

The Rt Hon Francis Maude MP, Minister for the Cabinet Office
Nick Hurd MP, Minister for Civil Society
Cabinet Office
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Dear Ministers

CBN response to the open letter to the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector

Thank you for your invitation to the voluntary and community sector to submit examples of good practice and suggestions of cost-savings.

I am writing from the Childhood Bereavement Network (CBN) to highlight the important cost-saving interventions delivered by childhood bereavement services across the UK. We are the national hub that provides representation and support to those who work with bereaved children and young people. Hosted by NCB, we have over 250 members across the UK who work with over 9,000 children and families each year who have faced the death of someone close.

Around 1 in 29 children and young people have experienced the death of a parent or siblingⁱ. Bereavement brings change and challenge into a child's life, and can be devastating. We know that bereavement increases the risk of poor outcomes for children and young people – particularly those already in disadvantaged circumstances - and that these outcomes can be costly: to individuals, families and society. Children and young people who have been bereaved of a parent or sibling have more somatic symptoms, accidentsⁱⁱ, and serious illnesses requiring hospitalisation than their peersⁱⁱⁱ, and consult the GP more often^{iv}. They are 55% more likely to have a diagnosable mental health disorder^v. They are 60% more likely to have been excluded from school^{vi}, and may underachieve at GCSE^{vii}. Girls are more likely than their peers to use drugs and have an early pregnancy^{viii}. Persistent young offenders are at least four times as likely as the general population to have been bereaved of a parent^{ix}. Young people bereaved of a parent through suicide are themselves more likely to die by suicide or to be hospitalised for psychiatric difficulties^x. Some young people identify that not getting help at the right time has meant their difficulties escalate. One young woman who had spent time in a psychiatric unit wrote to CBN member Jigsaw4u:

I was 10 when my mum died... After she died I was so upset. All I wanted was someone to talk to but instead they punished me by sending me away. I was in care – why would no one talk with me ... why didn't anyone understand? In the end I suppressed my feelings, because I hadn't been told how to deal with my feelings. They still came through though, but in wrong ways. I would be rude to people, have fights and get into trouble all the time. I was angry and misunderstood. I got bullied so I bullied other people. I never got help because I was in the unit.

Childhood bereavement services aim to help children and young people find healthier ways of coping, which can support them to avoid the difficulties outlined above. A controlled evaluation of an intervention found that timely support could improve bereaved children's mental health, and that these impacts grew over time, as well as improved parental coping and warmth^{xi}. Children, young people and their parents report that services make them feel less isolated, help them to make sense of what has happened, reduce their anxiety, improve communication within the family, improve confidence and parenting, and relieve them through exploring and expressing feelings^{xii}.

Services delivered early and flexibly to bereaved children and young people form part of a preventative, public health approach to bereavement, which builds on their strengths and helps them to develop a resilient mindset^{xiii}. 85% of services are based in the voluntary and community sector^{xiv}. These services are deeply rooted in communities, developed according to local needs and helping children's existing networks of family, school and community to support children over time as their response to their loss changes and develops, and as they encounter further losses in the future. Services receive referrals from schools, CAMHS, GPs and other professionals, who value their provision. Many services are delivered to groups of children and young people, helping them and their parents and carers to learn from and support their peers in a way which offers enduring benefits. By improving outcomes for bereaved children, these services are delivering significant cost savings to society.

Moreover, because the vast majority - 87%^{xv} - are reliant to some degree on volunteers, they are an important and long-serving example of the Big Society at work. Volunteers support services with fundraising, governance, publicity, administration, and direct grief support with children and young people. Many of these volunteers are highly qualified professionals and contribute a wide range of knowledge and experience to the sector. Volunteers' enthusiasm for their role and knowledge of their local community can increase awareness of and support for a service, which can result in referrals and funding. Sharing their wide life experience and expertise can generate exciting ideas for service development and re-energize paid staff in their own direct work. Their involvement reinforces that grief is a natural response and not an illness^{xvi}. However, it is important to remember that while using volunteers does save money, it is not without costs. These include recruitment, selection, training, induction and supervision, insurance, travel and other expenses. Paid staff may not be able to deliver all the training necessary and their time invested in supporting volunteers – often a significant amount particularly in the early stages of volunteering – takes them away from other work.

Childhood bereavement services will need continued investment to continue delivering the big cost-savings they can make across health, social care and the criminal justice system. We are already being made aware of the debilitating impact of the recession and the cuts to public services on our members – and ultimately on the bereaved children and families they are supporting. We urge the government to recognise the important contribution that these services make, and to encourage local government and the public to continue supporting these services.

I would be pleased to talk to you or your officials further about the important contribution that childhood bereavement services make.

Yours sincerely

Alison Penny
Coordinator

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