

Bereavement Processing – The Poor Relation



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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1. Introduction

The bereavement process within the Wealth Industry can be lengthy and complex. There are rules and regulations that must be adhered to, identities that need to be verified, details that need to be validated, risks that need to be managed.

This paper focuses the spotlight on bereavement processing by wealth platforms and transfer agencies to examine what's currently being done both within the industry and by related external parties, with the aim of answering the following question:



Is the industry doing enough to make this customer journey as frictionless and painless as possible?

To help answer this question, we surveyed several companies, investigated the online presence of over 30 companies and also spoke to experts from charities, and various death notification services.

We consider the external perspective from the Bereavement Standards

Working Group, bereavement charities and death notification services; changes that companies have implemented in response to the pandemic; and propose a number of areas where the industry is not currently providing an optimal service, including improvement recommendations that could be made across the bereavement customer journey to both enhance the customer experience and bring about business benefits. We also predict what future trends are likely to emerge.



CHAPTER 2

Thinking Outside the Box

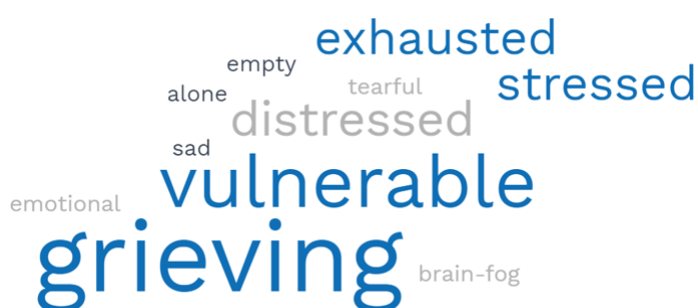
2. Thinking Outside the Box

In this section we consider bereavements from outside of the Wealth industry.

2.1. The 'Customer' Perspective

End-of-life planning can be a taboo topic of conversation amongst families and unfortunately, people often don't do enough to get their affairs in order before they pass away. Whilst this has recently been more at the forefront of people's minds due to the pandemic, there are still **less than 50%** of adults in the UK who **have an up to date will** in place (WealthAdviser)

However much planning is done ahead of time, when someone passes away, going through the process of establishing what assets form part of their estate and making the necessary notifications and claims can be a very slow and painful process at a time when a person's nearest and dearest are going through a difficult time and trying to deal with their own grief.



It's estimated that **the average next of kin, executor or estate administrator* will need to deal with 21 separate organisations** (Equiniti.com) across various sectors such as utilities, banking, mobile &

broadband, wealth, life and pensions. The discovery stage, of trying to track down all of the financial assets the deceased held, can be incredibly difficult if the deceased didn't keep their documentation organised and readily available. This is emphasised by examples of it taking over a year to even notify all of the necessary companies.

Once all of the accounts have been established, there's a research phase where they have to work out how to notify each company, what channels are available and what information and documentation needs to be provided. There is often a huge amount of repetition here, in having to fill in a multitude of forms, have the same painful conversation over-and-over again and having to send originals or certified copies of the death certificate to each organisation to get the ball rolling in claiming the assets.



[Companies] don't realise that every time you have to call and say those dreaded words: *'My mother has died ...'* it breaks your heart

James Coney, ThisIsMoney.co.uk

2.2. The 'External' Perspective

It's easy to become inwardly focused on what you're doing within your organisation. But what is happening externally?

2.2.1. Bereavement Standards Working Group

Various charities and companies across different sectors of industry, including Cruse Bereavement Care, Sue Ryder and Settl'd have been working as part of a Bereavement Standards Working Group campaigning for 'Bereaved Customers First', which aims to get companies to adopt 4 key principles centered around Plan, Process, Paperwork and People. Steve Wibberley, CEO of Cruse revealed that the ideal would be to turn this into a standard 'kitemark' as a possible useful next step.

As part of this working group, they've held roundtables that were attended by various industry sectors. The main outputs of which were to raise the profile of the issues and to give these companies an opportunity to share ideas on good practice which they could take away and implement.

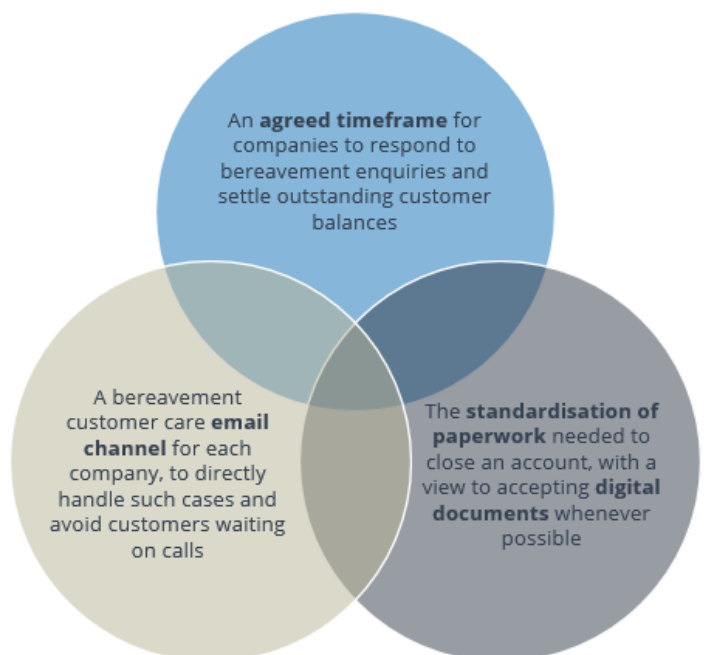
But, whilst their campaign gathered some noise in the press last year, probably as a result of covid, the various industry regulators including the FCA weren't interested as it didn't meet their threshold to pursue. Unfortunately, since then, their work has slowed down.

2.2.2. Petition for a Bereavement Standard

Vicky Wilson, CEO of Settl'd (an account closure service for death administration), created a

petition to make it easier for families to close the accounts of a loved one who dies.

The petition on Change.org currently has 93k+ signatures and calls for a Bereavement Standard to establish:



<https://www.change.org> - Make it easier for families to close the accounts of a loved one who dies



CHAPTER 3

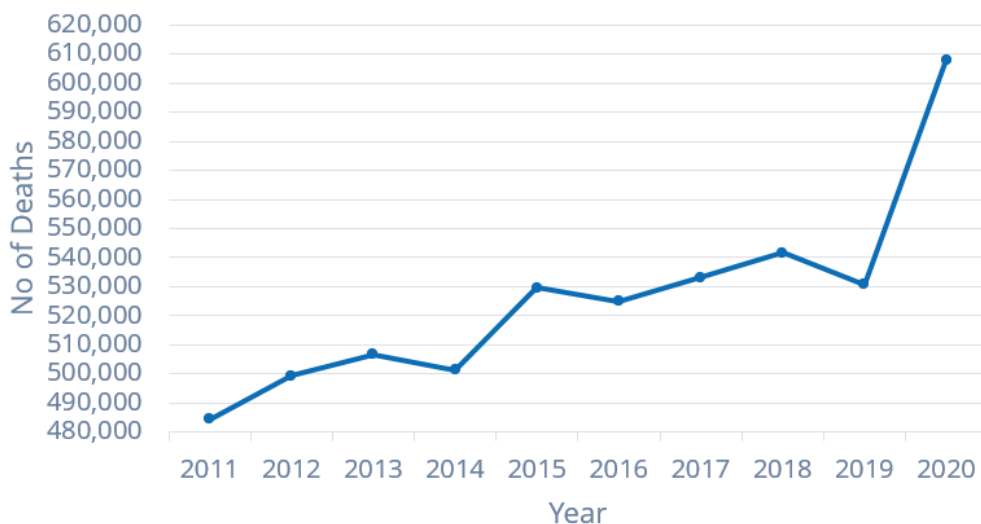
The Current Landscape

3. The Current Landscape

In this section we consider current UK death statistics and trends, the impact on the Wealth Industry in terms of investment products held and how the industry has reacted to the impact of the pandemic.

3.1. Statistics and Trends

Number of Deaths in England & Wales over the last 10 years



<https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/transparencyandgovernance/freedomofinformationfoi/deathsintheukfrom1990to2020>

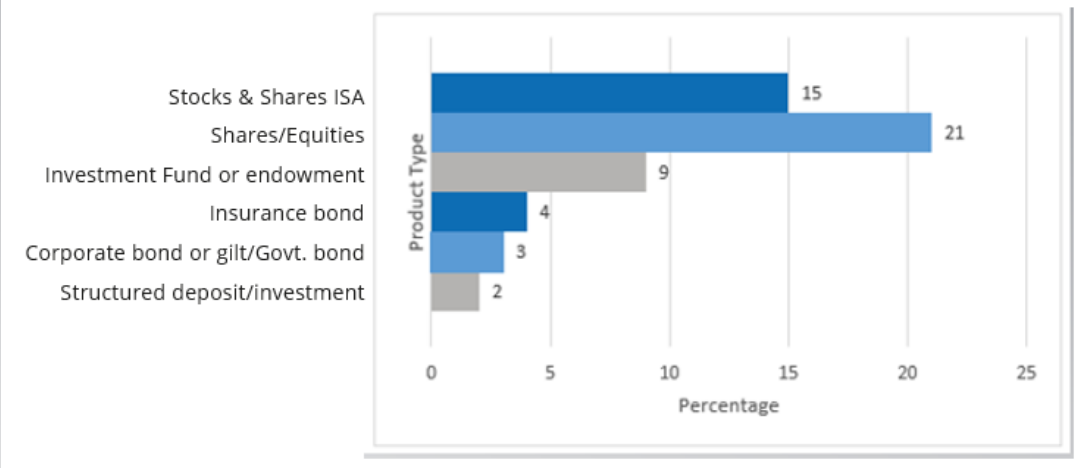
608k

Deaths in England & Wales in 2020

The number of deaths in England & Wales rose to over 600k in 2020 with the impact of Coronavirus. In addition to this, the UK's population is ageing. Around one-fifth of the population (19%) was aged sixty-five or over in 2019, and this is projected to grow to 24% of the population by 2043 (commonslibrary.parliament.uk, 2021). As such, it's anticipated that annual deaths will continue to increase, reaching 635,814 by 2040 (journals.sagepub.com, 2017):

Therefore, wealth management providers need to continue focusing on the deceased process as **the number of new notifications received are not likely to decrease** to any significant extent, even if the pandemic eases.

Percentage of UK adults holding investment products in February 2020



The graph above shows the percentage of UK adults holding investment products in February 2020 (FCA.org.uk, 2021). To try and put that into context in terms of volumes of death claims, if you assume a uniform distribution of product holdings across the general population, that’s potentially up to 90k Stocks and Shares ISA and 126k Shares/Equities death claims in 2020.

3.2. Response to Covid

Sadly, due to the increase in deaths due to Covid, many companies have had to react quickly to a vast increase in bereavement claims over the past 18 months.

Here are some examples of steps companies have taken to deal with increased volumes and ease the process throughout the pandemic.

HSBC

Accelerated use of online as a channel e.g. email notifications and electronic signatures where previously only wet signatures were accepted.

M&G

Resilient Operations - in its half year financial results report for 2020, M&G noted that in response to Covid, they had launched a new digital upload tool to simplify and speed-up bereavement processes.

Quilter

A "pre-notification" process was introduced due to high volumes to get fees and charges stopped before bereavement packs are issued.

Capita

Calls to their pension centre more than doubled. To help cope with this, Capita arranged bereavement training for all call centre staff, delivered by bereavement charity Winston's Wish. As part of this, the staff learned about the right language to use, not using complicated financial terms/jargon, keeping it simple and not rushing calls. They also learned about empathy and listening effectively and reacting appropriately for example not reacting if a caller is sharp, or telling them to take their time if they're tearful.

Diligenta Transfer Agency

"The normal peak claim time moved from January to June in 2020. To help cope with this, Diligenta rapidly ramped up their resources both on and offshore. We initially went into recovery when the spike hit, but recovered through bringing in extra resource and we have now made that resource permanent"

Julie Gawthorpe, Head of Transfer Agency.

Scottish Widows

"We made a number of enhancements to our claims journey including a £2,000 advance payment for critical illness claimants to help with immediate costs. We've also introduced online claims forms and the ability to accept birth, marriage and death certificates digitally to help create a more supportive claims experience for you and your clients"

Scott Cadger, Head of Protection Underwriting, Claims and Commercial Strategy

3.2.1. Case Study: Going Paperless



For one large organisation, a previous verbal death claims process had been revoked following complaints and controls shortcomings in the process.

However, as a response to the pandemic, the process and associated telephony script was reviewed and strengthened to make it more robust from a risk perspective, signed off by the organisation's Financial Crimes Team and rapidly re-introduced in May 2020. This allowed death notifications and claim instructions to be taken over the phone for certain low risk product types where the total value was less than £25k. The process included the following:

- Death certificate details were taken verbally over the phone.
- AML, PEP and sanctions checks conducted on the claimant using external systems such as Experian and SIRA.
- If the notification was more than 2 weeks after the date of death, verification of the deceased status was also conducted via TraceIQ
- If any checks failed, the agent would request additional details from the claimant e.g. probate. The case would then follow a similar route to a usual paper-based case.
- If checks passed, the claim would be paid out and a confirmation or closing statement sent to the claimant.

The organisation was able to process around 600 cases per month with an average handling time of only 20 minutes per case, whilst bringing the benefit of a better customer journey and faster claim pay out times. This example highlights the benefits to both customer and organisation of taking a risk-based approach and streamlining the process.



CHAPTER 4

Moving Forwards

4. Moving Forwards

Getting it right can do wonders for the reputation of your organisation – nobody wants to be headline news when a case goes badly. The goal should always be to make what is invariably an unpleasant process more palatable. In many cases, notification of death may be the first time the customer has ever interacted with your company.

By making a good first impression, you can improve brand awareness and reputation and also increase the likelihood of asset retention.



There is a difference between a difficult process and a process going wrong – it's always going to be unpleasant, but the aim should be to make it more bearable

Steven Wibberley, CEO Cruse

Any improvements will obviously come at a cost. However, bereavement processing has been written off as loss making for too long – a service that has no perceived cost-benefit revenue, just costs and overheads. It's time to cast a different lens upon it and focus on the opportunities that can be gained by improving this customer journey.

It can be a difficult sell, given that there's generally a lack of data in this area so the future business benefits are somewhat intangible, which doesn't encourage investment. The first step would be to understand what percentage and equivalent cash value flows out of the organisation as a result of death claims. And further, to examine where that value is flowing to e.g., to other competitor organisations?

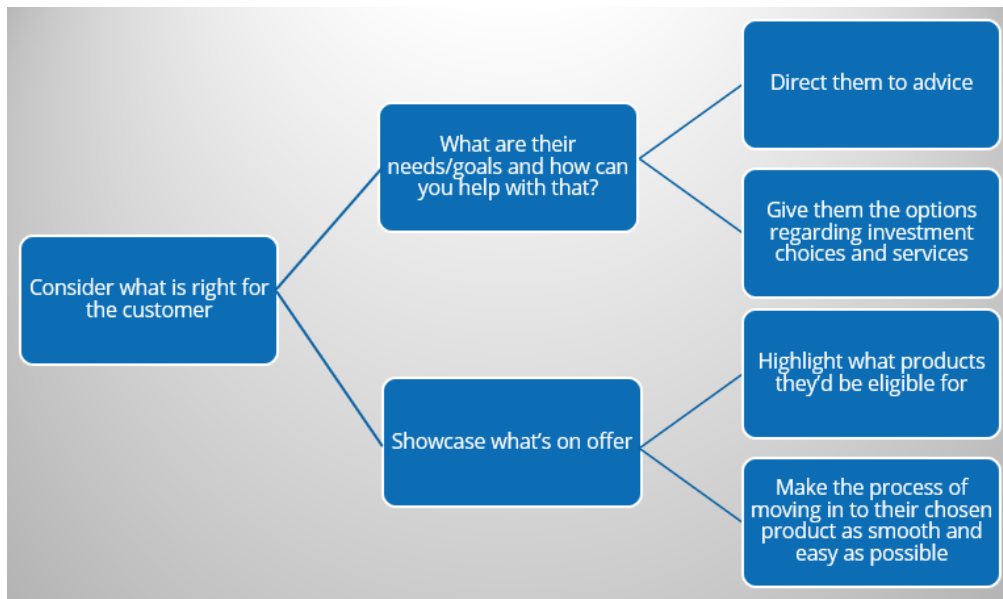
What percentage of claims result in the value of the policy/account being paid out/leaving the company?

Approx. 75%, the rest will go through APS or stock transfers

This represents a huge **opportunity to retain the flow of intergenerational wealth** within the organisation.

MOVING FORWARDS

To make the most of the opportunity for asset retention, focus on making your customer service and journey the gold standard. Whilst doing this, you may wish to consider the following:



It's tricky with wealth products as sums involved are typically higher than average bank or building society accounts, so fraud measures often need to be more stringent.

Neisha Morley, Programme Manager

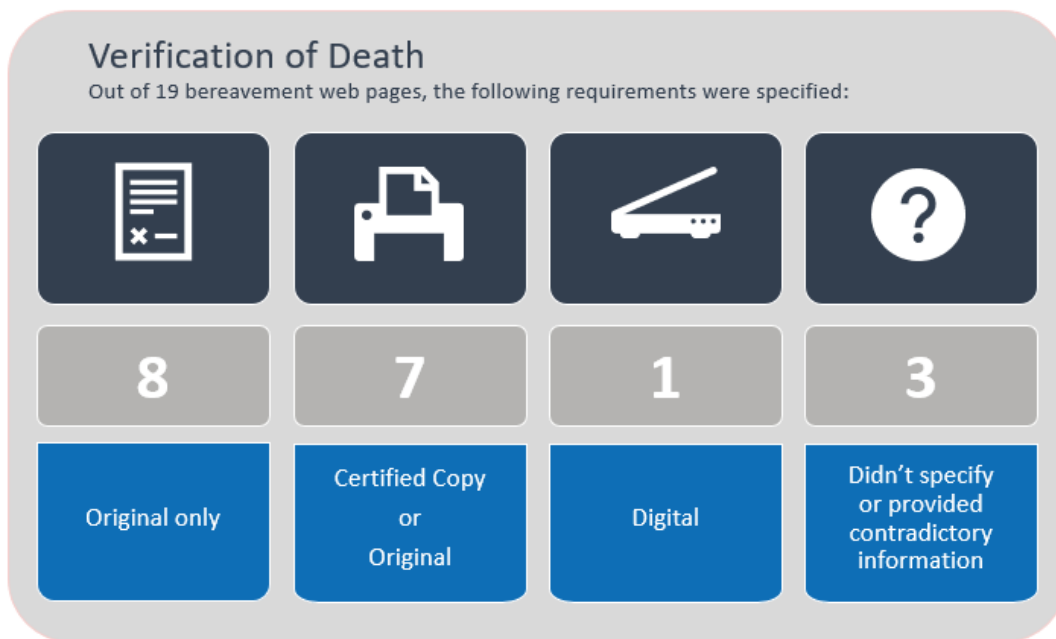


There is a balance to be struck between simplifying as far as possible whilst also retaining adequate security levels and due diligence so that people can't access information or gain funds improperly. However, there is a lot of scope to make improvements and the following sections outline what companies can do to make the journey easier whilst at the same time trying to achieve business retention.

4.1. Greater Industry Collaboration

Organisations should put more energy into working together to share best practice and collective ideas. But perhaps most importantly of all, to agree and **adopt consistent standards**. Two key areas where this could be achieved are as follows:

1. The **standardisation of paperwork** needed to close an account, with a view to accepting **digital documents** whenever possible. There's still such a great variance between companies as to whether they need to see the original death certificate, a certified copy or whether they'll accept a photocopy or scanned copy.



2. **Adopt a consistent level at which probate is required.** Of those surveyed, we found that the amount at which a Grant of Probate is requested varies from zero up to £75k.



There are still lots of places that request a Grant in every case.

The Grant is not actually required by the financial institution. It is something that is asked for to essentially cover their risk by ensuring that the version of the Will used is the correct one and remains uncontested.

Ben Dawkins, Director at Blou Consultancy Services

4.2. Centralised Customer Journey

For organisations where the customer base may hold multiple product sets, implement an internal 'Tell Us Once' strategy so that the customer only has to make one death notification, that will be communicated to all relevant business areas. Make it clear to the customer from their initial point of contact, what products will and if necessary, will not be covered by their notification.

4.2.1. Case Study: A Centralisation Journey

Around five years ago, a global organisation who operate across many business areas including transfer agency, wealth product platforms, asset management and retail banking; began a programme of centralising their bereavement processing, establishing a central Bereavement Support Team (BST), with a separate back-office wealth ops bereavement team to support.

A fantastic idea in theory, but how has it worked out in practice?

It was implemented fairly effectively, and the centralisation afforded a **reduced head count and resulting cost savings** for the organisation.

One of the key benefits for the customer is that it facilitates a **'tell us once' style of notification**. Notifications can be taken directly in branch, via post, email, phone, online via a website form, via a relationship manager (in person) and also via the DNS. All notifications flow directly to the BST, who also receive intra-day feeds to show all product sets held by the customer, thus providing a Single Customer View (SCV). The team then notify all business areas where products are held by the customer.

As the programme progressed, they moved towards BST being the 'gatekeeper service', sending out one holistic communication pack for all product sets. This **joined-up mailing exercise** helped to reduce the overall volume of paperwork received by the customer. Any responses are also sent back to this central team.

However, the outcome isn't a 100% cohesive end to end journey.

The complexities of the wealth products mean that **additional information requirements apply**.

For example, an original or certified copy of the death certificate or coroner's certificate is required in most circumstances. Additionally, some legacy wealth products were excluded from the centralisation and must be administered completely separately.

Whilst BST represented the centralised customer facing team, the staff had mainly come from the retail banking area and were specialists in retail but only generalists in other product specifics and therefore unable to answer the more complex queries around wealth products. This causes **additional handoffs to the back-office wealth ops bereavement team** to respond to. However, as they are now operating a reduced capacity due to the headcount reduction, this often-creates **bottlenecks and delays**.

Ultimately, **volumes of complaints are high**, with the main reason for complaint being delays in the process. Distress & Inconvenience payments are a minimum of £100 per complaint but can often be up to £3000 in addition to redress payments.

This example highlights the customer value in centralising bereavement services and operating a 'tell us once' service, particularly when the organisation covers multiple business areas and product sets. However, it also flags up several issues when this isn't implemented cohesively or with regard to the complexities of wealth products.

4.3. Notification Services

The Government already has an established Tell Us Once service which has developed over the past 10 years to now offer almost universal coverage of statutory bodies including TV licensing, the DVLA and most local councils.

There are also a growing number of similar services amongst the private sector. The biggest player amongst these is Equiniti's Death Notification Service (DNS), which allows users to input details of the notifier and the deceased; and select which organisations to notify from a dropdown. It checks the deceased's details against the General Records Office (GRO) database to confirm the death and verifies the identity of the notifier against Experian. The details plus results of the verification checks are sent to the selected organisations, who must then respond to the notification within a 10-day SLA.

The benefits to the customer, are that they can quickly and efficiently notify multiple organisations in one go via the online form. This can be done from anywhere in the world at any time. It removes the need for direct contact and painful repeat *'my <loved one> has died'* conversations. There is also the option of calling a UK based contact centre to provide the notifications, although volumes received this way are low.

For the organisations, the benefits are as follows:

- Data feeds directly into workflow, reducing volume of inbound calls, emails, postal notifications.
- Fast tracks the process (removes all scanning, post etc), allows them to jump certain steps in the usual process.
- Data is validated against GRO and Experian.
- Member organisations are notified daily via automated secure encrypted data transfer, with any unvalidated records flagged for further due diligence.



In-house Death Notification admin costs: *It ranges from £7.75 to £29.12; the large variance in cost is driven by channel of contact, the efficiency of the operating model, and the number of interactions needed.*

Equiniti – The business benefits of joining The Death Notification Service

So, is the DNS widely used amongst the Wealth industry? On the face of it, it would appear to be primarily used by retail banks, with many big names such as Barclays amongst the numerous members signed up. The CEO of one bereavement charity, referred to the DNS as 'the best kept secret' and believes they haven't shouted enough about their service in respect of it currently being used primarily by larger organisations within one particular sector only.

MOVING FORWARDS

Speaking to Dan Williams, Business Manager at Equiniti Benefactor, the service is in fact used by many organisations in the Wealth sector e.g., Scottish Widows. It's also used by companies such as Lloyds who disseminate the notification throughout all relevant business areas where the deceased held products. But Equiniti are actively promoting the service for greater take up amongst other industry sectors.

Beyond the Death Notification Service, there are a number of other fintech newcomers to this market including Settld and Life Ledger which are growing rapidly and attracting lots of investment backing.

So how would customers be made aware about such services? They have been advertised in media publications such as Good Housekeeping and on websites such as Money Saving Expert and Which, they are also signposted by their members on their own websites and within their own bereavement guides. And of course, the companies themselves are advertising through social media channels such as YouTube, by taking part and sometimes sponsoring conferences, participating in webinars etc. Some registrars will also mention these services when someone registers a death.

4.4. Accessible Contact Details

Most organisations have a dedicated bereavement team to communicate with customers and process claims. This is positive; however, our research has found that often the route to contacting this team could do with improvement.

Almost
1/3

Companies don't have a
bereavement webpage

Of the **34 companies researched**, almost a third did not have a dedicated bereavement webpage on their website. And of the companies that did have a bereavement webpage almost 50% of these were difficult to locate. Ideally, you should have a bereavement page that is accessible via a link on your home page, or the customer should be able to find this info within one or two clicks on the website.

How easy is it to find a bereavement page?

Of the 34 companies we researched, we were able to find a bereavement page for 24. But of those 24, there was a great variance in how easy and quick it was to find this page.



Where contact details are provided, these should include all possible methods of contact. Additionally, the phone number should be accompanied by opening days/hours and call charge rates.

Customers may commonly make contact using the first phone number or address that they come across within documentation left by the deceased or that they find online.

Where this is the case, ensure your processes are rigorous in order to provide a quick and

seamless handoff to the relevant team. For example, if a customer calls a central contact centre, ensure your call routing is set up to provide an option to contact the bereavement team to save the customer holding to speak to a more generalist team. Or failing that, ensure frontline teams are trained in how to deal with these customers sensitively, know where to direct them to and provide a 'warm handover' by transferring them directly and introducing them to the specialist team.

>40%

Companies did not include a bereavement contact number on their website

4.5. Signposting

Signposting to other services can be extremely valuable to the customer.

Your literature and web page should contain signposting to advertise other services that the customer may need to make use of, whether they be services offered by your company or external providers.

This could include links to practical advice, emotional support, financial support e.g. [moneyhelper.org.uk](https://www.moneyhelper.org.uk); and 'tell us once' style services. Signposting should include multi-channel contact details including weblinks, phone numbers and addresses where applicable.

Do you offer any additional services to help with bereavement?

"Bereavement Line" - this is outsourced, offers counselling, help with finances, help with what else you need to do when someone dies

But make sure it's specific signposting - one example found a signpost to gov.uk - this is not specific or useful!

Additionally, of the signposting found for existing living customers, few included provision for End of Life and Estate Planning. As we mentioned earlier, less than 50% of UK adults have a will (WealthAdviser.co, 2020). This can make the administration of their estate more complex and lengthy. The media and charities are making efforts to encourage people to make wills for example the recent 'Free Wills Month' campaign last October.

However, organisations can also do more in this area, by **signposting existing customers to advice and guidance regarding making a will, estate planning** and possibly also around the use of e-vaults to help with centrally storing information about all accounts held. There are a growing number of companies offering e-vaults such as Once I've Gone (now Keylu) and Legado. These facilitate the storage of a person's files, photos, documents etc. which may include important documents that are pertinent to the accounts and policies they hold and allow the customer to nominate a nominee who can access the information e.g. a solicitor or next of kin.

4.6. Digital

The pace of moving towards a more digital offering in the wealth industry can sometimes be slow. But here are some key areas of functionality where 'digital' could be incorporated:

- **Accept scanned certified copies** of the death certificate, rather than requiring original hard copies. This often comes down to an organisation's appetite to risk, but adoption of this approach has been accelerated somewhat due to the restrictions of covid.
- Alternatively, **verify the death using a credit reference service** such as Experian or Tracesmart (Lexis Nexis) who obtain regular feeds of registered deaths directly from the GRO via the Disclosure of death registration information (DDRI) scheme.
- **Sign up to the Death Notification Service** (who will also verify the death and the identity of the notifier), Settl'd, Life Ledger or other similar death notification services.
- **Verify customer identities electronically** with a credit reference agency such as Experian rather than asking for them to send in certified proof of name and address documents.
- **Accept digital signing** rather than wet signatures, by using an integrated electronic signing platform such as DocuSign.

Of course, there are costs and overheads involved in this, plus the responsibilities of due diligence of relying on a third party.



I think the industry needs to balance what original documents need to be seen in-line with the risk of fraudulent claims

Natasha Birchall – Simplify Consulting, Consultant

4.7. Channel of Choice

'Channel of Choice' is a much-used phrase. However, it really can make such a difference to customers during the bereavement process. Some people may not want to make multiple phone calls to different companies; whilst others may find post to be too slow an option, particularly if they're having to provide the original death certificate and also need it back in order to provide it to numerous other companies.



Channel of choice is hugely important

Dan Williams,

Business Manager, Equiniti Benefactor

Almost
2/3

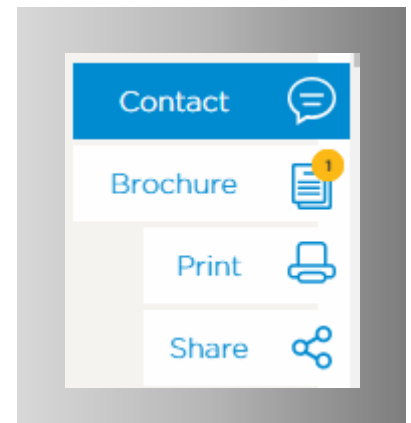
Companies don't facilitate
online submission of death
notification

With changing attitudes to digital journeys and an increasing number of people becoming digitally native, offering an online contact gives the customer a route to make a death notification quickly and efficiently

and in a slightly more detached way than a phone call. However, of the 34 companies we researched, almost two thirds don't offer this option.

Additional options include allowing the customer to specify their preferred method for ongoing communications, using a live chat with an option to download a transcript of the discussion and also offering a call back service at a preferred time specified by the customer.

One website we investigated offered an additional dashboard of options, allowing the user to interactively contact, print the page, share the page e.g., via email or even create their own personalised brochure of content from across the website which you can then name and save.



4.8. Communications

This is a complex area covering both communications that may be available via your company literature and on your website, verbal communications, plus communication outputs that you send to customers.

4.8.1. Verbal Communications

For verbal communications, it may be difficult for the customer to take in and remember all of the information provided over the phone. Therefore, it can be helpful to offer the following:

- Transcript of the call
- A call back service for them to ask any follow up questions
- Send out an info pack to back up what's been discussed

4.8.2. Bereavement Guide

A Bereavement Guide is a useful way of pulling together all the required information in one place. This can be made available on your website and sent to the customer as part of your correspondence outputs.

<50%

Companies included a
bereavement guide on
their webpage

Of the companies we researched, less than half provided access to a bereavement guide on their website.

MOVING FORWARDS

Some examples of what should be included in a bereavement guide are as follows:

Section	Description
Notifications	Where multiple product sets are held, be clear whether the notification will be disseminated to all relevant business areas. This is something that's often not specified up front.
Requirements*	What documentation and information needs to be provided in relation to the deceased, notifier, beneficiaries e.g. Death Certificate, GOP, identity verification documents etc.
Steps in the process	Articulate next steps including what will happen to the account during this time, such as ongoing fees and charges, distributions and Direct Debits. Plus, expected timescales e.g. how many working days on average it will take to complete an encashment
FAQs section	To answer common questions and provide necessary information up front.
'Jargon Buster' or Glossary	Use plain English and steer clear of corporate jargon
Links/Signposting	To internal services available and useful external websites/contact details re. finance, government, charities and emotional support

*For some companies, we found inconsistencies around what was being requested, as per the following example which are two excerpts from different pages of the same company website, one stating that only the original death certificate would be accepted, and the other stating that a certified copy would also be accepted.

Can I send copies of documents?

You must send us original documents - we can't accept copies of the death certificate or grant of representation, even if they're certified. We will, however, send the originals back to you as soon as possible.

When I need to send in documents relating to a bereavement, who can certify those documents?

We accept original copies, or certified copies, of:

- Death Certificate
- Death Certificate Verification Form
- Certificate of Confirmation
- Grant of Probate
- Wills






MOVING FORWARDS

What's listed above is obviously a lot of information and the difficulty is that inclusion of too much detail may result in key messages getting lost and cause more confusion. To try and overcome this, ensure the guide is structured well so that the key information is at the start and any additional 'nice to have' info is an appendix at the back. Also try to include visuals to communicate information – for example decision trees are a useful way of explaining the process and options.

If this information is presented as part of an online journey, it can be easier to tailor what is displayed to make it more targeted and relevant to each customer's personal circumstances.

4.8.3. Correspondence Outputs

In terms of outputs sent to customers, this requires careful crafting and there's a lot that could be said on this subject! There's a lot of information that needs to be provided and compliance aspects to be taken into account, but below are some key aspects that should be considered:

 Tone of Voice	 Automation	 Digital	 Suppression	 Testing
<p>This is a sensitive area and difficult to get right. Wording that might work for the majority of customers could cause upset or even offence to others.</p> <p>For example, I've recently worked on a comms project that puts '(deceased)' after the name of the customer, but have experienced that some find that to be insensitive.</p>	<p>Try to automate your suite of letters, forms, statements etc as far as possible. Many of the complaints raised relate to the use of manual letter templates where the user has to decide which paragraphs are relevant and which need to be deleted or manually type in data items. This is prone to user error.</p> <p>However, there should always be the option to manually edit an automated letter so that it can be tailored to cater for specific needs.</p>	<p>Provide a portal for customers to provide a receive documents electronically.</p> <p>This should also include functionality to display all documents relating to the case so that they can be easily viewed in one place, enable the customer to make notes, highlight, save, share and print documents.</p>	<p>Ensure suppression markers are used and correctly maintained and interpreted by the system to prevent certain standard outputs from being issued.</p> <p>Again, automate this where possible to avoid the risks associated with manual management.</p>	<p>There can be several sets of communications sent to the customer, particularly if the deceased had numerous accounts or policies with a company, and additionally if some of those accounts are jointly held.</p> <p>Ensure you've fully tested the end-to-end process to ensure the right comms are produced at the right time with the right content & attachments.</p>

Often the literature is far too complex or there is far too much of it. I believe that this is mainly due to the fact that the institutions wish to provide all the options up front.

However, getting 10-15 pages can be quite daunting. If you extrapolate that up for 3-4 institutions, you've got nearly 60 pieces of paper just from financial institutions on top of all the other things you need to then deal with - Council Tax, state pension, DVLA etc. It can soon become very unwieldy.

Ben Dawkins, Director at Blou Consultancy Services

MOVING FORWARDS





4.9. Complaints

What volume of bereavement related complaints do you receive p/a?

Approx. 300 p/a*, this will include complaints that are not directly our liability. On average we only have control over 30% of the bereavement complaints that come in for our product at the moment due to the complaint being outside of our control. This could include branch delays, items getting lost in transit, legacy system issues etc.

*Based on an overall customer base of 1m customers

Having discussed this topic with people from bereavement charities and from within the industry, the key areas of complaint that crop up in most conversations are as follows:

			
Time	Customer Service	Communications	Exception Cases
<p>The time taken both for the end-to-end process from notification through to closure of a case, but also the time taken for particular parts of the process.</p> <p>This can be from the outset for example having to hold on the phone for over an hour waiting to get through to a contact centre to notify the death; or waiting for 10-14 days after notification to receive a response from the organisation.</p>	<p>There are many reports of customers receiving poor customer when discussing a bereavement via phone, email or face to face, including staff having poor empathy, listening skills or saying tactless things.</p> <p>There are also complaints relating to staff not following through on commitments such as to call them back, send out certain information or make certain updates on system records.</p>	<p>This can cover a range of issues including the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unclear outputs/instructions • Excessive volumes of paperwork • Tactless wording within or sending of documents. For example, sending letters addressed to the person who has died, "or sending account closure notices with the words: 'We're sorry you're leaving us. What can we do to make you stay?'" (James Coney, ThisIsMoney.co.uk) • Not suppressing certain communications 	<p>Things going wrong with processes, for example when a case has unique needs or exceptions which can't be met by sticking to the standard process and the organisation is not prepared with how to deal with them.</p>

Look at the source of your complaints and seek to address any recurring themes. This will also have the business benefit of cost savings through reduced volumes amounts of D&I and redress payments.

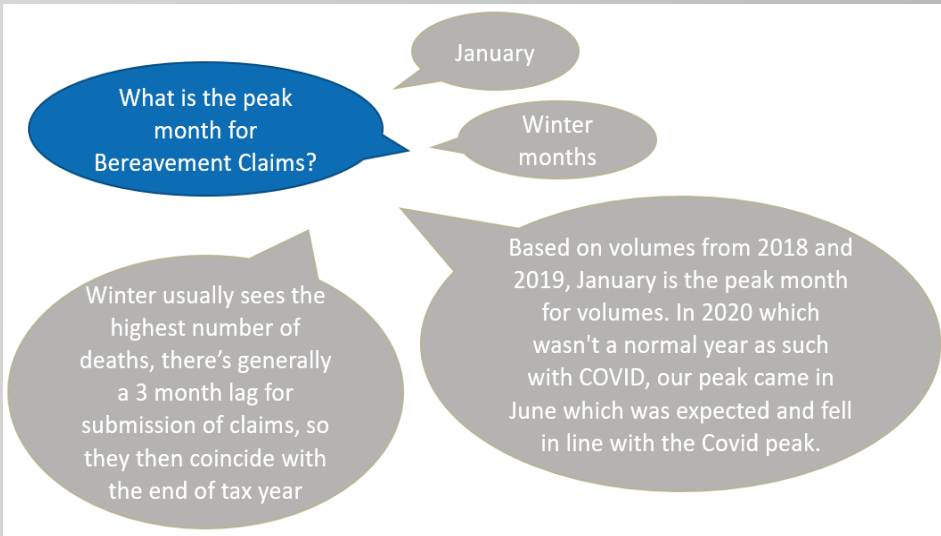
What are the main areas of complaints in relation to bereavements?

Being massively outside of SLA or regarding the requirements set out by HMRC

Complexity of the process and time to complete claims

Primarily delays, correspondence being addressed to deceased. Issues with HMRC payments resulting in additional tax charges (IHT).

4.10. Peaks in Volumes



Understand when peaks are likely to occur and make plans to handle these without causing deterioration of service and elongation of processing times. This is something particularly to be aware of if that peak then coincides with tax year end as it may cause resource constraints given all the additional processes and reporting that is required at this time of year.

4.11. The Need for Speed



Consider what can be done to speed up the process. Most companies have SLAs for each part of the process e.g., 5 days between notification and issuing an update to the customer. Yet, the majority of complaints relate to how long the process takes.

Our research also showed issues with in-progress cases stagnating - In one example, a death claim case had been open for over 25 years! There are a number of factors affecting how long a case takes to process, but often a case can remain open due to lost contact part way through. This can lead to ongoing admin costs, for example if fees are stopped at the point of death notification, then you could be administering the account for free for an undefined period of time.



MOVING FORWARDS

To reduce the time between notification and case closure, identify where the delays occur and take steps to reduce or eliminate these. This could include the following:

Handoffs

Ensure handoffs between different teams function quickly and efficiently.

It's not always possible to reduce the number of handoffs, but where they exist, ensure adequate controls are in place to avoid delays and cases getting lost.

Chasers

Send automated diarised chasers where required information and documentation hasn't been returned.

Public Records

Search public records on Gov.uk or via credit and tracing agencies to find the missing information required or re-establish lost contact in order to progress the case.

4.12. Training and awareness for relevant employees

Of all the companies we asked, none currently offer specific bereavement training to their staff.

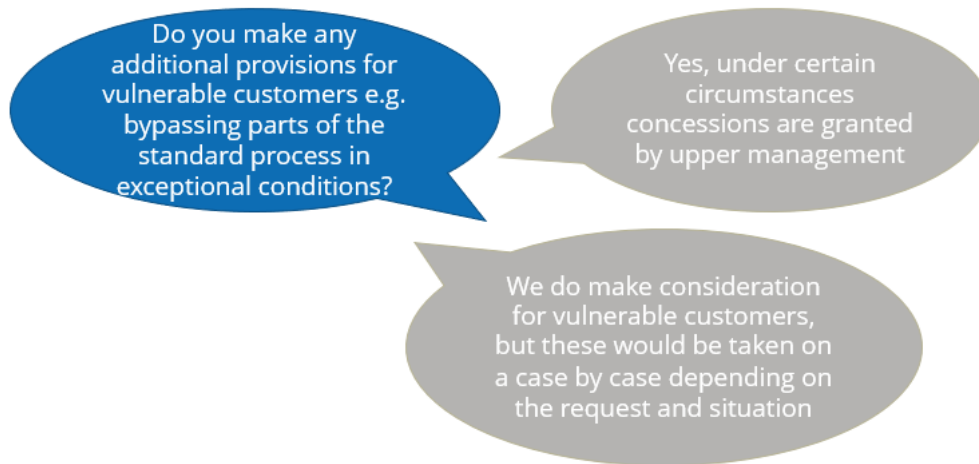
External companies and charities offer **specialist corporate bereavement training** that can be tailored to your organisation e.g., Cruse. This can help improve the organisation's handling of bereavement cases by emphasising a compassionate and supportive approach.

Training may cover aspects such as tone of voice, words to use and those to avoid. It can also help to instil empathy, however Nicki Osborne - M&G, Life & Pensions Customer Experience Programme Manager points out that it should be tailored appropriately by trying to gauge and understand from the customer where they're at, without going over the top.



A culture of adopting a human approach should be emphasised, rather than as is often the case, adopting a transactional approach e.g. I have a 5-minute target to get through this call.

4.13. Vulnerable Customers



Bereavement as a Life Event is an unexpected vulnerability and can

cause further vulnerabilities such as mental ill-health or risk of over-indebtedness. This can be made worse if the customer suffers difficulties and delays when trying to engage with organisations to deal with the deceased's accounts and policies, thus potentially causing them disadvantage or harm.

Make provisions within your process to recognise vulnerable customers, for example, educate your team on indicators and key words to look/listen out for that indicate vulnerability. Then make a call on how to handle that case, assessing the vulnerability needs versus risk in determining whether to override the normal process in order to provide the best outcome for the customer.



Firms should understand how vulnerability can be perpetuated or worsened by their own actions, or inaction

FCA - Guidance for firms on the fair treatment of vulnerable customers



CHAPTER 5

Predicted Trends

5. Predicted Trends

The ongoing progress in the realms of Open Finance and Digital Identity will eventually filter through to encourage enhancements to bereavement processing.

At some point in the future, although still some years off, **digital proof of death certificates** are likely to become a reality. This will be a big win for customers and make the death notification process

much easier. There are a couple of initiatives rumbling along in the background which may help bring this to fruition:



- The Register of Birth and Death Bill 2019 aims to reform the way births and deaths are registered to move from a paper-based to an electronic register.



- In parallel with this, the Government Home Office recently procured a company (Kainos Software Ltd) for **digital death certification**. They will be working with this delivery partner to develop a service which will facilitate online registration of a death.

The expansion of services such as Death Notification Service and Settled is also to be expected.

It may also be possible to use the **Pensions Dashboards** for tracking down pensions of the deceased.

Increased use of 'digital' as a channel. This would include more companies offering online forms for notification, portals for submission of relevant documentation/information and possibly also increased use 'Live Chat', with options to save off/download the transcripts of what was discussed.

It's a taboo subject, but there are an increasing number of tools available targeted at getting people to think of their own mortality and plan for it more up front such as **digital vaults**. Whilst it's a sensible thing to do, it's also very time consuming to set up and maintain. Given that more than 50% of the UK population don't have a will, take up of such services also remains low. But if some of the big will writing companies such as Co-Op and FareWill were to start offering this as a service, usage may increase.



CHAPTER 6

The Final Chapter

6. Conclusion

For too long, and perhaps because it generally represents an outflow of money rather than being a profitable area of the business, the bereavement process has had a lack of focus and money spent on it.

We have demonstrated that **there are a number of areas where companies are currently lacking**, which results in poor customer experiences at a time when the customer is already vulnerable and suffering. We've outlined the **many opportunities for improvement** across the customer journey.

Of course, there needs to be a balance between what is best for your organisation and what is best for the customer. Ultimately, whilst there are constraints of cost, resources, technology, security etc to consider, the customer needs should also be there front and centre. It should be acknowledged that by investing more in optimising this customer journey, **you will achieve both tangible and intangible benefits in the form of enhanced brand reputation, savings in time and money, and increased customer acquisition and asset retention.**

If your organisation is looking to make improvements in your bereavement process and need assistance in reviewing your current processes, controls and hotspots regarding complaints, please get in touch with us today at info@simplifyconsulting.co.uk



There's a difference between a difficult process and a process going wrong – it's always going to be unpleasant, but the aim should be to make it more bearable

Steven Wibberley, CEO Cruse

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Nina Cherry is a Wealth Consultant at Simplify Consulting, working with a wide range of clients on a variety of different engagements within the Wealth Management, Life & Pension sectors.

With over 20 years' experience as a systems analyst, tester and solutions design analyst and numerous professional qualifications including an ISEB Intermediate Certificate in Enterprise & Solutions Architecture, an ISEB Diploma in Business Systems Development and a PMI Retirement Provision Diploma, Nina has a wide and varied skillset and is experienced in working on large scale projects and programmes.

She enjoys collaborating closely with stakeholders from around the world and from of all levels of seniority, is tenacious and always focused on delivering the best outcomes for the clients.

Recent work has included testing and verification for the implementation of a new Transfer Agency platform, mapping as-is and to-be operational business processes and associated controls, designing APIs to support core banking processes, acting as data, interface and test SME on a pension transformation programme and leading a project to write a suite of business correspondence specifications for a Transfer Agency.



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