



THE FUTURE OF FUNERALS PART 2

IS PUBLIC INTEREST IN POST-COVID MEMORIALS WANING?

NAFD members report a reducing interest in holding future memorial events for people who have died during COVID - and greater planning to make restricted funerals as personalised as possible.

With the exception of those deceased people that were repatriated abroad in 2020 (a much smaller number than in a normal year), almost 700,000 funerals took place in the UK in 2020.

Given that the maximum number permitted to attend in the UK, at any point during 2020, was 30 - and the minimum was six - there are now not only hundreds of thousands of families that have experienced a restricted funeral, but tens of millions of people who were unable to attend one of those 700,000 funerals last year because they were not able to be included in the numbers.

Funeral Director Monthly asked a panel of NAFD Presidents and Past Presidents, from across the UK, for their observations on how families are responding to the ongoing restrictions on funeral attendance - and whether

the initial rush of interest in holding a memorial event once the pandemic is over was still evident.

In the early days of COVID-19, members reported that a majority of families had spoken about holding a future memorial service/ashes scattering or celebration of life when restrictions were lifted. This still remains the case in some parts of the UK, with both Jeremy Field of CPJ Field and Abi Pattenden of Freeman Brothers, both based in Sussex, confirming that around half of their clients still wish to discuss a future memorial service.

However, given the extended length of time that restrictions are lasting (and may still continue), for many families interest has waned, with clients no longer wanting to wait for restrictions to be lifted to hold a larger event - and simply wanting to be able to move on. Current NAFD President David



Abi Pattenden



Alison Crake



David Barrington



Jenny Gilbert-Trigg



Jeremy Field



William Millar



Nigel Lymn Rose



Paul Cuthell

Barrington agrees: “Lots of people say they want something, but the interminable nature of the restrictions is putting them off.”

Says William Millar, of Ivan Murdock and Sons in Northern Ireland: “It’s now less than 1% of families talking to us about thanksgiving services at a later date – and many families we cared for earlier in COVID-19 have come back to the funeral director saying they don’t want to revisit the bereavement all over again.”

Paul Cuthell, of Thomas Cuthell and Sons in Falkirk, has seen a significant shift as well. “At the beginning we offered a future memorial service to everyone and kept a list, but now we don’t even suggest it – as many people don’t want to reopen old wounds.”

While there is a general sense that people now reluctantly accept the restricted numbers and are seeking to move on, there is also an argument that, in leaving ‘wounds’ closed, there will be unresolved grief for those people who were not able to be included in the numbers attending the funeral service.

This is something Co-op Funeralcare identified in its June 2020 report, *A Nation In Mourning*, which reported that approximately 9.7 million mourners had been denied the chance to say their last goodbye at a loved one’s funeral during the first lockdown. A number which has now multiplied, many times over. Given the important role that funerals play in the grieving process, it is not yet possible to assess the long-term impact on all those who haven’t been able to say goodbye to someone they were close to.

For some families, not having to have the ‘big show’ funeral has reportedly come of something of a relief – reporting that they prefer the more intimate and personal nature of a smaller funeral.

Says Alison Crake, of Crake and Mallon in Stockton-on-Tees: “I’ve looked after a few families that have been content with only 30 attending. One, in particular, would have been high profile and led to a high attendance and the family confessed to me that they were a little bit relieved it would be just the immediate family and a service that was ‘intimate and personal’.”



While there have also been (and continue to be) issues over people seeking to go around the restrictions – or uninvited additional mourners simply showing up – the majority of families have been very stoical and accepting of the restrictions and have increasingly sought to work within them to create the best possible funeral.

Jenny Gilbert-Trigg, of AJ Adkinson & Son in Leicestershire, has found that families are also starting to embrace options such as webcasting and video presentations. “It took a long time for webcasting and video tributes to really take off. At first, many families indicated that, if they couldn’t have the full service, they’d rather just keep it simple, but now we see more people planning video eulogies – think of *This is Your Life* or a musical and photo montage.”

The panel also reported seeing people make personal choices in other ways – such as a personalised coffin, a horse and carriage, or more elaborate headstone.

Nigel Lymn Rose, chairman of AW Lymn – The Family Funeral Service, in Nottingham, agrees. “In the first lockdown I would guess probably a third of families talked to us about a memorial service. But now, with the 30 mourners permitted and the advent of webcasting services, including live view, and view on demand and recording

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of service by request, I would say just a tiny percentage and certainly less than 5% of families are having those conversations with us now.”

He adds: “I get the feeling that what will really happen is that, at the next family celebration, such as a special birthday, wedding anniversary or the like, mention will be made of the deceased and a glass raised in their memory – rather than a special formal service being organised.”

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

SHARE YOUR VIEWS WITH THE NAFD

Are families embracing smaller funerals in your local area – or is there a pent-up demand for larger memorial events that will happen when restrictions are lifted?

Email your thoughts to editor@nafd.org.uk for inclusion in a paper the NAFD is working on setting out the key issues for a post-COVID funerals market.

Next month, *Funeral Director Monthly* will be exploring the impact of digital technology and other changes which have taken place during COVID that may be here to stay.