



This information note is one of a series produced by the Community Woodlands Association. This information note provides a brief introduction to green burials and is intended for community woodland groups considering establishing a green burial site. It outlines the major practical and regulatory considerations, includes a case study, and contains a resources section providing a list of contacts for more detailed technical information.

Introduction

Green, or Natural burial is the interment of a person's body in a manner that allows the body to recycle naturally, and has become an increasingly popular alternative to other contemporary Western burial methods in recent decades, as a response to both the environmental impact and the cost of conventional funeral care.

The first woodland burial ground in the UK was created in 1993 at Carlisle Cemetery; there are now nearly 300 dedicated natural burial grounds in the UK, including over 20 in Scotland.

The [Association of Natural Burial Grounds](#) (ANBG) was established by the [Natural Death Centre](#) (NDC) charity in 1994. It aims to help people to establish sites, to provide guidance to natural burial ground operators, to represent its members, and to provide a Code of Conduct for members. The NDC also publishes the "[Natural Death Handbook](#)".

There is no single definition of what constitutes a green burial, but it is usually understood that:

- The site serves a conservation purpose;
- Sustainable materials are used for the coffin or shroud;
- There is no embalming;
- There is limited or no demarcation or personalisation of the grave.

Although the idea of being buried amongst mature trees may seem attractive, for practical reasons most "woodland" burial grounds are either new woodland creation sites or clearfelled areas with stump removal and landscaping prior to restocking.

Some burial grounds permit demarcation of a grave with a temporary wooden post, others a small, simply-worded stone marker laid flat. Some will allow nothing at all. This can be a challenging issue for family, who can find it very difficult to lose sight of exactly where a person is buried. However, those natural burial grounds which permit a certain amount of gardening of the grave can find it impossible to hold the line.

Green burials in community woods

There has been increasing interest amongst community woodland groups in establishing green burial sites, for a variety of reasons:

- As commercial operation to generate income to support the community management of the woodland;
- To create or support a part-time job locally;
- To deliver a service for the community, particularly in those areas with limited or no alternative burial provision;
- To develop a deeper sense of connection between the community and the woodland as a place where significant ceremonies and events take place.

Establishing a green burial site

Proposals to establish new burial grounds are assessed by Local Authorities and the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA); any new burial site is a material change of use and will require full planning permission.

The responsibility for granting planning consent for green burials lies with the local planning officer. Groups may need to make sure that councillors and planners are aware of Scottish Government and Local Authority support for green burials.

The Local Authority roads department will decide the extent of access infrastructure required: this is often the biggest single cost. They will expect access to be at the standard necessary for emergency vehicles and tend to default to local authority adoptable standard, although this is not a legal requirement.

The potential for the cemetery to impact on groundwater will be assessed by SEPA, whose officials work to [cemeteries guidance](#) (note this is guidance not legal requirement). The two main considerations are:

- (1) the depth of unsaturated soil available:
 - The soil cover above the coffin or shroud should not be less than 1m;
 - The base of the grave should be 1m above bedrock or the seasonal high groundwater level.
- (2) the distance from watercourses - SEPA recommends that burials should not be:
 - Within 250 metres of any groundwater abstraction; namely any spring, well or borehole used as a source of drinking water;
 - Within 50 metres of any other spring, well or borehole or any watercourse;
 - Within 10 metres of a field drain.

In addition, cemeteries should not be located above shallow mine workings, on designated contaminated land, on steep slopes, or on free draining soils or sand and gravel deposits.

Cremation burials are considered to present a lesser risk to the water environment, and consequently face fewer restrictions.

Legal considerations

After a person dies the Cause of Death must be established and a Death Certificate obtained. Any death which occurs in Scotland must be registered within eight days of the date of death by the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages.

Funeral ceremonies can be held anywhere, indoors or outdoors, and there are no restrictions about who can hold the funeral ceremony: it may be a Minister or Celebrant but could also be a friend or family member.

[The Burial and Cremation \(Scotland\) Act 2016](#)

provides the legislative framework for burial and cremation, defining burial grounds, extending the definition of burial authorities to include private companies, and requiring that a person seeking a burial has submitted an application to the appropriate burial authority, and that application has been granted.

Financial considerations

Charges for green burials vary, with some sites charging a premium for more scenic locations, but many are benchmarked to Local Authority rates. Fees have several components, notably reservation of the lair, the interment itself and the long term maintenance of the site, some of which may be payable in advance.

Potential customers will need to be assured that arrangements for the management of the site are secured in perpetuity, and if you are taking advance payment for services, such as the long term care of the plot, then bonds or insurance to protect the customers' investment will be required.

Funerals typically involve services of other businesses: funeral directors as well as florists, catering, venues. It may be that the community group is able to offer some or all of these services, or there may be opportunities to work in partnership with existing local businesses. Other practicalities include sourcing (either owning or hiring) suitable digging equipment.

Other issues

Funerals are a sensitive area to be working in and people have a wide choice. Living wills help families to take decisions but these can be overruled. Green burials tend to need more involvement by family at the time of the funeral arrangements.

The co-ordinator role is essential and involves a lot of work for the right type of personality. The role is to link people and make sure things go smoothly, and may be difficult to cover with volunteers. There may also be some concerns in the community about the appropriateness or siting of green burials.

Case Study: Findhorn

The [Findhorn Hinterland Trust](#) (FHT) operate a green burial site at Wilkies Wood: this was the first green burial site in Moray and is located in a quiet, sheltered position in the middle of a 12 ha mixed pine plantation adjacent to the Findhorn Foundation.

The site was initially established by the Findhorn Hinterland Group in 2008, when the Moray Council granted approval for up to 700 lairs. Following the change in the law in 2016, FHT, a Scottish Incorporated Charitable Organisation, became the official burial authority and purchased the site for a nominal fee from the Findhorn Foundation.

FHT have engaged a specialist funeral co-ordinator, whose role includes offering guidance and information about the grave site, costs, agreements, transportation of the coffin, required paperwork etc., liaison with funeral directors, meeting with the family and friends and co-ordinating whatever is necessary during the time between the passing of the deceased to the funeral and burial.

In 2013 FHT introduced a “Pay now, die later” scheme, which has brought in considerable income through lair reservations: by 2017 there had been 24 interments and a further 49 lairs had been pre-sold.

A single lair (interment plus maintenance) costs £1,531 (plus £500 Funeral Co-ordination fee), whilst a double lair is £2,098 and interment of ashes including a small tree is £198 (costs from April 2017).

No visible signs of identification such as headstones or mementos are permitted at Findhorn, but FHT have created a memorial book which a contribution from the family and friends about the person may be made.

Wilkies Wood and the surrounding land are primarily managed for environmental and social objectives: the wood is used for community gatherings, weddings and parties as well as for burials, and, as graves are not marked apart from a few with newly planted trees, some people may not be aware that the land is also used for burials.

Resources

Community Woodlands Association (advice and support for community woodlands)

<http://www.communitywoods.org>

Scottish Government What to do after a death in Scotland

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/death-scotland-practical-advice-times-bereavement-revised-11th-edition-2016-9781786522726/>

SEPA cemeteries guidance <http://www.sepa.org.uk/media/143364/lups-gu32-guidance-on-assessing-the-impacts-of-cemeteries-on-groundwater.pdf>

The Natural Death Centre <http://www.naturaldeath.org.uk/index.php?page=home>

Woodland Burial Grounds A list of natural burial grounds in Scotland (not comprehensive)

<http://woodland-burial-grounds.50webs.com/pages/scotland.html>

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