

## GUIDANCE IN DEALING WITH BEREAVEMENT

### **General**

The following information and guidance has been gathered from the school's reading about bereavement. For added guidance there are flow charts at the foot of this document which detail suggested actions in the event of a child's bereavement, the death of a student or the death of a member of staff.

### **Supporting the Staff**

It is important that staff members have support networks readily available and feel able to ask for help. Senior staff and governors need to be aware that these reactions may occur and should seek appropriate guidance from outside agencies. It is important to remember that school staff, including teachers and teaching assistants, are not trained counsellors. They are not expected to offer bereavement counselling. Listening and being available for comfort are the main skills required. However if a member of staff feels unable to offer support because of their own reactions, this should be acknowledged and accepted, and another colleague should be considered for the role.

### **Showing Grief**

Grief can be shown in many different ways including:

- unusual tiredness;
- loss of appetite or comfort eating;
- frequent daydreaming;
- deterioration in work;
- shorter attention span, difficulty in concentrating and following a task through to completion;
- memory problems: short and long term;
- more quiet and withdrawn;
- more tearful, needing more adult reassurance than usual;
- more irritable or aggressive;
- more than usual fluctuation of mood (especially in adolescents);
- difficulty in coming to school: wishing to remain at home, complaining of minor illness, not wishing to leave parent or carer;
- fears, heightened anxieties about potential danger (swimming, going out on trips etc).

### **Adolescence**

The normal experience of being adolescent may intensify the conflicts of grief for older students. Emotions are powerful at this stage: these may lead the young person to question his or her own identity, the meaning of life etc. They may compensate for the pain by taking on the role of the lost parent or elder sibling. Denial can also be a feature at this age: a pushing back of feelings with a fear of expressing them and losing control, or looking childish. They may dislike being the odd one out and tend to minimise or reject

special treatment or being made to feel different. The natural feelings of grief (i.e. becoming more childlike) may seem at variance with the progression towards adulthood.

Staff need to help the young person's peers know how to react as the student experiencing trauma may feel isolated. The peer group can be a source both of support or rejection. Caution about talking to the press.

There may also be the problem that natural, healthy grieving takes time and it cannot be hurried, nor should it be repressed or denied. This may conflict with the necessity to work hard or even to concentrate when important examinations are looming.

### **How to Respond**

It is best to admit the limitations on knowledge on the illness or death rather than being tempted to make up details.

### **Listening and Talking with the Child or Young Person**

One of the most valuable things a member of staff can do is to listen and take their communication seriously. This may mean negotiating extra non contact time: a planned approach to dealing with their crisis could include this.

Talking is also an essential part of healthy grief: not mentioning the illness, loss or death can be counter-productive. It may be tempting to rationalise that 'it is for their benefit' not to talk about the situation but this reaction may convey more about the adult's feelings of sadness and possible inadequacy in dealing with a difficult situation. Children and young people should be reassured if any guilty misunderstandings emerge. It is also not good practice to tell the class "don't talk to him/her about it, as it may upset him/her".

It is helpful to provide a quiet, private place for the children and young people to come to whenever they need to be alone, or with a member of staff known to be trusted by them. Almost anything may trigger tears in some of them and it is important to help them to realise that grief is a natural and normal reaction to loss.

Anniversaries and birthdays may be difficult times. Where a parent has died, Mother's and Father's Days may be particularly distressing, especially if the rest of the class are making cards. Staff may wish to talk to the remaining parent about someone else that a card may be sent to. This is also pertinent for single parent families, and where children and young people have experienced the divorce or separation of their parents.

### **Changes in Behaviour**

It is important for staff not to misinterpret the changed behaviour because attention seeking is common. This attention seeking may alienate others, especially when everyone in the family is bereaved and may be feeling needy too. This is a dilemma, and it may be difficult to know whether to be tolerant or understanding or whether to be firm because of the underlying needs of the child or young person, and also the needs of the rest of the class and the school.

There is evidence that survivors of suicidal deaths have unique and very difficult times handling their grief. Shame, guilt, anger and fear of their own self-destructive impulse may exist in the survivors.

## **Acknowledging the Death or Loss**

It may be appropriate for the school community to acknowledge the death of a student, parent, teacher or governor after discussions with relatives. Schools have typically responded in ways such as holding a special assembly or bench, but there are many different possibilities.

### **To help someone who is suffering after the loss of a loved one you SHOULD:**

- let your genuine concern and caring show;
- be available – to listen or to help with whatever else seems needed at the time;
- say you are sorry about what happened and about their pain;
- allow them to express as much unhappiness as they are feeling at the moment and are willing to share;
- encourage them to be patient with themselves, not to expect too much of themselves and not to impose any 'shoulds' on themselves;
- allow them to talk about their loss as much and as often as they want to;
- talk about the special, endearing qualities of who they have lost;
- reassure them that they did everything they could.

### **Individuals who have experienced the loss of a loved one said that the following when asked what they found HELPFUL to them:**

- "People sent letters and cards";
- "People being there for me";
- "I was allowed to be left alone";
- "I was allowed to feel the way I did";
- "I was listened to";
- "A friend allowed me to talk as often and as long as I needed to";
- "I was surprised to find humour helped when it was appropriately used";
- "People were infinitely patient with me".

### **To help someone who is suffering after the loss of a loved one you should SHOULD NOT:**

- let your own sense of helplessness keep you from reaching out;
- avoid them because you are uncomfortable (being avoided adds pain to an already painful experience);
- say you know how they feel (unless you've experienced their loss yourself you probably don't know how they feel);
- say "you ought to be feeling better by now" or anything else which implies a judgement about their feelings;
- tell them what they should feel or do;
- change the subject when they should feel or do;
- avoid mentioning their loss out of fear of reminding them of their pain (they haven't forgotten it);
- try to find something positive (e.g. a moral lesson, closer family ties etc) about their loss;
- point out that at least they have their other children;
- say they can always have another child;

- make any comments which in any way suggest that their loss was their fault (there will be enough feelings of doubt and guilt without any help from friends).

**Individuals who have experienced the loss of a loved one said that the following when asked what they found UNHELPFUL to them:**

- “People giving me advice”;
- “People ignoring me or not speaking about the loss”;
- “Being told to cheer up”;
- “Being expected to return to normal after a week or two”;
- “Being offered a drink to forget it”;
- “Being told not to cry and upset myself (it probably means “don’t cry and upset me!”)”.

**Dealing with the Funeral**

The funeral is a means of acknowledging a death: a chance to say goodbye. Nowadays it is usually felt to be helpful for children and young people to be given the choice about whether to attend. The company of a trusted relative, friend or member of staff might be helpful in case the child has questions or wishes to leave at any point. Again, each person is different and school staff should be mindful of culture, religion and family views.

**Summary**

The overall message in helping children and young people suffering from loss is:

- listen attentively
- be sensitive, reassuring and calm
- maintain feelings of security and of being cared for
- keep to normal routines whenever possible
- maintain all the necessary practical care
- continue to communicate
- be honest: do not pretend to believe what you do not believe
- try to understand the child’s feelings and to reassure them wherever possible
- say ‘I don’t know’ to the unanswerable and do not convey that everything relating to death, illness and loss can be explained or understood

**Review**

This guidance will be reviewed by the Governing Body Student Welfare sub-committee every 3 years or sooner if circumstances dictate.

April 2013

## **Further Resources**

### **Grief support for the young in Oxfordshire**

See Saw (Only available to Oxfordshire families)  
Tel: 01865 744768 and 01865 742803

### **CRUISE Children's Service**

Only available to Buckinghamshire families  
Tel: 01296 425757

### **Death and Bereavement in schools- a policy document**

Angela Jones and Margaret Wysling

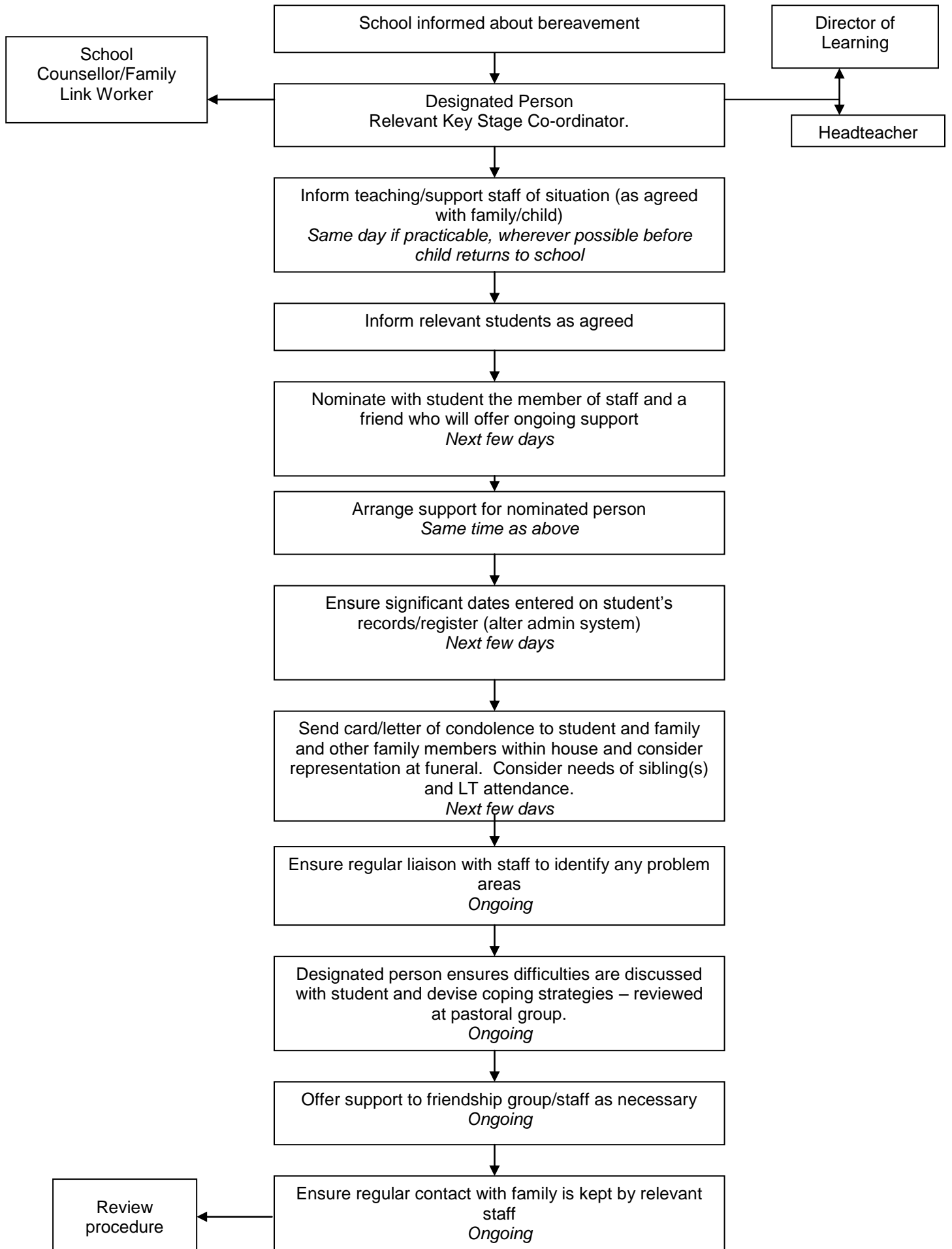
### **Managing Loss, Trauma and Crisis**

Hillingdon Education Services

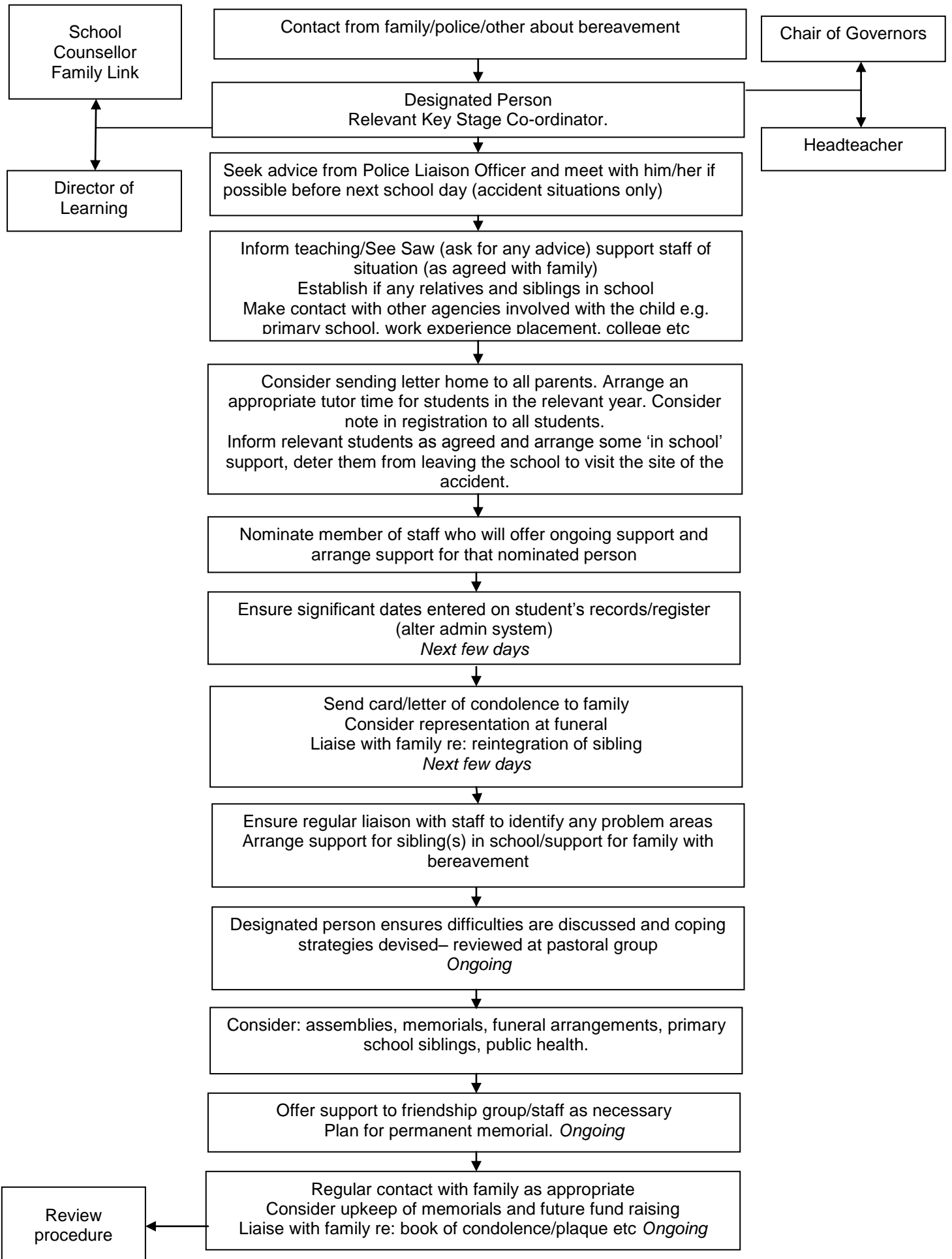
### **Daisy's Dream – supporting bereaved children and their families**

Tel: 0118 934 2604

# Child Bereaved



# Death of a Student



## Death of a Member of Staff

