



Natural Burial Guidelines

Introduction

The following guidelines outline New Plymouth District Council's (NPDC) approach to natural burials at Council administered cemeteries designated for natural burials.

A natural burial is characterised by:

- 1) No embalming.
- 2) A shallow burial.
- 3) The use of a rapid bio-degradable non-pollutant casket.
- 4) Over planting of the grave with a native tree or shrub.
- 5) No headstone is installed.
- 6) Site identification is through marking each burial site and both ends of each row containing burial sites with a labelled concrete marker.

A key goal for natural burials is that the burial process is environmentally friendly. This is achieved by not introducing anything synthetic to the ground, by not preventing or slowing natural decomposition processes, and by restoring the surface to a natural flora and fauna environment (a native bush reserve/park).

The following guidelines are designed to assist the public, funeral directors and staff who are involved in the management of a natural burial.

Objectives

- To set guidelines so that staff and funeral directors are informed of procedures for natural burials.
- To inform the public of appropriate procedures at NPDC natural burial grounds.

Development plan for each natural burial area

A development plan will be devised for each natural burial area and will include:

- A site plan with reference points that records plot layout and indicates the start point for burials.
- The provision of access ways through the site.
- A bush restoration plan.
- A list of approved trees and shrubs that are local plants, native to the area and able to provide shelter for later native trees that are added around and over plots.

PROCEDURES

Notification to Cemetery Officer

The Cemetery Officer is to be contacted and provided with a 'burial application' at least eight working hours (Monday to Friday) prior to a burial. When a death occurs on the last day of the working week, the weekend or on a statutory holiday, the burial will need to be held over. The earliest a burial could occur depending on circumstances, is 2.00pm on the first working day of the following week. The application must include:

- a) A death certificate or other documentation relating to the release of the body.
- b) Relevant information where a person died of a communicable disease.
- c) Written confirmation by the applicant that the requirements have been met.

Where the services of a funeral director have not been engaged to coordinate the funeral service and control the activities at the grave site, the use of a Council 'Approved Person' under the provisions of Part 3 of the New Plymouth District Council Bylaw 2008, is required. The use of an approved person requires adherence to conditions of use that pertains to each site and may involve additional costs.

REQUIREMENTS

1. Embalming

The use of embalming fluids is **not** permitted with natural burials.

2. Biodegradable casket, shroud and urns

The deceased must be presented in an authorised container or shroud. This will be quick to biodegrade and will not emit toxins into the soil. Criteria to meet acceptable standard are listed in 2a. Presentation of caskets for burial at Council designated natural burial areas requires a signed declaration from the applicant that the casket is an eco casket as defined in 2a.

2a. Caskets

Caskets are to be made from untreated natural materials with no synthetic finishes - natural oil finishes are accepted. Casket attachments, such as handles are to be made of natural materials and casket linings are to be of bio-degradable material such as cotton.

The following materials are not to be used on caskets: plastics, vinyl, metal fittings (except fastenings), varnish and paint treatments on the timber, and glues or plastic inside the casket.

2b. Shrouds

Natural fibre shrouds such as cotton or wool on a solid base such as untreated timber, are acceptable¹.

Caskets or shrouds that are leaking fluids or have an obnoxious smell will not be accepted at NPDC cemeteries.

2c. Urns

The same requirements as for 2a Caskets. Urns are only accepted into an existing grave and where burial can be practically achieved.

3. Plot dimensions, placement and depth of burial

The grave is to be dug with a minimum coverage of 750mm from the top of the casket to the natural soil level². The plot dimensions are 2.5m long x 1.8m wide.

¹ The solid base is required as support for lowering into the grave and must be affixed to the shroud so that it is stable during the burial procedure.

² This requires a alteration to the existing NPDC Bylaw 2008: Part 3; Cemeteries & Crematoria – Section 9 (2)

Each new burial will be adjacent to the most recent burial, as set out in the development plan. Prior to planting, sites plots and graves will be maintained in long grass. Selection of plots and the reservation of adjacent plots is not permitted. There will only be one body burial per plot. Additional ash burials may be permitted into an existing grave when practical and are to be contained in a biodegradable urn. This requirement is due to the progressive establishment of natural vegetation after burials and for maintenance considerations.

4. Burial process

Graves are to be dug by approved Council staff only. Family or friends may backfill a grave if they desire, otherwise this will be undertaken by Council staff.

5. Memorial

A wooden grave marker may be installed at the head of the plot, at the time of burial. The wooden grave marker is to be a temporary marker – maintained for a maximum period of one year from the date of burial and will not be replaced when it deteriorates. No permanent or synthetic memorials and commemorative artefacts are to be installed at a burial site.

A tree or shrub will be planted at the burial site. The planting will occur at a time when each cemetery row is occupied with burials or within five years from the date of the first burial, whichever comes first. The plant is to be selected by the family from a list of suitable plants specific to each natural burial area. The choice of plants will vary along the boundary of the natural burial area where lower growing plants will be used. Council staff will supply and plant the tree, the cost of purchase and maintenance is included in the plot purchase fee. Over time, new trees will be planted around and over sections of used plots to fill out the regenerating forest. For information on tree maintenance, refer to (7) Maintenance.

Provision for a combined memorial that lists those buried near the entrance of the natural burial area will be assessed depending on demand. The inscription of names onto the memorial would be optional, and at a cost to those choosing the option.

6. Plant selection

A list of plants approved for the burial site is to be included in the development plan. The plant selection varies for each cemetery. Gravesites on the perimeter of the burial area would use a subset of the plant list, such as lower growing plants.

The area will be developed as natural bush revegetation as opposed to an arboretum.

7. Maintenance

Maintenance of the natural burial area will be determined with consideration of site attributes with a programme outlined in the development plan for each natural burial site. When the plots are planted with trees the area will be maintained as a bush revegetation site. Care and maintenance of the trees will be required until sufficiently developed and minimal maintenance is needed. Maintenance involves controlling vegetative growth around the planted tree seedlings, until they dominate the grasses and weed species. Ongoing control of plant pests such as old man's beard and gorse

may be necessary. Any tree pruning from the area will be mulched and applied to the site.

NPDC staff will attend to planting and maintenance. If a tree or shrub does not survive, the decision to replace the plant is left to the Council staff. This discretion will be dependent on whether surrounding plants are sufficiently occupying the ground, so that a replacement is either required or unnecessary. Plant selection considers those that benefit native bird species and planting will not be undertaken during January to April.

FEES

The plot purchase and burial charge at the natural burial area will be the same as for a traditional plot. The natural burial site has higher costs due to its larger area, however this is offset by lower long term maintenance costs.

No burial is to take place unless all applicable fees have been paid or written arrangements for payment have been made with the Council, in compliance with the Clause 6.1(d) of Part 3 of the New Plymouth District Council Bylaw 2008. A schedule of current fees for natural burial plots and services can be obtained from the cemetery office or a funeral director.