



Manifesto for grieving children

General election 2019



Childhood
Bereavement
Network

**NATIONAL
CHILDREN'S
BUREAU**
Part of the family

Manifesto for Grieving Children

Every 22 minutes, a parent dies in the UK leaving dependent children. That's over 2,000 parents over the course of this General Election campaign. Many other children and young people are bereaved of a brother, sister, grandparent or someone else close. While many get great support from family, friends and school to help them through, others struggle to find the help they need. Bereavement brings long term consequences and risks, and getting the right support is key.

This Election, we're calling on candidates to spell out how they would support bereaved children and young people if they were elected. Our manifesto for grieving children has simple pledges.

Financial support

- End discrimination against grieving children whose parents were living together but not married
- Restore longer term support for widowed parents to help them put their grieving children's needs first

Support in school

- Ensure every school is prepared to respond to the death of a pupil, staff member or someone important in a pupil's life, or news that a death is expected
- Give all children and young people opportunities to learn how to cope with loss and bereavement

Extra support

- Provide a platform of sustainable funding so that all children and their families facing and following bereavement can access extra support if they need it

Numbers

- Collect data on how many children are bereaved each year in the local area, and what support they need

Support for all children

- Because bereaved children are children first, we're supporting NCB's call for a national strategy for all children and young people, backed by an investment of £10 billion, with children's voices at the heart.

Financial support

End discrimination against grieving children whose parents were living together but not married

One in five parents raising children can't claim bereavement benefits if their long-term partner dies, because they weren't married or in a civil partnership before the death.

Parents make the same National Insurance contributions whether they're married or not and this builds up their entitlement to certain benefits including the State Pension. If they die before they are able to draw that pension, the contributions they made entitle their surviving partner and dependent children to bereavement benefits. But their partner is only eligible if they were married or in a civil partnership. Parents who weren't married lose out by almost £10,000. In most other European countries, payments can be made to cohabiting partners or to the children themselves, so they don't miss out.

Lots of couples in the UK don't realise they wouldn't be eligible: over half of people with children wrongly believe that living together for some time brings them the same legal rights as if they were marriedⁱ. This lack of awareness has hardly changed over the last ten years, despite campaigns and coverage of high profile cases.

This confusion about the myth of the 'common law' marriage is partly because the means-tested benefits and tax credit systems treat couples as one unit, whether they are married or not. The Family Testⁱⁱ includes cohabitation within its definition of couple relationships, and the Family Law Reform Act 1987 identifies parents as being parents irrespective of whether they are married or notⁱⁱⁱ.

On 30 August 2018 the Supreme Court ruled that denying Widowed Parent's Allowance to Siobhan McLaughlin, a mother who wasn't married to her partner who died, was incompatible with human rights legislation^{iv}. More than a year on, we are still waiting for the eligibility criteria to be amended, and for clarity what will happen for people who were previously ineligible because of their marital status.

We want the incoming government to end this discrimination and make cohabiting couples eligible for the old Widowed Parent's Allowance and the new Bereavement Support Payment. We estimate this would cost around £20 million per year. This is 0.01% of DWP's budget, but a huge amount for an individual grieving family adjusting to the death of their mum or dad.

Restore longer term support for widowed parents to help them put their grieving children's needs first

Until April 2017, the National Insurance contributions of a husband or wife who died supported their family until the youngest child left full time education. On average, surviving parents were supported for five to six years. Two years ago, the government scrapped this Widowed Parent's Allowance and replaced it with Bereavement Support Payment, which supports the family for just 18 months. 91% of families are supported for a shorter time under the new scheme, and 75% are worse off.

The new scheme is no longer intended to replace the lost income of the parent who has died^v. But our survey of over 300 widowed parents showed that is exactly how many parents are using their payments, to meet the daily living costs of bringing up their children. Stopping the payments after just 18 months is creating a second economic shock for many families with young children, at a time when they are still reeling from the death of one of the parents. Some told us how they were having to move house, increase their working hours before their children were ready, and sacrifice bereavement counselling and other expenses that were helping the family adjust to life without their mum or dad^{vi}.

Children's grief often reveals itself over a period of time, and many parents report the second and third year more difficult than the first. Children are often very anxious about their surviving parent, worried that something bad will happen to them too. Research has shown that children need their parents to be available to them over time as they adjust to their new life^{vii}.

Universal Credit is intended to meet the longer term income support needs of widowed parents, but after a short period, they have to put their claimant commitment ahead of their grieving children's needs. The scheme does not differentiate between a widowed parent who is now completely on their own and a divorced parent who gets maintenance payments and shares childcare and decision-making with their former partner.

We want the incoming government to restore longer term support to widowed parents and their children. We want a national consultation on the appropriate length of time over which grieving children should be supported, and how this should best be done.

School

Ensure every school is prepared to respond to the death of a pupil, staff member or someone important in a pupil's life, or news that a death is expected

Around one child in every classroom will have been bereaved of a parent or sibling at some point in their childhood^{viii}. Over 70% of primary schools have a recently bereaved pupil on roll^{ix}, and the majority of young people will have faced the death of someone close to them by the time they leave school^x. Bereavement can threaten children's wellbeing, health, relationships and learning.

School is a key context for grieving children, providing continuity and structure when everything else is changing. It can be a place where they are listened to and supported by staff and peers, where their experiences are acknowledged and their needs are met. But it can also be a place of misunderstanding or bullying, leaving them isolated and under pressure.

Good support involves clear procedures – set out before they are needed - and flexible pastoral support. This gives some choices back to pupils and parents when life feels out of control. It also means that early help is in place to keep students on track and avoid difficulties emerging or escalate. While some pupils' grief emerges in changes or behaviour that attract attention, others may be struggling in silence. Children and young people often revisit their grief as they develop their understanding and face further changes over the years. It is important that support is available over time to all those that might need it.

We want all school staff to know how to respond appropriately to a bereaved child, and where to get extra support, information and training. We want every school to audit and improve their practice using our *Growing in Grief Awareness* framework during the 2019-2020 academic year.

Give all children and young people opportunities to learn how to cope with loss and bereavement

Learning about change, loss and bereavement equips pupils to support themselves now or in the future, and to respond kindly and supportively to bereaved peers. The majority of young people will have experienced the death of someone close to them by the time they leave school – and almost everyone will face this at some point. There are lots of opportunities in the curriculum to help build students' skills and knowledge in areas such as changes and differences in families; lifecycles and understanding death; and managing feelings and seeking help.

Having partnerships in place with local and national bereavement organisations can help school staff teach these topics with confidence and know where to get extra help for students who need it.

We want all schools to review the areas in the curriculum where loss and bereavement can be addressed, and to teach these topics at relevant points. We want future curricula to address bereavement explicitly so that schools understand their responsibilities.

Extra support

Provide a platform of sustainable funding so that all children and their families facing and following bereavement can access extra support if they need it

All services working with children and families and with death and dying have a role to play in supporting grieving children and those caring for them. This includes schools, children's centres, hospitals, hospices, GPs, CAMHS and specialist childhood bereavement services.

These local specialist child bereavement services offer direct support to children and families as well as ancillary services such as training and consultancy. Some work with particular groups (eg the children of patients at a particular hospice), while others work with all children, whatever the cause of death, be it anticipated, sudden, violent or traumatic.

Services work with families to assess how the children are doing, whether extra help is needed, and what type of support would be best. This tailored support builds on families' strengths and prevents difficulties from escalating. Children, young people and their parents are clear about the benefits these services can bring: helping them to make sense of what has happened and what is happening now; supporting them to communicate and understand one another's grief; and helping them to feel less isolated and more in control.

Most services are based in the voluntary sector and provision is patchy and vulnerable. Even where services exist, they rely heavily on donations, fundraising and volunteers, often struggling to keep their services afloat. Around 65-70 per cent of local authority areas have an 'open access' service available to any bereaved child in the area, however the death occurred, but even where services are available, they may not be able to cope without extra resources if their profile rises and referrals and demand increase.

Our members report in-year budget reductions in contracts and grants; late agreement of budgets making it difficult to retain staff; increasing referral rates as statutory services including CAMHS are cut and look to 'export' their caseloads; and increasingly complex family lives.

We want the incoming government to commit to providing a platform of sustainable funding for child bereavement services supporting their local community.

Numbers

Collect data on how many children are bereaved each year in the local area, and what support they need

While data are collected each year on the number of children affected by the divorce of their parents, no official record is made when a parent dies leaving dependent children. This seriously hampers local service development and planning, and means that bereaved children are often 'under the radar' when national policies are developed. It also makes it

difficult to know how many children in a given area might need support, who they are, and how to make sense of research into bereaved children's lives.

We want the incoming government to commit to a system for recording children's experience of bereavement so that an appropriate response can be planned.

Support for all children

Because bereaved children are children first, we're supporting the National Children's Bureau's call for a national strategy for all children and young people, backed by an investment of £10 billion, with children's voices at the heart. Read more [here](#).

About the Childhood Bereavement Network

The Childhood Bereavement Network (CBN) is the national hub for those working with bereaved children and young people across the UK. We underpin our 250+ members' work with essential support and representation. We are hosted by the National Children's Bureau.

ⁱ <http://natcen.ac.uk/news-media/press-releases/2019/january/almost-half-of-us-mistakenly-believe-that-common-law-marriage-exists/>

ⁱⁱ Department for Work and Pensions (2014) The Family Test: Guidance for Government Departments

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1987/42/section/1>

^{iv} <https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/uksc-2017-0035.html>

^v <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/work-and-pensions-committee/support-for-the-bereaved/written/102155.html>

^{vi} <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/work-and-pensions-committee/support-for-the-bereaved/written/102338.html>

^{vii} Worden, JW (1996) *Children and Grief: when a parent dies* New York: Guilford Press

^{viii} Fauth, B., Thompson, M. and Penny, A. (2009) Associations between childhood bereavement and children's background, experiences and outcomes. Secondary analysis of the 2004 Mental Health of Children and Young People in Great Britain data, London: NCB.

^{ix} Holland, J. (1993). 'Child bereavement in Humberside Primary Schools'. *Educational Research*, 35 (3), 289-297.

^x Ribbens McCarthy, J. and Jessop, J. (2005) *Young People, Bereavement and Loss: Disruptive transitions?* London: National Children's Bureau.

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CBNtweets



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