# UK cities embrace digital graveyards and grave reuse as burial space runs out



As urban areas in the UK grapple with dwindling burial space, experts are turning to innovative solutions such as digital graveyards. With the United Nations predicting nearly 90 million global deaths by 2048, the urgency for alternative interment methods is becoming increasingly apparent. The Law Commission has already sounded the alarm, revealing that England and Wales' urban centres are rapidly running out of capacity for traditional burials. In 2024 alone, there were 568,613 recorded deaths in these regions amidst a backdrop of overcrowded cemeteries, which has propelled discussions around optimising existing grave sites. Suggestions include reopening closed Victorian-era burial grounds and reusing old graves, a process that would only occur after 75 years since the last burial to ensure due respect is paid to the deceased.

The Necropolis 4.0 report offers a future-forward perspective, advocating for a shift from conventional graves to more sustainable and technologically integrated memorials. As articulated by Dr. Farzan Baradaran Rahimi of MacEwan University, this approach could involve biodegradable capsules that, upon burial, foster the growth of trees or shrubs, thereby contributing positively to the environment. The report envisages a landscape where individuals can upload their memories to a digital database, creating interactive experiences with holograms that reflect on their lives. Such transformations could redefine societal attitudes towards death, making the concept of a "digital graveyard" not merely a possibility but an emerging reality.

While some areas have already begun addressing the space constraints through modern methods, such as the innovative approaches taken by the City of London Cemetery and Crematorium, others are still facing a pressing need for action. In 2016, this cemetery's management converted a waste area into a space for an additional 3,000 graves, demonstrating a proactive stance towards burial space. Their policy of grave reuse—coupled with strict regulations to ensure that graves selected for reuse are over 75 years old—has led to a considerable percentage of burials now occurring in reused graves. This initiative is part of a broader strategy to manage the ongoing shortage effectively.

Consultations are happening at various local levels to explore feasible solutions. For instance, Sheffield City Council has initiated a review to assess burial sites with the expectation that some cemeteries may run out of space within the next five years. Similar problems have arisen in Reading, where local authority projections suggest that the borough will face a complete lack of burial space by 2029 unless measures are taken. Here, the council advocates for cremations as a viable alternative and has formed a working group to delve deeper into the issue. Meanwhile, Fife Council has ceased the pre-sale of burial plots as a stop-gap in its strategy against limited capacity, reinforcing the necessity to expand cemetery space as a high priority.

In light of the ongoing discussions, the Law Commission's proposals for reusing graves and re-opening old burial sites highlight a critical point: Without intervention, these ground facilities risk falling into disrepair or becoming areas characterised by anti-social behaviour. As cities navigate these unprecedented challenges associated with death and burial, the notion of blending technological advancements with traditional practices may well represent the future of how society remembers and honours its deceased.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2063984/uk-cities-may-need-adopt-digital-graveyards-burial-spaces-dwindle), [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/oct/03/graves-could-be-reused-under-proposals-to-tackle-lack-of-space-for-the-dead)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2063984/uk-cities-may-need-adopt-digital-graveyards-burial-spaces-dwindle), [[2]](https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/news/2016/05/city-of-london-cemetery-will-never-run-out-of-space), [[5]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/10/03/graves-law-commission-nick-hopkins-burial-legislation/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-south-yorkshire-67986563), [[6]](https://www.readingchronicle.co.uk/news/24028653.cost-graves-reading-burial-space-runs/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[7]](https://www.fifetoday.co.uk/news/politics/council/pre-sale-of-burial-lairs-in-fife-to-cease-as-cemeteries-are-running-out-of-space-4744364)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2063984/uk-cities-may-need-adopt-digital-graveyards-burial-spaces-dwindle> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/news/2016/05/city-of-london-cemetery-will-never-run-out-of-space> - In 2016, the City of London Cemetery & Crematorium in Newham, managed by the City of London Corporation, addressed the national shortage of grave space by converting a waste area into space for 3,000 new graves. This expansion, combined with a grave re-use policy, ensures the cemetery can offer burial space indefinitely. Graves chosen for re-use must be over 75 years old, with notices posted for six months beforehand. If there is an objection, the grave remains untouched; otherwise, the new inscription is engraved on the back of the headstone, which is then reversed, preserving the old inscription. Since 2009, over 1,500 graves have been recycled at the site, with over 60% of burials now in reused graves, partly because they are cheaper. The cemetery works with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to ensure that the graves of those who died of war-related injuries in the First and Second World Wars, and civilians who died as a result of enemy action during WW2, including the Blitz, are not re-used. The City of London Cemetery & Crematorium is Europe’s largest municipal burial ground, with almost 800,000 burials and cremations since 1856. It is Grade I-listed and contains eight Grade II listed buildings, as well as the remains of footballer Bobby Moore, victims of Jack the Ripper, Dame Anna Neagle, and Winston Churchill’s nanny.
3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-south-yorkshire-67986563> - In 2023, Sheffield City Council launched a review of burial sites to ensure sufficient space over the next 25 years. Cemeteries are becoming full due to a lack of forward planning, little investment, and no clear funding direction. The council estimates there is enough space for around five years before capacity is reached in some cemeteries. Tinsley Park Cemetery has already closed to new burials as there is no way to expand the land around it. The council is keen to find new land to build modern and greener cemeteries and improve facilities at current sites.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/oct/03/graves-could-be-reused-under-proposals-to-tackle-lack-of-space-for-the-dead> - In October 2024, the Law Commission proposed that graves could be reused and closed burial grounds reopened to address the shortage of burial space in urban areas. The proposal is part of a public consultation on updating 170-year-old burial laws in England and Wales. The commission warned that urban areas are fast running out of burial space, with many cemeteries already full. Proposed changes would allow burial grounds to reuse graves, but only after public consultation and government approval. Safeguards would also be in place for each individual grave, with plots only eligible for reuse when the last person was buried at least 75 years ago.
5. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/10/03/graves-law-commission-nick-hopkins-burial-legislation/> - In October 2024, the Law Commission proposed that graves may be reopened to bury the dead under plans to tackle the shortage of space in Britain’s overcrowded cemeteries. The Commission warned that failure to reuse graves meant burial grounds and cemeteries no longer had 'a useful life', which meant they were at risk of falling into ruin or becoming sites for anti-social behaviour. The proposal is part of a package of measures that would seek to reopen Church of England churchyards shut by the Victorians and give funeral directors powers to dispose of people’s ashes because of a backlog of 250,000 pots built up by laws banning them from scattering them without families’ consent.
6. <https://www.readingchronicle.co.uk/news/24028653.cost-graves-reading-burial-space-runs/> - In 2024, Reading Borough Council revealed that it is running out of space for new graves. The council estimates that Reading will run out of space for new graves within seven years, and unless alternatives are found, by 2029 burials will no longer be able to take place in the borough. The council is encouraging people to opt for cremations instead of being buried and has set up a working group to look at the matter in more detail.
7. <https://www.fifetoday.co.uk/news/politics/council/pre-sale-of-burial-lairs-in-fife-to-cease-as-cemeteries-are-running-out-of-space-4744364> - In August 2024, Fife Council's Cabinet committee agreed to cease the pre-sale of burial lairs as cemeteries across the region are running out of space. The council will also reclaim lairs sold more than 50 years ago that have never been used and have no successors. The cemetery strategy includes developing new cemeteries in areas of high priority and generally expanding cemetery capacity across the Kingdom. A Fife-wide consultation last year revealed that 92% of respondents believed that doing nothing is not an option that the council should consider.