



TCF NEWS

A newsletter for supporters of The Compassionate Friends

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Retreat for those in early bereavement

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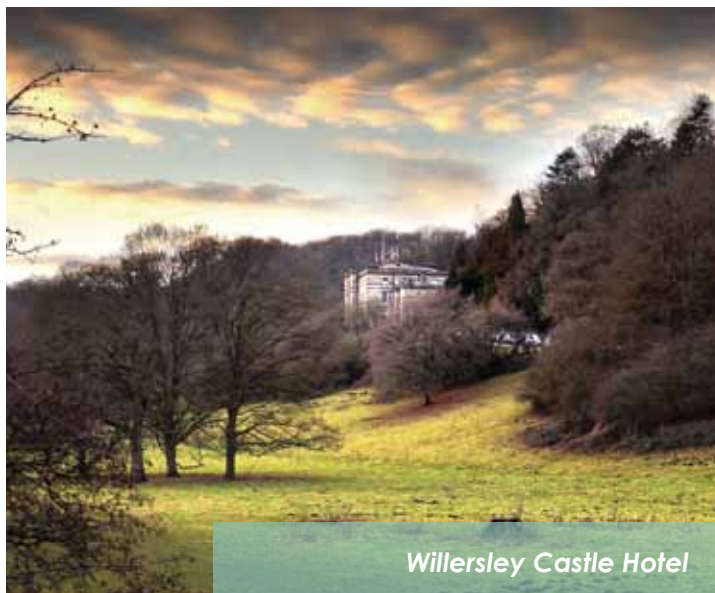
In mid January, The Compassionate Friends retreat weekend for parents and siblings in early bereavement welcomed 62 parents and 3 siblings - despite some tussles with snow - to Willersley Castle Hotel in Derbyshire.

The weekend began with tea, cakes, wine and small groups getting to know each other and our children and siblings. After dinner we watched the short film **"Say Their Name"** introduced by Jimmy Edmonds and Jane Harris, the filmmakers.

Day 2 and 3 of the retreat saw discussion groups on a range of topics, including coping with strong emotions, caring for surviving siblings, self-care, managing PTSD, dealing with social situations, sudden death, the death of a child through prolonged illness, death as a result of substance misuse, a group especially for bereaved fathers, and one discussing grieving as a couple, as well as many more.

What a wonderful privilege to meet such lovely people... thank you to all who came to our few days together and to those volunteers giving their time to make the weekend happen. We hope you found comfort and support by being together, sharing your stories and your beloved children. We hope you made new friends and connections to help and sustain you as you navigate this new life without your sons and daughters, brothers and sisters.

Carolyn Brice



Willersley Castle Hotel



Nisha's memory candle jar remembering her daughter, Kishori



Remembering Bailey

A parent's view on the retreat...

Judy writes here about her experience of the weekend... "On 13th January my daughter Naomi and I joined a group of "Compassionate Friends" for a weekend in the beautiful Derbyshire countryside. A retreat for the newly bereaved at Willersley Castle.

We were incredibly well looked after by kind, friendly hotel staff and there was so much delicious food.

Everyone received a wonderfully warm welcome from the volunteers, caring people further along this painful journey than we are.

I generally don't like to venture far from home these days and I have to admit I almost did wish I was climbing into my own bed on the first evening even though we had had a lovely meal (and fizz) with companionable people in a very relaxed atmosphere. But I was so glad I stayed. It was hard at times, every one of us with a sad story to tell but we were encouraged to tell our stories, to talk about our beloved children, laugh and cry if we wished. And that is what made the weekend so special, we have all lost someone we love unconditionally so we have an innate understanding of one another. We may differ in how we cope with our grief but with gentle guidance from the supportive volunteers and by just being together, whether decorating candle jars, going for a walk or a swim, listening and talking to each other we came to understand we are not alone in the dark.



Photo credit: Jimmy Edmonds

Walking at Willersley Castle

I learned quite a lot, that there is much comfort in the companionship of others in the same position, that it is ok to say no if being pushed into doing something you don't want to do, that there is definitely no right or wrong way to grieve, that although grief doesn't end it is possible to learn to live with it and that it is absolutely fine to laugh.

I did feel rather lost leaving all the lovely people we had met, as I said to Carolyn it was good to enjoy little moments of light and sparkle and I look forward to staying in touch with new found friends. It is also good to know TCF are there to offer support whenever it is needed.

Judy Veale

PS I would encourage everyone to read Gina Claye's book – **'Don't Let Them Tell You How To Grieve'**. I love her poems, funny, warm and so true "

Annual Scottish Gathering 'From Darkness into Light'

This is an opportunity to be with others who know that agony and anguish of losing a much loved child, grandchild or sibling. For some your loss may have happened recently, for others some time ago, but here with us you can share freely your own precious and special memories and speak about your loved ones with others who do truly care and understand.

When: Friday 12th – Sunday 14th May 2017

Where: Royal George Hotel, Perth

Book your place: £210 per/person for the weekend with full board.

There are also other options to attend for just one day and one night - either Friday or Saturday, or as a day visitor. You can also extend your stay to cover Thursday night and/or Sunday night bed.

For more information and to download a booking form visit www.tcf.org.uk (go to EVENTS/SCOTTISH GATHERING) or please contact Maureen McAninch on **01738 631 406** or email maureen.mcaninch@blueyonder.co.uk



Comments from previous Scottish Gatherings:

"I had the tremendous privilege of being able to listen to and share other parents' experiences. I was no longer alone in my grief...I didn't have to try and explain it or justify my feelings or apologise because everyone there just understood. I felt wrapped in a blanket of warmth and love".

"Being in the presence of other bereaved parents, who truly understand, enabled me to let go of that mask - the mask that can at times be so tiring to wear - and to be myself - even if only for a weekend".

"It was not a sad and sombre affair but was full of lots of laughter and enjoyment and I have come away with a treasure of memories and renewed strength. I gained so much from the weekend".

Introducing our new Chair of Trustees Maria Ahern

Maria writes... "If ever there was a lesson in planning your life.....or rather not planning your life, this must surely be it. Of all the things I might have planned or thought I would be doing, introducing myself as the new Chair of a bereavement charity was definitely not one of them. But here I am. I introduce myself to you as James Ahern's proud mum and the new Chair of the Board of Trustees.

Some of you already know me. Hello again. To those that I haven't met, allow me to give you a brief introduction.

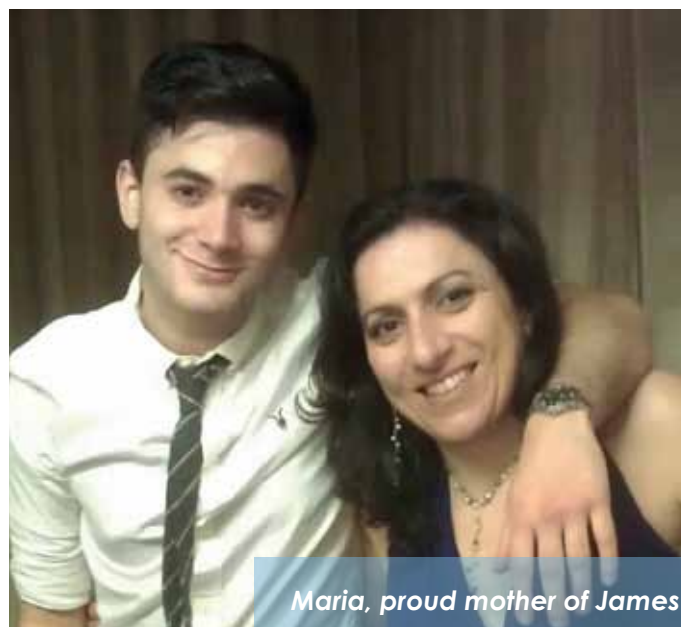
James, my only child, died in a road accident in August 2014. He was 22.

As I searched for a way to acclimatise to a world without my son in it, I met The Compassionate Friends, and quickly formed close and supportive friendships. I met the inimitable Dr. Margaret Brearley, my predecessor in the Chair, and as she metaphorically took my hand and guided me along, I began to find my way in this new world. I was initially asked to help organise the Cadogan Hall fundraising event for TCF in the autumn of 2015 and I was appointed a trustee and Company Secretary in November 2015. I would like to add here my huge gratitude to Margaret and to the trustees who have helped me, guided me and ultimately trusted me with the huge honour of electing me Chair. I pledge to them, and to all of you, my enthusiastic commitment to this charity and to all its members and to continue in Margaret's footsteps. Thank you Margaret for helping me to find my smile and for all of your continued strength and support.

Soon after James died, The James Ahern Foundation was created "Enabling the Pursuit of Passion" in young people. We raise funds and provide grants to help young people achieve their goals - a legacy for a compassionate young man who dedicated so much of his time to helping others who didn't have his advantages.

Working for these two organisations is a rewarding way to honour my son's amazing, but short, life.

What else? Well, soon after James left, I started to write what have become known as "The Jamie Letters". These have become popular, even with people who didn't know James. For me they are a way of maintaining my relationship with James and keeping him involved in everything that I do. I talk about him constantly, (as I did before he left!) and I find ways to include him in every new experience. I passionately believe that we need to dispel the traditional approach to grief and that we need to change common attitudes to bereavement. To that end, I will continue to promote this charity publicly and very loudly! Some of you may have heard my recent brief spot on BBC Radio 5 Live when I took part in a bereavement phone in. Promoting the charity will be one of my main aims for my time as Chair.



Having experienced, first hand, the comforting and strengthening force of being in company of others who truly understand, I am committed to making this support available to as many people as we can reach. I have benefitted enormously from the warmth, friendship and guidance of those more travelled on this journey than I am, and I aspire to help others in the same way. I would like to encourage more bereaved parents to help pass that support on to the newly bereaved. I'd like to see more support groups available in more geographical locations and more social gatherings teaching people how to smile again and passing on hope to those who come to us without it.

With the rest of my time I have a full and busy practice as a barrister specialising in Family Law and Divorce Law, I am Head of Chambers and a trained mediator. Add in a lot of knitting and a spot of poker playing and you have a small picture of the woman who is first, last and foremost, proud to be James Ahern's mum."

Our current Trustees are:

Chair: Maria Ahern

Vice Chair: Susan Hughes

Margaret Brearley

Gina Claye

Jane Harris

Jen Hughes

Lyndon Hughes (co-opted January 2017)

Vicky Joseph

Nicola Martin

Andrew Miller (Company Secretary)

Nigel Taylor (co-opted)

A Huge “Thank You” to Outgoing Chair Dr Margaret Brearley

The Trustees of the Compassionate Friends wish to extend a huge “Thank You” to Dr Margaret Brearley who has been Chair of Trustees for the past 3 years.

As many of you will have experienced, Margaret has led our charity during that time with kindness, warmth, intelligence and wonderful wisdom, as well as an enormous amount of hard work, as for most of that time she has also been acting as our unpaid CEO!

Under Margaret's marvellous leadership, TCF has truly blossomed. The trustee board has been strengthened with several new accomplished individuals having been appointed to help drive our charity forward; Carolyn Brice has recently been promoted to CEO; we have a new Telephone Helpline Manager – Ruth Mercier - and new staff are being recruited so we can do more to support bereaved parents and siblings.

Other innovations that have happened under Margaret's stewardship include several new supportive weekends throughout the year including one just for those in early bereavement and one for parents bereaved through suicide or substance use. These have been proven very popular and successful with great feedback from those who attended. Margaret has played a key role in both these new weekends supporting grief stricken mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters, giving bucket loads of empathy and gentle reassurance and hope.

She has also played a leading role in The National Gathering every year, delivering many opening and closing speeches, running discussion groups and spending hours talking and listening to many who have benefited from her calm presence and wise words.

Margaret has also reinstated the Annual General Meeting into the TCF calendar. These meetings have been well received and a great opportunity to network with a large group of TCF members and volunteers. At the most recent AGM – held last December – we were honoured to have renowned broadcaster Michael Rosen as a speaker, all arranged by Margaret as he is a neighbour of hers!

She also organised a wonderful classical music concert as a TCF fundraiser which took place at the Cadogan Hall in London in 2015 with The Doctors Orchestra playing led by her conductor husband Stephen. This magnificent event will long be remembered by all who attended.

Margaret has attended several international bereavement conferences as a representative of TCF UK, and brought back latest ideas from grief experts and international colleagues from TCF in other countries.



Photos credit: Andrew Miller

She has also represented TCF at many networking events in the UK spreading the word about the wonderful work of our charity.

Many of you will have heard Margaret talk about parental grief often including symptoms of post-traumatic stress. She has researched this area thoroughly and given several in depth speeches explaining why so many of us – particularly in the early years after our loss - may have experienced anxiety, panic, extreme restlessness, fear of going out or travelling, inability to socialise, and other seemingly irrational behaviours. Her words – reinforcing that all these behaviours are actually quite normal in our extreme grief and do usually eventually lessen with time – have been enormously reassuring to many.

Margaret has the gift of making people feel appreciated – so important in our charity which runs almost totally on volunteers. Margaret has truly nurtured our volunteers resulting in renewed enthusiasm and energy throughout the organization. As a result, we have more people stepping forward into support roles and the atmosphere among the volunteer team is warm and uplifting.

If all this wasn't enough Margaret has also hosted many informal get-togethers for bereaved parents at her beautiful home in North London. These have been lovely warm events full of friendship and food where many broken hearted individuals have found some comfort and hope.

It truly has been an honour and a privilege to work with Margaret these last 3 years. We are venturing forth now on this firm base that Margaret has created as a united and happy team, and The Compassionate Friends will be eternally grateful for everything she has given.

Thankfully Margaret is not disappearing from our charity. She remains as a Trustee, a member of the Pastoral Committee, and will be part of the volunteer team at many of our supportive weekends hopefully for many years to come.

**So THANK YOU MARGARET from the bottom of our hearts.
You are a real inspiration to us all.
Sue Hughes, on behalf of the TCF Trustees**

We have received so many wonderful comments about Margaret that it is impossible to print them all here. We will make sure Margaret receives them all but here are just a few which reflect just how much she is appreciated.

"Margaret has been an inspirational Chair, tirelessly working for TCF, and she has touched so many hearts with her kind, caring ways. I personally have been extremely touched by the wonderful emails that she has sent me over the last few years, for example after my son Marcus ran the London Marathon for TCF...despite her extremely busy schedule she always took time to send a beautiful note of thanks or good wishes, and these I will always treasure. Thank you Margaret for all you have done for TCF and for your exceptional leadership of our small but very special charity. We will miss you terribly as Chair." **Christina Ford**

"I cannot speak highly enough of what Margaret has done for TCF. Throughout my long involvement with TCF, no Chair has done more for the charity than she. Her infinite patience, kindness, and, most of all, her encouragement to all bereaved parents has been truly exceptional. I know many bereaved parents who have said they have been helped by her deep concern for their situation, and that she has given them real hope for the future. Margaret - TCF will always remember with deep gratitude all that you have done and achieved for our charity." **Adrian Keach**

"Margaret: You are simply a wise and witty woman and most importantly ever loving mother of Joshua. You have been an inspiration since you took the helm at TCF, and your generosity and ability to always see the positives even in the most challenging of circumstances has often left me speechless. Margaret you are quite simply a one in a million." **Jane Harris**

"Margaret is welcoming, supportive, vulnerable, intuitive. I see my pain in her and I see her surviving. What a wonderful example for us! Thank you Margaret." **Jancis Cammarota**

"Margaret is a total star, a brilliant strategist that helped steer TCF into the vibrant charity it is today and one of the most compassionate people I have ever met. Our children shared the same name (JOSHUA) and I am so glad that we have met even if in the most tragic of circumstances." **Jimmy Edmonds**

"As editor of the TCF Newsletter during the three years that Margaret was Chair of Trustees I was helped enormously by her perceptive advice and inspired by her extraordinarily intelligent and profound contributions to text. All of her strenuous work was carried out with no complaint and with a smile that made everybody try that little bit harder. Sometimes I thought she had wings!" **Mick Wilson**

"I find you very inspirational, Margaret, a wise, reassuring, compassionate soul who has a wonderful and very calming

presence and just the most amazing way with words. I am enormously grateful for all you have done." **Ruth Mercier**

"Thank you Margaret not only for the time you have given to TCF but also for being as gentle and caring a person as I could ever hope to meet. You have been an inspiration to many people." **Kath McKnight**

"I credit Margaret with helping me find my smile and keep my sanity. Thank you dear lady. I am blessed to have you in my life." **Maria Ahern**

"I want you to know how much help TCF has been to me in these last months. You have been the face of the organisation to me - personally greeting me and always being welcoming and so very very kind. Thanks for all your hard work - I hope to be able help TCF in the future so that your legacy continues." **Nisha Shah**

"Margaret has given unstintingly of herself over these last three years, as she has put her life and work on hold. She brought to TCF the vast reserves of her intellect, her rigour, her tenacity, her networking skills and her clear-sightedness. Along with this, she brought her personality: her kindness, tact, wisdom, compassion, her great depth of understanding of grief and the grieving process, her enormous understanding of human nature, of the strengths and weaknesses of us all. But above all, she brought and gave freely to us all her caring and her love. We have been truly blessed to have had three years of Margaret's precious time." **Jan Alcock**

"Margaret has been a genuine inspiration to me. I feel that she was most definitely influential in dragging me up from the bottom of the 'pit of despair' and starting to face a new future. Meeting Margaret and the Compassionate Friends was like walking into a big, safe hug. She has welcomed me to the gatherings, listened to my story, held my hand, wiped my tears and most importantly with her wise words opened the door to hope. From the bottom of my heart thank you Margaret." **Sharon Blore-Rimmer**



Photos credit: Jimmy Edmonds

Helpline - Volunteers Training Day

We were delighted to welcome 16 of our wonderful team of National Helpline volunteers to London on Saturday 4th February for a Training Day organised by Ruth Mercier, our Helpline Coordinator.



It was great that so many of the team were able to be there and had an opportunity to meet up, participate in a workshop run by a MIND trainer and share experiences. All the team are bereaved parents themselves and have gone through specialist Helpline training. If you are interested in applying to be a Helpline volunteer, you can find more information on our website at www.tcf.org.uk – go to HELP US/VOLUNTEER FOR TCF – or call us.

Lou Allerhand, who joined the National Helpline team last year shared her thoughts with us about the day...

"I have been a helpline volunteer for about a year. I have never attended a TCF Gathering or group because I have felt too scared of breaking down my fragile defences. Working alone at home on the helpline can be quite isolating, so to attend this training day at Jessica's Heart was a heart warming experience. In addition to the training day nine of us travelling from further afield spent the previous night in a London hotel and had the pleasure of sharing dinner and breakfast together with lots of talk and sharing of experiences.

The training day itself began with coffee and introductions, followed by a warm welcome from Ruth and Carolyn and apologies from those unable to attend. The morning training session was presented by Janet Lallysmith from Mind. The topic was "Offering Support to People Expressing Suicidal Thoughts". Janet is a bereaved mum herself and guided

the session with great sensitivity and insight, through group discussion and role play. Many volunteers had experienced suicidal feelings themselves and we drew the conclusion that suicidal thoughts are a part of grief, a longing to be with our child, to escape from feelings of guilt, isolation, alienation and unbearable pain. Helpline volunteers can acknowledge suicidal thoughts and feelings without judgement. We can reassure the caller that they are not alone in having such feelings and we can enable them to explore them fully without censorship. Janet provided useful handouts underpinning what we had learned.

After a delicious lunch, the afternoon session began with a talk by Graham on the Tokyo English Lifeline (TELL), a helpline on which he volunteered for 30 years. He drew an analogy between the various forms of loss the TELL callers expressed and those of the bereaved parents he later talked to on the TCF helpline. Claire and Annie gave presentations on their work for Cruse and The Samaritans which supplemented the morning's session and gave an insight into the training, structure and practice of both organisations. The commitment, time and energy all three put into channelling their loss into helping and supporting bereaved people is very humbling.

Ruth then presented the group with a questionnaire about ways the administration and support services for the helpline could be improved and there was a general discussion about implementing various suggestions which would benefit both volunteers and our callers. This led into a discussion about how we can best care for our own needs so that we give our best to callers without diminishing our own reserves.

Finally Carolyn gave a brief resume of the latest developments within TCF, including the projected move to new premises, upcoming events and developments to the website which she encouraged everyone to explore.

"We can reassure the caller that they are not alone in having such feelings and we can enable them to explore them fully without censorship."

Spending time with other helpline volunteers was such a pleasure. We are a diverse bunch and the circumstances of our losses are different, but we all work on the helpline to honour our children and to try to bring a positive to something so very negative and that feels like a true bond. Thank you to Ruth, Carolyn and TCF for bringing us all together".

Thank you to Diana...



In December 2016 Diana Youdale came to the end of her terms as a Trustee of our charity, and all of us wish to thank her for the tireless commitment to, and her tremendous championing of, The Compassionate Friends over the years.

Diana became involved with The Compassionate Friends when Caroline, her precious only child, was killed in 1992 at aged 15.

Diana writes... "At the time I was a GP Practice Manager, a role I found impossible to return to, needing time to grieve and to try to find a new meaning and purpose to life. During this time I was greatly supported by TCF friends who

understood the all-encompassing hell that you find yourself in after your child dies. This proved invaluable to me and my family after the further tragic deaths of a brother, niece and nephew"

In time, Diana founded a charity in her daughter's name providing pets for a children's hospice, helped found a charity for bereaved children, and became a volunteer for Cruse and Winston's Wish. She is also an accredited Play and Creative Arts Therapist and Supervisor, specialising in loss and trauma, working with CAMHS and other organisations.

Over the years, Diana has undertaken many and varied roles within TCF, from supporting others to developing and running training and events, eventually joining the Board of Trustees for a prolonged period which included time as Chair, as well as a period as CEO.

She continues her influential work on behalf of bereaved families as Vice-Chair of the Bereaved Parents Support Organisations Network.

"A Gentle Giant"

Tribute to John Norris 1941-2017



John and his wife Audrie joined TCF after the tragic death of Nicholas aged 16. Officially Audrie was the TCF County, local and group contact, as well as manning the Helpline, the 'Memory Corner' contact, and Public Relations contact. But always with John lovingly supporting her every step of the way, as did Audrie when John took on the role of TCF Chairman in 2007 - 2008. Their strength being always working closely as a supportive team, together they supported parents and the work of TCF for almost 30 years, both locally and at national events. They even found time to support other causes like the Canal and River Trust, as well as being actively involved with the local amateur drama club, which included writing plays as well acting and making the scenery for the background.

I attended John's funeral to honour the friend I had been fortunate to know and deeply respected. It was a beautiful church, packed with so many of their friends, including TCF friends, as well as family, and I found myself sitting alongside a bereaved mother who had attended their support group

and we were soon sharing details of our own dear children. It was as if John had guided us there and it transpired that John, as a member of the Derby Flying Squad team, had attended the accident where her own son had died.

Both the priest who knew John well, and a close friend, paid tribute to John's many qualities, which was echoed by all those present and in the many cards and letters received by Audrie and their family. "**A gentle giant**" well known for his kindness and friendship to all who came into contact with him. His selflessness, humility, truthfulness, sincerity and warm humour all defining his character that had endeared him to so many of us.

As Jane Morris once commented

"a conversation with John was always like a warm hug".

We will all greatly miss those hugs!

Diana Youdale

New private Facebook group for bereaved dads

Our charity has just set up a new group for fathers whose son or daughter has died at any age, and from any cause. Your loss can have been just a short time ago or many years previously - all are warmly welcome. We hope the group will offer fathers an opportunity for discussion from a dad's perspective, a chance to share experiences as a bereaved father, talk through things that might have been helpful, get feedback and perhaps others' perspectives, and hopefully find some support, encouragement, hope and friendship.

At our supportive retreats and weekends we find that often the dads' only discussion groups are really well attended, and the discussion often continues after the allotted time - with fathers wanting to get together again during the weekend. So, we thought we would start a private online group where fathers can talk in a similar way.

If you would like to join this new UK Facebook group, then please could you email Paul and John at info@tcf.org.uk requesting access to the Bereaved Dads Facebook group.



Could you edit this newsletter?

We are looking for an editor for TCF News, our printed charity newsletter published four times a year. It is a lovely job at the heart of our charity. The publication acts as a shop-window for all the news, events and the wonderful people who make up The Compassionate Friends.

We are looking for someone who enjoys writing and would like to be proactive in looking for news stories within TCF. Many of the articles and features are submitted by our National Office, Trustees and other members, and your role would be to edit and assemble copy and pictures ready for

the designer who lays out the newsletter. Basic computer literacy is essential.

The ideal candidate would also be interested in developing the publication, writing articles or conducting interviews of interest to our supporting members and donors.

If you are interested in taking on this voluntary role, please contact Carolyn in the National Office. Tel: 0345 120 3785 or email at info@tcf.org.uk



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Friends**

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