

Nelson's Journey – a brief note

First, a word from a Nelson's Journey Child Bereavement Support Worker

"It is an honour and a privilege to be someone that children and teenagers turn to when their lives have been turned upside down by the death of someone special. I have spent the last 4 and a half years being motivated and inspired by the bravery and resilience I've witnessed in hundreds of children going through unimaginable pain. Seeing the path these young people are walking and being someone they turn to ask directions along the way is so incredibly rewarding. People often think that a bereavement workers job is sad or morbid, but getting to hear so many fantastic memories about people and help young people overcome anxieties and self-esteem issues to look towards and believe in their own futures just goes to show that our work is more about life than it is death. I am so lucky to work for this amazing charity and get to be a part of children and teenagers courageous journeys. To me, this is not a job or even a career, it's my calling."

Story of Nelson's Journey

In the mid 1990s a group of social workers attended a social services training course at Caistor Hall, Caistor St Edmund, Norwich where they learnt about Winston's Wish, a charity supporting bereaved children in Gloucestershire. Several people attending the course including some who had personal experience of supporting bereaved children felt strongly about the need to develop a similar service in Norfolk and as a result, Nelson's Journey was born and registered as a charity in November 1997.

Why are we called Nelson's Journey?

When the charity was set up the Trustees wanted to choose a name that had a connection with Norfolk as we offer our service across the County, with Lord Nelson being born in Norfolk this felt very appropriate particularly as Lord Nelson himself was a bereaved child, his mother having died when he was 9 yrs old. Journey is simply to do with the journey of grief that everyone embarks on when they experience a significant bereavement.

Our Vision

Our vision is to give every bereaved child (aged 0 – 17yrs inclusive) in Norfolk the support they need to move forward positively with their lives, never having to cope with their loss alone. We know offering the right help at the right time gives them the best chance of avoiding long-term mental and emotional health issues, which can lead to educational problems, drug and alcohol abuse and law-breaking. We understand too that coming to terms with their loss often means dealing with anger, bottled-up feelings and confusion as well as grief, particularly when their loved one's death was sudden, unexpected or the result of suicide. Our 1:1 sessions, therapeutic weekends, activity days and NJ Clubs offer support tailored to each child's needs and circumstances, and our guidance gives parents and carers the tools they need to support them.

Services we currently offer

Our services include many opportunities for us to meet the varying bereavement needs of children and young people. Following an initial assessment process, we ascertain the level of therapeutic intervention that the child/children require to best support their individual needs.

Our menu of interventions include:

NJ Clubs – Youth groups in 6 locations around Norfolk (Gt. Yarmouth, Kings Lynn, Diss, Dereham, North Walsham and Norwich) to allow children and young people the opportunity to meet others with similar experiences in a fun, informal setting.

1:1 Support - For children and young people who have complex bereavement needs/additional needs and would benefit more from individual support than in a group setting.

Activity Day - A one day intensive programme of bereavement support including memory work activities, exploring feelings and building self esteem. The day will provide children and young people with coping strategies and an opportunity to meet other children with similar experiences.

Residential - A two day intensive programme of bereavement support (with an overnight stay), including memory work activities, exploring feelings and building self esteem. Both days will provide children and young people with coping strategies and an opportunity to meet other children with similar experiences.

Group Events – we organise an annual Memorial Walk and Christmas Carol Concert which gives families and individuals an opportunity to come together and remember those who have died.

Smartphone App – Developed with the guidance and initiative of the Youth Panel (see below), Nelson’s Journey launched the world’s first interactive bereavement smartphone app in 2016.

We also offer:

Child bereavement training for professionals who may find themselves having to support a bereaved child e.g. teacher, youth workers and Family Liaison Officers

Guidance and Information Service at and around the time of death. We are sometimes contact soon after a death and asked questions like ‘Should my child attend the funeral?’, ‘Should my child see the body?’ our bereavement workers are able to guide parents and carers through these questions.

We have a range of resources we use to help support those caring for bereaved children.

How we work with bereaved children

We receive enquiries for support direct from families as well as professionals such as teachers, GPs and social workers. If a family is open to receiving support from us then the child’s bereavement needs will be assessed and appropriate support will be offered. In some cases, an assessment may identify that the child has other needs beyond that of their bereavement and these circumstance would be referred on to other agencies.

Types of referrals and causes of death vary, and include unexpected and violent deaths e.g. murder, suicide, Road Traffic Collisions (RTC), sudden deaths such as brain haemorrhage and heart attack, as well as expected deaths through long term illnesses e.g. cancer.

Some of the children supported by Nelson’s Journey are looked after by the local authority, living with foster parents or a carer from the family.

A Child Bereavement Support Worker will speak with the parent/carer of the child asking a range of questions which will assess whether the child's functioning has been affected by their bereavement e.g. they may be more angry than normal, depressed, self-harming, refusing to attend school, sleep regression, bed wetting etc.

For some children they may require less intense support and will be invited to attend the NJ Club closest to their area. If it is concluded that the child is displaying a substantial detrimental change following their bereavement then a comprehensive assessment visit is arranged. During the assessment we speak to both adult and child.

Adult - Find out what they think the child's understanding of the death is, has the child cried, did the child attend the funeral etc. Also talk through with them how children grieve e.g. If a child is very upset about the death one minute and then running around and laughing the next, that is fine, it is called 'puddle jumping'. Behaviour in school has worsened, again normal.

Child - What is their understanding of the death, sometimes conflicts with what actually happened, what memories do they have of the person who has died, feelings around when they were told of the death and since then e.g. do they feel angry sometimes etc.

Outcome of assessment

Following an assessment the bereavement worker will support the parent/carer in deciding what service would best suit their child's needs. Occasionally we may have to refer a child on to a higher level mental health service e.g. if they have been self harming. Some children may require 1:1 work and others are invited to attend a therapeutic residential weekend, activity day or NJ Club.

On both activity day and therapeutic weekends a number of activities take place to help the child talk about their feelings, emotions, memories and realise they are not the only one going through such an experience.

Following our therapeutic weekends and activity days, we contact the family the following week to check how the children have been since attending and whether the family feel they need any further support, if this is the case it is offered. All previous and current service users are also able to access our NJ Club where more informal support can be ongoing and relationships are built with peers helping to reduce the sense of isolation.

Monitoring of the impact of our work

We monitor the impact of our work at the point of referral, following the completion of therapeutic interventions and after they have received support from us.

We also request written feedback from children, young people and parents and carers following our therapeutic weekends and activity days to ensure they felt we met their bereavement needs and felt adequately supported.

Youth Panel

Our Youth Panel is made up of past service users and non service users aged 11 – 17yrs to provide feedback, advice and guidance on improving our services for bereaved children in Norfolk. It is important to us to have young people involved in the development of our charity, they are key to us ensuring that the services and ideas we develop are appropriate for the young people that we support.

The Youth Panel work on projects which will benefit our service users and the charity including a Bereavement Game, a Bereavement Box of activities, and providing mentoring assistance at our bereavement groups.

Smiles House

In November 2014 we achieved our long term aim of securing our own accommodation from which we could offer our bereavement services to children and young people. Since inception in 1997, the charity had been based within temporary accommodation, offered by local businesses or other charities.

Smiles House is located a few miles east of Norwich on the Octagon Business Park in Little Plumstead, and provides a permanent base where we have a visible and accessible centre for everyone who needs us and expand the service we offer. We have the space to provide a vital service for young people and their families; to run training sessions for our volunteers and further develop our partnerships with other organisations.