

Burial space supply in Sydney’s Crown sector – audit overview

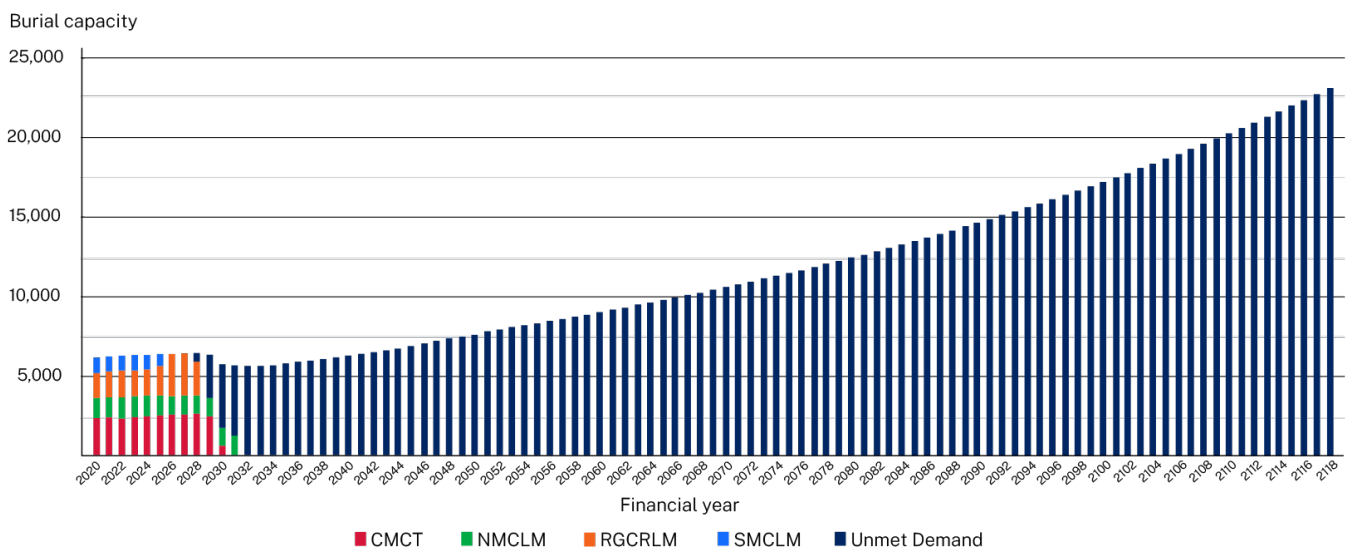
In NSW, and in Sydney in particular, the government has played a long-standing role in facilitating cemetery and crematorium services on Crown land to ensure equitable, culturally appropriate and affordable interment options are available for people of all faiths.

The NSW-wide interment industry comprises a diverse mix of Crown, local government, private, community and church operators. In Sydney, Crown cemetery operators account for around 67% of all interments of bodily remains within the region.¹

Overview of supply pressures facing the sector

As the [report](#) on the statutory review of the *Cemeteries and Crematoria Act 2013* released in 2021 (the ‘11th Hour Report’) showed, Sydney’s Crown cemetery operators are collectively close to exhausting their supply of burial space within the next 10 years, with some Crown operators and cemeteries expected to exhaust sooner than others. Without new burial space supply coming online in the Crown cemetery sector, significant future demand could be left unmet (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Crown demand versus supply analysis (99 years)



Source: 11th Hour report, p14, 94 (Whitella, 2020) Excludes Macarthur Memorial Park (Varroville) – 136,000 plots and Nepean Memorial Gardens (Wallacia) – 27,000 plots

While activity data for 2021-22 shows that cremation is the preferred interment service for Metropolitan Sydney, at 65%, burial rates in that region are relatively stable (and actually increased in 2021/22).² These rates are expected to remain stable due to population growth within religious

¹ [Cemeteries and Crematoria NSW 2021-22 Activity Report](#)

² [Cemeteries and Crematoria NSW 2021-22 Activity Report](#).

and cultural groups that require burial as their only interment practice.³ For Jewish, Orthodox and Muslim religious groups, burial is an essential aspect of deeply held traditions and cultural and faith practices.

Recent information from the OneCrown group of Crown cemetery operators (Rookwood General Cemeteries Reserve Land Manager, Northern Metropolitan Cemeteries Land Manager and Southern Metropolitan Cemeteries Land Manager) has confirmed that shortages are becoming more acute. Some burial reliant faith groups are expected to run out of allocated supply at some Crown cemeteries within the next five years (see Table 1), with some unable to pre-plan purchases to meet the needs of their families and loved ones.

Table 1: Burial reliant faith groups with five years or less of allocated supply remaining at OneCrown group cemetery operators

Operator	Cemetery	Faith group	Maximum years until exhaustion #
Northern Metropolitan	Frenchs Forest	Armenian Orthodox	3
	Macquarie Park	Armenian Orthodox	2.5
Rookwood General	Rookwood Cemetery	Antiochian Orthodox	3
		Eastern Orthodox*	3.5
		Islamic*	3
		Macedonian Orthodox	2.5
Southern Metropolitan	Eastern Suburbs Memorial Park	Eastern Orthodox*	4.5
	Woronora	Eastern and Macedonian Orthodox*	4

Source: Internal data provided by the Office of OneCrown, February 2023.

Includes current and planned capital works

* Indicates currently selling only 'at need'

A new Crown cemetery, Macarthur Memorial Park, is being developed at Varroville in Sydney's southwest which will inject additional supply of up to 136,000 burial plots over the next 100 years (with approvals). This site will be a sustainable and multi-denominational memorial and parkland destination. The 113 hectares will include open space including gardens and water features and is being developed as a multi-use space for the whole community. While this is a good start, more supply within Sydney is needed to meet community needs and expectations of affordable and accessible burial options for the whole community.

³ The 2021 Census data shows the growth of these faith groups from 2016.

Identifying suitable cemetery sites in Sydney is not a straightforward exercise. Conventional burial practices and cemetery designs are land-intensive. The cost of land in Sydney is high, and potentially suitable land is increasingly sought after for new housing supply and other priority uses. Additionally, there are site-specific factors that determine if land is suitable for cemetery use, including topography, flood risk, bushfire risk, vegetation and geology, which make locating suitable sites challenging. Adequate supporting infrastructure and connectivity, including transport options, are also crucial considerations along with commercial viability considerations.

Since 2022, new and expanded cemeteries of over 5,000 or more plots are now assessed as State Significant Development, in the same way as other important social infrastructure such as hospitals and schools. The changes provide a clearer and more consistent approach to assessing larger cemetery proposals to help speed up the delivery of new space. The pathway will benefit Crown and non-Crown cemetery proponents alike.

Options to address this issue

Given its unique position and history in the market, the government has a role to play in ensuring Crown cemetery operators remain a viable part of Sydney's burials sector into the future.

The NSW Government is taking steps to enhance the capability of the Crown cemetery sector to meet future needs by moving towards a two-operator model for Sydney. This decision will improve the collective financial and operational sustainability of the Crown operators and allow them to focus efforts on securing new burial space supply for all faiths.

The NSW Government is also exploring various options to address the issue.

Potential land within or near existing Crown cemeteries

The NSW Government is engaging with Crown cemetery operators to investigate opportunities to unlock further supply within existing Crown cemeteries, including potential opportunities identified by the 11th Hour Report for Rookwood cemetery. The potential to expand existing sites is also being explored. However, since most existing sites are in central Sydney metropolitan areas, the NSW Government is considering land use options in conjunction with other priority land uses such as housing, as well as taking into account the needs of the surrounding communities.

Potential new sites for 'greenfield' cemetery developments

Potential new sites are being explored to build new 'greenfield' cemeteries in the Sydney region. Modern cemeteries are designed with open, green, multi-use spaces and other amenities that can be accessed by the community for a range of social, cultural, environmental and recreational purposes, enhancing an area's liveability.

The NSW Government is investigating multiple options including repurposing existing government land as well as potential purchase of new sites. When considering potential cemetery sites, feasibility and cost-effectiveness are weighed against the need for cemetery space, public cost, environmental impact, community considerations, and strategic planning goals for the Sydney metropolitan area.

More efficient practices and alternatives

Finding ways to use current and future cemetery land more efficiently will be key to supporting a sustainable way forward for the interment industry in NSW, alleviating future strains on burial space, and addressing affordability and accessibility issues for interment in Sydney. Increasing the availability and uptake of renewable burial interments and cremation and investigating options to sensitively renew and repurpose older areas in cemeteries while continuing to preserve the perpetual burial rights of those interred are two such examples. Consideration of the viability of these options will occur in consultation with interested stakeholders.

Summary

What the information in this document makes clear is that urgent action is needed to address burial supply pressures facing Sydney's Crown cemetery sector. While competing land use priorities, site suitability, accessibility requirements, and acquisition costs pose significant challenges, the NSW Government is ensuring that all possible options are canvassed to meet the diverse needs of Sydney's burial practicing residents and communities and safeguard a sustainable future for Crown cemetery operators.