

Life



Funeral Partners

in the community
with Funeral Partners

Issue 19 – April 2026



**MORE
FUNDING
FOR GOOD
CAUSES**

CHAMPIONS IN ACTION

Making a difference in our communities everywhere



45 YEARS AT THE HEART OF GOODBYE

CEO Sam Kershaw on how funerals are changing

SUPPORTING CHILDREN THROUGH GRIEF

What changes to the National Curriculum
mean for funeral directors



Sam Kershaw

Chief Executive Officer



where we serve and live. I'm so proud of how our branches show our commitment to helping people to improve the lives and wellbeing of others.

With many funeral homes reaching the end of their third round of the donation programmes and others launched in new areas across the country, welcoming Community Fund applications, read more on page 3.

We also round up the latest community activities (pages 9-11), from fundraising to special events to awards. A huge well done to everyone involved – your efforts are inspirational!

Welcoming new businesses to the family

The latter part of 2025 was again a busy time for acquisitions. I truly appreciate the years of heritage, respect, care and experience each new business brings to the Funeral Partners group – it's always an honour to welcome them to our family and continue to build their legacy in the communities they serve. See the latest acquisitions on pages 4-6.

Helping children to cope with grief

The introduction of grief to the schools' National Curriculum from September 2026 struck me as a particularly important achievement for death awareness. So many children experience the loss of a loved one, or have to support friends or family in difficult times, but it

Welcome to the latest edition of Life magazine, where we'll be looking back at how we've grown again as a group and forward to the events and initiatives coming up this year.

As ever, we'll be catching up with stories from across our family of caring, compassionate and highly professional funeral homes. As well as heartwarming individual achievements, all the businesses highlighted in this edition deserve praise for their creative and enterprising efforts for good causes that give so much back to their community.

Supporting compassionate work in our communities

Our businesses thrive by being at the heart of the communities that surround them. Because of this, our Community Funds and Assistance Programmes play an important part in maintaining relationships with caring organisations and projects on the ground in the towns and villages



The UK's fastest growing funeral service provider

funeralpartners.co.uk

has not been talked about enough. See pages 14-15 for how young people will soon get the valuable help they need and grief will become normalised at school.

Sharing over 45 years' worth of experience

Finally, Life magazine quite rightly focuses on the great work being done by our funeral home branches supporting their communities across the UK. But I was extremely flattered to be asked for my insights from my 45 years in the funeral sector for a feature in this edition. Go to pages 12-13 to see my thoughts on the changes I've seen in the profession, what I think is most important right now and what I think the future holds.

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FUNERAL PARTNERS LAUNCHES NEXT WAVE OF COMMUNITY FUNDS AFTER DONATING NEARLY £60,000



L-R: Kavanagh & Coates Funeral Director Clare Dyson, Paul Wood (Treasurer, Parkinson's UK Rochdale), and Funeral Director Samantha Collier



The team from Catterick Whizz Kidz receive their cheque from John Blenkiron & Sons Funeral Services Community Fund



Elizabeth Way & Company Funeral Directors support Millbrook school's secret garden transformation

Charities and good causes across the UK will receive more support from funeral homes as we launch the next Community Funds and Assistance Programmes in 2026.

Participating branches will provide targeted grants totalling £66,000 to inspiring organisations based close to their funeral homes and addressing local needs. Grants are available for projects that improve quality of life and align with one or more of four core themes: Health, Education, Employment Opportunities, and Poverty & Social Deprivation.

Each fund will be guided by a local panel made up of funeral home team members and independent community representatives. Together, they will identify and support projects that create meaningful, positive change for people locally.

The new funds include:
Andrew Grey, Tyne & Wear;
Edwin Pounds & Sons, Bradford;
E Sargeant & Son, Berkshire;
James Brown & Sons, Belfast;
John Nodes, North West London;
John Roach, Renfrewshire;
Mulhollands, County Antrim;
Nicholas O'Hara, Dorset;
Pinks, South London;
Trafford Lowe, Derbyshire;
W Sherry & Sons, West London;
and WH Painter, Birmingham.

Helping Communities to Make a Difference

Funeral Partners donated more than £59,500 to community groups based close to 10 participating funeral brands in 2025.

These contributions have provided vital support to good causes, working tirelessly to support their communities – from youth activities and cultural projects to mental health services and community wellbeing initiatives.

These funeral homes have each seen first-hand the impact that grants can make, helping meaningful organisations to deliver projects, activities and services that improve lives in their communities.

Kelly Hailou, Funeral Partners' Marketing Director, said: "I'm incredibly proud of how our funeral home teams continue to champion these community funds. Their passion, dedication and deep local knowledge are what make the programme so meaningful. It's inspiring to see the real difference these contributions make – supporting local people, strengthening communities, and bringing important initiatives to life. Every fund, big or small, plays a part in giving back and helping the communities we serve."

Participating branches in 2025 included:

- **A N Abraham Funeral Directors** – Hemsworth and South Elmsall, West Yorkshire
- **Bairds of Antrim Funeral Directors** – County Antrim
- **Eaves Funeral Service** – Whitehaven, Cumbria
- **Melia Powell Funeral Service** – Bradford Road, Sandbeds, and Cavendish Street, Keighley
- **Elizabeth Way & Company Funeral Directors** – Mossley, Manchester
- **Howard's Funeral Directors** – Southport and Ainsdale, Merseyside
- **James Brown & Sons Funeral Directors** – Belfast
- **John Blenkiron & Sons Funeral Directors (incorporating Simon Barningham)** – Richmond, Barnard Castle, Catterick and Reeth, North Yorkshire/County Durham
- **John G Hogg Funeral Directors** – Sunderland, Tyne & Wear
- **Kavanagh & Coates Funeral Services** – Heywood, Greater Manchester
- **Miles & Daughters Funeral Directors** – Winnersh, Reading, Whitley, Twyford, Binfield, Crowthorne, Maidenhead and Tadley, Berkshire/Hampshire
- **ML Williams Funeral Directors** – Ayr, South Ayrshire
- **Mulhollands Funeral Directors** – County Antrim

A WARM WELCOME TO MORE FUNERAL HOMES JOINING FUNERAL PARTNERS

We're delighted to welcome more funeral directors to the Funeral Partners family following a busy and rewarding second half of 2025.

Our acquisitions teams have worked closely with funeral homes across the country to ensure a smooth and supportive transition, and we're especially pleased to have welcomed our first ever branch in Cornwall.

Each funeral team brings a wealth of history, local knowledge and dedication to serving families, and we're proud to support them as they enter a new chapter with Funeral Partners. Here's a little more about the latest businesses to join us.



Personal Choice former owner and Business Principal Ken.

Personal Choice

www.personalchoicefunerals.co.uk

Based in St Austell, Personal Choice Funeral Directors was established in 2012, and with two additional branches close by, it has an excellent reputation for serving the local community.

Former owner and now Business Principal Ken has taken the opportunity to improve his work life balance, focused on supporting the team and clients. The day-to-day operations will continue to be headed by Steve and Pat Jones.

We are delighted to welcome Ken and the team and pleased to announce our first acquisition in Cornwall, opening a new geographical area for future expansion.



Joseph A Hay & Son: Robert Morphet and Joan Hey-Morphet with Regional Development Director David Dernley

Joseph A Hay & Son

www.heyfunerals.co.uk

A respected fourth-generation business in Bradford established in 1908, current custodians Robert Morphet and wife Joan Hey felt it was time to lighten their responsibilities while still preserving the company's legacy.

With no immediate family to continue the business, they turned to Funeral Partners for our commitment to preserving heritage, protecting staff and upholding family values.

Robert said: "From very early on, it was evident that Funeral Partners shares our values, and we felt confident they were the right people to entrust our business to."



Sandy Close: Agnes and Sandy Close outside their funeral home in Belfast

Sandy Close Funeral Services

www.sandyclosefuneralservices.com

Sandy set up his own Belfast-based business in 1998. For him, becoming part of Funeral Partners would secure the legacy and growth of the business for years to come.

He said: "I definitely want to stay on and continue doing what I am passionate about, so it was great to have that option while having the benefits of investment, marketing support, administration, compliance and more."

The business remains family run, with Sandy at the helm and his daughter Catherine and sister-in-law Christine all holding key roles within the team.



Caerphilly: Area Development Manager James Rees with Business Principal Dean Thomas

Caerphilly Funeral Services

www.cfs.wales

Founded in 1989, Dean Thomas bought the business in 2004 and now moves into the role of Business Principal, handing over day-to-day management to his experienced team.

CFS General Manager James Rees started there aged 21 and has now been promoted to Area Development Manager at Funeral Partners. He will oversee the funeral home and the rest of the Welsh region.

James said: "It's a challenge, but one I am really excited about. Being part of Funeral Partners means everyone has access to great personal and career development opportunities."



Knox & Son Funeral Directors: Business Principal Rachel Aitken with Funeral Partners CEO Sam Kershaw

Knox & Son Funeral Directors

www.knoxfunerals.co.uk

The historic Warrington funeral directors has joined Funeral Partners after serving the community since 1882.

Business Principal Rachel Aitken joined Knox & Sons 15 years ago to run the financial side of the business, was made a shareholder in 2019, and will continue to run the day-to-day operations.

Rachel said: "Funeral Partners was the only serious option when it came to finding an acquisition partner - we had heard great things and were impressed with their reputation in the profession."



CT Hull: Rebecca Turner, Chris Hull and Claire Hull Naylor

CT Hull Funeral Service

www.cthullfuneralservice.co.uk

Known for going above and beyond traditional funeral services, this family-run business in Poulton-le-Fylde secured its 75-year legacy by joining Funeral Partners.

The business continues to be led by Funeral Director Claire Hull Naylor, supported by her brother Chris, their mother Catherine Hull and Funeral Director Rebecca Turner.

Chris said: "Being part of Funeral Partners gives us access to a network of operational expertise, compliance support, training and digital resources. It complements our family business perfectly."



Michael G Ryan Son & Daughters: Funeral Director Rachael Ryan, Managing Partner Louise Yhnell, and Business Principal Michael Ryan

Michael G Ryan Son & Daughters Funeral Directors

michaelgryansonanddaughters.com

Based in Newport with a branch in Cardiff, Michael G Ryan Son & Daughters has served the South Wales community for 27 years.

Michael and Pat's eldest daughter Louise became Britain's youngest undertaker when she directed her first funeral aged 19. Today, as Managing Partner, she is focused on growing the business and staff development.

Her sister Rachael gained national headlines when she took the title of Britain's youngest Funeral Director at the age of 16 after leaving school.

Michael said: "This new chapter allows us to secure the long-term future of the business, ensuring our values, family ethos and personal touch continue for generations to come."



The Martins: Funeral Manager Adrian Cartwright and Funeral Director Ian Austin

The Martins Funeral Directors

www.themartinsfuneraldirectors.co.uk

After serving the diverse community of Crawley in West Sussex since 2001, this well-known local funeral home is now beginning the next chapter of its journey.

Funeral Manager Adrian Cartwright, who joined the business 16 years ago and now leads the team, knows the move ensures the long-term future of the business while safeguarding its defining values.

"It's still the same team, the same faces and the same care our families have always known," said Adrian. "Funeral Partners understands that The Martins' strength lies in its local knowledge and personal service."



Box Bros: Andrew Whitaker, Kim Bonar and David Potts

Box Bros Funeral Directors

www.boxbros.co.uk

Box Bros Funeral Directors has been serving the Blackpool community for more than a century and has remained in the same family for four generations.

Box Bros, originally founded in 1915 by Thomas Edwin Box, was one of the first funeral businesses in the country to offer families the use of a private ambulance and to provide worldwide repatriation services. Trevor Box, the founder's grandson, joined in the 1940s.

Today, the business is managed by Trevor's daughter, Susan Haslem, who has led the team for the past three years alongside her husband Peter. Susan and Peter both bring strong caring backgrounds to their roles, having previously worked in nursing and the fire service respectively. "Everybody has been professional, friendly and helpful," she said.



Gibson's: Business Principals Matthew and Victoria Gibson

Gibson's Funeral Services

www.gibsonsf.co.uk

Founded in 1860, Gibson's Funeral Services has supported its community for six generations, with siblings Matthew and Victoria Gibson continuing the family tradition today.

The business still operates from its original premises in Howden-le-Wear, County Durham, alongside a funeral home and office nearby.

"Our history is a point of pride – it was my father's business, my grandfather's business, and we have always run it to the best of our abilities," said Matthew. "We felt Funeral Partners' values and behaviours fitted with our way of operating the business and that they would support us to continue in our own style."

To read more acquisition partner stories or to find your nearest Funeral Partners Funeral Director visit corporate.funeralpartners.co.uk/partners-stories/



GOING THE EXTRA MILE WITH FLEET OF NEW ELECTRIC VEHICLES

As part of our drive to keep up with modern technology innovations and give environmentally conscious families more options around their funeral arrangements, we have now added even more fully electric luxury vehicles to our fleet.

In the last issue of Life, we reported on Walker & Morrell Funeral Directors in Washington and Gateshead adding three impressive fully electric Ford Etrive vehicles to their funeral vehicle fleet, based on the high-spec Mustang Mach-E model. Since then, we were pleased to deliver another Ford Etrive hearse to our Belfast funeral homes – this is in addition to the Nissan Leaf electric hearse and hybrid fleet already in service in Belfast, offering a comprehensive alternative solution to traditional funeral ceremonial vehicles.

These electric vehicles are known for their smooth, comfortable ride and come with all the modern features you expect in contemporary luxury electric cars.

They also have the benefit of being respectfully quiet, making them ideal for funerals.

Our fleet in the Midlands has also expanded, with the addition of a new fully electric private ambulance vehicle. Based upon the Maxus eDeliver 7 van, with larger capacity to transport two deceased and a range of over 200 miles, this vehicle was sourced by our fleet management partner IFC Fleet Services and professionally converted by Flag To Flag Fleet Management Ltd.

This vehicle is based at WH Painter Funeral Directors in Yardley.

Meanwhile, families in the Midlands now have more choice when travelling to the final goodbye of

their loved ones. We have two more Mercedes Vito vehicles – 'The Diamond' and 'The Sapphire' – both again luxury seven-seater people carriers designed so that more mourners can travel together in comfort and style. These will also be based at William H Painter Funeral Directors in the Birmingham area.

Mark Potts, Head of Operational Support at Funeral Partners, said: "We are always looking to increase the choice of vehicles for the families we care for as well as modernising and future-proofing our vehicles."

Funeral Partners continues to introduce electric vehicles into its fleet as part of our commitment to going carbon net zero by 2050.



The Diamond



Families now have greater choice when travelling to say their final goodbye to loved ones.



The Sapphire

‘SMALL ACTS OF KINDNESS GO A LONG WAY’

Each issue, we shine a light on a member of our team to learn more about their role, their journey, and the meaningful work they do every day.

This month, we spoke with **Karen Rattigan, Funeral Partners Area Development Manager for South West London.** Karen was recently elected **Chair of the Southern District of the London Association of Funeral Directors (LAFD).**



Is there anything about your role that you find particularly challenging?

Managing the needs of 16 funeral homes can be challenging, as each one serves a unique community with its own demands. Balancing this while keeping a wider strategic view is key.

What has been your proudest achievement or memorable highlight?

Seeing our teams grow and excel. Whether it's team development, branch improvements, or exceptional feedback from families, those moments truly stand out. Being elected as Chair of the Southern District of the London Association of Funeral Directors (LAFD) is a real career highlight and an honour.

What skills or qualities are most important in your work?

Compassion, clear communication and adaptability. With so many funeral homes, being approachable and organised is essential.

How has your role evolved since you started?

I started as a funeral arranger with Pinks Funeral Directors and went on to become a

Business Development Manager, initially, and then an Area Development Manager. My role has expanded into more strategic planning, community engagement, and supporting new initiatives across the region.

What's something people might be surprised to learn about your role?

It's not just operational management – there's a significant emotional aspect. Every decision ultimately impacts families during sensitive moments.

What motivates or inspires you each day?

Knowing that the support I give my teams helps them deliver comfort and care to families when they need it most.

What's one lesson your role has taught you?

That small acts of kindness go a long way. Listening, understanding and being present make a real difference.

Can you tell us about your role and what a typical day looks like for you?

I'm the Area Development Manager for South and South-West London, overseeing 16 branches. My days are spent visiting our funeral homes, supporting teams, maintaining standards, and ensuring every branch has what it needs to deliver exceptional care.

How long have you been with Funeral Partners, and what first brought you to this line of work?

I've been with Funeral Partners 11 years. I was drawn to the profession because I wanted to be part of work that genuinely makes a difference to people during incredibly difficult times; I was volunteering for Cruse Bereavement previously.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

Definitely the people. Supporting our dedicated teams and seeing the care they provide to families is incredibly rewarding.

COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS IN ACTION

From fundraising and moments of remembrance to awards, our funeral teams are making a difference every single day.

FUNERAL DIRECTOR LEE RAISES MONEY IN MEMORY OF YOUNG BATMAN FAN



Senior Funeral Director Lee Dimmock, of **WH Putnam Funeral Directors**, in Harrow and Edgware, pounded the streets as part of a fundraising initiative in memory of a young Batman fan who was cared for by Noah's Ark Children's Hospice in Barnet, north London.

Lee notched up 13 walks covering a distance of 90 miles to raise more than £645 in donations, which are being matched as part of an initiative via the hospice, taking the total to £1,290.

He was inspired to put on his walking boots after conducting the Batman-themed funeral of a 15-year-old boy, Jack, who was known as 'Jackman' because of his love of the fictional superhero.

Jack's family had customised Batman capes made for his funeral, each printed with his nickname, 'Jackman',

which they and the WH Putnam team wore proudly in tribute.

Lee also designed a special Batman-style coffin for the service.

He said: "Jack was a truly special young boy who was a huge character and touched the hearts of everyone who knew him. We wanted to do this fundraiser in his memory to honour his life and support Noah's Ark Hospice, who provided such compassionate care to him and his family. We hope to help make a difference for other children and families in need."

Main Photo Lee Dimmock and the WH Putnam Funeral Home team in their 'Jackman' capes.

Inset Senior Funeral Director Lee Dimmock in his custom-made Batman cape honouring 'Jackman'.

LIGHT UP THE NIGHT BRINGS COMMUNITIES TOGETHER IN REMEMBRANCE AT BELFAST CITY HALL

Hundreds of people came together at Belfast City Hall for 'Light Up the Night: An Occasion to Remember', a reflective service offering comfort, connection and remembrance to those who have lost loved ones.

Now in its third year, the event was organised by Funeral Partners Northern Ireland and Cruse Bereavement Support Northern Ireland. Those attending included the Rt Hon Lord Mayor of Belfast Cllr Tracy Kelly, former Cruse clients, families supported by Funeral Partners' local funeral homes, including James Brown & Sons, Mulhollands, John Gray & Co., Bairds of Antrim and Shields of Donaghadee, plus members of the wider public.

Guests were invited to write personal messages to their loved ones and place them on illuminated remembrance trees before taking part in a programme of music, readings and quiet reflection. A candle-lighting moment at the heart of the service provided a powerful opportunity for collective remembrance in the unique surroundings of the Great Hall.



L-R: Julian Hodgkinson, Funeral Partners Business Director (Northern Ireland); Elaine Brannigan, Senior Development Officer, Cruse Bereavement Support; Rt Hon, the Lord Mayor, Councillor Tracy Kelly; Thelma Abernethy, Head of Northern Ireland, Cruse Bereavement Support; Beverley Brown and James Brown, James Brown & Sons.

GARDENING INITIATIVE OFFERS FRESH AIR AND FRIENDSHIP FOR THOSE WHO HAVE FACED LOSS

Murray's Funeral Directors, serving communities around Staffordshire and Derbyshire, helped to launch a community allotment where people who have experienced grief can grow friendships as well as food.



Funeral Director Megan Smart at the Thyme to Grow allotment

The funeral team formed Thyme to Grow based around a plot at the Thorntree Lane Allotments in Swadlincote. The group is open to anyone looking to reconnect with nature, share peaceful moments, and make new friends.

Funeral Director Megan Smart, who is leading the project, said: "Sometimes families that we have looked after can feel lost following the funeral of their loved one, and we thought this might be a nice way to gently introduce something new to their week."

HOUSTON & WILLIAMSON MARKS 125 YEARS OF SERVICE TO BELFAST FAMILIES



(L-R) Peter Mulholland, Mulhollands Funeral Directors; Paul Williamson; June McCandless; James Brown, James Brown & Sons; Jim Henning, former manager of Houston & Williamson

Belfast's Houston & Williamson Funeral Directors celebrated an incredible 125 years of service to the local community with a special

thanksgiving event held at the company's premises.

The event brought together current and former team members, along with representatives from local schools, community organisations and clergy, to honour the firm's proud heritage and enduring commitment to compassionate service.

Paul Williamson, great-grandson of founder David Williamson and special guest at the ceremony, said: "My great-grandfather, David Williamson, alongside the Houston brothers, founded this business on values of compassion and service. Seeing those same principles still at the heart of Houston & Williamson today is deeply moving."

JOHN GRAY & CO EARNS PRESTIGIOUS AWARD FOR MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE COMMUNITY



John Gray & Co Funeral Arranger Riana Mackenzie de Sousa with the certificate from Holywood Chamber of Commerce.

John Gray & Co Funeral Directors, which serves Holywood and Bangor in County Down, Northern Ireland, was 'Highly Commended' in the Community Impact Award category of the Holywood Chamber President's Awards.

The Holywood team were recognised for being "woven into the fabric of the town" – from sponsoring local events and supporting older generations to being a reassuring, familiar presence when people need it most.

John Gray & Co Funeral Arranger Riana Mackenzie de Sousa said: "We really weren't expecting this award. It's so lovely to be recognised in this way and we feel very honoured. We've been part of the community for 60 years and have always looked for ways to support people in any way we can.

'FLYING' FUNERAL DIRECTORS ACHIEVE SOARING SUCCESS WITH DARING RIVER ZIPWIRE CHALLENGE



The brave team from Malone & Fox after their zipwire challenge.

Glasgow's Malone & Fox Funeral Directors were feeling on cloud nine after raising £2,757 – smashing their original charity target – by crossing the River Clyde on a zipwire in aid of Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland (CHSS).

The four-strong team traded their smart professional attire for safety harnesses and helmets, tackling an adrenaline-fuelled feat which involved zipping 380m (1,245ft) across the River Clyde from a height of 30m (100ft), cheered on by family, friends and colleagues. They had hoped to raise £1,000 but managed to more than double their target to £2,757 by taking on the challenge.

"Taking the leap was a bit scary," said Martin Brown, Funeral Director at Malone & Fox. "We're thrilled to have raised more than double our target... We are now unofficially known as 'The Flying Funeral Directors!'"

MARRIED BUSINESS PRINCIPALS WALK 100 MILES TO RAISE FUNDS FOR AUTISM CHARITY



Business Principals Michael and Michelle Rushton, of M Rushton Funeral Directors.

Husband-and-wife Business Principals Michael and Michelle Rushton, of M Rushton Funeral Directors in Southport, completed a 100-mile walk in aid of the National Autistic Society.

The couple were inspired by their autistic children to take on the challenge and raise both awareness and funds for the charity.

Bad weather, sore feet and their own family challenges did little to deter the couple from completing the distance with their efforts raising at least £320.

The '100 Miles' challenge encourages participants to walk, run, cycle or take part in any physical activity covering 100 miles while supporting charitable causes. Michael and Michelle surpassed the target with over 300 miles walked between them.

Michelle said: "The challenge had its highs and lows, the most difficult being challenges with our children, illness and family members being seriously unwell. The best has been walking part of the challenge with our children, helping others and spending time together."

FUNERAL DIRECTOR AIMEE SURPASSES FUNDRAISING GOAL IN HEARTFELT TRIBUTE



Aimee and Andrew with their dog Dexter

Aimee Hughes, from Walker & Morrell Funeral Directors in Tyne & Wear, and her husband Andrew exceeded their fundraising target after taking on a sponsored walk for The Miscarriage Association.

The couple wanted to support The Miscarriage Association following the loss of their baby at 10 weeks. Accompanied by their dog Dexter, they joined the charity's Memory Walk to cover four miles, reflecting the one in four pregnancies that very sadly end in loss.

Funeral Director Aimee and Andrew had a target of £500 for their walk during Baby Loss Awareness Week but have raised £940.

Aimee said: "The Miscarriage Association were recommended to us after our own sad loss; they have provided us as a couple with endless support, and we wanted to help them with funds and also by raising awareness. The donations we have received will make a difference to the charity's vital work."

CEO SAM KERSHAW 'SLEEPS OUT' TO SUPPORT YOUTH HOMELESSNESS CHARITY

Chief Executive of Funeral Partners, Sam Kershaw, braved a cold and damp February night sleeping outdoors to raise awareness and funds for Centrepoin, a charity dedicated to ending youth homelessness.

Sam took part in an organised sleep-out on the terrace of Somerset House in central London with around 150 supporters, helping to raise £2,000 towards a £118,000 fundraising target for the charity, which estimates that more than 118,000 young people face homelessness each year.

Motivated to take part in the challenge by personal experiences during 2025, Sam stepped in to help two individuals who had unexpectedly become homeless.

"The reality of having nowhere to live or sleep is incredibly daunting," said Sam. "Seeing this first-hand made me determined to do something to help."

"I'm not fit enough to run a marathon and too 'chicken' to attempt a skydive, so I chose something I excel at – sleeping. The event was incredibly informative and rewarding, and it reinforced just how important Centrepoin's work is."



Funeral Partners CEO Sam Kershaw on his 'sleep-out' in London.

FOUR DECADES AT THE HEART OF GOODBYE

Forty-five years ago, at the tender age of 17, I walked through the doors of the then 'Royal Funeral Director' to start work as a coffin fitter – my first full-time job. I could never have imagined that four decades later, I would end up Chief Executive of the UK's third largest funeral director.

In those early years, my training took me through all aspects of the profession, and I soon realised that this was very much a team effort – every role was equally important.

I joined Funeral Partners back in 2016 as Chief Operating Officer and soon became Chief Executive. To this day, I refer to myself as the 'accidental CEO' as even at this late in my career, I thought I would see my time out in operations, not heading the company.

Funeral Partners has grown rapidly during my tenure, building a strong reputation as a well-run, high-quality funeral services business overseeing over 30,000 funerals each year. With 300 funeral homes staffed by over 1,300 dedicated funeral professionals serving communities across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. It now includes more than 150 family businesses, which have entrusted their reputation and heritage to Funeral Partners.

Four and a half decades later, the heart of what we do remains the same: guiding families through one of life's hardest moments. Every role remains equally important, and all I ask of my team is that they do everything to the highest standard and to the best of their ability.

What's changed though?
Oh, almost everything else.

A growing and changing marketplace
When I started, our town had maybe two funeral directors, each known by just about everyone on the high street. Now? Across the UK, the

number of funeral director businesses has swelled by around 28% in the last ten years. That expansion reflects growing competition and a fragmented marketplace where families have ever more choices.

Digital beginnings: from Rolodexes to Google rankings

For years, families were most likely to use the funeral director whose father handled his grandfather's service or the nearest one, or perhaps they would seek advice from the trusted friend, or even the local vicar. Either way, the circle stayed tight. But now, families rarely live all their lives in the same town. Children grow up, move away, and come back home only for visits. Those broken local ties have already begun to erode the natural referral pipeline that used to define much of our work.

Today, families look online, not just for cost, but for style, values, and the different kinds of services offered. We have always said our vehicle and our funerals are our 'shop window'. Well, we now have the internet as another shop window, and it is becoming more and more important.

Religion and celebrations of life

Traditional funerals still make up the vast majority of funerals arranged today, but it's fair to say over the years they have become much more of a celebration of life with many more families reading a eulogy or personalising a service through popular music rather than hymns.

Forty-five years ago, the vast majority of funerals tended to be Christian. The

number of people identifying with no religion has risen sharply, and so we have seen the introduction of the civil celebrant. And of course, immigration has brought vibrant diversity. It's wonderful to witness faith and culture expressed in so many ways, but it demands deep learning from funeral directors who want to serve every family with respect and understanding.

Unattended funerals

Perhaps the biggest shake-up of the last 10 years has been the rise of direct, unattended cremations – the no-frills option without family present. Our challenge is to support the needs of our clients and their families with a dignified and meaningful farewell, even when the format shifts. Ensuring no compromise on the quality of care and service.

Funeral plans: the rise of the pre-planner

Another big change has been the growth in funeral plan sales. Forty-five years ago, very few funeral businesses offered funeral plans. But today, just about every funeral director offers a funeral plan and there are numerous specialist plan providers.

More people are choosing to pre-arrange and pay towards their funeral. This trend reflects a growing desire for control – "get it sorted, so my family doesn't have to" – and for many, peace of mind. It's been good for longer term business stability too; plans provide visibility and commitment to our funeral directors' brand, long before a death occurs.

The provision and sale of funeral plans is now regulated, providing much-needed consumer protection. But with this regulation comes governance complexity not seen in the profession before, and we have had to adapt and learn.

Looking ahead

For all this change – more competitors, more choices, more technology – there are also real challenges we face.

Families are more cost-conscious and better informed – a good thing, yet this creates commercial pressure for businesses. The biggest concern is this can deter families from looking at quality and value over just headline price alone.

Rising property, fuel, vehicle, staffing and compliance costs all put upward pressure on funeral prices, leading some families to make choices driven by budget rather than value – and in some cases, into funeral debt – something we have to help with.

We need to attract people who understand grief, culture and ceremony with empathy – not just logistics. Recruiting and retaining skilled team members is harder than ever.

Regulation in Scotland, continued CMA oversight, FCA regulation of Funeral Plans, GDPR, health and safety, employment laws – the regulatory landscape has become more complex, demanding and costly.

So, what does the future hold?

I see three big themes shaping the next decades:

Personalisation over tradition – ceremonies that reflect lives lived uniquely, not a one-size-fits-all approach. Funeral directors need new skills and product and services



diversification to accommodate these changes, needs of society and customer expectations.

Digital Growth – virtual attendance, livestreams, online memorial and funeral management portals. Easier planning tools for families to collaborate, fully arrange, pay for and attend funerals from any distance. The web will continue to play a key role in the selection of a funeral director, and digital marketing will surpass traditional print media.

Holistic care – support not just for the funeral day, but grief resources, long-term remembrance, and community engagement. Our community activity is growing, and fundraising and family donations is imperative for many local good causes.

After 45 years, I'm still here in the funeral profession, as committed as ever. I may have swapped my hat and tails for a well-pressed suit, but at the end of the day, our work truly matters. For most of those who work in the profession, we all share the same passion and devotion to serving our clients and families in the very best way we can. With the utmost dignity, respect and exemplary care for the deceased.

At Funeral Partners, these are part of our core values and are at the heart of

everything we do. Be it from behind the desk and laptops in our support offices, to the arrangers who hold the hands of a client in the funeral home, and the chauffeur bearer driving the route and carrying a loved one on their final journey – we all have a part to play, every role is equal.

People will always need someone steady and trustworthy to guide them through their time of need. So, as long as we keep caring deeply, listening closely, and adapting wisely, this industry will endure in ways both familiar and new.

Some things will never change: My shoes will still shine, and my car will be waxed and polished... I will always be a funeral director at heart. The privilege of helping a family say goodbye, the quiet hum of respect in a service, the ritual of comfort woven through shared loss.

But how we get there, that has changed, and will continue to evolve. I'm proud to be a funeral professional and proud of the team at Funeral Partners, who provide amazing support to our bereaved clients and families throughout the UK, every day.

A life well remembered lives on.

Sam Kershaw
Chief Executive Officer
Funeral Partners

TEACHING CHILDREN ABOUT GRIEF: A NEW CHAPTER IN THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

The introduction of grief education into schools from September 2026 may create new opportunities for funeral branches to support teachers, pupils and families as trusted partners within their local communities.

Last summer, the Department for Education announced revised Relationships, Health and Sex Education (RHSE) guidelines that included the introduction of grief and bereavement education into the English national curriculum.

This welcome addition takes effect from next September and will include topics such as natural responses to grief, how to cope with change and loss, and how to support those who are bereaved.

The change is a response to the growing understanding of the importance of mental health in our society and a need to address death and grief more openly to destigmatise these topics, especially among those in their formative years. Suppressed emotions and denial can lead to an inability to face grief in a healthy way, and sometimes deeper problems.

The aim of the new guidelines is to help children understand grief as a normal, universal experience, build emotional resilience and develop empathy for those who have been bereaved, as well as emotional literacy to help navigate future losses.

Many young people will experience bereavement before leaving school, making these skills essential for their emotional wellbeing at this stage in their lives, as well as standing them in good stead in adulthood. It

will also serve to provide teachers with the training and confidence needed to support pupils who are bereaved.

Beacon of the community

As an organisation, we strive to provide the best support we can for grieving families. Funeral professionals are often among the first to guide families following a death and have a deep, practical understanding of grief in all its forms.

Our funeral home teams are available to offer support and answer any questions – particularly if children and young people are involved. We may encourage them to write letters or draw pictures to place in the coffin, arrange a crematorium visit, or share age-appropriate images to help them understand the practical aspects of a funeral. This can support children in understanding what will happen, where everyone will be, and the role they may play on the day.

We also signpost loved ones to bereavement counsellors, who are always on hand to help people cope immediately after a death and to find a positive way forward as life around them continues.

The new guidelines present an important opportunity for the funeral sector to play a visible and supportive, community-based role alongside schools.

Andy Langford, Clinical Director at Cruse, told *Life*: “The introduction of grief education as part of the national curriculum is an important and timely step. Grief is a natural part of life, and therefore part of children’s lives as they grow. Many young people will experience bereavement, which is why it is essential that schools feel equipped and confident to respond. When adults talk openly and honestly about grief, they help create safe spaces where children can share their feelings and learn healthy ways to cope.

“Community-based services such as bereavement charities, funeral homes and local support organisations, play a vital role in helping schools access guidance, resources and reassurance, particularly for vulnerable children. By working together, we can support not just the child, but the whole family, strengthening the network of care around them.”

For more information about the National Bereavement Service, go to www.thenbs.org

For more on Cruse, visit www.cruse.org.uk

CARING FOR BEREAVED FAMILIES ACROSS NORTHERN IRELAND

Several funeral homes within the Funeral Partners Northern Ireland network – including long-established names such as **James Brown & Sons**, **John Gray & Co.** and **Bairds of Antrim** – have worked closely with Cruse to help provide wider support to bereaved people within local communities.

The partnership provided funding during the Covid-19 pandemic to support the recruitment and training

of additional Bereavement Volunteers across Northern Ireland. It has since included developing an online support hub for young people experiencing bereavement, which includes helpful videos on: Coping Immediately after a Death, Birthdays and Anniversaries, Coping at School or College, and How to be a Grief Ally. More information is available on:

www.jamesbrownfuneraldirectors.com/cruse-bereavement/

Image by wirestock on Freepik



Mulhollands Funeral Directors, Larne

Our experience of Mulhollands is nothing short of exemplary and this was in every area from initial contact, explanation of funeral arrangements, subsequent phone contact, speed of response, funeral proceedings. This was overarched by genuine compassion and professionalism at every point and by each person just when we needed it. This made our experience so much more bearable. .

CG

Thank you messages

Our team regularly receive messages of thanks and testimonials from families they have helped. Here is a recent selection of five-star ratings they have received for their service via Google Reviews.

Malone & Fox, Shawlands

We have dealt with Malone & Fox three times in the past two years and on every occasion, they have exceeded our expectations of what a funeral director should be. Peter and the team have been wonderful! Their respect, compassion and support throughout each loss has meant so much to our family.

They took the time to truly learn about our loved ones and the little personal touches they incorporated into each funeral were so thoughtful, adding meaning in ways we would never have thought to do ourselves. At an incredibly difficult time, Malone & Fox made us feel cared for, understood and supported.

LH

Andrew Grey Funeral Directors, Hetton-Le-Holen

I cannot thank Andrew Grey Funeral Directors enough for the exceptional care and compassion they provided. From the very first conversation, they guided us gently through every step with professionalism, kindness and genuine understanding. Nothing was ever too much trouble, and every detail was handled with such dignity and respect. During one of the hardest times of our lives, they made us feel supported and reassured. I am truly grateful for their outstanding service and the comfort they brought to our family .

AC

Michael G Ryan Son & Daughters Funeral Directors, Cardiff

This is the second time of dealing with Michael G Ryan, but the first for my own family and they have been absolutely brilliant. Making a very hard time that much easier. The care and precision is wonderful and comforting.

CD

J H Way Funeral Services, Teignmouth

From the first moment we contacted the team, we felt reassured and comforted by their professional and compassionate approach. The whole service provided was courteous, calm and considerate. At no point did we feel rushed, and we always felt certain about the process.

RT

W Sherry & Sons Funeral Directors, Uxbridge

I can't thank W Sherry & Sons in Uxbridge enough for their kindness and professionalism. From the first phone call, every member of the team was compassionate, patient and respectful – nothing was ever too much trouble. Everything was organised beautifully and handled with care from start to finish. Their support made an incredibly difficult time a little easier.

CC

Firmager Funeral Service, New Romney

We used Firmager for my mum recently and have to say their professionalism is second to none... On the day of the service, the staff were fantastic and looked after us, as well as my mum, and we couldn't have been anymore grateful to all at Firmager. All we can say as a family is, thank you so much.

DL