

BRITISH INSTITUTE OF FUNERAL DIRECTORS



THE JOURNAL

ISSUE 2



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Letter from the National President

Clive Pearson

Dear Colleagues and Friends,

As we move through the final stretch of winter, February often presents us with a unique set of emotional challenges. While the rest of the world is draped in red roses and sentimental cards for Valentine's Day, those we serve are often navigating a much quieter, sharper kind of grief.



For many of our clients, this month acts as a stark spotlight on the "empty chair." Whether it is a first February without a spouse or the tenth, the social pressure to celebrate "everlasting love" can make the permanence of loss feel particularly heavy. As funeral directors, we are the stewards of these memories. Our role during this season transitions from logistical coordinators to empathetic anchors, helping families honour a love that doesn't end just because a life has.

Advocating for Our Profession: Parliament Update

I am pleased to share that our efforts to elevate the standards of our craft continue to gain momentum. Recently, Amanda and myself represented the BIFD at the House of Commons for a pivotal meeting regarding the future of funeral regulation.

During these discussions, our message was unwavering: Professionalism is rooted in qualification. We made it clear to the Member of Parliament that the families we serve deserve the peace of mind that comes with knowing their loved ones are in the care of a fully qualified funeral director.

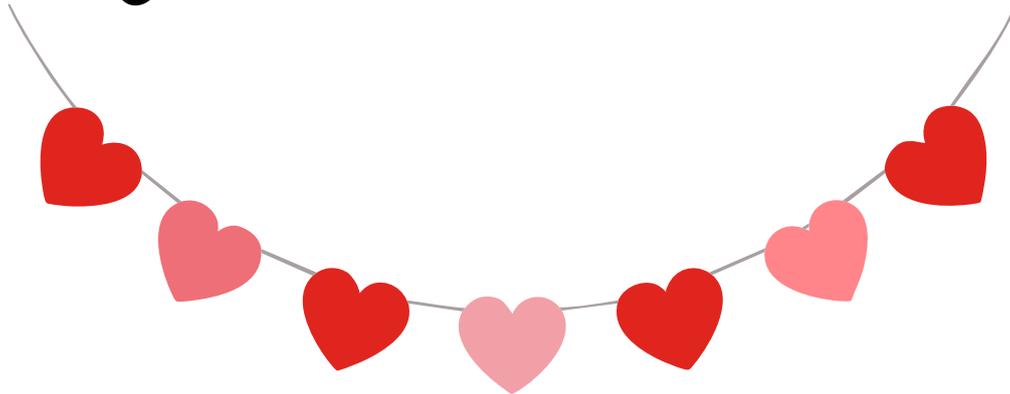
It is our belief that by championing mandatory qualifications, we aren't just raising the bar for ourselves—we are ensuring a safer, more respectful environment for every grieving family in Britain.

Looking Ahead

As the days begin to lengthen, let us continue to support one another and maintain the high standards that define our Institute. Thank you for your unwavering dedication to your communities and for the dignity you bring to this essential vocation.

Clive

*Clive Pearson
National President, Region C*



SAVE THE DATE!

We're delighted to announce the dates for CBCE 2026 which will see us returning to the Hilton Utilita Bowl - Southampton

There are a number of ticket options - head over to www.cbce.org.uk to book your place today!

**TUESDAY 23RD JUNE TO THURSDAY 25TH
JUNE 2026**

44th ANNUAL BIFD CONFERENCE

23rd – 25th October 2026



Mercure Tankersley Manor Hotel

Church Ln, Tankersley, Barnsley S75 3DQ

The BIFD Invites You To Conference 2026.....

BIFD National President, Clive Pearson, and his wife Leanne cordially invite all Members, Fellows, Students, Associates, Presidents of Kindred Associations, and Distinguished Guests to attend the upcoming Conference and Gala Dinner of The British Institute of Funeral Directors. The event will take place from 23rd to 25th October 2025 at The Mercure Tankersley Manor Hotel.



Tankersley Manor centres around a renovated 17th-century residence, conveniently located just a minute from Junction 36 off the M1 and offering free parking. Its 98 refurbished rooms are designed with elegant craftsmanship and bursts of colour to create an inviting atmosphere for guests. You'll find leisure amenities such as a gym, swimming pool, jacuzzi, sauna, steam room, and five spa treatment rooms—perfect for enjoying some relaxation during Conference Weekend (advance booking is recommended). The Woodman Restaurant offers a cozy spot by the fire where you can unwind and savour classic Yorkshire dishes.

Nearby attractions include Elsecar Heritage Centre, Cannon Hall, and Chatsworth House.

The President's Charity For 2026.....



Clive and Leanne have selected The Samaritans as the Institute Charity for 2026.

Founded in 1953 by Chad Vara, who recognised through his own life experiences the importance of listening, the organisation empowers individuals by offering a compassionate ear to callers wishing to talk about their emotions, feelings, challenges, and concerns, hoping to help them make positive informed decisions about their lives.

The Samaritans' mission is dedicated to reducing the number of individuals contemplating or attempting to take their own lives. The organisation currently provides comprehensive 24/7 telephone support across England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. Its services have expanded to help individuals facing a broad range of issues, including suicide, depression, anxiety, stress, loneliness, all forms of abuse, and alcohol or drug use.

Conference Secretary David Gresty actively serves as a listening volunteer and is highly engaged with his local branch. He expresses sincere gratitude to Clive for his support of a charity, that is significant to him, throughout 2026.

The itinerary so far...

Friday 23rd October 2026

The Education Committee is scheduled to convene in the morning, followed by a meeting of the Board of Directors in the afternoon.

Once you've settled into your rooms, Clive welcomes you to join him and Leanne for a three-course dinner in the hotel's function suite.

Saturday 24th October 2026

The Annual General Meeting will be held in the morning, and a buffet lunch will follow afterward.

In the afternoon, Clive has tentative plans for an activity of interest; further details will be provided once arrangements are confirmed.

The evening will commence with a drink's reception, followed by a three-course dinner accompanied by wine, cheese and biscuits, as well as tea and coffee. The programme will include the Diploma Awards Ceremony and the official Handover of Offices, concluding with music and dancing later in the evening.

Earlier than 23rd or later than 25th October 2026

Should you wish to extend your stay, we have arranged favourable rates for dates surrounding the Conference, allowing you to enjoy Yorkshire for a longer visit. Kindly inform us of your specific requirements, and we will endeavour to secure the most advantageous arrangements on your behalf.

The British Institute of Funeral Directors Conference 2026:

23rd – 25th October 2026

The Mercure Tankersley Manor Hotel

Church Ln, Tankersley, Barnsley S75 3DQ

The 44th BIFD Conference 2026 Rates

1. Friday Evening To Sunday Morning – THE COMPLETE PACKAGE

<i>Friday Dinner</i>	<i>.....Double Room (per couple)</i>	<i>£675</i>
<i>Friday & Saturday Bed & Breakfast</i>	<i>.....Single Room (per person)</i>	<i>£425</i>
<i>Saturday AGM: On Arrival Tea & Coffee</i>		
<i>Saturday Lunch Included</i>		
<i>Saturday Evening Drinks Reception</i>		
<i>Saturday Gala Dinner – Includes 3 Course Meal, Cheese & Biscuits & Tea and Coffee</i>		

2. Friday Evening To Saturday Morning - ONLY

<i>Friday Dinner</i>	<i>.....Double Room (per couple)</i>	<i>£295</i>
<i>Friday Bed & Breakfast</i>	<i>.....Single Room (per person)</i>	<i>£200</i>
<i>Saturday AGM: On Arrival Tea, Coffee & Biscuits</i>		

Saturday Lunch Is Available At £30 PP

3. Saturday To Sunday Morning - ONLY

<i>Saturday AGM: On Arrival Tea, Coffee & Biscuits</i>	<i>.....Double Room (per couple)</i>	<i>£395</i>
<i>Saturday Evening Drinks Reception</i>	<i>.....Single Room (per person)</i>	<i>£235</i>
<i>Saturday Gala Dinner – Includes 3 Course Meal, Cheese & Biscuits & Tea and Coffee</i>		
<i>Saturday Bed & Breakfast</i>		

Saturday Lunch Is Available At £30 PP

4. The Gala Banquet Dinner Only

.....£85 Per Person

<i>Saturday Evening Drinks Reception</i>
<i>Saturday Gala Dinner – Includes 3 Course Meal, Cheese & Biscuits & Tea and Coffee</i>

Saturday Lunch Is Available At £30 PP

5. AGM ATTENDANCE ONLY

.....Free To All Members & Students

<i>Saturday AGM: On Arrival Tea, Coffee & Biscuits</i>
--

Saturday Lunch Is Available On The Day At £30 PP

TO STAY BEFORE OR AFTER THE CONFERENCE B&B BASIS

Please add extra dates to booking form:

<i>.....Double Room (2 People) £POA</i>
<i>.....Single Room (1 Person) £POA</i>

The 43rd BIFD CONFERENCE – 23rd – 25th October 2026

The Mercure Tankersley Manor

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Address:

Post Code: Contact Telephone Number:

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Special Dietary Requirements: Yes/No Details of Diet

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Attending **Guests** Names:

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Tariff (2) – Fri to Sat

Double Rate: £.....

Single Rate: £.....

Tariff (3) – Sat to Sun

Double Rate: £.....

Single Rate: £.....

Tariff (4) – Gala Dinner Only

Total Attendees £.....

Tariff (5) – AGM Only

£ No Charge

Please return, or email, your completed booking form to the Conference Co-ordinator and make payment either by Bacs or by Cheque made out to “The BIFD”:

Bacs Payments To:

Sort Code: 60-83-01 - Account Number: 20336550

Reference: BIFDCONF

Mr. David Gresty

C/O The British Institute of Funeral Directors
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 JC Atkinson

THE RISE OF THE DEATH DOULA

Victoria Wells

Deputy Editor, Region C

A rapidly emerging trend in end-of-life care is the rise and professionalisation of the Death Doula (also known as an End-of-Life Doula or Death Midwife). Mirroring the support provided by a birth doula, these non-medical professionals are filling a crucial gap in modern care by focusing on the emotional, spiritual, and practical needs of the dying person and their family.



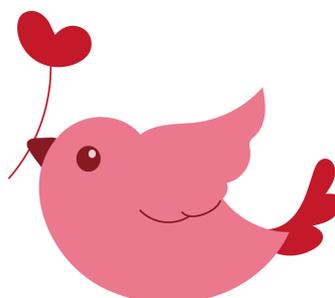
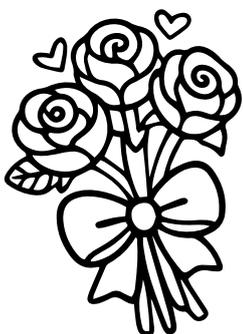
This trend is a direct result of the "Death Positive" movement—a growing cultural shift that seeks to normalise conversations about death and dying, pulling the process back from being solely a medical event in a hospital setting.

It is important to recognise that a Death Doula works to complement, not replace, the care provided by hospice and palliative medical teams. Their primary function is to provide holistic support before, during, and immediately after death, ensuring the final days are lived with dignity and purpose.

The support they offer is highly personalised and can include:

- **Emotional and Spiritual Companionship:** Being a consistent, non-judgmental presence and active listener for the dying person, allowing them to express fears, regrets, or final thoughts without burdening family members.
- **Advocacy and Education:** Helping the individual and family understand medical jargon and their options for care, ensuring the person's wishes are respected by medical staff.
- **Legacy and Life Review:** Assisting the person in reflecting on their life, collecting stories, creating a final video, or putting together a physical legacy project for loved ones.
- **Vigil Planning:** Helping the family create a peaceful, personalised atmosphere for the final hours, which can include music, scent, readings, or specific rituals.
- **Liaising with Funeral Directors:** Assisting the family in making informed, non-rushed decisions about funeral arrangements, educating them on the different available options, and easing the often-difficult transfer of care to a funeral director.

The rise of the Death Doula signals a shift towards a community-centred model of deathcare, positioning them as crucial allies to both families and funeral directors, offering a bridge between the clinical end of life and the transition to final disposition and remembrance.





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September 16 2026

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What Should Funeral Directors Look For When Recommending a Celebrant to Families?

Over the years I have become increasingly aware of the quiet influence funeral directors carry in shaping a family's experience of a funeral.

Often it happens in a very simple moment.

A family, unsure what they need, asks:

“Do you know a celebrant you'd recommend?”

It rarely feels dramatic. It can feel almost casual. Yet contained within that question is a great deal of trust.

The name you offer is not simply a supplier. You are, in effect, introducing someone into an intimate space of grief, memory, and vulnerability. You are vouching, not just for their competence, but for the way they will treat people at one of the hardest points of their lives.

I don't say that to add weight where none is needed. Anyone who has worked in funeral care for any length of time already understands the responsibility. But I do think it is worth pausing to reflect on what we are really noticing when we decide that one celebrant feels “safe” to recommend and another does not.

In my experience, it is rarely about whether someone can stand up and speak clearly. It is about who they are when nobody is watching.

I have met celebrants who are technically excellent. Their scripts are well written. Their delivery is polished. And yet something in the room feels slightly off. Families describe the ceremony as “fine” or “nice”, but not quite “right”. Conversely, I have met celebrants whose style is very simple, sometimes understated, but whose presence seems to settle people. Families feel held. They feel understood. They feel seen.

Over time, a pattern emerges.

The celebrants who consistently create meaningful experiences tend to share a particular quality of emotional intelligence. They are curious about people in a genuine way. They listen without rushing to shape the story. They are comfortable sitting in silence. They don't need to fill every gap with words. They recognise that grief is not linear, tidy, or predictable, and they don't try to make it so.

When I speak to families after a good ceremony, they rarely talk about how eloquent the celebrant was. They talk about how easy it felt to talk to them. How they didn't feel judged. How they were able to say things they hadn't expected to say. How they felt gently guided rather than steered.

That tells me a great deal about what matters.

Another pattern I have noticed is that strong celebrants tend to have a clear sense of process, even if they describe it in different ways.

They can explain, simply and calmly, how they work. What happens first. What happens next. When families will see a draft. How changes are handled. What they need from the family, and what the family can expect from them.

This clarity does two things.

It reassures families. And it reassures funeral directors.

It reduces the number of small uncertainties that quietly create stress behind the scenes. When a celebrant has a dependable rhythm to their work, you begin to trust that things will happen when they say they will. That trust is gold.

I once worked alongside a celebrant who was deeply compassionate, but chronically disorganised. Lovely person. Big heart. Constantly running late with drafts. Frequently forgetting small but important details. Funeral directors found themselves chasing, double-checking, buffering.

No one questioned this celebrant's intentions. But intention does not compensate for the additional load placed on others. Reliability is a form of care.

It is also worth paying attention to how a celebrant speaks about families when they are not in the room.

Do they talk about "difficult families", or do they talk about complex situations?

Do they blame, or do they wonder?

Do they approach challenges with curiosity, or with irritation?

These small linguistic choices reveal mindset. Over time, they tell you whether someone sees families as problems to manage or people to support.

I am also increasingly interested in whether celebrants see their work as a craft. Not in a precious way. Not in a "look at me" way. But in a quiet, committed way.

Do they talk about learning? Do they mention reflecting on ceremonies? Do they seek feedback? Do they notice structure, pacing, language, and flow?

Good ceremonies rarely happen by accident. They are shaped by people who care about words, about rhythm, about how a story unfolds in time.

This matters because families feel the difference, even if they cannot articulate it.

There is another layer that feels important to name. Some celebrants are very focused on building a business. Some celebrants are very focused on doing the work. Neither is inherently wrong.

But when I think about who I would feel comfortable recommending to a grieving family, I notice that I am drawn towards celebrants who still speak primarily about people, not packages. Who talk about families before they talk about fees. Who describe their role as a privilege rather than a performance.

That does not mean they undervalue themselves. Quite the opposite. It usually means they have a grounded sense of their worth that does not need to be loudly asserted.

Finally, I think it is worth acknowledging that not all training and development routes are equal.

You will encounter celebrants who have completed a short online course and little else. You will encounter celebrants who have invested significant time in learning, mentoring, and ongoing professional development.

You will not always know the details. But you can often sense the difference in how someone speaks about their preparation and their responsibility.

Recommending a celebrant is not about having the longest list of names. It is about having a smaller number of people you trust deeply.

People whose work you have observed. People whose behaviour you recognise. People whose values feel aligned with your own.

I would be genuinely interested to hear how funeral directors make these judgements in practice.

What tells you that a celebrant is “one of the good ones”? What patterns have you noticed over the years?

Because the more we talk about these things openly, the more we raise the quiet, human standards of this work — together.

Dinah Liversidge is the founder of Celebrant Coaching and Training Academy (celebranttrainer.com) and delivered her first funeral in 2009. She is an award-winning trainer and speaker and celebrant.



Boost For Community Projects In Final Funding Round From Local Funeral Directors



Karen Noble, Pallion Action Group (Phase 1 award); Fr Richard Brown, The Church of the Good Shepherd (Phase 2 award); Claire Ward, John G Hogg; Suzanne Brown, Marge Wilkinson and Denise Wilson, Soroptomist International; Ray Ross, Friends of Derwent Hill; and Martin Morrell, John G Hogg.

Inspiring groups making a positive difference in Sunderland have benefited from vital support, thanks to grants awarded through John G Hogg Funeral Directors' Community Fund.

Local organisations based close to John G Hogg branches were invited to apply for the funeral directors' final round of grants in their funding cycle. In this latest round, a total of £1,700 has been presented to two community projects:

Soroptomist International Sunderland – awarded £600 to fund comfort packs for women fleeing domestic violence. These packs will include essential toiletries, sanitary products, and other emergency items to provide comfort and dignity to women during times of crisis.

Friends of Derwent Hill – awarded £1,100 to help children whose families are facing financial challenges build confidence, teamwork and lifelong memories through outdoor education.

Business Principal John Hogg said: "We would like to thank everyone for their applications for community funding, and we have thoroughly enjoyed helping local charities. It's an honour to support such incredible causes – one helping women in Sunderland feel cared for and supported when they need it most, and the other ensuring outdoor education is accessible to every child living in the community, regardless of circumstances."

John G Hogg's Community Fund has supported local activities that enhance the quality of life for residents living within a three-mile radius of its funeral homes in Farrington, Hendon and Pallion. Projects had to align with one or more of the fund's four categories: Health, Education, Employment Opportunities, and Poverty and Social Deprivation.

Earlier in its funding cycle, John G Hogg Funeral Directors awarded £1,500 to the Pallion Action Group's Ready Steady Cook programme. The food and cooking classes helped families improve their kitchen skills, make meals go further and provided tips to stretch their budget. A further £1,655 was awarded to The Good Shepherd Church to support its Connect Project – a scheme aimed at helping vulnerable individuals and families living in the Ford housing estate.

Michael G Ryan Son & Daughters Preserves Community Legacy After Joining Funeral Partners



Rachael Ryan, Louise Yhnell and Michael Ryan

Funeral Partners has welcomed a new addition to its growing network – a respected family-run Funeral Directors, whose youngest generation has held the title of Britain’s youngest undertaker.

Based in Newport, with a second branch in Cardiff, Michael G Ryan Son & Daughters has served the South Wales community for 27 years, building a strong reputation for compassionate and professional care.

Business Principal Michael began his career as a carpenter, joiner and shop fitter, steadily progressing through the construction industry to become a site manager, and later a contracts and project manager.

Michael’s experience leading funeral home refurbishment projects inspired him to establish his own business in the sector in 1998.

His wife and Funeral Director, Pat, has been involved with the company since the beginning and was the face of the Cardiff branch until she retired in November 2023.

Their eldest daughter initially worked behind the scenes before joining the firm full-time and became Britain’s youngest undertaker when she directed her first funeral aged 19. Today, as Managing Partner, Louise is focused on growing the business and staff development.

Her sister, Rachael Ryan, took the title of Britain’s youngest Funeral Director at the tender age of 16 after leaving school. Her achievement made national newspaper headlines, and a BBC documentary followed her training as she honed her skills to help continue the family’s proud legacy in funeral care. Rachael moved to the Cardiff branch with her mother in 2014.

Now, Michael G Ryan Son & Daughters is looking forward to an exciting new chapter as part of Funeral Partners, with the family remaining at the helm of day-to-day operations.

The decision to join Funeral Partners followed a lengthy period of consideration. Michael explained that while other organisations had approached him in the past, Funeral Partners stood out for its family-oriented approach and respect for local identity.

Michael said: “We’ve built a very well-known name in Newport and people know what we stand for. What made Funeral Partners different was their understanding that every funeral home has its own history and community ties. They’ve respected that from day one. This new chapter allows us to secure the long-term future of the business, ensuring our values, family ethos and personal touch continue for generations to come.”

Louise added: “The acquisition process was quite a change, but the people we’ve worked with have been very reassuring. The support network Funeral Partners provides is exceptional, from compliance to finance – it’s given us the freedom to focus more on families. While there have been positive operational upgrades to systems and processes, including refreshed interiors at the funeral home, the team supporting our families and the quality service and ethos remain unchanged.”

Michael concluded: “We’re proud that the Michael G Ryan name will stay above the door. Our community knows us and has been putting their trust in us for over 27 years. This partnership is about support for the future – it’s about strengthening what we’ve built over many years. Our aim has always been to treat every family with respect, dignity and understanding. That won’t ever change – it’s the foundation of everything we do.”

Funeral Partners CEO Sam Kershaw said: “I am both proud and delighted that another highly respected, family-run business with a strong reputation for compassionate and professional care has chosen Funeral Partners as its acquisition partner. This new acquisition strengthens our Funeral Director presence in Wales. Michael G Ryan Son & Daughters will continue to provide the exemplary service to the community it has become so well known for, and we welcome their wealth of experience to the Funeral Partners family.”



About Funeral Partners:

Funeral Partners is the UK’s third largest funeral business, with more than 290 funeral homes staffed by over 1,300 dedicated funeral professionals serving communities across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. As well as a regulated funeral plan provider, of Choice Funeral Plans.

Chief Executive Sam Kershaw has over 45 years’ experience in the funeral profession, joining the business back in 2016 as Chief Operating Officer. Funeral Partners, which has been established for over 18 years has grown rapidly, building a strong reputation as a trusted, well-run, high-quality funeral services business and funeral plan provider, with exemplary standards of care for the deceased and their clients, overseeing more than 30,000 nationally funerals each year.

It now includes more than 150 family businesses, which have entrusted their reputation and heritage to Funeral Partners.

Funeral Partners Limited (FPL) is an appointed representative of Alternative Planning Company Limited (APCL) which is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority with firm reference number 965282. Choice Funeral Plans are provided by APCL.

Both FPL and APCL are part of the Funeral Partners Group.

Renewing Your Commitment To Your Families And Community

Renewal is a concept funeral directors know well and, with spring around the corner, now is a good time to reflect and consider how to renew your commitment and service to bereaved families. As communities change and the ways people express grief evolve, funeral professionals are continually called to renew their commitment to compassionate, adaptable care.

At the heart of this renewal is the understanding that each family has their own story and the way they experience grief is unique. Some families seek quiet reflection, others need communal rituals, and many welcome digital spaces to connect and remember. By understanding these differences, funeral directors can offer support that is both professional and deeply personal.

Renewal also comes from updating and expanding the tools and services that you offer to families. Providing clear pathways to ongoing support shows that your care does not end when the service concludes and you could consider some of these ideas:

Online Tributes

Providing online tribute pages is a meaningful way to enhance long-term bereavement care. These spaces allow families and friends to share memories, photos, and messages over time, creating a memorial that supports connection and comfort long after the funeral.

Charitable Giving

For families who wish to honour their loved one through fundraising, MuchLoved tribute pages offer the option to collect donations for charities that are meaningful for the family.

Bereavement Counselling

By partnering with MuchLoved, you can give families immediate access to professional bereavement support through GriefChat. This free online service offers reassurance and guidance for bereaved people by connecting them directly with a qualified grief counsellor.

Funding For Grass Roots Bereavement Projects

You might also strengthen bereavement care within your community by developing or supporting a local project. MuchLoved Charitable Trust offers grants to help fund grassroots bereavement initiatives. Grants such as this can help strengthen local support networks and extend meaningful care to local families beyond the funeral.

Renewing your commitment to care for families doesn't have to mean making major changes. By evolving alongside the communities you serve, you can ensure families feel supported not only on the day of the service, but in the weeks and months that follow.



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Direct Cremation: What Is Going On? Thoughts for Funeral Directors

Why the rise of direct cremation is reshaping the funeral sector — and what the industry must do next

Direct Cremation: What Is Going On?

Direct cremation is now around 20% of all funerals. And around 60% of all prepaid plans, this seismic shift has taken the industry by storm.

For some, direct cremation represents freedom: the shedding of ritual, cost, and complication. For others, it marks something very sad, almost dark — the quiet erosion of shared mourning and the communal recognition of death.

After listening to a debate between the Traditionalists and the Directs, I realised their disagreement wasn't really about facts, but about frameworks. The Traditionalists spoke from the perspective of society — what rituals mean for us collectively. The Directs spoke from the perspective of the customer — what people want individually. They were, in effect, describing entirely different worlds.

For every cremation there is a number of, let's call them, interests: the deceased (their wishes), those closest to the deceased (e.g. next of kin), and then potentially a number of mourners who have a wish or need, but no 'purchase power'. Frequently, these different wishes don't align. Traditionally, it wouldn't have really mattered — all but the very poor or neglected received a 'public funeral'.

Now not all funerals are public, and this decision lies either with the deceased, if they left wishes, or the family, if they did not. And Yes, the family may choose not to follow the deceased wishes, but this is rarely done lightly.

If we look at the two arguments from their different perspectives something interesting emerges.

I Am Satisfied

The Directs argue that their customers are satisfied — and why not? They offer clarity and simplicity: a straightforward service that avoids complexity and cost. Many families appreciate precisely that.

The Traditionalists' concern lies elsewhere. When we reduce death to a private transaction, what happens to the wider social function of mourning? Satisfaction, after all, isn't the same as meaning.

When people say, "I don't want a fuss, just put me in the bin," they may mean it sincerely — or they may be trying to protect others from the discomfort of grief. It's a very British sentiment. This clear desire not to cause 'trouble or any bother' then passes down to those left behind, who feel obliged to follow it. And, let's be honest, some are relieved to have this "opt-out" option.

Funerals are daunting: they demand courage, composure, and the ability to juggle logistics while grieving — particularly in our more complex society of step-siblings, divorced in-laws, and the like. The temptation to avoid all that is understandable.

It's easy to imagine a grieving daughter thinking about a direct cremation: "This option is wonderful. It will spare Mum from sitting at the front next to Dad's dreaded ex, or his estranged daughter wailing with grief when she's shown no interest for ten years. Yes, this is perfect — avoid all that. Get the ashes back, have a simple little ceremony with just me, Mum, my brother, and the grandkids. Scatter his ashes at Loch Lomond, raise a glass of whisky — job done, perfect."

And is that not the right answer? Well, it might be — but it might not.

You don't have to do anything?

Navigating family and friends after a death is difficult — horrible even — and now we have the ability to avoid it. Optout entirely, easy. And some may claim that omitting a funeral damages mental health. However, the modest amount of research that has been conducted on this doesn't concur: grief does not yield to neat moral arithmetic.

However, what research has been conducted has been from the industry in an attempt to put people off (and thus retain profits) directs, but here lies another problem — those conducting such studies often have a financial interest in the outcome, and they tend to survey only the bill payer.

Unsurprisingly, those who made the decision usually back it:

"So, Mrs Jones, did you mess up your dad's funeral and find yourself unable to grieve properly?"

"Err, no, of course I didn't."

I'm not suggesting that industry surveys are wrong, merely that this approach won't yield anything meaningful. Grief varies person to person, depending on temperament and emotional proximity to the deceased.

Tradition — Help or Hindrance?

The Traditionalist reminds us that funerals have endured because they work. To a degree, that's true: structure steadies us in chaos. But tradition is no guarantee of virtue; cruelty too has its traditions.

The task is to discern which rituals still serve meaning, and which survive merely out of habit.

During the pandemic, people were furious at being denied traditional funerals. Yet once restrictions lifted, many continued to choose direct cremation. For a silent group, it clearly worked. COVID broke the bond of expectation — and for some, that was a welcome relief.

And don't tell me tradition provides dignity. Who defines that? To a Zoroastrian, having your body offered to eagles is the height of honour and respect.

There is one thing a tradition does do. A person may not wish for ceremony, but the living may need it.

Our lives create many layers. The daughter scattering ashes by the loch may be content — she'll tick the box marked very satisfied. But if her friend was killed in a car accident and she were excluded from a farewell by the same route, I doubt the same box would be ticked — but she wouldn't be asked.

The real losers in this new world are the friends and wider family. The immediate family have the ashes, the documents, the authority. Friends have only stories. A funeral offers them the right to witness, to stand together, to remember.

Traditionalists may argue that, in this case, a 'duty' to hold a public funeral may be a gift in disguise — a way of affirming connection. The awkward tea afterwards, the ill-timed eulogy, the silent hand on a shoulder: these gestures, banal as they seem, are acts of community. To eliminate them in pursuit of convenience may relieve stress, but it also removes the small rituals that remind us grief belongs to us all. In part I agree, I would argue there is a duty to consider everyone — not necessarily to agree to or comply with, but to consider.

Duty, I hear you cry! It's not the defence of the realm! But duty is now an unfashionable term. Just because society places the highest credence on personal choice doesn't make it a right without a responsibility.

Modern life treats obligation and duty as burdens — something to be shrugged off. Direct cremation caters to that instinct. But sometimes duty yields a better result. How many times as parents do we say to our children: "Don't just make the easy choice — make the right one."

I do believe we have a duty to hold a gathering — whatever that might be. Not necessarily the kind with pallbearers and cold cups of tea, but something. And it should include all those who loved that person, no matter how challenging that might be. Because it's about them — and they didn't just love one person.

Economics Tilts the Debate

Time and again we hear that direct cremation is primarily a financial decision. While it would be naïve to ignore that, it's often an easy label for a more complex rationale.

For the funeral sector, however, economics are central. Crematoria and funeral directors are losing significant revenue as direct cremation grows. Some of their concern is self-interest; some is civic. When profits vanish, infrastructure crumbles. Who then maintains the spaces where communities can still gather to remember?

I tend to be more relaxed about this — markets adjust. Not to diminish the struggles of well-respected colleagues in the sector, but let's not argue against the tide. Customers want different things in a traditionally conservative industry, often without articulating their needs in advance.

So the CFO of a direct cremation company might say:

"Look, they're very satisfied. They like what we're doing. Everyone's happy. Away we go." not, "Hang on a minute — our shareholders are concerned about the wider cultural implications of our highly profitable business."

The Directs have tapped into a genuine cultural current: the desire to relieve others of fuss, to keep things tidy and controlled. Their adverts are masterful — serene, reassuring, efficient.

Furthermore, the argument goes: fewer emissions, less waste, less stress — entirely more efficient.

Comparing the Reviews: What Are Families Actually Saying (and what they are not)?

If we compare the reviews from the leading direct cremation provider with those from more traditional funeral directors, we can see something rather interesting.

Pure Cremation — the standard-bearer for direct cremation — has more than 28,000 on Trustpilot, scoring a glowing 4.8 out of 5. The comments are almost uniform in tone: “Simple,” “professional,” “no fuss,” “so easy to arrange.” The recurring message is relief — the sense that a difficult job has been efficiently and respectfully completed.

Now compare that to independent traditional providers — say, Kenneth Keegan in Scotland, or Anderson Maguire — both scoring close to 5.0 out of 5, though with far fewer reviews (a few hundred rather than tens of thousands). Their praise is of a different kind: “Compassionate,” “personal,” “they looked after us,” “they cared.” The language shifts from process to people. It’s not about efficiency, but empathy.

The contrast is telling. Both groups of customers are satisfied, but satisfied with different things. The Directs are happy because the process was smooth, the price clear, the service delivered. The Traditionals are grateful because they felt seen, supported, and accompanied.

And the numbers reinforce the divide. Tens of thousands of reviews for Pure Cremation suggest a model built for scale — a service that runs like a well-oiled machine. The traditional firms, by contrast, work at human scale: smaller volume, slower pace, but often a richer emotional vocabulary.

They are answering different questions. The Directs have perfected transactional satisfaction — the customer got what they ordered. The Traditionals, when they get it right, deliver social satisfaction — the family felt cared for, the death acknowledged, the community gathered.

The big gap again is that the review platforms, of course, can’t tell us whether the friends, neighbours or relatives were included — only whether the purchaser was pleased. But that, in itself, makes the point. We are measuring a private transaction, not a public ritual.

The concerns are not societal but procedural — the lack of transparency around the process. If you tell a family after the fact that Uncle George was cremated at a certain time in a local crematorium, they’ll say: “That’s wrong.” But if you tell them beforehand, they’ll likely shrug — “That’s a shame, but it won’t change our decision.”

All of which brings us neatly back to the real question: what are we actually measuring here? The reviews show that people are happy — very happy — but perhaps only with the service, not necessarily with the experience of mourning. Efficiency and satisfaction look good in the data, but meaning doesn’t show up in star ratings. You can rate delivery times, not catharsis. When death becomes something to be “handled” rather than shared, we risk mistaking smoothness for care.

Efficiency Versus Meaning

This brings to mind a recent episode of the BBC's Moral Maze, titled Is Democracy a Failed Experiment? One panellist argued democracy fails because it's inefficient. But efficiency was never its purpose; democracy exists to include.

Funerals, too, were never meant to be efficient. The businesses providing them may aim for efficiency, but funerals are necessarily inefficient — full of pauses, silences, and awkward encounters. They allow time and participation: the very things efficiency eliminates.

When we prize smoothness above humanity, we forget that care is rarely convenient.

So what does it all mean?

For the funeral sector: there seems such a massive opportunity to claim the ground that does both, what that might look like I could not say, but imagine a business that could provide the simplicity of the direct with the meaning of the traditional. Maybe it is out there already and it has not been marketed very well. Maybe it I need to look radically different to cut through.

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