

2016

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# THE FUNERAL TRADITIONS REPORT

EXPLORING BRITAIN'S BEHAVIOUR, IDEOLOGIES AND  
PRACTICES WITH REGARDS TO FUNERALS

October 2016

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## INTRODUCTION

Death and funeral arrangements are topics often avoided despite it being something we all must face at some point in our lives.

But increasingly, when brought up, funerals are seen as a chance to celebrate a life well lived, rather than a gathering to mourn the loss of a loved one.

As such, here at Damsons we wanted to shed light on the one thing that is guaranteed to happen to everyone and get people talking about it in a positive way.

We surveyed 1,000 British adults to address the issues associated with death and discover what our attitudes really are to this event that is often considered so negative.

In the following report, we explore how the nation says goodbye. We look at people's perceptions of traditional funeral events, before comparing these perceptions with what people would prefer their funerals to look like. We also examine what people's preferences are when it comes to how their physical bodies are handled after death and also what becomes of their online existence.

Do we really consider what our loved ones would have wanted as a celebration of their lives when they pass? Or are we concerned with tying in to religious traditions or keeping up appearances amongst friends and family? And, in the multicultural society that is Britain, how do we reflect such varied beliefs and traditions of modern society, as well as a growing sense of individualism?

## HIGHLIGHTS

27% of Brits would opt for a celebration of life in place of a traditional funeral

33% of Brits want their funeral to reflect their cultural interests (types of music, readings and speeches given)

Nearly half (48%) would be happy for family to do whatever made them least upset when organising a funeral

13% of millennials (people reaching adulthood around year 2000) would prefer families to stick to a plan they had drawn up for their funeral, compared to 17% of Over 65s

6% of millennials and 6% of Over 65s have written up a plan for what they want to happen at their funeral

Nearly one fifth (17%) of millennials have thought about what they would like their funeral to be like about what they would like their funeral to be like.



27% of Brits say they would want to buck the downhearted, morbid, affair in favour of a lighthearted event known as a 'celebration of life'.



One out of three Brits would want their funeral to reflect their cultural interests.

## THE GREAT BRITISH GOODBYE

Traditionally, funerals are regarded as somber affairs requiring black clothing, cars and subdued hymns – accompanied by the British stiff upper lip. However, research suggests that the UK's attitude towards remembering our loved ones is changing – reflecting a desire to celebrate a person's life, rather than mourn their passing.

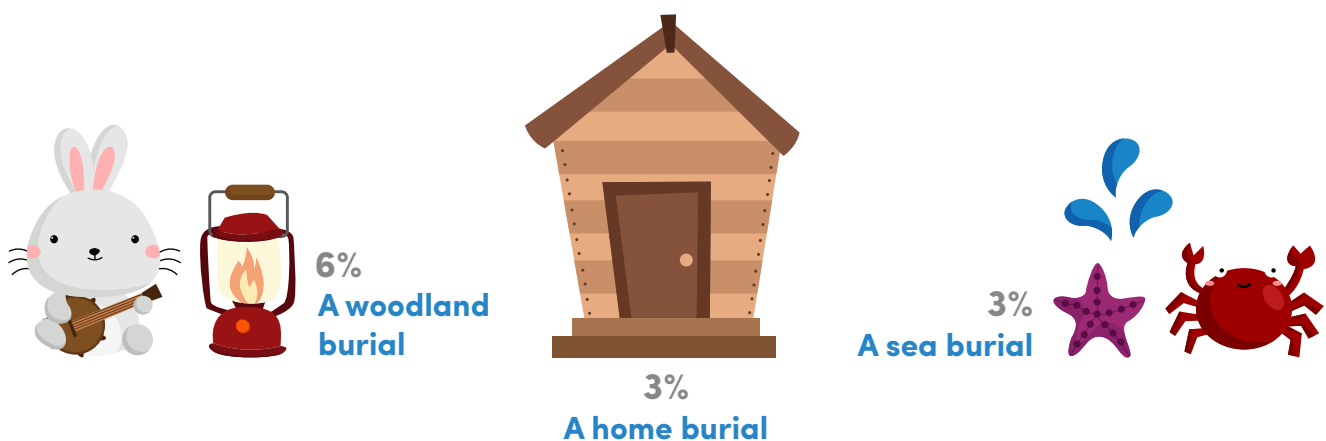
Cremation remains the most popular service to mark someone's death, with 74% of Brits saying they have attended this type of ceremony. In

terms of a traditional cemetery burial, 66% have attended a ceremony of this nature.

But beyond the traditional service, more than a quarter of Brits (27%) are now insisting their passing be marked with a celebration of life.

Others say they have been to niche funerals, with burials taking place in woodland, at the deceased home and even at sea.

### WHICH TYPE OF NON-TRADITIONAL BURIALS HAVE YOU ATTENDED?



## PLANNING FOR THE END

The average cost of a funeral in the UK is now more than £3,700, according to Money Advice Service. In challenging financial times, it is more important than ever to ensure every penny is spent on aptly reflecting the wishes and of the deceased.

For young people, paying for a funeral may not be top of the list of priorities, but that is not stopping the millennial generation (aged 18-34) thinking what they want their passing to represent.

Nearly one fifth (16%) of this generation has already given some thought as to what they want to happen at their funeral. And, while 13% would prefer friends and family to follow a plan they had arranged themselves, just 6% said they have already written that plan out.

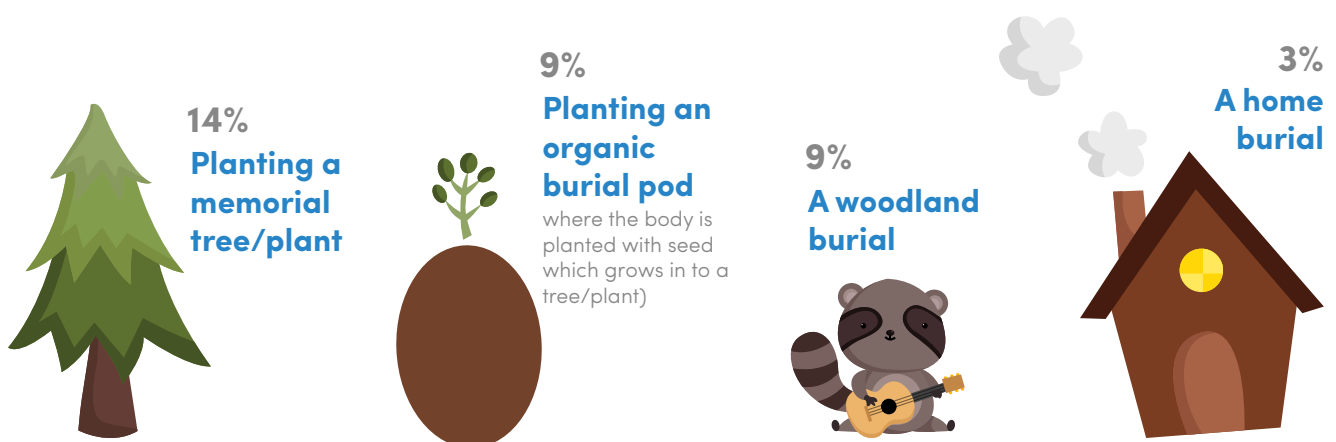
Perhaps surprisingly, this type of personal planning surpasses that of Brits over the age of 65, who we'd expect to be considering their funeral

arrangements in greater detail. While almost 1 in 4 (24%) have discussed their wishes with their family, only 17% of Over 65's would want their loved ones to follow a plan they had drawn up, and just 6% said they already had a plan on paper – the same percentage as millennials.

When it comes to the ceremony, a traditional cremation remains the favoured option (43% of people choose this type of ceremony), but increasingly a ceremony celebrating life is becoming the choice for the British public. 27% now say they would want to buck the downhearted, morbid, affair in favour of a lighthearted event known as a 'celebration of life'.

Some go further, saying they want a lasting memorial to mark their final resting place. This research found a number of other options people are now considering beyond the traditional burial or cremation.

### THINKING ABOUT WHEN YOU PASS AWAY, HOW WOULD YOU PREFER YOUR DEATH TO BE COMMEMORATED?



**“Nearly one fifth of the millennial generation have already thought about what they want their funeral to be like and more than one in ten has a plan written down”**

## **A CELEBRATION OF LIFE**

Funeral services and ceremonies are not likely to be described as happy affairs, but our data reflects an increasingly changing desire among UK adults for their own funeral.

60% of Brits agree that they wouldn't want their final goodbye to be a sad affair and would want guests to treat the occasion as a celebration of their lives, regardless of the ceremony structure (burial, cremation, scattering of ashes etc).

More than a quarter (26%) of Brits would even call on friends and family not to cry at their funeral

and 23% wouldn't want their loved ones to view their body before it is disposed of, suggesting people now want to remember the deceased at their best.

Abolishing the more melancholic traditions is a theme that appears to echo throughout the data. Just 7% of respondents would choose for their friends and family to wear black at the funeral, and 1 in 5 would decide against a black hearse to carry their body – two traditions which have been widely followed at funerals in the UK for decades.

# “More than a quarter of stiff lipped Brits would prefer it if loved ones didn’t cry at their funerals”

## MY LAST WISH

While we may be becoming more open to discussing our demise, families remain at risk of being left in the lurch when it comes to arranging the funerals of loved ones.

Despite the fact that 16% of people would prefer their loved ones to stick to a plan they have drawn up, only 5% of the nation actually have a formal plan in place.

In either case, it is clear that more people would prefer their funeral reflected them as a person, rather than surrendering entirely to tradition. 33% would want the ceremony to reflect their cultural interests and 13% would like religious music to be played, but there are also a variety of additional elements to consider. Almost 1 in 10 British adults would like their pet, or pets, to attend their funeral when they pass, suggesting the guests who attend are just as important to Brits as the style of the funeral itself.

For bereaved families that have been left without concrete plans, almost half of respondents (48%) would be happy for their loved ones to do whatever made them feel least upset at their funeral.

## THE MODERN GOODBYE

It is unavoidable that every funeral will carry an element of sadness.

But as a nation, we are increasingly calling upon our friends and family to “keep calm and carry on”, with research finding nearly a quarter of UK adults would want a night out drinking to form part of their funeral and 11% would want there to be dancing/singing at the ceremony.

While DJs and live bands are something more likely to appear at a birthday or wedding, 9% of Brits would consider arranging one for their funeral.

Adding a personal touch is also important to modern Britain, with 31% saying they would like their passing to include a toast with their favourite drinks, while 33% would want their ceremony to reflect their cultural interests.



## A LASTING LEGACY

For nearly a fifth (17%) of Britain's population, the legacy they leave behind is something they often consider, while more than a quarter (26%) have made provisions for their family in the form of a will.

Despite nearly half of Brits (49%) claiming they try not to think about death, research suggests it's not an easy thing to keep out of your mind.

38% of people say simply thinking about their immediate family can trigger thoughts of what will happen when they die and almost 1 in 3 (31%) say a death of someone they know makes them think about their own life.

With just the thought of someone dying acting as a trigger, it is not surprising that 29% say that attending a funeral makes them think more about their own death.

**“Nearly one third of Brits have never considered what they would like their funeral to look like when they pass away”**

## GREENER GOODBYES

With the green agenda becoming more prominent, more of us are now considering how our deaths will impact the planet after we've gone. Almost 1 in 5 people are now saying their funeral should not have a negative impact on the environment, whilst almost 10% of people want to be buried in an “organic burial pod” (which involves burying the body with a seed that turns into a plant or tree). 9% say they would want a woodland burial, while nearly 15% say they would like a memorial tree or plant to be planted in their memory.

And it is not just attempts to replenish the planet that are on the minds of the British people, with 40% revealing they would like their organs to be donated to someone in critical need of a transplant. A further 23% would like their organs to be donated for science.

Unfortunately, the NHS estimates that 1,200 organ donations haven't gone ahead in the past five years due to families blocking the donation, despite them being on the register – a worrying fact and one that suggests Brits should make their feelings on this very clear to their loved ones now.

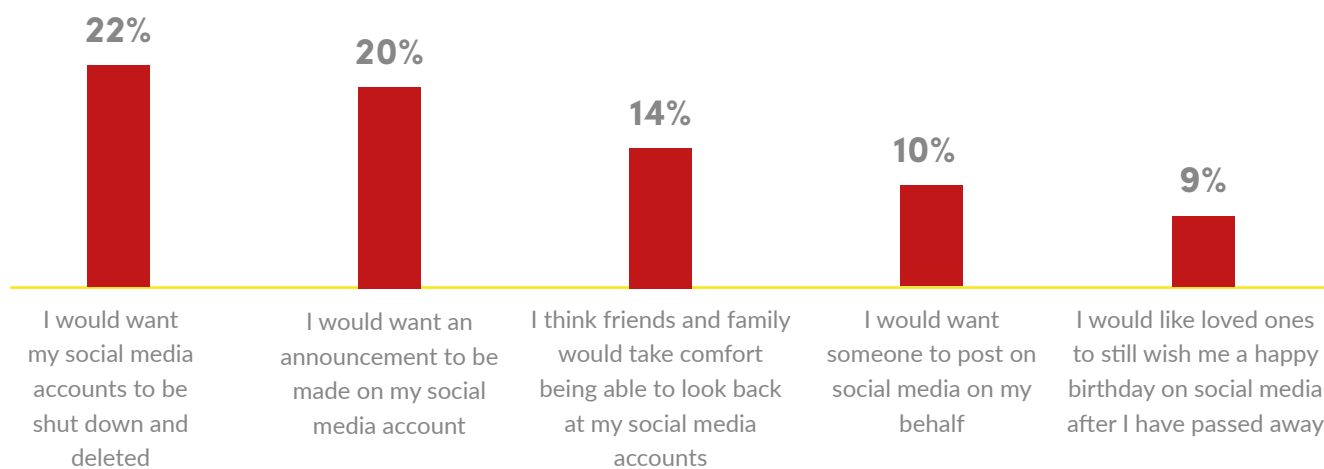
## SOCIAL MEDIA MOURNING

Social media has taken over the lives of many people and is increasingly becoming part of the wider agenda. It is only natural that the thought of our death eventually brings about thoughts of what happens to our social media presence.

For some people, the thought of their social media accounts ending with them is too much to take, as 10% of UK people say they would like someone else to continue posting from their social media accounts after they pass away.

With many people living their lives on social media platforms, research suggests 4% of the population would consider live streaming their funeral to an online audience. This trend also appears set to increase with the latest generation, with 13% of 18-24-year olds considering showcasing their final moments to the rest of the world. If this rate continues, by 2079 as many as 59,000 funerals could be broadcast on the internet. \*

### WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO HAPPEN TO YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS AFTER YOUR DEATH?



\* [www.theloop.ca/dead-facebook-users-will-soon-outnumber-the-living/](http://www.theloop.ca/dead-facebook-users-will-soon-outnumber-the-living/)

# “Millennials’ use of social media could create a trend that may see as many as 59,000 funerals broadcast online by 2079”

## MILLENNIALS AND A DIGITAL AFTERLIFE

This research demonstrates that Britain’s younger generation are increasingly seeing social media as the best way to keep their memories alive.

14% of millennials see social media as a good way of informing others about funeral plans and would be happy for guests to be invited through Facebook and Twitter. Only 15% of millennials like the idea of their social media accounts closing after their death, while 1 in 4 Over 35's want their accounts to end with them.

But despite the attitude of the older generation,

13% feel that looking back at old social media accounts and pictures would be comforting for their loved ones.

Yet, Brits showed a dislike for the idea of people continuing to communicate with the inactive accounts on social media after they pass (regardless of age). Just 7% said they would like their friends and family to continue wishing them happy birthday even after they’ve passed. This was least popular in those aged 65 or over, followed by 18-24 year olds.

## A DIGITAL GRAVEYARD

If Facebook was to stop growing today, the number of deceased people with accounts would outnumber the living within the next half century, according to lifestyle website TheLoop.com.

Social media platforms have processes in place

for when a user dies to protect their privacy. 12% of people feel it is in poor taste for social media accounts to remain active after a death. Even offering to turn an account into a memorial page for a deceased user is not welcomed, with just 5% saying they would opt for this.

## FUNERAL FAUX PAS

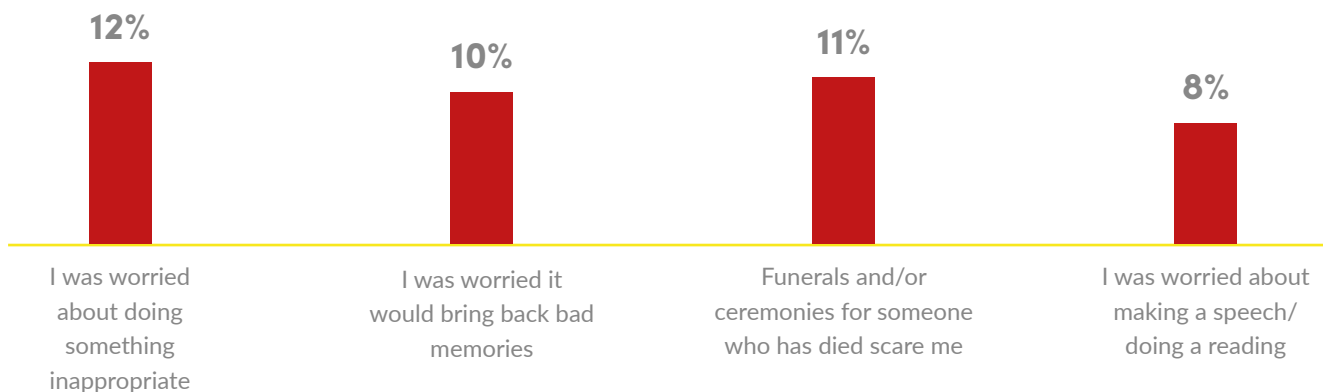
While funerals are expected to bring a sense of sadness, Britain's heritage of maintaining a stiff upper lip in the face of adversity seems to carry over into attending services.

One of the top reasons people get nervous about attending funerals is due to the fear of emotions getting the better of them, with 36% saying this had concerned them in the past.

For a funeral where alcohol was available, 6% of people say they would be worried about getting too drunk.

More than 1 in 10 also said they would be uncomfortable if they felt the service did not reflect the character of the deceased, suggesting personalised services could be a benefit to loved ones as well as a key wish of the deceased.

### WHAT MAKES YOU MORE NERVOUS ABOUT ATTENDING FUNERALS?



## THE MULTICULTURAL GOODBYE

Religion also plays a role in raising concerns among people attending funerals, with 13% saying they have felt nervous attending the funeral of a friend or family member because they were affiliated with a different religion to them, and they were not familiar with the traditions.

Britain has become a more secular country and the population follows more than 170 faiths today\*, raising the likelihood that people will attend ceremonies with practices unfamiliar to them.

\* [www.vexen.co.uk/UK/religion.html](http://www.vexen.co.uk/UK/religion.html)

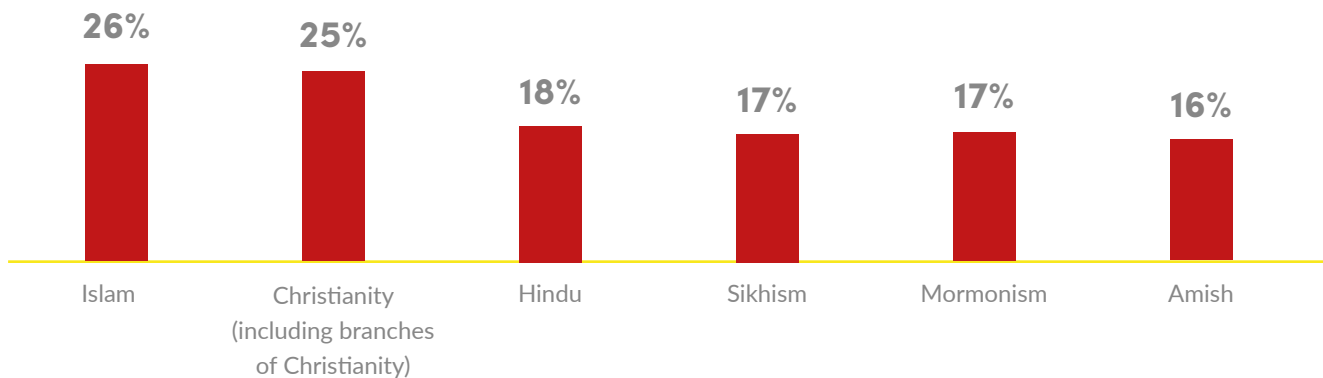
For almost 1 in 10 people, stepping outside of their comfort zone and attending a traditional religious funeral of a different faith is a major concern.

More than a quarter (26%) said attending an Islamic service would make them most nervous, followed closely by Christian services (25%). Lack of knowledge about religious traditions is one of

the major factors for this fear, with 1 in 3 people admitting to being unfamiliar with any religious practices associated with death and funerals.

Even services carried out under no religious affiliation made some people feel uncomfortable, with 10% saying they would be nervous about attending an atheist ceremony.

### WHICH RELIGIOUS SERVICES ARE YOU MOST NERVOUS OF ATTENDING?



**“Lack of knowledge about religious traditions is one of the major factors for this fear with 1 in 3 people admitting to being unfamiliar with any religious practices associated with death and funerals”**

## CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that Britons are gradually beginning to shun traditional funeral services in favour of more personalised and modern practices.

More people are now looking beyond the morbidity of black clothing and are instead looking at funeral services as a way to celebrate the life of a loved one, using the event to cherish their personality and personal preferences.

Whether toasting with the deceased person's favourite drink or serving their favourite food at an after party, truly reflecting the tastes of those whose passing we're commemorating is becoming increasingly more important.

Despite the fact that many of us have considered what will happen to ourselves, our loved ones, and even our social media accounts when the last day comes, there remain a large number who still prefer not to think about it.

Even young people, who may not be considering the financial implications of their funeral yet, are nonetheless making plans, with some even putting these plans on paper to relieve their family and friends of the burden of planning.

Being prepared – either by formal planning, making a will or discussing wishes with loved ones – will avoid those left behind being left in the dark during what is already a difficult and emotional period in their lives.

Despite becoming a more secular country, multicultural services continue to cause concern for Britons who are worried about attending funerals based on traditions they are not familiar with.

Embracing multiculturalism and celebrating the variety of religions in the UK will allow more people to pay the ultimate respect.



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