

Cruse Bereavement Care at 60 – strengths, challenges and new directions



Steven Wibberley joined Cruse as Chief Executive in April 2018. In this article he talks to Kate Mitchell about building on the 60 year history of Cruse and how to implement a vision for the future.

Kate Mitchell: This year Cruse is celebrating its 60th anniversary – congratulations!

Steven Wibberley: Thanks. An anniversary like this is a good chance to reflect on where we've come as an organisation, and also spend time looking forward to what we can build on, and what our vision of Cruse is for the future.

KM: Before we hear about that vision, I'd be interested to know what your first impression was of Cruse as an organisation.

SW: I've worked in the area of health and charities for over 25 years now, most recently for the British Lung Foundation where we worked with people with lung disease, often with a terminal prognosis. So I knew of Cruse and its reputation, and about how important it was to support those family and friends left behind after someone dies. But I didn't know much more.

As I went through the recruitment process I was immediately struck by the passion and commitment of everyone I met – volunteers, staff, trustees and other supporters. I was also hugely impressed that a charity with a relatively small infrastructure was able to support so many people, by using a base of dedicated volunteers. My first months out and about meeting people across our network reinforced this view of Cruse as an organisation focused on people.

KM: What particular strengths do volunteers bring to Cruse?

SW: So many of them show an incredible level of commitment, and we simply couldn't offer what we do without being a volunteer-based organisation. When I meet volunteers and ask them about working for Cruse, they often talk about a sense of belonging and it's

obvious that their volunteering brings them a valuable sense of purpose and focus.

Being a volunteer-based organisation is really important to us for three key reasons. First of all, practically we couldn't provide the amount of support we do today if we were dependent on paid staff – we simply couldn't afford to do it. But, secondly, having 5,000 volunteers means that we have advocates in every community across the country – 5,000 people talking about Cruse and, equally importantly, talking about death, dying and bereavement, and helping support people in the communities and their families who are dealing with their own grief. And the final reason why I think it's so important that we are a volunteer-based organisation is when we talk to our clients (the bereaved people we support), they tell us about the unique relationship they have with our bereavement volunteers and the recognition that a volunteer is freely giving up their time to support the bereaved person at one of the worst times of their lives. So I wonder whether there's an extra therapeutic value to the fact that it's a volunteer having those conversations, rather than a trained person or a counsellor. And I wonder if, in turn, the fact that someone is giving up their own time to support the bereaved person, actually has a real beneficial impact.

We do need to be aware of what the evidence says about the way volunteering is changing – while there are clearly huge numbers of people happy to give up their time, in the future it may be that those able to make a long-term weekly commitment for several hours will be fewer. As the ways we provide support are changing we need to make sure that we offer a wider range of volunteering too – there may be opportunities to volunteer in new ways, for example using social media, or helping moderate online communities.

We also need to make sure that the processes for recruiting and training volunteers are streamlined and don't

take longer than is necessary. We want people engaged and feeling part of the Cruse family from their first contact as a potential volunteer.

KM: So volunteering is changing. What other challenges and opportunities are coming up for Cruse in the next stage of its development?

SW: One of the biggest changes comes from what people need and expect in terms of services. Our new strategy for 2019–2024 is called Bereaved People First, and we chose that name because the most important driver of change is understanding what bereaved people need and want. We need to improve our services and reach more people, and a key part of that is moving away from a one-size-fits-all model, where Cruse mainly offers one-to-one face-to-face support. In fact different people have different needs and as we move into 2020 and beyond more people may want to receive support and information digitally, for example.

Of course as a charity we don't operate in isolation either, and there are external factors which affect every charity in 2019. There's a challenging fundraising climate, and in recent years there has quite rightly been a much stronger spotlight on the governance of charities. As an organisation with 76 local services we face the challenge of how to balance accountability and control in a networked organisation. We hope the changes we are making will keep improving on the strengths we have – of providing a local service using local volunteers – while keeping national accountability, and sharing resources and expertise as efficiently as possible.

Also, although in some ways our brand profile is low compared with some of the other 'universal issue' charities, we do have a good reputation in the sector, and that reputation extends internationally. We are the largest bereavement charity in the world and colleagues from many other countries are interested in learning from us and finding out how we do what we do.

Expanding our digital offering is a huge opportunity, as we move deeper into a world where people are used to (and expect) interacting and receiving services digitally.

Finally, although the fundraising climate for the charity sector as a whole remains challenging, we are coming from a position where we have been running a charity with an annual income of £5 million with hardly any fundraising infrastructure. We're confident that putting in a small and focused fundraising team will soon start to make a real difference and add to our potential for growth.

KM: What is your vision for the future of Cruse?

SW: I would like to reach a situation where every bereaved person knows about Cruse. And that anyone they come into contact with, during all the 'busy work' that comes

with bereavement, knows about Cruse, including hospice workers, funeral directors, GPs and so on.

Those who want to find out more will be able to by following us on Facebook, or going to our website where they will find information tailored to their own particular situation.

If they need more help they will easily be able to contact us in a way that suits them, be that by phone, email or webchat. During their first contact they will be offered some initial support, and complete an assessment (over the phone, or on the website).

If they need more support, within an appropriate timeframe and without a delay they will be able to access services local to them. This service could be in the form one-to-one sessions with a bereavement volunteer, which is how we have traditionally provided support. But we are also building on some of the innovative work already taking place in our network, where many local branches offer welcome sessions and group and peer support, such as walking groups. For example in some areas walking groups have been very popular and we are in the early stages of a partnership with The Ramblers to expand this service.

KM: What about the other aspects of the charity's work – campaigning and awareness?

SW: The second part of our mission is to enhance society's care of bereaved people, and it's really important that we keep up our political campaigning work. In recent years there have been harsh and savage benefit cuts to bereaved parents, and there remain unresolved issues around those who lose partners when they are unmarried. We've had a few successes, like the recent promised introduction of statutory leave for bereaved parents, but there is a lot more to be done.

We also need to keep up the pressure on companies in the utilities and financial sector, some of whom have been treating bereaved customers with an astonishing level of thoughtless cruelty. As one of our 60th year events we're going to be launching a new campaign at the BT Tower in November, asking companies who deal with bereaved people to commit to a few key actions which could make a big difference to the experience of bereaved customers.

The other part of enhancing society's care of bereaved people is in our information networks of support via friends, family, co-workers, etc. Recently we have seen a little progress in how death and bereavement is accepted – it is constantly in the media and on our televisions. But it is often portrayed as something that is an individual problem, for example when sharing the story of a particular bereaved celebrity, rather than a universal issue affecting us all eventually.

Day-to-day there is still a great reluctance to talk about death and dying, typified by how reluctant people are to speak to a bereaved colleague returning to work after the funeral – they may get a few mumbled condolences and then find themselves avoided. I think death and bereavement

are a bit like cancer was 20 years ago, when no-one would mention the ‘C word’. I think we can change that attitude, and we as a society would all benefit from a more open and accepting attitude to death, dying and grieving.

Another challenge facing bereaved people is loneliness. Recently I trained as a helpline volunteer and when taking calls, loneliness has often come up as an issue, and not just in older bereaved people. Some of our recent peer support projects have begun to address this need, and we will be building on this work.

We also need to make sure that as an organisation we support everyone in our society – increasing our diversity and inclusion is part of the new strategy, and I think it’s a vitally important one with several aspects to it. First we need to ensure we are supporting and providing relevant and appropriate services to all the groups who need us, including the LGBT community, different faith groups, those with disabilities and so on. Then we also need to make sure a representative number of our staff and volunteers are drawn from those groups and feel supported and encouraged. Finally we need to make sure that our external profile reflects this, and that we are explicitly welcoming and open to all people.

KM: It’s great that Cruse help will soon be available to more people and in different ways. How can you make sure that the support you provide is evidence-based?

SW: One of the advantages of the new model of support we are developing is that it gives us an

amazing opportunity to generate a lot of really valuable information. As we unify our referral processes, we can put in a standard model of assessment. We plan to build in outcome measures and this will help us to understand and unpick what impact we’re having, and adapt appropriately.

We’re appointing a number of clinical advisers to help us with this process. I’m delighted that Dr Linda Machin and Dr Henk Schut are the first to be appointed in this role, and we’ll be taking their advice both on measuring impact and on how to continue to bring insights from the best of bereavement care research into our practice.

KM: I’m sure the readers of Bereavement Care will be in favour of that! As one final question, what do you think Cruse founder Margaret Torrie would say if she could see today what the organisation she founded has become?

SW: I’m sure she would be surprised at some of the directions we have taken, but I hope she would be able to see how these have been related to other changes in society that couldn’t have been predicted in 1959. I think she would be able to see that the core vision she had of support after grief, using trained volunteers and through peer support, are as important to us in 2019 as in 1959. ■

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