



## Opinion

By  
**Sir John  
Hayes MP**

Chair of the  
All-Party Group  
for Funerals and  
Bereavement,  
Westminster

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# Caring for grieving people during COVID-19

Funeral directors work hard to not stand out in a crowd. With a quiet professionalism, they see it as their role to care for the loved ones of those who have passed, supporting them through their grief and helping them say goodbye with dignity and respect.

As Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Funerals and Bereavement I am privileged to have gained an insight into the huge amount of work funeral directors have put in during this pandemic, ensuring those who are bereaved are still able to say goodbye.

2020 has put funeral directors under an unprecedented amount of pressure. An increase in the rate of deaths worldwide has meant that, in a number of countries, systems have been overwhelmed. This, in some cases, has tragically led to the use of mass graves.

We should be grateful to have avoided such an experience here in the UK. Funeral directors across the country have gone to extraordinary lengths to support bereaved families through funeral restrictions that have forced them to be isolated and distanced in their grief – unable to surround themselves with all those they love.

The restriction of mourners to just a handful of people at times, while understandable, has led to painful and distressing decisions for families, and real challenges for the funeral directors looking after them.

Despite these challenges, I have been struck by the ways in which the funeral profession has been able to keep these funeral services as special as possible. This has included the livestreaming of services to friends and relatives at home and across the world, taking a cortege to pass directly by a vulnerable relative to enable them to pay their last respects,

or making an extra effort to deliver a personal request, such as the funeral director who printed out scans of family members' hand prints to place over the coffin, because touching the coffin wasn't allowed.

It is not just an increased number of funerals that directors have had to contend with. Ensuring the safety of staff and mourners has been essential, and funeral directors have gone to great lengths to do this. It is, therefore, vital that funeral directors are part of the conversation about ensuring the necessary supply of PPE at affordable prices and that their role is understood and factored into local and central government planning for the next phase of the pandemic, when a vaccine appears in sight but deaths sadly continue over difficult winter months.

Worrying about their own exposure to the virus and witnessing the grief of families on a daily basis has come at a price and I know many funeral directors are exhausted and saddened by what they have been through. But, their overriding commitment to supporting those who are grieving has kept them going and, during this National Grief Awareness Week - more poignant than most years - we should pay tribute to the 20,000 funeral service employees in the UK who care for the dead and who support the bereaved in our constituencies.

**This opinion piece was also published in *The House Magazine*, a publication for Members of Parliament.**