

Establishing a social and support network

By Margaret Bryant, Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire Branch, WAY Foundation

The WAY Hertfordshire & Buckinghamshire Branch a self-help organisation providing opportunities for bereaved families to meet socially on an informal basis. It is a member of the national WAY Foundation. Events are arranged by and for people who have in common the experience of being 'widowed and young'.

Aims

Our aim is to provide opportunities for bereaved families to meet socially on an informal basis.

Principles

A set of guiding principles underpins our approach. Others thinking about setting up a similar group may find it helpful to take these into account in their planning and development:

- Bereaved families can learn a lot from each other; providing opportunities to contact others in the same situation is helpful.
- The organisation should be informal and flexible so that people can participate as much or as little as they want to, when they want to, and how they want to.
- Membership is open to all who are widowed at a young age, regardless of time since bereavement and type of bereavement (the only qualification for joining the branch is being widowed at a young age - typically under 50 years of age - including those who were not legally married to their partner).
- Activities are planned by members, who simply invite other WAY members to join in if they are interested. This spreads the organisational workload across potentially the entire membership and ensures that activities reflect members' interests.

This leaflet is one of a series showing different models for working with the parents and carers of bereaved children and young people. The series aims to provide practical ideas and inspiration for others thinking about setting up services for bereaved families. Funded by the Parenting Fund, the series is produced by the Childhood Bereavement Network, a national federation of over 300 organisations and individuals and Winston's Wish, a national charity helping children and young people rebuild their lives after a family death.

What the group offers

We produce and distribute a 'calendar of events' three times each year (see back page for an example). The process for doing this is as follows:

- Every four months, the branch committee organises a 'WAY ahead' planning meeting.
- Members volunteer to host an event. They may do this at the planning meeting, or by contacting a committee member via telephone or email prior to the meeting.
- All events are organised by the members who offered to host them.
- A member of the branch committee coordinates the setting of dates to ensure there is no overlap and is responsible for compiling the written calendar, which is then distributed to all members by post.

The 'core' calendar includes regular events, specifically a monthly meeting in a pub or a restaurant meal. The venue for the monthly meeting is largely determined by the location of the member hosting that event.

Identifying the need

The Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire branch of the WAY Foundation began in the 1990s when a small group of young widowed people learned of each other through membership of the national charity, which distributes lists and contact details of WAY members in each UK region. They first met in a local pub, and agreed to plan and organise a programme of social activities to enable them to meet on an ongoing basis.

At one stage activities were planned and organised by one individual, for the benefit of the group as whole. As membership grew, it became evident that it was not viable for one individual to organise a wide range of activities which covered the needs of the various subgroups among the local branch membership (for example the newly bereaved, those with young children and those with children who have left home). So the organisation evolved to enable members to volunteer to 'host' events.

By 2004 we had a relatively stable membership of around 50 people and were aware that many WAY members in other UK regions had formally constituted their local membership under a branch committee affiliated to the national WAY Foundation.

The area contact proposed that we should go down this route and this was put to a members' vote. While the response rate was disappointing (22%), there was a good majority in favour of being a formal branch. The main reasons for this change were:

- transparency in following national Way guidelines and policies, for example regarding basis of membership and handling information and confidentiality issues
- affiliation to a national charity may promote confidence to join the local group
- affiliation to a national charity may improve publicity for the local group
- transparency for managing the costs of producing and distributing the calendar of events
- facility to organise fundraising activities if required/desired.

The first AGM was held in May 2005. Membership of the branch committee expanded at that time, and overall membership has risen to around 70 people.

In setting up the group, we did not formally seek any external support or advice. We drew solely on the valuable range of experience and expertise of our local members, who come from a range of occupational backgrounds and offer their time and commitment voluntarily.

Cost

The main costs to our service are met voluntarily by branch members. These are:

- people's time
- meeting facilities
- communication hardware and costs (for example phone and email).

The cost of distributing a hard copy of the events calendar is around £30 per mailing. This includes £15 for copying, £10 postage, £5 stationery. Funding for this comes from a voluntary local branch subscription of £5 per year.

People

We do not have paid staff. Branch members manage the activities of the local branch on a voluntary basis. There are currently around 70 members across Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire.

The branch committee has six members: two area contacts (one for Hertfordshire and one for Buckinghamshire), a treasurer, a secretary, an events co-ordinator and a national WAY committee link member. All branch committee members are volunteers.

The success of the Branch is dependent on members who are willing and motivated to organise and host events.

Training

We have recently recognised that training is an issue that should be addressed. The main priority for training at this stage is some form of support for member-volunteers whose contact details are published and made available to those joining national WAY or the local branch for the first time. Their training needs include:

- how to handle telephone calls (listening, what not to say, how to present what the group offers etc.)
- effective ways to enable people to try the group and discover if it might help them
- how to take care of themselves (for example handling difficult calls; having clear boundaries around their involvement; and having avenues for personal support and supervision).

The national WAY committee is actively considering training and support needs of the national WAY telephone team, in the light of a workshop on befriending offered by the Child Bereavement Trust, so at both national and local level the WAY Foundation recognises the importance of supporting the work of its volunteers.

Partnership working

Though we are not involved in any joint work at present we believe there may be some value in talking with other bereavement self-help organisations (such as Compassionate Friends) which may be more proactive in training members to become befrienders, or in arranging memorial days (for example the SANDS balloon release picnics). This would help us to learn from examples of good practice in other circumstances that may (or may not) be similar to those of WAY members.

In addition, the development of a link with the Buckinghamshire-based Child Bereavement Trust may be a useful partnership for delivery of training for members who volunteer for the area contact role.

Our informal links with the Amersham CRUSE branch means that they can refer people to WAY. There is potential to network in a similar way with other local bereavement services, but we are not aware of any local bereavement network (indeed they may not be aware of WAY!).

Issues to consider

- The best events for the calendar are simple, no-cost activities that can be adaptable to the number of people turning up, for example a walk or meeting for a drink in the pub. Activities that require advance planning and

financial commitments (such as a trip to the theatre or a youth hostelling weekend) are best arranged by members among a known group of contacts. It is unreasonable for any event organiser to have to commit money with no guarantees of who will turn up. We have found that the newly bereaved or those with young families want the flexibility to join in or drop out at the last minute.

- Organisers are advised to plan activities that they enjoy doing and are likely to do anyway, whether or not they are joined by other WAY members. For example if you go swimming on a Saturday afternoon, you can let people know via the calendar and see if anyone wants to join you. Aim to keep any extra organisation to the minimum, at least until the group is well-established and you have some idea of who is likely to come to what events.
- Attendance at events is completely unpredictable – sometimes it is just one family, sometimes six. Don't take it personally on a day when few people come. The same event on another date could be a very different experience. Persevere; just being there probably encourages some members who have yet to find a date for a WAY event that is convenient for them.
- Sometimes members may encounter difficult behaviour, for example long-established members wanting a safe social group and being actively unwelcoming to the newly bereaved. The national WAY Foundation has a code of conduct so it would be possible to clearly warn someone whose behaviour is offensive.
- Occasionally you may get fraudulent new members. To some non-widowed people, advertising that a group of young widowed people is meeting in a local public venue appears to be an opportunity to pursue potential new relationships. To avoid this happening, we are very cautious about publicising exact venue details in the events calendar. Members are required to pre-book with the event organiser for full details. This provides some degree of protection for the organiser, as well as enabling them to plan ahead according to how many people are likely to be attending.

Evaluation

Our annual AGM is an opportunity for the branch committee to ask the membership to comment on activities over the past year and make comments, including suggesting new ways of working. Notice of the AGM goes out two weeks before the meeting, and comments and feedback are requested in that letter. The May 2006 AGM

included a discussion of responses to a short survey on the extent to which the branch activities were meeting members' needs. Feedback showed that the majority of members were happy with the range of activities. Areas identified for improvement included (i) helping new members develop a sense of belonging to the group, perhaps via a local befriending or buddying system and (ii) developing some form of information or activities to support bereaved parents as they support their bereaved children.

About the WAY Foundation

The WAY Foundation provides a self-help social and support network for men and women widowed up to the age of 50, and their children. The main aim is to help those widowed young to rebuild their lives by helping one another. According to the latest estimates, there are approximately 36,500 widowed men and women in England, Wales and Scotland under the age of 40. Under 50, the figure rises dramatically to approximately 142,000. Nationally, the WAY Foundation has around 1,100 members. There are local area contacts in 44 locations across the UK, of which about 20 groups have an active programme of meetings.

Information about the national charity can be found at www.wayfoundation.org.uk

The WAY Foundation
PO Box 6767
Brackley
NN13 6YW

Telephone: 0870 011 3450
Email: info@wayfoundation.org.uk

Reflections on the social and support network

We reflected on the network we have developed, focusing on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for those involved (a 'SWOT' analysis). Although this is specific to our network, others may identify some areas they want to consider about in more detail if they are thinking about setting up something similar.

Strengths

- offers people opportunities to make friends/talk with people facing similar challenges
- accessible by a diversity of bereaved people, at different 'stages' of life and the bereavement journey
- informal and easygoing
- people can bring their children with them when appropriate and the children have opportunities to meet others in the same circumstances in a relaxed setting
- activity programme is led by the membership so reflects their interests and suits their needs in terms of location and time of day
- organisation is low-cost (volunteers) and spread across the membership

Weaknesses

- self-selecting group; primarily 'middle class'
- cost of some events may exclude some members
- access to many events is likely to be problematic for members reliant on public transport
- the critical mass of active membership in some localities can be borderline at times in terms of keeping things going (areas like Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire are very big)
- aspects of local branch policies and procedures could be viewed as under-developed or inadequate, for example training and support for area contacts who are the focal point for new members

Opportunities

- members can gain confidence when they progress from participating in events to organising events themselves
- members are able to meet people with whom to develop other shared interests outside WAY
- members can identify others who have been bereaved in the same way to share experiences
- the branch can develop by members sharing their experience from other organisations and passing that on
- formal branch organisation provides a focal point for liaison with other more specialised bereavement services in the locality, e.g. CRUSE

Threats

- members do not join in or leave the organisation, so the venture runs out of steam (in practice only a small proportion of the branch membership attend social meetings and there is a high rate of turnover, with many joining WAY for the web-based discussion forums only)
- the running costs could become unmanageable by current volunteer-driven arrangements if the branch membership becomes too big, or the scope of activities offered too ambitious
- a lack of well-established policies, procedures and training exposes volunteers to some risks, for example complaints about misuse or insensitive handling of personal information
- occasionally members participating in certain types of activities do not meet their share of the costs (for example a restaurant meal), undermining goodwill and illustrating the need for 'how-to' guidelines

A sample page from a calendar of events

HERTFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE WAY CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Below are details for events organised by members of the Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire WAY group. These are informal get-togethers with people who have and share something in common. If you would like to come to any or all of the events, please contact the event organiser by the book in date. **New members welcome at all events** – if you are new to the group and would like someone to meet you either beforehand or at the event, please contact the relevant organiser. Hope to see you there!

Date	Place	Event	Organiser
Sun 19 Jun 10am Prebook by 15 June	Stokenchurch	WAY Walks Led by guide from English Nature. Circular 3-5 miles. Parents advised to consult organiser to decide if children would enjoy this walk. Suitable clothing and footwear necessary. Pub lunch optional.	Margaret 1 Tel : xxxx xxxxxx
Fri 24 June 12.00-2pm Prebook by 21 June	Berkhamsted	At home lunch All welcome to drop by for a light lunch and a chat. Child-friendly house, so small people welcome too.	Margaret 2 Tel: xxxx xxxxx email: name @isp.co.uk
Tue 28 June 8pm Prebook by 26 June	Amersham area	Last Tuesday of the month drinks Regular monthly get-together. Contact the organiser for details of pub and directions.	Margaret 1 Tel : xxxx xxxxxx
Fri 1 July 8pm Prebook by 27 Jun	Amersham	Evening meal – bring your young adults Members with older children have successfully brought them along to previous WAY events. This is another opportunity to involve the 18+ 'children'.	Margaret 1 Tel : xxxx xxxxxx email: name @isp.co.uk
Sun 3 July 1pm lunch 2.30 bowling Prebook by 20 Jun	Stevenage leisure centre	Ten pin bowling With optional lunch at Fatty Arbuckle's beforehand (1 child meal free for every paying adult)	Brian Tel: xxxx xxxxx email: name @isp.co.uk
Sat 9 Jul pm Prebook by 2 Jul	Redbourn	Par 3 golf 9-hole course. Clubs and trolleys may be hired. Golf shoes not required. Do come if 'pitch & putt' level or above www.redbournclub.com	Pam Tel: xxxx xxxxx email: name @isp.co.uk
Fri 8th OR Sat 9th July 7pm Prebook by 7 Jun	High Wycombe	Jacqueline Wilson's Midnight Advertised as suitable primarily for 9-13 year olds. Wycombe Swan Theatre. For details see www.wycombeswan.co.uk	Jane Tel: xxxx xxxxx email: name @isp.co.uk
Fri 15 July 10.30am Prebook by 13 Jul	Aylesbury	Coffee morning Child-friendly house – children welcome.	Michael Tel: xxxx xxxxx email: name @isp.co.uk

For further information email:
info@wayfoundation.org.uk

May 2006

