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Gathering of Death Literacy Pioneers

Co-organized by Plenna and Gail Rubin

A diverse group of death educators, funeral directors, academics, and end-of-life planners convened at ‘Exit Here’ Chelsea funeral home in London on 24 July 2026 to exchange practices and explore innovations. The unifying theme that emerged was **how to communicate better about death** — across public engagement, legislation, digital tools, and community building. Participants identified a persistent gap between strong positive feedback on death-related initiatives and consistently weak public uptake, and discussed strategies to bridge that gap.

Main Takeaways

- **Communication as the core challenge:** All participants converged on the view that death literacy and open two-way conversation — not any single tool or service — is the primary lever for change. We always need to listen, and bear in mind that around the topic people will prefer/quickly want to speak with a human rather than interact with AI or browse through information.
- **Society could benefit from returning to rituals** – funerals being a central point of discussion.
- **Natural burial was identified as a potential major growth area** in the UK, with lack of urban access and markers cited as key resistance points.
- **Direct cremation (DC) was critiqued** as often bypassing meaningful ritual; Exit Here’s model of pairing ceremony (celebrations, receptions, unique settings) with direct cremation offered a constructive industry response.
- **Death education on the UK national curriculum starting in September 2026** was acknowledged as a significant milestone, though implementation is expected to be light-touch initially. However, the **multiple jurisdictions within the UK** can pose complexities and differences in all areas.
- **AI poses an existential challenge** to static end-of-life planning websites (e.g. Plenna); the group discussed pivoting toward AI-enabled personal planning journeys or employer-focused services.
- ***Don’t need to “reinvent the wheel”, rather “connect the cogs”*** – the death industry is developed but siloed; there are more opportunities for exchanges like the Gathering could help people share experiences.

- **Linking across the generations** – older people tend to be more interested in death planning but younger people are more technically savvy to help with online promotion of related content.

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Pictured below (L to R): David Sunderland, founder of Plenna; Oliver Peyton, OBE, founder of Exit Here; Gail Rubin, Certified Thanatologist and "The Doyenne of Death®"; Laura Barnett, General Manager of Passages International in the UK; Tom Shakespeare, social scientist and author; Jenny Kitzinger, creator of the Before I Die Festival; and Isabel Russo, Executive Director of the Good Funeral Guide.

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Date: 2026-07-31

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