

A Guide to Organising Affairs after a Loved One Passes Away



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Dealing with the loss of a family member or friend, and having to organise their affairs, can be overwhelming as you may be required to make decisions and provide information to a number of organisations and authorities. This guide provides information on what actions you may need to take and what you may need to consider including whether Inheritance Tax (IHT) may be due, how the probate process works and what the role of an Executor of a Will entails.

10 things to do following a death

When someone passes away, you may not know what steps you need to take, or which ones can wait until a later date. Here are 10 things you need to do immediately or in the days that follow a death.

1 — Obtain a medical certificate

You should seek to obtain a medical certificate immediately. If the person dies in hospital, the hospital will give this to you. If the person dies at home, you should contact their GP or call 111 to ask for advice. If a post-mortem or inquest is needed to determine the cause of death, there may be a delay in issuing the medical certificate.

2 — Contact their next of kin

If you are not the deceased's next of kin, you should contact them. You may also want to contact other close family members or friends at this time, as well as carers, their employers or others that need to know immediately.

3 — Check their paperwork for their final wishes

Whilst you don't need to worry about their Will at this point, the deceased may have some wishes that need to be known immediately. This may include a preference for a certain funeral director, or religious considerations.

4 — Find a funeral director

A funeral director will arrange for the deceased to be collected and brought into their care. You should check the deceased's paperwork to see if they have a preference for a funeral director. You don't need to start making funeral arrangements immediately, but this is often done through a funeral director when you're ready.

5 — Secure their property

If the deceased lived alone, you should ensure their property is secure. If they have dependents or pets, you may also need to arrange for someone to look after them.

6 — Register the death

Once you have the medical certificate, you can register the death. You will need to go to a register office. The government's [register office](#) search can help you find the closest one to you. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, you must do this within five days, in Scotland you must do this within eight days. If there is a coroner's inquest, or procurator fiscal in Scotland, registration is delayed until this is concluded.

You will need to pay for a death certificate and it's often a good idea to get extra copies, as this means you can deal with several organisations that need to see a copy at the same time.

7 — Inform government departments of the death

You will need to inform government departments of the deceased's passing. In many cases, there are multiple departments to contact, the [Tell Us Once](#) service means you don't have to contact each authority separately. You must use the service within 28 days of registering a death. This service is not available in Northern Ireland.

8 — Activate the Mail Suppression Service

Receiving mail for a deceased loved one can be difficult. The Mail Suppression Service helps to reduce junk and marketing mail in the name of the person that has passed away. It can also help to reduce the risk of identity fraud. [The Bereavement Advice Centre](#) can activate this for you.

9 — Organise important documents

Once a death certificate has been issued, you will need to find and organise important documents. This can help with the probate process and may include a Will, pension statements, or bank account details. You will also need to return the deceased's driving licence and passport to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) and Passport Office, respectively.

10 — Contact professional services and organisations

As well as informing personal contacts, you will need to get in touch with professional services. This may include financial organisations, solicitors, accountants, or financial planners. You may need to provide a death certificate in some cases, such as to a bank that needs the document to freeze an account to stop any standing orders or direct debits.

When taking these steps, you may feel in shock or overwhelmed by the amount of information provided. This can make it difficult to remember everything that you are told. It's a good idea to take someone with you to meetings or make notes that you can refer to later.

Planning a funeral

Planning a funeral at what is already a difficult time can be stressful, especially if you're not sure what steps you should be taking.

If you will be planning the funeral for someone, the first thing to check is whether they've left any instructions or information about their preferences.

Understanding the deceased's preferences

You may have spoken to the deceased in the past about what their final wishes are. From where they would like the service to whether they would like flowers; some people will have clear ideas about what they would like.

But it can be difficult to make some decisions. If you're planning a funeral, you should:

1. **Check their paperwork:**
They may have left instructions or guidance.
2. **Read their Will:**
While instructions for a funeral written in a Will are not legally binding, it could provide you with guidance if you're not sure what they would prefer.
3. **Check if they have a funeral plan:**
A funeral plan is a way to plan and pay for your funeral during your lifetime. It can give you more control and mean loved ones don't need to make decisions. You may be able to find details in their paperwork. If you think they may have purchased a plan but can't find further information, you can use a [tracing service](#) from the Funeral Planning Authority (there is a charge for this service).

Arranging a funeral

Most funerals are arranged through a funeral director. The deceased may have had a preference about the director that is used. If you will need to find a director yourself, searching for local firms that are part of the [National Association of Funeral Directors](#) can be a good place to start.

You don't need to use a funeral director if you don't want to. If this is your preference, the cemeteries and crematorium department of your local authority may be able to offer guidance.

After checking paperwork, speaking to family and friends about what they would prefer can help you tackle decisions. Asking people that were close to the deceased the following type of questions can give you more confidence as you arrange the funeral:

- Would they prefer a burial or cremation?
- Would they want a religious service?
- What would their preference for music or readings be?
- Who is it important to invite to the funeral?
- Did they have a preferred venue for the wake or post-funeral gathering?
- What type of flowers (if any) would they prefer?

The cost of dying

According to a 2024 SunLife report,¹ the average cost of dying has reached a record high of £9,658.

*The 'cost of dying' is the total cost of a funeral – including professional fees, the funeral service, and optional extras such as a wake.

Four types of insurance that can provide loved ones with financial support

When reviewing the affairs of a loved one that has passed away, you should check if they've taken out any insurance policies that could provide financial security to you or their family. If you have dependents, it's something you may want to think about too.

The death of a family member can leave some people in a financially vulnerable situation. Their income may have been used to pay for essential day-to-day costs or be part of a long-term financial plan. An appropriate insurance policy can provide financial security and mean they don't need to make immediate financial decisions while they're dealing with a loss.

It's not just the main income earner that can benefit from taking out a financial protection policy either. A stay-at-home parent passing away could mean their family faces much higher childcare costs or that the remaining parent needs to cut back their working hours. Financial protection can provide families with the time and space they need to grieve without worrying about how they'll meet financial commitments.

As you review the affairs of a loved one, these four types of policies can help create financial security.

1 — Term life insurance

A term life insurance runs for a defined period. If you pass away during the term, your loved ones will receive a lump sum to use how they wish. You can select the amount of cover provided to reflect the financial commitments of your family. If you outlive the policy term, you usually don't get any money back. This type of policy is usually taken out to coincide with milestones. For instance, the policy term may coincide with paying off a mortgage or children reaching adulthood.

2 — Decreasing term insurance

This type of life insurance policy is similar to a term life insurance policy, but the amount of cover provided reduces over the term. It often runs alongside a mortgage, with the cover amount falling as you pay off the debt. Again, it would pay out a lump sum if you passed away during the term and you can choose the level of cover and how it decreases.

3 — Whole-of-life insurance

As the name suggests, this policy provides cover for the whole of your life. When you pass away, it will pay out a lump sum to your loved ones. It can be used to create a nest egg for your family, and, in some cases, a whole-of-life insurance policy is used to pay an Inheritance Tax (IHT) bill. If you're taking out a policy to cover IHT, the policy will need to be written in trust. Otherwise, it could mean your IHT liability rises.

4 — Family income benefit

The above three options provide surviving loved ones with a lump sum. In contrast, family income benefit can pay a regular income for a defined period if you pass away. It's a policy that can provide a reliable income that your family use to meet financial commitments they may have. It's an option that can mean they don't have to worry about how to use a lump sum to create financial security.

When taking out financial protection, you will need to pay regular premiums to maintain the cover. How much the premiums are will depend on a range of factors, from how much cover is required to your health.

How to make a claim

If your loved one has a financial protection policy that pays out on death and you want to make a claim, you should contact the insurer. There isn't usually a set timeframe for when you need to contact them.

You will need to provide the name of the deceased, their policy number, and their death certificate.

The beneficiary does not have to be the one to make the claim, but they are the only one that can receive the payout.

Sometimes a payout will be delayed if the cause of death is uncertain. However, claims are often settled within a month.

97% of life insurance claims are paid

It's a common misconception that financial protection policies don't pay out. Figures from the Association of British Insurers (ABI)² show that 97% of term life insurance claims were paid in 2020; this rises to 99% for whole-of-life insurance policies.

2. 2/9/24 | Protection insurers pay out record £7.34 billion to support individuals and families | ABI



The probate process: How does it work?

When someone passes away, the process of sorting out their assets and how they will be distributed is called 'probate', or 'confirmation' in Scotland. The process includes gathering assets together, paying any remaining debts, and distributing what is left.

Not every estate will need to go through the probate process, and you can [check here](#) if it does. For instance, if assets are jointly owned with a spouse, probate is not normally needed.

How long the probate process takes will depend on the assets of the deceased. Usually, it takes between four and eight weeks to complete if there are no complications. However, it can take longer if the estate is complex, or you need to sell assets.

When someone passes away, you will need to establish if they have left a Will. If so, they may have named a suitable executor within the Will. This is the person who is responsible for dealing with the estate.

If there is no executor named or the executor is not willing to act, an administrator has to apply for letters of administration before they can deal with the estate.

If you are the executor or administrator, you can decide to go through the process of probate alone or appoint a specialist. What is right for you will depend on a range of factors, including how comfortable you feel dealing with the process and how complex the estate of the deceased is.

Keep in mind that probate specialists will charge fees, this could either be a fixed fee or an hourly rate. If you do decide to engage the services of a specialist, make sure you understand the fee structure.

Probate glossary

Beneficiary:

Someone who will receive a gift, lump sum, or share of the estate.

Estate:

All of the assets owned by a person, such as savings, property, and other material goods.

Executor:

The person appointed in a Will to administer the estate.

Probate:

The process of sorting and distributing the assets of the deceased.

Seven steps to take if you're the executor of a Will

If you're the executor, it can feel like a daunting process. Here are seven essential steps you'll need to take in most cases.

1 — Check the latest version of the Will

Before you start acting as the executor, you should check that the version of the Will you're using is the latest copy, as the deceased may have written a new one. Make sure you carry out a thorough search of their paperwork and contact their solicitor if they have one.

2 — Arrange the funeral

If the person who has passed away has left instructions for their funeral, it's your responsibility to ensure they're followed. This could include preferences stated in their Will or a funeral plan. You don't need to make all the arrangements yourself, you can ask family and friends for support or delegate some tasks.

3 — Review all assets

You will need to start building a picture of the assets the deceased held and what their value is. You'll need to check through all their paperwork to track down bank accounts, insurance companies, pension providers, and more. You should let these organisations know that the deceased has passed away so they can freeze the account and provide further information.

While doing this, you should keep track of the value of the assets and keep any necessary paperwork, such as an estate agent's letter valuing their home.

4 — Value the estate

With a clear picture of the assets the deceased owned, you can provide a value of the estate. As well as adding up the assets, you will need to take into account any debt that is still owed, as this will need to be paid from the estate.

5 — Pay any Inheritance Tax (IHT) due

For the current tax year, if the value of an estate is less than £325,000, known as the 'nil-rate band', no IHT is due. For IHT purposes, not all gifts are considered outside of an estate immediately. Some may be considered when calculating IHT for up to seven years, which are known as 'potentially exempt transfers' (PET).

If there is IHT to be paid because an estate exceeds the thresholds, some gifts are taxed on a sliding scale (known as taper relief) depending on when they were given:

Less than 3 years:	40%
3 to 4 years:	32%
4 to 5 years:	24%
5 to 6 years:	16%
6 to 7 years:	8%
7 or more years:	0%

Note that taper relief only applies to gifts in excess of the nil-rate band. It follows that, if no tax is payable on the transfer because it doesn't exceed the nil rate band (after cumulation), there can be no relief.

Taper relief does not reduce the value transferred; it reduces the tax payable as a consequence of that transfer.

If a qualifying property, including the deceased's main home, is left to children or grandchildren the residence nil-rate band may also be used. This is £175,000 for the current tax year.

The portion of the estate that exceeds these thresholds may be liable for IHT at the standard rate of 40%.

However, calculating the amount of IHT can be difficult. The deceased may be able to use the unused allowances of a partner who passed away before them, gifts may need to be included, and leaving a charitable legacy can reduce the standard rate of IHT.

You can find out more about Inheritance Tax and potential ways to mitigate it in *Our Guide to Inheritance Tax and Gifting*.

Seven steps to take if you're the executor of a Will

6 — Apply for a grant of probate

A grant of probate permits you to administer someone's estate after they pass away. You can apply for probate [online](#) or by completing a paper form.

Before you apply for a grant of probate, you must estimate the estate's value and find out if there's any IHT to pay. You'll need the death certificate or an interim death certificate from the coroner to apply. When the probate is granted, you should send copies to any organisations that hold some of the deceased's assets so they can release them to you.

If the value of the estate is over £5,000, you will need to pay an application fee of £300. You can order additional copies of the probate for which you may have to pay a fee. This can make it easier to deal with different organisations at the same time.

7 — Distribute the estate

Once any debts and IHT have been settled, you will need to distribute the assets of the estate following the terms of the Will.

There are different ways that people can specify how their estate is distributed. For instance, a 'pecuniary bequest' means leaving a fixed sum of money, whilst a 'residuary request' means leaving a portion of the estate. Make sure you understand the instructions and seek support if you're uncertain.

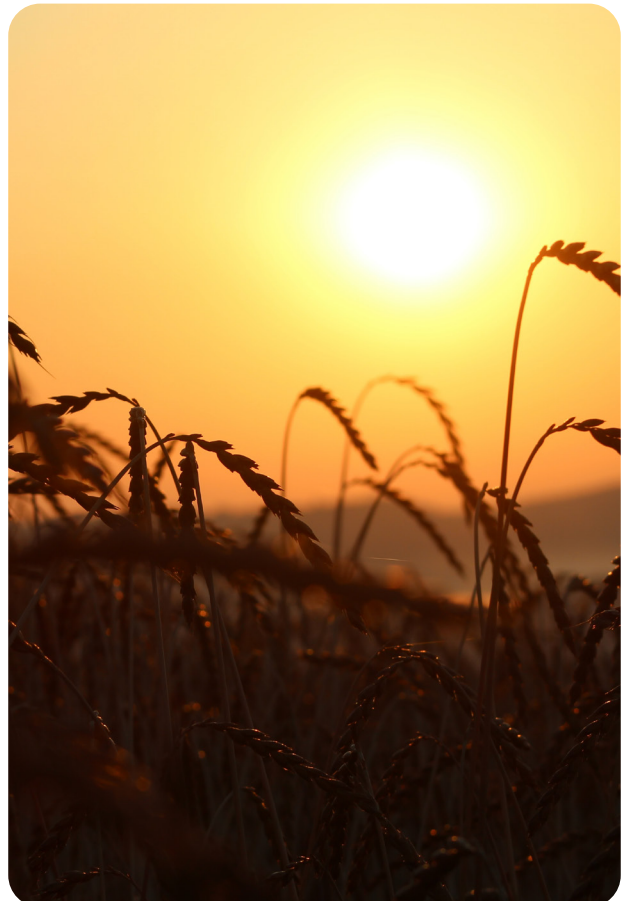
If you're not sure you've found all potential claims against the estate, you don't have to do this straight away. Waiting two months before you distribute assets can give you confidence that all claims have been made.

Make sure you keep clear records in case there are any questions about how you've administered the estate.

Can a Will be contested?

It is possible for a Will to be contested, though it is rare. A Will may be contested if you believe it doesn't reflect the true intentions of the person or the Will hasn't been executed correctly. A contested Will can go to court, which can prove lengthy and costly.

If a court finds that a Will is invalid, the estate will be distributed at the discretion of the court, so there are no guarantees. If there is a previous Will, the court will normally take this, as well as intestacy rules, into consideration.



What happens if someone passes away without a Will?

Writing a Will is essential for ensuring that a person's wishes are carried out, but many people overlook taking this step. If a Will is not in place, the deceased's assets will be distributed according to intestacy rules.

These rules set out who the assets will pass to. Eventually, assets may pass to the crown if there are no other relations to benefit from the estate. Passing away without a Will may mean assets aren't distributed according to the deceased's wishes and under these rules, some of their loved ones will not benefit.

The rules of intestacy in Scotland and Northern Ireland differ to those in England and Wales. You can read the rules that would apply to you on the [Gov.uk website](#).

Under intestacy rules, friends or charitable causes a person would like to support won't receive anything either.

Fact

59% of people in the UK don't have a plan in place for when they die.³

3. 17/9/21 | 14% of the UK wrongly assume loved ones will automatically inherit after death | Will Aid



Have you written your Will?

As you're dealing with the affairs of a loved one, you may think about setting out your affairs too. An essential part of this is writing a Will. It is the only way to ensure that your assets are gifted to the people or organisations that are most important to you.

While it's easy to put off, writing your Will can be simple. After setting out your assets and who you want to benefit from them, you can write a Will yourself or engage the services of a solicitor to help you.

Remember to review your Will regularly to reflect changes in your circumstances and your wishes. It is advisable you review your Will every five years or after major life events.



Frequently asked questions about Probate

What is probate?

Probate refers to the process of dealing with the estate of someone who has died. This is done either according to the deceased's Will or intestacy rules if there isn't one.

Do you need probate?

While the probate process is common, it's not necessary in all cases. If the value of the estate is less than £5,000, you may not need to go through the process. This may also apply if the entire estate is being left to the deceased's spouse or civil partner.

What costs can I expect?

You will need to pay for a grant of probate if the value of the estate is more than £5,000. There may be other administrative costs, such as if you want additional copies of paperwork. If you use the service of a professional, you will also need to pay their fees.

Do you need to use a solicitor for the probate process?

There's no legal requirement to use a solicitor. However, you may feel more comfortable dealing with the affairs of a loved one with a professional, especially if you need support because their estate is complex.

How long does probate take?

The time frame varies depending on the complexities of the estate. In most cases, the process takes between six months to a year. There is no time limit for completing the probate process, but IHT must be paid within six months after the person's death.

How long does it take for beneficiaries to receive their inheritance?

Again, this will depend on how complex the estate is. However, it's typical to receive an inheritance within a year.

Do I have to act as executor?

No. Even if you're named as executor, you don't have to act if you don't want to. You will need to complete a Deed of Renunciation, which you must sign and submit to the Probate Registry.

Coming to terms with a loss

Losing someone important to you is challenging, and people deal with grief in different ways. Whilst you may need to make decisions following a death, your emotional wellbeing is important too. If you're struggling to deal with grief or would like to talk to someone about your experience, there is help widely available. Here are some organisations that can help you find support.

At a Loss

At a Loss is a signposting website for the bereaved. You can use the website to find support, including local organisations, depending on a range of factors, from your age to the circumstances.

Cruse

Cruse is the UK's leading bereavement charity and helps people by providing bereavement support and information. You can find resources on their website and call their helpline to talk to someone. The organisation also provides grief counselling.

Samaritans

Samaritans are open 24/7 for anyone that needs to talk. Volunteers are trained to help you talk through your worries and concerns. You can visit some branches in person or write a letter or email.

Set out your estate plan

We know that dealing with the death of a loved one is difficult. We're here to help you through the process and, when you're ready, provide support to put your own affairs in order. Understanding your assets now and what you want to leave behind for those that are important to you can help ensure your wishes are followed.

We know that dealing with the death of a loved one is difficult, but understanding what steps you need to take and what support is available to you can be a great help during an already challenging time.

Contact Us

If you need help organising the affairs of someone else or for yourself, please get in touch



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You should seek legal advice to ensure that your Will reflects your wishes and is legally binding.



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