

National Bereavement Alliance

c/o National Children's Bureau
23 Mentmore Terrace
London
E8 3PN

For correspondence: Alison Penny apenny@ncb.org.uk

The Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP and Nadine Dorries MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and Minister for Bereavement
Department of Health and Social Care
39 Victoria Street
London
SW1H 0EU

26 January 2021

Dear Secretary of State and Minister for Bereavement,

In November's Spending Review, the Chancellor announced £500m for mental health services. We are writing to you to ask you to commit a portion of this funding towards the vital support offered to those who have been bereaved during the pandemic, to help prevent them developing mental health difficulties.

The terrible toll of 100,000 deaths from COVID-19 reached today lays bare the scale of loss faced by families, friends, and communities across the UK. Millions of people bereaved by the usual 600,000 deaths each year have also been impacted by the social restrictions necessary to control the virus. Families and friends have been bereaved in sudden and shocking ways; many have been unable to be with their loved ones as they died, and to gather to support one another in their grief. These losses have been felt particularly heavily by those from disadvantaged and deprived communities. Health and care workers on the frontline have been impacted by death on an unprecedented scale. The impact of bereavement is felt by individuals and families and also by society and the economy through increased use of health services and impacts on employment and schooling.

The sheer numbers of bereaved people are greater than ever: around 20% higher in England since March 2020 than in previous years¹. Ongoing research from the Universities of Cardiff and Bristol has found that 81% of people bereaved since March 2020 have had limited contact with family and friends in their bereavement and 67% have experienced social isolation or loneliness. Among those bereaved by Covid-19, 85% were unable to say goodbye to their loved one as they would have liked. These experiences at the end of life and in bereavement are leading to higher levels of distress and difficulty, with over half of respondents showing high or severe levels of vulnerability in their grief².

¹ <https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/static-reports/mortality-surveillance/excess-mortality-in-england-latest.html>

² *Supporting people bereaved during COVID-19: Study Report 1*. Available at <https://www.covidbereavement.com/reports-and-publications>

It falls largely to communities and voluntary sector bereavement services to meet this doubly increased need: more bereaved people, facing greater distress and risk of mental health difficulty. Our survey of voluntary sector bereavement service managers in September 2020³ found that 41% were already reporting an increase in the number of people seeking their help, with 90% expecting demand to increase further. Use of the central information and signposting website AtALoss.org has grown by 743% over the last year and Cruse Bereavement Care are speaking to twice as many people on their national helpline than this time last year. 80% of voluntary sector bereavement services are having to meet this increased demand from a frozen or reduced income.

These pressures are having an alarming impact on the availability of support. 56% of those bereaved during the pandemic who had sought help from bereavement services faced difficulty in accessing support, including limited availability and long waiting lists⁴. Emergency grants, while welcome in the short term, are not sufficient to meet the ongoing and future needs of bereaved people. Our survey found that 40% of voluntary sector bereavement service managers will have to close or further reduce or restrict their services if they do not secure further funding.

Despite the case for bereavement support being made in submissions to the Comprehensive Spending Review, these crucial services were overlooked. We urge you to work with colleagues across Whitehall to look again at how this critical provision can be supported. It is vital that a portion of the £500m announced for mental health services in the Comprehensive Spending Review is allocated to those providing critical help for bereaved children, young people and adults, stabilising these services and helping to address the postcode lottery in provision.

Sustainable funding would enable services to provide:

- Early support to meet bereaved people's immediate health and welfare needs;
- Opportunities to meet others who have been bereaved and to offer mutual support;
- 1:1 support for those who need more intensive interventions;
- And training for schools, employers, faith communities and others in bereaved people's networks to help them provide a supportive response.

Support should be bolstered by funding for proactive information about grief and signposting to appropriate services so that people know that help is out there, and feel able to access it. This enables people to help themselves and each other, and reduces pressure on frontline services.

The holistic approach outlined here would help address the devastating legacy of grief from these extraordinary times.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Marilyn Relf, Chair

³ Covid-19: the response of voluntary sector bereavement services. Available at <https://nationalbereavementalliance.org.uk/ourpublications/covid-19-the-response-of-voluntary-sector-bereavement-services/>

⁴ *Supporting people bereaved during COVID-19: Study Report 1*