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# Funeral experts by experience: what matters to them

Dr Julie Rugg and Dr Sarah Jones

September, 2019





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## Acknowledgements

This research took place under the guidance of an advisory group, and we are very grateful for the involvement and input of Reverend Ruth Dowson, Leeds Beckett University; Julie Dunk, Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management; Fran Hall, Good Funeral Guide; and Terry Tennens, SAIF. The study benefitted considerably from input and discussion with the team of researchers at Full Circle: Dave Billington, Ruth Owen and Jade Westgarth. They helped to shape the topic guide, undertook interviews, and contributed to recognition of emerging themes and subsequent framing of analysis.

Our principal thanks go to all our research participants, who gave freely of their time, talked with candour about their personal and family circumstances and shared their experience and expertise.

## Foreword

For the last twenty years, I have been immersed in the world of funerals. I have had the privilege of sitting with thousands of bereaved people and listening to them talk about the person who died and the type of funeral that they want. This experience has shaped my fundamental personal beliefs about the purpose of a funeral, and it has emphasised the importance of listening to the people who I believe are the real funeral directors: the people who are making the funeral arrangements.

I was completely in support of Sarah when she shared her plans to investigate whether a good or poor funeral experience led to long term consequences for the well-being of bereaved people. I was pleased to accept the invitation to be part of the advisory group, which has followed the work as it progressed.

The findings that have resulted from this first stage of the research are fascinating. Rich and revealing, the voices of those who contributed are telling us clearly what they think and feel about their experiences and what mattered to them. Unsurprisingly, this varies immensely: the complexity of each individual bereavement, the family dynamics and interpersonal relationship, any preconceptions or beliefs, previous experiences, preferences and expectations combined with societal and cultural influences and norms all contributed in different measure. It is hoped that the insights from this study will feed into large-scale quantitative research, which will help us better understand how funerals impact on wellbeing.

Our requirements from a funeral are changing, and the funeral industry must change in response. At a time of change, it is easy take the wrong direction. The experts into what really matters when it comes to funerals are bereaved people, and we need to listen.

Fran Hall DipFD  
CEO The Good Funeral Guide CIC

## Summary: Key points

This report is based on interviews with 50 respondents talking in detail about a funeral they have arranged, participated in or attended. The research team did not choose respondents based on any particular characteristic: they responded to an invitation to participate. Similarly, the funerals discussed in the study were not chosen because they were particularly good or particularly bad. Rather, they reflected what might be regarded as a balanced range of funeral experiences England. This research has, in a very open way, explored what matters to people when it comes to funerals and has aimed not to be directive in making any presupposition as to what people will find meaningful.

For the first time, this report has analysed how people talk about funerals in the context of the circumstances of the death, family relationships, the role taken by the respondent in the funeral and their own prior experience of arranging or attending funerals. These contexts have contributed substantially to a better understanding of how people chose or chose not to derive meaning, and what – in the whole range of actions, events, and processes following a death – people regarded as being important to them.

In listening to respondents' accounts, the research findings indicate the need to establish a broader definition of 'funeral', and include all the actions taken from the moment of death, preparations for the funeral service, the funeral event itself, and the decisions made and actions taken with respect to cremated remains and memorialisation of the burial. In using a wider frame, it quickly became evident that the funeral service itself was not necessarily the most important thing.

The research has found that five things mattered:

*That the funeral followed the wishes of the person who died.* Being able to follow last wishes was hugely comforting to family members arranging the funeral. Not having wishes to follow meant that many people were 'unmoored' in their arrangements and found it difficult to make decisions. Family tension often arose around the uncertainty. Last wishes did not have to be complex: just leaving a favourite song could be enough for family members to feel comfort in gifting this one last task to the person who died.

*Decision-making had to be inclusive.* The majority of families in this study strove to ensure that all close family members were involved in the decisions being made about the funeral. In a small number of cases, the funeral exacerbated family rifts, and any sense of exclusion was reflected on with bitterness even years later. The role of funeral directors in family mediation cannot be under-estimated.

*Responsive funeral directors were well-regarded.* A good funeral director was immediately intuitive as to the manner of approach they should take. Many people who were arranging funerals brought a great deal of experience, having arranged or attended a number of funerals previously. Respondents were happiest when the funeral director understood what level of information and guidance was needed, and different approaches were often



required at different stages of the funeral arrangement. No family need was the same, and funeral directors were required to be emotionally intelligent and flexible: good funerals were 'co-productions', with varying degrees of control between families and professionals.

*Being with the body: the importance of getting it right.* Respondents had very different views about how much time they wanted to spend with the body of the person who died. That engagement with the body started from the very moment of death, and time in hospital following the death could be as important as time spent with the body at the funeral director's premises. However, this time was often mediated by professionals, and it was important that they understood and facilitated family access. Where someone actively sought to be with the body of the person who died, then it was a very strongly felt need; conversely, some individuals were equally adamant in their wish not to see the body. Again, getting this element wrong was something that was not readily forgotten.

*Having a funeral service that met expectations.* People in the study were often sufficiently experienced to know what kind of funeral service was appropriate, given the circumstances of the death. Respondents wanted to be sure that the tone of the service was right, that the funeral accurately reflected the person who had died, and that there was an opportunity for everyone to say goodbye. Participants had different perspectives on the degree of personalisation they felt to be desirable. No-one wanted to be told about what funeral service they should have, and – indeed – there was often a great deal of tolerance about other people's choices.

The study participants were 'experts by experience', and the factors highlighted by their accounts add a valuable perspective. These accounts should be considered in discussions about evidence-based training, regulation or policy formulation to ensure continuous improvement in funeral care.

# 1. Introduction

## Why this research has been done

This study has emerged as the consequence of Sarah Jones' movement into funeral directing, after a career in surgery within the National Health Service. Sarah established her own independent funeral directing business – Full Circle Funerals – and since setting up that business has noted that there appears to be very little evidence-based practice within the funeral profession, and has become highly motivated to understand the best way to deliver funeral care. This research arose as the consequence of her asking a simple question: is it possible to arrive at an understanding of whether a good or poor funeral experience has consequences for the long-term wellbeing of the bereaved? This was a hugely ambitious question, and this study does not provide an answer. However, this first report signals a start to thinking about the answer, by asking and answering a preliminary question: what is about funerals that people find meaningful? Are there factors it is possible to isolate?

A first response to this question was to survey the existing evidence base for funeral care, and this included a search of databases including MEDLINE, PsychInfo, CINAHL, EMBASE, the Cochrane Library and PubMed. This search took place in October 2017 using the search terms 'funerals' + 'outcomes', 'ritual', 'involvement', 'attendance', 'viewing', 'control' and 'participation'. Of 113 references identified, 83 peer-review articles and one book could be obtained and were reviewed. In addition, academic experts were contacted personally to establish whether the literature review was suitably comprehensive and to identify any research not yet published. Much of the literature was anecdotal, consisted of personal reflections, and considered the views of funeral and bereavement professionals, rather than bereaved people.

The majority of studies which did include bereaved people asked about specific aspects of their experiences. For example, quantitative studies regarding specific funeral factors considered music<sup>1</sup>, cold rooms following child death<sup>2</sup>, funeral attendance<sup>3</sup>, personalisation<sup>4</sup>, grave goods<sup>5</sup>, body viewing<sup>6</sup> and the opportunity to participate in the

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<sup>1</sup> Adamson, S. & Holloway, M. (2012) "A sound track of your life": music in contemporary UK funerals', *Omega*, 65: 1, 33-54; Caswell, G. (2011) 'Beyond words: some uses of music in the funeral setting', *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, 65:4, 319-34.

<sup>2</sup> Forrester, L. (2008) 'Bereaved parents' experiences of the use of "cold bedrooms" following the death of their child', *International Journal of Palliative Nursing*, 14:1, 578-85.

<sup>3</sup> Silverman, P.R. & Worden, J.W. (1992) 'Children's understanding of funerary ritual', *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, 25:4, 319-331; McCown, D.E. (1984) 'Funeral attendance, cremation and young siblings', *Death Education*, 8: 5-6, 349-63; Weller, E.B., Weller, R.A., Fristad, M.A, Cain, S.E. & Bowes, J.M. (1988) *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 27:5, 559-62.

<sup>4</sup> Schafer, C. (2012) 'Corpses, conflict and insignificance? A critical analysis of post-mortem practices', *Mortality*, 17:4, 305-21.

<sup>5</sup> Harper, S. (2012) "I'm glad she has her glasses on. That really makes the difference": grave goods in English and American death rituals', *Journal of Material Culture*, 17.1, 43-59.

<sup>6</sup> Mowll, J., Lobb, E.A., & Wearing, M. (2016) 'The transformative meanings of viewing or not viewing the body after sudden death', *Death Studies*, 40:1, 46-53; Fristad, M.A., Cerel, J., Goldman, M., Weller, E.B. & Weller,

funeral.<sup>7</sup> Further, one quantitative study focussed on the correlation between the use of ritual and bereavement outcomes<sup>8</sup> and one matched case control study asked whether holding a baby after stillbirth is helpful for bereaved mothers.<sup>9</sup>

Three studies considered funerals more widely but in each of these studies the funeral factors were defined by the research team. First, a quantitative Australian study published in 1997 defined and considered various aspects of death and bereavement which correlated with bereavement outcomes.<sup>10</sup> A second observational study of 46 funerals considered how people seek meaning at a funeral<sup>11</sup> and a third study deployed a questionnaire asking which aspects of funerals people found hard.<sup>12</sup> No studies were found which sought to establish what funeral factors a broad range of people might identify as being significant to them. Furthermore, no studies pursued funeral factors from a broadly temporal perspective. Finally, no studies were found which included participants from the general population as opposed to selecting individuals from a specific source – for example, a church congregation, bereavement support group or cancer care centre.

Before attempting to establish whether funeral experiences have an impact on long-term wellbeing, it was first important to understand more confidently what bereaved people themselves identified as the key elements or 'factors' within the funeral. Furthermore, it was felt to be essential that any new research in this area should aim to capture what might be regarded as fairly typical funeral experiences, from a broad range of the population, and where those experiences were set in context: for example, how the death took place, the role taken by the respondent in arranging the funeral, and family circumstances. The study also adopted a slightly wider focus than just the funeral service itself. Adding these elements into analysis meant that it would be possible to arrive at a more nuanced insight into where and how people made and found meaning in funerary practices after death. In

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R.A. (2000) 'The role of ritual in children's bereavement', *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, 42:4, 321-39;  
Chapple, A. & Ziebland, S. (2010) 'Viewing the body after bereavement due to a traumatic death: qualitative study in the UK', *BMJ*, 340, c2032.

<sup>7</sup> Doka, K.J. (1985) 'Expectations of death, participation in funeral arrangements and grief adjustments', *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, 15:2; Gamino et al. (2000) 'Grief adjustment as influenced by funeral participation and occurrence of adverse funeral events', *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, 41:2.

<sup>8</sup> Bolton, C. & Camp, D.J. (1986) 'Funeral rituals and the facilitation of grief work', *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, 17:4, 343-52.

<sup>9</sup> Hughes, P., Turton, P., Hopper, E. & Evans, C. (2002) 'Assessment of guidelines for good practice in psychosocial care of mothers after stillbirth: a cohort study', *The Lancet*.

<sup>10</sup> Kissane, D.W., Bloch, S. & McKenzie, D.P. (1997) 'Family coping bereavement outcomes', *Palliative Medicine*, 11:3, 191-201.

<sup>11</sup> Hunter, J. (2007) 'Bereavement: an incomplete rite of passage', *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, 56:2, 153-73.

<sup>12</sup> Hayslip, (2007) 'Assessing adults' difficulty in coping with funerals', *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, 55:2.

addition, it was felt to be important that people should be allowed to express their experience with very limited pre-judgement on what might be regarded as being important. The research therefore aimed to capture a detailed narrative with open prompts, and which aimed – simply – to help people to remember the funeral they chose to talk about. Once funeral factors have been defined – by the bereaved themselves and not funeral care professionals or academics – it becomes possible to establish what a ‘good’ funeral looks like, and only then can it be feasible to assess the impact of funerals on long-term wellbeing.

## Method

In April 2018, with approval and oversight from a multidisciplinary research committee, people were invited to participate in a qualitative study to establish what factors within the funeral bereaved people identified as being important to them. No formal ethical approval was obtained but an ethical approval process akin to a formal University ethics procedure was closely adhered to and included due regard for formal protocols of recruitment, informed consent, researcher and respondent mental health, and data protection. The research committee provided scrutiny and assurance.

Participants were over 18 years of age, and had attended or arranged a funeral in the UK at any time. Participants ‘opted in’, in response to a flier (Appendix 2) distributed via the Leeds Bereavement Forum, the Good Funeral Guild members, SAIF publications and social media channels of SAIF, ICCM, GFG and Full Circle Funerals. Newspaper articles regarding the study and encouraging participation were published in the *Yorkshire Post*, *Telegraph and Argus*, *Wharfedale Observer*, *Funeral Service Times*, *Brentwood Gazette*, *Dover Express*, *Harlow Star*, the *Billericay and Wickford Gazette*, and the *Surrey Mirror*.

The aim was to attract participants from across the UK since the intention was to understand a broad range of experiences by interviewing people who had been bereaved some time ago and more recently; those people in different circumstances and with different relationships to the bereaved; and to include people in different roles. These were defined as a primary arranger, co-arranger, and those who had only participated in or attended a funeral. People were asked to choose for themselves which funeral they wanted to discuss, and were not guided to select one that they perceived to be either particularly good or bad. There was no intention for the research to offer commentary on differences in experience between the larger corporate funeral directors and those who operate independently; indeed, respondents were not asked this question directly. However, it was evident from their narratives that respondents were mixed in this regard.

Tables in Appendix 1 give a detailed breakdown of the study respondents, which comprised 50 individuals. In a small handful of cases, respondents were directly involved with the funeral industry. Where this was so, analysis has focussed entirely on the account of the funeral they chose to talk about and has not included any commentary that might have carried lobbying intent.

People who were interested in taking part in the study were sent a pack including a participant information sheet and consent form; if they confirmed that they wanted to take part after reading the relevant information, a date and time for an interview was arranged. The interviews were conducted using a topic guide approved by the research committee (Appendix 3).

The research team gave some consideration as to whether participants should be selected to ensure a mix of ethnicity, cultural background and religious affiliation. It was decided not to pursue an ethnically representative sample. As the interviews progressed, it became clear that there was remarkable diversity of experience, and disaggregating that sample further to accommodate ethnic difference would have resulted in group sizes that were too small for meaningful analysis. It is acknowledged, therefore, that this account represents largely 'white' British funerals.

Participants were interviewed by one of the four members of the Full Circle research team in the setting chosen by the participant, which included their home, at the premises of Full Circle Funerals or over the telephone. Having signed the consent form and been given the opportunity to ask any questions, participants were asked to focus on one specific funeral and were asked a series of questions to guide them through a full account of the death, aftermath, funeral service and post-funeral rituals. Participants were also asked to reflect on that funeral experience and to consider more broadly their views on what was important to them and what they thought constituted a good funeral. Interviews each took between c.30 minutes and two hours, and have yielded fifty detailed accounts of funerals which have been located in the context both of the circumstances of the death and an understanding of how families approached the task of deciding how to arrange the funeral service.

All interviews were recorded on an encrypted voice recorder; at transcription all personal data and location were removed. Analysis took place using the entirely anonymized transcriptions, which included basic demographic information on the respondent. All respondents were subsequently identified using a number code, and these numbers are used in the following report.

This research method has yielded remarkably rich data. The funerals in the study are presented as a fair reflection of typical funerals taking place in the UK now and in the recent past. In this report, care has been taken to include the words of respondents as far as possible with a minimum of analytical commentary, and reflects participants' own expertise and experience in deriving meaning from funerals.

## **Defining the funeral**

A funeral is not just whatever takes place within the thirty- or forty-minute service time-slot at the crematorium or chapel, and any associated funeral tea afterwards. Respondents who were asked to describe their funeral experience in many instances talked about ritual activities, interactions and processes that were taking place long before the day of the formal funeral, and these had an impact on the way that respondents judged their funeral service. In measuring degrees of satisfaction and to understand the meaning attached to

funerals, it is necessary to draw much broader boundaries around what might be regarded as funerary practice and to deconstruct its constituent elements. Indeed – to simplify matters – this report defines a funeral as all activities taking place from the point immediately after death up to and including decisions on the erection of any grave marker or the disposal of cremated remains, but not extending to longer-term commemorative practices. As will be seen, it is important to include the making of funerary wishes within this time-frame. Although not strictly speaking a funerary practice, making wishes is a vital element of the funerary process. The term ‘funeral service’ is used to refer to the formal ceremony that includes committal of the body of the person who had died.

### **‘Boundaries’ to funerary activity**

In this report, the funeral follows an extended timeline, with the following key events and processes. These events and processes merge into each other, and do not always follow the same trajectory although in the study every funeral contained each of these elements.

#### *Discussion of funeral wishes*

This can take place at any point in an individual’s life, and is often provoked by a death; where funeral wishes have not been articulated, the absence of knowledge can itself frame the funeral.

#### *The death itself*

Most often now taking place in the hospital, but very often with family and friends in attendance: the ‘function’ of the funeral may well include consolation and compensation if the death is regarded in some way problematic.

#### *The first, and subsequent, meetings with the funeral director*

This meeting defines key elements of the funeral, and is essential in framing choices and opportunities around what will take place before, during and after the funeral service.

#### *Family decision-making*

The funeral will generally include the family coming together to decide how to proceed, and will reflect the family dynamic; pre-existing problematic relations within the family can create tensions that funerals may well exacerbate.

#### *Emotional labour: preparing for the funeral*

Involvement in the funeral, as arranger, co-arranger, participant or even attender generally includes some activities which become ritualised: from writing the eulogy, to choosing the music, and even to deciding what to wear.

#### *Caring for the body*

From the point of death, the body is usually taken to the funeral home and – in some instances – to the family home; families sought to establish the degree of contact with the body that they found most consoling.

### *The funeral service*

The day of the funeral and events leading up to the funeral service as an 'event', including the tangible and material (cars, coffin, flowers) and non-material, performative elements (eulogy, music, ritual action/performance) which aimed to set a tone; the point of committal; and any social gathering afterwards.

### *Final deposition*

The burial and deciding on a headstone or other grave decoration or, where there has been a cremation, the final deposition of the ashes or a settled decision as to deposition. This study does not include continued commemorative acts but recognises their potential significance.

Respondents discussed all these elements, and their accounts indicate that the funeral service was not always necessarily the most meaningful part of the funeral. For example, one respondent had held his father's hand as he died, and that remained the most important thing. He supported his step-mother through the decision-making process around the funeral service, but regarded this as a largely functional activity that had to be gone through to satisfy the wider group of family and friends. He was not present when the family released his father's ashes into the sea: *'I didn't actively choose not to go, but it wasn't like a massive deal either'* [FC35]. It becomes evident, therefore, that the funeral service has to be set in a wider context in order to gauge its meaning and significance.

### **Who is involved**

The process of deconstructing a funeral also requires an understanding of the multiple 'actors' who travel different but obviously associated timelines through the course of events following a death. These actors include: the person who died; the person arranging the funeral alone or with co-arrangers, and other close family and/or friends; hospital and mortuary staff; police and coroners (depending on the circumstances of the death); funeral directors; celebrants; and staff at cemeteries or crematoria. All these actors will be centre-stage at some point, but no-one individual fully 'controls' the funeral. Performances also require an audience, and in the funeral the audience includes those people attending the funeral, who may not necessarily be close to the person who died; and – crucially – the person who died themselves, who is believed to be 'looking on' as the funeral service progresses.

### **Funerals in the study**

The majority of funerals were cremations (38), and in all cases these took place in a local municipal crematorium. In 27 of these cases, the funeral comprised a cremation and a service at the crematorium chapel; of the remaining eleven, three involved a Roman Catholic mass before the cremation service, and seven included a Church of England funeral service before the cremation service. In all but one instance where there was a separate religious service, an additional simple service took place at the crematorium itself before the cremation. One further instance included a cremation and service and interment at a green burial site. Eight funerals were burials, and included a mixture of churchyard (3)

and municipal cemetery interments (5). Four funerals involved a natural burial ground in some way, and four funerals were more complex events including a service with a committal and a separate memorial service. Further details will be given through the course of the report.

It is important to note that the majority of respondents had been satisfied with the funeral they were discussing.

## **Structure of the report**

The report includes seven chapters. Chapter two reflects on the importance attached to knowledge of the funeral wishes of the person who has died. Chapters three and four consider in detail decision-making around the funeral, and the role of the funeral director. Chapter five considers the contact that respondents had with the body of the person who had died, from the moment of death through to the point of committal. The funeral service is reviewed in detail in chapter six. Chapter seven considers the 'final goodbye', and actions taken to establish the grave with an appropriate marker and decisions as to the dispersal or retention of cremated remains.

## **Conclusion**

As will be seen in the following discussion, this report will not assign weight or significance to any single particular element as being crucially important. Respondents themselves saw significance and derived meaning from different elements of the 'extended' funeral described above. However, analysis of the interviews indicates that there were five factors that had a decisive impact on whether the funeral achieved its purpose, however defined, for the people arranging or attending the funeral and the following chapters will discuss these factors in turn. Getting a funeral 'wrong' generally meant that one of these factors was somehow compromised or lacking.



## 2. Were the person's wishes known?

Where family or – in some cases, friends – had responsibility for arranging a funeral, the first guiding principle was invariably whether the person who had died had left any last wishes regarding their funeral preferences. The ability of the family to follow the wishes of the person who had died made a substantial impact on respondents' degree of satisfaction with the funeral, even if only a minor preference or wish had been expressed. However, it was evident that some of the people who had died were very resistant to leaving wishes, and in other circumstances the manner of the death meant there was simply no time.

### Leaving wishes

In just over half the funerals, respondents had left some indication of what they wanted for their funeral. Indeed, some of the people who had died expressed very clear wishes some time prior to their death. One respondent, talking about her great aunt, mentioned that her faith had guided her choices: *'So she'd always been sort of straight talking about what she wanted. So, we knew. We knew hymns, we knew the readings'* [FC52]. Another respondent, discussing her mother's funeral, said that her mother had also been guided by her faith and wanted a Roman Catholic mass. She chose some hymns in advance, *'So I was able to meet what I knew were her wishes. I think it was all as she would have wanted, and we had a very nice day'* [FC10]. Another respondent commented, *'It's very much par for the course within all our families is that you make your wishes known [...] You can't pussyfoot around, you have to talk about funerals whether you like it or not. I've had the conversation with my mother-in-law, who's go next year. So I know exactly what she wants'* [FC04].

In some instances, respondents talked about their relatives who had declined in health over a long period, were lucid through that time and had a willingness to be involved in discussions. The funeral of a woman who had died from cancer in her 30s had been planned by her in detail. She had wanted a natural burial, and she had written down everything she wanted in a bullet-point list. For the respondent, *'That felt kind of...tough but good. I felt there was something I could do that was practical, because we could start the ball rolling, if you like, and make sure we started getting things in place. It was lovely actually, because we could discuss it with her'* [FC34].

Other people had been prompted into talking about their choices. For example, discussion of funeral wishes more generally was often provoked by a death in the family. Adult children mentioned that when one of their parents died, the other often then expressed wishes for their own funeral. After her grandmother had died, one respondent had conversations with her grandfather: *"What do we do with you, granddad, when you go?" And he just said "Throw us at mud heap"'. She knew he wanted to be cremated as his wife had been, but he did not want a fuss: "Don't be booking no clubs or owt like that to drink beer", he says, "Just keep it...", so we did, kept it quiet, we kept it low-key, we did it at the house. A couple of friends of mine [...] asked if there was anything they could do. I said, "well, if you could sort out a buffet at my granddad's while we're at the funeral that would be...So*

*they did'* [FC29]. Similarly, the death of her mother meant that one respondent started a conversation with her father about what he wanted, and in fact, *'we all of us spoke in general about what we would like'* [FC33].

One respondent had just happened to attend a funeral planning event which took place six months before her mother died suddenly during an operation. The event: *'was a bit of an eye-opener to me, because I saw people painting cardboard coffins and doing things I'd never heard of...'* She told her mother about it – she was fit and well at the time – and she said *'When I die I'd like to be cremated, can you paint my coffin in a beach theme and she told me a piece of music she wanted... That was really helpful'* [FC02]. Another respondent had also explained funeral plans to her grandparents, and again this provoked a discussion as to preferences.

A small handful of respondents discussed funerals where their relative had been highly averse to talking about the matter, and had left no instructions at all. One respondent had a hand in arranging the funeral of her grandfather, who had never expressed any advance wishes, *'and that was a massive problem for us, yeah [...] [He] completely like stuck his head in the ground kind of thing [...] I'd broached the subject with him because I used to look after him, so I used to go and say jovially, "what are we gonna do for you?" And all this kind of thing. And he just said, "When I'm dead, I'm dead", and that's all we have got'* [FC17]. For another respondent, discussing funeral arrangements would have been a signal of defeat: his father died from cancer. The respondent said, *'I think if you're trying to stay alive as long as possible, discussing funeral plans is probably not the, you know, there's a lot of evidence around cancer that those who treat it as a death sentence are usually right, and those who think they're gonna beat it, are usually right'* [FC35].

## **The absence of wishes**

Often, the circumstances of the death also meant that it was not possible for wishes to become known. This was the case where deaths were sudden, or the person had become incapacitated. One woman talked about the funeral of her grandmother, who had lived with dementia for a long time. This on its own was regarded as being difficult to deal with, and it was not possible ever to broach the subject of funeral wishes: *'To be honest, I would have loved to have a bit more of a chat with her when she was alive about it really, which would have made all the difference'* [FC22].

It was evident that not leaving wishes was problematic for families and friends. One woman had a close friend who died following surgery in her 30s. The woman had been too young to have left any advance wishes: *'She'd not said "I would like this" because she was not so poorly so it wasn't even on her radar'*. The respondent commented:

*'I often talk to my family and I will say, "We should talk about whether you want burying, or whether they want cremating", and all you get is "Why do you want to talk about that?" It's just something that's a way off and you just don't talk about that or just don't say those words because you don't want to think about it...and you think you*

*know somebody and when you're dealing with all the emotions, you start second-guessing yourself and I think it's really hard' [FC26].*

Another respondent had been happy with the funeral she had arranged for her father, then commented *'If I could have done things differently I would have wanted to have conversations with dad about what he wanted [...] That would have made it better for me because I would have known that I was doing what he wanted' [FCo8].*

Finally, one respondent discussed the funeral of her mother, who had collapsed and died very suddenly in her 60s. Her parents had bought funeral plans for each other as a wedding anniversary gift – this was a measure that had been largely her father's decision. The couple had sat at a table and over two days had filled out all their wishes for the funeral, and put them in an envelope. However, when the time came, they found that the mother's sheets of paper were blank. The funeral was, for the respondent, tainted substantially by her father then making arrangements for a religious service that she knew her mother would not have wanted [FC14].

### How much detail?

It was not necessary for the funeral wishes to be very detailed for the respondents to derive some satisfaction from fulfilling them. Indeed, sometimes, instructions could be very minimal. One respondent had arranged the funeral of her mother-in-law: *'She was a very, very practical, down-to-earth woman and her only comment was "oh for heaven's sake, don't spend it on that, go have a drink and just shove me in a hole" that was about it' [FCo3].* Sometimes, the wishes asked for a particular tone, but without giving any specific details.

One respondent, talking about the funeral of her father, mentioned that neither of them was religious, and they had found it difficult to talk about the funeral. *'All he said was, 'I've lived a long time, I don't want to be just thrown away'. This was the principle that drove how she arranged the funeral. 'He wasn't a particularly religious man and we just wanted it to be as low key but, kind of, who he was really. We didn't want, need a big pomp and ceremony fancy thing' [FCo8].* Similarly, one woman who had made arrangements for her father had discussed those with him in the months before his death from cancer. He was clear that he did not want a fuss: *'He said "you don't spend a lot of money on the funeral. Don't go over the top"'. In fact, he made a lot of suggestions as to economies, and the family arranged much of the funeral to get the cheapest deal, to reflect his wishes [FC20].* Spirituality played a role in defining arrangements: respondents in some instances mentioned the strong wishes for a religious service, but also equally strong wishes for the service not to be religious. One respondent said that her mother had been very upset by the vicar disregarding her husband's and her wish *'to stay away from the subject of religion'*, and said that when her time came,

*" She said, "I don't want anything", she said. "I don't want any religion, I don't want anybody blessing the coffin, and goodness knows what", she said, "because it's not what I want. It's not what I believe". So then she said, "I just want cremated. I don't*

*want to go with people remembering me". That's it. She made no other stipulations, only that it should be non-religious' [FC49].*

The funeral wishes might not necessarily be focussed on the funeral service itself. It could sometimes be the case that the manner of final committal was the important choice. One man, in discussing his father's funeral, said:

*'They played Beatles songs because he was a massive Beatles fan [...] but I very much doubt he specifically said "then, I want this to happen. And I want this", you know. I know, emphatically, that from my dad's point of view, he would have been happy to do without any funeral or, you know what I mean? [...] It didn't really matter to him. He did have advance wishes on his ashes, part of which were scattered at sea: that was something that they already knew in advance, already discussed. He'd always, like, loved the sea and stuff' [FC35].*

## Meeting wishes

Respondents were clearly happier when they had wishes to work with. One woman, helping her father make arrangements for the death of his wife (and her mother), said that they had found a piece of paper after her death, *'which went through what she wanted. So, that's what we were, then, based things on. [...] It was definitely helpful, it stopped a lot of second-guessing' [FC53].* Similarly, another woman arranging the funeral of her mother-in-law commented *'We were helped by mum having already made the decisions for herself' [FC10].* The respondents who were responsible for funeral arrangements and who had wishes to work with dealt with the wishes very seriously, and prioritised them, however slight.

The respondents who had nothing to work with and no direction for their preparations, clearly felt at a loss. One woman had found her father very elusive about funeral arrangements and his wife and family had tried to discuss them with him in the months before his death:

*'They'd never really discussed it at all. [...] Which was challenging [...] because even though you're dead, you want to do good by them and you want to do the funeral you think they'd like, which always sounds a bit weird. And we didn't really know what he liked, so it was a bit of a... [...] He wasn't really...we never had a conversation and he never really brought it up' [FC44].*

The lack of information meant that respondents found themselves 'second guessing': a respondent whose mother had not been lucid in the weeks before her death, said that the funeral *'had to be about giving her the best send-off we could in terms of making choices we think she would've liked but also weren't abhorrent to us' [FC12].* Second-guessing then could lead to family disagreements about what the person who died would have wanted, and was more likely to lead to dissatisfaction, that the funeral had not adequately represented the person who had died. A daughter, discussing the funeral of her father, said that he had avoided talking about his funeral: *'He used to say things like, "I don't care what happens, just put me in a bin bag and put me out for the bin men", or "stick me in a box and chuck me in the*

sea". But he never actually expressed any positive wishes.' This meant that when it came to the event, the lack of uncertainty created anxiety:

*'I think the biggest worry and the biggest concern for everyone, that he hadn't actually made it clear what he wanted. So you're trying to plan the last thing you do for someone without any clue of how to do it or what their wishes are. You're picking what you think is their favourite song, you're picking all of those things, but you're doing it without their wishes, you're just hoping you're making the best choices. I think that was the hardest, not to have any clues to go on'* [FC51].

There were two instances where the respondents felt that the funeral had gone seriously awry because there had been no final wishes. In both instances, the respondent talked about funeral arrangements that had fallen to a family member who had simply not understood what the person who had died would have wanted. The woman who had died leaving blank pages in her funeral plan had been militantly anti-religious, but the daughter found that her father simply followed the lead of the funeral director in making arrangements for what became a high Anglican Church service. The respondent pictured the conversation between her father and the female funeral director:

*'So dad, you know if she [ie the funeral director] said about flowers, and dad would have presumably said "oh yeah, we'll have whatever" and I'd have gone "whoa, no, you know what mum said about flowers at funerals", and then "what hymns do you want" my dad would have said "what are the standards?" we might have said "you know she didn't want singing, she hated singing, she was against all that stuff" '* [FC14].

Similarly, the daughter who had found her dad's head 'stuck in the ground' when it came to making arrangements was forced to concede funeral arrangements to an older sibling, who then simply replayed the grand funeral he had arranged for his own daughter who had died very young. The ceremony had not been at all fitting for a man the respondent knew to be modest and not at all showy [FC17].

Finally, there were circumstances in which the wishes that were expressed did not necessarily marry with what the family really wanted to do. One respondent who had attended the funeral of a close friend, who had died in her thirties, said that the parents had not really wanted to arrange an elaborate funeral, but felt this is what their daughter would have wanted:

*'It was quite a big funeral, they had to give in to a few things. I think they really quite happily could have had about five people there and had it done, but I think they were in control and understood what they had to do for her as well and what she'd have wanted and it wasn't always what you want. They'd have come home and had a cup of tea and that'd been it, they wouldn't have put anything on afterwards, they just knew they had to do that for other people and it was probably what she wanted done'* [FC26].

## Conclusion

For all respondents, knowledge of funeral wishes provided an anchor or a foundation to build on, in making plans for the funeral service or later burial or ashes dispersal. Where respondents felt that mistakes were made, and particular actions were regrettable, it often reflected a lack of guidance on funeral wishes which led to second-guessing, anxiety and arguments between family members. Conversely, knowing that they had clearly met the wishes of the person who had died was a great source of consolation for the people making arrangements and added substantially to their satisfaction with the funeral.

### 3. Was the decision-making process inclusive?

A second important element reflected on how decisions came to be made about the funeral. Little attention has been paid to the family dynamics underpinning the ways in which funerals are organised, and it was evident that the tenor of family relationships played a substantial part in whether and how far the funeral was regarded as being meaningful or satisfactory.

#### Families making decisions

The task of the funeral most often falls to individuals in their forties or fifties, attending to the funeral of their parents or grandparents. In a small handful of cases in this study, parents talked about arrangements they had made for their children. Where a spouse died in extreme old age, adult children often stepped in to support their remaining parent. One man in his nineties took full responsibility for his wife's funeral arrangements, but this was unusual [FC38].

The respondents were asked about who was involved in decision-making when it came to the funeral, and this question provoked sometimes extended description of the family tree. Families are remarkably complicated, and in this study included a full range of close, small nuclear families; extended, multi-generational but still close 'tribes' of great-grandparents, grandparents, parents and children; re-constituted families including step-siblings; families fractured by tensions and disagreement and personal animosities; one isolated couple, who had very little family contact; and – in one case – a funeral arranged by a group of friends who stepped in to support their friend's very frail mother.

These family narratives were essential to an understanding of who was involved in the decision-making, and why. Sometimes this task fell to the individual regarded – sometimes without this being clearly articulated – as the family 'leader', who generally made the big decisions and who may already have experience of arranging a funeral. For example, one respondent talked about the funeral of her Nan, which her mother had mostly arranged since she was 'a practical person': her auntie – her mum's sister – was simply 'not that kind of a person, she's not very good at it' [FC13]. Another respondent talked about her mother arranging her husband's – the respondent's father's – funeral. The respondent's sister was there, but would not be drawn into decision-making: "Do you want to look at the coffin brochure", "Oh no, I'm too upset", that malarkey. So she just sat there really, she didn't contribute a lot, but then that's her' [FC42]. Where death happened to people in old age, families had often been involved jointly in complex decision-making around care. Funeral responsibilities generally followed where care responsibilities had been accepted, although this could lead to tensions if it was felt that the care burden had not been shared equally.

Equally, it was permissible for some individuals to abrogate responsibility if their own personal circumstances made it difficult. Having a young family, for example, was accepted as a reason why some people might not take responsibility, or if that individual had recently

dealt with another funeral, or was generally regarded as being 'emotionally' not up to the task. Much of this kind of decision making appeared unspoken and taken largely as read and happened in the way that families generally understand their own relatives' strengths and capabilities.

### Sensitivity in making arrangements

Funerals are a remarkably public display of family dynamics and, like weddings, constitute one of the circumstances in which families present themselves in the way they would like to be seen. The very public nature of the funeral and its degree of emotional importance could provoke highly sensitive and thoughtful behaviour: some families worked together to ensure that decision-making was as inclusive as possible. One respondent was one of a large number of siblings whose mother had died: *accommodating everyone was really important*, and they decided to take time to ensure that everyone could contribute [FC19]. Another respondent set up a shared message system on their phones so that all the 'core' family members could be immediately agree or question the decisions that were being taken, *'so we could all comment, so it was a kind of running conversation'* [FC10]. This kind of inclusive approach meant that people had to make compromises. One respondent was very deliberately flexible and set aside her own preferences to protect family unity: *'But throughout the whole thing, my central message was none of this is worth falling out over. It really isn't. [...] So I was ready to back off with anything at any stage. [...] Because at the end of the day it doesn't matter'* [FC53].

In other circumstances, individuals clearly took the opportunity to behave badly, to be deliberately insensitive and to exacerbate rifts and tensions that were already in evidence. One respondent said that her brother had decided not to be involved in their mother's funeral arrangements:

*'I was very, very upset with him. And eventually I got a letter, this was a long time after, weeks after, telling me he had nothing but contempt for all those formalities. That as far as he was concerned, it was much healthier to go out and have a good howl on a hill. And you know, so all I could answer was "Well, I hope you found a good hill to howl on". But I doubt that he did'* [FC48].

Another respondent – a man in his thirties – talked about arranging his grandmother's funeral. He had a problematic relationship with his father, who had deliberately chosen not to be involved in decision-making and this added to the respondent's anxieties. He had not arranged a funeral before, and he knew his father would be difficult:

*'I knew he would have quite specific views on certain elements of the funeral but I couldn't really guess what they were and I think that sometimes he doesn't like to say [...] and then we were in this quite intense period of having to be in contact every day which in some ways doesn't really work for either of us if I'm being terribly honest'* [FC21].



Respondents who talked about funerals which they found difficult were often discussing funerals that were reflective of problematic family dynamics, where they themselves had been excluded from arrangements in a deeply insensitive way. One woman talked about the death of her partner. They had lived together for over ten years but never been married, and when he died suddenly her partner's brother took over all the funeral arrangements and left her with little say in what happened during the funeral service. Her partner had left no final wishes, and in her view few of the decisions his brother took were appropriate: there was *'so much wrong about that day'* which became *'just something I had to go through'*. She has not spoken to the brother since that time [FC11]. Another respondent talked about the funeral of her son, who committed suicide. She had split from his father – who she regarded as being aggressively emotionally manipulative – in a very acrimonious divorce, and he had remarried. Her ex-husband took responsibility for the funeral since he was in a better position, financially, to bear the cost. The funeral arrangements were actually made by her ex-husband's new wife, and she paid no attention to the mother's preferences. She had wanted her son to have a natural burial, *'as far as possible, or as natural as, you know, the powers that be will allow me to have, and yet I wasn't listened to. I didn't expect them to actually agree with but I, I hoped they might take some essence of that on board, but they didn't'* [FC25].

In other instances, respondents discussed family rifts that were temporarily set aside: there was a 'standoff' for the sake of the funeral, but then hostilities resumed. A woman discussing the funeral of her baby mentioned that her ex-husband had *'removed himself'* from making any funeral arrangements although he did participate in the service [FC01]. Another woman was one of three sisters who had fallen out over care arrangements for her mother and were barely talking to each other at the time of her death. The respondent was wry about how fraught the funeral arrangements became, as she mentioned her mother's wishes: *'The only thing she did say were "Don't be arguing at me funeral" [laughter]. So we promised her we wouldn't so we didn't, so there were no arguments on the day [laughter]'* [FC09, spoken emphasis].

## Conclusion

It appears trite to focus on the ways in which families and friends made decisions about funerals, but decision-making reflected the hierarchy of the family unit. The funeral was understood – in a largely unspoken way – as way of acknowledging and strengthening the family unit or as a means to underline or exacerbate family rifts. Exclusion from decision-making could be deliberate and punitive, and many of the respondents who talked about funerals they had been unhappy about were discussing funerals from which they felt excluded by their own family members.

## 4. Was the funeral director sufficiently responsive?

Professionals played a pivotal role in decisions taken around the funeral. Chapter six will discuss the funeral service officiant in more detail. Here, the principal focus is the funeral director. Respondents' needs were twofold: factual information on the legal formalities and 'logistics' following a death; and suggestions and guidance around what might take place before, during and after the funeral service. Clearly a very delicate balance was being arrived at by funeral directors, in establishing a framework for decision making that was sufficiently supportive without necessarily being overwhelmingly directive, and many respondents brought a great deal of their own personal experience to the decision-making process. Respondents were very happy with the funeral director they had chosen. Satisfaction was generally expressed around how far the funeral director struck the right manner, listened to, and facilitated their wishes and needs around the funeral.

### Funeral experience

Research on funerals rarely acknowledges that people can be very experienced in making funeral arrangements and quite confident about the processes involved. Consequently this study found that, for many respondents, their own experience played a substantive role in decision-making around the funeral they were discussing. For the majority of respondents, the funeral under discussion was not the first funeral they had attended or indeed the first one they had arranged. Twenty-eight of the respondents who had role in arranging or co-arranging the funeral they talked about in the interview had had experience in arranging funerals before. One respondent said, *'We're kind of old hat with funerals.'* She and her husband had arranged the funerals of three of their parents, and also grandparents [FC37]. Another respondent commented in a similar way. She had attended the funeral of a family friend just three months before the funeral she arranged herself, and had in the past arranged both her parents' funerals. She felt confident about arranging her father-in-law's funeral: *'I knew exactly what to do and I knew what was required and who to speak to and what the order of things was'* [FC44]. A daughter who was arranging the funeral of her father said that her knowledge had accrued over time: her mother had died two years previously, as had her father-in-law: *'I've sort of attended four in the past five or six years and you learn something each time'* [FC33].

Respondents certainly learned from funerals that had not been positive. A respondent who talked about arranging her father's funeral said that the family had learned from their past inexperience and on this occasion worked more closely with the celebrant than the funeral director: *'We all had memories of my mum's funeral which wasn't very personalised and we didn't really know how to handle ourselves, we were in shock and it was the first family funeral that we'd attended. This time after sixteen years thinking about it, we all wanted it to be different. So we had lots of opportunity, only with working with [the priest]'* [FC31]. Another family also decided to be more proactive. When their father had died ten years before, the respondent's younger sister had taken over arrangements because the respondent had a younger child at the time. Her father's funeral went badly, and they had been very unhappy with the funeral director and so when they arranged their mother's: *'We knew we were only*

*going to ask for the very minimal bits that they have to do because it had gone so outrageously wrong with my dad's where we let them do everything. It was awful. And so you know, we'd already decided we'd manage the event ourselves' [FC48].*

Funeral 'novices' were in the minority in this study. Only seven of the people who were arranging or co-arranging funerals had only attended or participated in funerals before. Just three of the respondents were arranging funerals, and this was their first experience: they had never before even attended a funeral. It is evident, then, that respondents arrived at the funeral director with very different needs with regard to information and guidance.

## Deciding on the funeral director

Respondents were not asked the name of the firm they used or whether it was independent or affiliated with a larger business; the purpose of this report is not to make an industry judgement, but rather here to understand how respondents viewed their personal relationship with the funeral director they chose. The majority of respondents (30) came to the funeral director because they already knew and had used the firm before, knew the funeral director or were following a personal or professional recommendation. As one respondent commented, *'It wouldn't have made sense to go to a firm where I didn't know the people'* [FC10]. One respondent said that when her mother died, her father immediately said, *'We'll ring [first name]'* – this was the funeral director who had arranged her grandmother's funeral and who her mother had also wanted [FC12]. Another respondent who had arranged the funeral of her husband said she had asked her friend who recommended a funeral director close to where she lived, *'she said "Oh we've always used them, they're fantastic". So I said, "Well, fine, we'll do that". Then she was true to her word, they were absolutely fantastic'* [FC40].

Many of the interviews were taking place in smaller towns rather than larger cities, and there was often a sense in which people were using firms that were well-known locally and where indeed it might have been the case that the family had used the same funeral director on more than one occasion. Occasionally, people felt they had little choice but to use whoever was most local: *'I just went along with the same funeral director that had been used for the family for generations, so I didn't look around, I didn't really think there was any choice in the matter'* [FC36]. There were also instances of people steering away from particular funeral directors they had had bad experiences with, or who had a poor local reputation.

For many people, the most important consideration – more important than price – was arriving at a funeral director who was 'right' in terms of manner and approach:

*'My sister and I both went to a funeral director in [PLACE] and it was, it was just as you'd imagine a funeral directors' and everyone was wearing black and it felt like we were being, like, "you need to have a coffin like this, you need to have this, you need to have this." So, when we looked up [FIRM] in [PLACE] they looked like they had a very open attitude and that's why we picked them and the fact that they were women, I*

*don't know, there was something quite nice about that compared to the other one that we'd gone to' [FC02].*

Respondents clearly judged the funeral directors as people before they judged them as professionals, and were quick to make comment where they felt that personal skills were either good or lacking.

## The importance of first impressions

Some initial meetings went badly from the very outset. One respondent had decided not to use a 'chain', since her mother's funeral had been excessively expensive in her view. She had opted instead for a small independent business but was unhappy at their first meeting:

*'He was personable enough but he wasn't very professional in some respects. He had a television on his desk and he was watching a game show when we went in and eating biscuits and there was a packet of Rich Tea biscuits on his desk and crumbs everywhere and this television was just frozen, so he hadn't turned it off or anything' [FC31].*

Another respondent, visited at home, also clearly did not feel that she had connected with the funeral director:

*'He was in his 40s, and he was immaculately dressed. He did, he looked me up and down. I thought that even though I was not totally myself, I knew that wasn't the right thing to do. I just let him in and then he started telling me things. I just remember going through the motions. I felt as it was very similar to going to the supermarket, doing your shopping, putting it on the conveyor belt, and coming off the end' [FC11].*

Where there was criticism, it tended to rest on the feeling that the initial conversation was formulaic: *'When they came to see us, I think my middle sister did say this, that it all felt very scripted, and it was. When I look back, it was all very scripted. "Good afternoon, Mrs [X]. I'm terribly sorry for your loss". That was the opening line. Then the conversation as well, we didn't break off that line of questioning. There was nothing personal about it whatsoever.'* [FC15]

Respondents were happiest when the funeral director quickly arrived at the right manner, but there was not one single 'right' manner: different families wanted different things. One respondent, an elderly man, had specifically chosen a funeral director who he had already seen at work, and who he considered to be *'sympathetic and dignified'* [FC38]. In contrast, a daughter, who co-arranged the funeral of her father with her mother appreciated her funeral director's relaxed approach: *'He spent a couple of hours with us, just chatting about what sort of man my dad was, what he wanted, what my mum wanted, any concerns we might have.'* And the next time they met was on the day of the funeral. They had *'a bit of banter'*, joking about selling her father's new false teeth on ebay [FC08].

Achieving the first right impression required even more skill when the funeral director was accommodating some difficult familial dynamics. This made it difficult to arrive at a manner that would satisfy very different responses amongst family members to the death.

One respondent said that his parents had been married twenty years, and then drifted apart; on the death of his father, the respondent made joint arrangements with his father's new partner. His step-mother and father had been together for over ten years, and the respondent knew that her wishes had to be accommodated although he himself did not regard the funeral service as particularly important. He became impatient with the funeral director's deferential tone, which was clearly aimed at the respondent's step-mother:

*'They were nice. They were very kind of, the guy was, I think he's now the son of the chap who started it, or whatever. Fairly young guy but he was obviously well versed. You know, he was very sombre. But I presume that's the done thing, so as not to, almost, offend [...] So he was almost like he was acting like he was 60, but he might have been, you know, in his 30s. [...] and I was thinking, "Mate, you can just ask the questions". [...] And I'm sure, they probably have a lot of [...] where it maybe takes you three or four attempts because every time you start talking about a certain thing, people break down or whatever. [...] But we weren't like that. So, we were a bit, let's wrap it through, mate, you know. Flowers, "Red", cool. Next' [FC035].*

## The need for information

The fact that respondents differed in their degree of funeral experience mediated the amount of factual, 'logistical' information the respondents wanted and expected from the funeral director. Familiarity with the legal requirements was variable:

*'The difficulty with funerals is to know what to do immediately after the death, because of course people don't tend to deal with this and there is also read tape and we have to get it registered within a few days and all the malarkey so that's what adds to the stress, not grieving so much, of course you're grieving, but all the red tape' [FC10].*

Where the death happened suddenly – as was the case here – coroner involvement added substantially to the bureaucratic burden. This respondent had been given lots of information including *'various pamphlets including what to do when someone dies. That was a helpful bit of information. I had a big file and that was at the front of it'* [FC10]. Information packs were generally welcome, and were used.

Respondents were asked about their first meeting with the funeral director, and much of the narrative they recounted dwelt on how far the funeral director was responsive to their needs for information and direction and tailored their services accordingly. In terms of information, respondents who were arranging funerals had to absorb a great deal of bureaucratic, 'procedural' information very rapidly. A respondent whose child had died very soon after the birth and where the coroner was involved said that there was *'so much information flung at us'* [FC01] they found it hard to understand what needed to be decided immediately and what could be left until later.

Where a funeral plan was in place, having some of the more immediate decisions – as to the funeral director, and burial/cremation options – was something of a relief. One respondent,

who had arranged a number of funerals, commented: *'I don't think people realise what's involved and it's best to have things in place, especially for the people left behind'* [FC33]. Where it was possible to have advance planning, it was thought to be a good idea to start getting to grips with the legalities. It was rare that funeral directors did not have all the right information immediately to hand. A woman who was co-arranging her mother's funeral with her father found that the funeral director was less knowledgeable than she had anticipated. Her father had asked about how to register the death, and whether there was any sort of checklist of things he needed to do, *'And it was just like, "Nope, good idea though. That's one we'll think about"'*. So she went online and found a checklist almost straight away. *'But if it had been me, I wouldn't have thought to ask them anyway, because I wouldn't have seen that as their role. But that was something Dad was obviously seeking help for'* [FC53]. Thus, even within families, information needs could differ substantially.

## Guidance on the funeral service

Leaving the legalities to one side, many respondents mentioned that funeral directors tended to have a 'tick box' approach to the actions that needed to be taken and decisions that had to be made about the funeral service itself. Some respondents regarded that as being efficient and helpful, and felt that they were in the hands of experts who would guide them accordingly. A respondent attending the funeral of her grandmother said that there seemed to be a huge amount to do: *'Sometimes, it feels, I have to think it could be a bit like if you take your car in, and you're not a mechanic, and therefore you're kind of led by people who know what they're talking about.'* She said it would be easy to think that families were being 'ripped off', but that was the same in any case where reliance is being placed in an expert, dealing with something that happens only rarely. *'You have to sort of trust them, and you hope that they're giving you a fair deal'* [FC22].

Generally, the funeral director gauged the tone of the exchange correctly and very quickly picked up how the family wanted to deal with the funeral. One respondent had supported her mother, who was making arrangements for her husband. The funeral director *'talked through the music, and flowers, and all the different...what was going to happen, you know, the type of coffin and everything. And he made it very easy. And he also gave us a hefty discount which was appreciated, and it was all very easy. So that's kind of it. It wasn't difficult, or traumatic, or sad.'* As he talked through the options, her Mum just said *"Just keep it cheap". You know, very simple. And then he said, "And flowers, do you want flowers?" I think this is what he said. And Mum said, "Yes, but we're only having one family bouquet, or whatever, and the rest we want money contributions to [charity].'* From that point the funeral director *'made a choice knowing exactly what one wanted, you know? He would do exactly what you said without having to bother her with further choices'* [FD23].

In other instances, respondents mentioned funeral directors who had expanded out the kinds of decisions that could be taken, and forwarded options that simply had not been considered. In all cases these included options for further personalisation. A respondent co-arranging the funeral of her father-in-law described her meeting with the funeral director, who had *'a printed sheet, it was like a thicker card, very nicely done with all gold around the edges and everything, but it was basically a coffin menu.'* The funeral director was good at



making suggestions and offering up ideas: *'They didn't push their agenda or anything, but they allowed us to consider.'* The funeral director suggested that the family might prefer a humanist funeral, and the family was happy with that suggestion [FC51].

That having been said, it should be stressed that some respondents did not want their funeral director to be anything more than functionally effective, and there could be relief at the presentation of a limited range of choices. There were some remarkably brisk transactions, which respondents were still very happy about: *'They spoke to us verbally in a nice little featured area, a nice little room, and I think they did give us a piece of paper at the end that we signed.[...] But it was mainly verbal, it was questions and answers and if there was anything we think we needed, it was very well done'* [FC33].

### Space and time to make decisions

The respondents' accounts indicated that families wanted some agency in decision-making, but there was remarkable variation in exactly how much agency was regarded as the right amount. At one extreme were families who placed very little reliance on the funeral director, and who made much of the arrangements themselves: *'So the funeral director didn't have a great deal of involvement. It was almost as though he was the transportation and storage party, that's all he really did. He just picked up my dad's body and stored it'* [FC31]. At the other extreme were families who felt completely overwhelmed by all the decisions that needed to be made: *'you literally get a week, or two weeks, and it's God, it's just astounding to make all these decisions that are so final for somebody in a space of such a short time'* [FC39]. A vicar, who discussed the recent funeral of an elderly parishioner talked about her husband: *'just making simple decisions about what type of coffin, where it should take place, things like that, they were decisions which seemed insurmountable at one point for him'* [CF41]. One mother, following the death of her young son from cancer, said *'We did the important decisions, I think, but if there was a decision that could be outsourced, we outsourced it. Absolutely nothing that I wanted to arrange, so if it could be dealt with by somebody else, that was what happened'* [FC37].

However, most people generally wanted to have a leading role in making the decisions that would personalise the funeral. The period between the death and the funeral was extremely important: this was time in which it was possible to dwell on the person who had died and address the task of creating a funeral that was regarded as appropriately personal. Accepting agency around decision-making was part of the way that respondents could gift something to the person who had died – to 'do something for them'. As will be seen in chapter 6, the act of dressing the funeral with flowers, photographs and orders of service, of deciding music and readings, and of writing the eulogy were the three main sets of activities where making the right choices indicated a very personal and accurate knowledge of the bereaved and a 'gift' to them of something they would have enjoyed. Time was needed for this kind of emotional labour.

## Excessive direction

Respondents were clearly most unhappy with funeral directors who had not understood where there might be a need for information, and/or had been excessively directive and inflexible with regard to the offered choices. The fact that the funeral director had a 'tick list' meant that it could be difficult to include things not on the list. One respondent thought that she was led by the funeral director through the decisions *'in the way the funeral director wanted to lead me through it'*, with little room for creative dialogue about ritual elements she may have wanted to incorporate. She regretted, for example, that family had not been able to touch the coffin before the end of the service [FCo6]. Another respondent, participating in the funeral of her grandmother, also commented: *'We wanted to do more than the funeral director told us we were allowed to do, which I now know is annoying nonsense, we could've done it ourselves'* [FC13].

Less experienced arrangers did not necessarily 'push back' where they were being limited in where they could make decisions: *'We were very new and very naïve to this and also because we were grieving, we didn't think outside the box ourselves. We took all our guidance from this one person, which was limited to the hymns, the flowers, the coffin'* [FC15]. There was a sense, in some accounts, of a battle between the respondent and the funeral director as to 'control' of decision-making on the funeral service itself: one respondent commented that *'Overall, they would have liked to have been more hands on than they were allowed to be – we did as much as they were willing to relinquish to us, and the choices made about the coffin and that we were going to carry the coffin'* [FC13].

## Funeral plans and the death of children

Funeral plans and the death of children could both, in an artificial way, affect the degree of agency deployed by bereaved people themselves. Respondents arranging funerals which had funeral plans were often ambivalent about the circumstances in which they found themselves, depending on the type of plan. For example, one respondent was arranging the funeral of her father, who had bought a plan some years previously. She was told that the plan specified a car and a particular coffin type. The respondent had asked whether it might be possible to have a wicker coffin, but was advised that this would be a lot more expensive. The respondent reported that her mother had been happy with the plan and had determined not to make a fuss: *'she said "Oh, I'm not paying more money than I need to, he's only being cremated. I'm not being funny but it's stupid really'* [FCo8].

Another respondent was also arranging a funeral that had had a funeral plan with one of the larger funeral firms, and which had been taken out in the 1980s. The plan, in no real sense, covered the cost of the funeral but the funeral director had to honour it. As a consequence, he was *'trying to push with the cheapest options on everything. The plan was, you know, just covers the cost of the funeral [...] They were trying to minimise the cost.'* The respondent said that she would never again use that funeral director: *'I just felt a bit, I felt almost like a second-class citizen because we had a plan.'* She felt that the funeral arrangement had been little more than a business transaction: it was all a bit *'pared back.'* [FC29]



A degree of compromised agency was also evident where respondents talked about the death of their children. In these circumstances, funeral directors generally offer their services free, but then that could create uncertainty around what was permitted. A mother whose baby had died was told *'that because it was a stillbirth that the funeral would be free, but any extras I would pay for, but they didn't explain what that meant to me, so I didn't know what was really an extra and what wasn't. So I let them guide me what they wanted, I knew what I definitely didn't want'*. She didn't want a white coffin,

*'but what they didn't really tell me is what would be the alternative and because they were free I didn't feel like I was in a position to question or sort of to bespoke the funeral to what I wanted because I felt a bit ungrateful and they'd already said it was free, that I didn't feel as though I had the option to be going away from what they were saying'* [FC36].

## Conclusion

A great deal of emphasis is placed on the responsiveness of the funeral director as being a major element in overall satisfaction with the funeral. The interviews indicated that the initial meeting with the funeral director comprised a complex negotiation, where families and funeral directors had to establish how much information and guidance was needed. The first meeting set the manner of the on-going relationship and in a handful of instances went wrong from the offset. The funeral then became a 'battlefield' where the respondents felt that they had to wrestle for some degree of control over the decisions being made. However, it was much more often the case that the funeral director did indeed deal with the family in the way they thought was right, although there was not 'one' manner that all the families would have found acceptable.

## **5. Was there the right level of contact with the body of the person who had died?**

The body of the person who has died is central to funerary ritual, and contact with the body at the right times on the long trajectory from point of death to the final committal was a key element in how respondents defined satisfaction in the funeral overall. There are a number of strands in this particular theme, which will be discussed under two principal headings: engagement with the body including decisions around whether or not to formally spend time with the body, and the funeral directors' role in that process; and decisions made to ensure that the body was 'comfortable'. Families' engagement with the body of the person who died began from the very moment of death, and for respondents that time in hospital was as much a part of the funeral process as time taken more formally at the funeral directors' premises. However, it would be unwise to be prescriptive about guidance on being with and handling the body beyond ensuring that individuals are given the opportunity to make their own decisions.

### **Trajectories of engagement with the body**

When asking people about their decision whether or not to view the body at the funeral director premises, it became evident that this formal point often came quite late in what was a more extended trajectory of the respondent and their family's engagement with the body. It is appropriate to explore this trajectory, since respondents often reflected back on different points as being significant and meaningful. To this end, the chapter will focus on four particular periods during the funeral when the respondent had contact with the body of the person who died: in the moments immediately following the death; in the hours and days after the death, before the body was transferred to the funeral director's premises; formal visits at the funeral director's premises; and immediately prior to the funeral service, in instances when the body was 'brought home'.

It is necessary to overlay this extended trajectory with an understanding of how the death actually took place. In the majority of cases, participants talked about a death which happened after an illness and in hospital or in a hospice, but in a sizeable minority, the death was sudden and unexpected and involved emergency personnel. The involvement of the coroner might mean a delay in the body being sent to the funeral director premises. As might be expected, this context had an impact on the earliest experiences of being with the body, and extended the number of professionals involved in mediating those experiences.

A second important overlay is respondents' personal attitudes towards the dead body – any dead body – as being either a 'thing' or the continued and in some degree sentient embodiment of the person who had died. Some respondents simply did not consider the body to be at all important. This meant that, from the time of death onwards, emotional attention was focussed elsewhere. For example, for one respondent, being with the person who died was the most important 'gift' they could give to that person. This man talked about the death of his father, who had cancer. The respondent and his brother decided that they would hold their father's hands as he died:

*Whatever journey he's going onto, whatever, whether there's anything or nothing, like if it's nothing we certainly haven't hindered it have we? We haven't done anything. But if he is, if his, you know, you see the films or whatever, if his soul really did leave his body, or whatever, well then, he'll have seen his two sons with him, won't he? We were with him til the end, sort of thing. He won't have died on his own in a hospital bed.*

After his father's death, the son viewed the body as a 'shell', and regarded much of the funeral preparation as a necessary function which carried little significance for him personally [FC35]. Similarly, a woman who had arranged the funeral of her grandfather also saw no need to view his body again at the funeral director's premises: she had seen him soon after his death and did not regard his body as important. Her family had a tradition of always visiting the body and she said: '*I believe that once you're dead, your soul goes somewhere else, it is...But I've gone for other people's sake*' [FC29].

### **The body immediately after death**

There were varied circumstances in which people were with the body immediately after death. Many people discussed the death of an older person which followed a long illness either in hospital or culminating in a final move to the hospital once symptoms became difficult to manage in a domestic setting. This was also the case where the death had followed a cancer diagnosis. In a small handful of cases, the death took place at home or in a hospice but in the majority of instances the death happened in a hospital. Irrespective of the location, the death was generally attended by the family: there was a vigil, and the person who died was usually not alone at their death. Respondents themselves had sometimes been at the bedside when death actually occurred, or had been with the person who died within the previous few minutes or hours. If the respondent had not been there physically at the hospital then generally they were there very soon afterwards – within a matter of hours.

Twelve participants talked about the funeral of someone who had died entirely unexpectedly and suddenly through having a stroke or heart attack. This group included people who died in their sleep and were discovered by partners or other family members, or who died unwitnessed by their family in another part of the house, or who were with family members when the heart attack or stroke happened. These deaths involved the ambulance service and sometimes the police and, ultimately, the coroner to establish a cause of death. In these circumstances, family's first contact with the dead body took place in often chaotic circumstances and with medical professionals and police in attendance. A small group of respondents talked about deaths that took place unexpectedly in medical facilities. The two women whose babies were stillborn were in hospital at the time, and in one of these cases a coroner was involved. This was also the case with two deaths that took place unexpectedly, following surgery.

Being with the body in those few moments or hours immediately after the death was hugely important to many people for a variety of reasons. A woman whose father had died in his sleep told how she rushed to her parent's house as soon as she heard, and pushed past paramedics and coroner staff. She almost had to argue with them about being able to see her father: '*it was really important to me that I spent time with him and I think given the*

*opportunity I probably would have liked to have spent longer, but it's what it was' [FC8].* Another woman, whose mother was moved from a hospice to die at home, had been with her mother throughout her final hours, and sat with her for three hours after she died. It was, she said, the best three hours she had ever spent with her mother because *'she wasn't rude to me'* and she was able to just sit and talk to her [FC12].

Professionals at the hospital, hospice or nursing home were clearly influential in creating space and time for the family to engage with the body in any way they found comforting. One woman was surprised to be asked by nursing home staff if she wanted to wash her mother's body:

*and I was completely taken aback, and actually that was, it felt like a very nice thing to do.[...] Because my mum hated being handled, and that was one of the things that was most difficult for her when she was still fit and demented, was that she would fight with you, you know, all personal care was a fight, a physical fight with her. [...]* And then once she died, it felt...I was really happy to be able to sort of lay her out [FC48].

#### **Before the transfer to the funeral director's premises**

For some respondents, there was a hiatus between the death and movement of the body to the funeral directors' premises. This hiatus generally reflected a problematic death involving the coroner, and this period of time in itself could impact on a willingness to view the body formally once it had been moved to the funeral home. One woman whose mother had died suddenly following surgery had a delay of five weeks as a consequence of subsequent investigation. The woman had wanted to see the body but was pragmatic about the delay, and in her view, she had seen her mother soon after death as the life support was withdrawn, and that was felt to be sufficient [FC2].

There was one instance of a parent who talked in detail about her dealings with mortuary staff. Her baby had died and, again as a consequence of the investigation, his body was retained at the hospital mortuary for a protracted period. However, she said:

*'I visited him every day there, and the mortuary technician was wonderful, she was lovely. She treated him really well and talked about him really well. So I remember her saying when he'd had his post-mortem, she rang me up on the morning to say that he had gone for some scans and some x-rays and after that she rang me back and said, you know, "He's gone for his operation" so she talked about it as though it were an operation and not a post-mortem which was really kind. Then after that she said she'd bathed him and dressed him and put a new hat on and he looked nice and comfortable and I could go and visit. She treated him like a proper human being rather than just, you know, a corpse. That was really important because it felt as though she really appreciated who he was. So I was glad that I'd got a chance to visit him there' [FC36].*

Another mother, whose seven-year old son had died from cancer, also talked about this particular period as being important. Her son's body remained at the hospice for a number of days before it was transferred. The parents took this time *'kind of in with him and talking*

*to him and cutting his hair and things like that'. The respondent was distressed when his body was moved to the funeral director's premises, and chose not to visit there as a consequence of past experiences: 'knowing that he'd been embalmed. I'd not seen anyone, at that point. I'd seen my mother-in-law and my dad after they'd died, and he already didn't really look himself, and I didn't want to have that memory' [FC37].*

### **Viewing and visiting**

When it came to being with the body at the funeral director's premises, the respondents were roughly split in half in terms of those who choose to view the body, and those who decided not to, excluding the respondents who were talking about their attending or participating in a funeral only. This process of 'viewing' could be less or more interactive and in some cases quite possibly included the respondent simply looking at the person who had died. In a couple of instances, respondents said that they had spent just a few minutes with the body, and did not talk about what had happened in those moments. For other respondents, the time spent with the body at the funeral director's premises was less a viewing and more a series of social visits packed with event and ritual including taking gifts and keepsakes to tuck into the coffin, and decisions around how the body should be dressed.

The individuals who chose not to spend time with the body talked about that decision in a number of ways. For some, seeing the body was something that they clearly did not find palatable, and they were not at all positive about the prospect. A woman who had co-arranged the funeral of her mother said that her body had been with the funeral director for some time before the funeral service: *'I don't know what they got up to with her, to be honest. She was there two weeks. No, I didn't want to be involved in that side of things'. Her brothers also did not go. 'No, nobody went to her, to view her' [FC10].* For some respondents, being with the person as they died or soon afterwards was enough. A minority of respondents said that no-one in the family had been to a formal viewing; most people said that others in the family had gone and that it had been important to them. One man who had had a military background and had been used to dealing with dead bodies had had to identify his mother's body: she had been found dead at home. He did not attend a formal viewing but arranged it so other family members could visit.

A number of people mentioned that they had not spent time with the body because it was something they had done before, and had not found the experience beneficial. One woman said that in her family, viewing was expected and she was made to do it when she was younger: *'I'm not particularly interested in seeing dead bodies, purely because when other members of the family died and I was sort of thrown into that room, I just really didn't like it' [FC17].* Other people simply did not want to have an image of the person in a coffin. A woman who had found her partner dead on their bed said: *'I didn't want to see him in a coffin because I knew that would've been imprinted on my mind because when I see him now, I see him in bed with his hand on his chest and looking peaceful' [FC11].*

The respondents who did decide to spend time with the body had a very mixed experience. One woman said that in the period between the death and the funeral, going to see her mother had been particularly beneficial, *'knowing that she was close by and I could go and see her' [FC18].* There was a small number who talked in detail about multiple visits to the

funeral directors' premises alone and with other family members. A woman who had co-arranged a funeral for her mother said that she went five times, but always tried to go when she knew her father would not be there, because she did not want to disturb him. She said that the funeral director accommodated their wishes without any comment: the family was told it did not have to make an appointment, and the funeral director remembered their names. All this, the respondent found very reassuring [FD18]. It was evident that the image of the body in the coffin was comforting to some people, since the body looked 'at rest'.

Other people did more than view the body: for example, a mother whose baby had died in the minutes after birth spent some time singing to her child and rocking him, which she had been unable to do in the hospital [FCo1]. Another woman talked about her partner of many years who had died as the consequence of a devastating stroke at home; she had witnessed his death. She had little close family, and visited the funeral directors' frequently: *I felt like I could go in at any time to visit and to put in things in the coffin or in pockets, things like that, and talk.* Just before the funeral, she asked the funeral director to witness her slipping a ring on her partner's finger: they had been planning to marry, but there simply had not been time. *'That helped an awful lot between the death and the burial itself, I found that useful and nobody bothered, it was good that nobody really thought "What are you doing that for?" it was just that concept, that it's nothing, there's nothing un-normal about doing anything, it's how you want it to be'* [FC40].

Respondents were also likely to elaborate on formal viewings that had not gone well. There were instances of professional premises not being appropriate for viewings, in being less than clean. Another example was more extreme: the body was not in a private room. The respondent described the circumstances:

*'It was like a changing room at Marks and Sparks. So each deceased was in an area with a curtain pulled around them and went in like a long corridor, so when you went to see your loved one, they just pulled back the curtain where your loved one was. So I'm being very nosy so I'm thinking "Who's next door" so I'm pulling curtains and I'm seeing all of these other deceased lined up next to my dad. I had in my mind that it would be just a room for us, maybe with an altar and a cross and it was quiet and there were seats. No, you had to stand by the side of the deceased with his curtains at your back and someone dead behind you. You couldn't even get down the side'* [FC42].

There were also examples of inattentive and unprofessional staff. A woman whose father had died in hospital had been notified that the body had been transferred and was arriving at the funeral directors' premises on Saturday. She had tried to arrange a visit but was told that it was not convenient because the funeral director was going to a football match. He finally relented, and offered the family a slot at 11:00 but kept them waiting outside the locked premises. He finally *'turned up in his jeans and a very grubby fleece, you know to me completely unprofessional'* [FC31]. In another instance, the respondent had specifically instructed the funeral director to arrange a viewing with the coffin lid fastened. She was extremely upset to find that he had left the coffin open, and thought he had made the mistake in retaliation at her questioning some items on his invoice [FD24]. As will be seen below, there were also other issues relating to the treatment of the body which also affected attitudes towards the viewing but it was clear that the ways in which funeral

directors facilitated the viewing was in itself important to how that experience was remembered.

### **The body at home**

Four of the respondents talked about the fact that the encoffined body was brought to the family home before the funeral. One respondent discussed the death of her friend's mother. The family was Irish, and had a wake the night before the funeral: the coffin was open. The respondent said that she had decided not to go to the wake, since she felt it was a private, close family affair and she did not want to intrude [FC27]. For respondents who talked about the matter in more detail, the body coming back to the family home was regarded as important and deeply meaningful. One woman had cared for her father – who was in his nineties – for eighteen months before he died, but he had been taken into hospital at the end because he'd contracted a virus. Bringing him back home was, for the respondent, both a reparation and an echo of what had happened with her mother: *'he hadn't wanted to go into hospital and I felt very strongly that he would like to come home and when my mum had died sixteen years earlier, we did that as well and my dad was keen to have her home one last time, because again she hadn't wanted to go to hospital and sadly she died there'*. Once the body was home, her brother made her father a cup of tea, and they put a rose in his hand from the bush they had planted as an anniversary gift to their parents [FC31]. Bringing the body home was also important to the parents whose baby son had died: *'he was just home, he was there, it was the first time he'd been home, so that was nice'*. She took lots of photographs because she knew that she would forget exactly how it was, but then it was also good that he was just there, in the house, whilst they pottered around getting ready [FC36].

One respondent talked about her mother, who had a protracted and highly distressing death: she had cancer and had been moved around a number of facilities. She had been neglected, and there was some discussion about whether her hospital treatment would be subject to an internal investigation. The respondent was also part of a fractured and argumentative family, and her sisters had dominated the funeral arrangements. However, she decided that she would have her mother's body at home, and talked about it with some merriment: *'and for the first time in me life I got on me hands and knees and scrubbed all floor [laughs]. She was very particular, me mam, cleanliness-wise, whereas I'm not'*. They had decided that the coffin would stay open. *'We had a fair few people come to see her.'* She said to two friends who had travelled to be at the funeral, *'Look, me mam's going to be in in house, if it's off-putting you'll have to stay somewhere else. "Oh no, we don't mind". And they were having a chat with her. And me daughter, me other daughter and me sister's daughter, they did me mam's hair'*. Overall, the respondent had judged the funeral service as immaterial, *'It's just summat you do, in't it?'*, but the time spent with her mother at home was evidently much more significant [FC9].

### **Caring for the body**

There is a presumption that professionals will care for the body appropriately and well. As will be seen, professional interventions in this regard often included embalming, but this was not necessarily regarded favourably by the people who were interviewed. For many



people it was important that care should go beyond simple respect, and include making sure that the person who had died was comfortable. The act of embalming could be regarded as antithetical to that aim.

### Professional interventions

In discussing professional care of the person who had died, respondents were highly upset where they thought that care was lacking, or that the body had been treated in a way they were unhappy with. By far the biggest expression of dismay which sits under this heading related to the preparation of the body for formal viewing at the funeral director's premises. All respondents who commented on embalming commented on the process in a negative way. One respondent had actively informed the funeral director not to: *'we don't need any of that, it's not necessary'* [FC19]. Others indicated that they regretted the decision, partly because they had not known what it actually entailed. One woman had returned to view the body of her father because she wanted to be sure that he was being treated respectfully. She had thought that embalming was necessary if she wanted to visit, but found she was mistaken, and now regrets the decision: *'I am sorry that I put him through that. I am sorry that I put his body through that'* [FC6]. People could feel unprepared for what embalming did to the body. One respondent visited, and was shocked by how his hand felt. She had not been told the body had been embalmed: *I never understood what the embalming process was about before. I still don't, but the first thing I'd ever say if I was planning a funeral for a member of the family is I would say "Don't do that"'* [FC15]. Another respondent was also dismayed by her father's appearance. She confronted the funeral director:

*""Why does he look that colour and why is he so cold? And the second in command looked a bit embarrassed and said, "because he's been embalmed" and I said "what does that mean" and he said to me "we don't discuss that". I turned around and said "You do now, start talking" so he gave me a little overview about what the embalming process was. There was no mention if you want Dad embalmed or not. I didn't even know that was something that happened. Awful'* [FC42].

Cosmetic aspects of presentation could also be cause for distress. In these cases, respondents blamed the funeral director for not securing a photograph so they could check how the person generally presented themselves. A respondent visiting with her sisters was upset to find that their father was not wearing his glasses, his hair was not arranged in the way he normally had it, and – a detail which was entirely misplaced – he was wearing a suit with a handkerchief folded into the top pocket. All these things were wrong: *'Lots of things, the way he looked really struck us. 'Also which I did not like to see...I hope I never see it again. The pose. The arms crossed. [...] Which was way too formal. Our lasting memory of him is absolutely not at all how he looked in life'* [FC15]. Another respondent, also viewing her father, found that the preparation had completely altered his face:

*'His mouth was completely out of shape, his nose looked really weird, it just looked like something drastic had happened. So he [ie the funeral director] came in and he said "Well, I've had to pad out his cheeks" and I said that my dad had had very slender cheeks, that is how he was and he just looked ridiculous with these big puffy cheeks and the stuff was coming out of his lips, so I had to pull that out, it was sticking to his*



*chin. I said, "What's happened to his nose?" and he said, "Oh, I'll see if I can fix that", and started to mess about with my dad's nose and just slapped his hand away' [FC31].*

There were also problems with make-up: a respondent had to ask for her mother's face to be washed clean because the make-up simply did not match her mother's mixed-race skin tone [FC45]. One respondent had been unsure about whether to go in to see her mother, and was outside the door of the chapel. Her father's report on her mother's make-up decided the matter:

*'Dad went in for a few moments, came out. My brother mumbled something about "Oh, what was it like?" And said, "Oh, yeah, she's in her dress, and they've done her make-up". And that was it! "Done her make-up?" She wasn't one for huge amounts of make-up and I could just imagine her just being painted like a doll or something. And the way dad said it, I was like "They haven't done it naturally have they?" So, even had I been undecided at that point, still I would not have gone in' [FC53].*

It is notable that this element of the funeral was only really discussed where the treatment of the body had been in some way remiss or unexpected or gone badly, and in all these cases the shock was remembered and recounted in detail.

### **Family care**

Family care for the body rarely extended to physical processes of handling the body itself, but was generally expressed in decisions around how the body should be dressed. There was a markedly gendered element to this aspect of the funeral, and there was clearly a hierarchy as to who should be involved in decisions. Wives would make active decisions for their husbands, and daughters and even grand-daughters decided for mothers, fathers and grandparents but men generally left this element of decision-making to other women in the family.

There were two principal themes to the decision-making: that the person should be either comfortable or smart, and that the decision should reflect the personality of the person who had died. A family had met at their mother's house to decide: *'we looked through what she had and tried to think of something which was quintessentially Mum. So it was head-to-toe in Marks and Spencer's'* [FC18]. Women were most often dressed in special wedding outfits or other smart attire. Men could be rather more comfortable. A participant who had made arrangements with her mother when her father died said that they had agreed that he should wear a special tie – he always wore a bow tie, but changed to a normal tie for special events – and be wearing a suit. However, he also wore his slippers, which were the same pair he had worn since he was eighteen [FCo6]. Another daughter also talked about the arrangements she made with her mother, when her father died. He wore his *'funeral suit [...]* *That's what it was called, his funeral suit'*. Also, her mother said to the funeral director, *'I'll tell you what he can wear. I bought him some new sheepskin slippers at Christmas that cost an arm and a leg, he can wear them. It's a travesty but he can wear them'* [FCo8]. Other men were dressed in similarly comfortable ways: one daughter, made decisions about her grandfather with her mother: *'I said to my mum, "What are we going to bury him in, in his suit?" And she said, "Well you know he bloody hated wearing a suit". So he was just cremated in his daily trousers and a shirt. He was a checked-shirt fella'* [FD29]. This

element of caring for the body was, for some participants, very much about how the person who had died wanted to present themselves, particularly if they were known for being well-dressed, or had a 'signature' look. One daughter, arranging the funeral of her father, found herself selecting '*from his tiny, tiny wardrobe of clothes, but things that he liked. [...] What he'd gone out in public, what he would like, he'd like to look nice and smart*' [FC46].

## Conclusion

In part, the approach taken by this chapter was prompted by a comment made by one of the respondents, talking about the death of her mother:

*'Actually the disposing of her body started from the day she died. And that, I don't think we really...I don't know, I've never thought of it that way since, but actually all of those different stages happened in a sort of gentle, considerate and unrushed and unpressured way. And added up to you know, if you talk about the disposal of the body, that it went very smoothly and kindly.'* [FC48]

The majority of people were satisfied with the way that the body had been treated, but where those processes had gone wrong then the memories stayed fresh and retained the power to distress. Poor formal viewing experiences could mean that respondents did not take up that opportunity again. This is not to say that engaging with the body is somehow necessary and right for everyone, but that it is unfortunate that experience of an unprofessional intervention in the past remains the basis for that decision. Viewing the funeral as an extended process, beginning at the point of death, means that it is possible to locate moments of intense personal significance taking place outside the funeral service itself, and which in turn play a role in defining the significance attached to that service. The next chapter discusses the funeral service in detail, and whether it met respondents' expectations.

## 6. Did the funeral service meet expectations?

This report regards the formal funeral service as one element of the funeral, and combines in itself processes, actions, rituals and participants. Preparation for the many elements of the funeral service themselves constituted almost ritualised activities, requiring family members to engage with and shape their memories of the person who had died. However, as has been indicated in previous chapters, not all the respondents regarded the funeral service as being intrinsically significant to them, and in these cases the emotional weight of the funeral sat elsewhere. This group was in the minority. Most respondents drew something from the funeral service, but it would be a mistake to presuppose which elements of the funeral service were always regarded as meaningful or significant. This chapter 'deconstructs' the funeral service into nine key elements, and in doing so frames the chapter's discussion of what was expected from the funeral service and whether those expectations were met. Finally, the chapter indicates some of the rather more prosaic concerns which could overwhelm the more emotionally impactful work that the funeral service needed to achieve.

### Degrees of personalisation

Current discussion that relates to funerals indicates that personalisation is of paramount importance. As much of this chapter will indicate, people were satisfied with very different degrees of personalisation, and where and how far the funeral was regarded as personal could differ substantially. So, for example, one respondent who had arranged a very strict religious service for his wife was insistent that the funeral had been entirely personal because he himself wrote and spoke her eulogy: *'It was a focal point and the most meaningful part of the funeral'* [FC38]. It is necessary to unpick the notion of personalisation a little, as much of this chapter will do, to understand that it mostly comprised getting the tone of the funeral right, and leaving an accurate portrayal of the person who had died. Where respondents regarded the funeral service as unimportant to them, then the degree of personalisation mattered little. One respondent was helping her mother to arrange the funeral of her husband said that there was only one objective: *'she wanted to be seen to be doing the right thing and that was important to her'* [FC51].

### 'Deconstructing' the funeral

Respondents were asked to describe the day of the funeral generally, and were then guided through the narrative again in more detailed time-sequence order. Respondents were prompted to remember, although in the course of the interview there was a tendency for respondents to elaborate on those things which they personally found most important. These tasks, rituals and processes can be grouped into nine major areas, and each of these will be discussed in turn.

### The journey to the funeral service

One of the principal and very conspicuous elements of funeral director services is the provision of hearses and limousines to travel to the place of committal. This element of the funeral has been subject to critique, as being expensive and unnecessary and a cost that people arranging funerals are unable to avoid. In a handful of cases, respondents did mention that they had agreed to a hearse and cars because it was expected. One respondent said that the funeral director had decided on the cars: *'so you just do what you're told to do, because that's kind of his job in a way, you know? He's in charge of that situation. He's being paid to direct matters. He's a funeral director [...] So we just let him do his job'* [FC23]. In a couple of instances, cars were arranged even when it was thought to be not strictly necessary. One respondent's mother had lived only a few yards away from the church, and her son decided that they would not walk: *"Well, we'll do it with some dignity" you might say. Make sure she had a proper funeral. When most people, when you go to funerals, you have a hearse and a car don't you?"* [FC47]. However, it was by no means always the case that families adhered to this arrangement, and many funerals included a hearse but no additional cars, and in one instance the family took the coffin themselves, in their own car.

Although many respondents discussed the journey to the funeral service in largely functional terms, in other instances the journey and the mode of travel was imbued with additional significance. A handful of respondents said that they had not travelled directly to the crematorium but instead travelled a particular route, which might include coming back home rather than being taken directly from the funeral directors to the funeral service. One woman arranged for the hearse to travel the route her father had walked every day with his dog, and women from the chemist waved as the hearse passed by: *'that was really nice'* [FCo8]. In some cases, the journey was heavily ritualised. Two of the funerals discussed by the respondents were attended by bikers: one respondent found the support hugely comforting, but in the other case the level of attendance created its own logistical problems including an argument as to which rider would travel on the motorbike owned by the man who had died [FC15]. Just one funeral included a horse-drawn hearse and full cortege which – as will be seen below – was regarded by the respondent as entirely inappropriate [FC17].

The two respondents who were mothers whose babies had died talked about their journeys to the funeral service, which in both instances made significant statements with regard to visibility. It is unclear in one account where the decision-making on this matter had sat, but one family decided not to have a hearse for the tiny coffin, and this choice was regretted. The body was conveyed in the boot of the limousine, and the mother felt that had been wrong: *'You know, children die, babies die, so why should we hide it from society? I felt that he wasn't important because they'd hidden him. They're funeral directors and if they hide it and think it's not something you should show the public, then how are parents supposed to feel going through it?'* [FC36]. The other mother benefitted from a car which had been configured so that the coffin and parents could travel together, and she was able to keep her hand on his casket. She was pleased, otherwise, *'I would have felt very isolated and separate from him'* but the limousine was not evidently a hearse, and she felt that she had no *'public recognition'* for her loss. She concluded *'there is no perfect answer in this case'* [FCo1].

### Bearing the coffin

In the same way that the journey to the funeral service was sometimes – but not always – laden with significance, bearing the coffin from the hearse in to the place where the funeral service took place could also be important. The majority of respondents – over 40 – recalled this aspect of the service; in around half the cases it was funeral director staff who acted as bearers, and this passed without extended comment generally although some respondents indicated that this had been a preference, or said that they did not have enough men in the family who they felt could have taken that role. In twenty cases, families themselves decided to bear the coffin and in some instances this reflected a strong family tradition. One family had eight members – including the respondents' niece – shouldering the coffin into the chapel: *'We want it all family. We don't want anyone carrying granddad who didn't know him'* [FC29]. In another family, the teenaged children carried the coffin of their grandmother. The respondent commented: *'That was really important to them and that was sort of like their gift to us as their parents'* [FC19]. Bearing the coffin had intense significance for one of the respondents whose baby had died, and who decided to carry the coffin into the church herself:

*'So I carried him because I wanted to be able to carry him, because I'd not been anywhere with him. I'd never carried him, you know, other than sat with him in a room and picked him out of the Moses basket and held him and then put him back in, so it felt as though that was the only opportunity I was ever going to get to carry him somewhere. So that was really important for me to carry him in. I remember the look of shock on my friends and horror of the fact...they were probably just devastated for me looking back, the fact that I was carrying the coffin in and I put him at the front'* [FC36].

### The officiant

In the majority of cases – well over half – the officiant of the funeral service was a church minister, generally Church of England clergy. Again, in just over half of these cases, the minister was known to the family either because the family or the person who had died attended their church or there was some other social connection. Just under half the funeral services discussed by respondents were taken by clergy who had previously not been known to the family, and who had been recommended by the funeral director. Almost all the services that used civil or humanist celebrants had also done so on the recommendation of the funeral director. In five cases, a family member or friend conducted the service and there was no 'formal' officiant.

The decision about the officiant could also rest on respondents' own previous experiences and there was some element of 'shopping'. One respondent had had a humanist celebrant when her mother died, arranged through the funeral director, but *'not that we didn't like the humanist, we weren't satisfied with the way they carried out our instructions on the first funeral, so we asked the funeral home if they had a different humanist they could recommend'*. This celebrant came and talked to the family in detail about what they wanted, *'obviously it was whether anyone in the family wanted to say anything, or if there were any particular sayings that we wanted to be said and any music that we fancied.'* Overall, they *'worked with the funeral very well'* [FC33]. Respondents also might see a

celebrant or minister 'at work' on another funeral, and make their decision based on how they thought it had gone. This was the case for one family, who opted to use a particular celebrant on this basis: *'we'd seen her a couple of times and really like her manner'* [FC44]. There could be some delicate manoeuvring where families who were connected with their local church did not like the particular way the local vicar undertook funeral services or where there had been a recent change of clergy but usually it was possible to work some compromise.

Where a respondent was arranging or co-arranging a funeral, they generally mentioned meeting with the officiant, who was more or less expansive in giving guidance on the shape of the funeral service. It was evident that the officiant had to tread a careful line in offering the right level of guidance and detail as to what could be included, and balance what could be variance in demands across the family. One celebrant had been both *'empathetic and jolly'*, which suited everyone in that particular family [FC06]. However, one respondent was co-arranging the funeral of her father-in-law with her mother-in-law, and both saw the funeral service very differently. The celebrant *'came up with all sorts of different suggestions'*, all of which were vetoed by her mother-in-law; the celebrant *'was trying to make a really personal service and his mum was just going "No, no, no, no, no, I don't"'* [FC44]. Another respondent, who had never arranged a funeral before, did not meet the celebrant. The funeral director had suggested the celebrant, who then made all his arrangements with the respondent by email. *'Basically there wasn't a conversation, he just sent me over a template and he was like, I'm going to need stuff from you for this bit, this bit and this bit.'* The celebrant had approached the funeral largely functionally, but the respondent had wanted more guidance: he had never written a eulogy before, and did not know how to go about it. What he wrote was simply inserted by the celebrant into his script without comment [FC21].

Indeed, respondents were highly critical when the officiant's approach appeared functional or unconsidered. One respondent had hoped for a Church of England service, but was not impressed by the vicar recommended by the funeral director. The vicar had come to the house and it had been a short and perfunctory meeting: *'what hymns do you want, what music?'* The service was *'soulless': 'he didn't know dad'* [FC42]. Another respondent was similarly critical, again, of a Church of England minister who had evidently made little attempt to consider what the family might want: *'I can't remember what the priest said, it was so generic and boring, or generic hymns that sort of thing'* [FC46]. The group of respondents that was least satisfied with their celebrant overall was the group which had used a vicar recommended by the funeral director, and had not known that vicar previously. However, when the respondent or the family actually knew the vicar who took the funeral service, they were usually very happy with how it went. Respondents were also generally more positive where a civil or humanist celebrant had been used but this was possibly a reflection of the inclusion in the sample of some funerals that had taken place over ten years ago, when it seemed that *'a bog-standard CofE funeral service'* was all that could be expected [FC42].

### **The eulogy**

Delivering the eulogy is central part of the funeral service, and respondents often talked about this aspect of the funeral in some detail. The nature of the eulogy played a

substantial role in defining overall satisfaction with the funeral. Writing the eulogy and delivering it were generally viewed as two separate tasks, 'co-produced' by the family and officiant. The balance of involvement fell between the two extremes of a family wholly writing the eulogy themselves and reading it; and families advising the officiant who then wrote a eulogy based on that information. As might be expected, higher degrees of family involvement led to a greater sense of satisfaction with the delivered eulogy.

The time taken to draw together information for the eulogy represented a special period, when respondents felt they were still with the person who died: one respondent said that she valued this time: '*That was my goodbye to my mum*' [FCo2]. Eulogies were written and re-written to accommodate particular stories, and to make sure that all the voices were included that needed to be heard. In eight cases, family members wrote and delivered the eulogy – and this group included instances where it had been the respondent who undertook this job themselves. On two occasions the family drew on someone they knew, who they thought would deliver the eulogy well on their behalf. All respondents were all happy with eulogies delivered by family or friends, since it ensured that the eulogy was personal and fit with the tone of the service they were hoping to achieve. One woman, talking about the funeral of her father, which she co-arranged with her mother, said:

*'We didn't want, need a big pomp and ceremony fancy thing. We wanted his friends there. My mum said "I don't want some stranger getting up and saying lots of nice things about him but he didn't have a clue who he was" [laughs]. So I wrote a eulogy and I read that myself and one of his friends got up and spoke about him and then we all went out for pie afterwards. [...] As funerals go it was very nice.'* [FCo8].

Family could be in a better position to mediate inputs from people, and knew the nuances of family relationships that the eulogy needed to accommodate. Indeed, dissatisfaction with the eulogy often rested on its not acknowledging an important facet of the family, for example, the failure to mention an ex-partner, a sibling who had died young, or family offshoot. One respondent had been very unhappy with the vicar they had used, who had been previously unknown to the family. The respondent felt, '*There was no heart, I felt he was just there to do his job*' [FC29].

When respondents indicated that a eulogy had gone well, it generally meant that it had been possible to present an accurate picture of the person who had died. This picture had to be an emotionally as well as factually accurate description. One respondent who wrote the eulogy did not want her brothers to think she had painted a false picture: he could often be difficult, and this had to be said [FCo6]. One respondent whose mother had died suddenly abroad had found that her father had begun to '*deify*' his wife in the weeks following a difficult police investigation, and wanted the eulogy to be a corrective, to say that her mother had often been very blunt and no-nonsense [FC14]. Similarly, a son whose father had died was happy with the eulogy which had been detailed and '*realistic as well. Didn't try to make him out to be, like, something that he wasn't. 'Cause obviously, none of us are perfect, sort of thing*' [FC35].

Some respondents who had talked about funerals they had attended said that the best eulogies were ones in which they learned something about the respondent that they had



not known before. A respondent who attended the funeral of her friend's mother said that the eulogy had been almost an obituary: *'They're a spot-on family. They're together. And so I wasn't surprised they'd come together and they'd written out her life story, really, and all the things that she'd done'* [FC27]. The account which perhaps best reflected all the desiderata for the eulogy was related by a respondent talking about her father's funeral. The service had been taken by the vicar, who had been with her father when he died, and known him very well:

*'It was so true and so tailored to him and there wasn't a word wasted, everything was just about my dad's life and it was funny, it was just so accurate. We'd spent two and a half hours with him [ie the priest] one night, all of the family were still in [place] and we all contributed, he had a mass of information and he used it brilliantly and he just told my dad's story really from the heart.'* [FC31].

### Music and readings

Some people – a small number – made little reference to the music chosen for the funeral service and clearly did not regard it as important, but the vast majority had a great deal to say. Indeed, for some people the music was the most important part of the service, particularly if they felt that they had little control over other aspects. One woman talked about the death of her father, which had taken some twenty years previously, and where her mother had been the principal decision-maker around the funeral. The respondent said, *'I suspect at the time she was probably led by what you do and what you ought to do'*. It was decided to have a church service, even though the family was not religious. The respondent dwelt on the one element of the funeral where the family had made a personal choice. The family wanted 'Danny Boy': *'Which is like a real [she sighs] because my dad used to sing it when we were kids so it was like a real [she gasps] and then where was some hymns which didn't matter to me. The music was important, far more than the eulogy – I think having the music he would have chosen, he would have liked.'* [FC46]. This is not to say that the selection of hymns was always regarded as a constraint. Many people who opted for a religious service mentioned the hymns they had chosen as being important to them: for example, one respondent said that when her mother died, her father had chosen a hymn sung at his wedding [FC14].

In the same way that the eulogy was a task requiring careful choices in making a final statement on the person who had died, deciding on the music and readings required a similar level of attention. Preparing the eulogy is an invitation and an obligation to reminisce, and the selection of music also meant that family often listened to hours of music and entered into long discussion before deciding on exactly the right tracks. The task was made substantially easier if the person who had died left a note on what they wanted. Without guidance, there could be confusion. In making arrangements for his grandmother's funeral, one respondent said that he simply could not decide from her broad and eclectic music collection. It was even harder to decide because he also had to accommodate his father, who would only say what he did not like, and because the grandson only really knew his grandmother in the last third of her life. He wanted to be able to represent all her life in his music choices, and choose something that would be meaningful to her [FC21].



Many of the respondents mentioned the particular tracks they had chosen, and then immediately gave a detailed justification for that decision: for example, the person who died often played it on the piano, or had been a big fan of the artist. One respondent had chosen the music for her father's funeral: *'one of the pieces was 'It's a wonderful world' and because it really summed up my dad's attitude to life. He did think life was wonderful and he saw the good side.'* Another piece – a jazz number – was chosen because it was more upbeat, and she had arrived home once and he had been in the bath with this track on at full blast and had been singing over it: *'it just seemed again to sum up the joyousness of my dad really'* [FC31]. One respondent also said that the songs they chose were 'about' her mother. At the end of the service, the funeral party had walked out to 'Come on Eileen', but during the service itself her father had insisted that they play 'Ave Maria', not because they were religious but because it was the family tradition. This was something she was rueful about: *'I'm not having it at mine [laughs]'* [FC18].

Decision-making, then, had to negotiate a complex pathway between what the respondent thought was meaningful in the life of the person who died, summed up that person accurately, and was acceptable to other people in the family. However, it was also important that the music set the right tone, and this will be discussed in more detail below. By contrast, there was surprisingly little said about the readings chosen for the funeral, and no-one indicated that the readings chosen had been particularly important unless they were reading poems they themselves had written or that had been written by other family members. There was little sense that deciding on the right reading was a task that respondents felt burdened by in the same way that they referred to the music choices.

### **Dressing the funeral service**

Critique of excessive funeral costs is often directed toward the material elements of the funeral and what might be termed its 'aesthetics': dressing the funeral will here include flowers, orders of service and the use of photographs. This facet of the funeral also brought in questions of taste. As with other elements of the funeral service, respondents tended to dwell on the elements that they themselves found significant. Many people mentioned that there were flowers at the funeral, but did not particularly elaborate on the fact. However, others talked about the flower choices in much more detail and again provided a rationale for the decisions that had been made. For example, there were flowers in particular shape arrangements, and in colours matching favoured sports teams; and many people simply chose flowers that they knew that the person who died had loved.

It was very common for family members to deal with flowers entirely independently of the funeral director. This was also the case with orders of service. These were viewed in two very contrasting ways. Many respondents said that the funeral simply had no orders of service: the service had been small and uncomplicated with no sung hymns or songs so it was felt that an order of service was unnecessary. Other families viewed these elements of the funeral as something much more significant: they became obituaries sketched out with photographs and were provided almost as a keepsake of the person who had died. Photographs were used in a number of different ways in the funeral, from very elaborate slideshows shown as the funeral service progressed, to the inclusion of a single photograph on the order of service. As with the music, the choice of photographs could follow extensive family consultation and trawling through dozens of images.

One common element of all these aspects of dressing the funeral service was the degree of family involvement. Like the eulogy, the family might decide to 'contract out' delivery with appropriate degrees of instruction, or create something themselves. Decision making in this regard could reflect a consciousness of cost: for example, some families decided that producing their own orders of service was far cheaper than accepting the funeral director's package. However, price was not always a primary concern, and families making their own arrangements to dress the funeral service could in some instances spend considerably more.

However, three factors emerged as being important in what amounted to be considerable variation in the ways that families dressed the funeral service. First, families approached the task as 'emotional labour', which they contributed as a gift, almost, to the person who had died. One respondent worked on the order of service with her husband, for her father's funeral: *'So we did that, and we're really pleased that again we took responsibility and we made sure it was done properly'* [FC31]. Another respondent also spent a lot of time preparing the order of service, and found this to be very therapeutic:

*'it allows you to be a little more creative, but all focussed on Mum. So, on a particular day when I woke up in the morning, I wasn't feeling particularly great, I just thought, "Ah, I'll get on with that", and actually I felt better for doing it. That was a really nice thing to do. Took a lot of various negotiations and compromises [...] to agree the contents, because suddenly it's not just about how it looks, but ... We ended up putting photographs into it, so suddenly everybody's got a different interpretation of what the right photograph is. [...] Churning through thousands of them. So, I did that and I found that to be a really nice thing to do [...] And actually something I felt I could do, that was really something for Mum. She was really quite a creative person, so to create something that looked pretty...Like when she had the golden wedding anniversary, she had the...the invites had to be nice. [FC53]*

One mother whose baby had died also created her own orders of service. She went to a craft shop and got some blue ribbon and card. She typed everything up and made it into a booklet and put ribbon on the side. *'They'd given me some footprints of him at the hospital, so I put a picture of the footprints on the front, so that it was very personal to him, and I've still got them somewhere. I've still got a couple of the orders of service that we didn't use, which I've got at home in a memory box which the hospital had given me'* [FC36]. It was important for these elements of the funeral to reflect what the person who had died might have wanted and who they were. A respondent who made arrangements for her father's funeral said *'I didn't want to make the funeral very pretty or very girly, so I just went for really lovely, like, white woodland kind of flowers with lots of pinecones and I remember being really conscious of it being in my dad's taste. I just really wanted every choice to reflect my dad, not me'* [FC39]. It clearly still rankled with one respondent that she had been told that orders of service were not allowed at the crematorium they used, and she had very much wanted to these to show pictures of her father who in his youth had been a very good-looking man [FCo6]. These elements were 'material eulogy'.

Second, and perhaps less importantly, the funeral aesthetics had to achieve a delicate balance in terms of being appropriate and tasteful. One respondent had self-consciously

'clashed' with another side of the family in her choice of much more flamboyant flowers for her partner, which she felt reflected his love of travel: *'I was trying to do what I thought [her partner] would have liked'* [FC11]. Another respondent had opted for simple white tulips: *'I didn't fancy a conventional, big coffin-shaped thing and to have 'Dad' spelled out in flowers would have been a joke – and not a funny joke either – it would have been hideous'* [FCo6]. A third respondent attending a funeral praised the *'traditional'* nature of the order of service: it had a cross on the cover but no photographs and was a simple booklet that was judged to be *'subtle, discreet'* [FCo4]. Respondents themselves might not necessarily agree with the aesthetic choices expressed in last wishes. One woman talked in detail about the flower arrangements that her mother had specified, which the respondent herself regarded as *'old ladyish'* although on the day people had praised the choices and said that they had been appropriate for her mother [FC12]. Another respondent simply refused to add a wreath to her mother's coffin - as her mother had instructed – because *'wreaths always seemed really sombre, and that wasn't her at all'* [FC53].

Third, dressing the funeral could be absorbed into ritualized actions and elements and became more important as a consequence. For example, flowers became more important where they handled by people at the funeral and placed on the coffin or thrown into the grave. There were a small handful of funerals where the degree of ritualization was hugely significant to the person arranging the funeral. One mother whose baby had died had arranged for the church to be draped in white, and placed on the coffin some lavender from her own garden, tied with ribbon she then later sewed into a quilt. Other flowers included very soft hydrangeas and gypsophila *'because it's baby's breath'*. For her, these rituals *'gave us something to hold on to'* [FC12]. Aspects of the material elements of dressing the funeral – flowers, orders of service – were often fashioned as mementos, for people to take away. Indeed, flowers were invariably taken away from the service and often *'repackaged'* as posies or in some other way split amongst the family.

### **The coffin**

A great deal of discussion around excess in funeral prices focuses on the cost of the coffin, but for the respondents in the study, this element played a very minor role in narratives about the funeral service. Many people indicated that their choice had been largely functional: they had opted for something basic, the cheapest on offer – or perhaps one up from the cheapest – since the coffin was generally going to be cremated anyway. Two respondents typified many of the comments: *'It was a bog-standard veneer, wooden coffin. I should imagine it wasn't a solid wooden coffin because they are dreadfully expensive. But it looked very nice and shiny, brass handles. Yep, it did the job [laughs]'* [FCo8]; and *'I'm trying to think that we must have gone and looked at coffins and I'm actually quite disinterested in things like that and people saying "but it has a silk lining", well it's still going to be burnt'* [FC46].

However, in some instances – as with all elements of the funeral service – respondents indicated that the coffin was prominent in their memory of the funeral. For one or two families, there was a higher level of engagement with the coffin: it was decorated very elaborately with contributions from everyone in the family, and one family had the coffin at home the night before the funeral and worked with the florist to weave flowers into its wickerwork.

Other respondents had less positive memories. One of the women who arranged the funeral of her baby said that she had been given a 'free' funeral by the funeral director and consequently had very restricted choices. She had wanted a 'cosy' woollen coffin but the baby was tiny and she was upset to find that the funeral director had instead used an ashes container; *'they had sort of squashed him into the box they'd got, rather than making one for him'*, and the baby did not look comfortable [FC36]. Another respondent was also dismayed by an inappropriate choice. She had been excluded by her estranged husband from funeral arrangements for her son: he was *'a plain simple lad, he didn't like show and fuss...but they decided to try and do everything with literally knobs on.'* The coffin was a high-polished, 'mahogany-looking', and *'obviously a lot more expensive than was strictly necessary'* [FC27].

### The committal

The majority of funerals were cremations, some of which followed a religious service at a church. The principal issue that most respondents mentioned was whether they had decided that curtains should be closed to signify committal, or that the funeral party walk out of the chapel. Feelings on the matter could be very strong, and families were generally very clear in their specification. One respondent said that their family had opted to stay behind whilst everyone left, to say goodbye, but then themselves also leave: *'None of us wanted to see it go behind those horrible curtains'* [FC02]. The memory could be very upsetting: one respondent acceded to her mother's wishes in this regard, but had found it very difficult: *'I don't like, you know, they close the curtains because it's going to go and be cremated, and that's a particular moment that I find quite tear-jerking but that's what she wanted so. Anyway so it was all arranged and that was the right thing to happen, but it is a very dreadful moment when those curtains close [cries]'* [FC10]. One respondent said that her father's funeral was the first time she had attended at a crematorium: *'My lasting memory is that curtain, which I didn't really like'* [FC15]. The closure signalled a finality that some respondents were not prepared for: *'That was very, very difficult. That was difficult 'cause up until that time, I think for me personally, it was a case of 'look, this has happened, I've got to organise it for me mum. But then the doors closed, I thought, "She's no longer there". That was very, very difficult, yeah'* [FC49].

Not closing the curtains could be an attempt to mitigate the finality of the loss: *'For some people they want the curtains closed because they want that closure, it's over and done with. But the vast majority of our family think along the lines of don't actually want to go with any finality. We'd say goodbye but the person's still with you'* [FC29]. Some respondents found, with experience, neither option was satisfying. One respondent had attended her grandmother's funeral, when the curtain was closed; the family had not liked having to walk away. When her mother died they opted to walk away so *'she was taken from us rather than us going'*, but it had not felt any better [FC12]. However, not closing the curtains meant that the ending of the service could include touching the coffin and gave the family the option of a private goodbye. When their young son died, the vicar instructed everyone to leave the family at the crematorium chapel: *'We felt we had the space that we needed, so that was really nice [...] just to say goodbye to him, which was all we wanted'* [FC37]. This act of saying goodbye by touching the coffin was in some instances extended to everyone in the funeral party, and was part of the narrative told by a respondent who had attended a funeral. The respondent felt that this part of the funeral service had not been well directed:

*'You're sort of queuing up to go to a coffin, and then you get there, and there's loads of people behind you and just there, and I felt I was ok with it because I just said thank you to her [ie the woman who had died]....And also there wasn't any guidance really, around that, like how long you should stand there for, and now move on and go out this door, so people went to the coffin and didn't know whether they should go that way or that way, and that was a bit awkward too' [FC27]*

Where the committal involved a burial, the ritual activity was extended into a procession with the coffin to the graveside, a prayer or words at the graveside, and then action after the body was lowered into the grave. For one respondent, this procession was the part she remembered with most fondness: she walked along with coffin and her family to the grave, and felt released by the open air after the stuffiness of the chapel. Just before the interment, the funeral party was invited to pray with their hand on her great-aunt's coffin: *'Yeah, so I think that maybe something about the physicality of that and the practicality of that that I was glad of' [FC52].*

### **The funeral tea**

One final element of the funeral, taking place immediately after the funeral service, was what will here be called the 'funeral tea'. As with most elements of the funeral service, the post-service refreshments were discussed either in terms of their emotional connotations, or rather more functionally. Some respondents could recall very little about it: it was, simply, something that had to be done. For one respondent, who had invested a great deal – emotionally – in the funeral service itself, this part of the day was not particularly important: *'I mean, it was just one of those things that you do I think. I wouldn't, I don't think I would have been bothered whether they were there or not' [FC36].* Others actively disliked this element of the funeral service: *'We just fell in line with that really. I'm not a great lover of that to be honest.'* This woman had had a discussion with her mother about her desire for a funeral tea. She told her mother: *"Well I won't be going to it because if you think that I can stand there grieving, as I know I will for you, making pleasant conversation with people and handing out sandwiches, no, it aint going to happen."* *I do feel quite strongly about that' [FC15].*

The majority of people were less averse. Considering first the funeral tea as an 'event', there were three principal approaches taken to making these arrangements. At their most elaborate, funeral teas were catered events very similar to wedding receptions. These events appeared to be an extension of the funeral service itself with effort made to 'dress the room' and provide opportunities to engage in memorialisation. One respondent said that 300 people had come to the funeral tea which had been held at a hotel, and where numbers had overwhelmed her father's wish for a formal grace to be said [FC12]. A second option was having a more low-key funeral tea at a local pub or function room, chosen because it was near the crematorium, or because the family were known there. These were generally regarded as being for close family and friends. The third approach was to host the funeral tea at home. In both these less formal events, family often made arrangements as to catering: indeed, in one case the family had spent the day before the funeral making vegetable soup; in another instance, people had been asked to bring along cakes and refreshments to the church hall, so there was a 'communal' buffet.

Other respondents talked less about the funeral tea arrangements, and more about what the tea had meant to them. For a small handful of respondents, the funeral tea further evidenced bitter family rifts. The feuding sisters who had uneasily compromised over their mother's funeral arrangements went their own ways after the service, and essentially had two separate funeral teas. The respondent who had had to cede the funeral arrangements of her partner to his estranged brother herself arranged a funeral tea – the brother had not wanted one – but said that the event had been stilted, with people sitting in separate tables and not mingling.

Other funeral teas were rather more positive. The nature of the tea itself was taken as an indicator of the person who had died: one respondent said that she had arranged a catered event, since she had wanted the funeral tea to be upmarket and expensive, and to give everyone a nice feeling. Further, *'My father very much enjoyed good food and wine as long as someone else was paying'* [FCo6]. Other respondents did not like that approach at all: *'Sometimes there's huge dos, and it goes on and on. It really wasn't that, and that wouldn't have been appropriate, not for her, but not for us as well. That bit of it's more to do with you having conversations with other members of the family, or friends'* [FC22]. Respondents talked about the opportunity taken to share photographs and memories, and to meet up with family members and friends: *'It was a really big, friendly, lovely, lovely gathering'* [FC31]. Overall, respondents said they were often comforted and touched by the number of people who attended the funeral, and their attendance underlined just how important the person who died had been to many people. The sharing of photographs was often a big element of the funeral tea, which in some instances became a more formalised memorial service with slideshows and speeches.

## A good funeral service

When people were asked about what they regarded as being a good funeral service, they often reflected on their summary of the funeral they had experienced, and reiterated why in their view it had been a good or bad funeral service. There were three themes which emerged as being important: getting the tone right; leaving an accurate portrayal of the person who had gone; and saying goodbye.

### Getting the tone right

The individual elements of the funeral service all contributed to setting the tone for the whole event. There was no one single 'right' tone: *'for any family in any situation being able to do what matters to them is what makes a good funeral'* [FC16]. One respondent summed up this feeling succinctly:

*'A good funeral is whatever you need it to be. I know that there's sometimes this sort of thing about oh, it should be a celebration of life, but, you know, maybe what you need is for it to be really sad and solemn. I think a good funeral is whatever you need it to be, not what you're told it should be, or what tradition gets handed round a bit'* [FC13].



As this respondent intimates, there were three broad general tones which people talked about as being quite distinctive: traditional, 'religious' services; celebratory services; and ones characterised as being more sombre. People were well aware that there was this range of approaches. Most people who were arranging funerals made quite active choices with regard to the tone they were aiming for and the majority of respondents who were attending funerals were generally tolerant of and 'played along with' the choices other people made.

### **Religion**

Tolerance was particularly evident when it came to religious difference. Belief played a major role in deciding the tenor of many of the funerals in the study: arriving at a funeral that respected the religious beliefs of the person who had died was deemed to be important even where the funeral arranger had no such belief. Where the respondent also shared the beliefs of the person who died, it was felt that having a formal religious service did not compromise the degree of personalisation. One respondent had arranged the funeral of her father, and then her mother. The services were very different: *'I didn't want to have a very personal funeral [for her mother]. I have had that before when my dad died when he was not religious, so we had a humanist service for him and it was all very, very personal, there was various different people saying things and specific songs he liked and that was perfect for him, but that was not right for my mum. So no, it was a Catholic mass.'* Overall, the tone had been *'devotional, it was prayerful'* [FC10].

One of the other respondents attended what had been to her an unfamiliar Roman Catholic service when her friend's mother had died. The respondent had *'had a bit of an issue'* with her friends not singing or joining in, and was very moved by the mass:

*'people were invited to go up for a blessing. There was a lot of wailing at that point, which I'm totally cool with but it's upsetting of course. Having all the people come up for the blessing mass, all the people that loved their mum and loved them are coming up, and suddenly it was like "Oh look, they're there, and we're all in this together" and I think that was a real moment in the service'* [FC27].

One respondent also commented that she found a religious service unexpectedly comforting: *'there was a real sense of occasion, and a real sense of formality and ritual, and I remember that more than anything. I can't remember thinking, "Oh that's formal, that's ritual", like that. I just got a strong sense of order, a sense of ritual, in the way people came to church, the wake was all organized, and it felt really, really reassuring'* [FC32].

### **Celebration**

Where people talked about the funeral aiming for a particular tone, it was slightly more likely to be the case for funerals to aim at being a celebration of the life and achievements of the person who had died. A respondent, who had co-arranged the funeral of her 90-year old widowed father with her siblings, had opted for a religious service in accordance with their faith, but *'it didn't feel too heavily religious'*. The funeral was *'was extremely loving, I think the two themes were love and gratitude and this is what we wanted to convey really. I just wanted to let everybody know that my dad knew how well he was loved and just how*

*grateful he was for the time that he had.'* The funeral had 'worked': *'People said it was one of the nicest services they had ever been to'* [FC31].

Aiming for a celebration meant for many people the inclusion of, as a number of respondents put it, *'positive and funny stories'*. This kind of approach was deemed appropriate when the death came after a long life and had been expected. One respondent said, *'my eulogy was quite tongue in cheek and a bit funny. Because you don't want it...yes, it was sad but he was old and he'd been ill. So it wasn't as though it was a big shock. So we wanted it to be a bit more positive. A celebration of his life rather than weeping away'* [FC42]. The eulogy was central to the celebration, but music was also often used as a means of exactly characterising a life and personhood. One woman had co-arranged the funeral of her father with her mother, and they had wanted a celebratory tone. Their funeral party walked out to a particular comic song which her mother wanted to use, to signal how full of humour their marriage had been. The respondent said that the gales of laughter that arose as the song played was one of the things she most remembered about the funeral service [FC23].

However, one respondent – who was determined for the funeral of his grandmother to have a celebratory tone – found it difficult. The effort took a toll: *'It was nice to see lots of people there, we all had really positive stories and funny stories. In the end, it was exhausting to have that celebratory tone: I was just, I was a bit of a mess really. So I found that quite hard, I did find that quite exhausting. But I was quite determined to just make sure that that came through'* [FC21].

### ***Sombreness and respect***

Some respondents disagreed with the notion that funerals should necessarily be celebratory, and thought – rather – that it was appropriate for the service to be sad, and it should be possible for people to demonstrate their grief. One respondent articulated this thought:

*'I find it really difficult when I have been to funerals recently and people are kind of saying "It's a celebration" and trying to be really happy and actually I find quite incongruous really. So when I went to my late uncle's funeral it had been very celebratory and only my cousin was looking shockingly ill and thin and crying and I thought actually you're being real, you've lost your dad, you're devastated and I know everybody does things differently and it's what they want but actually I thought you know, so I actually think it's something about allowing yourself you know, it's really terrible not "yay, it's fantastic!"'* [FC46].

A number of respondents actively aimed for services that were sombre; as one respondent put it: *'I just think we needed space to be sad'* [FC20]. The outpouring of grief was felt to be a paying of respects, which was a way of bringing people together [FC46].

There were circumstances in which this approach was considered entirely fitting, as indicated by one respondent. Her elderly mother's death had been in *'the natural order'*, and some levity was not inappropriate although *'if somebody's been murdered or what have you that's a different kettle of fish entirely; I'm not saying we should all be laughing and joking*



then' [FC09]. The respondent was indicating that some funerals can never be 'right', and will always be distressing and sombre. The mother whose son has committed suicide appreciated that the vicar had a difficult task in framing an appropriate tone. The funeral had been formal: *'I suppose with a suicide it's very difficult to have any levity in it'* [FC25]. Similarly, the one of the women whose baby had died said that the overall tone of the funeral had been *'shock and sadness. I think a lot of my friends were feeling quite uncomfortable because again it was a baby, so what do you say to somebody who's lost a baby? It's not what's normal is it? So I think they probably all felt quite uncomfortable, yeah, uncomfortable and sad'* [FC36]. This discomfort had also been the feature of another funeral: one respondent talked about the death of her emotionally abusive father. Only the immediate family attended the funeral; he had had no friends. The respondent said that she had been glad that her father died, and had wished that he died sooner. The celebrant had not been made aware of his true character, and their attempt to achieve a celebratory tone fell flat: *It was a very strained affair, you could tell because they say "don't speak ill of the dead" but if the dead person wasn't a very nice person, what are you supposed to do?'* [FC51].

For the most part, however, it was felt to be important that the tone of the funeral should be appropriate to the personality of the person who died. One of the respondents was a vicar, who talked in detail about a funeral he had arranged with one of his parishioners. The parishioner was very elderly and the death of his wife had left him devastated. He wanted her funeral to convey a very particular tone. In the words of the vicar:

*'The husband wanted it to be very dignified, he wanted it to be simple because he said his wife was – this is going to sound bad but – "simple person" but by that he meant that she had simple tastes and she wasn't one for ostentation or anything like that. She loved to keep a tidy home, the simple things in life gave her pleasure; so he wanted her funeral to be a very simple and dignified affair really'* [FC41].

Other people also acknowledged that there were lots of ritual options and possibilities, but simplicity was more appropriate. One woman said of her mother: *'I mean she's not the sort of person who would have wanted flowery poems, or people standing up singing, or any form of ceremony like that...you know sort of children blowing bubbles and things...It just wouldn't have suited her'* [FC03]. Another participant, whose mother had also died, was also happy that the funeral celebrant did not set any fixed tone: *'I don't think that the funeral service as it was held and written by [the celebrant] made people feel that they had to be or conduct themselves in any particular way, it was very much come as you are and remember [her mother's name] as you want to". That's what she would have wanted'* [FC18].

So it was evident that many of the respondents were aware of how all the decision-making around the separate elements of the funeral service gelled to create a particular tone, and that the tone should not always be the same. Much of the discussion of this section is summed up in the comment made by a respondent, who had opted for a service at a natural burial ground:

*The tone felt like a breath of fresh air. In the space of two months we lost five family members, and we'd gone to a lot of funerals, but they'd all been traditional, heavy,*

*church-based and to be stood on a hilltop, surrounded by sheep, was a literal and sort of emotional breath of fresh air. And also because Nan died in the right position on the arc of life, it felt like that was what's meant to happen, whereas with other people it was a bit more unexpected. So it felt like we can actually have a bit of a celebration, thanksgiving, which didn't feel right for other people. I mean everybody was absolutely devastated but it was definitely more uplifting than other funerals. Everyone had to wear really bright things. The tone felt exactly right. [FC13]*

### **Leaving an accurate portrayal**

Achieving the right tone was entirely necessary for the funeral to be judged positively, but the funeral also had to present an accurate portrayal of the person who had died. This accuracy was conveyed in the tone, the eulogy, the music and the aesthetics of the funeral. For example, we '*definitely felt that [the person who died] was completely central to everything that was going on, and everything was done with him in mind*' [FC04]; and '*It began subdued but ended upbeat. But generally, people enjoyed it. They felt that it had been true to my dad and the music and everything had gone very well, yeah, it was good*' [FC33]. Honesty was important:

*'Overall, the family talk about it as a very positive experience, and we all still talk about it as a positive experience, it's spoken about fairly regularly by the family...Because it was so personal and it felt like a real reflection of her, it just felt really honest and it felt like we'd properly been able to say what we wanted to and express what we wanted to'* [FC13].

In some instances, the funeral was an opportunity to introduce a slight corrective, and was an essential reminder of elderly relatives as they had been before they had become debilitated by long years of illness, or dementia had altered their personalities:

*'there was an opportunity to get back and talk about the person that she lived as without any reference to the fact that she, you know, that bit of her died ten years before her body did, and stuff like that.[...] And you know, it was lovely just to be reminded that people had loved her. She'd been a pretty amazing person. And yeah, it was just right, just what the way it should be'* [FC48].

Where funerals were judged poorly, it was generally because they had failed in this task of accurate portrayal: '*It was all date, date, date, it was just like he gave accounts of my granddad's life in chronological order but forgot to include my granddad*' [FC29]. Worse, the funeral might be actively 'wrong' for the person who had died. There were two instances where respondents talked about funerals they thought were entirely ill-conceived. One of the respondents talked about her mother's funeral. She had died unexpectedly whilst on holiday and had left no funeral wishes. The respondent had no hand in the funeral arrangements, which were made entirely by her father who used the funeral director who came with the funeral plan the couple had purchased. Her father, who up until this point had very limited connection with the Church, arranged a heavily traditional church service '*with hymns and a man in a funny outfit, with you know, and I don't understand it all I've never been involved in it. And readings from the Bible? It was just bizarre.*' The respondent was furious because her mother had been almost militantly anti-religious, to the point

where she would not even sing Christmas carols. She said that other people attending the funeral had also commented on the choice: *'lots of people afterwards laughed about it, and said you know she would have been fuming. She would have been so cross that we were all [...] in church with hymns'* [FC14].

Another respondent also talked about a funeral that simply had not suited the person who had died. She had been involved with funeral arrangements for her grandfather, principally in agreeing that she would pay for the service that was arranged by her grandfather's son. This was a son he had had from a second marriage; the brothers from her grandfather's two marriages were in no respects close and so the funeral arrangements took place in strained circumstances. The respondent was both dismayed and amused by the choices made about the funeral. Her relative had replicated almost exactly the funeral he had had for his daughter, who had died as a child. This included a horse-drawn hearse, elaborate floral arrangements and clowns to entertain the children at the funeral tea. *'It was just weird....why's he going in the back of a horse-drawn carriage? He drove a little Fiesta. Do you get what I mean? He's a little modest guy, why does he need all this?'* She found the whole day excruciating: *'it wasn't in good taste [...] it was terrible and it was embarrassing, especially when the cortege caused a traffic jam'* [FC17].

### 'Closure'

Although the term 'closure' is often used with regard to funerals, this concept and the idea of saying goodbye was not often articulated by respondents in their narrative of the funeral service itself. The committal was for many people the point in the funeral where a final goodbye was said, and – as has been seen above – many people found the finality distressing.

*'It was so hard to say the last goodbye up until that point, even at the funeral parlour, you know in the chapel of rest whatever you want to call it, you knew that you'd be going back. So there was something very final and I think for me it was the thought of the only thing that's left for her now is the flames; and I remember thinking that so clearly, thinking "Oh my god that's it now, she's gone." I think it was something about letting the body go, it had still been ours up until that point'* [FC18].

Another respondent noted a similar feeling, but also gained a more positive sense:

*'The most meaningful thing about the funeral was that sense of loss. Especially when the doors closed. A sense of loss, but a sense also of closure. It's not the right word, but it's a sense of yes, she was there and now she isn't. And that's part of life, that's a part of growing up. Death is a part of life. So it was an acceptance that I gained from that. It wasn't immediate by any means. [...] It's still acceptance that she's no longer with us'* [FC49].

The sense of closure could be affirmative: it gave *'a sense of relief, a happiness at having known the deceased. I think it has to have that slightly positive ending'* [FC03]. It was also, for some respondents, a signal that their grieving could continue to another stage. Some people indicated that they felt themselves to be in limbo in the days between the death and the funeral, and the service allowed them to move on: *'I think a funeral is about, I think it's*

*about space to start to be able to move to the next stage of grief. Yeah, a good funeral is about having the space to actually be able to say goodbye to the body. And for that to be ok' [FC52].*

Sometimes respondents indicated that they had said their goodbyes before the funeral service, either at the deathbed or during a formal viewing at the funeral director's premises. There was a sense, therefore, that the funeral service was an occasion for the wider family and friends group to say their farewells. Many respondents expressed surprise at the number of people who attended the funeral they talked about. One respondent had approached the funeral arrangements quite functionally: *it was more about doing what needed to be done and letting every, giving everybody the chance to say goodbye'. However, he had been gratified by the number of people who attended his father's funeral, and who all participated in the final action of touching the coffin before leaving the cremation chapel: 'Everyone walked past it. Everybody was sort of, you know, like giving it a tap, or sort of saying their, you know, final goodbyes and there were a lot of tears and all that stuff' [FC35].*

### Nothing going wrong

Where respondents placed little emotional importance on the funeral service, it was generally thought to be satisfactory that the event had gone *'smoothly'*, and nothing untoward had happened [FC06], and there were *'no nasty surprises'* [FC12]. Where people regarded the funeral service as being rather more important, sometimes prosaic concerns could derail the funeral and undermine its purposes. A funeral service is a hugely complex production, requiring *'behind the scenes'* and – where done well – entirely hidden orchestration by the funeral director, celebrant and cemetery or crematorium manager.

There was little tolerance of poor performance, particularly if it undermined the principal tasks of getting the tone of the funeral right or allowing for the right degree of personalisation. Although not strictly speaking a *'mistaken'* action, the fact that limited slots were available at the local crematorium meant that some respondents felt self-conscious about time: *'That was the only slight blot on the day, the fact that you don't want to hold people up. [...] You want time for yours. I think you know you should have at least an hour. Half an hour just isn't long enough'*. If the respondent had known it was possible, they would have booked a double slot at the crematorium. *'[Funeral director's name] was not exactly tapping his watch but ushering us into the car to clear out for the next incoming. So it was just that little rushed back at the end that we could had done without. But it was nobody's fault, it's just how it is' [FC23].* Another respondent, similarly, felt conscious of being managed and rushed along: *'I realise these timeslots at the crematorium are crucial for the next people, but again, you're a process. It's wrong' [FC11].* The term *'processed'* was also used by another respondent [FC43].

As indicated above, some of the respondents were very unhappy with the performance of both the funeral director, who had put very little effort into the arrangements, and the officiant: *'She did her welcomey bit and then played some music. And then one of the goddaughters did a reading. And then played some more music. And then there was the Lord's Prayer. And then I did the eulogy. And then there was some more music. And then we left. The*

*funeral service just seemed as though you were on a conveyor belt'* [FC43]. Perhaps worse were the cases where celebrants got names wrong, sometimes genders also wrong, or omitted to mention particular family members. In one funeral, the celebrant made a terrible mistake in omitting to mention one of the sons in the family, which meant that a whole section of the family was not included. The son had thought the omission was purposeful and had been very upset. The respondent was angry with the celebrant: *I'm afraid I went back at the end of the service and I gave him the politest bollocking you've ever heard in your life, and I managed to hold back the tears but I told him exactly what I thought.* The celebrant had not emailed his script to the family, which meant it had not been possible to spot the error. This brother had then refused to attend the funeral tea: *'so yeah, if you can spoil a funeral he [ie the officiant] spoilt it* [FC29].

## Conclusion

The funeral service is often – but not always – of central importance to narratives about funerals, and its constituent elements carried different meanings and significances for respondents in the study. Again, as much of this report indicates, it would be mistaken to be prescriptive about guidance or direction about funerals aside from acknowledging that families should be allowed to define their own tone. Respondents in this study were often conversant with the range of possibilities, and looked to arrive at a tone they thought most appropriately matched both the circumstances of the death and the person who died. The funeral service had to be factually and emotionally accurate: personalisation occurred in the tone, in the eulogy, in the music and in the way the funeral was dressed. Saying goodbye is often regarded as one of the intrinsic tasks of the funeral, but in actuality many close family and friends said their goodbyes – when they wanted to say goodbye – in other ways and at other times.

## 10. The final goodbye

For the majority of people who had arranged or co-arranged the funeral, the day of the funeral service did not mark the end of the funeral. Where there was either a burial or a cremation, decisions had to be taken about marking the grave or the final disposal of the ashes. This decision-making drew respondents into further discussion and negotiation with family, and choices that were made largely outside the purview of any formalised professional intervention. This element of the funeral is often regarded as being detached from the funeral service and is generally studied separately. However, many people saw a direct line travelling through all their decision making, to arrive at this 'final goodbye'. This study benefits from fact that many respondents were discussing funerals that happened more than two years ago, and where plans had come to fruition.

### Taking time to decide

Between the death and the funeral service there was a time period of around two weeks in which people finalized details of that service. Once the funeral service had taken place, the time in which decisions had to be made became infinitely more elastic. Four of the respondents said that after the funeral service and cremation they had still made no decisions with regard to the ashes: one family was still mulling over possibilities some three years after the funeral. The participant in this case said that they had finally decided to scatter her father's ashes on the moors where his parents had been scattered but her mother kept making excuses and the time never seemed to be right: the respondent had concluded that her mother was just not ready yet emotionally [FC20]. This kind of delay was not necessarily regarded as problematic. One respondent said, of her father's cremated remains,

*'It's not been discussed what we'll do with them. I think it's because one of my brothers is really prickly, he finds it difficult to talk about them whereas my other brother and sister we have talked about it in quite a light-hearted fashion about what we might do, but we were living in different parts of the country so it's not that easy to get us together to do something. But they're here at the moment and personally I'm quite happy just to keep them' [FC31]*

People who still had decisions pending often generally referred to the ashes as that person, and often talked to them although not all family members concurred. One respondent said that her mother had received the ashes of her husband, and told the respondent "'You can talk to him". I'm like "Are you serious? I could talk to a box?" She's like "Yeah, you can talk to him". I was like "I'd rather talk to him when I go for a run rather than looking at a box and talking to a box" [FC28]. A couple who worked as funeral directors, and who had talked about their recently arranging the funeral of a friend who died suddenly and largely without family, were – at the time of the interview – waiting for a special dispersal container for the ashes. In the meantime, the ashes were kept in their office, and they nodded as they walk past. They did not want to leave them on the shelf in the mortuary with a curtain covering

it, as they would normally do: *'It's not particularly logical I know, but we are able to treat him in that sort of familiar way while he's with us'*. From the moment of his sudden, unexpected death, through his time in the mortuary and up until the point of committal, the respondents ensured that their friend would never be unattended [FC16].

Ashes were often split between family members, who themselves decided what they thought to be appropriate. For example, one husband had given a portion of his wife's ashes to their children but kept a portion for himself so they could be mixed with his own when he died [FC38]. This retention of ashes so that spouses could be disposed of together was not uncommon. One respondent found, in clearing out her father's house after his death, that he had kept the ashes of her mother and so she mixed them and the family disposed of both together in a ceremony on the beach [FC8].

In a couple of cases, it was decided to keep the ashes at home indefinitely, with no plans to do anything further. In both cases, the ashes container was openly displayed. One of the women whose baby had died, and who had arranged for a cremation, simply could not part with the ashes: recreating them in some other form such as jewellery risked loss: *'I was really worried that I would lose that and then it would be like losing him all over again'*. She said that retains the ashes on display in a small pot the living room, *'Every now and again I dust him and put him back [laughing]...He's underneath the Sky box [laughing] to keep warm!'* [FC36]. Another respondent said that her father had created a shrine for her mother's ashes, which he displays alongside some of her jewellery.

This sort of interim period also happens when there has been an interment, in the time delay which occurs as the grave settles and before any headstone can be fixed. There was a sense in which this period could be an uneasy waiting. One wife, making arrangements for her husband's headstone said:

*'To me that was the worst part because when you have the funeral it's just like a mound of earth and you had to wait, that was the worst part, especially when it was raining, visiting a grave that's just like muddy and it felt awful. [...] it seemed to prolong the actual unreal itself, a bit in limbo. I didn't like to visit the grave that just had the soil there. It felt incomplete'* [FC40].

Another respondent, who arranged for the double interment of her father and her mother's ashes, felt that in the intervening period she had been simply waiting for the task of grave tending to start: *'So it felt, not that I didn't like going to see my mum and dad, but once the stone was there it felt like it was an actual destination or I could start putting things round it and start making it look nice and maintain it and actually have something to go to, rather than this patch of grass that it had become'* [FC40].

The delay also meant it was possible to think rather more about the gravemarker. The mother whose baby had died had arranged for an interim wooden cross to be erected, and was working with a sculptor to frame something more permanent. She said that this was an expensive option, but her parents were contributing to the cost because they saw it like giving presents at birthdays and Christmas [FC01].



## Formal disposal of cremated remains

It was very rare for there to be no ritual at all attached to the disposal of cremated remains. In three cases, the respondents said that the ashes had been strewn at the crematorium, and had not arranged attendance: it was simply not regarded as being important. A respondent who had attended the funeral of a friend who had died in her 30s, said that the family had had the ashes strewn, with no ceremony: *'It surprised me how little it meant to them, as if that wasn't her now. It surprised me because I think in my place, I might have wanted them and perhaps wouldn't have been ready, but they almost, was "Just do it", she's not there anyway you know'* [FC26].

Many more people arranged for the ashes to be disposed of in a more formal manner, which included interment either in a churchyard or in an existing family grave. One respondent said that she had kept her father's ashes for over three years. She did not feel that she could scatter them, because his specific wish had been that he did not want his body to be just *'thrown away'*, so *'he would need to be contained'*. She finally decided to have his ashes interred in the local cemetery, with a small stone: *'the wording needs to be thought about carefully. It may have taken a length of time, but I am happy I have come to a solution, a good decision in the end'* [FCo6].

The interment of ashes often took place with rituals that echoed elements of a formal full-body interment, in being attended by family and with prayers or some words being said. A respondent, who had arranged the cremation of her mother only recently, decided to have the ashes formally interred in the local church memorial garden. All the family attended. The vicar spoke *'formal, religious-y type words'*. Her father lowered the ashes into the ground, and the family was given a chance to have a few thoughts and invited to throw some soil down onto the box. *'Again, I thought that was just something that happened in the movies. And we'd been pre-warned that we could take flowers, as well. Strict rules in those places about what you can and can't place. Yes, yes, oh my gosh, the rules. So, yeah, we laid our flowers at the same time. My cousin said she hadn't expected the putting the earth in, and she found that quite distressing'* [FC53].

The ashes interment was taken by one respondent as an opportunity to repair the family rift that had been caused by the celebrant's mistake in the funeral service. The funeral service was replayed, in essence, with everyone fully included and it was resolved that the respondent would always deliver the eulogy at family funerals [FC29]. Another respondent was also able to reinvest emotion in a second service: the first funeral service for her partner had been wholly controlled by his brother and she regarded it as an entirely negative experience. He had no interest in the cremated remains, and she decided on her own service: the ashes were strewn at the crematorium in a spiral shape, on the day after the cremation. She attended this service with her sons and no other family. She asked for a spiral shape specifically because *'the spiral is very personal to me. It's the natural form of growth and symbol of everlasting life'*. The family was then left then to reflect a while before they came away [FC11].



Conversely, family feuding might continue well beyond the funeral service. The woman who had fallen out with her sister said that the sister had appropriated their mother's ashes for dispersal in Spain, where the sister lived. The respondent dismissed this action as being pointless, since her mother had before been there, and had no emotional connection to the place [FCog]. The respondent who had fallen out with her ex-husband was rather more distressed by his decision to have their son's ashes entombed within a sculpture which had signified his work. The mother thought her son being bullied at work had contributed to his suicide: *'They couldn't have planned it more inappropriately if they'd tried [laughs]'*, and the action ran entirely counter to her wish for a natural burial [FC25}.

## Places of remembrance

The formal interment of cremated remains tended to be part of the funeral narratives that took place some years ago. Where cremations had taken place more recently, it was much more likely that the remains were dispersed in a place that was meaningful to the families or to the person who had died. This event could be more or less elaborately orchestrated: one family visited the Lake District – their usual family holiday destination – and all took out rowing boats onto a lake. Each member had a box containing some of their father's ashes, and scattered them into the lake at the same time, retaining some to scatter on the hills overlooking the lake.

Another respondent who had arranged the funeral of her father with her mother said that, once they had picked up his ashes, they had sat down one night with a drink and decided to do three things. They were going to retain some of the ashes to make a diamond, and then have a portion of ashes scattered at sea. Her father had been in the navy, and the family found out that the RNLI would arrange a scattering for a small fee. The remaining ashes would be scattered in a nearby memorial wood: *'He loved being outdoors, some of my memories of me Dad are walking the dogs up there so I think it must be a nice thing to do, it means a bit more than just having a stone somewhere that no-one is going to look at, so'* [FCo8]. Another respondent said that her mother had planned what she wanted to happen with her cremated remains, and the family was happy to make these arrangements:

*'After the cremation, we, erm, probably breaking all kinds of bylaws we did the same with my mum's ashes that we'd done with my dad's ashes twenty years previously. He was a great fisherman, so we all went to one of the places he liked to fish and stood on a bridge and threw them in the river and so she'd asked that we did the same with her. I don't think she considered burial, I think she was satisfied with what we'd arranged for my dad all those years before and you know, part of the ashes to go to the same place, she needed to be cremated for that, you can't really chuck a coffin in the river, well you could I suppose, burial at sea and all, but no, so that is what she wanted, she'd got planned. This took place about a year after she died – there was some money in her estate still and so they had a meal and then scattered her ashes, that was nice'* [FC10].

Distance and proximity could be a big part of these decisions. The respondent whose son had died of cancer a year before said that his ashes had been at the funeral director until only a week before: *'I didn't want them at home. I couldn't bear the thought of having them*

*at home*'. Now they have decided to scatter the ashes in a local wood. Her in-laws had been scattered at a place on the coast where they had often gone on holiday, and the remaining family had not since been back. She and her husband both wanted her son to be nearer, and decided on the local woods '*which are very pretty*'. She explained: '*I want to be able to go wherever [son's name] is. I don't want him so far away that I can't...I mean I know he's not there, but I want to be able to go to whatever spot we chose as often as I want to and easily feel connected to him in that way*'. However, they wanted the ashes to be dispersed, and they did not want there to be any sort of shrine: her husband '*doesn't want to have a particular specific place to go*' [FC37].

## **Conclusion**

The 'final goodbye' – the burial and the dispersal of ashes – was for many respondents an important element of their funeral narrative, and one where it was more likely to be the case that they were not under time pressure to make a decision, could mull and debate their decisions with other family members, and arrive at their final decision with – ostensibly – very little professional intervention. This element of the service was also the opportunity for a corrective and for repair if the formal funeral service was in some way lacking.

## 11. Conclusion

This short conclusion draws out some of the main themes which emerged from the funeral narratives, and focuses on how people created and derived meaning.

- Many of the people who arrange funerals are experienced in this role, and also knew – from their own experience – how best to create meanings for themselves and their families. This research included only a small number of ‘newbies’, who were in the position of arranging a funeral despite having no experience at all of attending one. Where people felt that they had insufficient say in how a funeral went, they expressed a strong desire to do things differently the next time; people who talked about their decisions often reflected on a decision they had regretted. People learn from funerals, and carry that knowledge from one funeral to another.
- It would be a mistake, therefore, to presume that all customers in the funeral marketplace are gullible or easily persuaded to purchase things they do not want or need. Few people in the study said that paying for the funeral was an issue for them, but many were well aware of costs and only a small handful actively chose to inflate their expenditure beyond what they knew to be necessary.
- Much of the debate on funerary practice focusses on the professionals who are involved. In actuality, the family itself is the biggest determinant of whether a funeral is regarded positively. Funerals are events which exacerbate and underline family rifts, and in this study where these rifts were in evidence then respondents critiqued almost every element of the funeral from which they had been excluded. However, the majority of families in the study worked hard to ensure that all voices were included and that decisions were made collaboratively where possible, and this meant that overall most people were happy with the funerals they talked about.
- There was a strong understanding that the funeral was to a degree ‘for’ the people who were bereaved but actually the person who died was the principal focus. The funeral was a gift to that person, and it was important to get the gift right. Where people had left funeral wishes, many respondents expressed satisfaction in being able to meet those wishes, however minor. Having no wishes to follow meant that the person arranging the funeral was left to second guess what might have been wanted, and it was much more likely that disagreement would arise in the family as to core elements such as the preference for burial or cremation.
- All this meant that families themselves were also engaged in the ‘emotional labour’ of the funeral, and worked hard to ensure that it was sufficiently personal, that the tone was right, and a ‘goodbye’ was properly expressed. The period of time between the death and the funeral was very important to many respondents, in being a time when much of this labour took place, and where the families could actively engage with and order their memories of the person who had died. It is important, therefore, that this period is not too limited or rushed although where the death had

followed a protracted illness, families were often already engaged in preparation and the time needed could be short.

- The professionalism of funeral directors was discussed in terms of their personal demeanour. This meant less a commentary on their empathy, and more on their willingness to listen actively and work with families to arrive at the funeral they wanted. This could also mean that funeral directors were required to pick up signals where families might want guidance and information, to suggest possible alternatives if families were uncertain, or even to be simply functional if that was what the family wanted. Families were very unhappy where they felt that the funeral director was simply 'processing' their funeral or was too directive and inflexible when they wanted a higher degree of control themselves. This was also the case with officiants, although more recent experiences with civil or humanist celebrants tended to be more positive than the use in the more distant past of clergy who had been unknown to the family.
- People had a complex relationship with the body of the person who had died, and interactions often began at the very moment of death. Being with the body at the hospital was often as important – sometimes more so – than any formal viewing or visiting at funeral directors' premises. Families were often distressed by what they regarded as unnatural preparations, and actually felt that these processes distanced them from the person who had died. For some people, having no limits on the time that could be spent with the body was very precious indeed. It was always important that the body of the person who died was cared for with respect and solicitude: the body had to be 'comfortable'.
- It is difficult to presuppose which elements of the funeral service were regarded as being more meaningful. Respondents were remarkably varied with regard to the parts of the service they chose to focus on, which means that it is a mistake to be prescriptive about formulations for a 'standard' or 'usual' funeral. Creating opportunities for people to identify what is meaningful for them may be a key tenet of the funeral director role.
- Not all funeral services had to be meaningful, but if they were then they generally had to serve the triple function of having the right tone, however defined by the family; to give an accurate reflection of the person who had died; and to allow for the wider family and friends groups to say farewell. Close family goodbyes were often said outside the confines of the funeral service – soon after death, during the arrangement process or in the dispersal of ashes. For some respondents, there was no conscious 'goodbye', and this was not regarded as being problematic.
- The relative freedom that sits around the nature of ceremonies to dispose of cremated remains ashes was clearly important. The idea that 'direct cremation' necessarily equates to a lack of concern with ritual may therefore not be tenable. Many people arranged complex and sometimes expensive rituals for the disposal of cremated remains, although these tended to be private and not involve the wider community.

## 12. Recommendations: making meaningful funerals

### General messages from the report

- Leaving last wishes is the best final gift someone can make to their family. This does not necessarily mean a funeral plan, but can include even just one single preference as to song, tone, reading, ritual action or even a strong opinion about what is not wanted. At the very least, last wishes should also include a preference as to burial or cremation. Friends and family generally were deeply comforted by meeting a last wish, and distressed when this was not possible.
- Funerals are rarely just 'about' the funeral service. Ritual funerary activity extends from the point of death through to final actions around committal which may take place months or even years after the funeral service. There are, consequently, multiple places in these processes where it is possible to get things wrong or get things right.
- Not everyone was comforted by being with the body of the person who had died. A formal viewing at the funeral director's premises was not necessarily the most important time for people to be with the body after death. Time at hospital or at home could be more or equally important.
- People don't always find meaning in the same part of the funeral; different family members will find different things more or less significant to them. It is best not to be prescriptive about where attention should be focussed.
- Getting the tone of the funeral right was extremely important in defining satisfaction with the funeral: the eulogy had to be truthful both factually and emotionally; music choices and dressing the funeral had to correctly convey the taste or personality of the person who died. Families were more satisfied the more directly they were engaged with this 'emotional labour'.
- Respondents felt it was inappropriate to be prescriptive about the tone: no-one wanted to be told to be either celebratory or to be sombre. Families were generally well able to decide what was right for them.
- People wanted different amounts of involvement, participation, control, personalisation and information. Any generalised statements regarding what bereaved people need collectively should be treated with caution.

### Messages for professionals

- People should be encouraged to discuss funeral wishes: health and social care professionals could play a greater role in creating a range of opportunities for those wishes to be expressed.

- Funeral directors should consider giving people the opportunity to discuss and express funeral wishes without purchasing a pre-paid funeral plan, and without any obligation to then use their service at time of need.
- People may well be seeking meaning from a funeral at any point along an extended timeframe which means that, all the way along that line, professionals should acknowledge and support each other's contribution to meaning-making. All funeral professionals want the best outcomes for the individuals and families using their services, and should work collaboratively to achieve this goal.
- Family dynamics will play a substantial role in defining the success of the funeral, and funeral directors' mediating between family members to facilitate inclusion is an important function.
- Funeral director training should acknowledge that families using their services may themselves be expert in creating meaning at funerals: arranging funerals should be framed more as a dialogue and less in terms of 'expert' direction of 'inexpert' customers. A good funeral service is a 'co-production'.
- However, funeral care professionals should also recognise that the funeral service, while the most significant event for many, may not be the most meaningful aspect of the wider funeral for others.
- Whatever services are provided by the professionals involved, there is a need to ensure that there is space for families to contribute their own labour, and work towards making the funeral successful.
- Individuals differ substantially in the comfort they derive from being with the body of the person who has died; it would be mistaken to presume that everyone needs the 'closure' of a personal encounter: no-one should be in any way forced to view the body of the person who died, on the assumption that this is always beneficial.
- Families should be made fully aware of the processes involved in embalming. Indeed, there should be active and informed consent. Understanding the process after the fact can be deeply distressing and regarded as an unmitigated harm that is often regretted.
- Funeral directors may well have a role to play in advising individuals and families about post-funeral options, particularly in terms of the legality of disposing of cremated remains in public places.
- In terms of funerals, professionals getting things wrong can carry a long-term detriment to the family in how the funeral is remembered; where mistakes are made, professionals should explore with families how best to repair the damage, perhaps through compensatory ritual or other symbolic acts. For example, rituals around the disposal of ashes could replace 'failed' funeral services that did not meet family expectations.

## Messages for policy makers

- Participants spoke extensively about the support they wanted from funeral directors and this could best be described as requiring an emotionally intelligent, flexible approach which can be both directive and facilitative depending on the task and needs of the individual receiving the support. If regulation of funeral care is to occur, then professional accreditation provides an opportunity to create a framework to encourage these skills and attributes in people working in funeral care.
- Furthermore, the very diverse needs of participants with respect to the level of involvement, participation, control, personalisation, time with the person who has died and requirements for caring for the body highlight the need for general transparency to reduce information asymmetries between professional and customers. Transparency should include clear information on funeral director's approach, views on personalisation and co-production of funerals with families, how the funeral director will care for the person who has died, and how they price for their services.
- There is evidence that deep distress can be caused by a lack of awareness of the details of the embalming process and other physical interventions. Families often misunderstood or were not told what this process comprised. The study suggests that embalming should only take place once fully informed consent has been secured from the family.
- Attempts to define a 'basic funeral' to allow for price comparison are problematic, and have a tendency to presume that the predictable, material elements of the funeral are the things that are most important. Elements that are hardest to predict were often the most important things, and many of these rested on the funeral director's time and skill. A 'basic' funeral might therefore presume that the funeral director will not take the time to mediate a funeral that includes all the family, or offer the opportunity for the family to be with the body of the person who died.
- There was little evidence that family members inflated their funeral expenditure any more than might be necessary. Highly ritualised funerals with increased attention paid to elements such as dressing the funeral could often reflect a problematic death, and in these circumstances there may well be dissatisfaction with artificial limitations on 'approved' expenditure, as currently exists within the Funeral Expenses Payment.
- Further, the funeral is not just about the funeral service. Some families found other elements of the funeral far more important. It may be that a Funeral Expenses Payment should be a sum that the family should be at liberty to spend as they would like on the funeral arrangements, much in the way that the Death Grant operated.

## APPENDIX 1: Participant demographics

Table 1: Demographic information

	Respondent	Person who has died
<b>Age</b>		
Stillborn/child		3
20-35	2	1
36-50	20	4
51-65	26	3
66-80	1	11
81+	1	18
Information missing		10
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	5	27
Female	45	23
<b>Location</b>		
	Respondent at time of funeral	Person who died, at time of funeral
Yorkshire and Humberside	26	25
London	7	4
South East	2	3
South West	3	1
North West	1	5
North East	2	3
East Midlands	1	0
West Midlands	0	0
East	4	4
Wales	0	1
Scotland	0	1
Overseas	1	0
Information missing	3	3



**Table 2: Relationship and role in the funeral**

		Role				
		Principal	Co-arranger	Participant	Attender	Total
Relationship to deceased	Spouse	2	1	0	0	3
	Adult child/grandchild	10	16	3	0	29
	Parent	3	0	0	1	4
	Other close family	1	0	1	0	2
	Close friend	1	2	3	2	8
	Distant	0	0	1	3	4
Total		17	20	7	6	50

**Table 3: Funeral information**

<b>When the funeral took place</b>	
Less than two years ago	21
Two to five years ago	10
Six to ten years ago	7
Eleven+ years ago	7
Missing information	5
<b>Disposal option</b>	
Cremation	38
Burial	10
Natural burial	2

# Participants needed for funeral study

## *How much do funerals really matter?*

### Brief description of study

Very little research has been carried out to establish what constitutes a “good” funeral, and how best to support people when they are arranging a funeral. This study aims to identify which aspects of funerals people find helpful and to see whether funerals have an impact on long-term wellbeing. It is hoped that this knowledge will then be used to support people in the best way possible.

### Who is carrying out the research?

The research is being carried out by Full Circle Funerals, an independent Funeral Director based in Leeds. The project is supported, and endorsed by, an advisory committee with representatives from the University of York, Leeds Beckett university, ICCM (Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management), the Good Funeral Guide and SAIF (the National Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors).

### What is involved?

Participating in the study will involve taking part in one interview, either in person or over the telephone (which is likely to take between one and two hours). The interview will ask questions about your experience of arranging and attending one funeral. After the interview most people will be asked to complete a short questionnaire (either over the phone or by email) after six months and one year.

### Who can participate?

Anyone aged 18 or over, who has attended the funeral of a close relative or friend, is able to take part in the study. The funeral must have taken place in the UK and could have taken place at any time. Different members of the same family may wish to take part (although their interviews will be carried out separately). Ideally, we would like to include people who have had a range of different experiences and who have different perspectives.

### Are there any risks associated with participating?

Some people find that talking about bereavement and funerals makes them feel very emotional and you may find it upsetting to discuss your experiences of arranging and attend the funeral of someone you feel close to. If you do feel upset, or find the interview too difficult, then you are able to withdraw from the study at any point.

If you are interested in taking part, please contact Sarah on 01943 262626 or [sarah@fullcirclefunerals.co.uk](mailto:sarah@fullcirclefunerals.co.uk)

More information can also be found at [www.fullcirclefunerals.co.uk/aboutus/research](http://www.fullcirclefunerals.co.uk/aboutus/research)

## APPENDIX 3: Topic guide

### Topic guide

#### CONTEXT

Please could you start by telling me who the funeral was for?

- Establish relationship to deceased
- Explore other main people involved
- If appropriate, explore the quality of relationship and any contributing interpersonal dynamics

Can you start by telling me about events leading up to the funeral?

- Might include illness / sudden death
- May give indication about nature of death / coroner involvement etc
- How long after the death did the funeral take place

What was your role in making the funeral arrangements?

- Was individual the executor / client or more peripherally involved?
- Who else was involved in making the arrangements and what role did they take?

Did the person who died leave any instructions about what they wanted?

- Was it a burial or a cremation?
- May include formal expression of wishes or informal comments

#### FUNERAL

Please could you describe the funeral?

Specifically, gather information about:

- Location and timings
- How many people attended
- Tone of funeral
- Celebrant
- Eulogy / spoken word – who and what?
- Coffin
- Photographs/filming
- Flowers (including what happened to them afterwards)
- Cars (including occupants)
- Travel route
- Pallbearing / coffin transitions
- Written service sheets
- Actions at committal (curtains at crematorium / lowering of coffin)
- Funeral favours

- Dress code
- Refreshments
- Condolence book
- Commemoration – memorial if burial OR what happened with the ashes.

Could you describe the tone of the funeral? Was it as you wanted it to be?

Do you feel that you had the opportunity to make the funeral more personalised? IF YES, was this important to you and how did you achieve that? IF NO, do you think that would have liked to?

What part of the funeral did you find most helpful / important?

Was there any part of the funeral that you found particularly difficult?

When you look back, would you say that the funeral was a positive, neutral or negative experience? Please could you explain your answer?

## **BURIAL OR CREMATION**

How did you decide where the service and committal would take place?

Please can you tell me about the timings and the order that things took place?

How did you decide whether burial or cremation were most fitting? Did you consider the alternative?

How did you decide the location for the burial or cremation? Did you consider any alternatives?

Did you have any contact with staff from the crematorium / burial ground / any other venues?

How do you feel about these choices now?

## **ARRANGEMENT PROCESS (time leading up to funeral)**

### **IF INVOLVED IN ARRANGEMENT PROCESS**

How did you decide which funeral director to use?

Did you have any previous experience of arranging a funeral?

IF YES, do you think that was helpful

Please tell me about the process of arranging the funeral?

- How was initial contact made?
- Where and how many times did you meet face-to-face?
- Did you have contact any other way?
- Was there anything that you were worried about?
- What were your priorities?

- How was information provided to you?
- Was there anything that you found particularly helpful (i.e. FD style / manner)?
- Was there anything that you found unhelpful (i.e. pressure to make decisions)?
- Is there anything that you would change about the arranging process?

How were decisions made about the funeral?

- Who took the lead in decision making?
- How many people were involved?
- Was there anything that helped you to make decisions?

Was there anything that helped you to make the decisions?

Did you perform any specific tasks in the time leading up to the funeral that you found to be helpful?

- The may include organising refreshments / care of the deceased / choosing clothes etc

Specifically, did to engage in any of the following (and if so, how did you find this)?

- Choosing clothes
- Choosing music
- Choosing location / date of funeral
- Writing or contributing to eulogy
- Contributing to service in another way
- Choosing flowers / coffin / hearse etc
- Making service sheet etc
- Communicating with other friends and family
- Personal care of the person who has died

When you look back, would you say that the process of arranging the funeral was positive, neutral or negative? Please could you explain your answer?

## **SUPPORT NETWORK**

Who did you find most helpful when making decisions about the funeral?

- May include FD, cleric, friends, family
- What was helpful about their approach

Was there anyone who you did not find helpful, or who you feel could have been more supportive?

- As above
- What was unhelpful about their approach

From your personal experience, what support do you think people need when arranging a funeral?

If you were training funeral directors, what would you tell them was the most important thing for them to learn to do well?

And if you were training funeral directors, what would you tell them they should never do?

## POST-FUNERAL

Can you tell me about paying for the funeral?

Is there anything that you have done after the funeral that you have found helpful?

- For example, scattering ashes / fulfilling final wishes / dealing with possessions

When you look back now, what is the thing that you have found most meaningful about the funeral?

What do you think constitutes a “good funeral”?

## DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

<b>Gender participant</b>	Male	Female	Transgender	Unspecified		
<b>Age participant</b>	18-24	25-34	35-49	50-64	65-74	75+
<b>Profession P</b>		SC 1	SC 2	SC 3	SC 4	SC 5
<b>Ethnic Group P</b>	White / white British	Black / black British	Asian	Mixed ethnicity	Other	
<b>Religious persuasion participant</b>	Christian: RC/Protestant Denomination	Islam	“Spiritual” unspecified	Atheist / agnostic	Other:	
<b>Religious persuasion deceased</b>	Christian	Islam	“Spiritual” unspecified	Atheist / agnostic	Other:	
<b>Where participant lived at time of funeral</b>						
<b>Where deceased lived</b>						
<b>Where funeral took place</b>						
<b>Burial or cremation</b>						