The Silence is Over: Why Grief Belongs in the Classroom

December 2025



Central Co-op


ere whenever
ed us
s inside
- Friday 9am - 5pm
anytime
8 5097
website:
to talk funeral plans, call us on 01543 648473
in our homes for the safety of our clients and colleagues.
ffice: Central House,
t, Lichfield WS13 6QD
ralcoop

Foreword

“As a co-operative, everything we do is built on community, compassion and integrity. Our purpose is to create a sustainable Society for all, and that includes nurturing the emotional wellbeing of our young people.

Every day, we support families facing bereavement. We see first-hand the difference that open, informed and compassionate conversations can make. That’s why we’ve been proud to stand alongside John Adams and others in calling for bereavement education to be part of the national curriculum.

This whitepaper marks one year since MPs debated this vital issue in Parliament and celebrates a milestone in shaping a more compassionate future for every child.”

Glenn Barsby, Head of Funeral at Central Co-op



“In 2022, when I launched a parliamentary petition calling for bereavement education to be included in the national curriculum, I could never have imagined the journey that would follow. From that moment to the debate in Parliament in December 2024, and finally to the Government’s announcement on 15th July 2025, confirming that children in both primary and secondary schools will now learn about death, dying and bereavement, this has been a milestone not just for education, but for society.

For me, this work is, and always will be, a tribute to my late mother, Maria. I was twelve years old when she died. My father spoke openly about our grief at home, but at school, there was silence. That silence shaped me. It showed me the pain of unspoken loss, and it became the reason I’ve spent my life trying to make sure no child feels that same isolation.

“When I began this campaign, I was simply a son who’d lost his mum too young, and a father determined to ensure his own children would grow up in a world that talks openly about grief, not hides from it.”

What began as a personal mission has become a collective movement. Through my role with the National Association of Funeral Directors, I've seen our profession unite behind this cause and mission. The NAFD has become part of who I am, a family of colleagues who believe that service extends far beyond the funeral itself; it's about helping shape a society that understands what it means to live, to lose, and to care.

I am deeply grateful for the support of Central Co-op, whose belief in this campaign and commitment to compassion have been constant and invaluable. Their decision to stand shoulder to shoulder with me and my family reflects what true partnership looks like, collaboration not for recognition, but for impact. Together, we've shown that change happens when service providers act with true heart and together.

Equally, my ongoing relationship with Child Bereavement UK, where I serve as Funeral Industry Advisor, has been vital in shaping both the message and the mission. Their expertise and empathy continue to remind me that grief is not a weakness to be fixed, but a human experience to be understood.

This is not just about helping children who experience a loss, it's about helping society confront the only guarantee in life. By teaching grief literacy in our schools, we are teaching compassion, resilience, and humanity. We are equipping young people with the understanding that death is not the end of a story, but part of the shared story of us all.



If there's one lesson I've learned throughout this journey, it's that when you lead with heart, and when people come together with a shared purpose, any goal is possible. This campaign has shown that change is not born in policy rooms alone, it begins in conversations, in classrooms, and in the courage to care.

My hope is that this white paper inspires others to continue that conversation, so that no child, teacher, or community ever faces grief in silence again."

John Adams, Funeral Director | Funeral Industry Advisor to Child Bereavement UK | Past President, National Association of Funeral Directors

2: Executive Summary

This whitepaper explores the journey to include death, dying and bereavement education in the national curriculum - a milestone achieved through the tireless advocacy of John Adams, with the support of Central Co-op and others across the funeral, education and charity sectors.

It marks one year since the December 2024 parliamentary debate, which led to Government guidance confirming that children will now learn about bereavement as part of compulsory Relationships and Health Education.

And on 15th July 2025, it was formally announced that death, dying and bereavement will be included in the national curriculum from September 2026 - a landmark moment made possible through collaboration, cross-party support and years of advocacy by those determined to make society more compassionate.

Central Co-op and John Adams welcome this decision as a vital step towards giving every child the understanding, empathy and language they need to navigate bereavement. We will continue to support schools, teachers and communities through this transition, ensuring the rollout is practical, inclusive and sensitive to different faiths and cultures.

At its heart, this is a story about compassion. How lived experience, community leadership and partnership can shape policy for the better.

- A parent of children under 18 dies every 20 minutes in the UK
- That's 127 newly bereaved children every day
- By the age of 16, 1 in 20 young people will have experienced the death of one or both parents
- 78% of 11-16-year-olds say they have suffered a close bereavement
- Yet 90% of teachers report having no bereavement training, and 57% of children want to learn how to cope with bereavement

This whitepaper outlines

Page 6: The case for bereavement education.

Page 7: The story behind the campaign.

Page 9: Central Co-op's leadership in community grief support.

Page 10: How we can help young people understand death through language and learning.

Page 12: The next steps for embedding meaningful, compassionate education nationwide.

3: The Case for Bereavement Education

Death is the only guarantee in life, yet we often fail to prepare young people to understand it.

Children's books, films and lessons already touch on death and bereavement. But without guidance, many children internalise confusion, guilt or fear when bereavement touches their lives. Teachers, meanwhile, are often unsure how to respond or support grieving pupils.

Grief literacy - the ability to understand and talk about death - is a social skill as vital as empathy or emotional regulation. Teaching it helps build compassion, resilience and connection. It normalises conversations that too often happen only in crisis.

"As a parent and a School Governor I've seen our school community navigate multiple bereavements over the last few years. Each time finding a way forward that acknowledges the different students, circumstances, families and friends and the whole school team. Time off school, memorialisation, exam mitigations and emotional support considered and carefully implemented. Bereavement education in school would provide a common language, and a foundation of confidence and shared understanding for staff and students."

Hannah Gallimore, Social Change Manager at Central Co-op | Parent | School Governor







Evidence from schools already trialling bereavement education, such as through Project Eileen - a multimedia program aimed at helping young people in UK secondary schools tackle the topics of death and grief - shows positive results. Students report feeling better prepared and less anxious discussing grief, while teachers feel more confident addressing bereavement when it arises in class. Parents have also shown their appreciation at the opportunity for children to learn about death in a safe, supported environment.

“Unfortunately, this is a topic that everyone experiences at some point. In my classes the course enabled my students to develop the skills and preparation for coping with change in a student-centred way. Forewarned is forearmed. I found that these resources started conversations about a very challenging topic and my students opened up the taboo surrounding death and bereavement. The Project Eileen resources offer detailed information and support to help with this subject, and we have found this adds to our teacher confidence. We can’t wait to deliver these lessons again next year!”

R Auld, Teacher at Blatchington Mill School

4: A Campaign Rooted in Compassion: John Adams’ Story

At just twelve years old, John Adams lost his mum, Maria. While his father spoke openly about grief at home, school was silent on the subject. That silence shaped his life’s mission.

As a fourth-generation funeral director, and later President of the National Association of Funeral Directors (NAFD), John saw again and again how unprepared people were to discuss death and bereavement, especially with children.

“I believe MPs now see this as a necessary step in the curriculum. It’s about helping children understand that grief is natural, and that showing compassion is strength.”

In 2022, he launched a parliamentary petition calling for bereavement education to be part of compulsory PSHE lessons. Over 11,000 people signed, leading to a House of Commons debate in December 2024, attended by Central Co-op representatives.



"It was a privilege to be in Parliament alongside John and colleagues from across the funeral industry last year, witnessing such a compassionate and thoughtful debate. For me, it showed that this isn't a political issue - it's a human one. Every child, regardless of where they grow up, deserves to have the language, understanding and support to cope with bereavement. This decision gives schools a blueprint, and gives families reassurance that the next generation will be better prepared for one of life's hardest lessons."

Andy Peake, Chief Operating Officer – Funeral, Property and People, Central Co-op

The debate united MPs across parties, who shared their own experiences of grief and called for urgent action. Within months, the Department for Education updated its statutory guidance:

"By the end of primary school, pupils should be taught that change, loss and bereavement can provoke a range of feelings, that grief is a natural response, and that everyone grieves differently."



On 15th July 2025, the Government went further - confirming that bereavement education will be part of the national curriculum from September 2026.

This milestone represents the culmination of three years of advocacy, research and collaboration across political parties, and demonstrates how compassion can transcend politics.

5: Central Co-op's Role in Driving Change

At Central Co-op, our work begins and ends with compassion.

We were inspired by John's campaign because we see daily how isolating grief can be, especially for young people.

Our support goes beyond funerals. Across our communities, we provide practical, emotional and educational support to help people navigate bereavement:

- Monthly grief groups and coffee mornings in our funeral homes
- Remembrance services four times a year (Mother's Day, Father's Day, Baby Loss Awareness Week and Christmas)
- Partnerships with Child Bereavement UK, The Lily May Foundation and Samaritans
- Free use of community rooms in our funeral homes for local groups
- Participation in over 120 community events annually
- Engagement with schools through our Adopt a School programme

"Bereavement should be an integral part of the curriculum because it is an experience that all children will likely face at some point, whether it's the death of a grandparent, a relative, a friend or even a beloved pet. These bereavements can have a profound emotional impact on children, and it's crucial to address these topics openly and honestly.

"By having conversations about death and dying in the classroom, we can create a supportive environment where children can process grief, develop empathy and learn coping methods. Ignoring these aspects of life can leave children feeling isolated or unprepared when they face such difficult realities."

Kate Spencer, Funeral Director at Central Co-op Funeral Home in Spondon

These initiatives sit within our wider purpose as a co-operative: to build a sustainable, compassionate Society where people come before profit.

6: Changing the Language of Death



At Central Co-op, we believe that the words we use matter - because language shapes how people experience death, and how they remember those who've died.

In 2024, we released two sector-first resources to help colleagues, professionals and families speak about death with compassion and clarity.

Language in Funerals

Our Language in Funerals guidance challenges outdated or detached industry terminology - words like "deceased," "removal" and "viewing" - which can unintentionally distance people from the humanity of the person who has died.

Instead, we use open, inclusive and caring language that honours both the person and the family:

- We say "person who has died" or use their name, never "the deceased"
- We refer to "visiting rooms" rather than "chapels of rest"
- We describe "bringing [name] into our care," not "removal"
- We use "died by suicide" instead of "committed suicide"

"We always remember that the person who has died is still a person, and that their life mattered." - Central Co-op Language in Funerals, 2024

A Guide to Talking to Children About Death and Grief

Our Guide to Talking to Children About Death and Grief was created for colleagues, parents, teachers and anyone supporting a child through bereavement.

It promotes honest, age-appropriate conversations and helps adults avoid euphemisms that can confuse or distress children, such as "gone to a better place" or "lost."

Instead, it encourages using factual, reassuring language:

- Say “dead” or “died” to give children clear words for what happened
- Explain gently, e.g. “Their heart stopped working,” or “They were very old, and their body wasn’t working anymore”
- Reassure them that the person who’s died no longer feels pain, hunger or cold
- Follow the child’s lead - talk when they’re ready, not before
- Use stories and books to help children understand emotions and healing

The guide also shares recommended children’s books such as Badger’s Parting Gift by Susan Varley, The Invisible String by Patrice Karst, and Michael Rosen’s Sad Book, as well as resources from Winston’s Wish, Child Bereavement UK, and Sue Ryder.

These publications show that grief literacy begins with language, and that by changing how we talk about death, we can change how society understands it.

7: From Words to Lessons: Supporting the Next Generation

Central Co-op’s work on language laid the foundation for our support of John Adams’ campaign. If language can open the door to compassion, education can help us walk through it.

Our NextGen inclusion network - a community of under 25 and supportive colleagues across the Society - has helped shape how we talk to and about young people in today’s world. They bring fresh perspectives on empathy, diversity and the need to include young people in conversations about life and death.

“As funeral professionals, the moments we share with children and young people in deep grief can feel like turning points - times that may shape the rest of their lives. Bereavement doesn’t discriminate by age, and we can’t let the fear of saying or doing the wrong thing hold us back from offering support.

Children and young people deserve the same chance as adults to work through grief in safe, supportive spaces. That support should be built on openness and accessibility, and education is key to making both possible.

We also shouldn’t overlook the role children and young people play in our own journey through grief. Time and again, it’s been their words, actions, and perspectives that bring the greatest comfort and healing to families facing tragedy.”

Simon Densham, Funeral Cluster Manager and Co-Lead for the NextGen inclusion network at Central Co-op | Former Youth Worker

By fostering open dialogue and equipping both teachers and students with the language of grief, we can help young people approach death with understanding rather than fear - turning one of life’s hardest lessons into one of its most human.

8: Where We Go from Here

The inclusion of bereavement in the national curriculum is a landmark, but it's only the beginning.

To make a lasting difference, we need:
1. Confidence and training for teachers to deliver grief education safely and sensitively
2. Partnerships between schools, funeral professionals and bereavement charities
3. Cultural and faith sensitivity in lesson design and delivery
4. National data on bereaved children to inform policy and support
5. Continued public awareness, so that conversations about death are met with openness, not avoidance

Central Co-op will continue to advocate for these next steps through our Policies and Campaigns Group, chaired by experts including Joe Fortune and Dame Pauline Green. Together, we aim to influence positive, people-centred policies across the co-operative movement and beyond.

9: Policy Recommendations

1. Make bereavement education mandatory within PSHE, not optional
2. Fund specialist training for teachers in collaboration with bereavement experts
3. Develop a national framework for supporting bereaved children in education
4. Encourage partnerships between schools, funeral professionals and charities
5. Embed cultural and faith sensitivity throughout curriculum materials
6. Promote grief literacy as part of wider mental health and wellbeing education

10: Conclusion: A More Compassionate Future

This whitepaper represents a shared belief: that grief is not a private burden to be hidden, but a universal experience to be understood.

As John Adams reminds us, "We learn how life begins in school - it's time we also learned how to talk about death."

Central Co-op will continue to help lead this conversation, as a trusted neighbour, a responsible business and a co-operative committed to building a kinder, more connected society.

"Our legacy will be that we did right by people. That we made death and grief less isolating, more human."

Glenn Barsby, Head of Funeral at Central Co-op

11: Appendices

A. Timeline of the campaign

i. Oct 2022: Petition launched by John Adams
ii. May 2023: Petition closes with 11,322 signatures
iii. Mar 2023: Government response acknowledges bereavement can be taught within PSHE
iv. Dec 2024: Parliamentary debate held; broad cross-party support
v. Jul 2025: Government confirms bereavement content added to curriculum

B. Partner organisations

i. Child Bereavement UK
ii. Project Eileen
iii. The Lily May Foundation
iv. Winston's Wish
v. National Association of Funeral Directors
vi. Central Co-op

C. Further Reading

i. DfE Statutory Guidance on Relationships and Health Education (2025 update)
ii. Central Co-op: Language in Funerals (2024)
iii. Central Co-op: Guide to Talking to Children About Death and Grief (2024)
iv. Project Eileen evaluation report

Contact
Central Co-op Funeral
centralcoop.co.uk/funeralcare
01543 421303

For press enquiries
pressoffice@centralcoop.co.uk



Central coop

For more information, visit
centralcoop.co.uk/funeralcare