

Cemeteries & Crematoria NSW

Fact sheet 2: Understanding your choices

Options for burial, cremation,
funerals and ways to
commemorate life



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Take the time to research and understand what your options are, then let family or friends know your preferred choices and the way you want to go.

Planning for after death allows you to have a say in what happens to your body and how you are farewelled and remembered. Planning provides you with an opportunity to reflect on and share the things that are important to you. It will also help your family and friends cope during a stressful time.

In this factsheet, planning for after death means:

- thinking about and talking with others about our choices for burial or cremation
- planning for a funeral or other ways of being remembered, including personal and individual touches.

Many factors, such as your values, beliefs, personal priorities and finances, will influence your decisions. NSW is home to more than 200 languages groups, over 125 religions, and some 300 ancestries. The rich diversity of our community means there is a wide range of needs when planning for after death.

Some people may already have specific plans for after death, such as scattering your ashes at a meaningful location or being buried somewhere in particular. For others, this could be the first time you're considering what you'd like to happen to your body after you die. You can make an informed choice about what is right for you by understanding your options and discussing them with family and friends. Some options need to be considered and organised in advance.

This factsheet is a starting point. Note that the price and availability of burial and cremation options will vary.





Start planning

It's never too early to start planning. Currently many people plan for death when they or a relative or friend are close to death. This can put extra strain on a person and their family and friends and may result in people making important decisions when under pressure.

It is important and helpful to communicate your wishes in advance, so that your family and friends understand and feel able to follow through with them when the time comes.

We have prepared a useful [factsheet](#) and [checklist](#) to help you take those first planning steps.



Legal responsibilities

Burying or cremating a deceased person is compulsory in NSW. [The Public Health Act 2010](#) and [Public Health Regulation 2012](#) regulates the handling of bodies both by funeral industry professionals and by members of the public. The regulation provides rules for preparing, transporting and disposing of bodies.



Your options for after death

In NSW, you have the option of cremation or burial. There are around 380 operators who provide [burial or cremation services](#) across NSW.

Cremation

Two out of three people who die in NSW each year are cremated. Cremation is often chosen because of its simplicity and is generally cheaper than burial, partly due to using less space.

Understanding terminology

You can choose between a 'regular' cremation or a direct cremation.

- **A cremation** is usually packaged with a funeral ceremony of your choice.
- **A direct cremation** does not include a funeral ceremony at the time and location of the cremation. It may also be referred to as a 'no-service cremation', or as 'cremation only'. This can mean family and friends do not attend the cremation but can still arrange a ceremony prior or a memorial at another venue later, if they choose.



Understanding cost

Compared to burial, cremation can be a significantly cheaper option. In 2019, Australian Seniors undertook research to understand the average [cost of death in Australia](#). A standard cremation (with funeral ceremony) costs on average \$5,600. Australian Seniors estimates the average standard cremation with ceremony in NSW ranges from around \$4,900 in non-metropolitan Sydney to \$6,200 in metropolitan Sydney.

Further information about cost is available in Cemeteries & Crematoria NSW's [General consumer guide to interment rights in NSW](#).

Choosing a coffin

The [NSW Public Health Regulation 2012](#) requires all cremations, including direct cremations, use a coffin. There is a range of coffin materials and price points. If you prefer, you can choose a coffin that is environmentally friendly and/or one with customisable design features.

While options vary between providers, there is nothing stopping you from asking for a coffin made from ornate rosewood, mahogany, cardboard, particleboard, wool or wicker. You can research in advance which materials best suit your needs and budget and discuss this with a funeral director or crematorium operator.

Transporting and scattering ashes

Scattering ashes in a place that has meaning for the person who died can happen in NSW. Around one-third of people have their ashes buried or scattered at a cemetery.¹ You will need to seek permission to scatter ashes on private land that you do not own and may need to seek permission for public places such as parks, beaches or playing fields. Your funeral director or local council can advise you.

In Australia, it is legal to take cremated ashes overseas. You must contact the consulate of the country you are visiting ahead of time and comply

with local requirements. The ashes will need to be transported in a sealed urn or container in hand luggage, with a copy of the death certificate and a copy of a statement from the crematorium identifying the deceased person, noting where and when the body was cremated.

Further information —cremation guide

Cemeteries & Crematoria NSW's [quick guide on cremation](#) is available online.

Burial (or interment, which can include cremated remains)

Burial of human remains—including cremated remains—can be either directly in the ground or above ground in a mausoleum, vault, columbarium, niche wall or other structure designed for this purpose. This is known as interment.

Burial is highly important for many cultures and religious groups. Around one-third of people in NSW choose to be buried.

Understanding terminology

An [interment right](#) is a contract with a cemetery operator that allows interment to take place in a particular location in a cemetery. The right is purchased, and the holder of the interment right is the only person able to choose who can be buried at the site.

In NSW there are two types of interment rights:

- **Perpetual interment rights** allow for remains to be left in place forever.
- **Renewable interment rights** allow for remains to be left in place for a limited period, between 25 and 99 years.

¹ www.industry.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/309530/CCNSW-Annual-Activity-Report-2018-19.pdf

Understanding cost

The high cost of burial in Australia's capital cities is driven by a shortage of land set aside for burial, as well as by the cost of cemetery maintenance. In 2019, Australian Seniors undertook research to understand the average [cost of death in Australia](#). The average cost for a standard burial and funeral in Australia is around \$9,400. The average for a standard burial and funeral in NSW ranges from \$7,900 in non-metropolitan Sydney to \$16,200 in metropolitan Sydney.

Further information is available in Cemeteries & Crematoria NSW's [General consumer guide to interment rights in NSW](#).

Cemeteries

Cemeteries play a pivotal role in our communities, offering a place for remembrance and reflection as well as providing open spaces in our cities and towns.

Many modern cemeteries also provide recreational areas for walking and cycling, sculpture gardens, spaces for reflection, meeting places and community facilities such as cafés. Burial plots are often provided in rows within a manicured lawn area and memorials and plaques are minimal.

Natural burial

A 'green' sustainable or natural burial means returning human remains as directly as possible to the earth in grounds that minimise environmental impact.

Natural burials usually involve burying a body that isn't embalmed in a biodegradable vessel or shroud. This process reduces the environmental impact of burial because fewer chemicals from coffins, synthetic clothes and embalming fluids drain into the soil.

Natural burials are commonly done in a cemetery in a bushland setting—at times some distance from urban areas—that is at a natural burial site or private land that has been approved. The natural landscape is left as undisturbed as possible.

Rather than placing a headstone or plaque, family and friends can locate the burial location using GPS technology. There is usually no physical memorialisation or clear visual marking. Some natural burial sites allow a rock or natural marker.

Natural burial sites are currently available in metropolitan Sydney, Lake Macquarie, Lismore and the Southern Highlands. Over time, we expect more natural burial sites will be approved.

While natural burials offer opportunities to limit the environmental impact of conventional burial, they commonly also limit the opportunity for physical memorialisation.

For further information, Cemeteries & Crematoria NSW's [quick guide on natural burial](#) is available online.

Reusing burial space

In NSW, burial lots can be purchased:

- in perpetuity—meaning forever
- as [renewable interment](#) for between 25 and 99 years.

At the end of a renewable interment right, the remains are to be removed and placed in an ossuary box and reburied in the same grave or placed in an ossuary house.² The grave, crypt or niche can then be reused.

Renewable interment rights were made available in NSW in 2018 to help address the land shortage for cemeteries in urban areas.

It is not mandatory for a cemetery to provide renewable interment rights and consumers do not need to choose this option.

² An ossuary box is a container that serves as the final resting place for human remains. An ossuary house is a building that serves as the final resting place for human remains.

Multiple grave occupancy

Multiple occupancy graves allow family members to be buried close together, which many families find comforting. It can also facilitate memorialisation and make it easier for relatives and friends to visit the graves of multiple family members.

This method of burial can also alleviate space issues. The proportion of families opting for multiple occupancy is reportedly growing in NSW, though numbers remain small.

Further information is available in Cemeteries & Crematoria NSW's [General consumer guide to interment rights in NSW](#).

Sustainable coffins, shrouds and urns

Materials used to produce conventional coffins include timber, varnishes, plastics, metal and fabrics. Many of these materials are not biodegradable and may remain in the soil for decades, even centuries. Growing numbers of NSW consumers and families are seeking environmentally conscious options that match their values and preferences.

If you are seeking environmentally sustainable options, the following are increasingly available, can be used at conventional cemeteries, and can be discussed with your funeral director:

- caskets made of willow, wicker or wool
- cardboard coffins, which can come with customisable designs
- biodegradable scattering tubes, earth urns, corn starch urns or salt urns
- burial shrouds made from biodegradable material such as 100% cotton, bamboo, linen or wool
- biodegradable burial suits made from mushrooms and other micro-organisms.

Steps required in NSW to be buried in a shroud

A shroud is a length of cloth used to wrap a body in preparation for burial or cremation. Shrouds are usually made of an organic material, such as cotton, linen or wool.

In NSW, you are required to use a casket or coffin for burial or cremation. However, you can apply to be buried in a shroud on both religious and non-religious grounds. Most people seeking burial in a shroud will need to complete a [burial of a body not placed in a coffin exemption form](#) to gain permission from NSW Health.

You can request the use of a shroud in advance of death, or a family member, community group, funeral director or cemetery provider can complete the form on your behalf. You need to make arrangements with the relevant cemetery beforehand and use a watertight vessel when moving the body.

Funeral directors and cemetery operators can help you develop your shrouded burial plans. Getting buried in a natural or green cemetery may be a simpler process if shrouded burial is your personal preference, but it's not necessarily more affordable.

At-home burials

You can apply to your local council to be buried on private property, which may be your property or that of someone you know. In NSW, the property must be greater than five hectares, and there must be no risk of contaminating drinking water.

The body must be buried in a securely sealed coffin at a minimum depth of 90 centimetres clearance below the natural surface depth of the soil (a geotechnical investigation might be needed to identify issues such as depth of the water table).

Further information is available in Cemeteries & Crematoria NSW's [General consumer guide to interment rights in NSW](#).



Donating bodies to science

Donation of your body to science must be arranged prior to death. It is not something next-of-kin can opt to do after-death. Universities use bodies for research and education. Learn more about what happens to your body if you donate it to science through our [‘Did You Know’ factsheet](#), which contains interesting facts and answers to frequently asked questions.

The Australian Facility for Taphonomic Experimental Research is a unique body donation facility located in the Blue Mountains dedicated to the study of human decomposition. The research is used to assist police and forensic investigators to search for, locate, recover and identify victim remains.

If you want to donate your organs after death, you can find information on the NSW Government’s Life Events website under [Make a health care plan](#).



Options for being farewelled and remembered

Funerals: a matter of personal preference

A funeral is a ceremony celebrating or remembering a person’s life and can be a critical step to process grief. Funerals can provide important support in a time of loss by bringing family and friends together to farewell the deceased person. Usually the funeral is prior to burial or cremation, with the coffin present.

You can have a funeral that is traditional or unique. It can adhere to your values, beliefs or cultural requirements, your interests or your specific requests. You can call it a gathering, a service, a ceremony, a send-off or a life celebration.

A funeral does not have to include a religious ceremony. Some people choose to hold the funeral ceremony at time or place other than before the cremation or burial, or even choose not to have a ceremony at all.

A funeral director can provide a complete funeral, including:

- organising the cremation or burial
- providing a choice of coffins or shrouds
- looking after the deceased’s body
- arranging transportation, flowers, music, legal paperwork
- providing comfort for families.



While there is no legal requirement to have a funeral or to use a funeral director, many people do find it easier to have an experienced professional lead and support them through the process. [Research](#) commissioned by Cemeteries & Crematoria NSW indicates that two in three people in NSW would consult a funeral director when planning for after-death.

DIY funerals, in which families undertake many tasks that would typically be the duty of the funeral director, constitute a small but growing number. Some families opt for a mix of DIY and a funeral director. This can help reduce the overall cost of a funeral as well as provide a more personalised funeral and closer sense of involvement.

There are no set fees for funerals in NSW and costs vary depending on the cemetery, crematorium, venue, scope of event and the level of service provided by the funeral director you work with. There are many options available when it comes to planning a funeral. [Australian Consumer Law](#) guarantees your rights when you purchase goods and services for funerals.

For further information about funerals, visit the NSW Government's [end-of-life planning webpage](#).

At-home funerals (or vigils)

In Australia and internationally, a growing number of people are involved in continuing home care of their relative or friend after their death. In NSW, if a person has died at home it is possible for the body to stay at home for up to five days before it is transferred into the care of the funeral director. It is important to make plans for this option before the person has died. Prior to a person's death, an experienced director can advise or help you hire cooling plates, or even pack the body in ice, to allow for a vigil.

Once notified, the treating doctor will issue a Medical Certificate Cause of Death. In some circumstances the body may need to go to the coroner to explore the cause of death.

Given it is challenging to arrange the transportation and burial or cremation of a body, you will generally need to engage an experienced funeral director for support with these activities, even if holding an at-home funeral. An increasing number of community funeral directors, some with death doula services, are emerging to help people with after-death home care and to hold a funeral at home.

Memorialisation

A memorial acknowledges a life and is a focal point for reflection. Memorials can be created for individuals, families or for specific groups (such as veterans).

In recent years, interest has grown in more personalised services, events and memorials that reflect the values of the person's life and their community. Your funeral director or cemetery/crematorium operator can advise you.

Your possibilities for memorialisation are near limitless. You may want to ask yourself:

Do I want a permanent memorial place where family members and friends can visit?

Do other family members want to keep some remains? There is no rule that ashes must be kept together. They can be divided between people or for different purposes.

It is common for memorialisation to include a plaque or headstone. Memorialisation can take place within a wide range of formats including:

- within gardens or lawns, around trees or pathways
- memorial seats or trees
- within scattering areas, with or without some visible record of names
- sculptures and artworks
- using portions of cremated remains within keepsake jewellery or artworks
- using public spaces with permission from the landowner, for example jetties, parks, grandstands, municipal gardens or road names.

The sky's the limit

Several companies are developing software applications (apps) to tell life stories from the graveside. Some companies will make a small disc to attach to a grave or a memorial site, and the information is relayed via Bluetooth technology to an app on your phone so a loved one can scroll through photos and listen to the person's favourite music and voice recordings.

Some websites offer templates for creating online memorials. Some are free and others have pricing plans or one-off fees—which allow users to create personalised online memorials for loved ones.

There are several companies offering creative things to do with loved ones' ashes. In Australia, some companies offer to create jewelled urns, fireworks and artworks from cremated ashes.

Cemeteries & Crematoria NSW (CCNSW) is the part of NSW Government that regulates cemetery and crematorium operators and provides information on burial and cremation options to the public. Its objectives are to ensure that everyone in NSW has the right to a dignified burial or cremation that is respectful of religious and cultural beliefs. CCNSW also holds a critical role in ensuring land is available for affordable and accessible burial and cremation options in NSW, now and in the future.



www.dpie.nsw.gov.au/ccnsw