



COMMUNITY CONSULTATION REPORT

December 2023

Introduction

In late September 2023, Remembrance Parks Central Victoria (RPCV) commenced an in-depth community engagement and consultation process in relation to the removal of memorial and adornment items from cemetery interment sites in early 2023. This process included private, face-to-face, in-depth discussions with members of the community who had been most affected by the removal of adornments and those who have a very deep connection with a cemetery or cemeteries. The meetings were largely conducted on an individual basis but also included some small-group meetings.

To assist with the process, RPCV engaged Stanford Marketing, a Bendigo-based market research firm. Information from the in-depth discussions was used to inform the development of a survey that sought to gather more information about how members of the community use cemeteries, what is important to them and what they value about cemeteries. The survey also addressed questions about memorialisation and adornment of burial and other interment sites.

The survey opened on 1 November and closed on 30 November 2023. It was sent to over 5,000 right of interment holders and over 100 people or community groups who had expressed interest or been involved in previous consultation around the removal of memorial and adornment items. It was also promoted via direct email, mail, Facebook and media. RPCV received over 450 responses to the survey.

The discussion meetings and survey information will be used to inform the development of a revised policy and guidelines on memorialisation at cemeteries.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, we acknowledge and sincerely thank everyone who took the time to participate in a meeting or small group discussion and those who completed the survey. Everyone at RPCV is very grateful for this opportunity to listen to members of the community who graciously shared their stories, experiences, and ideas. We have all learned so much from this experience. We have now gained a deeper understanding of what the cemeteries mean to many people. This is important to RPCV and will be immensely valuable for our future decision-making.

This report provides a summary of the feedback received throughout the consultation process and the key findings from the survey.

This information will be used to guide the development of RPCV's revised Memorialisation Policy and its new Visitor Guide which will be made available for public comment in early 2024.

Community Consultation – Key Themes

Theme 1 – Connection

- The deep connection with the cemetery often comes from an important need to continue to include their loved ones in family events and activities or just to remain part of their everyday life and to "keep their memory alive". One person described their son's resting place as "this sacred place", which is a beautiful tribute to him and speaks volumes about what is important to the family.
- Those with a deep connection to the cemeteries are regular visitors. They care for and regularly tend to their loved one's burial site. Most regular visitors like to adorn and decorate their loved one's burial site in a way that has deep meaning to them. This includes items that reflect their loved one's character or personality. They also ensure that their site is clean and tidy, and that any deteriorated, chipped, or broken adornment items are removed. Time is spent at the cemetery making the burial site clean and tidy, cutting the grass, watering pot plants and trees, removing weeds or debris and adding new ornaments or decorations.
- Fresh flowers and plants in pots add a bright, living feel to the site. Having large enough vases for fresh flowers is important.
- For some people, there is a strong desire to provide lighting and illumination at the burial site. This is especially important to those with children at rest. This provides the visitor with a sense of safety and security for their loved one, as well as a tribute or marker at night that gives them a sense of peace and comfort in a dark place and a rejection of cemeteries as 'dark and gloomy' places that should be avoided.

- There is a strong sense of community and connection that exists at the cemeteries. Regular visitors have formed friendships, supporting each other, and helping to look after neighbouring graves.

Theme 2 – Improvements to RPCV documentation

- Participants understood and respected RPCV's responsibility to maintain and provide clean, tidy, and safe public spaces for the community to use, and therefore the existence of a Policy or 'set of rules' to help manage the cemeteries.
- Participants were in favour of the idea of developing a "Visitor Guide" for the cemeteries.
- The Visitor Guide would provide guidance to everyone but would likely be more targeted at infrequent visitors since frequent visitors already maintain and protect their sites to a high standard.
- The Visitor Guide would provide information on adornment and memorialisation but would also include other relevant or useful information about the cemeteries.
- The revised Policy and Visitor Guide should be more 'principles-based' as opposed to 'rules-based'. The Visitor Guide should be designed to provide suggestions and options for visitors, and what people can do, as opposed to what they cannot do. Clear explanations will be provided if any items are deemed to be restricted for public safety reasons.

Theme 3 - Ideas for improvement to 'cemetery clean-ups'

- Participants were in favour of the idea for RPCV to schedule and promote regular annual clean-up days or having a published annual schedule of key dates (e.g., Mother's Day, Christmas etc.) with a surrounding timeframe to add any special adornments and then remove adornments that have deteriorated or are no longer relevant (e.g., Christmas decorations to be removed in mid-January).
- The Policy and Visitor Guide should also be clear about the criteria for any unscheduled clean-ups e.g., after a severe weather event or via general operations. For example, this would include items that have deteriorated (withered flowers) or are broken etc. and have created a hazard for staff or visitors. It would not include personal adornments that are maintained and in good condition.
- RPCV should always provide adequate notice and clear communication regarding any future cemetery 'clean-ups'.

Theme 4 - Other feedback and improvements

- The importance of regular maintenance of all areas in the cemetery, including lawn areas, grass cutting, weed removal, levelling sunken graves, fixing trip and slip hazards, road and pathway maintenance, storage of grave covers in sheds and maintenance of garden beds. Most participants understood that maintenance of the 'old sections' in cemeteries is a challenging task.
- The importance of maintaining effective risk and incident management systems and processes within RPCV for the safety of visitors and staff.
- Improvements to feedback and/or complaints management at RPCV.
- Improvements to communication and community consultation. A regular email newsletter (e.g., quarterly newsletter that can be subscribed to) was a preferred method for communication to learn about what is occurring at the cemeteries, along with media (radio and TV), print media and social media. The website was not considered to be an effective communications platform in its current form.
- Improvements to signage around the cemeteries. This includes signage for major events, hazards, planned maintenance, safety risk areas and labelling/markers on lawn cemetery rows and having adequate maps at each cemetery.
- Ensuring that digital maps and 'deceased search' databases are functioning and accurate.
- Improvements to access for disabled and elderly people and keeping entries clear of parking.
- Improvements to lighting around the cemetery itself, especially on pathways.
- Beautifying the cemeteries with garden beds, plants and trees, and keeping lawns green.
- Use of QR codes for visitors to leave messages for RPCV via mobile devices on their experience at the cemetery.
- Some participants requested that more rubbish bins, water taps, shade areas seating and toilet facilities be made available throughout the cemeteries.

Visitation:

37% of visits to the cemetery occur monthly,
26% visit annually and/or on special occasions,
18% visit the cemetery weekly and
1% visit the cemetery daily.

Activities:

When visiting the cemetery, most people like to sit and spend time with their loved one and engage in other activities such as cleaning and tidying their loved one's resting place, freshening flowers, or potted plants, checking on their memorial items, and chatting with others.

Personalisation:

49% of respondents stated that people should have 'some' flexibility in choosing how to personalise a grave,
40% stated that people should have 'a lot' of flexibility for personalisation and
10% stated that people should have 'a little' flexibility for personalisation.

Items for personalisation:

32% of respondents were happy with a vase of flowers on the site,
22% like to have a bit more personalisation including items that are meaningful to them,
20% like to have pot plants, flowers and/or a solar light,
8% like to have multiple items on display, and
6% like a standard site with no personalisation.



Experience with adornment removal:

51% of respondents had not experienced any issues with adornment removal,
20% of respondents stated that they were worried about adornment removal but did not have items removed,
18% of respondents had adornments removed,
18% of respondents were not aware of the RPCV adornment policy.

Items for adornment:

- A very high percentage of respondents (over 90%) agreed that flowers, artificial and dried flower arrangements should be allowed at the cemetery.
- All other items listed in the survey had a percentage split of responses between the yes and no options.
- Over 50% responded 'yes' to the following items:
 - Solar lights
 - Teddy bears and soft toys
 - Toys
 - Battery-operated lights
 - Photo frames
 - Terracotta
 - Stones or pebbles
 - Plastic & LED candles
 - Hardened clay
 - Wind chime
- Over 50% responded 'no' to the following items:
 - Degradable objects
 - Candles & incense
 - Decoration-free zones
 - Fencing or edging
 - Books
 - Glass
 - Flower wrapping & rubber bands
 - Items hanging in trees
- Over 80% of respondents stated 'no' to the following items:
 - Alcohol
 - Metal spikes
 - Withered/damaged tributes
 - Dead flowers
 - Sharp-edged objects
 - Items placed on pathways and garden beds
 - Offensive items
 - Items intruding on other graves

Removal of adornments:

Respondents were in favour of the removal of wilted or dead flowers, and unsafe or broken items.

Over 60% of respondents were in favour of special 'clean-up' days or removal of seasonal adornments.

Communication with RPCV:

Most respondents (90%) were in favour of having regular email communication from RPCV regarding cemetery issues or news.

Other feedback:

What people value most about the cemetery:



What amenities would you like to see in the cemetery:



How do you want the grave to look so it holds meaning for you?



Volunteering and Friendship groups

Some respondents (15%) indicated that they would like to learn more about volunteering at a cemetery or participating in a '*Friends of the Cemetery*' group. Email addresses were supplied by these respondents to RPCV, so we will send information to them in the coming weeks.

Summary of Key Lessons Learned

From your feedback, we understand that the cemeteries are very important places to a broad range of people in the community and that they represent love, rest, and peace.

You believe that the cemeteries are generally well presented but can always be improved through regular maintenance.

You would like to have more amenities available in the cemeteries such as seating, toilet facilities, flower/garden beds, better path/road access and fresh water.

You like to decorate your loved one's resting place with flowers and other items that have personal meaning.

You like to keep the burial sites clean, neat and tidy. You are comfortable with the removal or restriction of some specific items of adornment if they are withered, deteriorated, unsafe, broken, or damaged.

You would like to stay in touch with RPCV, preferably by email.

Thank-you for participating in the consultation process and survey.

If you have any questions regarding the contents of this report, please contact RPCV by emailing ceo@rpcv.org.au or call 1300 266 561.