sites had an estimated total area of 5,378 hectares of land suitable for burials (i.e. excluding land which is part of the burial ground but is unsuitable for burials, for reasons such as being prone to waterlogging, too steep, or set aside for the burial or scattering of cremated remains). Their average size was therefore just over three hectares (seven to eight acres) each. Overall, eighty per cent of the land was occupied by graves with twenty per cent set aside for burials but as yet unused. Of those local authority burial grounds in England that could be assigned a rural / urban classification, sites located in “Major Urban” and “Large Urban” districts accounted for just under two-thirds (64 per cent) of the total area usable for burials.

Figure C: Total area of local authority burial grounds in England usable for burials, by rural / urban classification (where known)



Church of England burial grounds are on average much smaller; their 5,497 sites able to provide area information totalled 2,400 hectares of land suitable for burials, an average of just under half a hectare, or a little over an acre, each. However, the proportion of land already occupied by graves was very similar to that of local authority burial grounds, at 81 per cent.

Figure D: Total area of local authority and Church of England / Church in Wales burial grounds usable for burials, in hectares



Perhaps unsurprisingly, given its high proportion of burial grounds closed to new burials, London overall had the smallest proportion of land available for new burials: just 4 per cent of Church of England and 14 per cent of local authority burial land is available for new burials there. In the South West, a quarter of local authority burial land and a fifth per cent of Church of England burial land was unused at the time of the survey. Burial grounds in predominantly urban areas of England had, overall, a lower proportion of land available for new burials than sites in rural parts of the country.

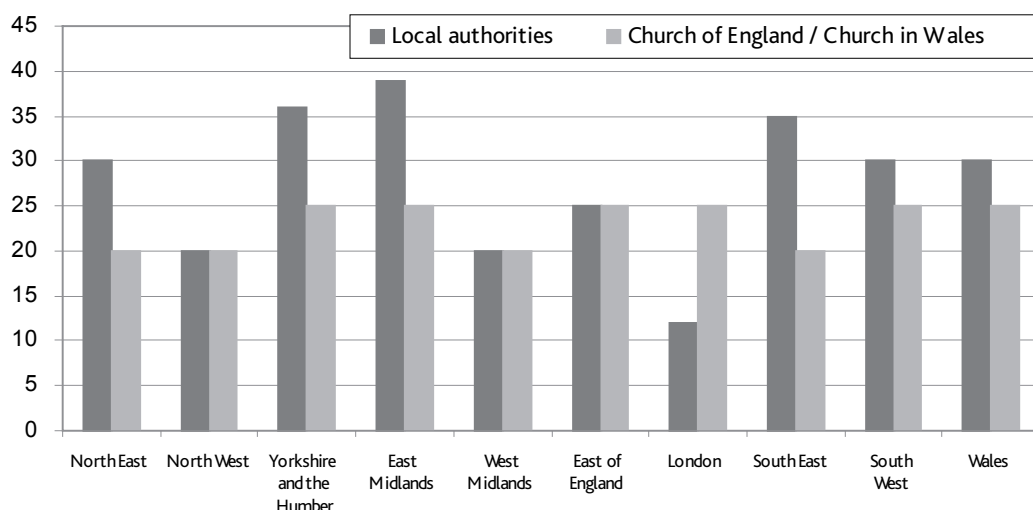
The survey also requested an estimate of the proportion of burial land that was occupied by graves that were greater than one hundred years old. Overall, 20 per cent of all local authority burial land was so utilised, close to the same total area of land as still available for new burials, and amounting to roughly a quarter (26 per cent) of used land. Thirty-six per cent of Church of England burial land in total was occupied by graves greater than one hundred years old, which comprised 46 per cent of the land already in use.

Predicted future period of operation [Tables 7 to 9 and Figure E]

The burial ground survey questionnaire asked for information on the expected number of years remaining before any land that was available for burials in new graves but not yet used would be filled by new interments. The average (mean) predicted remaining period of operation of both local authority burial grounds and Church of England burial grounds surveyed was 45 years. The median predicted remaining lifetime, however, was in both cases much lower, at 30 years and 25 years respectively. These differences between means and medians indicate that the predicted future period of operation data are positively skewed: many burial grounds' predicted period of operation are lower than the mean, which is pushed upwards by a relatively small number of burial grounds with a comparatively large unused capacity for new interments. All the regions also show this marked positive skew seen at the national level. Note that these figures relate solely to those burial grounds that are still open for burials in new graves and reported a predicted future period of operation. Burial grounds completely closed to new burials or open only for burials in existing graves are excluded.

Church of England burial grounds had a very similar pattern of predicted future periods of operation across the regions. Most regions had a median figure of 20-25 years and a mean figure of a little over 40 years. There appeared to be more variation in the predicted remaining future period of operation between regions for the local authority burial grounds. Those in the East Midlands had a mean predicted remaining period of operation of 52 years and a median of 39 years. By contrast, local authority burial grounds in London had a mean of 37 years and a median of just 12 years.

Figure E: Median predicted future period of operation of local authority and Church of England / Church in Wales burial grounds, by region



Burial grounds in urban districts appeared to have a slightly lower median predicted future period of operation than those in rural areas.

The data presented in this report are aggregate results for England and Wales and their constituent regions, and so do not reflect the range of pressures on burial space at a more local level. Nevertheless, the figures show that across the country there will be heightened pressures on space in burial grounds across all sectors over the next 10 to 20 years.

Number of burials [Table 10]

The large majority of burials in recent years have taken place at local authority burial grounds. In England and Wales as a whole, a total of nearly one million burials took place in the 10 years preceding the survey at local authority or Church of England / Church in Wales burial grounds providing a response. The large majority, accounting for over three-quarters (77 per cent) of the total, were undertaken at local authority burial grounds. The results also show a significant regional variation in the proportion of burials taking place at local authority burial grounds, ranging from 59 per cent in the South West to 95 per cent in London. It is difficult to say, however, if and by how much these differences are the result of varying rates of survey coverage rather than a reflection of genuine regional patterns.

The total number of burials reported as taking place during the financial year April 2003 to March 2004 at burial grounds responding to the survey was approximately 87,000. This is lower than the overall annual average of 98,000 reported during the 10 years preceding the survey. The proportion of those burials occurring in local authority burial grounds was 79 per cent, slightly higher than the overall proportion for the previous decade. It is not possible to deduce from the survey results whether or not the 2003/04 figures indicate a trend towards fewer burials overall and a greater proportion of burials in local authority burial grounds in recent years.

Finance [Table 11]

In general, in the 2003/04 financial year, the most recent complete financial year at the time the survey was launched, a higher proportion of the costs of local authority burial grounds were met by income such as fees or a local authority budget, than in the case of Church of England burial grounds. Just under a half (44 per cent) of local authority burial grounds in England and Wales were reported to have more than 75 per cent of costs met by income, compared with a little under a quarter (24 per cent) for Church of England sites. Many Church of England burial grounds benefited from voluntary financial contributions: 35 per cent were reported to receive income in this form. Only three per cent of local authority burial grounds were reported to receive voluntary financial contributions.

Staffing [Table 12]

A quarter of the survey responses relating to local authority burial grounds reported that no staff were directly employed, either relying on voluntary help or not being actively maintained. More than three-quarters (79 per cent) of the Church of England responses reported that no staff were directly employed, and nearly as many (74 per cent) reported that they received practical help and assistance from volunteers. The figures in respect of burial grounds not directly employing any staff are likely to be an underestimate; an additional 11 per cent of local authority responses and 14

per cent of Church of England responses in the survey did not provide any information in relation to this issue, which in many cases is expected to indicate that no staff are employed.

In some 60 per cent of local authority burial grounds, some, but fewer than five full-time equivalent (FTE), staff were employed. This compares with an equivalent figure of just 7 per cent for Church of England burial grounds. Fewer than 100 burial grounds in total in England and Wales were staffed by five or more FTE staff members, most of which were run by local authorities.

Grounds maintenance [Table 13]

Many burial grounds are actively maintained. This is usually done either by staff employed to do so or by volunteers. The large majority of burial grounds (79 per cent of local authority and 63 per cent of Church of England or Church in Wales) operate a “traditional” maintenance policy – regularly cutting the grass, pruning hedgerows, planting flowers, and so on – across the entire site. A quarter of Church of England burial grounds reported operating a deliberate policy towards allowing plants to grow freely and wildlife to thrive in at least a part of the burial land, including those that operate as part of the Living Churchyards and Cemeteries scheme. Some 11 per cent of local authority burial grounds also operate a deliberate policy towards allowing plants and wildlife to flourish on some or all of the site.

Public access arrangements [Table 14]

The large majority of burial grounds for which survey responses permit public access to the site at any time. This was the case for over 90 per cent of Church of England burial grounds and nearly two-thirds (62 per cent) of local authority sites. In a further 29 per cent of local authority burial grounds, public access is allowed only during the daytime, while in a further 6 per cent of sites access is permitted only by visitors making a prior arrangement. A significantly higher proportion of burial grounds in London were reported to permit access only during the daytime than in other parts of the country.

Criminal activity [Table 15]

The survey also asked whether there had been any incidents of criminal activity that were known to have taken place at each burial ground during the previous twelve months. For many burial grounds (43 per cent of local authority respondents and 57 per cent of Church of England respondents), no criminal activity was reported to have taken place. It is likely that most, if not all, of the further 15 to 16 per cent of burial grounds for which no information on criminal activity was provided also experienced no criminal activity. One third of local authority burial grounds had been the scene of disorderly or anti-social behaviour, such as drinking or drug use, in the year preceding the survey, with a similar number reported to have had at least one incident of theft or other criminal damage. Burial grounds in London were reported to have experienced a higher incidence of violent crime than the other regions. Note that these figures do not indicate the number of criminal incidents that took place at burial grounds, but the different forms of criminal activity known to have occurred.

Safety procedures and plans [Table 16]

For the large majority of local authority burial grounds in England and Wales, safety procedures were reported to be in place. Over three quarters (77 per cent) had safety procedures for memorials, covering the design, installation, foundations and repair. Inspection and audit plans existed for 81 per cent, while 79 per cent had safety plans for plot layouts, grave digging and ground care. Proportionally fewer Church of England burial grounds had such safety procedures in place than at local authority sites; for example, just over half (55 per cent) had safety procedures for memorials.

The large majority of burial grounds had an up to date diagrammatic plan of burial plots at the site. However, approximately one in eight of local authority burial grounds and one-third of Church of England burial grounds had no up to date diagrammatic plan of burial plots, with a further four to five per cent providing no information.