

In this extraordinary time we understand there are many new questions and concerns about funerals. To gain insight we spoke to Paul Allcock, a family Funeral Director and former President of SAIF – The National Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors.

- For advice and links to information for **other faith groups**, please see immediately below interview.

Q. How is this going to change the very way we physically bury or cremate our dead?

A. *“It’s changing almost on a daily basis at the moment. On Monday evening (23rd March) the Prime Minister announced the only people who should attend a funeral service **now** are the immediate family or immediate relatives. And, that it should only take place at the place of cremation or burial; not in a church; or in any other ceremonial hall. So immediately the support that’s available for families has become limited. There’s a lot of distress because arrangements are having to be changed literally on a daily basis.”*

Q. So what can families now expect in practice when they make arrangements for a funeral?

A. *“The first point is that all arrangements are being made wherever possible, either by telephone or by video link, rather than in person. Families are encouraged **not** to attend the funeral directors premises to have that personal one-to-one initial discussion that would normally take place.*

“Additionally, they are being warned that by the time the funeral takes place, we may be in a different position as far as the regulations and the requirements for us to actually dictate to others, funeral directors and the family themselves as to what we’re actually able to do. And there’s a concern that in the longer term, whether there will actually be a funeral service at all.”

Q. Inevitably there are going to be restrictions on numbers attending funeral services at the moment based on age, and underlying health conditions of the mourners. How is that likely to affect the quality of the ceremony, of the funeral service itself?

A. *“Well, essentially I always look at a funeral service in essence as being a service of support for the family themselves. It’s almost a plea to society to help them through, the remembrance of a*

loved one in group support of those closest to that individual, family and close friends, is really important and a really valuable part of any ceremony, in whatever faith that may be.

“It just creates that comfort and that support that there are others around them to help. And of course, at the moment, many people who are arranging the funeral itself are isolated themselves. So they haven’t got that support that naturally comes about as a result of organising a funeral.”

Q. How will technology interfere? Will it help or will it hinder? After all a screen isn’t the same thing as being there in person?

A. “It will paper over the cracks, shall we say. This is one occasion where live streaming of a service for those that aren’t able to attend – a number of crematoria around the country are offering that at a discount, or even at no cost to the families – will make the funeral inclusive of those that aren’t able to attend.

“And so everybody is trying to still make everything appropriate and everything in place as much as is possible, but it’s an ongoing challenge which is becoming hugely difficult to create an appropriate funeral. And so many occasions now, we’re encouraging people perhaps to have something very simple at this stage, but maybe to look at having some sort of memorial service or celebration service in the months ahead, once everything has got back to normal.”

Q. How important is the very act of a formal ceremony in the process of grieving?

A. “It varies hugely, I think, dependent upon your faith, as a Catholic myself the importance of a Requiem Mass is huge. And of course, not being able to do that with the body in attendance currently is very, very difficult for many, many people.

“Mass can still be said, but for the likes of myself, that’s actually really troubling, that I’m unable to pass my loved one into the hands of the Lord in what I would see as being the appropriate manner. And that goes for many, many faith groups. So it is a really, really difficult time. There are [opportunities for a Mass](#) still to be said, but even their family can’t necessarily attend. Many of the priests will still be holding Mass privately and would be happy to say a Mass for the dead, but it is a really difficult time for us all.”

Q. You mentioned arrangements further down the line to help with the grieving process, a memorial service, a Thanksgiving service and so on, but can the intensity of the emotion on the day be deferred?

A. *"I think it's not a question of it being deferred. It **has to be deferred**, if that's something that people would want. In my experience, there's that bringing together of people who knew and loved somebody is hugely beneficial to everybody. The stories that are told, the memories that are shared, it's almost the group gathering after a funeral – at a wake, for example – is in many respects as important as the service itself, because that's where you receive the love and the support of everybody else that's attending.*

And obviously, if that's not present currently, to put that off to a later date is going to be a really difficult time for any individuals but to be able to still do that and still remember a loved one in an appropriate way in due course, it's got to be a beneficial thing."

Q. I know this is distressing to consider what do people have to think about if they are burying someone, a member of their family who themselves have died of the Coronavirus?

A. *"At the moment, the recommendations being made to funeral directors, for example, that in those cases there would be no viewing in the Chapel of Rest. In a normal scenario somebody may want to come and pay their last respects, but that should be discouraged at this point.*

"It's still a learning curve we're on and subsequently the importance is to err on the side of caution, and families wouldn't be able to carry out, certain elements that they perhaps would really like to have done so, including their attendance, essentially, because if somebody that they love has died of the virus, they're likely to be put into self isolation anyway at that time, and so there would have to be a delay for the funeral if they were to attend at all. So there would be some difficulty in the arranging and organising of that, to even give them the opportunity to attend without a timescale, and knowing that they're going to be well and healthy enough themselves to be in attendance."

Q. Are you seeing any change in how people are approaching death and dying?

A. *"Only by force rather than by choice. Many of the families we're dealing with currently are accepting of the scenario. There is so much publicity regarding their own lifestyles and dictating*

to them what's having to happen in their own lives, that they appreciate and understand that it is not something that's happening by choice, but it's something that is having to happen for the good of the nation."

Q. Finally, are there any grounds for hope in these terrible times? Any grounds for solace or comfort?

A. "I think we have to cling on to hope. To be honest, if we didn't have hope, where would we be? We have to hope that it's over sooner rather than later and that we can we can get back to normal. So I think it's vitally important that we hang onto that hope, but also make sure that we follow the guidelines and ensure the health and safety of everybody around us is paramount and foremost in our minds."

[Always follow most up-to-date government advice](#)

- Visit the [UK government website](#).

[Helpful general advice from Marie Curie](#)

- Useful advice and links to further information about funerals and the coronavirus at the [Marie Curie website](#).

[Catholic funerals and cremations during coronavirus pandemic \(COVID-19\)](#)

- Read our page on [Catholic funerals and cremations during the coronavirus pandemic](#).

[Church of England: Clergy funeral and bereavement resources](#)

Funerals may now only happen at the crematorium or at the graveside. Only immediate family members can attend (if the crematorium allows) – that is, spouse or partner, parents and children, keeping their distance in the prescribed way.

- Read more [advice from the Church of England](#).

[Jewish grief and mourning](#)

- Read about [changes in traditional funeral and burial – impact during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic](#).

Guidance for Mosques and Madrassas concerning deaths during the coronavirus pandemic

- Please read more at the [Muslim Council of Great Britain website](#).

For all those who are grieving

- For more help and advice please visit the [Good Grief Trust](#).