



**SOUTHERN  
METROPOLITAN**  
CEMETERIES TRUST

Honouring and celebrating life

## Natural Burial Standards

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# What is a natural burial?

Natural burial is the interment of a deceased body into the earth, carried out in principle with the ordinary course of nature, and limiting (as much as possible within current regulatory frameworks) the use of any non-natural elements and processes.

In general, this means that the body is not embalmed, it is covered only in a shroud or contained in a coffin made of biodegradable materials, and buried at a shallower depth, to aid in the natural decomposition process. The site of a natural burial is intended to blend in with the local environment as much as possible and is therefore kept free of any items or plantings that are not native to the area.

Natural burials are also often referred to as green burials, woodland burials, bushland burials, ecofriendly burials, or sustainable burials depending on the jurisdiction<sup>1</sup>, as a key aim of this type of burial is to offer a more environmentally friendly alternative to traditional burial that contributes to the enhancement of the native habitat.

## Why consider natural burial?

Southern Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust (SMCT) recognises a cultural shift in attitudes towards death and burial in Australia. There is a growing desire for greater choice of alternatives to traditional burial that are more sustainable and environmentally friendly, accommodate greater variety of death rituals practiced by people of diverse cultures and faiths, and reduce decision-making for the bereaved.

Natural burial offers a range of benefits, each of which may appeal to different people for different reasons. Firstly, some people may feel that traditional burial and cremation is not well-suited to them or their loved one and natural burials offer a more attractive alternative. Natural burial is associated with a significantly lower carbon footprint than conventional alternatives, as it minimises environmental impacts, supports bushland regeneration, and adds to the biodiversity of the area. It is also a simple and less formal process, which removes some of the decision-making for the bereaved including decisions about the ceremony, coffin/casket, headstone, and floral arrangements, as many of these are not included in a natural burial. Finally, natural burial sites are designed to blend in with the local environment (e.g., bushland areas) - an appealing aesthetic for many people.

It is important to note, however, that a natural burial may not necessarily be the right choice for everyone. To maintain the integrity of the natural burial site for all who are or will be interred there in the future, there are several limitations on what can be done during and after the burial. The Natural Burial Standards (the Standards) presented here outline the processes and design principles involved in a natural burial. This can be used to guide cemetery operators and inform prospective customers about what exactly is involved in a natural burial.

<sup>1</sup> Australasian Cemeteries and Crematoria Association (2008). *Mentor Report: Natural Burials*. Available from: <https://www.gct.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Natural-Burials-Mentor-Report.pdf>



# Our standards for natural burial

SMCT has developed the following evidence-based standards to guide the current practice of natural burials on existing and future natural burial sites operated by SMCT. These standards have been developed for use in Victoria based on current evidence and legislation but are intended to be updated alongside the maturation of the concept, practice, and regulatory frameworks that govern natural burials in Australia.

## Guiding principles of these standards

The natural burial ground shall be designed, used, and maintained in such a way to achieve a natural aesthetic that maintains or enhances the natural habitat for native flora and fauna, with minimal adverse impacts on the environment (including through the reduction of carbon emissions).

The process of natural burial from preparation of the body following death, to interment of the body in the earth, shall be carried out in such a way as to adhere to the principles of natural burial by emphasising/prioritising the use of natural, biodegradable materials, and limiting the use of any non-natural elements as much as is reasonably possible and practical.

## Preparation of the body

A body intended for natural burial within SMCT cemeteries must not be embalmed<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the use of any chemicals when cleaning the body should be kept to a minimum or ideally natural oils should be used as an alternative to chemicals<sup>3</sup>. Any non-natural items on the body must be removed (see **Items buried with a body**), and the body must be dressed or shrouded in only natural, biodegradable materials (such as cotton, silk, or wool). These steps are taken to avoid interruption

of the natural decomposition process, and to prevent any leakage of non-natural chemicals into the soil and surrounding environment.

While there is no requirement under Victorian legislation for bodies to be embalmed, the circumstances of a death may require this process in some cases (e.g., if the body is being repatriated from interstate or overseas<sup>4</sup>). In these instances, the body would unfortunately not be eligible for natural burial.

## Acceptable materials for burial vessel

For natural burials, bodies will only be buried in coffins constructed of natural, untreated materials, or wrapped in a shroud made of natural fibres<sup>3</sup>.

Where coffins are to be used as a burial vessel, they must only be constructed from unpolished wood/timber, cardboard, bamboo, wicker, willow, seagrass, or other renewable materials. Fittings within, or around the coffin, including handles and fixtures, must be made from natural and sustainable materials. Metal and polished nails, screws, and plastic are prohibited from inclusion in the construction material of any coffin intended for natural burial.

<sup>2</sup>Embalming is a process where the body is treated with certain chemicals to achieve sanitisation; presentation; and preservation of the body

<sup>3</sup>Australian Cemeteries and Crematoria Association (2010) *Guidelines for Natural Burial*; Green Burial Council (2019) *Cemetery Certification Standards*; Natural Death Advocacy Network, *Natural Burial Factsheet* ([https://ndan.com.au/images/Factsheets/INFO\\_SHEET\\_5\\_Natural\\_Burial.pdf](https://ndan.com.au/images/Factsheets/INFO_SHEET_5_Natural_Burial.pdf))

<sup>4</sup>Australian Funeral Directors Association (<https://afda.org.au/arranging-2/>)

Where shrouds are used, they must only be made from natural fibres, including silk, cotton, and wool. The shrouded body should, ideally, be placed on a natural timber board and contained within a second layer of shrouding. This is to assist with the transportation of the body.

This Standard aligns with current Victorian legislation<sup>5</sup> and incorporates contemporary practices in providing a variety of options of materials that a body can be buried in. With advancement of innovation, and societal trends favouring more sustainable production and consumption, a broad range of sustainable materials for constructing burial vessels have emerged (including bamboo, wicker, seagrass, or natural fibres used to make shrouds)<sup>6</sup>.

## Body transportation

Body remains arriving at, and being transported within the cemetery, must be enclosed within a suitable burial vessel, constructed in accordance with the requirements outlined in **acceptable materials for burial vessel**, and in compliance with regulation 23 of the *Cemeteries and Crematoria Regulations 2015 (Vic)*<sup>7</sup>.

For burial in a vessel that may be porous, including coffins made of wicker or woven baskets, bodies must first be wrapped in a shroud and placed inside the burial vessel. For natural burials where the body is covered in a shroud but without a coffin, research<sup>8</sup> advocates for the shrouded body to be placed on a solid natural carrier, made from timber or other renewable materials, and contained in a second shroud. This will assist the movement of bodies over short distances and lowering into the ground. To the best possible extent, equipment for lowering burial vessels into the grave should also be constructed from sustainably sourced materials.

## Items buried with a body

Only items made from natural, biodegradable materials will be included with the body for burial. This includes items of clothing, accessories, and personal mementos or memorabilia<sup>9</sup>.

The body must only be dressed in clothing made from natural fibres (e.g., unbleached cotton, linen, or hemp). Clothing containing synthetic materials are not permitted as these can take hundreds of years to break down. Any accessories such as jewellery also need to be removed prior to burial. Exceptions may be made regarding jewellery or other accessories made from metals such as gold and silver, as this could be considered natural elements returning to the earth from which they came, although they will not degrade along with the human remains.

Where personal mementos or memorabilia are placed with the body in the burial vessel, these items must only consist of natural materials and be easily biodegradable (e.g., letters, hand drawn pictures, wooden tributes etc.).<sup>10</sup> Under the principles of natural burial, any items not made from natural materials, or deemed to have potential to cause damage to the surrounding environment, must not be included with the body.

An exception to this Standard is the inclusion of a nameplate made of durable material (e.g., metal) that provides the name of the deceased and their date of death. This can either be affixed to the coffin or placed on top of the shroud when buried. While this practice is not binding in Victoria, it has been included in legislation from other Australian jurisdictions covering natural burials.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *The Cemeteries and Crematoria Regulations 2015 (Vic)* stipulates that a body being presented for burial must be enclosed in a coffin, container, or other receptacle, constructed from wood, or other substantial material.

<sup>6</sup> Institute for Sustainable Futures. (2021). *Pathways towards sustainable burial and cremation options for NSW: A study of new and innovative models for managing human remains*. Institute for Sustainable Futures.

<sup>7</sup> Regulation 23 of the *Cemeteries and Crematoria Regulations 2015 (Vic)* requires bodily remains to be transported in a coffin, or receptacle, that is clean, constructed from durable material, and from which noxious emissions or matter from those remains cannot escape.

<sup>8</sup> Fournier, E. (2018). *The green burial guidebook: Everything you need to plan an affordable, environmentally friendly burial*. New World Library, California.

<sup>9</sup> Australian Cemeteries and Crematoria Association (2010) *Guidelines for Natural Burial*; Natural Death Advocacy Network, *Natural Burial Factsheet* ([https://ndan.com.au/images/Factsheets/INFO\\_SHEET\\_5\\_Natural\\_Burial.pdf](https://ndan.com.au/images/Factsheets/INFO_SHEET_5_Natural_Burial.pdf))

<sup>10</sup> O'Keefe (2023), Osolase, Rasdi & Mansor (2022).

<sup>11</sup> *Burial and Cremation Regulations (South Australia) 2014 (Part 2: S.17 – Interment of name plate with human remains)*.

## Family participation

Family members wishing to play an active part in the natural burial process for reasons of cultural, religious, or personal significance, may be offered the following opportunities:

- Prior to interment - family members may choose to decorate the burial vessel or place items on the body for burial such as personal letters, hand drawn pictures, and other mementoes made from natural materials, as long as this complies with requirements under **Acceptable materials for burial vessel and Items buried with a body**.
- During the burial process - family members may be involved in placing the body or vessel in the grave only if this has been previously discussed with the cemetery staff and an appropriate plan has been put in place to ensure this is conducted in a safe manner.
- After the burial - family members may be involved in backfilling or topping the soil that covers the coffin/shroud.

This Standard, which aligns with contemporary practices<sup>12</sup>, enables observation of important traditional, cultural, and religious practices, or personal significance attached in honouring the dead. By restricting family participation in this way, the Standard complies with existing legislation such as *Occupational Health and Safety Regulations 2017 (Vic)*<sup>13</sup>, and ensures only approved and professionally licenced staff or contractors operate equipment.

## Number of burials per grave and interment tenure

Only one burial will be permitted per grave in a natural burial site, and the grave shall be held in perpetuity in line with current Victorian legislation<sup>14</sup>.

Existing research evidence on best practice for natural burials specifies the need for graves to be at a shallower depth, close to or within the active soil layer (see **Grave depth and size**). This will promote accelerated natural decomposition, although minimises the number of burials that can be conducted per grave.



<sup>12</sup> Palko, H.C. (2021). Implementing Aldo Leopold's ideas through the socio-ecological practice of green burial: Ramsey creek preserve in South Carolina, USA. *Socio Ecol Pract Res* 3, 441-450 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42532-021-00098-z>

<sup>13</sup> Mandates that cemeteries, and their staff, be responsible for the safety and health of all non-employees on site.

<sup>14</sup> Section 74 of the *Cemeteries and Crematoria Act 2003 (Vic)* upholds the right that burials shall be held to perpetual interment. Exceptions to this Standard may apply to the interment of cremated remains, where a right of interment for cremated remains may be granted for a period of 25 years, but the cemetery must first offer perpetual right of interment to the person.

Disinterment of the body after natural burial is strongly discouraged. This is to avoid disruption to the natural decomposition process and the surrounding environment, and to uphold the burial wishes of the deceased and their right to perpetual interment.

Given that sustainable use of land is a key underlying principle of natural burials, there is advocacy<sup>15</sup> for re-use of the land for future burials after an appropriate amount of time has passed to allow for full decomposition of the body initially interred there. However, this is not currently possible within the existing regulatory framework in Victoria.

Another option that may be explored to maximise land use is the practice of upright burials<sup>16</sup>, in which a body is buried vertically (standing upright), meaning a greater number of burials could take place on a natural burial site. However, upright burials are a newer variation of natural burials. There is also some contention in the current research literature about the effect that the orientation of the body and depth of the grave may have on the rate of decomposition relative to traditional supine burials<sup>17</sup>.

## Grave depth and size

The body will be interred at a depth of between 1 to 1.5 metres below the surface, ensuring that there is at least 750 millimetres of earth between the top of the shrouded remains (or the receptacle they are enclosed in) and the normal level of the ground.

Minimum grave depth for all burials in Victorian public cemeteries is mandated by law.<sup>18</sup> Shallow grave depths (at a minimum of 1 metre) are recommended for natural burials. This will reduce the need for heavy earth-moving equipment, minimise the disturbance of the natural landscape, and promote the natural decomposition process with benefits for the surrounding environment.

In practice, natural burial standards in other jurisdictions vary in specificity on grave depth and size. However, legislation in other Australian States and Territories that specifically refer to and include the practice of natural burials stipulate the depth of burial or interment at a minimum of 1 metre below the surface. For example, in the Northern Territory, the Burial and Cremation Act 2022 (NT) states that "Human remains that are buried in the ground must be completely covered by soil that is at least 1 metre deep at its shallowest point" (s81). Similarly, the Burial and Cremation Regulations 2014 (SA) in South Australia, state that "A person must not inter, or cause, suffer or permit the interment of, bodily remains in a cemetery or natural burial ground so that any of the remains are at a depth of less than 1 metre from the surface of the ground." (r15).

The plot dimensions for natural burials are the same as standard burial plots, being 1.2m wide by 2.4m long, with a minimum distance of 30cm between adjacent graves at the closest point. In the case of upright burials, however, each grave would sit within a 1.2 metre square grid, within an opening approximately 70cm in diameter, and leaving a 50cm gap between adjacent graves.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Institute for Sustainable Futures (2021) *Pathways towards sustainable burial and cremation options for NSW: A study of new and innovative models for managing human remains. Report prepared for Cemeteries and Crematoria NSW.*

<sup>16</sup> For example, see Kurweeton landscape cemetery which practices upright natural burial (<https://uprightburials.com.au/>)

<sup>17</sup> Gould, H, Arnold, M, Duplex, T & Kohn, T 2021, 'Stood to rest': reorientating necrogeographies for the 21st century', *Mortality: Promoting the interdisciplinary study of death and dying*, vol 28, no. 1, pp.54-72.

<sup>18</sup> Regulation 24 of the *Cemeteries and Crematoria Regulations 2015 (Vic)* states: "If the ground above the place of interment is unsealed, there is at least 750 millimetres of earth between the coffin, container, receptacle or those remains and the normal level of the ground."

<sup>19</sup> Gould, H, Arnold, M, Duplex, T & Kohn, T 2021, 'Stood to rest': reorientating necrogeographies for the 21st century', *Mortality: Promoting the interdisciplinary study of death and dying*, vol 28, no. 1, pp.54-72.



## Excavation methods

Excavation of natural burial plots will be carried out using small, low-emission machinery to minimise impacts on the environment. Manual excavation methods will be avoided to minimise the risk of injury to persons involved. Furthermore, excavations will only be performed by approved cemetery staff or contractors. Family participation in this process will be limited to prescriptions set in **Family participation**.

Under Victorian Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) legislation and regulations<sup>20</sup>, excavations can only occur using mechanical methods and must be undertaken by cemetery employees. This protects against the risk of injuries from manual methods. While OHS standards do not prohibit families participating in backfilling, this must still be supervised by cemetery staff to ensure safety is maintained.

Cemeteries operating natural burial grounds may develop their own internal policies on how excavations are to occur, specifying the involvement or exclusion of family members in the process and how this will be navigated compassionately and safely.

## Grave markers

In accordance with the principles of natural burial, no obvious, obtrusive, or non-natural elements

will be present in the natural burial site, and the use of grave markers will be limited in such a way that they do not impair the ecological conditions and aesthetic of the natural landscape. In strict adherence to these principles, graves may be left completely unmarked by any kind of physical item. However, if a cemetery wishes to balance this against family wishes to have some form of marker, then there are several options available. These include:

1. Using a small, locally sourced, natural marker on each grave (e.g., rock with inscription; small sapling, tree marker with four plots off each direction).
2. Establishment of a larger communal plaque or inscription wall at the entrance to the natural burial site, naming all the deceased buried there.
3. A combination of options 1 and 2.

Under the *Cemeteries and Crematoria Act 2003 (Vic)* (s77), a holder of a right of interment may establish or alter a memorial at that place of interment. However, this must be done with the approval of the cemetery trust who are able to set terms and conditions on such activity. Cemetery operators are therefore able to set terms and conditions on the use of grave markers in the natural burial sites they operate.

<sup>20</sup> Occupational Health and Safety Act (2004); Occupational Health and Safety Regulations (2017)



## Locating mechanisms

At a minimum, site-mapping and digital record keeping of individual grave locations must be used. In addition, best practice indicates that technologies in the form of Global Positioning System (GPS) or Geographic Information System (GIS) be used to better ensure accuracy of record keeping. For example, GPS software could be used to determine the exact latitude and longitude coordinates of individual gravesites. These would be stored in a secure, internally held burial register, alongside a survey plan showing the exact location of each grave. Coordinates could then be provided to families following the interment.

The accurate mapping and recording of individual gravesites will reduce the likelihood of incorrect interaction with burial sites by either families or cemetery staff. This is particularly important for natural burial sites where the use of the traditional grave markers is limited (as per **Grave markers**).

In most Australian jurisdictions, cemeteries are required by law to keep a register of whose remains are interred and where exactly they are interred, including for natural burial grounds<sup>21</sup>. Some natural burial standards in other jurisdictions recommend the use of GPS or GIS technology to identify gravesites and require Trusts or Councils to maintain survey plans or records of cemetery sites for location purposes<sup>22</sup>.

## Tributes and memorabilia

The placement of tributes and memorabilia on gravesites is strongly discouraged under the principles of natural burial, where ideally, nothing should be left on the gravesite that does not belong in the natural environment. It is recognised, however, that families may still wish to place some form of tribute, memorial, or marker on the gravesite immediately after burial or at significant times following the burial (e.g., birthdays and anniversaries).

Under the *Cemeteries and Crematoria Act 2003 (Vic)*, a holder of the right of interment may establish or alter a memorial at that place of interment, including leaving tributes or memorabilia at gravesites. This must be done with the approval of the cemetery trust who are able to set terms and conditions on such activities.

The use of tributes or memorabilia in natural burials is restricted to only items consisting of natural, biodegradable material (e.g., fresh cut flowers, or small wooden memorials, such as a single timber post) to maintain the integrity of the natural landscape and ecosystem. SMCT reserves the right to remove anything left at a natural burial site which does not adhere to this policy. This includes the removal of any tributes and memorabilia left at natural burial sites containing any non-biodegradable material (e.g., artificial flowers, plastic wrapping or pots, ornaments, photo frames etc).

## Location of natural burials and grave placement

Natural burial grounds will be located within existing cemeteries or as part of land owned by cemetery trusts, in accordance with the *Victorian Cemeteries and Crematoria Act 2003*<sup>23</sup>.

The location of graves within a natural burial site will be guided by the principles of natural burials with a focus on minimising impact to the existing natural environment. For example, graves may be arranged around existing or newly planted trees, however, a clearance distance of at least 2 metres should be maintained around mature trees to ensure there is no interference with root structures during the grave digging process.

<sup>21</sup> *Burial and Cremation Act 2013 (South Australia)*; *Burial and Cremation Act 2022 (Northern Territory)*

<sup>22</sup> *Burial and Cremation Act 2022 (Northern Territory)*; *Upper Yarra Public Cemetery (2017) Natural Burials Vegetation Guide*

<sup>23</sup> *Under the Victorian Cemeteries and Crematoria Act 2003 (s114) remains can only be interred within public cemeteries if approval has been given by the relevant Departmental Secretary*



## Cremated remains

SMCT is dedicated to preserving the ecological integrity of our natural burial sites. This means we apply minimal maintenance to allow natural processes to occur, and refrain from using unnatural measures to modify the soil or vegetation; measures that would be adversely impacted by the high pH and alkalinity resulting from the addition of ashes.

To best support this commitment, we have determined not to allow the interment or scattering of cremated remains in our natural burial areas. While SMCT acknowledges the cultural and religious significance of cremation, interment, and the scattering of ashes, prohibiting the interment and scattering of ashes supports the sustainable management of our natural burial grounds.

## Landscaping

When designing and/or maintaining a new or existing natural burial site, SMCT will develop and refer to an internal design guide and individualised site landscape plan to ensure the natural burial area is reforested to reflect the local natural ecosystem. The design guide for establishing and maintaining a natural burial site will be informed by Commonwealth and Victorian conservation and heritage legislation<sup>24</sup>, an environmental impact assessment, and any consultation with relevant stakeholders.

The natural burial site, and any associated planting or revegetation will be done in such a way that it aligns with the local landscape and does not impinge on the existing trees, plants, and grasses, or the broader ecosystem. A register of approved species shall be maintained consisting exclusively of native plants and grasses indigenous to the area. This allows the site to reflect the natural ecosystem and better ensure successful reforestation.

Ensuring coexistence and cohesion with the existing environment facilitates the conservation of local woodlands and habitats. Strict adherence to this principle will serve to maintain the integrity of the area and the natural burial process for those who have chosen to be buried there.

Landscaping practice of natural burial grounds can vary between cemetery operators, as this will depend on the nature of the site (e.g., flat grassland, already forested, or coastal areas etc). While some sites allow for a more 'designed' approach where trees are planted along a sequential row of graves, others may advocate for as 'natural' an approach as possible by either using an existing area with established trees (ensuring that burials do not interfere with existing root structures as per **Location of natural burials and grave placement**) and/or following a landscaping plan which reflects a naturally forested area. This can include the purchase and planting of mature trees rather than saplings to ensure the area is established as soon as possible.

<sup>24</sup> Relevant legislation includes the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (Cth); Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 (Vic); Planning and Environment Act 1987 (Vic); Heritage Act 1995 (Vic); Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994 (Vic); and Wildlife Act 1975 (Vic).

Finally, under the *Cemeteries and Crematoria Act 2003 (Vic)* a cemetery operator may choose to set aside an area or erect a permanent or temporary structure designed for use during natural burial ceremonies. However, it is recommended that infrastructure within natural burial sites be kept to a minimum and where possible should be made of natural and recycled materials to complement the natural environment.

### Site maintenance procedures

SMCT will be responsible for the maintenance of the natural burial site, and have the right to prune, cut down or remove any plant on an interment site that is considered unsightly or overgrown, as well as dead or damaged.

Natural burial ground will be maintained to keep a 'natural' aesthetic as opposed to the formal, manicured aesthetic of traditional burial sites, noting that by design, natural burial sites require minimal maintenance. Where possible, maintenance of the site will be minimal, and may include removing overgrowth to ensure the site looks presentable and is safely accessible. This has the benefit of significantly reducing maintenance and labour costs for the cemetery.

SMCT will develop site-maintenance policies and procedures for their natural burial sites to ensure maintenance practices have minimal impact on the environment while allowing for continued access (as per **Walkways and access**) and safety of the site. This will outline how a site is to be managed based on environmental protection and conservation management. At a minimum this will include<sup>25</sup>:

- The removal of non-natural tributes or memorabilia from gravesites (as per **Tributes and memorabilia**).
- The removal of overgrowth and large fallen branches.
- Maintenance of paths and walkways to ensure safe access to the site.
- The use of electric (from renewable energy sources) and/or petrol-powered lawn and site maintenance equipment.
- A ban on the use of fertilisers and pesticides in favour of physically removing invasive species or other non-approved non-native plants.
- The use of recycled water as required.



<sup>25</sup> Australian Cemeteries and Crematoria Association (2010) *Guidelines for Natural Burial*; Institute for Sustainable Futures (2021) *Pathways towards sustainable burial and cremation options for NSW: A study of new and innovative models for managing human remains. Report prepared for Cemeteries and Crematoria NSW*; Upper Yarra Public Cemetery (2016) *Regulations: Little Yarra Bushland Natural Burial Area*.

## Walkways and access

SMCT will develop and implement landscape designs (see **Landscaping**) and site maintenance procedures (see **Site maintenance procedures**) to allow ease of public access to the site, and to the best possible extent, include considerations for people with disabilities in line with current legislation.<sup>26</sup>

The natural burial site may include compact, sealed paths (i.e., crushed granite) to allow for entry to the site. Walkways will be designed in such a way that there is limited impact on the existing landscape or trees. Due to the 'natural' and, therefore, sometimes overgrown aesthetic of natural burials sites, continued and unobstructed access to each individual gravesite off the main path may not be feasible. While communities may accept limited access as a trade-off to having a natural burial site, cemetery operators are still obligated under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Commonwealth) and the Disability Standards 2010 to maintain equitable access to people with disabilities. This includes continuous accessible paths of travel to all amenities and areas to which the public (including employees) is entitled or allowed to enter, as well as design

features to ensure safe movement and access along footpaths and in public spaces for people with vision loss or impairment.

In general, the public will have access to natural burial sites for visitation purposes at any reasonable time. However, it may be necessary for cemetery operators to restrict access to a gravesite immediately after burial, for reasons including the protection of the landscape, inclement weather, local environment protection concerns, and health and safety.

## Communication and information sharing

These Standards are to be made available to people considering natural burial as an option for themselves or their loved ones. They will help facilitate full understanding of the principles underlying natural burials and the processes involved to enable them to make an informed decision about whether this is the right choice for them. Similarly, they will be shared with and/or communicated to other relevant parties including funeral directors to ensure that initial processes such as preparation of the body can take place in a way that is consistent with a natural burial.



<sup>26</sup> Under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth), and Disability Standards 2010 (s8.2) cemeteries have a responsibility to ensure equal access to premises, goods and services, and to avoid discrimination against another person on the grounds of disability.

# Appendices

## Background on evidence-based development of Natural Burial Standards

While natural burials represent a small proportion of burials in Victoria, customer interest is growing. In 2021, 24% of respondents to The Future Cemetery Survey indicated a preference for natural burial (Allison et al, 2021).<sup>27</sup>

Practices and standards for natural burial differ greatly across the sector and operators as there is currently no Victorian public policy, or sector-wide agreement defining or establishing clear requirements for natural burials. *The Cemeteries and Crematoria Act 2003 (Vic)* and accompanying

regulations set out general requirements for interment and cremation, but do not outline specific requirements for natural burials. There is also limited guidance from the sector on best practice for natural burials. An opportunity now exists to articulate clear standards on natural burial, to support best practice by operators, and to equip customers to make informed decisions.

SMCT engaged *Allen + Clarke* to undertake background research and engage with key stakeholders to inform the development of Natural Burial Standards (the Standards). Figure 1 provides an overview of the methods that were taken to inform the drafting of these Standards.

Figure 1: Overview of methodology



<sup>27</sup> Allison, F., Arnold, M., Gibbs, M., et al. (2021) *The Future Cemetery Survey 2021 Summary Report*. Available from: <https://bbp-apse2.wpmucdn.com/blogs.unimelb.edu.au/dist/f/423/files/2021/11/The-Future-Cemetery-Survey-2021-Report.pdf>