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Cemeteries and crematoria

Jedan, Christoph; Westendorp, Mariske; Venbrux, Eric

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Cemeteries and Crematoria

Creating inclusive public spaces in Leeuwarden



Cemeteries and crematoriums are important public spaces and services serving all citizens – as highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The CeMi project studied cemeteries and crematoriums in 8 medium-sized municipalities in 6 countries: Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Scotland and Sweden. Each municipality included both long-established minority ethnic or religious communities and more recent migrants. Researchers talked with municipal cemetery and crematorium providers and planners, and faith and community groups. It is hoped that summary feedback will enhance understanding of cultural practices, prompt dialogue between local government providers and communities, and inform future planning both locally and internationally.

ABOVE: Noorderbegraafplaats, November 2021. Chinese graves (detail). Photograph by Christoph Jedan.

“I understand it completely: Dutch people expect things to be arranged like this. Sometimes we have to adapt. But we have adapted for so long. Now the time has come for them to adapt a little.”

— Surinamese-Hindu community leader

Issues and challenges

Members of minority groups want more dedicated provision; local politicians, civil servants and volunteers are receptive to such demands.

However, as in many other Dutch municipalities, finances are severely limited in the wake of the Social Support Act 2015.

In addition, it is difficult for a municipality of Leeuwarden’s size and population profile to create dedicated provision for relatively small migrant and minority groups.

This is exacerbated by the fact that Leeuwarden is the capital of a (by Dutch standards) sparsely populated province (195 inhabitants/km²), which makes dedicated provision even harder to realise.

Specifically:

- At 82%, the percentage of inhabitants with a Dutch background is comparatively large; no single migrant and minority group amounts to more than 2% of the population.
- At 74% cost-effectiveness, the municipal funerary system runs at a loss, but the municipality has decided to maintain a competitive price level for its services.
- A comparatively large number of smaller (village) cemeteries are located far away from the city centre; the main historic cemetery (Spanjaardslaan), close to the city centre, has great potential as a memorial garden but is currently in a state of managed decline.

A volunteer and tour guide told us: “We too think that there should be more space for responding to diversity.”

Location

Leeuwarden is the capital and largest town of Friesland, with international visibility owing to its status as a European Capital of Culture in 2018. By Dutch standards, the city centre is compact, while the municipality reaches far into the surrounding rural areas. As a result, Leeuwarden has a large number of municipal cemeteries within its boundaries, as well as a commercial crematorium (Goutum) and several non-municipal cemeteries, including the Roman Catholic cemetery of Vitushof. Outside the municipality, but within easy reach, is a second commercial crematorium, Adringastate in Marsum. As a ‘metropolitan provincial municipality’, Leeuwarden has a diverse population, but the various migrant and minority groups are quite small. More than 80% of the inhabitants are indigenous.

Population of Leeuwarden, top-15 countries of origin (1 January 2021)

82.05%	Netherlands
1.96%	Germany
1.80%	Indonesia (Moluccas)
1.33%	(former) Dutch Antilles, Aruba
1.20%	Suriname
0.95%	Curaçao
0.90%	Morocco
0.87%	Iraq
0.52%	(former) Soviet Union
0.47%	(former) Yugoslavia
0.43%	Turkey
0.42%	Syria
0.40%	Vietnam
0.39%	UK
0.38%	China

(Source: opendata.cbs.nl)



Best practice

- In spite of limited financial resources, Leeuwarden has maintained moderate prices for municipal funerary provision.
- At cemetery Noorderbegravingplaats, Leeuwarden has realised innovative and inexpensive yet highly effective signals of openness to cultural and religious diversity.
- Dedicated provision for Muslim graves is available at Noorderbegravingplaats.

A cemetery manager told us: "To me, it's the Muslims who stand out. ... I find it lovely to see the Islamic members of our community, very often on Friday afternoons; they come after they have been to the Mosque and visit the cemetery. Then they go to the graves. It's all those customs. ... I find it lovely to sit here on Fridays. I see them pass by."

"I find it lovely to see the Islamic members of our community pass by."

— Cemetery manager

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

Leeuwarden is characterised by a long history of Protestant domination. Dedicated Roman Catholic cemeteries have been few and far between: the tiny Roman Catholic cemetery of Wytgaard was situated c.10 km south of the city centre, a considerable distance in the past (January 2020).

Today, Leeuwarden tries to pay heed to the funerary needs of minorities, but their absolute numbers are small. Expansion of the dedicated Islamic section at Noorderbegravingplaats, with great variety of ritual expression (November 2021).

Noorderbegravingplaats is equipped with benches and seats on which the ornaments celebrate diversity: close-up of seats (November 2021).

Consider creating a dedicated section with a high degree of flexibility for the positioning and adornment of graves. This might appeal to individuals from a wide range of ethnic and religious backgrounds, including indigenous post-traditionalists (Selwerderhof, Groningen, September 2021).

All photographs by Christoph Jedan.

Proposed solutions

- Cooperate regionally on the creation of dedicated cemeteries and memorial spaces for minority groups. As the examples of Zwolle (Chinese cemetery) and Zuidlaren (Muslim cemetery) show, dedicated funerary provision can be cost-effective if it has a regional function. Accessibility with public transport to such regional cemeteries needs to be guaranteed.
- For smaller minority groups, even regional provision such as this will not be feasible. Consider offering a 'free field': a lawn section without rectilinear paths, combined with unregulated orientation and adornment of graves. This would make it possible to accommodate the dead of very different ethnic and religious backgrounds.
- Jointly, minorities with ties to the Dutch colonial empire (Moluccas/Indonesia, Antilles, Aruba, Suriname and Curaçao) are the largest migrant and minority group in Leeuwarden (more than 5% of the population). Consider making dedicated funerary provision for them, and to honour moral obligations arising from Dutch colonial history.
- Inexpensive additions to existing cemeteries can produce a greatly improved experience for minority groups, e.g. a fire bowl for Chinese and Hindu ceremonies.
- Consider reactivating the Spanjaardslaan cemetery as a memorial garden; the example of the Tongerseweg cemetery in Maastricht shows how a historical cemetery can provide an attractive setting for new features and new target groups

"We aim for a separate Islamic cemetery for all Muslims, because this group continues to increase in Friesland. Let us say, an eternal cemetery. That's our goal. And, since Leeuwarden is Friesland's capital, a large town, it would be great if that cemetery were to be located here."

— Female Moroccan Muslim

(Inter)national examples of best practice

- The Selwerderhof Cemetery (Groningen) provides a 'free field' in which highly diverse graves can be accommodated.
- The Tongerseweg Cemetery (Maastricht) showcases a high degree of entrepreneurialism, making use of its decorative monumental character, to attract new groups of users.
- In cemeteries such as Kranenburg (Zwolle), Selwederhof (Groningen) and St Eskil (Eskilstuna, Sweden), extensive signposting showcases diversity and provides visitor-friendly information.

Authors

Christoph Jedan (University of Groningen), Mariske Westendorp (University of Groningen) and Eric Venbrux (Radboud University Nijmegen)

Find out more

www.cemi-hera.org