

Social Security Advisory Committee report on Bereavement benefit Reform: Government Response

1. The Government welcomes this report and the recognition within it of the work already undertaken in reforming Bereavement Benefit. We would like to thank the Committee for their helpful considerations around the totality of support that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) provides to bereaved families. We note with interest that many of the areas the Committee identifies for improvement are consistent with those DWP has already highlighted, and where work is already underway.
2. The Government's response to the detailed recommendations is set out below.

Integrated support to bereaved families

We recommend that DWP consider whether Tell Us Once, the Bereavement Service, bereavement benefits, Social Fund Funeral Payments and Public Health Funerals and other sources of support can work better together as an integrated system to support bereaved people. It should particularly consider how Funeral Payments and Public Health Funerals will cope with increased future demand.

3. The Government welcomes this recommendation which is an area DWP has already highlighted for improvement. Currently the DWP Bereavement Service is linked with Tell Us Once (TUO) whereby notifications of Death are received via the system and actioned by Bereavement Service teams.
4. DWP are about to pilot an integrated telephony service with TUO telephony teams and DWP Bereavement Service teams. This would enable customers to report a death, take up the TUO service offering, be signposted effectively to benefit entitlements, and address any other bereavement related issues they may have in one call.
5. We continually assess the Funeral Payments scheme to ensure that it functions effectively in providing a contribution to the costs of a funeral for those on low incomes. Funeral Payments are paid to all applicants who satisfy the eligibility criteria.

Integrated support to bereaved families

We recommend that both the UK Government and Scottish Government (in light of the imminent devolution of powers in relation to this benefit) provide a greater degree of certainty to claimants about their eligibility and the potential size of an award to Funeral Payments before they are required to commit to funeral costs.

6. Again, we recognise that this is a sensitive area for many and the UK Government is currently reviewing how information about potential eligibility for Funeral Payments can be made clearer to people pre-application.
7. With regards to Scotland, the Scotland Bill will give the Scottish Parliament powers to set the rules over the Regulated Social Fund which includes Funeral Payments. The design and operation of the successor scheme will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament and Government to determine.

Universal Credit

We recommend that DWP reviews the interaction between Bereavement Support payment and Universal Credit in light of changes to Universal Credit and the timetable for its rollout to ensure that claimants are not significantly disadvantaged. This review should also consider the interaction between Bereavement Support Payment and existing legacy benefits in view of the revised timetable.

8. DWP has already considered at length the interaction between Bereavement Support Payment and Universal Credit as well as the existing legacy benefits.
9. Bereavement Support Payment will not be taken into account when determining eligibility for means tested benefits such as Universal Credit, Jobseeker's Allowance, Employment Support Allowance and Income Support. This targets financial support to help with the additional costs due to bereavement and ensures that those recipients who need help the most are not disadvantaged.

Awareness and take-up of benefits

We recommend that DWP act to ensure that all bereaved people are aware of Bereavement Support Payment. It should consider whether bereaved people could be automatically informed of their access to Bereavement Support Payment: this might be achieved by closer working with registrars. As anticipated by the Department in 2011, we believe that DWP should ensure that Tell Us Once and the Bereavement Service work effectively together, in concert with other stakeholders, by linking or merging the two services.

10. The Government is committed to ensuring that bereaved people receive benefits to which they are entitled. We have improved information available on the GOV.UK site to make it easier for customers to establish what they need to do and what they may be entitled to following a death.
11. We are also about to deliver a pilot which joins up the DWP Bereavement Telephony Service and the Tell Us Once Telephony Service. Findings from the pilot will inform how

we can move forward to a solution that provides as much awareness and advice as possible at first contact.

Bereaved parents

We recommend that, in the light of initial experience following implementation, DWP reflects further on whether to extend the period for which bereaved parents receive Bereavement Support Payment, even if this means a reduction in the value of payments to avoid an additional burden on the public purse.

12. The duration of Bereavement Support Payment (BSP) was discussed at length during the passage of the bill. BSP is designed to support people with the immediate additional costs associated with bereavement, rather than income replacement for on-going expenses.
13. We recognise that bereaved parents may incur increased expenses and this is acknowledged by awarding a higher rate to those with dependant children.
14. DWP has already made a commitment to monitor and review the effect of BSP in the Impact Assessment. This will be carried out at a point when sufficient evidence is available to assess all aspects of the policy.

Returning to work

We recommend that DWP ensures that effective training and support is being given to Jobcentre staff to help them understand the needs of bereaved claimants. It should also engage with Work Programme providers to provide similar training and support for their frontline staff as appropriate.

15. The Government recognises and supports the need for staff to deal sensitively with those who have experienced bereavement.
16. We have engaged with stakeholders to ensure that guidance to staff clearly articulates how advisers can identify and support claimants in difficult circumstances – including those where it would be inappropriate to apply conditionality.
17. Our advisory services are also being repositioned as a profession with a clear career path, accredited learning and on-going professional development. The learning programme will ensure advisers have up to date skills to deal with any claimant interaction and support them in making relevant and appropriate decisions on an individual basis.

Conditionality

It is important that jobcentre staff are sensitive to, and take account of, the individual circumstances of bereaved families when using their discretionary powers and actively consider when an exemption would be appropriate, for example for those who are not eligible for Bereavement Support Payment but are caring for bereaved children.

18. All bereaved partners or parents in receipt of Universal Credit, are eligible for conditionality easements, not just those receiving BSP.
19. Conditionality for Universal Credit is already set according to the claimant's personal circumstances and capabilities. Where bereaved people are required to be available for work, requirements will be tailored to their circumstances and may be limited or even lifted entirely where it would be inappropriate to impose them.
20. Additional temporary suspensions of conditionality can be accessed where a responsible carer is dealing with a child in distress due to bereavement, for example death of a parent or sibling.

Unmarried couples

We recommend that DWP recognises the impact of bereavement on a broader range (definition) of “partner” and considers extending eligibility to ensure consistency with other areas of the benefit system. We recognise that this would bring additional costs and the Government will need to give careful consideration to its affordability when balanced against other priorities, but nonetheless it should be an ambition over the longer-term.

21. A key principle of the National Insurance system is that all rights to benefits derived from another person's contributions are based on the concept of legal marriage or civil partnership.
22. Extending the eligibility to BSP to unmarried couples would increase spend by an estimated £300m over the first 4 years of the reform. The Government made reference to this issue in the bereavement benefits consultation, stating unambiguously that the question of allowing bereavement benefits for unmarried couples was not something it favoured.

Bereaved women

We recommend that, as part of its commitment to review and assess the impact of Bereavement Support Payment, DWP should monitor and evaluate how the introduction of the new benefit affects bereaved people and whether they are getting the support they need it will be especially important to identify the impact on bereaved women within that evaluation.

23. As previously mentioned, the Government has already made a commitment to monitor and review the effect of BSP. This will be carried out at a point when sufficient evidence is available to assess all aspects of the policy.