

APSE Health and Safety Webinar: Issues and Actions

To: All APSE contacts, England and Wales

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1 Executive summary

Recent tragic events surrounding trees, memorials and waste services have brought into sharp focus the need for local authorities to have robust health and safety policies. To support our APSE members an online seminar was held that brought together a range of experts – exploring the considerations and processes that authorities need to have in place to meet the legislation, maintain safe working practices, and mitigate the risk to communities.

2 Management of the risk from falling trees or branches

The first speaker, Wayne Owen, HM Inspector of Health and Safety from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), discussed how to effectively manage risk from falling trees and branches, which result in around 5-6 fatalities every year. He outlined the [operational guidance provided by the HSE](#) covering the duties under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974.

Recognising that the large number of trees in public places across the UK makes individual inspection and recording impractical and disproportionate, the guidance instead states that individual inspections should take place if the tree:

- Is situated in a place frequently visited by the public;

- Has been identified, for example, as having structural faults that are likely to make it unstable; and
- A decision has been made to retain it with these faults.

In terms of a day-to-day management system for tree safety, it must meet the requirements as set out in the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 and the associated ACOP. The HSE recommends a 'zoning' system, which categorises trees according to their potential risk to the public and whether there is frequent public access. This allows for an approach which prioritises public safety, while also being proportionate and manageable for inspectors and enforcement officers.

Organisations such as the [National Tree Safety Group](#) (NTSG) can provide further guidance and assistance to local authorities. The NTSG recently published their '[Common sense risk management of trees](#)' document, which gives a detailed breakdown of the risks and benefits provided by trees, a legal overview, and practical implementation guidance.

Further training on tree safety and management is provided by Lantra – whose partners include the HSE, National Highways and Forestry England. Courses on tree safety include highway, professional and internal tree inspections, their full training offering can [be found here](#).

APSE Training also offers Parks managers a range of training resources including '[An introduction to Parks Management](#)' and '[Advanced Parks Management; Sustainable Finance](#)'.

3 Managing cemetery memorial health and safety

Our second speaker, Rebecca Patton from Warrington Borough Council, presented on the inspection of memorials in cemeteries, outlining the legal duties and procedures to ensure health and safety while maintaining respect for these spaces. Again, the Health and Safety at Work Act forms the basis of the council's duty to safeguard employees. Ministry of Justice guidance on safety in burial grounds states "operatives should adopt a risk-based and proportionate approach to managing memorials". They also state that authorities have a duty of care to any member of the public using a cemetery, whilst affirming the need for respect and reverence of the space.

Like the safety management approach to trees in public spaces, 'priority zones' within cemeteries should be identified, which include areas of high footfall, new burial areas, the sides of pathways and roads, areas where children may play, car park spots and memorials of well-known people. Like with any other safety inspection, protective and preventative measures should be taken, including full training to all personnel involved, appropriate PPE and awareness of others and equipment - extra care should be taken to respect the space, such as not walking across any memorials.

Although cemeteries are not generally considered high-risk places, they do include some unique risks, such as grave excavation spaces and some memorials which may be unstable. Processes regarding memorials include visual inspections, hand testing, lean recording and topple testing. Memorials found to be unstable may be cordoned off, laid flat or 'sunk in' as temporary or permanent safety measures. Importantly, any action taken must preserve inscriptions and maintain respect for the space.

[Rebecca's full presentation can be viewed here.](#)

APSE Training also offers some courses which may assist those working in the sector including [The Burial and Cremation Scotland Act 2016](#) and [Legal and Practical Management of Cemeteries](#) and ['Making Space for Nature in Burial Grounds and Churchyards](#). Such broad training helps to skill staff across the council service alongside the appropriate training and guidance on specific issues of safety.

APSE Performance Networks has also developed an easy to use app. specifically to record Memorial Inspections. Full training on the app. is made available to subscribing member councils prior to data collection commencing through the app. [You can learn more about the Memorial Inspection app. through this link.](#)

Health and safety in waste and environmental services

The third speaker was Jonathan Cowlan, Health and Safety Consultant at Pinsent Masons, who presented on health and safety in the waste and environmental services sector, focusing on the role of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), a sector safety overview, recent prosecutions, and new industry guidance.

HSE's core functions in the sector include both announced and unannounced on-site inspections, investigating accidents and complaints, providing guidance through visits and events, and taking enforcement action. The waste sector has a dedicated HSE Principal Inspector, who assists HSE Inspectors to oversee safety covering municipal and industrial waste collection, waste reception, sorting, processing, material recovery, biological and thermal treatment of organic materials, and landfills.

In 2023-24, the waste sector was the second worst for fatalities per 100,000 workers – with four worker deaths and one member of the public – all of which were struck by a moving vehicle or object. From 2017-24, the sector was the worst in terms of non-fatal incidents, with 4000 injuries – 32% were caused by slips, trips and falls, 25% from handling, carrying or lifting, and 12% from being struck by a moving object. Ill health rates were also the worst in any sector, with 5000 new or long-standing cases from 2015–24, mainly musculoskeletal disorders and work-related stress, anxiety or depression, which accounted for 85% of cases.

Recent prosecutions included fines of £250,000 after a man was seriously injured after being hit by a shovel loader while hand picking litter, £100,000 at a waste and recycling centre where three compactors posed a risk of serious injury and £650,000 for repeated failures to segregate vehicles from pedestrians.

Jonathan concluded with a review of updated industry guidance, including WISH publications on containment walls, traffic management at waste and recycling centres, landfill traffic safety, and new Pan-European guidance on handling and treating waste lithium batteries.

[You can view Jonathan's full presentation here.](#)

APSE also hosts a '[Health and Safety in Waste and Environmental Services](#)' training course with Pinsent Mason

4 Lithium batteries and fire risk

Next up was Geoff Smallwood from the Waste Industry Safety and Health Working Group (WISH), who provided an overview of the fire risk from lithium batteries and the damage they are causing across the waste and recycling sector.

Although fire risks have always existed in the waste industry, such as poorly extinguished barbeques and gas cylinders, the recent proliferation of lithium batteries in household waste – mainly because of disposable vapes – has equated to around 40 – 50% of all significant and damaging waste and recycling site fires, amounting to more than 200 a year. Geoff explained that although coherent data for waste collection fires was not available, small-scale surveys and anecdotal evidence suggest fires have increased in recent years from around one a week to one a day, with many attributed to lithium batteries.

Currently, there is little guidance on the specific fire risks caused by lithium batteries to waste collection vehicles, although WISH and the fire and rescue services are working on creating guidance and approaches. However, preventative measures are much more difficult, as waste and recycling operators are generally not in control of what people put in waste bins. An estimated 5-8 million vapes are disposed of every week in the UK, the correct disposal route is via 'take-back' bins at retail stores or at local waste and recycling sites – research indicates only 17% of vapes are disposed of correctly.

Despite disposable vapes being banned from sale on 1 June 2025, vape manufacturers are now producing reusable vapes at a similar price point to the now-banned disposable ones – meaning that the problem is unlikely to disappear.

[You can view Geoff's full presentation here.](#)

5 Violence and aggression towards recycling industry staff

The final speaker was Jim Brown, Chair of SWITCH, a multi-partnership forum made up of organisations across all sectors within the resource management industry that supports continual improvement in health and safety, as well as education, training and development opportunities.

His presentation covered the increasing violence and aggression faced by waste and recycling sector staff, including verbal abuse, physical threats and other dangerous behaviours. These incidents have worsened since the Covid-19 pandemic and have not significantly decreased since. In response, SWITCH launched a campaign to raise awareness around this issue, highlighting that staff are merely enforcing regulations and not being responsible for them. The videos feature real stories from affected staff, giving firsthand accounts of abusive behaviour.

According to research, over 30% of waste management employees have reported experiencing

some form of abuse. Common triggers include missed collections, dissatisfaction with recycling rules, and misunderstandings about staff roles – with workers often enforcing rather than setting policies. Examples from the campaign included incidents of physical intimidation after a disagreement over incorrect waste in bins and regular verbal harassment at recycling centres. This rise in aggression has significant consequences, including deteriorating mental health amongst staff, increased absenteeism, and operational delays.

Further steps SWITCH have taken to prevent and manage aggression against workers include public education to increase awareness around waste management rules. They also provide staff training such as conflict resolution skills and have introduced safety measures.

[You can view Jim's full presentation and the campaign here.](#)

6 APSE comment

Adjusting for changes in reporting requirements, the [HSE estimates](#) that between 1974, when the Health and Safety at Work Act was introduced, and 2024, workplace fatalities have fallen by around 85%. Although the employment composition in the UK has changed drastically over this period due to deindustrialisation, the continued improvements made to workplace safety have undoubtedly led to huge improvements in safety for employees – the UK now ranks as [one of the safest countries in the world for workers by fatality rate](#).

However, despite this progress, challenges remain. Recent tragic events involving fatalities caused by falling trees and cemetery memorials highlight the need for continued evaluation and improvement of safety practices, especially when it comes to keeping members of the public safe. As illustrated by the presentation from WISH, changes in technology mean that authorities must be vigilant in dealing with new threats to workplace safety. The rise of vaping, especially cheap vapes containing lithium batteries, has contributed to a massive increase in fires in waste disposal facilities and vehicles.

Furthermore, the increase in violence and aggression towards workers that occurred during the pandemic has remained stubbornly high, including amongst retail workers, emergency service staff and even [telecoms engineers](#). The need for anti-violence campaigns from organisations such as SWITCH further demonstrates that safety threats to frontline workers are ever-changing and require innovative approaches to keep staff safe. A recent [open letter from the Institute of Customer Service](#) – co-signed by 100 signatories – has called for an amendment to the Crime and Policing Bill to expand the proposed charge of 'assault of retail workers' to all public-facing workers.

In addition to our network meetings, APSE offers a range of support to our member councils on issues relating to health and safety. APSE Training has a number of upcoming courses specifically designed to assist local authorities with the ongoing challenges around the health and safety agenda. These include [Health and Safety in Waste and Environmental Services \(in conjunction with Pinsent Masons\)](#) on Tuesday 2 September and [Health and Safety - Working on Highways and Verges \(CPD\)](#) on Wednesday 17 September. Member authorities are eligible for a reduced member rate for all training courses. A full list of available courses [can be found here](#).

To support councils in carrying out inspections, APSE Performance Networks offers the MIST app – a memorial inspection safety tool for burial grounds that enables an efficient and effective inspection process. [Find out more here.](#)

Finally, the APSE Waste and Recycling Seminar 2025 – taking place on Thursday 23 October in Nottingham will cover safety issues, as well as decarbonisation, innovation and best practice case studies. [Find more and book your place here.](#)

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Sign up for APSE membership to enjoy a whole range of benefits

APSE member authorities have access to a range of membership resources to assist in delivering council services. This includes our regular advisory groups, specifically designed to bring together elected members, directors, managers and heads of service, together with trade union representatives to discuss service specific issues, innovation and new ways of delivering continuous improvement. The advisory groups are an excellent forum for sharing ideas and discussing topical service issues with colleagues from other councils throughout the UK.

Advisory groups are a free service included as part of your authority's membership of APSE and are an excellent way to network with peers in other councils. If you do not currently receive details about APSE advisory group meetings and would like to be added to our list of contacts for your service area, please email enquiries@apse.org.uk.

Our national advisory groups include:

- Building Cleaning and Facilities Management
- Education Catering
- Cemeteries and Crematoria
- Climate Change and Renewables Network
- Housing, Construction and Building Maintenance
- Social Value, Procurement and Commercialisation Network
- Parks, Horticulture and Grounds Maintenance
- Highways and Street Lighting
- Sports and Leisure Management
- Fleet, Transport and Vehicle Maintenance
- Waste Management, Refuse Collection and Street Cleansing
- Veterans and Military Champions Network
- Local Government Reorganisation Network

Visit www.apse.org.uk for more details.



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