

Cabinet

16 December 2025

Medway Greenspaces Bereavement Memorial Policy

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Simon Curry, Portfolio Holder for Climate Change and Strategic Regeneration

Report from: Mark Breathwick, Assistant Director Community and Culture

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Summary

This report seeks the Cabinet's approval of a proposal to formulate a new Medway Greenspaces Bereavement Memorial Policy, setting out a range of site-specific opportunities for family and friends to commemorate departed loved ones.

This report was considered by the Regeneration, Culture and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 9 October 2025, the minutes of which are set out at section 9 of the report.

1. Recommendations

- 1.1. The Cabinet is asked to note and consider the comments and recommendations made by the Regeneration, Culture and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 9 October 2025 set out at section 9 of the report.
- 1.2. The Cabinet is asked to approve a proposal to formulate a new Medway Greenspaces Bereavement Memorial Policy 2026-2028, as set out in Option 5 at section 5 of the report, to include:
 - 1.2.1. introduction of a scheme enabling memorial plaques to be placed on existing parkland trees;
 - 1.2.2. implementation of memorial tree-planting programme in designated positions in Medway parks;
 - 1.2.3. enabling memorial plaques to be placed on existing benches;
 - 1.2.4. continuation of the existing bereavement memorial policy operated in Medway's cemeteries and crematoriums;

- 1.2.5. introduction of a ten-year time limit on memorial plaques, ensuring consistency with existing policy in Medway's cemeteries and crematorium; and:
- 1.2.6. establishment of a community working group to advise on the effectiveness of the new bereavement memorial policy, and to provide recommendations for consideration when the plan is updated in 2028.

2. Suggested reasons for decision

- 2.1. Implementing a Council-wide policy, developed with specialist knowledge from relevant external organisations, will bring clarity, consistency and transparency for Medway families.

3. Budget and policy framework

- 3.1. Approval of this policy is a matter for Cabinet. There are no financial implications arising which will require a formal decision from Full Council at this stage. The schedule of fees and charges is approved each year as part of the annual Council budget in February.

4. Background

- 4.1. There are currently a number of differing procedures in place therefore, it is important to formulate a new consolidated Policy to ensure the Council takes a consistent approach on this matter.

- 4.2. The crematorium and cemeteries have the most established procedure. Full details can be found on the Medway Council website https://www.medway.gov.uk/info/200337/memorials_and_tributes. In summary these include:

- Perspex garden plaques, located at the footings of rose and flower beds, available on a five-year lease.
- Granite memorial books, with plaques available on five, 10 and 25-year leases.
- Dedicated and shared benches, which can be dedicated to an individual or family, or shared among different owners. These are available on five and 10-year leases.
- Granite and floral wall plaques, on memorial walls around the Chapel of Meditation and available on five or 10-year leases.
- Granite garden kerbs, located on the Remembrance Walk, which include a plaque and flower vase available on five or 10-year leases.
- Granite mushroom plaques, available on five or 10-year leases.

- Dedicated roses plaques, these are Perspex plaques displayed under a dedicated rose tree, available on five or 10-year leases.
 - Babe-in-hand memorial plaques, dedicated to babies and children, available on five or 10-year leases.
 - Sundial memorial, incorporating plaques on five or 10-year leases.
 - Bluebell memorials, which can accommodate photos as well as two sets of cremated remains, available on a five or 10-year lease.
 - Columbaria – large memorials which can accommodate photos and motifs as well as two sets of cremated remains, available on five or ten-year leases.
- 4.3. With all of the above there is a lease period. Nearing the end of the lease, the service will write to the applicant and ask if they wish to renew. The memorials and plaques remain under the Council's ownership. Once the lease has expired the customer is offered the opportunity to purchase.
- 4.4. In cemeteries, the bereaved will require a permit to install a memorial headstone. Only approved stonemasons can work in the cemeteries. Within the grave plot trees and plants can be planted; trees are kept to a maximum four feet in height and the Council can remove any trees/plants if deemed necessary.
- 4.5. In both cemeteries and crematorium trinkets on grave ornaments are permitted, with the exception of glass items, alcohol or naked flames. Customers are advised any items are left at their risk.
- 4.6. Away from cemeteries and the crematorium, Medway Council permits memorial benches in country parks, or in designated parks including Gillingham Park, Grange Road, Jacksons Field, Victoria Gardens, Fort Pitt Gardens and The Esplanade. These seats are purchased by the individual, and a memorial plaque can be attached.
- 4.7. In country parks the price of the bench or seat can range from £400 to £800 depending on the specific purchase.
- 4.8. In urban parks, woodlands and play areas the set is £1,400 and the picnic table is £800.
- 4.9. Benches can also be purchased for footways on highways land. These can be purchased for £1,388. Each application will be reviewed by the highways team and there may be restrictions on certain locations.

5. Options

- 5.1. Option 1: Do nothing – continue to enact the range of options as outlined above, recognising there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

- 5.2. Option 2: Retain existing policies, compiling them all into one policy document in order to help individuals understand the range of options available to them.
- 5.3. Option 3: Retain existing policies, but in each case implement a lease procedure as already operated in cemeteries and the crematorium in order to bring consistency.
- 5.4. Option 4: as option 3, plus the addition of new opportunities for memorials on existing and newly planted trees in Medway's parks.
- 5.5. Option 5; as option 4, plus the creation of a new community working party to ensure the policy evolves in line with public thinking. The working party to include representatives from key stakeholders with specialist insight.

6. Advice and analysis

- 6.1. Option 1: This recognises the Council already has a number of policies in place across different areas. However, the approach is not consistent, with some services operating a lease system and others operating a purchase system. Correspondence also suggests residents are unclear why they cannot now have a memorial bench in certain parks when they have previously been allowed. While the rationale for refusal may be pragmatic it fails to reflect the emotional need of the family and friends of the departed loved one.
- 6.2. Option 2: Pulling all the different policies into one document may assist the individual in finding out what is available, but it does not remove the current inconsistent approach of lease/buy. Nor does it assist residents wishing to commemorate a loved one in a specific park which is no longer permitted under current policy.
- 6.3. Option 3: This seeks to implement the lease policy currently operated by the cemeteries and crematorium across all bereavement memorials. This will bring consistency to the policy which will make it easier for individuals to understand. It also ensures future generations will have the opportunity to place bereavement memorials in parks and open spaces, without the space gradually being filled up. Leasing will remove the opportunity for an individual to buy a bench in perpetuity; however, the current procedure operated in cemeteries and the crematorium allows individuals to renew their lease and this system would be applied to parks and open spaces as well.
- 6.4. Option 4: In discussions with stakeholders, there is clear public desire for more natural memorials. The planting of trees or plaques with existing trees already occurs in our cemeteries and crematorium and this could be expanded to our parks through a combination of identified existing trees or the planting of new trees. This both meets the growing requests of individuals and through the planting of additional trees assists with improving Medway's climate.

- 6.5. Option 5: This is the recommended option, which brings clarity and consistency while also recognising this is a dynamic subject with the wishes of residents evolving over time. Medway Council both wants to ensure it has a consistent up-to-date policy and also has ongoing, active engagement with key stakeholders and, through them, the community.
- 6.6. Subject to Cabinet approval of developing a new Policy (option 5), later this year, officers will bring forward the new Policy for approval in the new year.
- 6.7. A Diversity Impact Assessment will be developed alongside the formulation of the new Policy.

7. Risk management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Lack of a coherent, consistent policy	Currently there is confusion from residents about what is permitted, where and why. Without a policy it is difficult to give guidance to residents, exacerbated by historic lack of information of why changes have been made or decisions taken	A policy will enable residents to understand what is permitted, and will enable them to receive consistent advice	BIII

For risk rating, please refer to the following table:

Likelihood	Impact:
A Very likely B Likely C Unlikely D Rare	I Catastrophic II Major III Moderate IV Minor

8. Consultation

- 8.1. A range of key stakeholders have been asked to contribute to the report. These include Medway and Kent hospices, representatives of the National Association of Funeral Directors, and representatives of the Medway Diversity Forum. While a number of these organisations have yet to feed back their views, consultation to date has reflected the growing interest in natural memorials. This has been recognised in the options brought forward in this report and the report's recommendations.

- 8.2. Consultation will continue to try to ensure the views of stakeholders are incorporated within the new policy and also the establishment of the community working group, which will be reported to Cabinet.

9. Regeneration, Culture and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee

- 9.1. The report was considered by the Regeneration, Culture and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 9 October 2025, and the draft minutes of this discussion are set out below.

9.2. Discussion:

- 9.3. Officers introduced the report and explained that the views of the Committee were being sought prior to formulating the policy. Current arrangements operated under a number of different policies and this was an opportunity to bring all relevant services under one policy and to ensure consistency. It was also proposed to establish a stakeholder working group to better understand the needs of service users, how needs evolve over time and how the policy could be adapted to meet these changing needs.

- 9.4. Members supported a consistent approach to services and the creation of a working group which they felt should be cross party and reach out to all religious groups and hard to reach communities.

- 9.5. Members were concerned about the cost of using only approved stonemasons for work in cemeteries and requested that the costs be checked to ensure service users would not be charged a premium compared to the open market.

9.6. Decision:

- a) The Committee submitted comments to Cabinet on a proposal to formulate a new Medway Greenspaces Bereavement Memorial Policy 2026-2028, as set out in Option 5, to include the proposals set out in sections 1.2 to 1.7 of the report, and as set out above.
- b) The Committee requested that the new Community Working Group be cross party.
- c) The Committee requested that the costings for the approved stonemasons working in cemeteries be checked to ensure this does not require service users to pay a premium compared to the open market.

10. Climate change implications

- 10.1. While the recommendations are not made with direct emphasis on climate change, there are clear synergies arising from the increased desire – as reflected in consultation with external stakeholders to date – for more natural memorials.

- 10.2. Taking this into consideration, the proposed policy reflects the recommendation to increase opportunities for memorials through increased tree planting in parks. Work is ongoing with Medway Norse to identify specific spaces within each of our parks for additional memorial tree planting.
- 10.3. There is also recognition that traditional wood benches can require significant resources and energy to maintain. Moving to a lease system would reduce the demand for new benches while still allowing the placement of plaques on park benches, which has long been associated with commemorating a departed loved one.

11. Financial implications

- 11.1. There are no direct financial implications. Any costs arising from the implementation of the plan will be met through the income raised in accordance with the schedule of annual fees and charges to ensure operation of the policy is financially sustainable. The schedule of fees and charges is approved each year as part of the annual Council budget in February.

12. Legal implications

- 12.1. There are no legal implications directly arising from this report.

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Appendices

None

Background papers

None