

# Death in Service Procedure

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## Introduction

The death of an employee can be a traumatic experience, especially for those colleagues who worked closely with the member of staff concerned.

This procedure clarifies the practical steps that need to be taken by the University to record and acknowledge a death in service as well as outlining the supportive measures that are available and may be put in place for the benefit of colleagues. This procedure applies to employees who are in the service of the University only.

The death of a retired employee follows a different procedure and so should be reported to the Pensions team and the People Hub directly.

## Notification

The University might be notified of a death in service in a variety of ways. Notification might include contact being made by the next of kin, via a colleague, an accident at work, or in the case of an accident outside work, via a representative from the relevant authorities. In some cases, the University may find out about the death of a colleague when they do not arrive for work. Once concerns are raised, contact should be made with the next of kin or emergency contact. It is for this reason that we ask colleagues to ensure contact details of their next of kin remain up to date via the Staff Self Service intranet page.

The death of an employee may be as a result of a long-term illness, or it may occur suddenly. Managers will need to respond sensitively to individual circumstances leading to the death of their colleague and respond with empathy to colleagues, who will undoubtedly be shocked and upset.

The following section of the procedure outlines the practical steps that will need to be taken by the University, once notification of the death of a colleague is received.

## Essential steps, with designated responsibilities

When the University has been notified that a colleague has died, their Head of Unit and line manager must be notified immediately.

### Unit/Manager responsibilities

The line manager will be responsible for notifying the People Hub and Pensions team of the death in service immediately.

The Head of Unit and/or line manager should speak to those who were closest to the deceased (for example, their team, department) as soon as possible to advise them of the death of their colleague and offer support. Where appropriate, Heads of Unit may wish to send their colleagues home for the rest of the day. Once colleagues closest to the deceased have been notified, wider communications should be arranged for the rest of the Unit.

Those communicating information about the death of an employee should not give out any information that is sensitive or contrary to the family's/next of kin's wishes or instructions. If in doubt, please contact People Hub for advice.

Staff will need time to come to terms with what has happened and will undoubtedly provide support to each other at this difficult time, but they should also be reminded of the support available from trained counsellors via the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP). Some practical steps managers can take to support colleagues are outlined in further detail at the end of this procedure.

The Pensions team will contact the next of kin and send a letter of condolence on behalf of the University. Depending on the circumstances and the wishes of the next of kin, the line manager may also be in direct contact with the next of kin to discuss tributes to the individual, and arrange collection of personal items, for example. The line manager should notify the Pensions team of the date of the funeral arrangements, when known.

If the Unit wish to make any tributes on OU Life, these are to be emailed directly to [OULife-Editor@open.ac.uk](mailto:OULife-Editor@open.ac.uk). Any form of communication of this nature, relating to the death of a colleague and/or the funeral arrangements should be written sensitively and should be aligned with the next of kin's wishes.

The line manager should arrange for the collection of the deceased colleagues' personal effects. The next of kin may prefer to collect these in person, or where appropriate, another colleague may wish to gather these items together and arrange for them to be collected by, or delivered to, the next of kin, outside office hours.

The Unit should arrange for a representative from the Unit to attend the funeral of the deceased staff member and authorise the time for their colleagues to attend, where appropriate.

Arrangements for sending a wreath, or donation to a charity up to the same value, will normally be made by the Unit (in alignment with the wishes of the next of kin). Additionally, although there is no obligation, colleagues may also wish to undertake their own collection or fundraising activity, at their own expense, for a charity of the family's choice.

If colleagues wish to request a memorial plaque for a deceased member of University staff, please complete the [Memorial Plaque Request Form](#) and return to Estates-Liaison. Please note, requests may only be made for a deceased member of university staff and not for a deceased student. Estates anticipate a 6-week lead time following confirmation of proof. The plaque will be created and installed on the University Memorial based at Walton Hall Campus.

## **Pensions**

The Pensions team should be informed immediately of the death (and the date of the funeral when known). The Pensions team will:

- Notify staff payments of the death in service
- Draft a letter of sympathy to the next of kin for signature by the Vice Chancellor.
- Arrange for the University flag to be flown at half-mast on the day of the funeral.

- Obtain from the next of kin the death certificate, birth certificate, marriage certificate or civil partnership certificate (where appropriate) so that settlement of any pension benefits may be made.

Any salary due at the time of death (payment is usually made for the total month and outstanding leave is converted to a cash payment) is paid into the bank/building society account in the usual way. If the account has been closed/frozen, the monies will be returned to the OU by the bank/building society. The Staff Payments Office will arrange for a cheque to be drawn and subsequently forwarded to the next of kin or paid to the estate.

Any outstanding loans (e.g. personal loans) will normally be written off where the deceased leaves behind close relatives, otherwise they will be charged to the estate.

## **People Services**

The People Hub record the death in service on University systems to prevent inappropriate communications being sent out.

People Services will also provide advice to managers to support them in communicating the death in service to staff and provide support with any other general queries they may have about the steps they need to take to formally notify other areas of the University of the death. Where necessary, the Resourcing Hub will advise managers on the possible cover arrangements for the deceased staff member's work.

## **Operational considerations**

The University acknowledges that the death of a staff member is incredibly difficult for all concerned. However, management must act quickly to ensure the deceased staff member's duties are covered. Depending on the role the individual occupied, a backlog of work may form quickly and place undue pressure on colleagues who are already struggling to cope with the death of their colleague. Therefore, the appropriate arrangements should be made as soon as possible to alleviate feelings of uncertainty amongst colleagues and to ensure that the Unit's operational requirements are met.

## **Practical steps to support staff**

### **Managers**

As the deceased staff member's manager, it is likely that close bonds will have been formed with them during the time you have worked together.

Remember that even though you are the manager, and you will have responsibilities to fulfil during this difficult time, your feelings matter too. Although, as part of your role staff will inevitably look to you to provide them with support, be aware that this could become distressing for you. Where this becomes particularly challenging, or you need additional support or guidance in managing your team during this difficult time, please speak to your line manager in the first instance, or the People Hub for practical support.

Remember that you are not responsible for addressing the team's grief. Try to take time for yourself. Seek support from colleagues around you, and utilise the Employee Assistance Programme, where necessary.

## Colleagues

Staff working in a unit where a colleague has died, may experience a variety of feelings in the days, weeks and months that follow, such as:

- Shock
- Depression
- Frustration/Anger
- Disbelief
- Tearfulness
- Lack of concentration
- Anxiety
- Sadness
- Helplessness

The intensity of these feelings will vary from person to person and will depend on the personal bond that colleagues had with the colleague concerned. To some, they would have been like family, and others may not have known them well at all. There is no set process or timetable to deal with grief. Staff should therefore be treated sensitively, respectfully and with empathy as they come to terms with what has happened.

It is highly likely that job performance and some interactions may be affected by the stress of the bereavement. In time, things will return to normal. However, in the early stages of grief, managers may observe some work-related issues such as:

- Loss of productivity
- Low morale
- Issues with time management and attendance
- Shock and confusion

Managers should address these issues with tact and diplomacy and bear in mind that the reallocation of the deceased colleagues' duties could give rise to feelings of guilt and uneasiness. There may also be certain work situations that remind colleagues of the deceased staff member, which prompt unexpected emotional reactions. Managers should implement the following to support staff:

- Create an environment where staff can speak openly about their feelings with one another. Staff may be upset but it's important that they can express their feelings in an open manner, if they wish. Equally, ensure staff who don't wish to discuss their feelings openly, have access to someone to speak to in private. Managers should make it clear to employees that they are there to offer support, where possible.
- Listen to staff and acknowledge their grief.
- Don't be afraid to have a conversation and share your own relevant experience, it may help others.
- Encourage staff to get away from work for a few minutes of reflection. It is often simple things such as a lunchtime walk or having a quick coffee with a colleague, that provides staff with the space they need to come to terms with what has happened.
- Refer staff for professional support. If the circumstances of the death are unexpected or occurred in the workplace, the emotional trauma experienced may be more severe and the need for outside help will be greater. If it appears that someone is really struggling to cope, express concern and encourage them to seek professional support via the Employee Assistance Programme or one of the other resources listed below. The Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) is a free and confidential service available to all University staff.

## Useful References and external support

Wellbeing+  
Employee Assistance Programme  
[The Bereavement Trust](#)  
[Bereavement UK](#)  
[Mind](#)  
[StrongMen](#)