

House of Lords Oral question 9 Nov 2022: bereavement support

CBN Policy briefing for Peers

October 2022

Introduction

Dame Sarah Mullally, the Bishop of London has tabled an oral question for 9 November 2022 'Report by the UK Commission on Bereavement 'Bereavement is Everyone's Business' which found over 40% of respondents wanting formal bereavement support did not get any'.

The [UK Commission on Bereavement](#) (the Commission) has prepared a briefing which is available from the Whips' Offices.

This additional briefing from the Childhood Bereavement Network provides more information for those wishing to ask supplementary questions on the areas of the report that focus on bereaved children and young people. Please contact us at cbn@ncb.org.uk if you would like more information on this briefing or our work.

Background to the Commission

Bereavement is a universal experience, yet we know that the circumstances of each death, and the support received by those left behind, makes everyone's experience different.

Working in partnership with several UK charities, and with researchers leading an academic study on the issue, the Commission was established to explore these issues and make recommendations to better support bereaved people. As well as engaging with adults, the Commission also considered evidence on children and young people's experiences and views, via

- 99 written responses from bereaved children and young people aged 5-18
- Evidence from organisations supporting bereaved children and young people
- An oral evidence session
- Engagement with over 31,000 pupils in collaboration with the organisation Votes for Schools.

In response to the evidence gathered, the Commission established 8 principles setting out the things it would like all bereaved people to be able to say, and made recommendations to support these.

Childhood bereavement – facts and figures

- No data is collected on the number of children bereaved of a parent, sibling or someone else important in their lives
- In the absence of these data, the Childhood Bereavement Network estimates that
 - One parent dies around every 22 minutes in the UK
 - Around 112 children are bereaved of a parent each day
 - Around 1 in 29 school age children (or roughly one per classroom) have been bereaved of a parent or sibling

Suggested supplementary question:

Given the current invisibility of bereaved children in official statistics, what plans does the Government have to identify these children as a first step to meeting their needs?

- Bereavement affects every aspect of children's lives. The Childhood Bereavement Network's *Grief Matters for Children* campaign summarises evidence which shows that bereaved children are at increased risk of depressive symptoms and anxiety, physical health symptoms, accidents and serious illnesses, risky health behaviours and early mortality. They have lower average GCSE scores and are less likely to be employed at age 30. They are over-represented in the criminal justice system¹.

Grief education

Relevant UKCB principle: I am supported by my family, friends and the communities around me

- The UK Commission identified persistent discomfort in society about talking about dying and bereavement, which means bereaved children can miss out on the support they need from friends, family, and their communities.
- The Covid-19 pandemic confronted this generation of children with death and bereavement in an unprecedented way, both through direct experiences of bereavement, and through widespread discussion of these topics in the media.
- Learning about coping with bereavement as a part of life at school can help prepare pupils for their own experiences, and help them to support one another better. *'We should talk about it as it is a reality in life and a skill we need to learn for life. This would help us learn how to support others to cope.'* (Primary school pupil consulted via Votes for Schools)
- An increasing range of curriculum materials and training resources exist to help teachers' confidence in teaching these topics sensitively, helping prepare children to support one another and themselves at times of loss in the future, but they are not

¹ <https://childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/files/grief-matters-for-children-2017.pdf>

included in the statutory curriculum (for example in health education or relationships education), so many schools choose not to address them.

- In response, the Commission recommends that 'all schools and other educational settings must be required to provide age-appropriate opportunities for children and young people to learn about coping with death and bereavement as part of life.'

Suggested supplementary question:

What plans does the Government have to ensure that all children and young people are given opportunities to learn about coping with bereavement as part of life, to help them support themselves and their friends at times of loss?

Bereavement support at school**Relevant UKCB principle: I am sensitively supported by my school, college or workplace during my bereavement**

- Bereaved children and young people spend a significant proportion of their time in school or college, and should feel they 'belong'. As well as providing important social networks and stability, schools are places where children and young people have to study and perform, and so schools have a key role to play in providing the network of support around grieving pupils.
- The death of someone close can have a profoundly disruptive impact on children and young people's engagement and achievement at school.
- Some excellent examples of support were shared with the Commission, including careful sharing of information, adjustments to expectations where needed, and flexible support that continued over time.
- However, half of the bereaved children, young people and adults who shared their experiences with the Commission said they got only a little or no support from their education setting after their bereavement.
- The Commission is recommending that all education establishments should be required to have a bereavement policy including staff training, and a process for supporting bereaved children and their families.

Suggested supplementary question

Given the critical role that schools play in children's lives, what is the Government doing to improve the consistency of bereavement support in educational establishments, in support of pupils' wellbeing and learning?

Child poverty and bereavement**Relevant UKCB principle: I feel secure in my home and have the right financial support**

- Bereavement can often trigger financial insecurity and poverty, with many bereaved families at particular risk of financial hardship and changes to their material circumstances and living conditions.

- Among people nearing the end of life, people in families with children are the most vulnerable of all family types to experiencing poverty in the last five years of life. Two out of three working age terminally ill people with children will experience poverty in their last five years of life².
- Bereavement benefits for families with children were radically reformed in 2017. 75% of families are worse off than they would have been under the old arrangements and, with the new payments made for only 18 months, 91% of families are supported for a shorter period³.
- These benefits have not been updated at all since they were introduced in 2017, so they are now worth a sixth less than when they were introduced.
- Children and young people sharing their experiences with the Commission were very aware of the financial impact on their family and the stresses this was bringing *"I wish we had somewhere nicer to live and no money problems as this just makes things even harder for us."* (5-12 year old)
- These difficulties are worsening under the current cost of living crisis.
- The Commission makes several recommendations about the extension of key bereavement benefits to groups who are currently ineligible (e.g. extending Bereavement Support Payment to families who were cohabiting) and for longer time periods (e.g. extending benefits for carers to six months following the death).

Suggested supplementary question

Will the Government update Bereavement Support Payment to address the 16% depreciation in its value since it was introduced in 2017, so that children in 2022 and beyond are supported to the same degree as those bereaved five years ago?

Access to formal bereavement support

Relevant UKCB principle: I can easily find and access the right emotional bereavement support for my circumstances

- Many children and young people will cope with the support of their family, friends, school and communities. But some, particularly those in circumstances that are already disadvantaged, will need more than this, and may benefit from meeting other bereaved children and young people or accessing therapeutic support such as counselling.
- A number of flexible, non-stigmatising community-based organisations provide this type of typically a range of services including one to one and peer support groups for children and their parents or carers, along with support and training for schools and other professionals⁴.

² <https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/globalassets/media/documents/policy/dying-in-poverty/h420-dying-in-poverty-5th-pp.pdf>

³ <https://childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/files/BSP%20briefing%20March%202017.pdf>

⁴ <https://childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/if-you-need-help-around-death/finding-support-local-you>

- Where this sort of support was available, bereaved children and their parents shared with the Commission how helpful it was. They valued feeling understood, being able to talk, getting help managing their thoughts and feelings and remembering the person who had died, and building their confidence. Many bereaved children and young people liked meeting other children and young people in similar situations.
- However, many had struggled to get the support they needed.
- There is huge variation in the provision of these services across England. They have developed in an ad hoc way, leading to inequities in provision. Many struggle for funding, and large areas of the country are still without services that support all children, whatever the cause of death. Even in areas that do have a service, there may be long waiting lists or travel times, and services' survival is precarious.
- This results in many families struggling to find the help they need for their children. Prior to the pandemic, waiting lists for child bereavement services were increasing and there were already concerns about access.
- The pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities. Services are now faced with greater numbers of bereaved children and young people, grieving more difficult deaths. Lockdowns made community fundraising more difficult and many services report reduced and precarious income.
- Even where services are available, families may struggle to find their way to them, or they may be provided in ways that do not match children's needs, with some groups being particularly underserved.
- The Commission is calling for the Government to invest 79p annually per child, young person and adult in the population to transform access to bereavement services over the next five years, including a particular focus on better supporting Black, Asian and ethnic minority communities.
- It is also calling on bereavement services and support to sign up to an agreed set of standards, ensuring they meet the diverse needs of the communities they serve.

Suggested supplementary question:

How does the Government plan to invest in equitable early support services for bereaved children and young people, helping to prevent difficulties worsening and becoming entrenched?