

# NSS urges council to provide secular garden of remembrance

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The National Secular Society has urged City of Edinburgh Council to ensure secular cremation arrangements are provided as standard after it emerged that its policies disadvantage non-Christians.

The NSS wrote to the council after discovering that the ashes of babies who have shared cremations are interred in the garden of remembrance at Mortonhall crematorium, which has a large cross.

When most bodies are cremated at Mortonhall relatives have the option of taking away the ashes or having them interred in the garden of remembrance. But in the case of shared cremations for very young babies, the ashes cannot be retrieved on an individual basis and are all interred at the garden of remembrance.

No alternative arrangements are available for bereaved parents who opt for a shared cremation but do not wish for their baby's ashes to be interred in a space with Christian symbols. Parents who object must arrange a private funeral instead.

"Councils have a duty to ensure their provisions do not discriminate against people on the grounds of religion or belief," the NSS said in its letter to the council.

"But by having a prominent Christian symbol present in a council-run crematorium, non-Christians are being treated unfavourably. While the decision to place a cross in the garden of remembrance may have been well-intended, and a Christian cross may provide comfort to Christians, it is unlikely to do so for non-Christians.

"Indeed, the cross can cause offence and further the distress of grieving relatives."

The NSS also referred to the council's [Mortonhall crematorium policy](#), where the council says it will provide "a professional and dignified cremation service supported by competent, caring staff, to meet all religious, secular, ethnic and cultural needs." It adds that it will "approach the cremation of a baby with sensitivity, and will take account of and respect the wishes and needs of parents and families at this very difficult time".

The NSS wrote: "These are commendable policies, but Edinburgh Council is failing to enforce them with regard to those who wish for their remains or those of their relatives to be interred in a non-Christian space. This can be resolved by ensuring a secular garden of remembrance is provided as standard for the interment of ashes."

The NSS gave the example of Bath and North East Somerset Council's Haycombe crematorium, which [removed](#) a prominent window with a Christian cross etched on it and replaced it with plain glass and a removable cross in front of the window.

An NSS spokesperson said councils should "assume religious neutrality in shared burial spaces and allow people to add symbols on an individual basis if they wish".

In 2016 the NSS [called](#) on the government to ensure all state-owned crematoria are religiously neutral, allowing religious symbols to be added when requested.

Mortonhall crematorium made the [national press](#) in 2013, when more than 250 families discovered their children's remains had been disposed of without their knowledge. Staff at the crematorium buried baby ashes in secret and parents were told there were no ashes left when young babies were cremated.

*Photo for illustrative purposes only.*

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