Finite Lives

A study in how the State deals with issues relating to end of life

PART 1: A Report on how the Civil Service deals with dying, death and bereavement among its own members

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A Report to
An Taoiseach, Enda Kenny TD

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Introduction

Introduction

Between October and November 2013 the Oireachtas Committee on Health and Children brought together an eclectic and electrifying group of people to discuss an issue which has, without exception, the most profound implications for every one of us alive today: palliative care, end-of-life care and bereavement.

It was an education to hear from those practitioners – clinical and non-clinical, specialist and generalist, medical and legal, governmental and non-governmental – about their work with and for people and their families who are facing death and loss.

I heard not only about statistics – 29,000 people dying each year in Ireland, and 290,000 people newly bereaved – but also about the philosophy, psychology, cultural and educational aspects of dying, death and bereavement. The depth and breadth of their knowledge gave a new insight into the universal truth that – as a dying man once said – you cannot get out of this world alive. The hearings made me look again at how and when people die and the way we in which we as a country and a society react to and live with dying, death and loss.

I learned that we spend an estimated €1.3 billion each year on end-of-life care. Most of this spending is unplanned.

I learned that
- We die at all ages – at the end of a long life, in the prime of life, or when life is just beginning.
- We die at all times – in the small hours of the morning, in the dead of night and less likely between 9 and 5 Monday to Friday.
- We die in all places – most of us in hospital or in long-stay care, some at home or in hospice care and some in unexpected places.

I learned that we have varying understandings, practices and protocols about dying, death and bereavement. Some are good and some are not. When they are not good, the people mainly affected are those who are dying and those who love and care for them and live with their loss.

I learned that with end-of-life care we have one chance to get it right.

There are welcome initiatives underway in the health services and in the community to improve end of life and bereavement care.

But dying, death and bereavement cannot be neatly packaged and handed over to the palliative care services or the health service generally as their exclusive remit and responsibility.

As dying, death and bereavement affect us all so too are they **our** responsibility.

Our responsibility as citizens and as human beings.

Introduction

Our responsibility as:
mothers and fathers; sons and daughters; grandparents; brothers and sisters; nieces and nephews; aunts and uncles.

Our responsibility as:
employers and employees; law-makers and law enforcers; public servants and private citizens; teachers and pupils; colleagues and friends.

Our responsibility because we interact in all of those roles – personal and professional – with our fellow human beings facing or dealing with dying, death and bereavement.

How is this responsibility ours – and by extension – part of the State's responsibility?
Because the State also interacts with the dying, the dead and the bereaved. The State counts us in and the State counts us out.

Because of what I learned from the Oireachtas Committee hearings, I brought a Private Members Motion to the Seanad in April 2014 calling on the Government to consider a national strategy on end-of-life care and bereavement encompassing all areas of public policy and practice – outside of health – in all Departments.

My remit from the Taoiseach – and the subject of this study – is the first stage in this process.

I was asked to conduct a mapping exercise across Government Departments, to identify best practice and suggest areas for improvement in how the State deals with issues relating to end of life, particularly in respect of providing clear information around available services and supports.

Part One of the study establishes details of the internal procedures relating to dying, death and bereavement as they affect staff of Government Departments and Agencies.

Part Two examines end-of-life issues in policy and practice as they relate to each Department's role in their interaction with and services to the public.

Foreword

Foreword

There are 30,000 Civil Servants. They represent a cross section of Irish society. In many ways they are quite silent. This is partly because of the rules that govern the way they talk to the public and the fact that they don't get a chance to interact with the public in an emotionally real way. It is very rare that they get a chance to speak outside the remit of their departmental structure and work. This report invited them to do that.

My brief from the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny TD, was twofold.

Firstly to establish details of the internal procedures relating to dying, death and bereavement as they affect Civil Service staff. How they deal with the in service death of a colleague, bereaved colleagues, issues of serious illness, and people facing loss and challenge in their lives.

Secondly to seek to identify best practice and to suggest areas for improvement in how the state deals with issues relating to end of life, particularly in respect of providing clear information around available services and supports.

As Part One of my brief, I issued an internal questionnaire to each of the 16 Departments of State and 5 Agencies of State. I followed up with a semi-structured interview with each Department and Agency based on their individual responses.

The responses to the questionnaire gave very strict, guided, and basic answers around numbers and reactions. It is only when I began the semi-structured interviews that the real depth and complexity around the issues of dealing with dying, death and bereavement within the workplace came about, and the full dynamic and colour of their lives as individuals and as individuals within an organisation began to unfold.

When we hear about the working lives of Civil Servants, we always hear about permanence, increments, and the scrutiny of the structures, but we rarely hear about how the individual human being interacts inside and outside that structure.

We also live comfortably with the idea that because Civil Servants have permanent jobs, they therefore do not have the same problems as everybody else, and that permanency takes precedence, prestige and power over their personal lives. This is not true. They face the same challenges as everybody else. The majority of those I interviewed were middle ranking Civil Servants or representing middle ranking Civil Servant lives.

I had never thought of dying, death and bereavement politically. It was for me a family issue. However throughout my time as a Senator I have learned from great educators and leaders in this field that end of life and bereavement extend to non-health and into areas of public policy, financial, legal, social, cultural, educational and administrative, and must be at the centre of all Government policy. It is the one life event that Government can plan for as it is the common ground on which we all stand.

Foreword

All of the respondents and interviewees were working in HR Departments. They were the voices of their colleagues as they spoke, subjectively, objectively and anonymously. What they had to say, and how they said it, is set out below. Their voices throughout are passionate, acute, practical and humane. In their own words they tell the complete story. Those words both ignite and fuel the truth of the report.

This is Part One of my report on how dying, death and bereavement affect Civil Service staff – internally. I set out to initiate a mapping exercise and it turned into so much more. The report moved from being the flat lines on a map to becoming spherical and multi-dimensional in thought and voice.

The report is really about the fragility of our finite lives.

Acknowledgements

Methodology

The Study was undertaken in the following ways:

Firstly it was initiated by means of a written questionnaire sent to the Secretaries General of each Government Department. The questionnaire was returned within three weeks of its issue. Most of the written responses had been referred to, and were received from, Human Resource Professionals within each of the Government Departments. The questionnaire is in Appendix 1.

Following receipt and examination of each of the completed questionnaires, I sought interviews with the people who had completed the questionnaires or their representatives.

In each case a semi-structured interview took place which was based on each department's and agency's response to the questionnaire.

The interviews were qualitative and took an average of two to three hours. They took place in the individual Government Departments or in my office in Leinster House. In some cases there was one interviewee, but in most cases there were two or three.

I am very grateful for the cooperation I received both from the Secretaries General and the HR Staff and indeed others who facilitated the completion of the questionnaires and the interviews.

While the factual and statistical information was gleaned from the questionnaires, the qualitative interviews were the ones that opened up the breadth, depth and importance of all of the issues around dying, death and bereavement.

The results and the report are based on both the written responses and the issues identified in the interviews. No department, agency or civil servant is identified in the report. This was the condition around which the internal aspect of the study was carried out. It was anonymous and all the findings remain anonymous.

The research method used was both quantitative (research driven) and qualitative (through the semi-structured interviews). As such, a certain balance was achieved.

The Fact of Life

The Fact of Life

29,000 people die in Ireland each year

About 80 people each day

800 people are newly bereaved each day

About 290,000 people each year

75 Civil Servants died in Service in the past 2 years

8 of these deaths were by suicide

Over 6,500 Civil Servants have been bereaved in the past two years.

*"In Ireland we are good at dealing with death. We have a goodness around death.
We are ritualistic. We have a common decency."*

Dying, death and bereavement are the universal truths. Our common humanity is founded on our mortality.

Despite this certainty, dealing with this reality tests us as individuals, family members, friends, neighbours, acquaintances and colleagues. So too do they present enormous challenges to organisations attempting to manage the effects of personal and professional loss by and of their staff.

This study asked civil servants how they in their different Departments deal with these profound issues. To say how they had encountered death and loss, personally and among their colleagues.

"A staff member lost a baby."

"After my father died."

"The manager lost his daughter."

"A colleague lost a parent."

"It was terrible to watch them dying at the desk."

To say from their experience and their expertise:

What they found challenging.

What structures they found helpful.

What would be supportive.

These are their voices.

Context

Context

> *"Personal expectations have been slashed. Conditions have been slashed. Team confidence has been slashed. Pay has been slashed. What you are supposed to deliver has been doubled. They are the sort of things that break you when faced with profound loss at home."*

Nowhere was context more important than in a study such as this. I met civil servants faced with very challenging financial and personal landscapes. We met on the grounds on which we all stand after the Irish Banking collapse of 2008. This is the context within which I found them.

> *"The depletion of staff and services and their personal circumstances cannot stand up to the stresses and the strains at times…. You cannot deplete an organisation the way we have been depleted and still ask it to do and to be and to remain silent."*

This study has to be understood in a time and in a space in which the investigation was done. It was quite clear to me that I was meeting the Civil Servants and their many representatives after eight years of austerity and eight years of a depleted organisation, which included pay cuts, loss of promotion, loss of morale, and loss of personal expectation. For the Civil Servants there was the overall loss of their assumed world, lack of belief in who they are and questions around whether what they do is really worth it.

> *"Austerity and pay cuts and working extra hours and the whole family policies, like career breaks and work sharing and all of those things are so difficult now, particularly for young people with families. Morale has taken a bad hit."*

In Ireland since 2008 youth employment and youth migration has increased. Lower paid workers feel exploited and underpaid. All taxes have increased, and the USC and property tax affects every worker and every household. Much of the middle class, which may have had a reasonable standard of living during the Celtic Tiger years, is now in some form of personal and mortgage debt or in poverty for the first time in their lives. Many of the Civil Servants represented in this report would be in this category.

> *"It must be remembered that loss of promotion can also be an issue. It may not be profound, but no promotion in the last number of years has created havoc for some people and they would have found it very difficult."*

There was evidence of great vulnerability and the anxiety that comes from knowing that debt, health benefits and lack of financial continuity and certainty, must be managed against no foreseeable promotion.

I was also meeting the representatives of the Civil Service around an even more interesting social aspect – the reality of an ageing work force.

Context

 "The way in which we are ageing and how we energise ourselves to do the job we are going to do, until we are beyond the time we thought we were going to retire, but now it is going to be later…. so it is keeping the energy levels up and how do you do that? This is our first experience as an organisation where there are more older people in it than younger people.… We will be looking at people in their 50s who are tired and fatigued by life."

"…. there is an ageing staff and all the retirements that are happening and loss of corporate memory and things like that."

The reality of an ageing profile among Civil Servants is also very relevant as it brings right into sharp focus people getting older and experiencing parental and family death and bereavement. They are a profile that are losing their parents.

"Given the age profile of our staff there are a lot of parental deaths. It is very interesting to watch. The loss becomes a huge part of their lives. It impacts on everybody. The impact can be great on health, on mood and on work."

An ageing profile suggests also the reality of carers, and all of the other issues that arise when people are getting older. They personally may not be approaching end of life, but they certainly will have parents and other family members who are.

"So across all sorts of fronts, sickness, attendance and so on, which would be a feature of our ageing profile. People who had not been sick forever are now facing illness and conditions and requiring to be hospitalised and their attendance might not be as good as it was. So the kind of conversation you have to have with them may be necessary and different, but it has to be constructive."

Expectations were on the floor and there was a gratitude for scraps because choices had become limited. There was also an internalized sense around keeping one's head down and not raising it above the parapet while being careful not to ask for too much when resources are so limited.

There was also a loss of a sense of pride in being a public servant. People were afraid to say they were public servants, because they were perceived as privileged and cosseted.

"You are a public servant, you are an overpaid waster. You find yourself in a position of weakness."

Context

As Civil Servants they didn't lose jobs, other people had lost jobs. They felt that there was a lot of negativity about them and their work.

> *"The negative in the press and in the media never stops."*

The scars from the national financial devastation were very evident both in themselves and also in their perception of how their colleagues felt, and in how they as HR professionals had to continue to deal with people effectively.

I think it is very important to note that as we speak about Ireland's financial crash and our country's debt, we are really speaking about the poverty anxiety of every average salaried worker. During the interviews I got a sense that it is not easy to say you are a civil servant. You are lucky to have a job. That job is secure. You have the money to pay the mortgage. What also came through was that they are burdened by huge personal debt.

> *"If you look at the grades in the Civil Service, for example a Clerical Officer Grade, money becomes so important, especially in times of grief. And the constant worry that you won't have enough."*

Nowhere is that worry more evident than in a study such as this, where people were asked to look at issues of dying death and bereavement, which affect and will affect 100% of the population.   Out of this ask came other issues of loss heightened by the background of their social, financial, personal, organisational and professional lives.

> *"There are long commutes to Government Offices around the country, there are longer working days. During the Celtic Tiger, money and borrowings solved a lot of the problems, now the money is gone, the cracks have appeared and relationships are fraught."*

All of the contributions on issues arising from dying death and bereavement are coloured and informed by this context.

> *"…. We are going to make demands on people now in ways that might not have been made in previous years because they have to stay managed."*

General Policy

General Policy

"We have to be guided by DPER and by the policies that are there. We obviously take a one to one approach very much so, but at the same time DPER policies are there to protect the staff and to protect everybody else."

Most civil service policy is decided by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. (DPER) All Government Departments have their own Mission Statements which acknowledge their individual staff as their most valuable resource. This ethos is central to the Civil Service and is the context in which the Civil Service is placed.

"The provision of a service of this nature arises from a recognition that staff are a valued resource whose continued wellbeing contributes to the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the Civil Service." DPER Circular

Within the context of dying, death and bereavement the policy rules or ground rules are set by DPER. They include: bereavement leave, critical illness cover, force majeure, sickness and carers.

Two agencies PeoplePoint [1] and the Civil Service Employment Assistance Service (CSEAS)[2] were set up by DPER in recent years and their services impact on dying, death and bereavement.

'The new model of service delivery came into effect in mid 2012 as a regionalised shared service under a central management within DPER. It is to offer a quality resource to all staff that positively affect both individual health and wellbeing and organisational effectiveness.'

Both of these new agencies, within the context of this study, are described and discussed later in the report.

Most departments operate under these general ground rules as many of them do not have their own bereavement policy. The Circulars from DPER are considered a guide from which they either extend or expand upon how they individually operate.

There is an emphasis on the value of the internal services that are provided. They recognise that somebody who comes into the Civil Service is likely to be there for a long time, so it is in their interests to protect staff as a valued resource and keep them happy, throughout the length of their tenure.

There is also recognition that all departments need a central policy framework to which additions can be made to take account of individual circumstances.

Standardisation seeks to ensure that people are educated, informed and assisted by the general Circulars.

[1] PeoplePoint is part of the overall Civil Service Human Resources (HR) Delivery Model which includes Local HR and the Civil Service HR Directorate. It manages high volume transactional HR elements and activities relating to pension administration. www.peoplepoint.ie
[2] CSEAS began as the Welfare Service. It then became the Employee Assistance Services with an Employee Assistance Officer in each Department. In 2012 as part of overall centralisation and rationalisation of services, CSEAS came into operation. There are six regional services in Dublin, Tullamore, Cork Limerick, Mayo and Sligo. www.cseas.pergov.ie

The Individual Within The Organisation

The Individual Within The Organisation

"We are not trained psychological or bereavement counsellors. But we are human beings and we work in human resources."

Each of the respondents to the questionnaire and those who participated in the interviews were working in what used to be called the Personnel section of a Department or Agency, now called Human Resources (HR). It was to them that the Secretaries General of each Department had directed the questionnaire.

Many respondents set their role in dealing with the issues that are the subject of this report in the context of their Department's or Agency's stated values or ethos in relation to its staff.

"If you look at our values…. our website, we value and respect our staff. Interaction is necessary. We are trying here to encourage a culture of support in our own organisation, and to treat people with respect. You need to start with the organisation and the ethos of the organisation."

It was those principles of value and respect that underpinned their approach to their work, and in particular in supporting their colleagues experiencing the personal and professional stresses associated with care, illness, dying, death and loss.

This ethos was seen as a vital component of their role and that of their organisation, in engendering a culture of mutual support, understanding and loyalty.

"That is it. And those are the kind of things that keep people motivated and engaged as much as a monetary issue. It is known that if you put all in, you will get it back. When you need us we will be there for you."

The ethos and values were regarded as essential foundations of their role. However, in both the written responses and in the interviews which followed, respondents said that they had no special training or support to carry out this function in relation to end-of-life issues.

Some pointed out that their tenure in the HR section could be short.

"I feel that we are general staff. We could be transferred at any time."

Others considered that a long-established HR team was an advantage and led to both a more supportive environment within the teams and also added to the quality of the services they provide.

The Individual Within The Organisation

"We know each other very well and there is not much turnover. Our grouping is solid and cohesive. The HR team have been the HR team for a long time. So there are expectations from colleagues…. There is the knowledge of colleagues about each other since we are not strangers."

Team building in HR was seen as essential in fostering a safe and respectful attitude to staff and in fostering the Departmental ethos.

"From a HR perspective in order to establish the ethos of a department you must be a team and you must respect staff. There is a ritual of respect and the bereavement process reinforces that idea."

In all cases, the HR personnel were keen to do what is best. They wish to support those experiencing serious illness, or facing loss and bereavement in the best possible way and to remain the human face of a system which has often been seen as a monitoring section for rules. There is a perception that this dichotomy may create a tension for staff and make them reluctant to engage with the HR structure.

"We are trying to get away from the reputation of the "personnel" people because we are seen as the ones who watch the clocks and keep the rules."

"You cannot stick too rigidly to formalities. Staff do not meet enough. HR has a reputation of being somewhere that staff are called to account"

"HR must communicate that they are there to support as well as to watch. We have participated in courses, managing people. To open up discussions that HR are there to support managers and be collaborative. They are only seen as policy functioning."

The HR function was also seen to be a resource for local managers to support staff in helping them through serious illness, death or bereavement.

"We want to get away from that…we are here to work with line managers and work with senior managers to help. You are doing it for people as an employee but you are also providing support for people who manage. You can nip things in the bud – whether they are grievances or whether they are bereavements…. They know that they have somewhere to go for support."

"It is the line manager who sees and says 'I think we have a problem here', and they would come to us in HR and we recommend how to proceed."

The Individual Within The Organisation

In other cases HR was described as a higher level of support – the section which must correct errors – if any – of others, or offer additional support as appropriate.

> *"I am very conscious of staff when they are ill, or when they suffer the death of a parent or a child. They need support. You will always remember how you were treated. If line managers or any other managers get it wrong, it is up to HR to get it right."*

There is a general recognition of the need for structure and entitlement – as set out in the DPER circulars and other service-wide regulation and information.

> *"Our bereavement leave is 5 days. There is a structure and that is no bad thing… a certain number of days."*

This entitlement is seen as a protection for those people who have no wish to make their bereavement public. They can claim the leave to which they are entitled and have no further transaction with the formal HR structures.

> *"The last thing that you want to be doing is having to go and ask what your entitlements are when you are bereaved. You can just look it up. This is a document and it tells people without them having to ask, especially if you don't want to have to ask the question. The document is never going to replace a colleague's empathy and support, but at least it will tell those who are afraid to ask."*

> *"Some people are less overt. You must ask the question "Do they need you? Is it my business?" "It is none of your business. I just want my entitlements.""*

A number of responses identified preserving and protecting the individual's right to privacy. In all cases there was a realisation that there will always be a tension between the structures and rules of the organisation and the need for flexibility, where staff are undergoing a crisis in their lives because of illness or bereavement.

There was also an acceptance that knowledge of staff, understanding of their situation and local responses will always be important.

> *"There is very little scope for the father who has three children and his wife dies. He is expected to be back at work in 5 days. Local HR must have the final say. Local HR know their staff."*

> *"They should give HR the freedom and the flexibility."*

> *"There is exactitude in this Department, but I give the human argument. You cannot ignore emotions and feelings. We take a lead from everyone. I say 'If I was going to HR, what would I like to hear?'"*

The Individual Within The Organisation

This acknowledgement of the necessity for collegial and organisational responses is counterbalanced by a recognition of the rights of the individual to keep their bereavement personal and private. It will often fall to the HR staff to tread the fine line between preserving the bereaved person's right to privacy, with the natural collegial response of those with whom they work. Both respect and trust are seen as core values in HR dealing with sensitive issues, such as serious illness or bereavement.

> *"We are conscious about the sensitivity of communication. We always check what is private and what is public. We are sensitive about the telling. We respect the wishes of the bereaved. We tell the section, or one other person, or the Department. We deal with it in-house."*

> *"…. If a staff member loses a family member we would ask them if they would want us to notify staff and some will say no, I don't want any colleagues there. I will be at my most vulnerable and I don't want colleagues to see me like that. So you always have to get permission first. But then someone else will come back to us and say "You didn't tell us that that person's father died." And you have to say, we didn't have permission to tell you."*

> *"There are certain lines that you cannot cross. HR relies on confidentiality. What is private and what is public must be protected. All decisions rely on that."*

> *"It is about supporting people versus people wanting their privacy and not wanting their work and their private information coinciding."*

> *"What HR needs is to be extremely sensitive and there are times when people don't want the organisation to know. I have had requests not to circulate information. Some people can be estranged from their family and they don't want work to see this going on."*

In some cases, the response to sharing information is much more pragmatic and practical:

> *"When we hear that there is a bereavement we look it up on rip.ie. If it is on that we then email all staff of the details. The reason we do that is because some people might not want it emailed to all staff, but once it is on rip.ie it is published. That is just to keep people informed, especially with people being so decentralised."*

The challenge of returning to work after a bereavement was identified by a number of respondents. They reference challenges to the colleagues of the bereaved person and to HR staff themselves. Communication is once again cited as the biggest difficulty in all circumstances.

The Individual Within The Organisation

"When somebody comes back to work if you know them then it's kind of ok. But if you don't, what do you say? Do you talk or not talk? Do you wait? Do you say 'Are you ok? What do you need?' That is always a good question."

"I think the scariest bit is going back to work. I see people and having the constant reminder, that can be very difficult as well and people forget about that. Having people come up to you and say 'I am sorry for your loss'. Think about sitting in the church for two hours. You think about walking through the corridors in work and having people putting their hand out to you, people you hardly know, that you never had a conversation with. It is lovely I know, but it is hard at the same time and is a constant reminder."

There was a realisation too that following a death, people will have very mixed feelings about returning to work – some with trepidation and some with relief. Both feelings can be ameliorated by support and collegiality.

"Sometimes people get back to business to cope."

"The return to work after my [parent] died was probably the toughest. When I was going back there was a pain in the pit of my stomach because it is not really where you want to be. You want to be sitting at home, wallowing in your own self-pity and you would prefer the world not to be moving on, but it does. So if you have come back to a place where people around you have rallied round and got stuck in, it makes it an awful lot easier…. If it was analysed it would be that there is an understanding here for what you went through."

"I believe in a phased return to work and local arrangements."

While fully supportive of their bereaved colleagues, respondents identified practical problems to be addressed. In written responses and in subsequent discussion one of the most common difficulties identified in supporting staff following the death of a colleague or following a staff member's bereavement was how to maintain the workload while taking account of the effect of death and bereavement. This is seen as a major challenge for the organisation.

"It is very difficult to deal with the personal and keep the show on the road"

"For the individual who has had the loss the question is what do they need as a person, as an individual, not as an organisational process."

"The personal and the professional – it is hard to find the balance…. both impact on each other"

The Individual Within The Organisation

"The manager's interaction back with me isn't about the individual if it is a death in service. It is about can I replace them? How can we deal with the work and on the deliverables and the deadlines that have to be reached?.... So there would be a lead manager's perspective. They have a dual thing. They are dealing with the staff member and they are dealing with the impact on the workload."

"Apart from the awful shock of [our colleague's] death, the staff still had to run the department."

The comments show that there is a pragmatic acceptance of the fine balance between care for and support for the individual facing loss and bereavement and the need to continue the publicly funded work in tandem. The respondents are very aware of public cynicism about their "secure" positions.

"You are also aware too that the taxpayer is paying for all this and people would be giving out sometimes .... but there are people on trollies in hospital and it is all coming out of the same kitty."

"The taxpayer isn't interested in the humanity element".

There is also an awareness that tension can arise between colleagues when there is additional workload to be shared in times of loss and bereavement.

"If I am bereaved there is a good chance that I won't be doing my work and therefore there is a chance that somebody else will have to pick up the pieces for me."

"It might happen that you may not return to work in the normal way; you may be very affected by the bereavement…. and you could be heading to a series of leave or sick leave and that then becomes a whole different thing."

"You want to understand…but you also wonder when it will be full steam ahead."

"If it goes beyond a couple of weeks people are beginning to think 'hang on a second here, they have had enough time to get over this so why am I picking up the pieces?'…. You can deal with that in the short term, but in the longer term if we don't have a manager to monitor this…. and try and pick the person up it will manifest itself in conflict. That is why I am saying it is a challenge for the organisation."

This tension - both organisational and personal - was cited by a number of Departmental representatives. It is an ongoing challenge for the public service.

The Individual Within The Organisation

Civil Service Employee Assistance Service (CSEAS)

There have been recent developments in support for and reorganisation of HR function in the Civil Service which were both the subject of much comment in both written and verbal replies.

The Civil Service Employee Assistance Service (CSEAS) and PeoplePoint (the functions of which are described elsewhere in this report) are two relatively recently constituted centralised services designed to rationalise and standardise some of the functions of HR across Government departments and agencies.

In written responses, the availability of the CSEAS was cited as the most helpful support that respondents identified in dealing with issues around dying, death and bereavement, for both HR and wider Departmental staff. In some cases respondents identified information material available from CSEAS as a bereavement policy.

The positive reaction to CSEAS was also evident in the interviews with an overwhelming majority of HR personnel speaking highly of the availability and scope of the services.

Centralisation was seen as an advantage by many, allowing for both uniformity of approach and a wider range of supports.

> *"That is what they are there for. That is what they are trained for, to offer advice and support and counselling and to refer you on if that is what you need."*

> *"We would be dictated around the rules of the civil service, the supports that are there, the supports that are available. It is all centralised now. That is for the better. The advantage is that there is a broader range of supports."*

There were dissenting voices.

> *"My personal experience is that having a CSEAS person in the building is great. We don't have that in the field and we don't have that in Dublin. It is the immediacy of knowing who the person is, being able to have an ongoing relationship. I would have found the services better before it went to the shared services. It was better when we had one per organisation."*

The fact that CSEAS evolved from each Department having its own Employee Assistance Officer was seen as both a strength and a weakness of the current centralised structure. For some their independence – being at one remove from the departmental HR staff – was a positive, allowing all staff an independent avenue of support.

The Individual Within The Organisation

"Years ago there was an Employee Assistance Officer referral if something was wrong. Now we flag CSEAS to staff, because very often people would rather engage with strangers than those they work with."

"There was a time when each Department had one in-house and that was probably much better because then you would know the person…. On the other hand a person might not want to go to somebody that they think knows them too well and they might prefer to go out of house, you know, because of the whole confidentiality thing."

"The issues of end of life are not unique to our Department….like the idea of CSEAS…. their experience and interaction. They're shared services. Some aspects of this are very good. And they are independent of employees. That is a good thing. It generates confidence."

Not all agree that this is a positive.

"There is a belief that CSEAS are on the inside. They are civil servants and they might at some time have known who you are."

For some, CSEAS relieve the HR personnel of having to deal too directly with issues of dying, death and bereavement for which they feel they are not trained or equipped. They can also be the buffer between the "clock watching" HR department and the employee.

"We deal with wages and stuff like that so the idea of going to a CSEAS officer is easier."

"We would see CSEAS as the main people who would deal with loss. We would always refer straight away anybody to CSEAS."

"They just have that expertise and level of information that the local manager wouldn't have."

"There is someone we can call up in difficult circumstances. We have a number. We have a contact. Someone in that area will be available in that particular county to call in at relatively short notice and be in that office in half an hour. That is a huge resource for us. It is the initial response and they know how to cope with whatever reaction they are going to meet."

"There is a lot of scope within the CSEAS and they would then refer a person if needed confidentially to paid professionals."

The Individual Within The Organisation

CSEAS support was valued because it was outside of other Departmental time pressures – helping to overcome the tension between the personal issues and workload demands.

> *"The CSEAS officer can literally put everything aside and go and talk to you and spend the day with you if necessary and go back the following week, whereas in our office because we have hundreds of staff we cannot give that time to one person. We give them time, obviously, but the CSEAS officer can give a lot more to that person."*

The CSEAS themselves describe their service as demand-led, and largely dependent on HR departments or individual staff members to make contact with them on a range of issues, including bereavement and critical illness. They describe this as one of their challenges.

Another may be that described by one respondent that people may not contact CSEAS because they are too stressed or upset, or because they are admitting that they are in a difficult situation.

> *"People know of the supports, but they do not take the steps to avail of them. It is too difficult. They are under too much pressure. This is the same with CSEAS. They don't approach the individual in the Department. I have to do it. There is an attitude that you can't cope if you are going to those guys. You are acknowledging the disaster if you do."*

However there was an overwhelmingly positive response to the services provided by CSEAS, including personal contact and support for managers, HR personnel and individual staff. The availability of leaflets and on-line information was also valued. A number of Departments cited CSEAS information as their bereavement "policy".

CSEAS themselves feel that they have overcome some of the challenges of becoming a centralised service and have become a cohesive team. They have concentrated on ensuring that people are aware of their existence and of the services and supports they provide. Evidence from their annual reports and surveys conducted among Government Departments would suggest that this approach has been effective, and that there is greater awareness of their services. The responses of the officials who contributed to this report would bear this out.

One outstanding issue for CSEAS is that they are precluded from proactively providing workshops for staff across Departments without having first been invited to so do by each individual Department. This remains a barrier to their aim to provide a standardised and uniform service across all departments, and to better equip and support staff generally to deal with challenging issues.

The Individual Within The Organisation

PeoplePoint

PeoplePoint is part of the overall Civil Service HR Service Delivery Model which is comprised of three elements, PeoplePoint, Local HR, and the Civil Service HR Directorate. PeoplePoint is to manage high volume transactional HR elements and pension administrative related activities.

In the context of this discussion about the issues of dying, death and bereavement PeoplePoint was a source of dissent and debate amongst the HR representatives.

The new structure is taking time to bed down and there are problems with the early stages. For some, the centralisation has its advantages.

> *"It is a centralised service so by definition means certain efficiencies. So, ok, there are standards and efficiencies around that. I don't think we are seeing those yet and I think it may be some time before we do."*

> *"The process has been difficult and painful to some extent."*

> *"PeoplePoint is about costs and efficiency."*

> *"In theory it is a good thing. Whether it is too large for one organisation to deal with, it has removed some of the flexibility from us and being able to lift the phone and say 'Look at this case and can you deal with it without having to go through these loops?' To me it is like an organisation where consultants came in and said this is the perfect way that you do this."*

> *"The transition to PeoplePoint has been huge for us, but also for PeoplePoint and they are at the very early stages of nailing down processes."*

For some respondents the move to centralisation could be a welcome opportunity to free HR, to take a more proactive and strategic approach to their work.

> *" To allow HR division to be more strategic instead of dealing with a lot of administration work would be great. But it is not perfect at the moment."*

For others, the centralisation has meant a depletion of the services available.

> *"The preparatory work [in moving some of their functions to PeoplePoint] has been intense and then of course in our Department we are down 4% on our HR numbers. That was the efficiency."*

The Individual Within The Organisation

A big concern is the perception that the centralisation of services impinges on some of the HR functions in relation to critical illness, dying, death and bereavement. For many this presents a barrier between the local management, HR departments and staff.

> *"Once you lost that transactional stuff you lose your daily contact with staff. You ring me about your sick leave, or your career break or whatever…. so I get to know you because you are in contact with me on a regular basis with different queries. Now you are not having to come to me with your queries."*

> *"In relation to PeoplePoint I would have concerns that we are going to lose connectivity with our staff."*

> *"I think that when they are up and running they would not be very human, but they will be cheaper."*

> *"One of the flaws of PeoplePoint is the encroachment on the humanity of HR. They lose the human element. Staff are not cases they are people."*

The concerns about PeoplePoint centre for the most part on the fact that their work is data driven and the management of data is, of necessity, impersonal.

> *"I have always managed leave and illness and employee relations. PeoplePoint are administrators of it. PeoplePoint don't manage absence, they administer the data. They manage the record. I manage the people."*

> *"PeoplePoint is just numbers."*

Many respondents support the rationale of centralising transactional services, but in the context of the issues discussed in this study there is concern about what can be achieved from this, and how it will affect current relations within Departments.

> *"It was all worked out on paper. It was not worked out in place, not around the realities of people's behaviour."*

> *"It is all about cost savings and PeoplePoint and centralised Civil Servants and losing the local HR. When we do that we lose knowledge of staff. Even when it comes to bereavement and leave…. PeoplePoint now ask for paperwork on bereavement – paperwork which is essentially a death certificate."*

The Individual Within The Organisation

For some the new service has become an additional burden.

"It has complicated our lives instead of helping us. It was supposed to streamline to let us get on with strategic work. It was supposed to be transactional, to take on transactional things. Sick leave certs were messed up through PeoplePoint. I would like to know when my staff are unwell. I know my staff. With PeoplePoint you are a PPS number and they don't know the difference between grades. It is the difference between the real and the imagined."

"They don't communicate. It is a problem."

The discussion highlighted the complexities of supporting human beings faced with difficult issues where the transactional service cannot – or fails to – take account of the individual human situation. Several cases related to critical illness and bereavement were mentioned.

"I know my colleagues were struggling to get this sorted where there were issues like paperwork and there was a death certificate that had to be sorted out and PeoplePoint were delaying things.... we don't know.... and this went on for a very long time, maybe two weeks…."

"Getting things sorted out can be difficult at times of grief and loss, trying to get the paperwork sorted out as soon as possible. And PeoplePoint need to be conscious of this."

"We ring and we say we want an exception made in such a case and they say yes, we will do that. And the timing doesn't work. They don't make the change in time and it doesn't happen in that week. And it becomes a procedural thing – that 'We are still training to bed down'…. and things like overpayment and stuff. It is not that there isn't a willingness there, or that they don't recognise the need for it, or we haven't got proper communication with them. It is that volume of this stuff that is still a problem for them."

"Well I have limited experience but they are very process driven so, if by X day this hasn't happened the template letter will issue and we have at times had to say to them 'Please don't contact this person, because this has just happened. Can you leave them alone for a little while?' And very often it will issue anyway and then you are getting back to them and the person is very upset."

Difficulties with administrative issues, particularly delays in payment, or overpayments which have to be recouped, are viewed as major drawbacks of the service, adding to the stress of the situation.

The Individual Within The Organisation

"They send in certs to PeoplePoint. If someone goes over the allowed time and PeoplePoint don't see it, there can be an overpayment. Then the money has to be paid back over time. Then there is huge anxiety about wages."

Even in these circumstances, respondents reiterated the importance of local management and local HR support to help mitigate the bureaucracy.

"…what we are doing is a local arrangement. We would manage it and line managers would manage it as well. I would not be informed and I think it appropriate that I would not have to be involved. I would promote that the manager would do it locally rather than going through layers of administration."

"PeoplePoint will not replace and nobody can replace a manger's ability to manage. So we need to make sure that our staff understands that."

What does the Circular Say

What does the Circular Say

"There are Circulars for everything. Circulars are also to be ignored. Sometimes they are not what is needed. Deal with everybody individually."

"The whole thing of the civil service is that you are constantly moving and you have to be flexible and the other thing is that you are bound by the rules the whole time. Time and attendance -you cannot come in late- you are very rule bound and the rules are paramount. The first thing when an issue comes up is what is allowed? What does the circular say?"

The need to have rules – expressed in the catch-all title "Circular" – and have them communicated across a large and dispersed organisation, was accepted as vital by all respondents.

"What we do in our office is we take a central policy and we adapt it to suit ourselves. I believe that having central guidelines is the rigour."

In relation to issues arising with dying, death and bereavement the directly relevant Circulars include those on bereavement leave entitlements, carers leave and sick and critical illness leave.

There was an acknowledgement that standardised entitlements protect staff and clearly set out people's rights.

The language of the Circulars came in for some comment.

"Some of the circulars are there from the 1930s and you would need a legal degree to read them."

"They don't read them and sometimes they are worded so badly you could not understand them".

Not only the language used, but how the language is used is an issue. Completely different issues are dealt with in the same way with no distinction as to the subject matter. This along with the high volume of such documents coming across people's desks, militates against them being effective in what they are supposed to be, information which governs people's entitlement and behaviour, presented in a readily accessible and easily understood format.

"I find it strange with all these circulars. And sometimes you think 'Is the person who is writing this one on bereavement the same one as is writing this Circular on pension entitlements?' They are two so very different things. Circulars sometimes come to your desk and you send them on to everybody and you just think…. What is that about."

What does the Circular Say

In the opinion of some of the respondents, some of the Circulars are so obtuse as to be meaningless and would warrant having training sessions to understand their content.

> *"I think we need to do training on what to do. Literally going through some of the circulars and talking about them."*

Respondents also said that while the formal acknowledgement of entitlement to leave in times of crisis and stress expressed in the Circulars are vital, they may not provide direct support to people.

> *"We do not want to live by Circulars. We want to exercise flexibility. Thoughts around policy, loss and resilience."*

They all said that Circulars cannot not take the place of human interaction and dying, death and bereavement will usually require additional formal and informal supports from colleagues and management.

> *"I would like more flexibility around bereavement. The circulars and guidelines are too prescriptive. Sometimes you have to leave the guidelines behind.... There is too much rigidity."*

Collegiality

Collegiality

"Collegiality is very important. Most cases, where staff allow it, it is very evident."

The vital importance of collegiality – emotional and practical support from colleagues at times of stress or loss – was a recurring theme in both written responses and the follow up interviews.

Having the assistance of local managers and colleagues, outside of their formal roles, in dealing with issues related to dying, death and bereavement was seen as the second most important and helpful support across all Departments. A number of respondents also mentioned that they encourage other colleagues to be supportive of a bereaved person, or a colleague who is facing death or loss.

"The one thing I recall is that when you are bereaved the people you work with are the people you lean on."

For the most part, collegiality was a natural and spontaneous reaction. This was particularly highlighted where there had been the death of a colleague, the shared loss or trauma, the reality of a death among one of their number, being a catalyst for mutual support and understanding.

"You bring your experience from outside and inside to how you behave. It is a more exacting memory because the death and bereavement was at work and not at home. It was not theoretical. It was real for us all."

In many cases, respondents spoke of the death of a colleague galvanising them into action and mutual support.

"We noticed that his death coalesced us together and defined our common humanity."

"After his death our collegiality came to the fore, even without direction."

Respondents recalling the death of a colleague, particularly a sudden death, speak of how important work relationships are, and how much colleagues depend on each other at times of stress and need.

"Colleagues in the office were very shocked. You never know how a colleague has said goodbye the day before. There may have been a row, or they meant to do something, and then it was no longer possible. This colleague was very healthy and also very well-liked."

The need to express the grief for their dead colleague and support each other in that expression becomes crucial. The world of work takes second place to the need to grieve. In the quotation below there is a sense of pride of having come through a difficult phase together, and having been supported by the wider organisational structure.

Collegiality

> *"Again these relationships have built up over the years and they are organic…. is that the word? We drift to the people who care about us. So we were all here supporting each other. We had people who were due to start work together that day and we had to meet them and ask them to come back the next day because we were not able to deal with that on the day. It was not a problem. We went out to lunch together. We were numb for weeks but we got through it. We had a good support system. We managed it well. I think we had a lot of support."*

The value of collegial support was illustrated by those who had experienced familial loss as "the bereaved person" and those who had experienced bereavement as a group on the death of a colleague.

Empathy, respect, recognition and acknowledgement were seen as vital and valued supports from colleagues. So too was practical help and solidarity. The informal, community, human interaction can be seen to supplement – even replace – any formal structures in place within the organisation.

> *"When I was bereaved I took two weeks off. All my colleagues attended the funeral, or as many of them as could make it, which was on a Sunday. That means a lot in the Civil Service. When I went back to work…. They got my backlogs up to date. All my outstanding work was actually complete when I came back. Two or three people sat down and said "Let's get through this". That is bereavement policy in action."*

Respondents who had experienced personal bereavement, such as the person quoted above, particularly appreciated the understanding of and help of colleagues. Many recounted situations where colleagues were facilitated and encouraged to show support for their bereaved friend. It is seen as both an appropriate human and an organisational response.

> *"Last week we had a death. A staff member lost his [parent]. We found out who in the office was closest to him and we covered the cost for that travel because some of our clerical staff are not well paid and they were doing it partly on behalf of the rest of us. And we would send a mass card and when that staff member comes back to work all the team have been briefed on this policy and how it works…. and how not to be afraid to ask him how he is feeling and to keep an eye on him."*

Appropriate Responses

Appropriate Responses

> *"Those who are bereaved like to speak to a personnel officer. He/she is seen as removed and official and adds weight. He/she also has the support of the Department."*

Organisational structure and hierarchy are important in Government Departments and across the Civil Service. This is apparent in the responses to the questionnaire and the later interviews.

Helpful supports identified included support by local managers and colleagues following a death, facilitating attendance at the funeral and ensuring that the Departmental response to the death or bereavement is at the correct level.

Respondents identified this as important both in terms of the bereaved person being a valued member of staff, but also as the Department itself being seen to be "doing the right thing." Many felt that this was an important role for them as an individual and as a representative of their Department and their colleagues. These supports seem to have developed organically.

> *"There would be an unwritten rule that someone from the section must go to the funeral of a staff family member. Not that you shut down or abandon ship for the day. It is not a day off work, but it is about the family seeing that the person is valued as a colleague. That is where I would see it as really important. Even the colleagues of that person came back to me afterwards and said, 'Thank you it was really good to see you at the funeral.' That was nice, I just felt I should go. No one said to me, you have to go, this is part of your job."*

This is equally if not more important where there is a death of a serving member of the Departmental staff. In such cases those attending the funeral, contacting the family or supporting bereaved colleagues are expected to be of the highest appropriate grade. It is important not only to do the right thing, but to be seen to be doing the right thing at the right level.

> *"In that scenario the MAC member would always attend the funeral usually. All or some from HR would always attend. You won't find that written down anywhere but that is something we would do, we would feel not only is it important for the family but it is doubly important for the colleagues who have lost that person, but you cannot force people to do that."*

Where offices are decentralised or regionalised, the representation at the funeral should be the highest applicable grade.

Appropriate Responses

"The local management as senior as possible within the division…. So at the very least you would expect a Principal Officer to turn up to a funeral like that and perhaps also an Assistant Secretary…. depends on the circumstances."

"….our experiences would show that we need to be in contact with the people concerned all the time and make ourselves available to come in at the right level of support and the right level of seniority in terms of the level of response that is required".

The importance of attendance at a funeral as a gesture of solidarity and respect was emphasised by many:

"Wherever possible we would be available to attend a funeral or a removal. We will be there to represent the department but this isn't possible in every case. You might want to be there, you might feel you should, but it simply isn't always possible in those circumstances."

Even within this organisational structure, the need to be guided by the wishes of the bereaved person must be taken into account:

"In some cases individuals would say it is a quiet event and I don't want to make a big thing out of it. I don't want it to be a national story all over the department. Or other people might say I am disappointed that personnel were not down to talk to me, or didn't attend the funeral."

The protocol and hierarchy which guides the working day and working lives of Civil Servants is as apparent as ever in the ritual of funerals. There is an expectation that certain people should be present, there is an expectation that certain sections should be represented and there is an expectation that certain protocols should be observed.

"You notice when the person isn't there maybe more so than if they are there."

The Empty Desk

The Empty Desk

"It is very hard to look at a desk and say that person was here yesterday and they are gone today."

There are in our lives no greater and no more real visual representations of death and its eternal ending than the hearse, the coffin and the graveyard.

However the empty desk, in an office, once occupied, sometimes as recently as last Friday, by a colleague now deceased, can be as equally blunt in its reminder and in its death echo.

"Our colleague had cancer. We were all so distressed to see her dying in front of us at her desk…. we have an open plan office. She was only 50. Then the desk was empty."

The desk made empty by a death in service became in the responses to the questionnaire and throughout the interviews, the most symbolic reminder, both of the void created by the death of a colleague and the after reality of what to do, how to do it and most importantly how and when respect for the memory of the deceased can be assimilated into a changed office structure.

"We had a physical reminder of the loss ….The memory of her distress and the empty desk always there…. after a while the desk became a fond memory, the same sight became a fond memory."

The empty desk was in the study the second most difficult challenge that all respondents felt they had to face.

"We need to think about replacing our colleague and I said I think we will allow a period of time before we actually do that, because we need to actually let people acknowledge that the desk is vacant, that the person has died…."

The empty desk was that acknowledgement, like the empty chair in a home, or the empty bed upstairs. A difficult reminder but a real reminder and one which can and is used very intuitively, by many departments to find a way forward and a way of moving on.

Some respondents used that intuition and looked to creative and imaginative rituals as a guiding principle in how to deal with the empty desk. They found such rituals the most helpful in that the loss of colleagues could be captured, remembered and with appropriate time, let go.

"We have had shrines, a candle burning on a desk for a couple of days until after the funeral …. and I say that if there is something that may help your staff just to get over that really rough period of the first few days and there is something that you think you could do, we will do it."

The Empty Desk

"Our colleague's desk is now a shrine with pictures photos and flowers."

"Losing these colleagues was very difficult. We had to get together in the canteen, to have a cup of tea and a chat about the individual. A kind of mini wake – a ritual, crying, hugging, and laughing".

"Maybe go to mass- not everybody wants to go to mass -go for a cup of coffee together- because it is important to talk and not just carry on the day's work. Put the work aside for today and focus on your colleagues. You have lost somebody close."

"But the ritual allowed us to move on. We commemorated them well and communicated with each other."

The ritual of the empty desk was spoken about during all our conversations and referenced constantly in the questionnaire. It was discussed in the most sacred way, as it represented the etiquette of what to do about the life of the deceased and the standard and quality of how the organization wanted to react internally, especially when a desk is considered a kind of personal home base.

"Somebody has to get the box. To separate the personal/private stuff from the office stuff."

"Normally when somebody dies if the desk is left, we box the personal effects. We never touch them."

"Stuff that is left in the drawers and maybe papers that you didn't want to have at home, so you have them in the desk and other stuff."

There were immediate difficulties facing staff and colleagues after a death in service. How to deal graciously with the very personal belongings in the desk of the deceased.

"What I find interesting about this is and I haven't thought it through is how do you deal with people's personal effects."

"Suddenly the desk is still there, a person's belongings are still there and it is very difficult to deal with that."

The Empty Desk

"Well there is having to deal with personal belonging if a staff member dies. This can be very difficult. In my department it is done by the HR section. You don't know what you will find…. Birthday presents were in the desk. Very personal stuff …. Books diaries and brushes…. You have to leave it a while and then pack it up and inform the next of kin".

"You don't know about peoples other lives."

These responses go to the core of the complications and privacies of all of our lives. They also highlight exactly the balance that the organisation needs to strike between protection of the deceased personal space and the focus and function of the office.

There is also the sensitivity and the significance of leaving appropriate time between cleaning out a deceased colleague's desk and making sure that what needs to be cleared is cleared.

"I opened the drawer in the pedestal and her belongings were in there. That I would say was not right. You should have all the belongings removed before someone else takes over."

For many it became vitally important that the personal family of the lost colleague was given a place of refuge and support within the organization, where their loved one had worked, sometimes for a life time.

"We invited his family in to see where he had sat and where he had worked. They did not realise how much he was thought of and about. This brought us together so very well."

"Staff got themselves together in the late evening and gathered up the material, all of her belongings and brought them to her mother. So it was very dignified."

There were inventive and innovative and commemorative services spoken about. These included the commissioning of special paintings or books, the publication of photographs, resourceful memorials and artistic memories.

"Because people don't often know the work side of somebody's life."

"We did a memorial book for her, they looked for volunteers and put stuff into it and we decided to move the unit around and we changed the desk configurations, so that it did not look like a gaping hole, but that was a while after."

The Empty Desk

"I don't know what your view is but my personal view is that if somebody's name comes up in conversation their memory lives with us all and you know that stories about M means that he is still here in living memory of his former colleagues and likewise we will talk about M and the various other people we have lost."

In all organizations there are people for whom work is paramount. Those who live through and for their work. The way of life within the Civil Service can become a colleague's only way of life, or the life that they are most connected too. Such colleagues may not have the privilege of a personal family so the organisation becomes their family. All of the departments spoke of such a colleague's death as being even more poignant and around which they wanted to offer a greater sense of how they had been valued and regarded, during their life time of work.

Many had worked for a long time in certain departments and many of the interviewees and respondents spoke of colleagues as family despite office structures, and office arrangements, whether within small or big sections of the department, especially at such an overwhelming time. It was the idea of regarding themselves and the deceased as family that got them through.

"Her family really didn't know what she did in the Civil Service. They were very surprised. They did not know her life. We knew more about it. We still have a lot of contact with her family."

There was a huge understanding among all the respondents that life must go on, that life has to go on. There was an anxiety that the value of a deceased colleague, their talent and work ethic to the organisation, their personal friendships and their daily collegial support, should never be lost or forgotten.

"Replacing somebody is a very sensitive issue. If you do it too soon you nullify somebody else's life."

The respondents felt that their deceased colleagues should always have a real place in organisational memory, in organisational purpose, and in organisational success.

"The reality is that life goes on -but how do we make people feel valued and feel that if it was them they would be remembered - they would be valued- they would have some element of recognition- that they were here- that they contributed- that we miss them- and that we feel their loss."

The ghosts and phantom fears that we hold around death especially in Ireland, remain in the ether within our own personal lives and it is no different within organisations. Huge fears around sitting at the desk of the deceased and of using the office of a dead colleague came to the fore, in all of our conversations.

The Empty Desk

"People were afraid of dying at the same desk."

"We had a very close colleague who died. He was a senior member of staff. We had a very close relationship. When he died so suddenly nobody wanted to move in to his office…. Colleagues did not go in before he died and after he died very close colleagues cleaned it out. When it was cleaned out the person who was promoted would not go in to the office or take ownership of it…. The person had to be assigned a different office. The office is still locked."

"They didn't want to sit at her desk for ages. And so in the end we just moved everything around so it wasn't her desk anymore. And they were split on it because some of them didn't want to change anything. But some of them didn't want to leave it there because she was older than them all. They would have gone to her for advice."

"I feel it is really strange as I am sitting in his office, sitting at his desk using his computer screen."

"We are very protective of a colleague's office. It is very unsettling to have someone else there. You realise they are never coming back."

While most respondents were aware of what should be done in these sad circumstances and while most knew what was essential, there was a real sense that best practise is dependent on who is in charge on the day. The intention may be there, but it may not be carried out by those in charge.

"A lot of that can be down to who is in situ at the time, who is the manager who the people in the section are. It can be personality driven. We can give the guidance, but there is always somebody in an area who has enough cop-on and enough empathy."

"So far we have found that there is always one person who steps forward and deals with a situation very well."

The empty desk was the most expressive symbol of the loss and the grief for deceased colleagues within the Civil Service. Such a life's work space became a reminder, a ritual, a remembrance, and a return to new work. It was the area to which all colleagues were drawn and from which all colleagues found a way forward.

A Grief Observed

A Grief Observed

"It is difficult to define. You must learn to read the person, listen to the words the person is using, hear what is being said. Communication is difficult. You must learn the skill of silence and what silence says."

Communication was cited as the most difficult challenge by all respondents. They felt that what is said is often not what is heard. And what is said is not always what is meant. They also felt that what is not said can be the loudest conversation within the organisation. The absence of perceptive communication can lead to people feeling isolated or aggrieved.

"If you are not listening and not hearing it you are at nothing. I think that would be the key thing."

"We have very bright girls and fellas and sometimes they cannot communicate."

In a study such as this around dying, death and bereavement, some aspects of communication among all its myriad of components, became the most feared and the most critical.

The voice and human expression of "What do you say?" when faced with the grief and loss of a colleague in service, or a bereaved colleague in the office, were cited as the most difficult and testing. Respondents felt frail in their attempts to overcome this feeling of vocal and verbal inadequacy. They did not know how to, or felt unable to, give their colleague's grief language. To give sorrow words.

"Sometimes it is all really around the funeral and not when the person comes back. I had wondered myself if we should be doing something else. Should we be checking that that person is ok? Should we be talking to the manager but we don't do that."

There was an acute and consistent observation and discussion during the interviews that circulars were inadequate outside of informing people of their staff entitlements. The respondents felt that in relation to what to do around loss may not be adequately captured in paragraphs, no matter how well or how succinctly these paragraphs are written.

"There is process and there is policy. These are observed, but you must go beyond that."

"I think talking to people is the way forward especially with something like this, because you would never capture it in a circular."

The respondents felt that the handout or advice given online, can never capture the recognition and the expression of empathy. Empathy does not express itself in circulars.

A Grief Observed

"You must give people an opening to speak."

"You must know when they do not want to talk."

"Initiate conversation and the opportunity for it."

"We have standard responses to it. There are certain expectations in terms of performance, attendance and all those kind of things but in order to crack the problem if you like, someone has to sit down with the person and say - What is going on? - What needs to be done? - What are you going to do about it? - How can we support you? And that conversation is very difficult to have, if you haven't ever done it before, or if you have not done it that often. Or if you are simply a person who is not terribly skilled in that type of conversation."

Communication as a 'grief observed' was considered the most relational, the most perceptive and the most useful aspect of communication, when dealing with loss and grief and the behaviour of bereaved colleagues or indeed of colleagues generally. If colleagues or management are not observing grief there is little chance that they can come to terms with it.

"Discretion, instinct and judgement in each particular case is tantamount. You must continue to notice, look out for, recommend. Watch when people are struggling. No two incidents are the same. "

"The manager is emotionally astute and he is observational. He can see suffering and people who are suffering. He does not work by the book. He makes arrangement suitable for individuals."

"Coming back to work may be an enforced therapy. I will get on with it. I will continue. But we must be aware of what we saw previously and what we see now. We watch the behaviour, especially if somebody is not themselves."

The respondents felt that behaviour and attitude and silence at work will often speak more eloquently of the feelings of the bereaved person than any verbal communication.

"There is a volatility of behaviour after bereavements. An individual who has literally gone silent. Completely quiet. Others who have reacted more angrily over irrelevant things. Nothing to do with specific situations. Really to do with the death they have encountered. They overreact. There are interpersonal reaction differences stemming from bereavement. Unless you had that knowledge, you would have treated certain behaviour as a discipline issue."

A Grief Observed

"You must pick up signs."

"After bereavement people sometimes behave strangely. Either there is a lot of evident absence or they can become workaholics and be in the office all the time. If you have been visiting a hospital or a nursing home for a long time before the death of a loved one, there can be a big gap in your routine as that is no longer necessary."

Respondents spoke not only about the need to be observant of grief, but said that in order to respond adequately they must be informed and know in the first instance that a death has occurred. This was seen as particularly important in light of decentralisation, fragmentation and mobility within the organisational structure.

"Death notices would be published so people around the Department would routinely be informed or would make it their business to check. It is like reading the back pages of the newspaper people would know colleagues."

This information service is greatly valued and where technological changes prevented immediate and easy access to such important information, there was resistance to the changes and it is hoped that they will be reversed.

"If you are in the Department for a long time you could be at opposite ends of the country. You might have worked with people 20 or 30 years previously starting out in Dublin. They could find themselves in Donegal and one in Kerry, but would know that person and if that person had died it would warrant a mass card, if not actual attendance at the funeral…. So that kind of information is absolutely very much part of our organisation structure. That info used to be on the front page and now it is hidden behind the front page, because of the design changes. It is an issue of too many things needing to be on the front page. They are still there, but you have to look for it. So that has changed things very slightly and the effect then is that – and this is only in the last 6 months or so – ever since the page was re launched, you may not hear about things like that in the way you would have done previously. There has been a communication negative effect. It is interesting and it has been acknowledged that this is a gap that needs to be fixed and will be on the next configuration. But it was missed and that was an important thing and people relied on it and when it went there were problems. The Department is full of those personal relationships."

This respondent underlines the all-pervasive nature of grief and loss and the importance of human contact and communication in such circumstances, both informed and observed. Something as simple as changing the position of a webpage can have a profound effect on relationships within a very large and dispersed department.

A Man For All Seasons

A Man For All Seasons

"We depend on the managers to do the right thing."

"When my parents died I was treated very well by my mangers. If the line mangers do the job well, it will trickle down to other colleagues."

"There is flexibility to allow managers to decide on how things should be done. To map out what is to be done."

The second most important support the respondents and interviewees spoke about was the line managers. These were men and women for all seasons. Their responsibilities were considered great. The expectations around the line managers were huge. The dependency of staff on the line manager's talents, empathy, power, perception and intuition was generally deemed as indispensable.

"The line manager has a huge job and one that is being devolved out more. We have centralised PeoplePoint dealing with transactions and we have a centralized shared service. It takes a lot more away from central HR and puts a lot more back on the line manager. The line managers have a lot of responsibility especially if they have staff."

The line manager's role has now been equally strengthened and stretched. They have become a front line for everything. Because of centralization HR management may now not know what has happened to staff or families, but the local line manager will know. This is both an advantage and a challenge of responsibilities for the local line manager.

"We need to empower local line manager to exercise their own instinctive judgement, to manage locally. Empower them locally."

Throughout all of the interviews, interviewees referenced the dispersal of civil service staff around the country. Because of the size of certain departments and departmental sections and the constant mobility of staff, the interviewees felt they needed to rely on the knowledge and intuition of the local manager as a way forward.

"We have people all over the country and we rarely see each other. Local managers should be allowed make a supportive decision. There is a tendency toward the centre as the letter of the law, but you must manage the situation as you think it is appropriate locally."

Many of the interviewees had ideas about and experience around what constituted a good manager. The ability to relate and communicate on common ground was regarded as crucial. These attributes were considered as a guide for the promotion of talent within the organization and the route to valuing staff and getting the best out of them.

A Man For All Seasons

"If you look at any line manager they get to know people so well. They get to know their circumstances. You get to know their background. You will socialise with them in lots of cases and hopefully if you are a good manager they will come to you and talk to you unofficially and off the record. And you can do things properly and support them in any way. Of course you are a manager as well, and you have to get certain things done, but I think it facilitates getting better work out of people by taking care of them."

"It is one of those areas where you are not looking to procedures or formula."

"Most managers will be flexible. An understanding such as 'local arrangements may apply.'… You must be sensitive and sensible. Instinctive informed managers are good managers."

"Sometimes the CMO says Fit for Work but I know they are not fit for work -so I say no. You have to differentiate between the people who have the constant pain in the back and people who genuinely need time off. You have to build a case and hold onto the build for when you are audited in two years' time."

Despite the high expectation of the line manager, and knowledge of what a good manager could and should be, all respondents referenced lack of available training as a major barrier to managerial education and development.

"You know people are the most important thing you have. How come we have so many bad managers if they all know how to do it at the interview."

"At the end of the day, no we don't do any training for any of those things, so we do need some sort of guidance or training around that."

"We need training in communication. In what to do, how to do it, and who does it. And to tell people what is happening. No secrecy. Communication plays a huge part in the success of an organisation."

"Managers are not trained, maybe they all need training. There are always those who are able and there are always those who are not …. there should be possibilities of training in a broad way, training for newly appointed managers, communication, lunch and learn sessions."

"I believe that training for line managers should go across everything. How to manage a conversation with someone about an illness they have themselves, outside dealing with loss and bereavement. Dealing with somebody with a disability or critical illness or an addiction or anything else at all."

A Man For All Seasons

Very few had any training at all in dealing with dying, death and bereavement. Very few knew of access to training. Very few knew of the availability of training. Very few felt that there would be adequate time given over to such training needs.

> *"Because the demands of the job are so huge. It can be difficult to step away from your work and do training. Work takes precedence."*

This is a contradiction considering that there has been a transference of obligation, information and responsibility in the line managers direction. There has been an evident devolution of responsibility to the line managers, local, sectional and regional, but training and education have not kept abreast of such moves and changes.

> *"Different managers deal with things differently and none of them have had training. There are no courses being provided here for dealing with things like that. But I think generally people are sympathetic and empathic towards one another and there is always a way to redistribute the work or make things easier for the person when they come back and little things like that."*

While staff and management are by nature sympathetic and empathic, and while at all times they want and need to do the very best for all their colleagues in times of great stress, the need for and lack of general training remained one of the highest cited throughout all of the interviews.

Many respondents spoke about the haphazard nature of who the manager happened to be on the day, when loss and grief are experienced in the office.

> *"People would say 'oh my manager was great he was so sympathetic and he was so caring and humane' and then another manager who might be an equally good manager doesn't have the same skill set."*

> *"We were talking about training for HR. I was thinking it would be more beneficial to have specific training for managers because they are the ones who are going to be in the same section. So maybe doing some training in relation to how managers deal with their staff, immediate line managers, because they are the ones who would be in day to day contact and who would attend the funerals, and who would have to deal with them when they come back to work on a day to day basis."*

Despite the importance placed on training, there was a realisation from respondents that even the best training can have its limitations.

> *"I think the best managers have it naturally. It can be very hard to train somebody to have empathy."*

Creative Responses

Creative Responses

"There is a day when you are floored."

Many of the respondents spoke about the need to think through what needs to be done, what should be done, and to try to use a creative instinct around their general response, especially after the death of a colleague in service. To be and to act with perception and imagination.

The respondents all acknowledged the physical time that is necessary to take work loads from people, to give people time to talk, and to allow colleagues the space to grieve. They spoke about the routine and ritual of the funeral and how being part of that societal ritual was essential so that colleague's managers and department representatives could accept the death, attend the funeral and communicate their respects for the dead.

Within the organisational structure departments always send customary letters of condolence. Such letters might be regarded as standard and basic, but they were considered as vital and very important and are always adapted around the particular circumstances of an individual's loss and grief.

"We would always send a letter of condolence from HR. It would be signed by myself and the flip side is that because the department is so big people are very appreciative of that. I get emails saying 'I am really glad that you sent that letter.' "

All the respondents considered such communication as necessary. More importantly all respondents spoke of their gratitude for the official acknowledgment of their loss.

"It is sad in some ways that people are appreciative of a letter a standard letter that goes out. I think they see it as quite personal."

Some respondents were also keen to point out that colleagues who had died in service had a special place and were worthy of a more sustained memory and commemoration, because of their life's work within the organization. Respondents regarded their section of the organisation as a family.

"The family for that is what the 10 and 12 colleagues are…. There would probably be an organisational familial bond that is there, and there would be un-written things that would happen around death or bereavement …."

"So colleagues can become like a second family when something like a profound loss happens. You cannot maintain a relationship without acknowledging that."

This is not to undermine familial bereavement and their responses to it, but somebody who dies in service leaves a 'gap' and a 'void' for colleagues within a department and section.

Creative Responses

"You don't realise exactly what the person does and the capacity of what they do. His death went beyond grief."

"There are times when we feel that we must hold the truth of our colleagues to the fore."

Holding the truth of a colleague who had died in service to the fore was for many of the respondents crucial to finding creative ways to commemorate, remember and acknowledge a life's contribution to a department.

The respondents felt that the more creative and imaginative their responses were, the better they were able to cope and to honour a colleague's life lost.

"A colleague passed away on a walk. We organized a walk after the death. It was very poignant. This was very useful to help people through grief and to remember."

"We set up a collage board. The story of our intertwined lives. We put it up in the kitchen. It gave people an opportunity to speak and remember. We organised a mass. We invited the family. We brought them to see where A had worked. We gave the family the collage board. They were thrilled."

"We did a couple of things over that period. We created a little shrine for him at the desk. We put up photographs. No one was allowed to sit at the desk for a number of months. There is somebody there now but for a few months there wasn't. We believed that we shouldn't let anyone sit at the desk for a time. We put a book of condolences downstairs for all the offices because B died in situ. We have had people who died in service but they would have been out for a number of months. It creates a bit of distance. But still it is a great loss. But that immediacy is difficult. We then had a mass where we brought B's family to it. And they all came into the office and we had tea and cakes. The colleagues in the office thought of that."

Many of the respondents felt that they needed to hold onto a level of awareness around death outside the normal time and energy that is given or expected. They felt that using creative responses around commemorations especially concerning a death in situ can make the return to certain normality easier and more acceptable. The death of a colleague in situ was very painful, fearful and traumatic for all other colleagues, and it demanded that it was dealt with practically and professionally.

Some respondents across certain departments were also anxious to point out that memory plays an important part in the actions that are taken throughout the year in relation to colleagues that have died.

Creative Responses

"We invite all the retired people and they turn up. Last year we had 180 in the canteen in the Department and we provided them with tea and sandwiches and one of the lads who is a musician plays and there is a bit of comedy and a bit of humour and the Secretary General is there to welcome them all back. They come together to meet each other. They meet each other at the Mass, they remember the people who have gone on, their friends and colleagues, over many years and they all come together. It is remarkable. They want to do that. There are networks of retired people, they meet in groups, they have opera appreciation, they go to bridge and all those kinds of things and they have this broader group who come together once a year in November. As I say they have an afternoon and then off they go …. it is important to them and they make the effort to come. That is an organisational response to a need. It is something that has been done for a number of years."

However this particular get together commemorating the value and contribution of deceased colleagues, and the gathering together of retired staff did not occur without media problems.

"We got it in the neck for doing it. The Daily Mail wrote an article about this and they made it sound like …. 'Oh once again Civil Servants spending taxpayers' money for entertainment.' To stop the negativity around it, the General Secretary paid for it personally."

The fear around how civil servants perceive themselves, or are influenced by how they think they are regarded by society in general, and the media in particular, as evidenced within the context of this report, is borne out quite starkly once again here in a very real way.

Critical Illness

Critical Illness

"Life limiting - but not tomorrow."

"We have a lot of people middle aged so it has become far more apparent with the new sick leave regulation. It has been cut in half. It is now 3 months on full pay. Now we see the people unwell before or after. In the past we had 6 months. So they were usually quite well when they returned. Now they have to apply for critical illness pay so we are becoming more aware of people with life threatening illnesses…. They come back to work in the 4th month as they are worried about the money."

"There is very little provision for people who have to be with people who have critical illness. You can take force majeure days which are when there is urgent medical need which requires your attendance, and you are the only person available. That is in the legislation, but it is for emergency when my child has fallen out of a tree and he has a broken leg, and I have to go to hospital with him. But it is not dealing with something that is progressive."

The reduction in sick leave with pay from six months to three months has presented all of the respondents with enormous challenges in coping with a life-limiting illness amongst their staff. These changes also affect those who are caring for someone with a life-limiting illness. Respondents had already noted that the age profile of civil service staff meant that they had to deal with illness and loss more frequently. The changes have compounded this fact.

"You may halve sick leave in 2013 from 6 months to 3 months and it is cost saving. Critically ill people are suffering. When people take a generous amount of sick leave for ordinary illnesses, the savings are off the back of people who are critically ill. Cutting back 6 months to 3 months – people are coming back to work when they are still unwell."

"This links back to the fact that we have an ageing work force. The 20 year olds have days off. They are taking uncertified days but as you get older you have longer illnesses and chronic illnesses."

"It is aimed at getting rid of the people who take advantage of the situation, but you make it very difficult for the people who have genuine chronic serious illnesses and recurring illnesses. And so you have people who are not fit for working coming back to work because they are worried about their sick leave. And they are worried about their money."

People with a critical illness can apply for an extension to paid sick leave[3]. Along with the opinion of the Chief Medical Officer (CMO), there are four critical illness categories and the nature of a medical condition must have at least one of the following characteristics to qualify.

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[3]DPER circular on Critical Illness entitlements

Critical Illness

A.   Acute life threatening physical illness

B.   Chronic progressive illness with well-established potential to reduce life expectancy

C.   Major physical trauma ordinarily requiring corrective acute operative surgical treatment

D.   In-patient hospital care of two consecutive weeks or greater

It is these criteria that caused much comment and concern among the civil servants.

> *"I am currently experiencing appeals for critical illness for the first time and the criteria to meet a critical illness pay are incredibly tight, and there are a lot of people who genuinely need it, but they don't fit the criteria."*

> *"I have discussed it with the Chief Medical Officer because I have a case in front of me at the moment and I wanted to know was the CMO accepting that this person was genuinely ill. But they just didn't fit the criteria. And they said, they just don't fit the criteria and we cannot work on any other basis."*

In both written and oral responses the HR staff noted that before the changes to sick leave entitlement were made they may not have known much about staff who had a life limiting or terminal illness. Now it may be visually and physically evident within the office environment. They also have to deal with these issues much more frequently in appeals in relation to critical illness. This is an additional challenge to them all.

> *"It does not allow for a critical illness protocol and making a judgement, but it is very difficult to get. We are trying to talk to the CMO and to tell him what is happening, but it is very hard if it doesn't fit the criteria."*

Planning For End Of Life

Planning For End Of Life

*"The Civil Service is very good at responding to crises and getting through them.
It is not so good at seeing them coming or planning for them."*

Does your department encourage staff to plan for end of life needs? In the written responses to this question, three quarters of the Departments said they did not encourage people to plan for end of life. Three said that it was the job of the CSEAS and two did not respond.

When the subject was broached with the interviewees directly, at the semi structured interviews, their reactions were overwhelmingly negative. They did not want to talk about planning for end of life, either personally or as part of their professional role.

"I thought it was bordering on the morbid and I didn't really want to go there.'"

"I do not like to think about it."

"We don't want to talk about end of life."

"I don't like to dwell on it."

This can be partially explained by the reluctance on the part of HR to proactively introduce a subject to their staff which may have negative connotations.

"We don't want to be demoralising people. We are trying to keep our staff motivated and happy".

CSEAS were seen as available in this area and end of life planning was only discussed and thought about within the context of retirement courses.

"They go off on a retirement course and they find out everything there is to know about how their life is going to be afterwards.... And it comes as quite a surprise to a lot of people, everything from tax to practical things and how to plan for life ahead. It is an excellent course and it used to be run in Tullamore."

Great regret was expressed that what was seen as a successful pre-retirement course has been altered – mainly for financial reasons – and that spouses or partners were no longer included. There are less courses available and they may be outsourced. This was seen to militate against end of life planning being more proactively addressed.

Planning For End Of Life

"Before the spouses of the retiree used to attend, because when somebody retires the whole family is affected. There was a great take up over this …. this is going to change and will no longer be the case."

"They cover financial issues, social change and the lump sum. They are run by the IPA. Their contract is coming to an end…. it is going to change.   Finance has objected because of the cost. The tender has gone out. It will be a private firm."

All of the interviewees saw the need to have something available, such as the encouragement of a work life balance day and the making of wills. They acknowledged the great difficulty caused when personal and familial affairs are not in order when there is a death.   There was very strong resistance to the idea of any individual Department being asked to take a lead on this sensitive area.

"Yes, but I would find it difficult to bring the issue of End of Life to people within the Department. People would not react well to it. It would need to come from Employee Assistance Services or CSEAS."

"I don't think an Individual Department should do it. It should not be individual. There would be a reaction to that department. That is why it should be more general. Maybe have a paper to direct people to. A general direction from the CSEAS…. I think it is covered on the pre-retirement courses."

"There is far more to be done by the Department of Expenditure and Reform. They are the department that drive the HR policy for the Civil Service. What is provided is far too narrow and is contained in one circular. We need some broader support."

The very words "planning for end of life" were a major source of disquiet for many respondents. Some of them felt that a title with less negative connotations would meet with less resistance.

In the course of the discussions on this subject, respondents were introduced to an end of life planning tool to encourage people to think about, talk about and record their wishes and preferences at end of life.

The Think Ahead tool, designed and developed by The Forum on End of Life in Ireland and an initiative of the Irish Hospice Foundation was used in this instance.

There was a much more positive reaction to the idea of Think Ahead. Most of the interviewees had never heard of it.

Planning For End Of Life

"If it was called something else it would certainly have a better chance. I would just say thanks for putting it into our minds."

"Think Ahead should be considered a more structured preparation for end of life. Think ahead – yes that is fantastic. I would actively encourage it."

"Think Ahead sounds like it is planning for living, for continuing."

A Bereavement Policy

A Bereavement Policy

"I am not writing a policy so that the next time you send out a questionnaire I can say "yes". That is no good to anyone."

"It's no harm every now and then to go and look at the policies and to say 'How are we doing it? How formal are we? Are we just going with the standard or do we have additional supports?' Up to now I would say we are going with whatever is from the centre."

The written questionnaire asked each organisation if they have a bereavement policy. Three said they had a policy and nine said they did not. One Department was drafting a policy and two have draft policies for approval. Two did not answer the question. The other five responses included referencing CSEAS, a collection of local guidelines, or a "protocol".

There appeared to be some confusion about what exactly constituted a policy. In written responses several cited CSEAS guidance and DPER Circulars as their policy. This confusion also prompted the debate at the interviews of the value of a bereavement policy amongst a majority of the respondents and belies the simplicity of the written responses.

Some respondents rejected the idea of a bereavement policy outright.

"A bereavement policy would not be helpful. It would just be more policy from DPER. More policies."

Of those who were open-minded on the subject, some felt that it was not an urgent issue and one which did not require immediate action, or needed to be part of an ongoing development, taking less precedence than other strategic planning.

"Drafting a bereavement policy would not necessarily be a first priority. We focus on learning development, strategic HR, business planning."

"It is sort of a priority. But is it down the list. We are dipping the toe in resilience."

For some, the idea of formulating a bereavement policy was welcomed as an opportunity to examine current practice, to identify gaps and to add structure and coherence to Circulars and CSEAS material.

"Maybe we should develop our own bereavement policy. You have made us think very seriously about that. It really brought it all together for us. I am writing down what we are saying."

A Bereavement Policy

"I would like them to have a bereavement policy. I would really like them to have a policy. It would have a culture of decency and accommodation."

Some respondents felt that a bereavement policy would be appropriate and most effective if it set the tone and defined the ethos of the organisation within which the policy would operate. There was also the recognition that without such definition and statement of best practice there would be no written record to guide future actions. A policy rooted in the ethos and values would mitigate changes in personnel and in personalities within the sections of the organisation and allow for continuity.

"I think we do need a policy. A policy for us would mean an ethos. We do it very well now because of our HR office. We are lucky. But what if there was a change. Different people. If you set your ethos in a policy, whenever a person or people go, the ethos doesn't go with them."

"If we think about it more in terms of do unto others so here is a policy for you to do this when it happens to you."

The study prompted one organisation which had a draft policy which had not been approved to look again at what they had proposed and to see how it could be made relevant.

"We have bereavement policy. We have a draft but we did not implement it. The questionnaire made us revisit our policy. We printed it down. It should be brought up to date."

In all cases where a bereavement policy was considered an option there was unanimity on the need for it to be a relevant and meaningful document.

"What I don't want is a policy that sits on a shelf. So if it doesn't translate down into what happens on the ground, and how to deal with things, we may as well not have one."

Conclusion

Conclusion

"The grey area is very important"

The great strength of this report lies in human conversation. This was the conversation I was privileged to have been part of around end of life issues as experienced by Civil Servants represented by HR across all Departments of State and Agencies of State. These conversations were also underpinned by the guarantee of anonymity.

Throughout the interviews the Civil Servants had a private and confidential space in which to speak. This gave them a certain freedom to communicate with more acute honesty about end of life issues as they affect both themselves personally, and as employees within their individual departments.

They spoke eloquently and realistically about their colleagues. They brought their profound experiences of loss and grief at work and at home, to all the conversations. They spoke about meeting staff on their great days and on their worst days.

Their knowledge, their interactions and the examples they gave, through their own and other voices, were the pathways which directed and guided me through this report.

The questionnaire provided the essential factual information about each department. The report might have remained just a large questionnaire, in effect, the pencil sketch. However that would have been dull and incomplete without the human voices that emerged relating truer and more complex findings. Writing things on paper in fact, or just answering questions on a survey, can be obfuscation and a place to hide real thoughts and real feelings.

The full depth of colour, light, shade, challenge and creativity of dealing with the difficulties of dying, death and bereavement became apparent only in the dynamic of the interviews. They became in a sense the painting. It was the human interaction that brought the best out in all of the interviewees.
It is always about human interaction.

How are organizations to use what is already there, to better enhance the lives of employees who are experiencing loss and death? The employees who die in service, those who are left behind, those who are immediately challenged by critical illness, by illness at home, by caring duties. The multitude of human happenings that pervade our lives.

We all meet on the ground on which we stand. But how do you make the environment around that death, around that loss easier, and more helpful. We have to stop being frightened of not been good at it. We must try to get people more comfortable, more confident, and more competent in dealing with these issues. That is what this report is attempting to do.

Communication is very difficult to define. Most of us think it is easy and obvious. It is not. Most of us think we are good at it. We are not. We speak and what we say is not what is heard. We speak and what we say is not what is meant. And what we don't say can be the loudest conversation.

Conclusion

In a study such as this – around dying, death and bereavement – some aspects of the multi-dimensional nature of communication became the most feared and the most critical.

Despite all our communication advancements and despite the instantaneous nature of how we are capable of communicating electronically, and despite relying so much on technology as the great communicator, it is human communication that now tends to take second, if not third place. Great difficulties arise around human communication, face to face communication, person to person communication, especially when it concerns grief and loss.

Speech and especially natural speech never consists of words alone. If it did, colleagues would not have any problem knowing what to say or how to say it, in times of great sadness. Speech is made up of human sounds that are inextricably linked with the self and with language meaning, sounds that are internally tied into one's whole being. You come with your utterances of sorrow and pity, and when you utter out such feelings you expose yourself. What you say will be infused by the truth of your tone and who you are. It is this that is frightening. The delivery of the raw self around the loss and grief of the other

This was an acute and consistent observation and discussion during the interviews. It highlighted something of the inadequacy of circulars outside staff entitlements and the physicality of what to do. It pointed to how the human heart in pain, in bereavement and loss can never be placed within paragraphs, no matter how well or how succinctly these paragraphs are written. The typed paragraph or handout or advice online, can never fully capture the recognition and the expression of empathy. The ability to seep into and to capture a colleague's pain, or to break into the profound loss of another, is not the stuff of circulars.

There has been a global belief that technological communication is the most significant way forward: that in some way we will cultivate a communication expertise if we get the technology correct and that this kind of communication will have an authority over human communication. "You'll get it on the net," "Google it," "it's all on the website." The computer cannot tell you how your life should function emotionally or cognitively. It can only give your life a kind of efficiency. The computer can never take the place of empathy and indeed orality. We do not live electronically. We do not die electronically. And we certainly do not grieve electronically.

In one instance as related during the interviews, a front web page which listed death notices of both serving and retired staff from all over the country was reconfigured, and the notices were placed elsewhere, less readily accessible. The technical people did not see the value of death information on the front page of a department website, nor how staff depended on and valued it. Their graphics took precedence. The death notices just did have the same appeal. The staff had it reversed.

PeoplePoint did not fare well overall across all departments in relation to issues that arise around dying, death and bereavement. It was felt that PeoplePoint was an encroachment, statistical and inhuman. There were those who argued a case for it. They said that PeoplePoint will take much of the administrative burden off HR staff. Some believe that this will allow them more time to concentrate on the core of their work, which is human resources.

Conclusion

It must be accepted that PeoplePoint is a system. As a system, it suffers from a mismatch between the transactional activity of the work world in which it operates, and the upset individual human being at the other end of the system's mechanisms.

If I may be allowed speak directly on an organisational issue wider than the remit of this report, I would say that while most fully appreciate the need for centralised services, some of the civil servants have a major problem with the way they operate. Perhaps DPER would talk to staff across all Departments to see how their issues could be resolved.

Another recently centralised service, the Civil Service Employee Assistance Service or CSEAS, fared much better. It is considered an excellent service and one which offers direction, support and advice. This is very good endorsement of a relatively new service and bears out the surveying which they have undertaken. The CSEAS staff themselves would admit that they face challenges and there are gaps in the services and support they can provide. This is an organisational issue to be addressed by both DPER and CSEAS themselves.

Circulars provide the organisational ground rules, regulations and frameworks of the Civil Service. Some – such as those concerning leave entitlements – impact on end of life issues. Circulars are common to all Departments. Despite this common framework, it became clear that there is not necessarily cohesion among all Departments. When it comes to dealing with the complex issues of dying, death and bereavement, it depends very much on who is there on the day whether things go well or not so well.

The Civil Service is generalist. Mobility for change or promotional reasons is commonplace. That mobility, while essential, can be a problem as a manager might not be trained in the area that he/she is coming in to line manage. Managers may be willing to be developed and engage in training, but they may not be given the time to do it. The need for relevant training and the protected time in which to do it was referenced again and again. Departments should be imaginatively proactive in addressing these deficits and the way in which they are remedied.

There was much discussion about whether to have a Bereavement Policy or not. When is a policy really relevant? There was genuine confusion and dissent.

A Bereavement Policy is a guide. It should be a guide which contains circulars, but it can be much more. It can bring to life the bold statement that says, 'our people are our most valuable asset.' It can bring to life 'This is how our department feels. This is how our department thinks. This is our department's ethos. This is how our department operates.' It should be a written record, but not one that sits on the shelf. It should be a living policy, to be used, taken down, re-aligned and re-engaged with once a year, and certainly after a bereavement experience.

Policies are good because, if the policy is real, it will have all of the circulars that are relevant, critical illness, sick leave, force majeure leave, carers leave, and bereavement leave. There are excellent examples of bereavement policies, supportive material and information which could be shared. Ironically some of these were developed in collaboration with Government Departments but were not then shared within or outside the Department.

Conclusion

The first three questions of the questionnaire can be summarised as: What are your problems? What helps? What could we do better? These are questions that need to be asked to support learning, experience and good practice.

If there are changes of personnel, or new people coming in who are inexperienced, nervous, or have never faced certain difficult situations before, how are they to know and to hold onto what was done before and was right? How are departments to hold onto their corporate memory, when they are an organisation of mobility and an ageing staff? There are structures already in place and the entitlement side is set, but the human experience of supporting staff and dealing with end of life is lacking without a policy. Perhaps something in a policy will strike a chord in the individual. Perhaps it will show that there are ways around problems that look insurmountable or feel insurmountable.

The idea of introducing the topic of planning for end of life issues was met with deep seated fears and outright rejection. The Civil Servants were unable to talk about it. Most of the interviewees said "Oh my God, you couldn't say that to the staff!" or "If you speak about it, it will happen".

Currently end of life issues are only referred to around retirement, and even then the real concentration is about wills, what to do with your money, and how to spend your spare time. No department felt that they should lead on such an idea. No one department felt that they should be seen to lead on such an idea. That would be regarded as dangerous.

However when I introduced the topic of 'Think Ahead' a living document which helps people to plan, to discuss and to record their wishes and preferences, when they are well, in the event of emergency, serious illness or death, the reaction was very different and much more positive. Positive initiatives such as Think Ahead which inform and enable people to make their own plans for end of life should be led cross-departmentally. Perhaps the Department of the Taoiseach would be best placed to take this lead.

The Civil Servants are a microcosm of society and for them, as for us, serious illness, dying, death and loss are difficult, ever present, happen in all kinds of circumstances, and affect all of us in a world of ways that we never thought possible. These issues affect people's morale, their mood, their work ethic and have consequences for how organisations are run and perform.

The Civil Service may be what is thought of as a protected group, in that their jobs are permanent. But they are not protected from mortality. They are not protected from the context of an Irish society deeply affected by the financial devastation which started in 2008.

They may be very competent, but they are also very fragile. I could detect this mood and feeling when they spoke about things that were personal to them, their families, or their staff, who had experienced or seen or been through dying, death and bereavement.

Conclusion

When people are at their most vulnerable, when they are suffering illness, death, and bereavement, it is then that you see their managers and their colleagues at their very best. Such reactive communication is good for mental health. It is good for society. It is always good emotionally to respond to people when they are in times of crisis. And there is no crisis bigger than facing your own mortality or that of somebody you love. And there is no good time to die and there is no good time to lose the person that you love.

I found a very strong sense through all the interviews that the civil servants, as human beings, had a human need to respond to their fellow beings. They were very conscious, of how they might, could and must help. They questioned what they were doing, what others were doing differently, and what they could learn.

Some were more blasé and just wanted to know about entitlements, but that might have been more about their own fears. But the question did arise constantly, as to how as managers and as officials, they needed to react to a member of staff who is hurting, grieving or suffering loss, and at the same time to keep the show on the road – especially since the show is funded by the taxpayer.

The striking of a balance between man and the organizational machine is difficult and complex.

In this report I did not have the opportunity to question and interview smaller focus groups of those who had been the recipients of their department's service around end of life and bereavement. However, some of the HR representatives had been recipients themselves, having experienced personal losses. I would strongly recommend that HR should use the questionnaire as a template internally and anonymously within their departments to ascertain how effective their support really is. They do admit that they sometimes don't know if someone has been unwell for a long time, or other colleagues were bereaved, as sometimes they are not told, and would not be made aware.

One of the most extraordinary things that I gleaned throughout the interviews was the capacity of the Civil Servants to move on and up. Their capacity for learning, their acknowledgement of the need for learning and their willingness and their openness to new ideas and new ways of learning was very evident. This came through clearly during all our conversations.

We may consider the Civil Service to be stuck in a time warp, stuck in a certain way of doing things. They are not. There are of course aspects of a big organisation that resist a certain or urgent change. But there are always those who fuel things, and have the capacity to move things on, and should be allowed to do so, especially in areas such as this. It demands imagination and energy to look at the same things in a different way. The questions may be the same, but the answers will be different. And maybe we also have to start asking new questions, difficult questions, fresh questions too.

Conclusion

If dying, death and bereavement are treated well in an organisation, and work well, the quality of the work and work ethic will parallel the treatment. If you are treated well you will continue to be well. What is given will be returned. After a profound loss people will come back to work because they know they will be treated well and they will be valued. The heart does not recognise time.

This is not a judgemental study. However I have reached certain conclusions and I have made certain recommendations having read what was written and heard what was said.

Some of the recommendations come from the Civil Servants themselves and others come from my observations of their contributions.

This report is about their very personal lives, their emotive lives and their affective lives. Their working lives. Their finite lives.

Recommendations

➢ All Government Departments and Agencies should create a strategic, coordinated and cohesive approach to dealing with issues arising at end of life.

➢ Training for HR and Line Managers in human communication, particularly in communicating with people facing dying, death and bereavement should be developed and made available.

➢ Protected time for Line Managers should be made available for such training.

➢ Each Department and Agency should develop a comprehensive and relevant bereavement policy, informed by experience, based on both local protocols and ethos and on shared good practice from other Departments.

➢ Such a bereavement policy should have an annual review to ensure it is appropriate, and in line with general Civil Service regulations.

➢ HR Departments and/or CSEAS should regularly review their support services relating to dying, death and bereavement – through a questionnaire or focus group – with recipients of the services.

➢ All Departments and Agencies of State should make available to all of their staff a planning tool –such as Think Ahead – to guide them in discussing and recording their wishes and preferences in the event of emergency, serious illness or death. Such an initiative should be spearheaded by the Department of An Taoiseach.

➢ DPER should review the effect that centalised HR Services such as PeoplePoint are having on issues arising at end of life, critical illness and bereavement.

➢ CSEAS should be allowed flexibility to introduce new supports for dying, death and bereavement across all Departments.

➢ Civil Servants charged with social policy research and policy formulation, should examine issues relating to dying, death and bereavement across all sectors, with a view to developing a template for the State for a whole population approach to end of life issues, and set them at the heart of public policy.

In Their Own Words

In Their Own Words

CONTEXT

- *"There is lots of wisdom, but the energy is the issue to some extent."*

- *"Depression is the biggest reason that people miss work. We have a huge problem with depression, it keeps people disengaged and off the radar."*

- *"Huge demands have been made on public servants. Especially on their psychological abilities. It is going to become a broader issue."*

- *"Worry is a main feature in the mental wellbeing of our staff."*

- *"They will tell you the good and the bad, you are coming to this after 10 years of austerity and pay cuts, and of the negativity that comes at us."*

- *"We have been so busy the last few years and the number of staff has gone down."*

GENERAL POLICY

- *"The bottom line is we follow DPER's policy so we don't have our own policy. That is the truth."*

- *"DEPR has said that we are going to be losing the transactional work but we are also going to be losing staff. They're not just going to take the work and put it into PeoplePoint, staff in existing HR will be dispersed around the departments to make up the shortfalls."*

THE INDIVIDUAL WITHIN THE ORGANISATION

- *"Grief trauma is not a 9-5 emotion."*

- *"The impact of a sudden tragic loss is very hard to quantify. We will deal with it as necessary, we will see what is needed and we will be flexible. We will manage it locally."*

- *"A lot of my colleagues were very angry that he had died. We let them express their grief, accepted their humours, we attended the funeral, handled it appropriately. We had a memorial service. Tried to accommodate what was needed."*

In Their Own Words

- *"Within the department some people came from other services. They have the experience of working with non-government organisations in a vulnerable area. The old fashioned civil service ethos of serving is around. We have staff dealing with vulnerable young people. They are bred to empathy and kindness."*

- *"What we are doing is in line with what should be done."*

- *"I think it is to do with the duration and the longevity of the organisation. Also you are dealing with property and people would take huge pride in their work, so there is a collegiality and I suppose this is an ethos that goes with the organisation that we disseminate out."*

- *"HR is a strange environment, because they don't ring us up to say thanks or it is great out here. It is always a problem, every call is a problem. You live in that problem world, it is problem solving."*

- *"I have no professional qualification in HR. Some people do but I think that people who call themselves HR, it is a kind of a private sector thing."*

- *"A lot of what we do is people's wages or peoples sick leave."*

- *"The civil service is very generalist by nature."*

- *"In HR I would hope that we will be able to retain some human touch and that flexibility doesn't get lost, because of the size of the Department and more emphasis on process and output and turning out tables to show that you have done the work."*

- *"HR has the knowledge that they must carry. Share the knowledge with other HR colleagues.... otherwise you would go mad."*

- *"Because HR may not be wholly qualified to deal with the area of bereavement, CSEAS may be a better port of call, or indeed a nominated bereavement officer. But the question is who is to be trained as that officer? Who is that person to be? Is that person to be close to staff generally? It is very difficult when there is a child death or a miscarriage. Are HR the right people to deal with this? Are they really qualified?"*

In Their Own Words

- *"HR is not just a monitor -you need to know with whom and to whom to communicate. And what to communicate."*

- *"I am interested in people and I never forget that you only get ahead with help from others…. and so you help others."*

- *"Some griefs are complicated and you cannot be prescriptive. You have to take your lead from the individual."*

- *"We don't need to know about it, we don't want to know about it, but whatever the appropriate arrangement is, it will be made."*

- *"You would hope the manager is going to play their part in terms of driving the support. That is what we are aiming for. So the HR role, to some extent, has been taken on by local management based on the requirements of the staff member."*

- *"Sometimes we might to the right thing and get into trouble for doing it. Sometimes we win, sometimes we don't"*

- *"I say what I feel, but must abide by higher decisions. I will fight communication cases up to, and where I can. I also try to shield a person. I try to find better ways to give news, good or bad, and I argue for the facility of extra leave."*

- *"You need a balance between documenting, Nervous Nellies and instinct. But you need a minimum standard…. and you need to be clear on your intent as an employer."*

- *"I cannot qualify that there maybe have been people who were bereaved and who just took annual leave and didn't say it to anyone   and that is perfectly within their rights, they are not obliged to declare it, so we always have to be conscious of that."*

- *"It is all about getting the most work out of the least staff. Maybe there should be an away day for staff and not managers. We are all going through the mill, maybe HR needs to be more anarchic and more dissenting."*

- *"I would follow the rules but I understand that people devote life to work. So I would break the rules strategically."*

In Their Own Words

- *"The Civil Service has a lot of rules, a lot of normals and lacks transparency."*

- *"The first thing for me personally is how private are they about the bereavement, and some people are angry if it is a crash or a shock death. Some people are relieved and say 'it is a happy release' and so on. So it can depend on how that person comes into work after a death. When I came back to work after my mother's death you could see people trying to judge or gauge what way you have taken it. It is a difficult time for colleagues because you can say the wrong thing. It might seem like a joke at some other time but definitely not now"*

- *"They expect you to deal with the individual in terms of giving them the leave and that sort of thing but I don't think there is an expectation that we are going to step in in some way, that is from my own perspective - I would be quite private, I would not want the organization to step in - but that is me."*

- *"Yes but there is a length of bereavement leave. We also have PeoplePoint in relation to transactions."*

- *"There is communication and there is conversation. There needs to be a balance of support between the individual and the business which needs to go on. There is the short term of the individual, and there is the long term of work. We have a duty of care to both angles."*

- *"We did not capture statistically some of the information you were looking for. We only know it through bereavement leave."*

- *"HR has more understanding, I felt I had it covered, I felt I was good at it. I believe in line managers using instinct."*

CSEAS

- *"We can provide some training but the CSEAS, they would have more experience."*

- *"There is very little in the CSEAS document. You would be using the word policy very loosely. It is very minimal really, because it talks about information around the funeral and encouraging people to attend the funeral and that, but not actually dealing with the bereaved person no matter what they might need after the funeral."*

In Their Own Words

- *"I presume that the purpose of what you are doing at the moment is that you will develop some sort of a policy that we could take on board."*

- *"I think it is the structure, it is the template effect, it is making sure that the process happens. And that if you take two letters like these, one from the Secretary General and one from the Personnel Officer, and it is a standard letter developed over time the words are carefully picked. One refers to the death in service of a staff member and the other is the death of a family member. That is the standard wording the individual receives. We know what we want to say. We do not make it up on the spot. We do not want say the wrong thing or be insensitive in any way."*

- *"That is the structure it goes out in every single circumstances the same with the CSEAS. It is an existing structure it is a framework that is available to us."*

- *"Usually you would be looking to see did we need to change something. Was the information not getting out to people? Or she might just be advising us that there are a lot of people using the service. But they cannot formally tell us. If people have self-referred we have no right to ask about that. When you look at their report, there are a lot of people going and talking to them. I was looking at it at my office and thinking 'is there that many people going to them'. But I cannot ask what they are talking about."*

- *"There is no right time to recover. That is where you need courage. Each situation is different but there is a time to call in external help."*

- *"You must be human about this. If intervention is necessary, call in the CSEAS. Local management have access to CSEAS. We have an evolved HR structure because of the dispersed staff. So we try to empower local staff in local area."*

- *"In the civil service we have the CSEAS. It is their role to provide this. We are not experts ourselves in counselling or bereavement or any of that area."*

In Their Own Words

PEOPLEPOINT

- *"It was difficult at the start because in a small department like ours we did a lot of minding our own people and they didn't realise how much we did until it was all moved to PeoplePoint. But I think it will sort itself out."*

- *"On the transactional side we will lose dealing with people. We are dealing with the person where you lose the transactional, it will be more dictatorial. It will be emails going out about PMDS. It will be emails going out and about."*

- *"Regardless of PeoplePoint we would have given a payment even if it meant we had to get it back later on, we would have made the payment and then done the calculations."*

- *"We have lost control on the payment side."*

- *"Well our staff is our best resource and it is written into our statement of strategy that our staff are our best resource and we are doing our best to have a motivated happy workforce."*

- *"One of our biggest problems has been decentralization."*

- *"We provide flexibility to line managers to decide and they do not have to go through PeoplePoint."*

- *"What PeoplePoint are set up to do is to manage the transactional HR and in that context if someone is bereaved they cannot have bereavement leave assigned to them that they are entitled to unless that leave is sanctioned or signed off by PeoplePoint. It is about the standardising of the delivery of HR."*

- *"If I want to apply for leave I can press a button for PeoplePoint for my leave but my boss is the person who makes the decision not PeoplePoint."*

- *"It is rationalizing the service in some way."*

- *"In relation to critical illnesses - we are a small department and while the number of staff with critical illnesses is small, we have had some cases. The staff have gone on extended sick leave - they send in certs to PeoplePoint."*

In Their Own Words

- *"There is also the problem of staff returning to work far too soon. Because of the reduction in the sick benefit."*

- *"PeoplePoint…. number-crunching – hurdles."*

- *"PeoplePoint are totally insensitive. Local HR is the real connection. PeoplePoint has no connection."*

- *"PeoplePoint knows nobody and just sends out standard letters."*

- *"It is transactional, pensions and processes. Sick Leave, recording and monitoring, critical illness requirement - cut from 6 to 3 months. TRR Temporary Rehabilitation Remuneration."*

- *"I take the final say - whether we have it or not - we take it - we find ways around it - they don't have to know everything."*

- *"The human being comes first because we will have nothing without the human being."*

- *"PeoplePoint may obey the rules, but we will use informed discretion."*

- *"You have to override the system, find another way to do it. Veto it. But it depends on the Manager, if they are afraid to break the rules."*

- *"We are human beings not strategies. PeoplePoint are the direct opposite to this. We depart from the formulaic circulars."*

WHAT THE CIRCULARS SAY

- *"In terms of the circulars on bereavement you know your entitlement is 5 days or 3 days depending on your relationship with the bereaved. So what happens if you have an uncle living in your house that you have minded for the last 2 years. Do we give bereavement leave for that - yes we do - we give the appropriate leave in certain cases that is where HR will either make that decision or advise local management that even though the circular says that it is 3 days rather than 5 the 5 is appropriate because of the relationship with the person and it is appropriate to give it."*

In Their Own Words

COLLEGIALITY

- *"Colleagues will pick up the work if it has not been done. You must have experience in HR to navigate all of this."*

- *"I am not sure you could have too much empathy but if you go beyond being empathic then you are in bother. "*

APPROPRIATE RESPONSES

- *"I was more than grateful for the time off that I got and the support that I got, particularly getting three days. I thought that was good. I didn't need loads of support at my age."*

- *"I can tell you that I didn't really understand what people went through before a friend of mine's dad died when he was in leaving cert. I knew he was sad because I saw the tears in his eyes. I know there was a loss but I didn't know the extent of the loss, and you would sympathise and empathise, but I think it comes from people having gone thought it themselves and they think what would I want if I was in his place or her place."*

- *"The thing about it is that you have to treat that person in a special way for a certain period of time. They have to be treated separately. You have to separate that out and you cannot expect anything from anyone who is experiencing any sort of loss in dealing with a mother dying or a brother dying. You cannot expect anything from them for a period of time. The best person to know that is the line manager. If it comes to me then there has been some problem at the line manager level."*

- *"I would have said that the way people treated me was very good, but someone else's parent could die and they react very differently. Like my own family there is a pile of us and we all handled the death differently."*

A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

- *"There is devolution of responsibility to the line managers."*

- *"I think we should provide some kind of training."*

In Their Own Words

- *"The managers have the power to make instinctive decisions. HR did a general study, a kind of climatic internal study of staff. The results were not very good."*

- *"We would be open to further supports, practical supports. To do the right thing better."*

- *"We rely on managers. We need to support managers."*

- *"To have good performance outcomes you need good managers. They know what has to be done, and they know if it is done. You can see performance. You can see the real results. Bereavement needs such managers. Good managers who can see."*

- *"I want to communicate to them not to worry. We will do that. I wanted to talk them through it, make practical arrangements for them around adjusting and coping."*

- *"The learning and development area is part of HR now."*

- *"I think we would like to have some control over it because we know the staff and we know what types of courses are available."*

- *"All these circulars are all very well but maybe the managers need to know a bit more than that."*

TRAINING

- *"We want to learn from others as well, if there is something that we should be doing."*

- *"I am not on the learning and development side. I don't know what training courses are available but I certainly could pass on a message to the division."*

- *"We intend to train our staff around dealing with bereavement, also around psycho-social issues."*

In Their Own Words

- *"Training cannot do it all, there has to be some natural ability, but training is never a bad idea, it is always a good idea no matter what level it is. Most training in this area is not classroom training. It is information. It is talking to people."*

- *"I would like to see a situation where there were no qualms about buying in the expertise of certain organizations and of getting time off work to avail of their services."*

- *"I haven't done training in bereavement or loss myself, and I think it would be great to do so. Sometimes I feel you have to be aware that some people don't do it well."*

A GRIEF OBSERVED

- *"You observe the impact of death on people, when you have only seen them professionally, and then you see them at their rawest."*

- *"Communication is the big thing really. We had a loss. We felt leaderless. It is not only the family but the people in the office who suffer too. They need help and assistance and maybe a visit."*

- *"With bereavement there is always shock and this is normal."*

CREATIVE RESPONSES

- *"Something like fundraisers, commemorative services, these are slightly new things and that depends on circumstances."*

- *"Being there was the most important thing, taking workloads off people if they needed it to be taken off. Giving them, the time and space they needed. Also inviting them to come in and talk and cry and laugh and give them time and space to grieve."*

- *"I'd like to feel that we are more sensitive. There must be flexibility."*

- *"There is no amount of circulars will help you when you need to deal with people with humanity and with respect in relation to profound loss. You cannot prescribe how a situation will be handled. You inform and educate yourself, and you look to how you can enable."*

In Their Own Words

- *"Well if there was anything that is needed - it could be to come and sit in your office and have a cry. To having somewhere private or having a talk with somebody. We don't just use CSEAS to do that, we would do that as well, we are very loath to intrude too much, but we let them know it is available to them."*

- *"We are humane more than organisational.   We have developed more connection. We can bear through things."*

- *"What we learned was that it is just about being there together and doing little things."*

- *"We are a very values-based organisation."*

CRITICAL ILLNESS

- *"Yes but the quality for critical illness provision has been increased, in that the length of pay is up to 6 months. If it meets medical conditions, 3 months becomes 6 months on full pay and 6 months half pay. The informal provision is around the lessening of workloads and looking out for you, support from colleagues, communication with line managers, CSEAS and a safe space, a desk change if necessary and those kinds of things."*

PLANNING FOR END OF LIFE

- *"Help people plan for end of life? No, no, we cannot do that we would be sued!"*

- *"I don't like planning for end of life."*

- *"End of life planning is more about yourself. It is taking responsibility for yourself."*

BEREAVEMENT

- *"The death silenced us."*

- *"When there is a bereavement there is a void. There is always a gap."*

In Their Own Words

- *"Because of the bereavement you have to adjust to what normal was. That is grief but life continues."*

- *"We have to care for the people we are working with. We have to care for a father who has lost his child."*

- *"Support of colleagues is the most important."*

- *"People will have profound loss and the harsh reality is to get on and get over it. That's why we need facilities to be available to people."*

- *"We are all in a bit of a bind if you like, because it is a very appropriate time to be talking about bereavement, because the news of a death – though not unexpected – came yesterday. It always comes as a shock at the end of the day."*

- *"But it is a life event that everybody deals with. It is not unique to civil servants. It is a life event that every organisation has to deal with and every individual has to deal with."*

- *"I still miss him, I am very scared sometimes."*

- *"But when it comes to profound loss, professionals must keep going."*

- *"There is a silent exercise going on."*

LEARNING

- *"I would like to find out how we could do things better."*

- *"I want to learn what is best practice out there. Where is it? And how can it help us? How also can it be simplified to do what we need to do?"*

- *"We would like to know what others do. We would like to know if we can learn from others. Can we do more? We would also like to know what else is happening. What is good, what is really helpful, what are other peoples' experiences? We have great respect for our workers. Maybe we don't know how good we are, or not."*

In Their Own Words

- *"Our responses to bereavement, critical illness, tragic circumstances, have been honed a little bit over the years. The tone of our letters and the nature of our responses have also been modified over the years in the light of experience. What you are asking about here ties in with that experience. It reflects on us as a department.   We are hitting a number of these points reasonably well but it also shows up a couple of areas where I think we have work to do."*

- *"It has been enlightening. It has been an opportunity to look at what we are doing and maybe to extend what you have begun and what we do."*

- *"It was relevant when you look at it. The number of my staff that lost people in two years, because you get caught in the big numbers and the overall, and whether you like it or not, people have their own lives going on, and they are trying to deal with normal things and sometimes you are aware of them, and sometimes you are not aware of them."*

Appendices

26th March 2015

Senator Marie Louise O'Donnell,
Seanad Éireann,
Dublin 2.

Dear Marie Louise,

We recently met and agreed that you will undertake a small piece of work to conduct a mapping exercise of end of life services across Government Departments. This will seek to identify best practice and suggest areas for improvement in how the State deals with issues relating to end of life, particularly in respect of providing clear information around available services and supports. As the Minister for Health has initiated a review of health services in this regard, your work should exclude services coming under the remit of the Department of Health and HSE.

This work is to be principally carried out through the use of a questionnaire to examine end of life issues in policy and practice as they relate to each Department's role in their interaction with and service to the public. An aspect of it will also seek to establish details of the internal procedures relating to dying, death and bereavement as they affect staff. A single follow up meeting with the relevant official(s) in each Department may also be required to review and contextualise the information received. My Department will provide the necessary assistance to help ensure timely and effective inputs by the various Government Departments.

I have also requested the advice and expertise of the Irish Hospice Foundation and the National Council of the Forum on End of Life in Ireland to support and inform your work over the coming months.

I ask that that you prepare a short report of your findings in this regard and report back to me in July 2015.
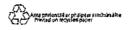
Thank you for agreeing to undertake this work.

With kind regards,

Enda Kenny T.D.
Taoiseach

Arna phriontáil ar pháipéar athchúrsáilte
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Secretary General
Department of

2nd June 2015

Dear Secretary General,

With the full support of An Taoiseach I am undertaking a mapping exercise of end of life services across Government Departments and he has asked that I report to him by July 2015.

The exercise will seek to identify best practice and suggest areas for improvement in how the State deals with issues relating to end of life. A particular focus will be the provision of clear information in respect of available services and support.

The work will be principally carried out by use of questionnaires with a follow-up meeting with relevant officials of your Department to review and contextualise the information.

This exercise will have two parts.

The first will be a questionnaire to establish details of the internal procedures in place in your Department relating to dying, death and bereavement as they affect staff of the Department. This first questionnaire is enclosed.

Your Department is a large employer with a significant number of staff. It is natural then that issues of dying, death and bereavement will affect the members of your Department as they affect members of the general public. These are difficult issues to deal with personally, and even more so in the workplace. The aim of this part of the exercise is to highlight areas of best practice, to identify any additional supports you would require and, where appropriate, to made recommendations about current procedures and programmes in place.

The information provided by individual Departments will be confidential and will not be made publicly available other than in collective findings.

The second questionnaire will seek to examine end of life issues in policy and practice as they relate to each Department's role in your interaction with, and service to, the public. As the Minister for Health has initiated a review of health services in this regard, the Department of Health will not be included in this part of the exercise.

This second questionnaire, looking at policy and practice in the interaction of and service to the public, will follow in coming weeks and will require consideration by policy and service areas in your Department. I will contact you again when this second questionnaire is issued.

I would be very grateful if you would arrange for an appropriate senior member of your staff to complete the attached questionnaire and return it to me by Wednesday 17th June. I am happy to answer any questions that may arise either by telephone or email as set out below. It will also be available in soft copy and can be completed and returned to me by email.

Thank you very much for your cooperation. I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,

Yours sincerely,

Marie-Louise O'Donnell

Internal Supports Questionnaire

QUESTIONNAIRE ON INTERNAL SUPPORTS RELATING TO DYING, DEATH AND BEREAVEMENT AS THEY AFFECT DEPARTMENTAL STAFF IN EACH GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT

Your Department is a large employer with a significant number of staff. It is natural then that issues of dying, death and bereavement will affect the members of your Department as they affect members of the general public. These are difficult issues to deal with personally, and even more so in the workplace. The aim of this questionnaire is to highlight areas of best practice, to identify any additional supports you would require and, where appropriate, to suggest additions to current internal supports and programmes in place.

Following receipt of the completed questionnaire a follow-up meeting will be arranged with your Department to review and contextualise the information. The information provided by individual Department will be confidential and will not be made publicly available other than in collective findings.

Please complete this questionnaire as fully as possible and return it by 9th June 2015 to

Senator Marie Louise O'Donnell
Seanad Eireann
Leinster House
Kildare Street
Dublin 2

Or by email to marielouise.odonnell@oireachtas.ie

Internal supports questionnaire

GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT: _____

NAME OF PERSON COMPLETING THE QUESTIONNAIRE ON BEHALF OF THE DEPARTMENT:

_____

GRADE:_____

CONTACT DETAILS:

PHONE: _____

EMAIL: _____

INTRODUCTION

Dealing effectively with dying, death and bereavement can be challenging for organisations and their staff. People generally want to do their best for their staff but often are unsure about what to say or do.

Even so, there are many examples of good practice. This questionnaire will focus on how staff can be supported when they have a life limiting illness, experience death and loss in their private life, or die themselves when in service.

The following questions cover:

(1) your general approach to dying, death and bereavement of staff

(2) some statistical information requests

(3) details of any formal procedures and policies in place in your Department.

SECTION 1

General approach to dying, death and bereavement of staff

1. What are the most <u>common challenges</u> that staff in your Department experience when dealing with dying, death and bereavement in relation to colleagues?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

2. What are the <u>supports</u> that staff find most helpful in dealing with dying, death and bereavement in relation to colleagues?

_____

_____

_____

_____

3. Are there <u>additional supports</u> that staff feel would help them to deal more effectively with dying, death and bereavement in relation to colleagues?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

SECTION 2 – Statistical information

Please think about your experience in the past two years.

1. **How many of the staff of your Department been bereaved in the last two years?**

   Approximate Number_____

2. **How many of the staff of your Department been diagnosed with a life-limiting or terminal illness in the last two years?**

   Approximate Number_____

3. **How many of the staff of your Department have died in service in the past two years?**

   Number_____

4. **Has any member of staff died by suicide in the past two years?**

   YES_____   NO_____ Number_____

5. **Has any member of staff been bereaved by suicide in the past two years?**

   YES_____   NO_____ Number_____

Section 3

Formal policies and procedures

1. Does your Department have a bereavement policy?

Yes_____   No_____

2. Does this policy cover:

Leave entitlements	Yes_____	No_____
Return to work protocols	Yes_____	No_____
Ongoing support of staff member	Yes_____	No_____
Health and safety	Yes_____	No_____

3. Does your Department provide training to staff on:

How to support someone who is bereaved	Yes_____	No_____
How to deliver bad news	Yes_____	No_____

4. Does your Department encourage staff to plan for end of life needs?

Yes_____   No_____

If, yes, please give details:

_____

Please add any further comments here:

_____

_____

_____

Statistics from Questionnaire and Interviews							
Department	Number of Staff	Average Age	Deaths in Service	Deaths in service by suicide	Bereaved	Bereaved by suicide	% Bereaved
Department 1	3,022	45	8	0	796	1	26.34%
Department 2	580	47	2	0	58	0	10%
Department 3	161	45	0	0	11	0	6.83%
Department 4	260	43	1	0	10	0	3.80%
Department 5	343	50	0	0	109	1	31.70%
Department 6	1,200	48	4	1	500	0	41.66%
Department 7	750	47	7	1	219	1	29.20%
Department 8	307	43.6	0	0	13	0	4.23%
Department 9	1,300	39	0	0	103	3	7.92%
Department 10	350	48	5	1	33	0	9.42%
Department 11	850	48	1	0	164	0	19.29%
Department 12	2,000	46	5	0	60	0	3.00%
Department 13	936	48	1	0	213	0	22.75%
Department 14	7,000	45	12	0	1,494	0	21.34%
Department 15	200	45	0	0	35	3	17.50%
Department 16	460	45	1	0	60	1	13.04%
Agency 1	130	48	1	0	2	0	1.53%
Agency 2	800	46	3	0	242	2	30.25%
Agency 3	120	38	0	0	7	0	5.83%
Agency 4	1,600	49	7	1	459	0	28.68%
Agency 5	6,000	49	17	4	2,170	2	36.16%
Total for 21 Departments/Agencie	28,369	46	75	8	6,758	14	24%

There are 28,369 people working in the Civil Service
The average is 46
6,758 people bereaved in the last two years – 24%
There have been 75 deaths in service in the last two years – 8 by suicide

All statistics applied to the last two years

SUMMARY INFORMATION
General approach to dying, death and bereavement of staff

1. What are the most <u>common challenges</u> that staff in your Department experience when dealing with dying, death and bereavement in relation to colleagues?

Death and bereavement generally:
Challenge
What to say/How to sympathise
Ensure flexibility dealing with staff re leave/work attendance/performance
Organising additional help to meet critical tasks
Dealing with emotion
Dealing with stress/absenteeism etc
Tension between professional/personal obligations
Dealing with shock
Ensuring staff know about CSEAS
Reminder of previous bereavement – personal emotional triggers
Returning to work
Ascertaining how much interaction bereaved person would like (privacy)
Making people feel supported and valued
Having managers/HR/CSEAS work together
Making sure people know about their entitlements
Death of a child

DEATH IN SERVICE:
Challenge
Dealing with shock/grief particularly when unexpected
Empty desk
Commemorating the death
Removal of belongings – family involved and time lapse
Organising additional help to meet critical tasks
Ensuring staff know about CSEAS
How to deal sensitively re replacement with colleagues & with replacement colleague
Dealing with "new normal"
Engagement with family re pension etc
Loss of corporate knowledge when sudden death
Appropriate contact at correct level with family

2. What are the supports that staff find most helpful in dealing with dying, death and bereavement in relation to colleagues?

GENERAL Helpful supports
CSEAS
Support by local managers and colleagues
HR support
Flexibility and understanding about work load & burden sharing
Attendance at funeral facilitated
Informing other staff of death and funeral (if agreed by bereaved)
Force Majeure and Bereavement leave
Encourage colleagues to be supportive
Contact with bereavement counselling where required
Acknowledging the loss
Training in grief and loss and supporting bereaved people
Making relevant information available
Special leave without pay where required
Sick leave where required following bereavement
Letter from Personnel Officer
CMO support
Funeral attendance while abroad
Available time-out space
MABS support
Sharing experience with other bereaved people

DEATH IN SERVICE
Helpful supports
CSEAS
Attendance at funeral encouraged
Memorial mass or other commemoration
Informal gatherings
Flexibility and understanding about work
Area to display photos/mementoes
Letter from Personnel Officer/Secretary General

3. Are there additional supports that staff feel would help them to deal more effectively with dying, death and bereavement in relation to other staff?

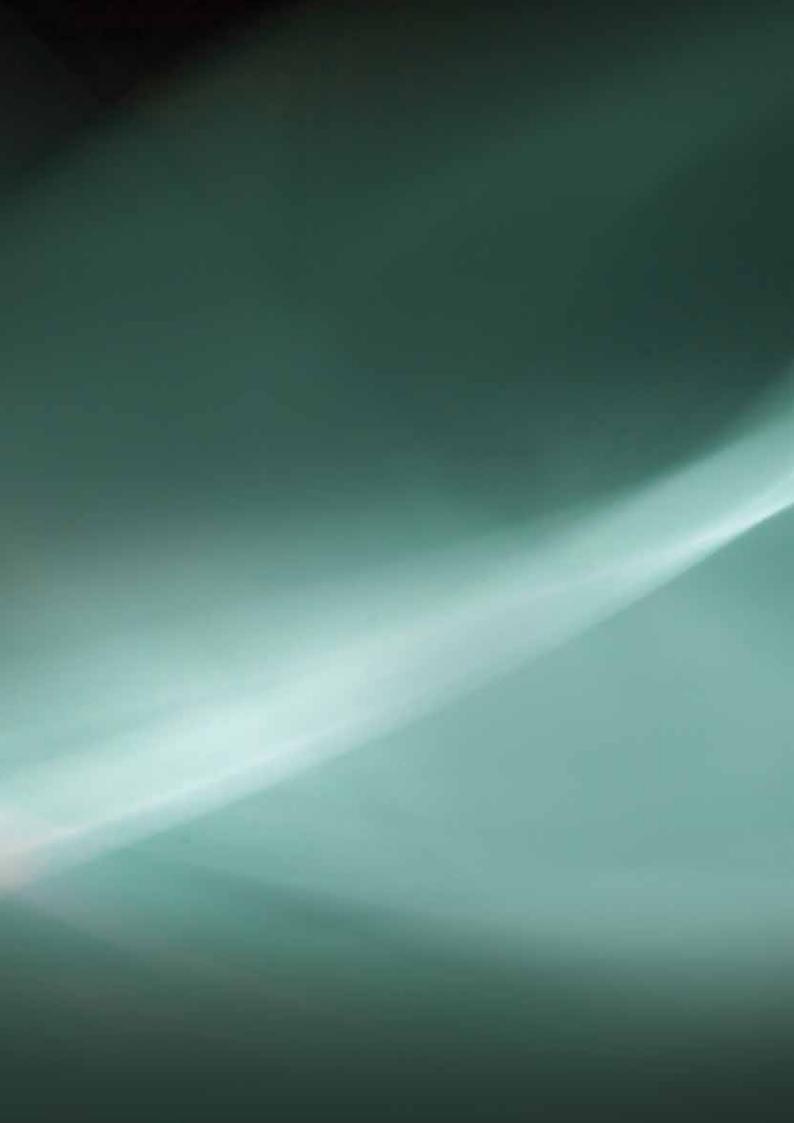| ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS |
|---|
| Generally satisfied with CSEAS and other approaches |
| **Training:** Bereavement awareness training/Managing grief at work/Lunch and learn/dealing with serious illness/opportunity for Q&A |
| **Bereavement policy:** Formal policy would make people more aware of supports |
| **Information leaflets (some being drafted) on suicide, serious illness, grief management** |
| Practical advice where life-limiting illness diagnosed |
| Bring to Partnership Committee to see if more supports could be given/are applicable |
| More flexibility than bereavement leave circulars |
| Guidance whether colleagues want ongoing contact while away from work |

Formal policies and procedures

Does your Department have a bereavement policy?	NUMBER
Yes	3
No	9
Being drafted	1
Have draft – not approved/needs consultation	2
Have "protocol"	1
CSEAS information used	7
Informal collection of supports/information	1
No policy across Civil Service	1
No response	2

Does the policy cover:	Yes	No
Leave entitlements	2	6
Return to work protocols	2	7
Ongoing support of Staff member	2	7
Health and Safety	1	9

Staff training on	Number	Comment/other
How to support someone who is bereaved		
Yes	3	
No	13	
CSEAS	3	
Managers information pack	1	
How to deliver bad news	2	
Yes	2	
No	14	
CSEAS	3	

Do you encourage your staff to plan for end of life	Number	How
Yes	4	CSEAS pre-retirement/ wills, insurance, retirement, not specifically EOL
No	13	
No, but plan to	1	
No response	1	