

# SPECIAL EXAM CONSIDERATION



## CBN POLICY BRIEFING – APRIL 2021

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### THE ISSUE

Facing bereavement around exam time is particularly difficult for young people. We are sometimes asked how bereavement or a family member's serious illness can be taken into account in young people's exam results.

The arrangements for this are different in 2021, as usual summer exams have been replaced by assessments. This briefing sets out our best understanding of how pupils bereaved in the run-up to summer 2021 exams can make sure that their circumstances are taken into account.

The arrangements in Scotland are different from those in the rest of the UK, so this briefing has a separate section for Scottish candidates.

### ENGLAND, WALES AND NORTHERN IRELAND

#### *How bereavement is taken into account in usual years – before 2021*

In usual years, there are standard 'tariffs' for adjusting marks in response to personal circumstances and challenges that pupils might experience around exams. This is called 'special consideration'. These apply across all exam boards and all subjects, and are set out by the Joint Council on Qualifications (JCQ), on behalf of all exam boards. Visit <https://www.jcq.org.uk> for up to date information.

The JQC acknowledges that special consideration 'cannot remove the difficulty faced by the candidate'. Generally, bereavements can only be taken into consideration if they happened within six months of the exam, unless an anniversary has been reached at the time of the assessment or there are on-going implications such as an inquest or court case. More details of the arrangements in usual years are set out in the appendix.

#### *How bereavement can be taken into consideration in summer 2021*

Special consideration requests will not apply in the usual way this summer because pupils will not be taking exams, and grades will be determined by schools or colleges. The arrangements are described in full here <https://www.jcq.org.uk/summer-2021-arrangements/>. In short, teachers will initially determine grades, which will then be reviewed by the school or college. The professional judgement of teachers will only be based on what pupils have been taught and teachers will use a range of evidence from across the course of study to make their decision.

In most cases, the range of evidence that teachers use to inform grades will be consistent across classes or cohorts for each qualification. However, schools or colleges may decide that a different range of evidence may be more appropriate to fairly inform an individual pupil's grade. The example that the JCQ gives to justify using a difference range of evidence is if a pupil has missed significantly more teaching than others

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in their class, but we think that pupils could also ask for a different range of evidence to be used if they have suffered a significant bereavement during this time.

Teachers will tell pupils which pieces of work will be used as evidence to inform their overall grade. Pupils will have the opportunity to raise any concerns about the evidence being used, for example, if the evidence was affected by personal circumstances, such as bereavement. The teacher will make the final judgement about what evidence is to be included - this is not a negotiation. Teachers will not be able to tell pupils the grade they have submitted to the exam board.

This year, there are two ways in which pupils can ask for a bereavement to be taken into consideration:

1. Talking to the school or college before they submit grades to make sure they are aware of the bereavement so they can take it into account
2. Appealing a grade if a pupil is unhappy with the way their personal circumstances were given special consideration.

These are set out in more detail below. In either case, the supporting evidence we have given later in the briefing may be helpful in demonstrating the impact of the bereavement.

### *1. Taking your bereavement into account*

It is very important to make sure that the teachers who will be grading are aware of the bereavement and how it has affected the pupil as soon as possible. If they do not know about it, they cannot take it into consideration. The JCQ advice to pupils and their parents or carers says:

*If you think that your performance in an assessment has been affected by illness or personal circumstances, you should talk to your school or college about this as soon as possible. It is important that you raise any such instances before your school or college submits your grade. If you have any questions about how your personal circumstances will be taken into account or want to raise anything with your school or college, now is the best time to speak to them. You should not wait until after you get your results.*

If teachers are aware of the bereavement, and it has affected the pupil's performance in an assessment which will be used to determine a grade, they should take this into account and document how they have done so. The guidance to teachers says:

*Centres must be satisfied that the issue or event [e.g. the bereavement] has had, or is reasonably likely to have had, a material effect on a student's ability to demonstrate his or her normal level of attainment in an assessment. Centres must record how they determined the impact of the misfortune.*

### *2. Appealing a grade*

Pupils will have a right to appeal if they believe an error has been made in determining their grade, including if they believe that your bereavement has not been taken into account properly.

Appealing is a two stage process. The full process is set out at pages 6-7 of the [JCQ Guidance for Students and Parents on Summer 2021](#).

### **Stage 1: centre review**

If a pupil doesn't think they have been issued with the correct grade because their bereavement was not taken into account, they can appeal to their school or college and ask them to review whether they did not apply a procedure correctly, e.g. they did not take account of mitigating circumstances such as illness or bereavement.

To help a pupil decide whether to appeal, they can request that their school or college shares with them (on results day if not before) details of any special circumstances that have been taken into account in determining the grade, e.g. mitigating circumstances such as bereavement. Pupils can also ask their school or college for their Centre policy and for the sources of evidence used to determine the grade.

### **Stage 2: appeal to the exam board**

If the pupil still doesn't think they have the correct grade after the Centre review is complete, they can ask the school or college to appeal to the exam board. This includes asking them to review whether the school or college did not apply a procedure correctly, e.g. they did not take account of mitigating circumstances such as bereavement.

## **SCOTLAND**

The Scottish Qualifications Authority has set out that National Qualifications in 2021 will be awarded based on provisional results - teachers and lecturers will use their professional judgement of learner evidence to determine provisional results. SQA produced guidance in October 2020 to support schools/colleges with estimates and has information and principles which may help when gathering evidence for provisional results. This outlines that:

*There may be a range of factors that impact on candidates' access to learning. When making judgements on estimates, it is important to bear this in mind, especially ...where illness or other personal circumstances might have affected performance, meaning that centres should also review candidate performance in alternative assessments of similar demand when making their judgements. Candidates who experience barriers to learning including those who have caring responsibilities, those who are care experienced, and those who may have further interrupted learning due to illness or disability.*

*For candidates who have assessment arrangements, or who would have reasonable adjustments, estimates must be based on likely achievement with the reasonable adjustments/assessment arrangements in place. When reviewing assessment evidence, you should reflect on whether appropriate support was in place, or whether the assessment was used as a 'baseline' indicator for future support. It is worth emphasising that these candidates may have been unable to access appropriate levels of support in home learning situations. Some candidates may have their learning supported by peripatetic teachers or support for learning specialists. You may wish to include these staff in estimate discussions.*

SQA are currently consulting on the appeals process for 2020/21 and we will update this briefing when the arrangements are announced. More information is available at [www.sqa.org.uk](http://www.sqa.org.uk).

## SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

Some of the following evidence may be useful when explaining the impact of a bereavement to teachers.

### *How bereavement affects young people – general evidence*

Studies with children themselves, their parents/carers and teachers have shown that young people may have difficulty in concentrating and focusing following bereavement, impacting on their studies. This can include young people experiencing intrusive memories while trying to concentrate, particularly when traumatic elements were associated with the death.

- One year after the death of a parent, bereaved children's concentration is significantly lower than that of non-bereaved children (Worden, 1996).
- Abdelnoor and Hollins (2004, UK) found that parentally bereaved young people's GCSE scores were an average of half a grade lower than their non-bereaved peers. Girls bereaved of a sibling scored almost a full grade below their controls.
- After controlling for other factors, the death of a parent by the age of 16 is associated with women failing to gain any sort of qualification (Parsons, 2011, UK).
- Analysis of a nationally representative sample in the US found that, after accounting for demographic characteristics and other traumatic events, experiencing sudden loss of someone very close was associated with lower academic achievement, lower ability to concentrate and learn, less enjoyment of school, lower school belongingness, and lower beliefs that teachers treat youth fairly (Oosterhoff et al, 2018, US).
- A register-based national cohort study found that the death of a parent before the age of 15 was associated with lower grades and school failure. Much of the effect, especially for deaths by external causes, was associated with socioeconomic disadvantage and psychosocial problems in the family (Berg et al, 2014, Sweden).
- Prix and Erola (2017, Finland) looked at the educational trajectories of children whose father had died before they were 16, in a representative sample of 10% of the Finnish population born between 1982 and 1987. On average, even after controlling for other family changes and family resources, they had a higher risk of dropping out of secondary education by age 18 and were less likely to have entered higher education (either a polytechnic or university) by age 23. However, if their surviving mother had high levels of socioeconomic resource, they were not more likely to drop out of secondary school or less likely to enter polytechnic. However, even those with mothers with the highest levels of education, income or social class were somewhat less likely to go to university.
- Using total population data on children born between 1982 and 2000, Høeg and others (2019, Denmark) found that in comparison with non-bereaved people, those who had been bereaved were less likely to finish compulsory school, high school or vocational training, bachelor degree or professional programme and university graduate degree, regardless of the gender of the parent who died, the cause of death or the child's age at the time of death.
- Focus groups with 39 parentally bereaved young people aged 9 to 17 revealed they struggled to reconnect with classmates following the return to school and often feel alone, that schools fail to have guidelines in place for what students are allowed to do if becoming sad in class, and that schools seem to forget their loss as time passes (Lytje 2018).

- McLaughlin et al (2019) have summarised the evidence on schools' supportive response to bereaved pupils, finding it patchy. Although their policy findings relate to the English education system, the report has relevance for the other UK nations.

### *How bereavement has affected young people during the pandemic*

Bereavements have been particularly difficult during the pandemic. Increasing number of young people responding to repeated surveys by Young Minds during the pandemic have cited bereavements as a factor impacting on their mental health (Young Minds 2021).

The social distancing measures put in place to stop the spread of COVID-19 has impacted on all bereavements during this time, not solely those caused by the virus itself.

- Almost 80% of managers of voluntary sector bereavement services for children, young people and adults are reporting higher levels of distress than usual among those seeking their support (Penny and Nibloe, 2020).
- Because of restrictions on visiting hospitals and hospices, many young people have been unable to spend time with dying loved ones, and to say goodbye, known to be of benefit to their outcomes in bereavement (Marshall et al, 2020).
- Other young people have been exposed to bereavements in the home, sometimes with distressing symptoms and experiences which may have left them traumatized (UK Trauma Council, forthcoming).
- Many families have experienced serious economic hardship and anxiety during the pandemic. A drop in household income and continued changes in family circumstances are associated with worse outcomes for bereaved children and young people (Lin et al 2004, Worden 1996).
- 94% of families bereaved since March 2020 have faced restricted funerals, often with extremely limited numbers and with households having to sit separately from one other. In some cases, children and young people have been excluded. Some rituals and cultural practices associated with death and bereavement have been unable to go ahead or have been performed by others. This has limited young people's opportunity to say goodbye, be involved and be supported by family, friends and the wider community. Being involved and supported are known to be critical factors affecting young people's bereavement outcomes (Worden, 1996).
- Support from peers and school staff can make a significant difference to young people's experiences of bereavement, and school can provide a source of continuity and relative normality while things at home are changing and challenging. While schools were closed, young people did not have access to this supportive community in the same way. This impacted on schools' awareness of significant bereavements, limiting their ability to respond and offer the support they usually would have been able to do.
- Anxiety about other family members' health and about themselves are very common among bereaved young people. These anxieties have been severely increased for bereaved young people during the pandemic, with very real fears of family members being infected and affected by the virus, multiple infections within families and uncertainty about childcare and other arrangements. There is now much evidence showing the impact of the pandemic on young people's mental

health: the impact on those who have experienced bereavement has been particularly acute. 17-22 year olds with a probable mental disorder were twice as likely to have experienced the serious illness or hospitalization of themselves or someone close to them during the pandemic as those unlikely to have a mental disorder (NHS Digital, 2020) (9.8% vs 4.1%).

- In usual times, many young people are referred to bereavement services via their school or GP. During lockdowns, particularly while schools have been closed, these referral pathways have been severely disrupted, contributing to a drop in referrals noted by many voluntary sector bereavement service managers (Penny and Nibloe 2020). These managers also reflected that many families were so focused on meeting basic needs and coping with home schooling that they did not have capacity to reach out for support.
- Child bereavement services have been severely disrupted by the pandemic, having to move their 1:1 and group support activities online, and facing significant challenges in raising funds to support their work. This has restricted young people's access to the support that would be available to them in usual times (Penny and Nibloe 2020). While some young people find virtual support to be more convenient, in many cases this has prevented them from seeking support or receiving the level of support they felt the needed (Young Minds, 2021).

## WHAT CBN MEMBERS CAN DO

Please make sure that any children and young people whose public examinations might be affected by bereavement know to apply through their school for special consideration. We would be very grateful for any anonymized examples you could tell us of young people who required this special consideration and how it was handled by the school or college. We will treat any such information as confidential but it will help us build up a picture of what is actually happening in this area. Please send this, or any questions, to [cbn@ncb.org.uk](mailto:cbn@ncb.org.uk)

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Briefing updated April 2021

## APPENDIX 1: SPECIAL CONSIDERATION IN ENGLAND, NORTHERN IRELAND AND WALES PRIOR TO 2021

In general, candidates will be eligible for special consideration 'if they have been fully prepared and have covered the whole course but performance in the examination or in the production of controlled assessment/coursework is materially affected by adverse circumstances beyond their control'. Relevant circumstances include

- ➔ bereavement **at the time of the assessment** (where whole groups are affected, normally, only those most closely involved will be eligible)
- ➔ domestic crisis arising **at the time of the assessment**.

The JQC specifies that candidates will not be eligible for special consideration if their preparation for or performance in the examination is affected by a bereavement that happened more than six months before the assessment, unless an anniversary has been reached at the time of the assessment, or there are on-going implications such as an inquest or court case.

The maximum allowance given is **5% of the total raw marks** and exactly what allowance is given depends on the seriousness of the circumstances, how close this was to the exam, and whether what was affected was coursework, practical task, examination etc. In 2020 for example, relevant examples include

- ➔ 5% adjustment for the terminal illness of a parent or carer; or the death of a member of the immediate family within two months of the examination; or very serious and disruptive domestic crisis at or near the time of the examination
- ➔ 4% adjustment for the life-threatening illness of an immediate family member; or the very recent death of a member of the extended family (very recent means within one month of the exam)
- ➔ 3% for a recent traumatic experience such as the death of a close friend or distant relative; or for a recent crisis or incident (recent means up to four months prior to the exam);
- ➔ 2% for extreme distress on the day of the assessment (not simply exam-related stress).

The exam officer of the young person's school or college makes an online or paper application for special consideration, using an official form. They may have to submit some supporting evidence such as a doctor's note.