



Cheshire East
Council

Coronavirus and Bereavement

Support for Schools, Colleges and
Settings

April 2020

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| 1. Introduction..... | 2 |
| 2. Pre-Planning..... | 2 |
| 3. On Receiving Notification of a Death..... | 4 |
| 4. Short-term Actions..... | 7 |
| 5. Follow Up: Develop Medium and Long-Term Plans..... | 10 |
| 6. Checklist of Actions to be Taken Following Notification of Bereavement..... | 12 |

This document directly relates to the: **Coronavirus and Bereavement Support for Parents and Carers** and **Activities, Resources and Sources of Support** documents.

Working for a brighter future together



1. Introduction

All schools should have access to the Cheshire East “Managing the response to Critical Incidents in schools, settings and services” booklet and they may have previously used this as a basis to write their own Critical Incident plan.

The COVID-19 pandemic means that there is an increased risk of unexpected deaths both in the school and the wider school community. Schools will be managing this in the particularly challenging circumstance where most children are at home and most staff working remotely.

We are therefore advising schools to plan ahead and prepare for such an event using this guidance to identify issues that need to be considered in addition, or as an amendment, to their usual Critical Incident Plan.

2. Pre-Planning:

When you personally feel loss, your thinking may be impacted. This document cannot provide all you with all the information that you require but it may prompt you, put an order to your thinking and actions, and help you to identify where you can find further support. Planning beforehand will give you something to draw on, should a death occur. It is not an easy task; however it is easier to think things through without the emotions that bereavement will inevitably bring.

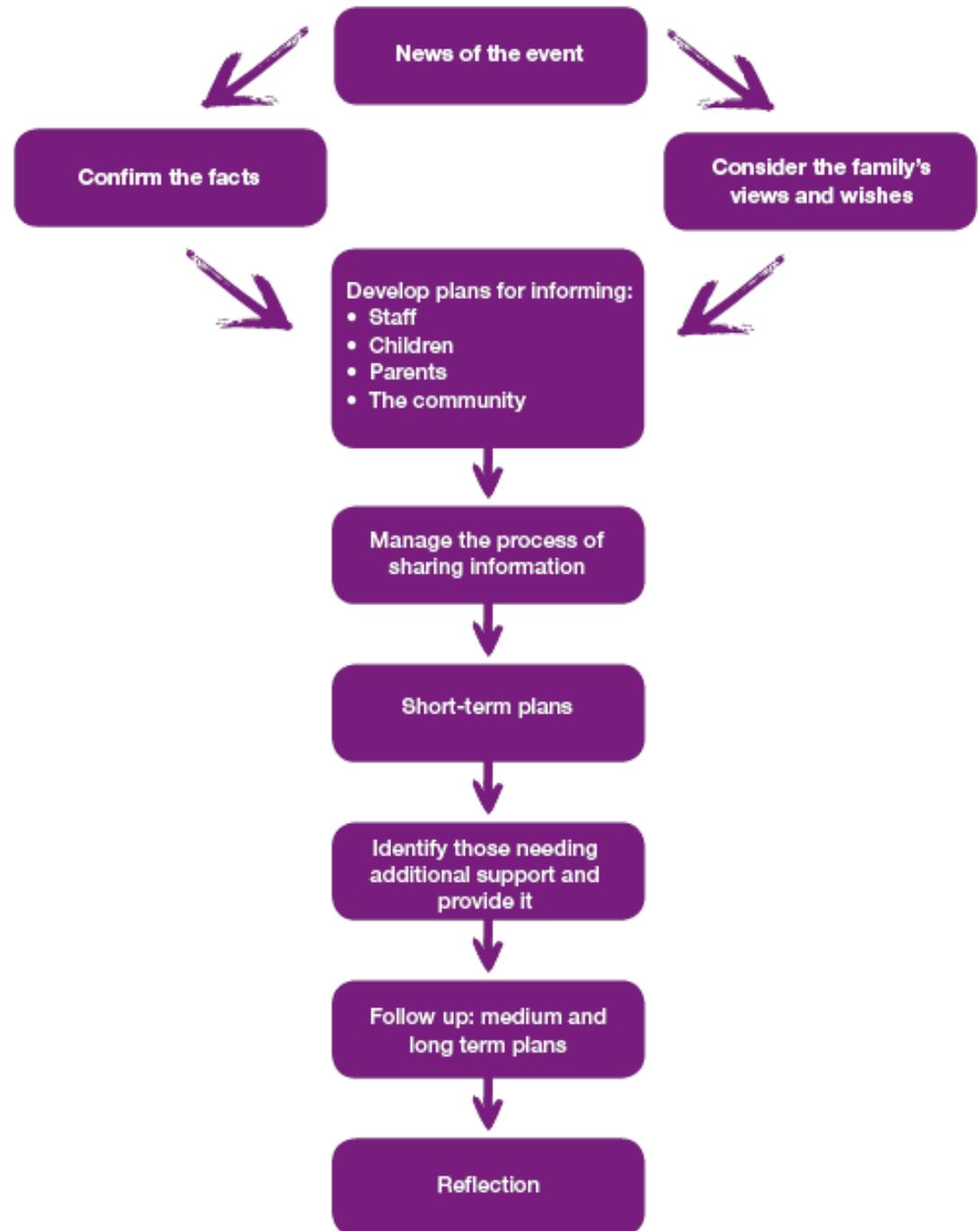
Helpful information to share with staff in advance of an incident

- Share information with staff about typical responses to bereavement and how to manage this while recognising that this is a new situation for all of us.
- Provide information that can be shared with parents about children and young people’s responses to bereavement.
- Some staff children may be more vulnerable at this current time ensure that you have support systems in place. Consider how you can support each other; making use of typical support networks.
- Share links on the school website to key information which you can signpost families and staff to e.g.

Mental Health Helpline - 0300 303 3972 for residents of Cheshire East: It is open 24 hours a day, seven-days a week for people of all ages including children and young people who need urgent mental health support.

For non-urgent help and general wellbeing advice, the [CWP website](#) contains information and links to resources to support people with anxiety, low mood, and worries relating to the current Covid-19 pandemic.

For children and young people there is also a dedicated website: [MyMind](#)



A sequence of response

This flowchart provides a possible sequence of events following the death of a child, adult or member of the school community.

3. On Receiving Notification of a Death

Notify Cheshire East

In the event of a Critical Incident, please inform Cheshire East as soon as possible.

E-mail: sciosteameast@cheshireeast.gov.uk

Telephone: 01606 275039 (*please be aware that this is SCiES main number*)

Please provide us with your name and the best way to contact you. Someone from the Critical Incidents team will then make contact with you; as far as possible this will be within the same working day.

Confirm the facts

It is important to establish the facts as far as you are able. Rumour and speculation can be created when there is a lack of hard evidence; social media plays a big part in this. Misinformation can spread quickly and add unnecessary distress to family members affected. Accurate information shared appropriately may help to counteract such rumour.

Where this involves the death of a child the Critical Incident team can support by seeking clarification from other sources, such as the police.

- Being able to answer the following questions is likely to provide you with enough information to pass on to the school community:
 - What has happened?
 - Was this expected or unexpected?
 - When did it happen?
 - Who was involved?
 - Are there additional fatalities, casualties or injuries?
 - Are there implications of this death for other members of the local community (e.g. someone may have contributed to the death in some way)?
 - Siblings may be affected, implicated or assumed to have some connection.
 - Has the family already been notified?

Practicalities

If this is a child then make sure their name is removed immediately from routine or automated contact lists. The family should not be receiving text messages or email notices about upcoming parents evenings/sports days/money for lunch etc.

If this is a member of staff ensure that HR/payroll are made aware so that they can ensure changes are made on their systems so that the family do not receive inappropriate communications

Develop plans for informing staff, children, parents, the community

Initial response

Depending on how the news of the death was timed, you may have been able to confidentially establish detailed facts about the circumstances before it becomes necessary to issue a bulletin to avoid inaccurate rumours starting or spreading.

Using the communications team

The local authorities Media Officer should be consulted over communications with the media, if you purchase their service. In some instances, the school may receive a barrage of telephone, email and other communications from media sources; here all enquiries should be referred to the media officer. We would strongly advise that if you are publishing information (e.g. on the school's website), the communications team first be consulted.

Contact details for Cheshire East communications team:
communications@cheshireeast.gov.uk

Consider the families views and wishes

Direct contact with the family will be difficult and requires great sensitivity but is an essential early action in passing on condolences and establishing what has taken place, allowing you to accurately communicate with the school community.

Conversations with the family may include the following:

- **What information would they like shared (or not shared) about the circumstances of the death?**

At such a distressing time, it is important to identify how much information the family wish to become widely known; this enables you to respect their wishes when addressing the child's questions. The family may need time to consider the various options, particularly as they may be distraught, in shock, numb or even in denial. Let them see the information you are planning to send out and who you are sending it to.

- **Funerals and commemoration:**

If you are considering any memorial or celebration to channel positivity or provide staff and students with the opportunity to share their grief, this will need to be discussed with the family first.

How do they feel about the participation of students/staff in the funeral/ commemorative activities?

Would they like to receive cards/ condolences etc.?

The cultural heritage of the family, traditions and adherence to faith may influence how they would like things to be handled. School staff will need to be particularly sensitive to these matters.

Establish how the family want to communicate going forward and who with.

Managing the process of sharing information

Informing staff

Ideally staff members should be informed directly (e.g. by telephone, or word-of-mouth to those on-site if the school is open). A meeting or conference call should be arranged to outline plans for informing children and determine strategies for managing their reactions.

In the current situation, extra consideration should be given when making parents aware of the reactions that children may display and strategies for support.

Unexpected news of a death can trigger recollections and experiences of personal loss and bereavement amongst staff.

For staff members, this may interfere with their accustomed day-to-day confidence in handling exchanges with children and parents, even where a well-established relationship exists. Staff are all individuals with their own history and experiences and senior staff need to be aware that responses will vary; sensitivity and support will be necessary for colleagues, as well as pupils and parents/carers.

Agree a script to guide communication/conversations between staff and children to give them confidence in what they are going to say. Give them an opportunity to say they need support in breaking the news.

Informing parents

When an agreed message or script has been chosen for communicating the information, it is important that this information is made available to parents. Parents whose children are in attendance at the school will need to know exactly what their children have been told.

For the vast majority of children in your school, they will not currently be in attendance. Therefore parents may be the first people to explore the bereavement with their child/children. They will need assistance on how to explain death and how to support the reactions and behaviours that may result. They will need information on professionals, charities and other support structures to access if necessary.

You should also be aware of the circumstances of individual families (such as EAL families) and make accommodations where necessary.



Informing children

For those children who are continuing to attend school it would be beneficial for them to be told in small groups, preferably alongside other children that they know or have a connection with, and by adults that they feel safe with.

Large gatherings as a means of explaining the news is generally discouraged. In some situations, children who are unsure of how to feel once given the news may take their lead from those that are visibly and audibly expressing their feelings and distress; this can lead to difficult escalations.

In smaller settings, children may be encouraged to adapt their expected routine behaviour according to the closeness of their relationships with the child/young person, or adult, who has died. Being alongside them in their shock and distress, validating their feelings, listening and supporting, are vitally important.

Time may be needed to accommodate this depending on the severity of the loss and age of the students. The monitoring of a flexible departure from normal routine can incorporate opportunities for staff and students to identify themselves, or request the chance to talk to someone individually/in small groups, about the issues which have arisen or been stimulated. The school should be aware of differing belief systems and practices adopted by different cultures and religions with regard to death.

For those children who are not currently attending school, information should be sent out by the school covering the circumstances of the death, family expectations and/or future memorials. It needs to be clear, concise and without ambiguity. Where information is shared within school settings, there are additional opportunities to clarify messages that appear less clear to students or parents; this will be much harder to achieve in current circumstances.

Plan for vulnerable students; consider if other involved agencies need to be informed e.g. CAMHS, Social Workers, Family Service Workers etc.

4. Short-term Actions

In relation to school-work

Staff and parents need to be aware that it will take time to return to any sense of normality. Normal work may need to be put on the backburner. Students will experience periods where they cannot focus and their memory or retention is poor. Some students may feel grief for a considerable time, especially if they are vulnerable in some way. Parents will need to know this at a time that they are expected to home-school/ take the lead on supporting their child's learning. Students should be reassured that their feelings and behaviours are normal; being upset is a healthy reaction.

Funerals

After sharing the news of the death, focus often centres on the anticipated funeral arrangements. Government guidelines during the pandemic will have an impact upon traditional ceremonies and representation.

This may include:

- The funeral being limited to members of the deceased's household or family members.
- Adhering to social distancing guidelines during the funeral.
- Some who have shown a desire to attend may not be able to due to isolation.
- In some cases, there have been alternative means of viewing ceremonies (e.g. through live streaming).
- Social and cultural practices are being altered to match Government guidelines, which may cause further distress for the family, or those who knew the individual well.
- This is challenging for all involved, those affected, and the ways in which people are able to show their support.

Remembrance and memorials

Ceremonies that may normally be held at school, such as memorials are unlikely to be possible in the normal way. Physical reminders that have been used within some settings, such as special places or books of remembrance, may be

compromised by the current situation, and may seem untimely when schools reopen. This presents a challenge, as channelling students through positive activities of remembrance like writing or sharing photographs, thoughts, and feelings is often recognised as a healing activity.

In some schools people have started leaving flowers at the school gate; this can cause further challenges like knowing when it is appropriate to move/remove these items. The visual analogy of the flowers dying themselves can also be distressing for some if left there for significant periods.

Some schools have provided an online space for positive comments and messages of goodwill to bring the school community together, whilst being mindful of social distancing and isolation. This needs careful planning:

- How long will access to this site/virtual space be offered?
- Who will have access and how can data be protected?
- Can individuals change/amend their comments?
- What happens to the information gathered when comments are closed (e.g. made into a remembrance book/passed onto the family)?
- Who will moderate comments sent to ensure that they are appropriate?

Most importantly, any memorial or remembrance will need to be in accordance with the wishes of the family, and respectful of religious and cultural beliefs, and traditions of the family.

Identify individuals requiring additional support and provide it

Individuals may need additional, specialised support, this could be the staff members, or children bereaved, those who have been bereaved previously, those whose needs are sparked by the more recent event or those for whom loss has been a significant part of their lives (but not necessarily identified).

Currently, households are being asked to isolate and only brief visits to the community are conducted whilst observing social distancing. Such situations could lead to an intensification of feelings of loneliness and grief and there could be family tensions that arise from household isolations.



Cruse advise those bereaved to:

- Keep in regular contact with friends by phone, text, email and video calls.
- Get fresh air or sunlight if you are permitted to do so or open a window if you are not.
- Exercise in the house if you are not able to leave the premises.
- Try to keep to a regular routine or schedule.
- Get as much sleep/rest as you can.
- Find jobs to do around the house at times when you have more energy.
- Don't feel guilty if you are struggling – reach out to others who might be finding it difficult too, and seek practical help from friends, family or neighbours.

They advise others of ways to help:

- Try and stay in contact with bereaved friends even if you cannot visit.
- Find out if they can talk on the phone or over the internet.
- Let them talk about the how they are feeling and the person who has died.
- If you know that someone is likely to struggle practically, you can still drop off supplies and gifts, staying 2 metres from them.

5. Follow Up: Develop Medium and Long-Term Plans

When the bereaved child or staff member return to school

It is important to try and keep things as “normal” as possible when the bereaved child or staff member returns to school. In general, people say that they would like others to treat them as before rather than being ‘over-nice’ to them. However, it is a delicate balance as they don’t want people to behave as if nothing has happened at all.

You might want to talk to the member of staff or the family and child, if age appropriate, to see what s/he would like to happen when they return to school. Acknowledge that people will have different preferences as to how they are treated. Some people may want to discuss what has happened, while others may want to be left alone.

When they return, acknowledge their loss “I’m sorry that (name of deceased) died. I know that you are sad.”

Allow them access to a ‘quiet room’ where he/she can go to be alone and agree a way to communicate this- in the case of a member of staff it may be via an agreed word being conveyed with a child, it could be an agreed signal or an exit card.

Supporting bereaved children and colleagues will be very stressful for staff who may already be struggling with their own reactions and emotions. Plan for some sort of mutual support, e.g. in the staffroom at the end of the school day give staff an opportunity to share feelings and reactions.

Reflection

The shock to the individual in experiencing trauma may be physical, emotional and cognitive, immediate or delayed. A school system, rather like an individual, may “carry on as normal” in an effort to cope, but the effects may be experienced long afterwards.

Having made arrangements to manage the immediate aftermath, the school staff (particularly the Headteacher) may find they have their own issues, which require them to seek counselling or other support. Monitoring the “emotional health” of the organisation, and affording space for individuals, or whole groups, to take restorative actions, will be very important.

You may consider making permanent curricular changes to proactively address issues around death and loss for future cohorts of children, allowing the school to use its experience in its own development plan.

At this relatively new period of social distancing and isolation, we do not know when schools are likely to re-open.

Depending on the feeling within the school community when this occurs, it may be appropriate to consider establishing permanent memorials or physical tokens of celebration, marking anniversaries or dedicating particular events/ occasions/ creations to the memory of a loved one.

Learning from an event can be a positive developmental process, and the collected thoughts and feelings of people who have shared a painful experience can be a very useful source of direction and reassurance to others who may tread that difficult path, or one close to it, in the future. As a Senior Leadership Team or wider staff team, you may wish to ensure a period of reflection to learn from this experience.



Experiences will be individual to your school and the things you choose to do, and not to do, will reflect that individuality. The Critical Incidents team not only want to support you in managing those situations, but also to learn from those experiences, to influence the advice we share with others. Therefore we would ask that you share your reflections with us – the books which have proved particularly useful, the activities which were helpful, and also the things to avoid. In this way we will be able to extend and modify the advice and support we give.

We would ask that you share these through the SCIES team sciesteam@cheshireeast.gov.uk

6. Checklist of Actions to be Taken Following Notification of Bereavement

The following list is not exhaustive but is intended to support your response

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| <p>Names and contact details: for the members of the COVID-19 Critical Management Team within school:</p> | |
| <p>Communication and Support</p> | |
| <p>Cheshire East: Who will contact Cheshire East on behalf of the school? Who will remain as the link person?</p> | <p>In the event of a Critical Incident</p> <p>Contact: E mail: sciesteameast@cheshireeast.gov.uk</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Telephone: 01606 275039 <i>(please be aware that this is SCiES main number)</i></p> <p>Provide the school name, your name and the best way to contact you. Someone from the Critical Incidents team will then make contact</p> |
| <p>Gathering Information: This will be gained from different sources: police, social care, relatives of the deceased, and the Critical Incidents team- who will act as the conduit of information?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What has happened? • Was this expected or unexpected? • When did it happen? • Who was involved? • Are there additional fatalities, casualties, or injuries? • Are there implications of this death for other members of the local community (e.g. someone may have been involved in contributing to the death in some way)? • Are there any siblings that may be affected, implicated or assumed to have some connection? • Have all the family/families been notified? |

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Family: Who will contact them initially and then going forward – at what frequency (to be agreed with the family in the initial phone call)</p> | <p>Actions: it is anticipated that the following actions will be covered over time with the family:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • offer condolence on behalf of the school, • signpost to resources or support • agree a point of contact and frequency of contact • share with them the wording which will be sent out to parents, governors and pupils (as relevant) • identify if there are any siblings and agree with the family who will liaise with their schools • identify if there are any involved agencies e.g. Early Help/Social workers etc. and agree with the family who will liaise with them • what are the family's wishes for sharing of information? |
| <p>Staff: How and what will you communicate Who will lead on this and how will others support?</p> | <p>Actions: it is anticipated that the following actions will be covered over time with staff members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • agree with them, after the initial communication, who will act as a contact for them • agree on what they need to know and do they all need the same detail • signpost to sources of support • identify which members of staff might be particularly affected and plan for additional support to be available if needed |
| <p>Governors: How and what will you communicate Who will lead on this?</p> | |
| <p>Parents and pupils: How and what will you communicate- <i>plan a form of words to express regret but at the same time reduce anxiety.</i></p> | <p>Written communications: keep the language clear, factual and unambiguous, ensure information cannot be misinterpreted, explain where children/parents/others can go for additional support, include arrangements that the school has made, remove all euphemisms (use words like dead or died instead)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Run the information by the Communications Team • Ensure the information takes into consideration the views of the family |

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Will you contact the parents only or parents and pupils? Who will speak to the Communications Team? Who will lead on each aspect of this?</p> | <p>For children: Decide who is best to tell them: The adult telling them should ideally be someone who: is known and trusted by them, is able to maintain contact with them in the future, allows children to express their feelings and who understands children’s expressions of grief. Decide where they are going to be told: where possible choose somewhere safe and familiar; decide if they will be told together or individually Decide what you are going to say and how to say it: use language most easily understood by the child, make it factual and consistent, give the child the opportunity to ask questions, give them the time and space to make sense of it and to give an emotional response, check to see that they have understood, consider any cultural or religious factors. Decide how the children who are not on site will be told: how will they be told, what support can be offered to the parents to help their own children make sense of it?</p> |
| <p>Vulnerable Individuals How will you identify who is potentially vulnerable?</p> | <p>The following questions might help:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Were any individuals directly involved? • Did anyone witness the event? • Are there any siblings or members of the household in the school? • Which children/staff were closest to the deceased? • Which children/staff are displaying emotional distress? • Have any of the children/staff experienced significant relational losses in the past or trauma? • Children with pre-existing mental health or SEMH needs? • Children with learning difficulties? • Children/staff who are currently experiencing difficulties at home? • Are any children/staff being blamed? • Are there any children/staff that may be vulnerable due to culture or language issues? |

| Key actions to be taken | |
|--|--|
| What needs to be done in relation to personal effects and ensuring inappropriate communications do not go out to their relatives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gather items belonging to the child/staff member together; every book, drawing, personal items such as coats, PE kits, contents of drawers or lockers etc. Put them safely into a box or nice bags to be given to the parents/relatives when they are ready to collect them. Treat the belongings with respect and avoid putting them into plastic bags/ bin bags, which could be hurtful for the parents. • If this is a child then make sure their name is removed immediately from routine or automated contact lists. The family should not be receiving text messages or email notices about upcoming parents evenings/sports days/money for lunch etc. • If this is a member of staff ensure that HR/payroll are made aware so that they can ensure changes are made on their systems so that the family do not receive inappropriate communications |
| Remembrance | |
| Staff member: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ways in which staff can celebrate and remember their colleague whilst in isolation • Ways in which staff can celebrate and remember their colleague when school returns |
| Pupil: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ways in which the school community can celebrate and remember the child whilst in isolation • Ways in which the school community can celebrate and remember the child when school returns |

When a bereaved staff member or child returns to school

Who will greet them on their return?
What will be put in place to make their return as smooth as possible?
What will be put in place to support their emotional wellbeing?

- Talk to the member of staff or the family and child, if age appropriate, to see what s/he would like to happen when they return to school. Acknowledge that people will have different preferences as to how they are treated. Some people may want to discuss what has happened, while others may want to be left alone. In general, people say that they would like others to treat them as before rather than being 'over-nice' to them. However, it is a delicate balance as they don't want people to behave as if nothing has happened at all.
- Allow them access to a 'quiet room' where he/she can go to be alone and agree a way to communicate this – in the case of a member of staff it may be via an agreed word being conveyed with a child, it could be an agreed signal or an exit card.
- When they return, acknowledge their loss "I'm sorry that (name of deceased) died. I know that you are sad."
- Supporting bereaved pupils and colleagues will be very stressful for staff who may already be struggling with their own reactions and emotions. Plan for some sort of mutual support, for example in the staffroom at the end of the school day, to give staff an opportunity to share feelings and reactions.