

Diversity-Ready Cemeteries and Crematoria in England and Wales

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Diversity-ready cemeteries, crematoria and remembrance sites are a necessary but currently neglected aspect of an inclusive and integrated multicultural society. Addressing these issues will contribute to greater social well-being and a more inclusive civic culture.



Muslim graves at cemetery

Introduction

The UK is an ethnically and religiously diverse country, shaped by longstanding ties with communities from the New Commonwealth, and other flows of international migration, particularly within Europe. Cemetery and crematoria provision is a little discussed but important dimension of migrant and minority experiences in England and Wales. As society becomes more culturally diverse, so too do the requirements for funerary spaces and practices. Having the 'right' sort of burial, cremation and associated rituals are important for the respectful treatment of the deceased and for those mourning them.

Cemeteries and crematoria are provided and managed primarily by local authorities, alongside some private providers including faith groups, non-profit and commercial services. Planners play an important role in forward-planning for, and mediating the location of, services.

Overview of project

- This research project studied cemetery and crematoria provision in the light of established minority and migrant funerary needs
- It focused on England and Wales which have devolved but similar patterns of provision and planning systems
- Four case study towns of broadly similar size with approximately 10% minority populations were studied: Huddersfield, Newport, Northampton and Swindon
- Participatory research methods included mapping and photographic surveys of each cemetery and crematorium, interviews and focus groups with service providers, planners, religious and community leaders, and diverse user-groups in each town

Key Findings

There is a growing awareness of, and attention to, diverse needs across local authorities and individual providers. The most effective service providers were well informed about the needs of different faith and cultural groups, including local variations and changing trends in population and practices. However, provision and understanding are uneven. The findings of this study highlight a number of trends and issues:

- Falling rates of repatriation of deceased bodies or cremated remains to South Asia
- Repatriation of ashes is common in the case of death for short term EU migrants
- Need for increased capacity in designated Muslim burial grounds
- Limited need of funeral services by short-term EU economic migrants
- Uneven knowledge of legal processes, practical processes and costs when someone dies (especially amongst recent migrants)
- Occasional need for local authority funerals for young migrants
- Recent increased costs for local authority burials are a particular burden on those with a religious obligation for burial



Moveable Shiva statue at crematorium



Crematorium anteroom to accommodate large funerals

- Monday to Friday public services (such as GPs, registrars, coroners, cemeteries and crematoria) are inadequate to meet the needs of faith groups which require prompt burial or cremation (notably Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs)
- Local authority budgetary cuts have led to reduced hours and some out-sourcing of cemetery services, which can make it more difficult to be responsive to weekend requests
- There are limited facilities available for families and communities wishing to wash and prepare the body of the deceased
- Inability to fulfil religious and cultural requirements for the dead leaves mourners feeling misunderstood, marginalised and anxious on behalf of the deceased
- 'Textbook' knowledge of diverse practices needs to be supplemented by ongoing communication and consultation with local communities
- Service providers are not always aware of 'diversity within diversity', including different denominational and regional interpretations of religious practice, as well as generational and gendered preferences
- Many funerary chapels and carparks cannot accommodate large funerals
- Insufficient capacity within crematoria and cemetery scheduling hinders flexibility for longer or large services
- Fixed religious iconography can marginalise those of different faiths or none
- The removal of permanent staff from some cemeteries has made elderly and minority visitors uneasy about visiting on their own
- Larger metropolitan areas were reported to be better equipped to address these issues, compared to the towns in this study

Recommendations

This study shows that whilst there is evidence of increased awareness of the cemetery, crematoria and associated funerary needs of diverse communities in England and Wales, more remains to be done. Both service providers and minority communities have evidenced examples of innovation and good practice, but ongoing dialogue and understanding of local needs, and the impact of budgetary and other constraints, are central to improving current services for mourners and for planning better diversity-ready facilities and services in the future.

Accessible information

- A 'one-stop' accessible guide on what to do when someone dies, including information on cemeteries, crematoria, funeral services and associated legal requirements (e.g. how and where to register a death) is vital for migrant and minority communities
- Translation of local authority and other funeral service information into key local minority languages maximises access to information for minorities and migrants

Local authorities, planners and bereavement services

- Planning for future cemetery and crematoria provision needs to be based on local population trends and funerary preferences (e.g. a growing Muslim population will require more dedicated burial space)
- Changes to cost structures need to be affordable and should be done in consultation with relevant stakeholders
- The planning and design of extended, refurbished or new cemeteries and crematoria will benefit from consultation with both majority and minority cultural and religious groups
- Planning for diversity-ready cemetery and crematoria provision and services needs to be included in local authority Local Plans and stronger guidance should be incorporated into the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)
- Local authorities and other providers would benefit from sharing examples of good practice and strategies
- Local authorities and planners could liaise with local Hindu and Sikh groups, wider communities and

the Environment Agency, to identify and designate more suitable river sites for cremated ash scattering

- Local planning authorities may be best placed to carry out public consultations as part of their Local Plan reviews, but more resources are needed to support participation
- More resources should be made available to local authorities in pressing need for diversity-ready cemeteries and crematoria to provide facilities and enable appropriate consultation with stakeholders

Diversity-ready cemeteries and crematoria

- Best practice includes giving more time and space for large funeral groups or lengthy rituals where possible
- Moveable religious symbols are respectful of different faiths and those of no religious beliefs
- High quality audio systems allow the use of recorded prayers, devotional or other music
- TV and webcam facilities would facilitate virtual attendance by international mourners as well as those unable to attend for other reasons e.g. poor health
- Required refurbishment, such as for rewiring, or air pollution abatement at crematoria, offers an opportunity to incorporate facilities for diverse communities
- Review the loss of staff at cemetery and crematoria sites; consider at least partial staffing at publicised fixed hours
- Consider the conversion of redundant buildings at cemetery and crematoria sites to other services such as a café, florist or information point with toilet facilities



Collaboration service providers and community to design, build and fund mausoleums

Community initiatives

- Identifying contact persons within community groups eases communication with service providers. This also can support families in making funeral arrangements, including translation, paperwork and understanding of formal processes.
- Some community groups have liaised with providers to provide local community members with training in cemetery health and safety to support cemetery staff during weekend burials
- Community initiatives can support families and service providers, e.g. Jewish and Muslim burial councils which collect funds for communal facilities, such as ritual washing rooms, hearses and individual funerals; and Italian Christian mausoleums
- Community initiatives need to be transparent about eligibility, membership and funds

Dialogue and consultation

- Need for ongoing engagement between funerary service providers and minority and migrant groups to understand their varied religious needs and cultural preferences
- More interaction between varied faith and secular groups within localities regarding funerary needs
- Service providers should consult with community leaders, but also with families and individuals: be aware of diversity within and between communities

- It is important to avoid assuming that everyone in a particular community shares the same beliefs or views. Preferences regarding funerary practices may fluctuate according to gender, age, ethnicity and country of origin or heritage
- Given mixed use of cemeteries and crematoria gardens, including diverse funerary practices and leisure, information on the diverse user groups and visitors can help others understand others' needs and practices
- Cemetery and crematoria open days and activities can enhance understanding of processes and encourage dialogue with and between different user groups and service providers

Conclusion

Creating diversity-ready cemeteries, crematoria and associated services is a vital element of an inclusive multicultural society, where everyone feels they 'belong', where their needs are catered for, and their deceased are treated respectfully.

Improved services and facilities which ensure cemeteries and crematoria are more inclusive of and responsive to minority needs can benefit all users, e.g. moveable religious symbols, webcam links, and anterooms with TV-relay systems for overspill and/or those with young children.

More research is needed in towns and cities with diverse populations and significant development pressures, and in Scotland and Northern Ireland.



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