

Perpetual care and the future of cemeteries

Draft Perpetual Care Framework for consultation

November 2025

cemeteries.nsw.gov.au





Acknowledgement of Country

Cemeteries & Crematoria NSW acknowledges that it stands on Aboriginal land. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land, and we show our respect for Elders past, present and emerging through thoughtful and collaborative approaches to our work, seeking to demonstrate our ongoing commitment to providing places in which Aboriginal people are included socially, culturally and economically.

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Cemeteries and memorial parks are significant places for everyone. They are essential places for remembrance and reflection, and for important community and cultural practices. They are a record of local, cultural and statewide history. They are quiet refuges, islands of green space providing space for relaxation and reflection in growing and densifying population centres.

Our research shows that 75% of people have made interment arrangements for a friend or family member at some point, and 39% of people have visited a grave or memorial at least once in the last 12 months. Statewide, 19% of people report visiting a cemetery in the last 12 months for recreation.

The role and public contribution of these important places will continue to evolve as our society does. Given their special role as sites for remembrance, and their very long life as community and cultural assets, this evolution needs to occur in a purposeful and respectful way.

This draft framework considers the appropriate perpetual care of our cemeteries, and options for how cemeteries can be managed as they approach their 'inactive' phase –when they are closed to burials and visitation levels are typically very low. Whether you are a cemetery operator or a community member, we want to ensure your ideas and experiences are considered and help us define what our cemeteries should look like long into the future, and how this can be implemented.



How to participate

Cemeteries & Crematoria NSW (CCNSW) invites feedback on all aspects of this draft framework to ensure that the final framework and resulting regulations have a meaningful impact and support a strong future for our cemeteries.

Community members may be particularly interested in contemporary thinking on the future states of cemeteries in Chapter 6, and the additional detail on those future states in Attachment B.

Operators will also be interested in the proposed regulatory requirements outlined in Chapter 7.

To provide us with your feedback:

- Take our survey
- Submit your feedback in writing by 27 March 2026 to ccnsw.regulatoryreform@cemeteries.nsw.gov.au

Please note that responses may be shared publicly, unless you request confidentiality.

What is perpetual care?

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Image credit: Metropolitan Memorial Parks

The *Cemeteries and Crematoria Act 2013* (the Act) provides for perpetual care to be regulated in the Interment Industry Scheme (IIS) but does not define the term. The final perpetual care framework will include a definition of perpetual care and incorporate it into the IIS. The proposed definition is:

The ongoing respect for and maintenance of a cemetery, or part of a cemetery, including after it:

- has reached full capacity (i.e. all interment sites have been fully exhausted), and/or
- is closed to new interments (burials or ash interments).

This includes the cemetery as a whole, graves and interment sites.

Ongoing respect is essential, even if maintenance levels change over time.

Existing licence conditions already ensure standards of care and respect throughout the active phase. When we refer to regulating perpetual care throughout this document, we are focused on the portion of perpetual care that occurs after a cemetery or part of a cemetery becomes inactive.

Perpetual care responsibilities would not typically extend to memorials, whose maintenance and upkeep are the responsibility of the relevant interment right holder. In most cases the cemetery operator is not permitted to disturb or change a memorial, although they may have obligations under relevant work health and safety or heritage legislation. There may also be existing contracts or other arrangements that make the operator responsible for memorial maintenance.

In this framework “cemeteries” includes memorial parks and memorial gardens. They may be places where human remains are buried and/or ashes are interred. Cemeteries may also have a crematorium attached to them, although crematoria are not themselves cemeteries.

This framework is shaped by four key contextual factors

1

Long-term responsibility

Cemeteries require care long after they stop generating revenue from new burials or ash interments.

Without forward planning, ongoing maintenance may be underfunded, risking both the dignity of those interred and their loved ones and the value of cemeteries as public spaces.

2

Diverse community needs

NSW's growing cultural and religious diversity means people value and use cemeteries in different ways.

Some communities require traditional burial and use cemeteries for important religious and cultural practices, while others prefer cremation or use cemeteries for peaceful reflection and recreation. The NSW Government's vision is for accessible, affordable interment options that respect all cultural needs. Cemeteries that reflect contemporary community attitudes and uses are a key part of this commitment.

3

Land and public space pressures

As our population density increases, land becomes more valuable and public open space more precious. Good public open space networks are the cornerstone of sustainable, healthy, cool and green communities. Cemeteries are part of these open space networks and, with thoughtful and respectful planning, can provide public value in different ways throughout their lifecycle.

This has always been the case in NSW and elsewhere. In our cities, cemeteries have in the past been respectfully converted to parks and green space. Other cemeteries that began life as highly formal places on the outskirts of town are now important spaces for quiet recreation in the inner city.

4

Communities want to be engaged

Our community is open to thinking about cemeteries in different ways.

Recent research shows that while most people haven't thought deeply about cemetery maintenance or future uses of cemeteries, they become engaged and interested when prompted and start to learn more.

Additional context can be found in Attachment A, including information on previous reviews and an outline of the research conducted.

Policy objectives

4

This draft framework is built around four key policy objectives:

Key policy objectives

Dignity and respect

The remains of people interred in cemeteries must always be treated with dignity and respect

Cultural and religious inclusion

The memorialisation practices and beliefs of all religious and cultural groups must be respected, both at the time of interment and into the future.

Financial sustainability

The approach to perpetual care must support ongoing financial sustainability of the sector and minimise cost impacts for people and their families.

Maximising public value

The future states of cemeteries should maximise their public value, in line with community needs and expectations while considering place-based approaches.

These objectives align with the objectives of the Act (which governs the regulation of cemeteries), as well as the NSW Government's strategic statement on cemeteries and crematoria (*Delivering strong consumer outcomes for Cemeteries and Crematoria in NSW*).

The traditional cemetery life cycle

5

Traditionally, a cemetery will progress from an active phase where regular interments take place and there is a high level of visitation, to an inactive stage where no new interments are accepted and visitation is often much lower (Figure 1). Different parts of a cemetery may be in different stages at any given time, and the achievable and expected maintenance levels will be different for each.

In the Interment Industry Scheme which licences cemetery operators, the maintenance obligations for inactive cemeteries are described in licence condition B.1. This condition applies to all cemetery operators and requires basic grounds maintenance and ongoing public access.

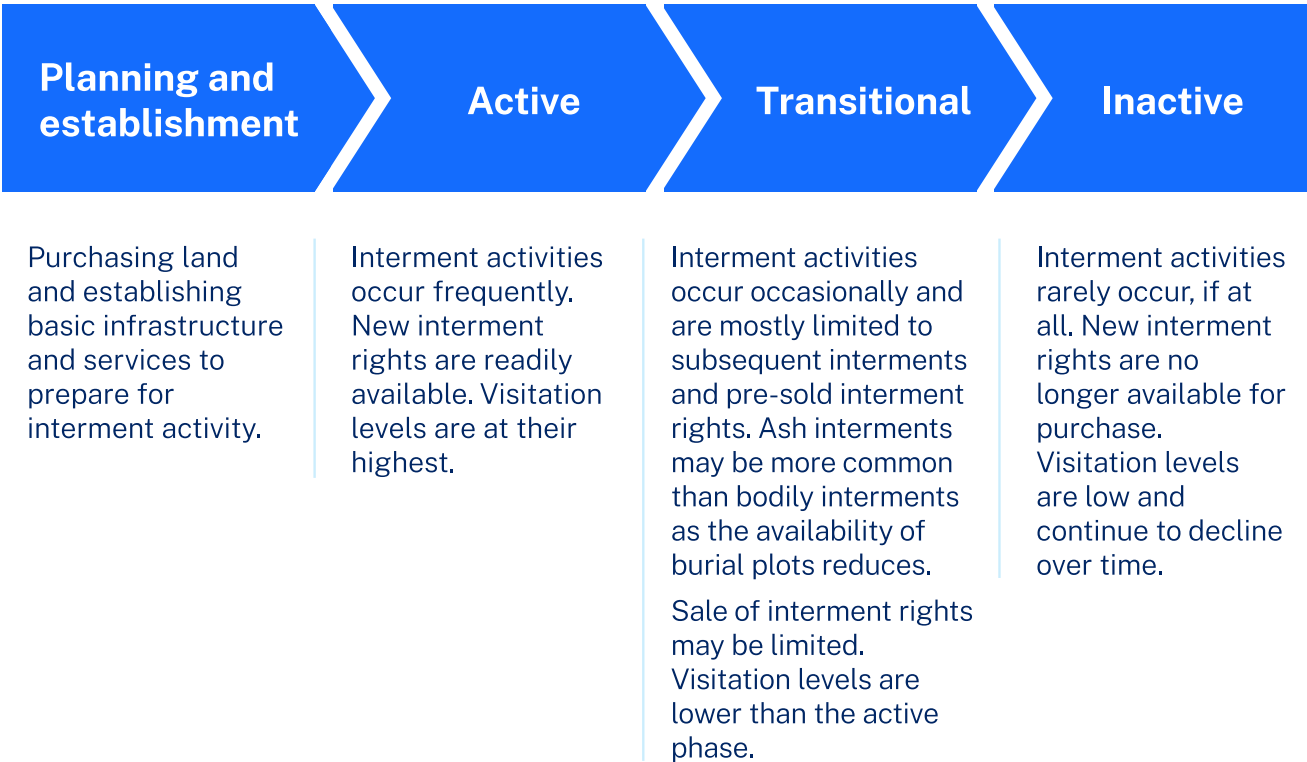


Figure 1: Overview of the traditional cemetery life cycle

Planning for the future of cemeteries

6

Planning for perpetual care isn't just about maintenance — it's about imagining respectful future possibilities for our cemeteries as public spaces that are consistent with the cemetery context. Early planning will be key to achieving successful outcomes. This means looking beyond the traditional life cycle and considering innovative ways to keep these spaces vibrant and valuable for the community for years to come. This could be within the paradigm of the traditional cemetery life cycle described above, or in more innovative ways.

The first planning step would be for cemetery operators to define the intended 'future state' for each cemetery.

We are proposing three distinct sets of 'future states' operators should consider when planning for perpetual care:

- Unlocking new supply, to prolong the active phase and defer the need for perpetual care
- Becoming inactive, and setting an appropriate style and level of maintenance and safe access
- Converting the cemetery to a complementary use, for example a public park.

These future states build on the traditional cemetery life cycle to create a 'modern life cycle' with new possibilities to consider (Figure 2).

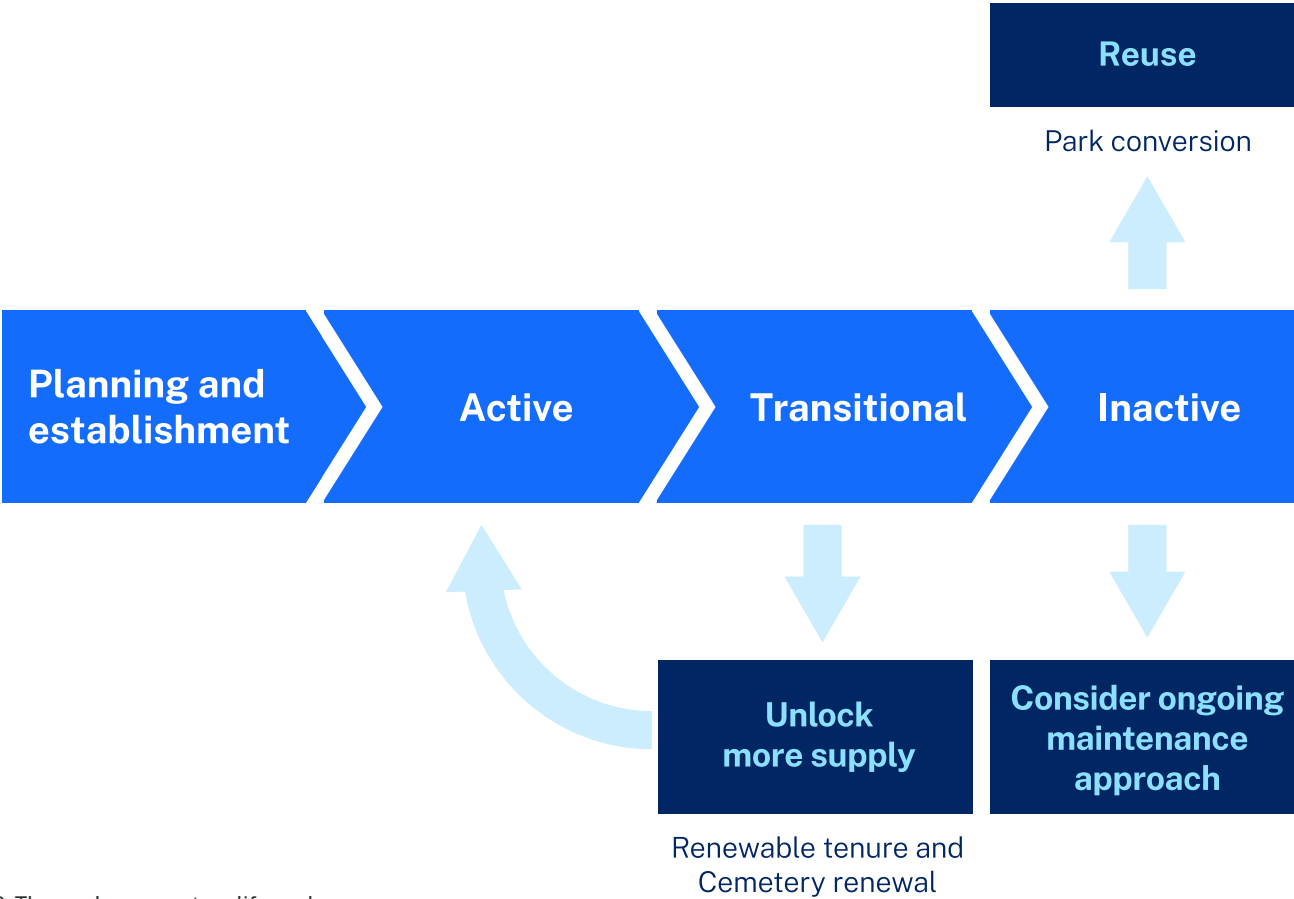


Figure 2: The modern cemetery life cycle

Table 1 shows several possible future states. More detail on each of these, including research insights and relevant case studies, are contained in Attachment B.

Future state	Description
Unlocking new supply	
Cemetery renewal	Creates additional interment spaces in parts of cemeteries where people are already interred by sensitively redeveloping them. In NSW renewal requires Ministerial approval. Remains are left in place, but monuments may be moved. Karrakatta Cemetery, Perth, WA is an example of cemetery renewal.
Renewable tenure	Allows interment of remains for up to 99 years. Introduced in NSW in 2018. This applies to individual interment sites with detailed requirements for notification, record keeping and treatment of any memorials. Renewable tenure is typical in many countries worldwide, as well as in South Australia and Western Australia and a few cemeteries in NSW.
Becoming inactive with an appropriate style of maintenance	
Maintain current maintenance levels	A cemetery continues to look the same and is maintained in the same way. This is typical in many inactive cemeteries in NSW.
Target and/or taper maintenance over time	Shifts to a different maintenance approach, for example: - targeting maintenance to certain sections, such as high visitation areas - tapering as the time since the last interment increases (and visitation decreases). This is typical in many inactive cemeteries in NSW.
Take a different maintenance approach	Reimagines what maintenance looks like for example using low maintenance native plants which can reduce ongoing maintenance costs, improve amenity and enhance environmental outcomes (for example use less water, create more biodiversity). Project Cultivate at Melbourne General Cemetery in Victoria is an example of this.
Converting the cemetery to a complimentary use	
Conversion to a public park	Currently available to council operators under the Act. Remains are left in place, but monuments are moved to create a useable public space and enhance public value. Examples in NSW include Pioneers Memorial Park, Leichhardt, Wollongong Pioneers Rest Park, Wollongong, St Thomas Rest Park, Crows Nest, and Camperdown Memorial Rest Park, Camperdown.

Table 1: Possible future states for cemeteries

Throughout a cemetery's life, there are also opportunities to activate these spaces in new ways — think cafés, history tours, or community events that bring people together and may also generate revenue to support ongoing care. These opportunities are compatible with many future states, and some examples of cemetery activations are also included in Attachment B.

These activities must be managed in a respectful way, consistent with the cemetery location, but can encourage public use of the space and may provide alternative income sources.

Proposed regulatory requirements

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This framework proposes introducing two requirements, with appropriate transition times. They are designed to ensure operators are developing plans for perpetual care by actively considering a range of future states.

The requirements would:

- 1. Clarify that cemetery operators are responsible for perpetual care
- 2. Require that larger operators plan for how they will carry out that perpetual care.

It is expected that the Perpetual Care Framework would be finalised in 2026 and any new requirements would commence in 2027.



Responsibility for perpetual care

All operators already have ongoing obligations to care for their cemeteries.

Licence condition B.1 requires that basic grounds maintenance be carried out and safe access maintained at all cemeteries, regardless of their life cycle stage. Operators may also have obligations under other legislation, in particular work health and safety legislation, and heritage requirements where any elements of a cemetery may be heritage listed.

CCNSW proposes that this requirement to ensure safe access and basic grounds maintenance is the minimum level of maintenance required in perpetuity. Actual levels of maintenance and access may change over time after a cemetery becomes inactive, as long as the cemetery is being managed safely and respectfully. This requirement will continue to apply to all operators.

Our research indicates that community expectations regarding maintenance at inactive cemeteries are different than at active cemeteries. The research gives a general timeframe for cemetery maintenance levels after the cemetery becomes inactive, which is provided as general guidance in Table 2.

Years since cemetery inactive (approx.)	Maintenance level
10 years	Maintenance at the level of an active cemetery
10-50 years:	Gradual tapering of maintenance prioritising higher-visitation areas, pathways and roads, access points, and heritage monuments
50+ years	Consider options like appointment only access or ‘rewilding’ style maintenance

Table 2: Illustrative timeframe for cemetery maintenance levels

Operators can use this timeframe to guide consideration of maintenance levels over time at inactive cemeteries, though may also implement different levels of maintenance. Community engagement may be required to understand community expectations or educate the community on how and why the cemetery may begin to change. Site specific factors or complexities that impact the operational and financial feasibility of different maintenance levels.

Some religious or cultural groups may prefer perpetual care in line with defined aesthetic standards. Similarly, if the operator has a contract with interment right holders promising a particular level of perpetual care, then this level must be delivered.

Planning for perpetual care

The proposed regulatory approach to ensure appropriate levels of planning is that larger operators, including category 1 and 2 operators, would be required to prepare a Perpetual Care Statement detailing plans for the perpetual care of each of their cemeteries.

Operators would submit their Perpetual Care Statement to CCNSW within 12 months of the requirement commencing, with updated statements to be submitted on request by the regulator.

For each cemetery the statement would be required to:

- Estimate the remaining supply for bodily and ash interments (in years), to give an indication of when the inactive phase is likely to commence and therefore how advanced planning needs to be at this time.
- Identify the intended future state, or sequence of future states, including planned levels of maintenance over time. Operators can consider the future states outlined in this framework, or may be able to identify another appropriate option not included here.
- Outline how the future state/s will be funded. This could be via a quarantined fund where money is specifically set aside, or could be another option that you outlined/identify.
- Assess current progress towards funding the future state/s.

This statement would cover each cemetery, whether currently active or inactive. It could consider different future states for different sections of the cemetery, if appropriate, explaining why this is the case.

For cemeteries that are already inactive, the statement can outline the current and planned level of maintenance, how it is currently funded and how that funding will be maintained into perpetuity.

Statements would be required to be approved by a senior executive on behalf of the operator.

CCNSW will review Perpetual Care Statements to assess the degree of operator preparedness they demonstrate. Based on these initial assessments, CCNSW will determine if further regulation is necessary, for example requiring more prescriptive planning or specific actions from some operators.

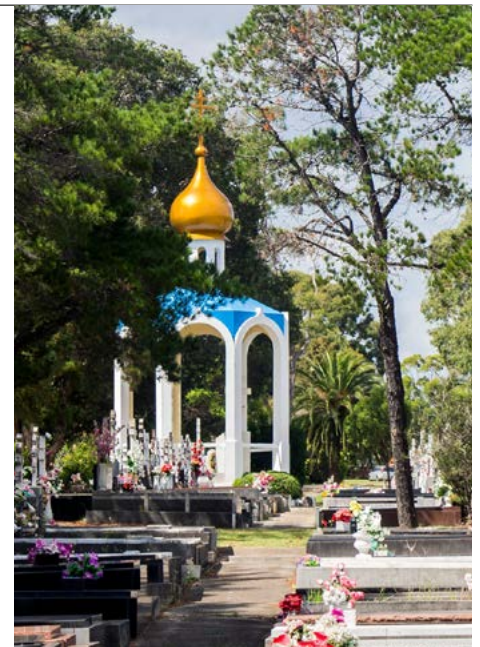


Image credit: Metropolitan Memorial Parks

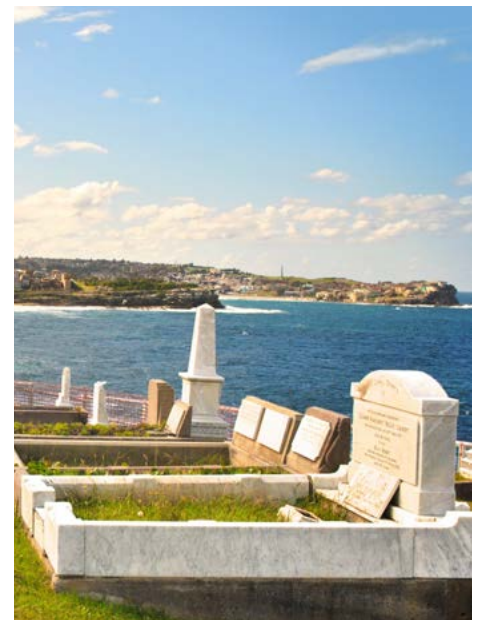


Image credit: Department of Planning and Environment



Image credit: Department of Planning and Environment

Attachment A - Background

Previous reviews and commitments

In 2020, 2 reviews of the sector, *The 11th Hour – Solving Sydney’s Cemetery Crisis: Statutory Review of the Cemeteries and Crematoria Act 2013* and the IPART *Review of the Costs and Pricing of Interment in NSW* raised perpetual care liability as a critical risk to the interment industry, the NSW Government, and the NSW public. The IPART report estimated the legacy liability (based on existing interments) at \$1.7 billion at 30 June 2019.

Both reviews made recommendations for the regulation of perpetual care. CCNSW included perpetual care in the draft Interment Industry Scheme which was released for industry consultation in 2021. Under the draft Interment Industry Scheme, operators with a Category 1 and 2 licence were required to:

- obtain advice from an approved actuary about their perpetual care liabilities
- establish a ring-fenced fund for perpetual care, with funds only used for perpetual care except where they exceeded 100% of the estimated liability.

Operators raised concerns that:

- the proposed approach was too prescriptive and could create difficulties in meeting perpetual care liabilities
- the proposed approach could significantly impact interment costs
- a ‘one size fits all’ approach is not appropriate given the diversity of the sector.

Perpetual care was removed from the final version of the Scheme in recognition of the complexity of the issue, with a commitment to further consider the most appropriate approach in consultation with operators and the community and introduce requirements at a later date.

Since the reviews were published, updated analysis

following changes to Sydney’s Crown sector shows that both major Crown operators (Metropolitan Memorial Parks and Catholic Cemeteries and Crematoria) have sufficient funding to meet their perpetual maintenance liabilities. However, as cemeteries begin or are soon to begin to transition into their perpetual phases, the issue of perpetual care remains important for the industry to address.

In 2024, the NSW Government released a strategic statement on cemeteries and crematoria (*Delivering strong consumer outcomes for Cemeteries and Crematoria in NSW*). The strategic statement directs CCNSW to develop a contemporary approach for perpetual care through introducing a framework.

Research insights

CCNSW commissioned independent research in mid-2025 to ensure that the Perpetual Care Framework approach is based on an understanding of community attitudes. The research examined community preferences and attitudes to cemetery maintenance as well as other issues relating to cemeteries such as cemetery renewal, renewable tenure, sustainable interment options and alternate uses for cemetery land.

The research included:

- A community survey of 1,006 people, with a statistically representative sample of the adult NSW population.
- Four two-hour focus groups
- In depth interviews with 11 cemetery operators and 7 faith leaders from a range of faith and community groups

Research findings are considered throughout the draft Framework, and a summary of the research will be released alongside this Framework.

Attachment B – Future state options

Unlocking new supply

Under the proposed definition, perpetual care begins only once the cemetery (or part of a cemetery) enters its inactive phase. Unlocking new supply can delay this transition, postponing the commencement of perpetual care and making additional burial supply available.

Cemetery renewal

What is it?

Cemetery renewal creates additional interment spaces in parts of cemeteries where people are already interred by sensitively redeveloping them. Cemetery renewal does not involve any disturbance or removal of human remains, but monuments may be moved.

Renewal projects might include creating additional interment sites in between existing sites, known as infill works, or adding layers of earth above existing sites to be used for an area of new graves as shown in Figure 3. In this option, existing graves could be digitally recorded, and any significant monuments preserved (for example, any heritage listed monuments or officially commemorated war graves), while opening up valuable new burial space.

In NSW, cemetery renewal projects require Ministerial approval. To approve a renewal project, the Minister must be satisfied that it is in the public interest, and consistent with one of more of the Act's objectives. An approved project would still need to comply with any environment, heritage or planning law obligations (including a development application or State Significant Development process).

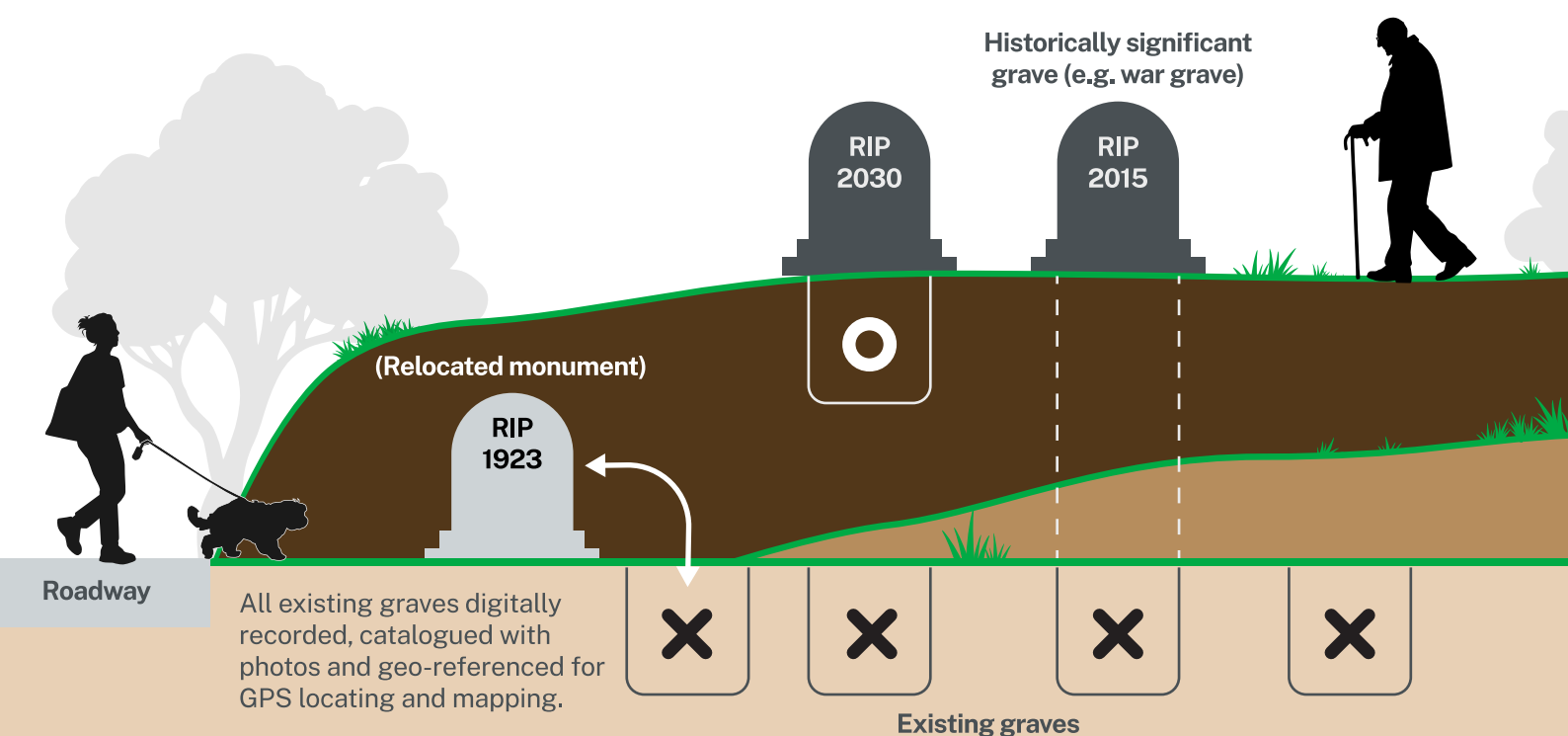


Figure 3: Example of a potential cemetery renewal project

What does the research show?

The acceptability of cemetery renewal was mixed among survey participants in CCNSW's research, which may be due to varying levels of awareness about burial supply pressures and the practice of cemetery renewal. Fifty-two per cent of respondents considered renewal through infill to be acceptable while 25% found it unacceptable. For the option of adding layers of earth, 44% found this acceptable compared with 35% finding it unacceptable. Renewal was seen to be more acceptable after longer periods of time had passed, and in areas with low visitation. Preserving records of any graves to be covered and memorials to be moved was also seen as important.

Where does it happen?

While renewal and reuse of individual graves is common internationally, more holistic renewal of a cemetery or an area of a cemetery is less common. It has however been occurring in WA for some time.

Case Study - Karrakatta Cemetery, Perth, Western Australia

Opened in 1899, Karrakatta Cemetery is Perth's most prominent and centrally located cemetery. Western Australia's Metropolitan Cemeteries Board has operated a renewal program for over 30 years, creating new interment spaces to enable Karrakatta Cemetery to continue to serve future generations.

The cemetery was initially expected to be at capacity by 2004. Over 9,000 graves and 30,000 memorial locations have been respectfully and sustainably created by rejuvenating older parts of the cemetery that have fallen into disuse. No remains are disturbed. Instead, walkways and other public areas are redeveloped, with new graves created in the unused space available between old graves. The newly renewed areas feature beautifully landscaped gardens and lawn, a stark contrast to the often sandy and sparse appearance of the original sections, creating a more peaceful and reflective environment for visitors.

Over the years, the renewal process at Karrakatta Cemetery has significantly evolved to reflect changing societal expectations and a deeper commitment to heritage preservation. Today, the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board undertakes extensive community consultation before any renewal work begins, ensuring transparency and sensitivity. All identified Australian war veterans' graves are now retained, not just those designated as official war graves. Headstones and grave decorations bearing inscriptions are respectfully relocated to nearby landscaped garden beds or memorial walls, preserving personal and historical connections. Names of individuals buried in previously unmarked graves are added to gabion pillars within each renewed section, and books of remembrance, complete with maps and name lists, are made available to help visitors locate non-retained graves. These enhancements demonstrate the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board's dedication to honouring the past and keeping history alive for future generations.



Before and after images of an infill project at Karrakatta Cemetery
Images credit: Metropolitan Cemeteries Board, Western Australia

Renewable tenure

What is it?

In NSW, renewable tenure was formalised in the Act in 2018. A renewable interment right relates to a specific grave or ash placement (interment site) and allows for remains to be left in place for 25 to 99 years for bodily remains, and up to 99 years for cremated remains. In contrast to cemetery renewal, renewable tenure applies to an individual interment site.

At the end of the renewable period, the right expires and the site can be reused, subject to detailed requirements for notification, record keeping, and the treatment of any memorials. Commonly, the grave is prepared for reuse via a process called 'lift and deepen', where the remains of the existing burial are respectfully removed, the grave is deepened slightly, and the original remains are then reinterred (often placed into an ossuary box) and moved lower down into the grave so that new burial space can be created.

Renewable interment rights are more sustainable as they make better use of existing cemetery space, and allow it to be re-used over time to continue to provide new supply into the future. Reusing interment sites allows for cemetery operators to meet ongoing public demand and continue to maintain cemeteries.

What does the research show?

In the survey, when participants were presented only with a brief description of renewable tenure, acceptability was mixed with 39% of people finding it acceptable and 41% unacceptable. However, when the concept was explained in more detail in the focus groups, participants were more positive once they understood the space and potential cost savings. This suggests that lack of familiarity is a factor in community views on renewable interment, which may change with education and awareness.

Where does it happen?

Renewable tenure is common in other places around the world, often with much shorter renewal periods due to acute shortages of cemetery land. For example:

- In Singapore, burial plots are leased for 15 years with remains then exhumed and either reburied or cremated.
- In Germany, burial plots are leased for 15 to 30 years with some extension possible.
- In Luxembourg, cemetery plots are granted for 15-30 years and may be renewed. If not renewed, remains are removed and placed in an ossuary.
- In Greece, graves are usually leased for 3 years with some extensions possible. When the lease expires, the remains are typically exhumed and bones placed in an ossuary.

In Australia, renewal periods vary. Renewable tenure is the most common type of interment in both Western Australia and South Australia. In Western Australia, a right of burial is initially issued for 25 years, which is renewable for a further 25 years. Further extensions of 25 years may be approved. In South Australia, sites are commonly sold for either 50 or 99 years.

Case Study - Enfield Memorial Park, South Australia

Renewable tenure is common in South Australia, and a renewal program is currently underway in the lawn burial area of Enfield Memorial Park. With only 2 years of capacity remaining in the general lawn sections, older lawn tablet areas are being prepared for reuse as the majority of sites have expired renewable tenure. Cemetery operator Adelaide Cemeteries is conducting a systematic process of contacting interment right holders and advertising expired sites. Once the required notification takes place, any sites that have not been renewed are able to be reused.

While there are other areas available for sale in Enfield Memorial Park, creating new spaces in this lawn area gives customers a greater choice of grave type and location.

The interment right on this site has expired. We request members of the family to please contact **Adelaide Cemeteries** on **8139 7400** to either renew the interment right and secure ongoing ownership of this site or register a claim for the memorial. Unclaimed memorials will be removed and disposed of in accordance with the *Burial & Cremation Act 2013*.

**ADELAIDE —
CEMETERIES**

Advertisement of expired right to be renewed, Enfield Cemetery.
Image credit: Adelaide Cemeteries.

Becoming inactive with appropriate maintenance

If operators decide that a cemetery entering and remaining in its inactive phase is the right choice for their community, they still need to decide what this will look like. Considerations around perpetual care and future maintenance levels must consider 2 important factors.

- Any specific religious and cultural requirements, particularly in dedicated sections. Some religious and cultural communities may expect higher maintenance levels indefinitely, and some of these may have been previously agreed through contracts or other arrangements. As with any option, consultation may be required to better understand needs and expectations.
- Any existing contractual agreements requiring operators to maintain individual interment sites or certain parts of cemeteries to a particular standard must be upheld.

Three broad options for maintenance of these cemeteries are outlined below.

Maintain current maintenance levels

What is it?

Operators may choose to continue to maintain cemeteries to the same standard as an active or transitional cemetery. For cemeteries that are already inactive, this could mean either continuing the same maintenance that is currently being carried out, or the same maintenance levels as in other active facilities.

What does the research show?

46% of people surveyed felt that maintaining current maintenance standards would be appropriate for around 10 years after a cemetery had become inactive.

Where does it happen?

This has traditionally been what is considered ‘normal’ for cemeteries, particularly in the immediate years after they enter the inactive phase. Many cemeteries in NSW and elsewhere continue to be maintained in the same way throughout their lifecycle.

Target and/or taper maintenance over time

For inactive cemeteries, operators may choose to target maintenance and identify areas within a cemetery that will have higher maintenance levels, for example areas with higher visitation or more recent interments.

Operators can also choose to taper overall maintenance over time with maintenance levels reducing as time passes since the last interment. Maintenance would still need to be done respectfully and at a sufficient level to keep the cemetery safe and accessible as required by existing licence conditions.

What does the research show?

Research findings indicate that most respondents believe cemetery maintenance should gradually decrease over time, with adjustments made according to visitation rates and historical significance.

Figure 4 shows support for reducing maintenance levels around 2-3 generations (50-75 years) after a cemetery closes.

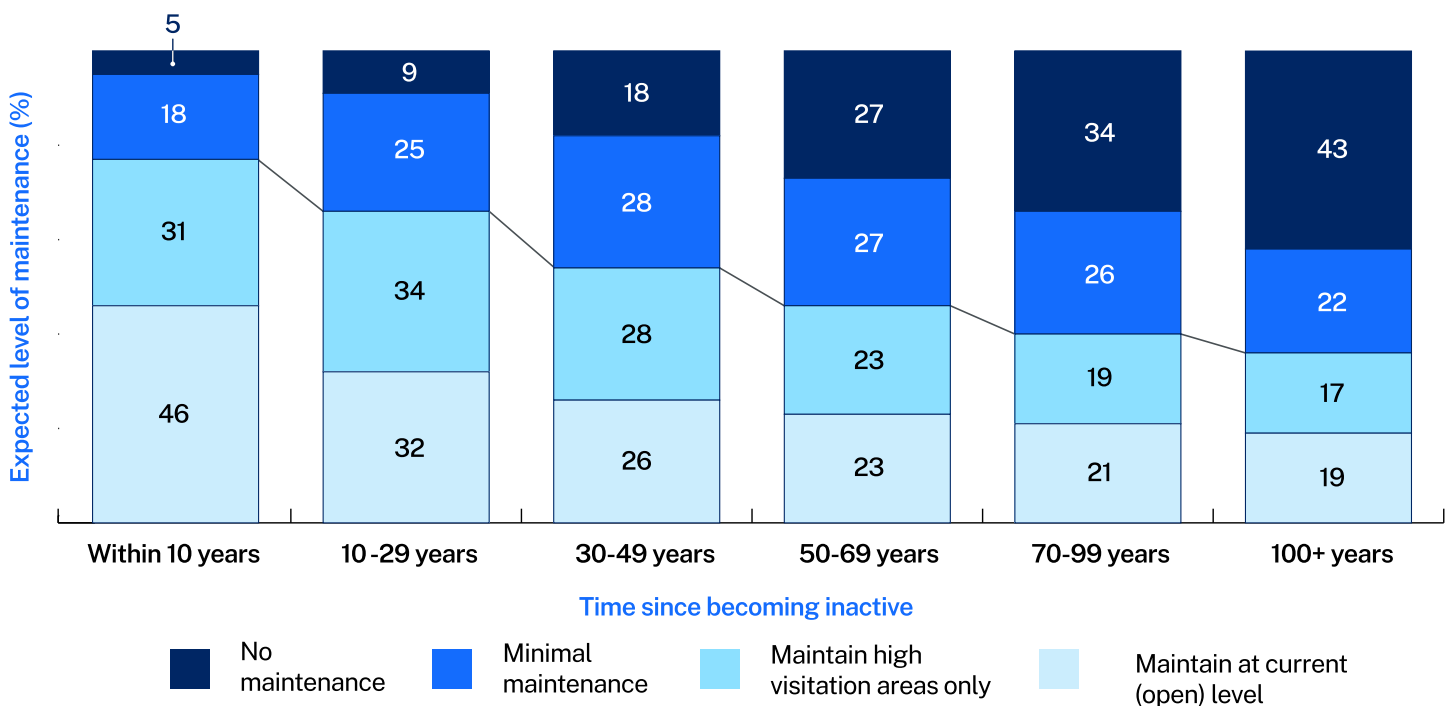


Figure 4: Community views on maintenance levels

In our research, we asked people to rank their maintenance priorities for a cemetery that had been closed for 30-50 years. Figure 5 shows that survey participants prioritised maintaining safe access to higher visitation areas within the cemetery through upkeep of pathways and roads, access points, and heritage monuments. 60% of respondents ranked pathways and roads in their top 3 priorities, followed by access points at 57% and heritage monuments at 52%. The lowest priorities were trees and shrubs (25%) and flowerbeds (22%).

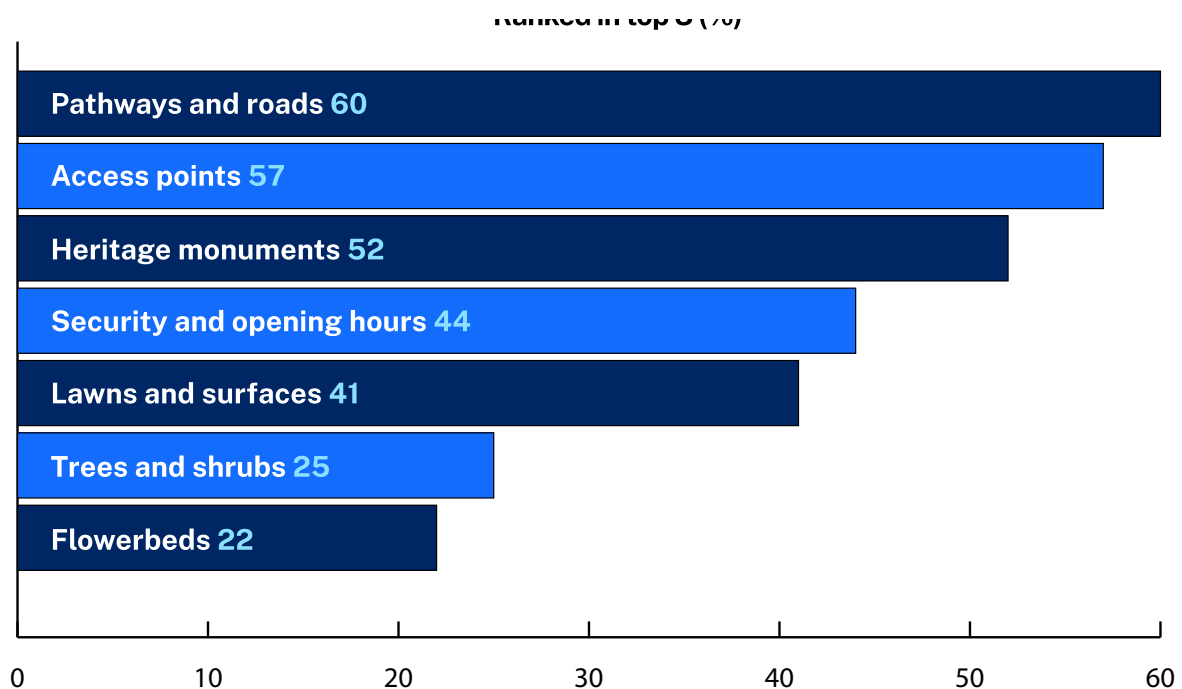


Figure 5: Maintenance priorities for a closed cemetery

Where does it happen?

This is also a common option for inactive cemeteries, particularly as the time since the last interment progresses. This does not mean that cemeteries aren't maintained, but that the appropriate level of maintenance may change.

Take a different maintenance approach

What is it?

Rather than just targeting or tapering maintenance, operators have an opportunity to reimagine what maintenance looks like. This could result in reduced maintenance costs, improved amenity, and improved biodiversity and environmental outcomes.

One option, sometimes known as 'rewilding', involves moving away from grass lawns, which require labour intensive mowing and often irrigation, to a more natural, often native, landscaping approach. This is a carefully thought-out approach implemented with community engagement. It is not simply abandoning a cemetery to overgrowth. It requires planning to revegetate with lower-maintenance plants suited to the local climate and the cemetery setting. In NSW, this will generally mean selecting drought- and frost-tolerant species with root structures unlikely to damage monuments.

What does the research show?

Our research indicated that cemeteries becoming more natural spaces is generally more acceptable to community 2-3 generations or at least 70 years since the last interment, but this depends on context. For example, a cemetery designed to appear as a more natural space during its active phase might become a nature reserve much sooner after entering the inactive phase than a traditional monumental lawn cemetery. 57% of survey respondents agreed that cemeteries are a green space with biodiversity and environmental value.

Where does it happen?

There are many examples worldwide of ‘rewilding’ and more sustainable approaches being used to maintain cemeteries, including many in the USA and the UK. Melbourne General Cemetery in Victoria has seen success with their Project Cultivate – see case study below. While this is a large scale revegetation project, research has shown that meaningful ecological benefits can be achieved with just a 2 m x 2 m area. Similar projects in NSW include:

- a small project underway in Manly Cemetery (operated by Northern Beaches Council) as part of the Northern Beaches Wildflower Project, where volunteers are planting native wildflowers and grasses throughout the historic cemetery to create a peaceful oasis and attract butterflies, bees and birds.
- a trial at Wollongong Cemetery (operated by Wollongong City Council) switching to native grasses and indigenous grassland species in a section of the cemetery.

Case Study - Project Cultivate at Melbourne General Cemetery

Project Cultivate (in Melbourne General Cemetery, operated by Victoria’s Southern Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust) is a forward-thinking initiative that redefines how cemetery landscapes can contribute to ecological health. Project Cultivate shifts from intensive maintenance routines that generally use herbicides to a more passive, ecologically sensitive approach. The project has introduced indigenous plantings that support biodiversity, reduce water use, and enhance habitat connectivity. This transition encourages self-sustaining vegetation that require minimal intervention once established.

The result is a landscape that not only honours memory but also actively contributes to environmental resilience. Indigenous species are adapted to local conditions and thrive with less irrigation and minimal chemical and physical intervention, making them ideal for long-term sustainability in cemetery settings. To date:

- Over 500,000 indigenous grassland plants have been introduced across more than 56 acres, with a visible increase in insects, birds and small reptiles.
- Over 5,000 cubic metres of organic mulch has been applied, dramatically improving soil quality and biological activity (reducing the need for chemicals and irrigation)
- Herbicide usage has reduced by 85%
- Early data shows a reduction in ambient temperatures of up to 3 degrees, compared to surrounding hard-scaped areas.

Community engagement is key to the project’s success. For example, citizen science initiatives welcome local involvement in improving urban biodiversity.



Native plantings underway at Melbourne General Cemetery, Southern Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust. Image: Andy O’Connor (SMCT)

Complementary use: park conversion

What is it?

Once a cemetery is built, it typically remains a cemetery forever. Yet across NSW there are numerous public parks which were formerly cemeteries. Usually they are called 'memorial parks' or 'rest parks' and were created as early as the 1930s. Today, council operators may convert a cemetery into a public park under a process set out in the Act. This process requires applications to balance consideration of heritage, community interests, and land use planning.

With park conversions, remains are not disturbed but memorials are able to be moved respectfully (often displayed around the perimeter of the new park). This means that conversions create more versatile, usable green spaces which can be appropriate both to the memory of the deceased and to the quiet enjoyment of the living.

What does the research show?

The time since the last interment was very important to the community's view on reuse of inactive cemeteries for other purposes. After at least 50 years since the cemetery became inactive, a park for peaceful recreation was the most acceptable reuse option, with 62% of respondents finding this acceptable and 21% finding it unacceptable.

Where does it happen?

There are numerous examples of parks that were previously cemeteries across NSW, including Pioneers Memorial Park in Leichhardt, Wollongong Pioneer Rest Park in Wollongong, St Thomas Rest Park in Crows Nest, and Camperdown Rest Park in Camperdown.

Case Study – Camperdown Memorial Rest Park

Camperdown Cemetery was a private cemetery founded in 1848, with burials ceasing in 1926 following the opening of Rookwood Cemetery. In 1948, the majority of the cemetery was dedicated as a public park now known as Camperdown Memorial Rest Park. The remaining 4 acres were resumed in 1950, leaving a small section of cemetery adjacent to St Stephen's Church. At the time of park conversion, council advertised the intended process and gave relatives an opportunity to relocate headstones to other locations. Some larger and more significant memorials were relocated to the remaining cemetery section. Those headstones not removed were used to create park walls. The park is now a popular meeting place in Newtown, a dense urban area, used for relaxation and recreation.



Camperdown Memorial Rest Park before and after conversion.

Image credit: City of Sydney Archives (left) and Cemeteries & Crematoria NSW(right).

Examples of cemetery activations

As the role of cemeteries continues to evolve, there are opportunities to consider activating cemetery spaces at all stages of their life cycle. Some of these activations may also align well with cemeteries in any of the future states described above.

Any activity proposed in a cemetery should be managed respectfully and developed in consultation with the local community.

Some examples are included here for inspiration, noting that these are only a sample of the many activities that are occurring in cemeteries.

- In West Terrace Cemetery, a historic cemetery in the centre of Adelaide, Adelaide Cemetery Tours (run by Adelaide Cemeteries) offer multiple guided walks exploring the cemetery's history. They also offer an award-winning night time tour where actors explore some of the stories behind the headstones in a theatrical walk.
- Centennial Park Cemetery in Pasadena, south of Adelaide, holds the SA Death Festival each year where people are welcome to explore grief and dying through workshops, talks, meditation sessions and creative spaces. This creates a space for honest conversations while also celebrating life, community and connection.
- Forest Hills Cemetery in Boston, USA, has held a lantern festival every July for 15 years. Families attend the cemetery to decorate paper lanterns with drawings and messages to their loved ones, releasing the lanterns at sunset.
- Green-Wood Cemetery in New York has an extensive program of community events, which have been so successful that in 2026 they will be opening an Education and Welcome Centre to welcome visitors, host art exhibitions and provide educational programs.
- Rectory Lane Cemetery in the UK hosts volunteer run hives which produce honey that is sold to raise funds for maintaining the cemetery. They also host kids' educational programs.



Image credit: NSW Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure / Bill Code

