

The Humberside funeral home incident shows England and Wales need a better system for dealing with death

March 20 2024, by Kate Woodthorpe



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In early March 2024, Humberside Police received reports of concerns over "care for the deceased" at a funeral director's in Hull. Two people have [reportedly](#) been bailed after the bodies and ashes of at least 35 people were [removed](#) from the premises. An inquiry is now underway.

As shocking as this news story has been, such concerns are not unexpected. Across England and Wales, funeral directors are an unregulated workforce. There is little external scrutiny and minimal educational requirements to be able to practice.

Funerals have [long](#) been firmly located within the commercial world. As far back as the 17th century, funerary arrangements were the purview of [family firms](#) and an alternative income source for carpenters and upholsters.

Today, there are only a handful of ways in which funerals become a public issue. Some deaths will be referred to coroners and local authorities will be involved in organizing and funding a public health funeral, when someone dies without the money or family to organize a service. Even then, though, most councils outsource this work to private, for-profit funeral directors.

More broadly, politicians and policymakers are largely reticent to talk about death and who supports the dead. It is rarely a vote winner. It doesn't fit neatly within the boundaries of individual government departments (involving health and social care, pensions, benefits, housing, cemeteries and crematoriums), all of which have competing interests and priorities.

Further, the dead are unable, and the bereaved often too tired to lobby for attention. It is only when families fight the system via public inquests

and inquiries, or when events such as those in Humberside receive media attention, that the way death is handled really gains political attention.

Lack of regulation

In countries such as the US, it is common practice for funeral directors to be required to hold a mortuary science qualification to practice. In England and Wales, however, there is no requisite training or accreditation needed. More or less anyone can open a funeral home.

There are two main trade bodies: the [National Association of Funeral Directors](#) and the [National Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors](#). These offer optional educational opportunities and advocate for the sector's reputation, acting as adjudicators of poor practice. While they can and do inspect premises, because they rely on and represent their membership, the extent to which they will intervene or publicly flag poor practice is open to debate.

Research has shown that, from a consumer perspective, there is significant variation in the services funeral directors provide. It can be difficult to [adequately compare](#) service provision between companies.

[Concerns have duly been raised](#) about the potential vulnerability of families needing to make financial commitments after a person has died. These concerns are compounded by the lack of routine checks and balances across the funeral sector.

A minimal educational requirement and inspection regime would, at the very least, reassure the public that funeral directors are operating within a set of defined parameters. There would be safeguards in place to guarantee that the information they provide is up to date, that staff are trained and equipped in dealing with recently bereaved people, and independent arbitrators to whom one could raise concerns. Crucially,

such oversight would ensure that the deceased people entrusted into their care are safe.

Implementing even a light touch regulatory regime will be a challenge. Until 2016, my colleagues and I at the University of Bath ran an independent foundation degree in funeral services. We faced some suspicion within the sector.

Our research found [people were resistant](#) to education and to sharing best (and problematic) practice. This was driven by a competitive marketplace and not wanting to give rivals an advantage.

There is also significant cost involved in making education and regulatory compliance a requirement. This would likely drive up costs for the consumer, in what is already a pressured sector.

Even before COVID, low-cost funerals and rituals conducted [behind closed doors](#) were gaining in popularity. [Recent estimates](#) suggest that 20% of all deaths now result in a direct cremation, that is, without an accompanying funeral service—these typically cost around half the price of a standard funeral. Paying for a funeral [reportedly](#) leaves one in five families in the UK in financial difficulty.

Profit margins for providers [are thus increasingly getting squeezed](#) and there are concerns over consumer exploitation. But the risks of overcharging or receiving services that are poor value for money are just one aspect of potential funerary malpractice.

Others include the [potential for fraud](#) and the consequences of a funeral home abruptly ceasing trading. In October 2023, in Penrose, Colorado, police removed 189 bodies from a dilapidated [green funeral home](#). It was [reported](#) that the company had missed tax payments, faced eviction from one premises and been sued by a crematory for unpaid bills.

The impact of this kind of news on bereaved people cannot be overstated. Reports on how families in Humberside have reacted to concerns that their deceased might not have been treated as they expected would be have rightly underlined their [anguish](#).

In recent years there have been some moves towards better scrutiny. In 2019, the governmental Competition and Markets Authority [undertook](#) a full-scale investigation of the funeral sector in England and Wales, laying out the reasons for pricing transparency, in particular. It did not go so far as to determine what constituted quality provision. And while it asked the question about regulation, it did not wholesale recommend it.

In 2022, meanwhile, the [Financial Conduct Authority](#) began regulating pre-pay funeral plans, provided by 26 companies.

Scotland is showing how this could be done better. In February 2024, the Scottish government introduced a funeral director [code of practice](#). This is the latest development within the regulatory framework for the end of life that was [launched](#) by Holyrood in 2017.

Such government action in Scotland positions death as a key feature of the welfare state. How a government recognizes, supports and resources death and bereavement speaks to its ideological conceptualisations of citizenship, rights and responsibilities, and social justice.

What happens back stage at a [funeral](#) directors is by its very nature hidden from public view. The public in England and Wales need to know that those who become the custodians of their dead are operating appropriately and ethically.

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