

## Report for Trustees of Remembrance Parks Central Victoria

### Removal of Adornments from Graves – Independent Investigation into Communications

#### Investigator:

Lucas Robertson, Chief People & Governance Officer, Southern Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust

Date of report: 19 April 2023

*See Attachments for additional documents and references*

#### 1. Background

Remembrance Parks Central Victoria (**RPCV**) manages 11 cemeteries in Victoria as a public entity established under the *Cemeteries and Crematoria Act 2003* (Vic).

From mid-2022 to January 2023, RPCV took various measures relating to the enforcement of a policy on flowers and ornaments permitted at memorial sites within its cemeteries ("**Adornment Policy**"). These measures included signage, statements on RPCV's website and Facebook account, and the removal of items RPCV considered prohibited under the Adornment Policy. The Adornment Policy at all material times was the same version, last reviewed by RPCV in 2017.

RPCV received significant negative community feedback and adverse publicity in response to its handling of this matter, including strong reactions to the disposal of sentimental items and a perceived lack of care and consultation. In addition to direct complaints and social media activity, the issue has received broad media coverage, along with the interest of Members of Parliament, the Victorian Ombudsman and the Department of Health, which is responsible for cemeteries in Victoria.

The Board of Trustees of RPCV has commissioned an independent investigation to ascertain gaps and deficiencies in communication that may have contributed to the crisis, and to identify areas for improvement to avoid a recurrence.

#### 2. Acknowledgments

It is important to acknowledge and respect the emotive nature of this exercise and the impact of recent events on all involved, particularly:

- (a) the members of the community who have loved ones interred at RPCV cemeteries and who have taken the time, energy and courage to share their experiences with RPCV, the investigator and/or current Acting CEO [REDACTED] (appointed 13/2/23), and
- (b) the staff of RPCV who continued to come to work through a very difficult period, many of whom shared their recollections in interviews.

#### 3. Definitions

**Acting CEO** [REDACTED] appointed by RPCV to act in the CEO role from 13/2/2023 to 2/06/2023. **Adornments.** Items placed on memorial sites, such as flowers and tributes, as detailed in the Adornment Policy.

**Adornment Policy.** RPCV's published document *Flowers and Ornaments in our Cemeteries (Attachment A)*.

**Clean-ups.** The removal and disposal of Adornments by RPCV staff at Eaglehawk Cemetery on 10, 17 and 19 January 2023, and at Pine Lodge Cemetery in Shepparton in mid-January 2023.

**Interim CEO** [REDACTED] who was performing the CEO role at all material times in 2022 and 2023 until stood down on 31/1/23, and who has subsequently resigned from her employment with RPCV.

**ROIH.** Right of interment holder, meaning an individual with the legal right to deal with a plot purchased for the interment of a deceased person or their cremated remains.

**Trust.** The members of RPCV as a Class A cemetery trust, who are appointed under the *Cemeteries and Crematoria Act 2003* (Vic) and operate as a board of management with responsibilities set out under section 12A of that Act.

#### 4. Executive Summary

##### Key Factual Findings – Communication Deficiencies and Gaps

The following factors contributed materially to the negative public response and reputational damage that emerged from RPCV's Clean-ups and associated actions. Further details are set out in *section 8*.

- A. The Clean-Ups represented a significant departure from past practice, when removal of Adornments had been ad hoc and items of potential sentimental or monetary value were retained for a period of time.
- B. The Clean-ups were implemented without a communication plan, a consultation process, effective prior notice or reasonable efforts to contact ROIHs and visitors known to frequent the cemeteries.
- C. To the extent that RPCV did communicate, its communications tended to create and increase confusion through a lack of clarity and consistency, both externally and internally.
- D. Staff were uncomfortable with the Clean-ups and some of them questioned management about the approach taken. However, there was no safe and appropriate way to escalate matters of serious concern, and many who conducted the Clean-ups considered their jobs to be at risk if they refused to participate. There was no formal internal complaints process.
- E. Instead of taking opportunities and advice to pause, address the community's concerns and contain the problem, Interim CEO [REDACTED] decided on two separate occasions to accelerate the enforcement of the Adornment Policy. This approach was motivated by a desire to swiftly improve safety around memorials, but did not appear to include full consideration of the impacts on community members and the potential benefits of engaging with them.
- F. As the reaction to the Clean-ups mounted, staff were provided with copies of the Adornment Policy, with the simple instruction to refer to it and provide copies to visitors as required. This demonstrated a further failure to stop, acknowledge the impact and engage on issues that remained unresolved.
- G. Interim CEO [REDACTED] made, or was in a position to make or correct, all material decisions about staff and community communications prior to and during the Clean-ups, with certain exceptions explained further in the report.
- H. Interim CEO [REDACTED] operated in a way that sought to keep the Trust at a distance from cemetery staff and operations, and resisted what she saw as attempts by the Chairperson to become involved in an "operations" matter as the crisis developed. This contributed to late realisation by the Trust of the extent of the crisis.
- I. RPCV as an organisation was not well prepared for the crisis that unfolded, managing its response "on the run".
- J. RPCV's attempts to provide clarity through public explanatory statements were not effective. In the context of a highly emotive and personal issue, this approach was received poorly and attracted further public criticism.
- K. The crisis highlighted gaps in RPCV's application of its stated values, which became more evident under intense external pressure.

Other matters surfaced that were important but less material, and informed the recommendations for improvement.

Concerns have been raised about the removal of Adornments at certain times and locations outside the Clean-ups. Some of these facts are likely to remain unresolved and the answers, if known, would not materially change the recommendations arising from this investigation.

### The Trust

The Trust's role in the crisis was reviewed. A range of evidence was considered, including that of Interim CEO [REDACTED] other personnel and emails, which together supported the following findings:

- In 2015 and again in 2017, the then Trust members approved the Adornment Policy, which remained in effect throughout the events investigated.
- Adornments were not a standard Trust agenda item and were not discussed at any Trust meeting in at least the 12 months preceding the Clean-ups.
- During 2022, Interim CEO [REDACTED] mentioned to the Chairperson her concerns about the state of memorials across RPCV sites. They also discussed the new policy of another cemetery regarding artificial flowers. However, they did not at any stage discuss plans or times for the removal of Adornments.
- Trust members were not involved in planning, instructing or conducting the Clean-ups.
- Trust members became aware of community confusion and concerns regarding the Adornment Policy in late December. They found out about the Clean-ups after the event, at a similar time to the rest of the community.

There are a number of important future recommendations that invite the Trust to take a leadership role in reviewing RPCV's governance and culture, including the roles of Trust, Chairperson and CEO, and ensuring the lessons from this matter can inform sustained improvement. Individual matters for reflection in relation to the Trust's role include:

- Interactions and connection with the community, including the Community Advisory Committee
- The cultural "tone" and expectations internally at RPCV regarding customer and community relations
- Moments during this series of events where further enquiry or intervention, or a different form of response, may have mitigated the consequences of management actions or failures to act

### Recommended Areas for Improvement

RPCV's Board of Trustees and management team are encouraged to consider the following areas for review and improvement. More details are set out in *section 9*.

1. A review of the **content of the Adornment Policy**, including clearly documented supporting processes.
2. **Ongoing consultation processes with community members**, first to address recent events and the Adornment Policy, and then to facilitate ongoing engagement.
3. **Volunteering** initiatives to strengthen knowledge and relationships, including volunteers to assist with RPCV operations, and RPCV representatives giving their time to community groups and initiatives.
4. Contemporary **procedures for handling customer queries and complaints**, with a high emphasis on empathy.
5. A review of **media, social media and marketing policies and practices**.
6. **Communications planning processes, templates and training** to organise and implement timely messaging with consistency and clarity.
7. Establishment of a **crisis management policy**, with a strong emphasis on stakeholder management.
8. Creation of a **workplace culture** that will best serve RPCV and its community, including alignment of all operations with RPCV's Vision, Values and Mission.
9. Establishment of a **psychologically safe environment**, including supporting policies, procedures, training and feedback.
10. **An effective induction process** for all new personnel and Trust members, including a briefing on this crisis for a suitable period until changes can be considered sustainable.

11. A **governance review** informed by the subject matter of this report and other recent lessons, structured consistently with section 12A of the *Cemeteries and Crematoria Act 2003* (Vic) and possibly assisted by a third party expert in modern board operations.
12. A documented **plan for investment in facilities and resources required over the longer term** to support an effective Adornment Policy and changes made by RPCV.

Most of these recommendations were discussed with the Chairperson from the early stages of the investigation, including the current status of the Trust's own strategic and governance work, and specific ideas put forward by the Chairperson. It is also noted that the Trust and Acting CEO [REDACTED] have initiated a number of specific actions prior to the date of this report, including community consultation.

#### 5. Investigation Scope and Purpose

The investigation Terms of Reference are included as *Attachment 8*. This investigation seeks to establish recent events, gaps and future opportunities relating to the Adornment Policy and related communications. It is not a purpose of this investigation to assess broader business matters or relationships within RPCV, or any individual's performance or suitability for their role.

**s 30** The remaining pages of this report have been redacted in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act 1982, including due to the private, personal and confidential nature of the discussions that took place between individuals and the Investigator, Mr. Robertson.