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Cemeteries and Crematoria: Creating inclusive public spaces in Cork

Cemeteries and crematoria are important public spaces and services serving all citizens – as highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The CeMi project studied cemeteries and crematoria in 8 medium sized municipalities in 6 countries: Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Scotland and Sweden. Each municipality included long-standing ethnic or religious minority communities and more recent migrants. Researchers talked with municipal cemetery and crematoria providers, planners, faith and community groups. It is hoped that summary feedback will enhance understanding of cultural practices, prompt dialogue between local government providers and communities, and inform future planning locally and internationally.



St Finbarr's cemetery, a traditional cemetery from the 19th century.

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Location

Cork is Ireland's second largest city in the south west of the country, with major universities and hospitals as well as new industries that have attracted migration in the last two decades. In fact, Cork has the largest non-Irish population increase in Ireland, about 14% of the population in 2016.

Population of Cork city, 2016

Polish: 2.6%
 British/Northern Irish: 1.5%
 Lithuanian: 0.4%
 Other EU: 5.3%
 Asian/Asian Irish: 2.8%
 White Irish Travellers: 0.7%
 *All data from the 2016 census

- Almost 80% of the country identify as Catholic.
- A recent boundary expansion has increased the city's provision to 13 municipal cemeteries, and a private crematorium in County Cork serves the city.
- Cremation rates are low but growing, with 19.61% of deaths cremated in 2017 nationally

Issues and challenges for cemeteries and crematoria in Cork

The local authority and funeral sector are making provision for changing trends in burial and dispersal, as well as a recent large expansion of burial space to meet future need.

- The high burial rate resulted in a scarcity of burial space in the city centre cemeteries, so in the past two decades new cemeteries have been built in the rural areas surrounding the city.
- A recent boundary expansion brought several of these cemeteries from the management of the County Council to the City Council. Overnight this meant a large price increase for graves in those cemeteries due to different prices across the two authorities.
- The local crematorium was built in Cork County in 2007. There are 6 crematoria on the island of Ireland with the majority of the rest of the provision in the Dublin area.
- Cork city has one columbarium – only the 2nd in the country – and there are plans for columbarium expansion at other cemeteries.

"Now my wish is that I'll be cremated and my ashes be scattered at the family grave. But none of my family so far has been cremated so I might be the first."
 Cork resident

- Burial space for the modest but growing Muslim community in Cork is provided by the local authorities. Unlike in some other places, the Muslim preference for fast burial is easily accommodated within the Irish majority norms.

"I applied for a graveyard for the Muslim community and the Council were very cooperative and they approved it immediately."
 Muslim Imam

- The Polish community shares a common Catholic heritage and preference for burial with the majority Irish population. However, as recent migrants, there can be a preference to repatriate bodies to Poland for burial, or even to cremate in Ireland and scatter or bury the ashes in Poland because repatriation can be expensive.
- The Irish Traveller population routinely experience problems around some aspects of their burial traditions. Lawn cemeteries have regulations around memorial height and size as well as access issues, where the Traveller community would like large headstones and funerals, raising questions around assimilation and equality.



One of Cork's most recent cemeteries, St James', in the lawn cemetery style, in contrast to St Finbarr's (cover image).



Service room at The Island Crematorium, an example of secular design and use of an historic building.



Graves demonstrating height regulations on memorials, with an 'overheight' Traveller grave in the far left.

Local best practice

Cemeteries as convivial places

Many people we spoke to from different communities described the cemetery as a space that equalises, where they can meet and chat to people from the Irish and other communities and interact when they wouldn't otherwise.

"It's probably the one leveller, you know. We're all the same, in the graveyard we're all the same. In fact I suppose we're more united in the graveyard than any place else. There's a man two plots down from my brother who was a big business man in Cork. We talk to his family standing by the grave. In any other context we would never meet or talk to each other."

Member of the Traveller community

"When people die they're the same. The same Catholic or Muslim."

Muslim Imam

Changing trends in burial and cremation

The City Council are aware of the increasing cremation trends and have plans in place to meet that future need.

"If you went back 20 years in Ireland only 5% of people were being cremated, and it's grown hugely in the last 20 years. It was always our intention in the medium term to provide columbarium's in all our cemeteries."

Burial service representative

Cemeteries as public green spaces

In the city, cemeteries are also used as public green spaces, and this has been especially important under the lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic.

"People do come in and walk there regularly. And we maintain them similar to our parks. They're well maintained and we see them as an amenity for people as well as a place that you bury loved ones."

Burial service representative

Challenges and innovations of Covid-19

Another issue that has come out of the pandemic has been limits on funeral attendance, so many funeral services have used technology to stream services.

"We've watched quite a few funerals through streaming. So that's been a great blessing. I know you've not got the warmth of people next to you but that certainly did help. There are some older people who can't get to the funeral anyway, so I would hope they keep that on for funerals and even for the services."

Cork resident

Challenges for migrants

Working out the burial and funerary system of another country can be a challenge, with different traditions as well as practical barriers such as language. A Polish advocacy organisation based in Cork has produced a leaflet in Polish explaining the process of what to do when someone passes away, and how the Irish system works.

"The people come in here and didn't know about how the system works here in Ireland, they didn't know what's the coroner's role and how it works when someone passes in this country."

Polish advocacy organisation representative



Islamic burial at St James' cemetery, established in 2006 when the cemetery opened, with graves orientated towards Mecca.

Ideas from elsewhere

Birkhill cemetery, Dundee, Scotland

Cork's cemeteries are predominantly traditional family burial plots. Birkhill cemetery in Dundee is an example of how several burial and dispersal options can be provided for at one site.

Birkill cemetery has sections for coffin burial, cremated remains burial, Islamic burial, woodland burial, a child and baby section, a garden for scattering ashes, and a section for government funded burial. They have also provided an indoor waiting room for funerals and visitors to gather in, particularly in bad weather, as well as public toilets.



Memorial garden for ash scattering, Birkhill cemetery, Dundee



Columbarium at St James' cemetery for cremated remains.

Noorderbegraafplaats cemetery, Leeuwarden, the Netherlands

At Noorderbegraafplaats cemetery a compass indicating the direction of Mecca has been painted onto the floor, as an inexpensive but highly effective way to accommodate and consider Islamic ritual needs.



Stencilled compass indicating Mecca at Noorderbegraafplaats cemetery, Leeuwarden

Selwerderhof cemetery, Groningen, The Netherlands

Alternative to providing sections to meet various burial and dispersal needs, in Selwerderhof cemetery a 'free field' has been created for those who feel confined by faith- or other-based sections. In the free field, grave orientation and memorial design are not restricted, and there is no clear path structure around the lawn and graves.



Free field at Selwerderhof cemetery, Groningen.