

Saying “No” goes against the grain

UK funeral directors’ experiences and the complexities of ‘choice’ during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic

Jennifer Riley, Vikki Entwistle and Arnar Arnason – *on behalf of the Care in Funerals Research Project Team*

CDAS Conference
May 2023

'[We're] not used to having to say, "No" to our families. Where it is legally possible, we will always give them what they want.'

Patricia - Funeral director

The Care in Funerals project

- Funerals as important ways of caring for dead and the bereaved
- Pandemic disruption and creativity illuminating what matters about funerals and why
- 68 interviews with UK nationals who during the pandemic:
 - were bereaved;
 - worked/volunteered as funeral directors/in death care;
 - acted as officiants or celebrants.



Background

We began the *Care in Funerals* project expecting that disruptions to UK funerals during the Covid-19 pandemic would enable us to interrogate things we might otherwise take for granted.

Between April 2021 and April 2022, we conducted 67 semi-structured qualitative interviews with 68 individuals about their experiences of bereavement, or of working or volunteering in funeral care during the COVID-19 pandemic – in particular, with 19 funeral directors. The interviews were wide-ranging, revealing disruption, innovation, and illuminating what mattered and why to the people we spoke with. We've already presented and written about the hybridisation of funerals and configurational eulogies.

This paper focuses on an aspect of the dataset we think is interesting and

complex, the subtleties of which we're very much still working on. Our analysis is somewhat tentative, and we would welcome your insights and suggestions about the ideas and the direction of travel.

Discomfort at saying “No”

Lauren – “it was hard because everything that they would have normally wanted to do wasn’t possible [...] [We] **feel like all [we’re] doing is saying no you can’t do that**, no you can’t do that, no...”. And the thing is it’s really difficult because, **although it’s not your fault** that you’re saying no, you are still saying no to someone.”

Thalia – **Nobody really went into the funeral industry to say no to people**, it’s not something we want to do [...] To be in the position that you have to explain to people that, you know, **for your own safety and for ours**, we can’t do this.



Discomfort at saying ‘No’

In the first place, the interviews showed that funeral directors found having to say ‘no’ to mourners unfamiliar and unwelcome. As these quotes illustrate, they felt uncomfortable doing so – despite the pandemic barriers being important for maintaining safety, as Thalia highlights, and not being their ‘fault’, as Lauren notes.

Aiming to produce a funeral that is...

"What they wish"	"Something personal[/ized]"
"What they want"	"Something meaningful"
"What's right for them"	"Something of themselves"
"What's relevant for them"	
"What's important for them"	
"What they choose"	
"What they ask"	
"What they select"	

Aiming to provide a funeral that is ...

If saying "no" was uncomfortable, what does saying "yes" look like? The funeral directors' consistently painted it as their aim to do, or to create a funeral which was...

- "What they wish"
- "Something personal[/ized]"
- "What they want"
- "Something meaningful"
- "What's right for them"
- "Something of themselves"
- "What's relevant for them"

- “What’s important for them”
- “What they choose”
- “What they ask”
- “What they select”

A funeral director's role

Thalia - "the organisation's rule is that basically we need to obey the laws about the funerals, but otherwise I'm quite free to **do what the family want**. [...] It is a situation where you're just **listening to them** and doing what they want [...] I **think that is a form of care**, it's very important."

This discourse evokes a facilitative, responsive, and open role in creating funerals which – with the important exceptions of some kinds of religious funerals - are varied and bespoke, reflecting personal touches and people's wishes. Some interviewees associated such aspects of the funeral director's role with providing 'care'. For example, this is how Thalia (F007) described her role, drawing attention to listening, and doing 'what the family want'.

Who are “they”?

Amanda – “[There can be an] issue around direct cremation: the family are often really not keen on it; they’re doing it because the person requested it.”

Samantha - sometimes [with] the choice of hymns, the choice of announcements, the choice of flowers, you feel like you’re in the diplomatic corps [...] everybody has to have their input, but clearly there’s obviously different factions in families.



Complexities of choice and facilitation

Supporting choice and personalisation in funerals has subtleties and complexities.

For example, we might ask who ‘they’ are. In almost every instance, they are the deceased’s family. But they can also be the deceased themselves – especially when personalization is in view. Or perhaps a broader religious or cultural community. Or some combination of those different parties. Because ‘they’ is plural, it can serve to suggest homogeneity and agreement – which may well exist, but certainly does not always. Potential for disagreement and contestation about what people want from a funeral – whether between the bereaved or between bereaved and deceased, or bereaved ‘family’ and members of the wider community, for example - is something we highlight in several of the case studies in the Care in Funerals casebook. These slides also offer some examples of the kinds of disagreements which might arise while planning a funeral.

Enacting wishes

Donna – “Whatever a family throw at you, you try and do. Yes, we can do this and yes, we can sort that [...] trying to **almost bend over backwards to provide exactly what they want.**”

Salma – “Creating exactly what the wish is of the family are asking us to do, putting that together [...] making sure we take very, very detailed instructions [...] I get really excited when someone says, “Oh, **can we have this?**” and then my mind goes, “**Yes, how can we make that happen?**”



We might also ask: if good funerals are about what *they* want, where does the funeral director’s *direction* come in? Interviewees’ descriptions of working to plan and produce funerals – both during the pandemic and out-with it – revealed various different ways in which funeral decisions might be settled upon, and different opinions about how best to make or support good choices.

Although in broad terms there was agreement that clients should be heard and their wishes respected, interviewees described various positions on whether and how funeral directors should suggest ideas, make recommendations and otherwise shape or influence the ‘chosen’ funeral.

As this slide shows, some funeral directors emphasised enacting pre-existing wishes.

Taking time to orientate and listen

Lauren - “The role of our job is to give people information so that they are empowered to come to decisions [that] involves sitting down with the family, asking them questions to find out what it is that they want [...] guiding them through the decisions that they need to make, getting as much information as you can, leaving them with information that they will need to decide for future [...] you would have ongoing responsibilities to ensure that you obtain that information from them within the right timescales.”

Several interviewees emphasised the importance of taking the time to elicit these wishes. (This quotation also mentions pointing out the kinds of decisions that might need to be made, rather than steering people towards a particular answer.)

Taking time to listen and understand

Amanda - “having **as many conversations for as long as we needed to** with people before we started doing arrangements, so we knew what they wanted us to do rather than us telling them what we were going to do.”

Also emphasising taking time, Amanda (F003) described “having as many conversations for as long as we needed to with people before we started doing arrangements, so we knew what they wanted us to do rather than us telling them what we were going to do.” The contrast here between asking and eliciting and knowing, and telling people, is quite striking.

Interpreting and leading

Brian - “My job is [...] leading what that family wants and interpreting it in such a way that they get the best standard of service possible.”



In some cases, the process evoked appeared straightforward, based on listening – though others noted that the translation of ideas into reality involved leading and interpretation on the funeral director’s part. Quite what ‘interpreting’, ‘guiding’, ‘leading’ and so on might involve are interesting ethical questions we’re keen to explore further.

In other cases, interviewees explained that people *don’t* know what they want, and reminded us that a funeral director is tasked with supporting people to make decisions which will culminate in a one-time event, of some significance, from which they will be hoping for positive memories and outcomes, at a time when they might be ill-disposed to do so because of their grief.

While Patricia (F002) explained that ‘a lot of people do have clear ideas,’ others benefitted from having alternatives and options presented to them – a kind of menu or catalogue of choices, which itself begs questions about who decides what is put on the menu, and how it is presented. Sometimes

this involved a literal catalogue – for example, when choosing flowers, or coffins.

Matching

Amanda described a process of ‘matchmaking’ between families and celebrants – starting by asking “*Tell me something about your mum*” and from there “*work[ing] backwards to which of our celebrants is going to suit the family best.*”

Amanda (F003) described a process of ‘matchmaking’ between families and celebrants – starting by asking “Tell me something about your mum” and from there “work[ing] backwards to which of our celebrants is going to suit the family best.” Here, there is again a kind of ‘menu’ of options, but it is the funeral director making the selection on the family’s behalf, from a menu they might never see.

Creating Options

Robert - “the family didn’t [...] come in asking for that [...] [But] I always start off by saying “Tell me about [the deceased] [...] give me an idea of what he was like, what he did, what his interests were [so that I can suggest] things that are appropriate to families to make it a good act of remembrance.”

Others described the *creation* of options. For example, describing how he helped a young man’s family plan a funeral involving a camper van hearse, Robert (F006) explained “the family didn’t [...] come in asking for that [...] [But] I always start off by saying “Tell me about [the deceased] [...] give me an idea of what he was like, what he did, what his interests were [so that I can suggest] things that are appropriate to families to make it a good act of remembrance.”

Working with families to produce funerals involves...

Asking	Interpreting
Arranging	Making [it] happen
Creating	Matching
Leading	Obtaining
Empowering	Providing
Guiding	Suggesting

We might say these funeral directors saw themselves as expert facilitators and guides – responsive to particular scenarios, which might differently require different approaches from a spectrum of what and how much guidance they think they need to give; plus funeral directors will not necessarily respond to the same situations in the same way(s). To illustrate the diversity and subtleties included in the funeral directors' descriptions of working with families to produce funerals, this table pulls together some of the verbs they used:

Asking

Interpreting

Arranging

Making [it] happen

Creating

Matching

Leading

Obtaining

Empowering

Providing

Guiding

Suggesting

Financial considerations

Brian – “We’re not a company here that sort of pulls out thousands of brochures and flogs them packages.

Why give people stuff or offer people stuff if they can't afford to pay it? We've done that for many, many years and we just sort of do everything to make it as simple and as easy as possible and not put themselves in sort of any stress.”



Drawing to a close, it was striking that several of the professionals we interviewed expressed concern about other funeral directors allowing commercial / profit-based concerns to “unduly” influence how they encouraged clients to design funerals. Imran described this as “squeezing money out” from vulnerable people, Patricia as ‘making people go out and spend money where they did not need to spend money’, or Amanda as ‘upselling’:

Amanda (F003) - What we’re also absolutely not about is upselling. When somebody comes to us, we will assume that they want to spend as little as reasonably possible on a funeral, unless they tell us otherwise, and if they ask us to, we will try to find ways for them to save money.

In this sense, Brian cast the idea of a catalogue or ‘brochure’ of options or choices in a more ambiguous light. His quote also reminds us that affordability is another crucial factor shaping choice and decision-making in funerals.

For further information

PUBLISHED PAPERS

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<https://doi.org/10.54210/bj.2023.1093>

Hybrid funerals

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2023.2201421>

CASEBOOK

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PROJECT BLOG

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careinfunerals@abdn.ac.uk

WEBSITE

<https://www.abdn.ac.uk/sdhp/philosophy/care-in-funerals-2015.php>



Conclusion

Some kind of personalisation is highly valued in many UK funerals in the twenty-first century. Yet the data from the Care in Funerals project suggests that personalisation involves complex processes, raising a number of practical questions and spaces for ethical contestation. We are beginning to explore these nuances, not least in light of ideas about shared decision making in healthcare contexts.

Interview Sample

Some people spoke from several perspectives.

(Mostly celebrants and funeral directors who had also been bereaved)

	Individuals	By category
Funeral directors	15	19
Celebrants & officiants	14	21
Bereaved	30	39
(Mixed)	9	
TOTAL	68	79

	COVID	NON-COVID	TOTAL
Bereavement by	17	25	42

(A more detailed overview of the interview sample).