

Rise of pauper's funerals hints at risk of 'loneliness epidemic' for older men

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Rising numbers of publicly funded funerals in England point to loneliness among older men as the strongest factor behind the trend, above cost-of-living pressures, according to research published by the Local Government Association and the University of Southampton.

[Memoria Funerals](#), part of the Memoria Group which owns and operates a network of crematoria across mainland UK, is drawing wider attention to what the underlying research shows about who these funerals are being arranged for as they become more common. Coverage of the trend has mainly centered on cost-of-living pressures, while the LGA and Southampton data point to a more specific picture of older men with weaker family networks and old-age income deprivation.

According to the Local Government Association's most recent research report, more than 4,400 public health funerals were arranged by English councils in the 2022/23 fiscal year, with total council spend on PHFs that year climbing to £5.96m. That is the equivalent of more than 12 a day and a 12.8% year-on-year rise from the year before.

More comprehensive research published in 2025 by the ESRC Centre for Population Change at the University of Southampton, drawing on direct Freedom of Information data from every English local authority, put the true annual total at closer to 7,020 by 2020/21, up from 4,760 in 2014/15. That amounts to a 47% rise over seven years, once NHS-trust-arranged funerals are included.

However, a less-reported finding within the same Southampton research is that the rate of public health funerals per 1,000 deaths has remained broadly stable across most of England over the last decade, with the exception of London, suggesting that much of the absolute rise reflects an ageing population.

The Southampton study identified a specific demographic pattern behind the rising numbers. Public health funerals are significantly more common among men over 60 than among women or younger adults. The single strongest statistical predictor is not general economic deprivation but the specific Income Deprivation Affecting Older People Index, which measures the share of over-60s living on low incomes in a local area. Hotspots include London, Birmingham, Manchester, Nottingham and Bristol, alongside coastal towns such as Blackpool, Hastings and Hartlepool.

The LGA's parallel survey of councils reinforces this pattern. 62% of English councils said the most common reason for arranging a public health funeral was a lack of family or friends to organise or pay for one. In essence, many of these funerals are being paid for by the state not because families can't afford them, but because there are often no families available to arrange anything at all.

Commenting on the findings, Steve Wallis, CEO of Memoria Funerals, said,

"The phrase 'pauper's funeral' is from the Victorian era, and it still has a Victorian ring to it. It implies destitution, failure, and a bit of moral judgment about the person being buried. Not only is that implied judgement unhelpful and uncompassionate, but it also doesn't quite match what the data is actually telling us.

"In our sector the natural reflex is to point to this kind of data and say: this is what funeral plans are for. And to be fair, a funeral plan can make a meaningful difference here. A pre-arranged, [pre-paid funeral plan](#) removes the financial decision from a family at the worst possible moment. If we want fewer Public Health Funerals, more people putting these types of plans in place could help. But I'd be uncomfortable with anyone reading the Public Health Funeral numbers and concluding that the answer is simply 'sell more funeral plans'. The figures tell us that thousands of people are dying every year with no one in their lives able or willing to pay for a funeral. That's a societal issue, a relational one, and a financial product, however well designed, simply won't fix that. You can buy a funeral plan and still die alone with no one to attend the service, and no one to know it happened.

"Councils, in my experience, take their duty seriously. The funerals they arrange are usually simple cremations, with a celebrant and a small service. A Public Health Funeral isn't a failure of the system. The failure, if there is one, is relational rather than financial. Talk to your older relatives. Talk to your friends and neighbours. Ask the awkward question early, while it's still awkward, rather than late, when it's too painful to raise."

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