



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

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A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Dear Sharon".

Mourners' right to visit cemeteries

I have had reports from local residents saying their cemetery has shut because of Coronavirus measures, so I have looked closely at the Government guidance. Whilst the guidance – backed by new regulations – is clear-cut on funerals, crematoria and graveyards linked to a crematorium the Government have not advised all cemeteries should close. I set out the detail for you below.

There has been a mixed response to the national guidance from local authorities across the country. Some, like Rotherham and Doncaster, have decided to close cemeteries while other areas have kept theirs open.ⁱ Barnsley's cemeteries are still open, though they ask visitors to take notice of social distancing guidelines. Parish councils tend to follow the lead of their Borough council.

In South Yorkshire, Rotherham and Doncaster have cited the *Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020*, which came into force on 26 March 2020.

Section 5, Part 8 of this calls for the closure of crematorium grounds.ⁱⁱ The regulation does not specifically mention cemeteries. This ambiguity has helpfully been picked up by the Institute of Cemeteries and Crematorium Management (ICCM), who have checked with Government to clear up this confusion. Their view – issued this week – is now clear-cut: the guidance does not say that all cemeteries must close.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is traumatic for those who have lost loved ones that attendance at funerals and cremations has been restricted in the national fight against Coronavirus but I think people largely accept this is necessary and in line with Public Health guidance on social distancing. However, stopping the bereaved from visiting the graves of those they've loved and lost is different, if this is done in a safe way and in the open air.



Graveside mourning is a private affair, not a social gathering. It is in the open air and low risk, which is why the new national guidance does not say all cemeteries should be closed; only those burial grounds linked to a crematorium.

I do not want to see Rotherham and councils add to a family's grief, so I am asking you to:

- Review the decision to close all our local authority cemeteries, and reopen those that are not attached to the crematorium
- Encourage Parish Councils to do the same with the cemeteries they run.

I am also writing to Health Secretary Matt Hancock MP, Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick MP and Justice Secretary Robert Buckland MP to urge the Government to clear up the confusion caused by their early guidance and make this very clear to the public, rather than leave this to the ICCM.

I look forward to your response to the points and the concern in my letter.

With good wishes

John Healey MP

ⁱ Rotherham.gov/Emergencies/Coronavirus <https://www.rotherham.gov.uk/emergencies-1/coronavirus?documentId=464&categoryId=20115>

ⁱⁱ S5 - (8) A person who is responsible for a crematorium or burial ground must ensure that, during the emergency period, the crematorium is closed to members of the public, except for funerals or burials. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2020/350/made>

ⁱⁱⁱ 6 April ICCM newsletter "It is important to note that although cemeteries in England, Scotland and Wales are not required to be closed, they may be closed if they are being misused and health and safety are being put at risk." <https://www.iccm-uk.com/iccm/wp-content/library/Covid-19%20Newsletter%206%20April%202020.pdf>