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Cemeteries and Crematoria: Creating inclusive public spaces in Dundee

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.

Balgay cemetery, a traditional cemetery from the 19th century



Location

Dundee on the east coast of Scotland is the country's 4th largest city and has been a place of migration for many decades. Dundee has a rich history of migration with a Jewish refugee population arriving in the 19th and 20th century. Communities from the Indian subcontinent moved to and settled in Dundee from the 1960s onwards, working in jute and other factories. More recently, migration from other European countries has been steady including a significant Polish community. 10% of the city's 148,750 residents are non-British minorities.

Population of Dundee, 2011

White Other: 4.7%

Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Groups: 0.5%

Asian, Asian Scottish or Asian British: 4.0%

African: 0.8%

Caribbean or Black: 0.2%

Other ethnic groups: 0.6%

*City population from 2018, demographic data from 2011 census

- There are six working cemeteries in the city managed by Dundee City Council.
- Across these cemeteries are several Islamic burial sections and a Jewish burial section. In addition, in 2014 a private Muslim cemetery was opened.
- The city has one private crematorium. In 2017 there was a 77% cremation rate across the UK.

Issues and challenges for cemeteries and crematoria in Dundee

The local authority and funeral sector have been facing issues of limited burial space, unsafe memorials, and poverty in the city, while also making provision for changing trends in burial and dispersal.

- The availability of lairs (graves) recently became critical. The Council have built a new cemetery to the east of the city and have the possibility for expansion elsewhere to ease this pressure.

"Go back 6 year we were managing burial space on a yearly basis, we were looking to see what we could do year on year, what ground was available for sale. We got to the stage, I made the decision we wouldn't sell any lairs unless it was for a pending interment."

Burial service representative

- Grave rights are leased in perpetuity, meaning grave rights are eternal. Descendants inherit the right to use a lair but also have responsibility to maintain them. Over generations it can be difficult for the Council to trace the deed holder, which has led to problems with unsafe memorials in cemeteries.
- To tackle this, Dundee City Council recently introduced a 'perpetuity fee': a one-off fee of £632 to cover grave maintenance in addition to the £656 cost of the lair and £69 for the title deed. They have introduced a memorial registration scheme for masons which includes a code of conduct on quality and workmanship.

"There was erosion, headstones were sitting on bricks that were crumbling. We've taken on the methods for erecting memorials, i.e., size of foundations that kind of thing. If stone masons want to work within our cemeteries they've got to adhere to the regulations."

Burial service representative



Posted and toppled unsafe memorials, Eastern cemetery

- Many indicators place Dundee below Scottish average for poverty, and funeral poverty has been identified as a specific problem. Yet, the crematorium in Dundee has the highest fees in Scotland, and the Local Authority thinks a lack of competition is part of the problem.

"The people we're serving are the folk who are working low paid jobs where they have low provision for their funerals. They struggle to make ends meet and have low disposable income generally, and may well not have good credit ratings so they can borrow in a healthy or a cheapish way."

Funeral poverty charity representative

- Muslim communities have negotiated burial space within the city since the late 1960s. An initial small section at a municipal cemetery became full, and two larger sections were provided in the early 2000s. Recently, the community have funded and built Dundee Private Muslim Cemetery, designed to meet the community's needs for several decades.

Dundee's newest cemetery, Pitkerro Grove, in lawn cemetery style in contrast to traditional cemeteries such as Balgay (cover image).



Dundee's crematorium and memorial gardens

Local best practice

Diversity of burial and dispersal options

Birkhill cemetery is a good example of how several burial and dispersal options can be provided for at one site. Birkhill 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 Muslim Cemetery Trust

The Trust was set up with representatives from the city's three main Mosques. They worked together to establish a private Muslim cemetery with a constitution in place for its management. They:

- Fundraised to purchase the land by selling plots in advance
- Bought the land off the Council
- Have a contract with the Council to maintain the cemetery and facilitate burials
- And, as a charity, financially support and cover costs for those unable to pay.

"What it gives people is peace of mind, they've got a bit of land there, rich or poor, they've got somewhere to lay their loved ones to rest. And the same with the students, it gives people a wee bit of ease. That the Muslims in Dundee have got this plot of land now that's going to last maybe the next 10, 15, 20 years you know, only God knows that. But it's, it's about relief, and that when they're going there it's nice and peaceful for them to pray"

Scottish Pakistani man



Dundee Private Muslim Cemetery.

Funeral Link

Funeral Link is an independent charity that opened in 2019. It resulted from a Scottish Government commission called 'The Cost of Saying Goodbye' and the local Dundee Funeral Poverty Action Group. They help in all aspects of navigating the funeral sector, offering choices, helping people access benefits, and loaning flowers and clothes.

The Respectful Funeral Service

The Respectful Funeral Service is a partnership between the City Council and four funeral directors in the city, who agreed to provide simple and affordable funeral packages with no hidden fees or costs, to tackle funeral poverty.

Free burial for under 18s

The City Council adopted a policy of not charging for burials for under 18s to reduce the impact on families who won't be financially prepared for these costs. Since then, the Scottish Government has introduced this across the board.

Ideas from elsewhere

Grave re-use

Grave re-use is permitted after 100 years in England and, due to recent legislation, after only 25 years in Scotland (CABE 2007; Fairbairn 2017; Scottish Parliament 2017) although this is uncommon in practice.

In other countries in Europe, fixed-term grave rights are the norm, and we can learn from European practice how to ensure respectful removal and relocation of remains for communities who may be open to this.

Luxembourg-city, Luxembourg

In Luxembourg-city, graves are rented for 15-30 years, and if the tenure is not renewed, they are emptied. Typically, the headstone is removed although some are kept for heritage reasons, and the remains of the deceased are transported to the communal ossuary at Fetschenhof cemetery, allowing new burials to take place in the grave.



Notre Dame cemetery, Luxembourg-city.

Drammen, Norway

Graves are leased for 20 years in the first instance and extension is possible. If the lease is not extended and the grave space is needed, the headstone is removed, the grave is opened, and any remains left from previous burials are turned and put back into the ground before a new coffin placed in the grave.

Dr Yasminah Beebejaun, University College London;
Professor Avril Maddrell, University of Reading



Bragernes cemetery, Drammen.

Religious and cultural signposting

There can be simple, inexpensive, but highly effective signposting added to cemeteries to acknowledge and accommodate minority traditions and needs. This can be simple signposts directing visitors to the different sections of a cemetery, or, such as in Noorderbegraafplaats cemetery in Leeuwarden, a compass indicating the direction of Mecca has been painted onto the floor.



Stencilled compass indicating Mecca at Noorderbegraafplaats cemetery, Leeuwarden, The Netherlands.

References

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