

What do funeral directors do?

Why aren't they qualified?

Undertaking is not regulated by law, so there are no legal requirements for undertakers to be trained to a recognised standard and licensed. The law takes a relaxed view of undertakers; its focus is on getting the dead buried or cremated before they become a health hazard. When you think that you need a licence to open a cattery, it may seem wrong that anyone can set themselves up as an undertaker just like that. But scandals are few, and the beauty of the way things stand is that bereaved people have all sorts of rights that would be taken away if undertaking became regulated. Professionalising and regulating undertakers can only reinforce the perception that they are the default disposers of the dead and, worse, move them a step closer to being the only people allowed to do so. At the moment, you are allowed to care for your dead person at home. It would be a shame to give that up.

Do any of them have qualifications of any kind at all?

Yes. Some undertakers have been professionally trained. They're the ones with the initials Dip FD after their names. The two trade associations, the [National Association of Funeral Directors](#) and the [Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors](#), who represent between them most undertakers in Britain, are very keen on training – but they don't insist on it as a condition of membership.

Should it matter to you? Inasmuch as some of the very best funeral directors do not have a Dip FD, no. They learnt their trade on the job. They served a good old-fashioned apprenticeship, starting by washing cars, driving and pallbearing, and advanced through the ranks. These are practical people and they learn by doing.

The most important attribute of a funeral director is emotional intelligence, and there's no exam that can test for that.

The three roles of a funeral director

Undertakers presently have three distinct roles calling for very different skills. They are:

- **Tradespeople** skilled in transporting and looking after dead bodies
- **Event planners** who source, instruct and orchestrate other providers
- **Guides** who will listen to you carefully, make you aware of your choices and help you make your way through unfamiliar territory. They will make suggestions and help you create a send-off for the person who has died which will be, both, worthy of that person and, also, of immeasurable emotional value to you. Of all the services a funeral director offers, this is the one with far and away the highest value. Some—just some—are brilliant at it.

Arranging a funeral is a fairly complex task which must be completed to a deadline and got right. There is no margin for error.

That's why most funeral directors have control freak side to their natures. It stems both from a terror of getting it wrong and from the fact that many of their clients are totally dependent on them.

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A Good Funeral Guide factsheet

Attention to detail is vital. Nothing could be worse than arriving late at the crematorium, or getting there only to find that the funeral cannot go ahead because the paperwork was late. Funeral directors tend not to get it wrong. Scandals, glitches, even, are few.

Military precision is what undertakers do best. They have systems. Procedures. A way of doing things, the same way every time. Foolproof. You can see how they can get to be inflexible stick-in-the-muds. It's the paranoia that keeps them up to the mark.

What do they actually do?

If you outsource everything to your funeral director, this is what they'll do. **You can, of course, do any or all of these things yourself.**

1. Take the call announcing a death and where that death has taken place – home, hospital, hospice, nursing home. Arrange to collect the body at a mutually convenient time. If the person has died at home or in a nursing home, the body may well have to be collected in the middle of the night. Some heavy lifting required and, possibly, difficult stairs to be negotiated
2. Measure body for coffin
3. See family representative and make arrangements for burial or cremation—date and time. Engage a minister or celebrant. Check vehicle availability and hire in if necessary
4. Sell ancillary services – coffin, limousines, flowers, catering, etc. Choose coffin.
5. Wash the body
6. Embalm (optional).
7. Close eyes and mouth. Shave men. Do hair. Apply makeup
8. Dress.
9. Put body in coffin
10. Put it in a fridge
11. Do paperwork – application for cremation or burial
12. Engage pallbearers
13. Arrange flower delivery
14. Get the order of service to the printer
15. Make body presentable in chapel of rest or venue of choice if family want to come and visit
16. On the day of the funeral, screw the coffin lid down, put it in the hearse and head off to the church or crematorium. (Sometimes the coffin will go the church the evening before.)
17. Superintend bearers or family and friends of the person who has died and ensure that the coffin is carried in safely
18. Superintend seating
19. Collect donations
20. Take chief mourners to wake (optional)

Who does what?

A very small scale funeral director will do all or most of this.

In bigger funeral homes the work is divvied up. An arranger does the arranging and paperwork — often part time, almost always female. This may be the only person you meet until the day of the funeral. A mortuary assistant does the body work – prepping, they call it. Your master of ceremonies on the day of the funeral is called the conductor, and many people do not meet their conductor until he or she knocks on their door on the day of the funeral.

Bearers carry the coffin. They are almost always part-timers, and they may work for several funeral directors. This is a nice little earner for off-duty firefighters, ambulance drivers and retired policemen.

The bigger the operation, the greater will be the number of strangers dealing with your dead person. At a busy funeral director's the priorities are paperwork and transport issues. The less they see of you, frankly, the happier most of them are. They need to get on.

The bigger the operation, the more impersonal it tends to be. In such an organisation the interests of the business and the interests of you, the consumer, are divergent. In balancing, on the one hand, things to do against, on the other, people to see, funeral directors have to prioritise things to do every time. They are running against the clock. You get in the way.

You do not have to engage a funeral director to be both the carer of the body of the person who has died and the event planner. If you want to plan an elaborate funeral, and you don't think there's a funeral director in your local area who can rise to the occasion, your best bet may be to engage an expert event planner.

If you need to complain about an undertaker

You are protected by

- The [Supply of Goods and Services Acts 1982](#) and, if you made arrangements at home, by the [Consumer Protection From Unfair Trading Regulations 2008](#).
- Both the [National Association of Funeral Directors](#) (NAFD) and [The National Society of Allied & Independent Funeral Directors](#) (SAIF) have codes of practice and offer an arbitration service to complainants against their members.

The trade associations – NAFD and SAIF

Most funeral directors belong to one of two trade associations. Each has entry criteria and each a code of practice. Both operate a complaints procedure under the auspices of the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators. They are the [National Association of Funeral Directors](#) (NAFD) and [The National Society of Allied & Independent Funeral Directors](#) (SAIF). They inspect members' premises to make sure they are keeping up to the mark.

They confer an element of respectability on the industry. It is impressive that members pay for the privilege of being policed. Are they any guarantee of quality? No. They are a guarantee of acceptable standards, that's all.

Don't be put off if a funeral director is not a member of NAFD or SAIF.

You can see their codes of conduct on their websites:

ENDS