

# Critical Incidents Policy



Committee Name:	Finance and General Management
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## General

The school has adopted policies and procedures to minimise risks to pupils and staff, and has a health and safety policy and procedures that are regularly reviewed. The governing body recognises that not all circumstances are under the control of the school, and that emergencies and disasters may happen. This policy is a response to these potential events.

## Sources of advice

There is general advice on:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/emergencies-and-severe-weather-schools-and-early-years-settings>

## Aims

The aims of this policy are:

- to prepare governors, staff and pupils for any disasters that may occur;
- to ensure that there is a plan that can be implemented swiftly in the case of an emergency caused by a disaster; and
- to be a guide to actions in circumstances that are liable to strain the capacity of those handling the situation to think clearly.

## Use of this policy and procedures

This set of guidelines is to be checked before a school visit takes place. It will also be used in the aftermath of an emergency. All staff and governors should be familiar with the contents of this guidance so that all those involved know what to do, or what not to do, if an emergency occurs.

## What can happen?

By 'disaster' we mean an incident that has caused death or serious injury to a member or members of the school community or to the school grounds or the buildings within the school grounds: e.g.:

### In school or in our community

- the death of a pupil or member of staff from natural causes;
- a traffic accident involving staff or pupils;
- a deliberate act of violence against staff or pupils;
- a school fire or major incident in a laboratory or workshop; and
- a serious accident of any sort involving death or mutilation.

### Out-of-school or our immediate community

- deaths or injuries on school journeys;
- tragedies involving children with many others (e.g. Hillsborough); and
- a bomb incident.

Most aspects of disasters are self-evident but two are important to emphasise for the purpose of planning:

1. **Feelings of grief, guilt and insecurity caused by the disaster.** These are felt by survivors, parents and staff alike (not only by those directly involved) and may strike at any time over a long period after the disaster. (*See post-traumatic stress disorder below*).
2. **Inevitable media interest.** This will focus on the 'human interest' and on discovering 'who is to blame'. To the media there is no such thing as an accident. Whether intended or not, the result can be to persuade people to say things in haste that they will bitterly regret at leisure. The media can sow discord and prevent healing. In the immediate aftermath the media may interfere with communications and distract people from coping with the emergency.

The following procedures are designed to deal with the problems in the early stages.

It is assumed in what follows that our first duty is to support and help pupils, parents and staff involved. We are also concerned to ensure that the handling of the disaster does not result in damage to the school which will then cause all pupils and staff to lose in the long term.

It is essential that everybody knows:

- the roles to be performed by each person;
- the communications strategy; and
- the basic principles we will follow with the pupils and parents.

### **Roles and responsibilities**

In term time, other things being equal, the crisis will be managed by a team that will include:

- the Chair of Governors;
- the Head Teacher;
- the Deputy Head Teacher;
- the Parish Priest
- other relevant staff, depending on the situation.

Contact details for members of this team are held by the school office.

The Head Teacher, if not disabled in the disaster, will be first contact for the media. It is probable that as things develop the Chair of Governors will need to make a statement and written statements may be issued by others.

The Head Teacher will be responsible for arranging the necessary communications network including allotting duties to other support staff for typing statements etc. The Head Teacher will also be responsible for checking with insurers etc. to make sure that we do not make mistakes at that stage of the crisis.

The exact roles of others will have to be decided at the time as any crisis will undoubtedly have its own particular character and need a different reaction but among the roles needed, will be:

- a note taker during the incident so that clear and precise notes are taken as soon as information becomes available including times etc.
- contact with parents;
- support for staff directly involved; and
- liaison with remainder of staff and pupils;
- finding assistance for the college/school e.g. legal etc; and
- liaison with relevant authorities e.g. police/Foreign Office/Health and Safety Executive.

Out of term, the **first** thing for the person in charge on site to do will be to contact as many members of the Emergency Team as possible.

### **Precautionary rules for trips off site**

When a disaster occurs off site it is critical to know quickly who has been involved, therefore:

- all trip leaders will make sure that there is a list in the school office with the names of all pupils and a contact number/s for parent/s; and
- every member of staff on the trip (not only the leader) will keep with them at all times a list of pupils on the trip. This may be the only starting point for identifying pupils and the leader may be incapacitated or dead.

It is also vital that information is passed to the school as soon as possible so that support can be given to the staff on the ground and parents and that accurate information can be given to the media etc.

All the staff on a trip will:

- know how an alarm is to be raised; and
- will have to hand a number to contact to report any disaster. This will not be the school number in case the media jam the phone lines. (Any such number must be kept absolutely confidential).

As soon as the injured etc are properly looked after and in the hands of competent assistance then communicating the news is the priority.

Once that has been done the priority of those on the ground becomes to look after pupils and each other. Dealing with the media, with parents and all other issues then becomes the job of the Disaster Team.

Should an incident occur, for example in London, which means that it is not possible to get back to school due to issues with transport links then children and group leaders should make their way to the previously identified 'safe' place to wait (school identified in the local vicinity to the trip, shown on risk assessment).

### **Immediate action in the case of disaster**

The Chair of Governors will be contacted immediately or in his absence, the Vice Chair. Failing either, another nominated governor will be contacted. The relevant governor will be asked to join the team at the school.

- The police will be contacted immediately to ask for help in controlling access to the school;
- the LA will be contacted and asked what resources they can make available;
- the Diocese will be contacted and asked what resources they can make available;
- the Disaster Team will convene at an appropriate headquarters;
- roles will be allotted;
- if the disaster is abroad then a contact will be opened up to authorities in the foreign country through the appropriate embassy or the Foreign Office and arrangements made to get a senior member of staff and someone familiar with the language (if possible) out to the scene of the disaster as a matter of urgency to take charge from the staff involved;
- parents will be contacted by mobile phone. It may be sensible to send someone off-site to phone from an exchange that will not be blocked or overheard by the media;
- depending on the situation, headquarters will either be in the office or another suitable building on or near the school depending on the circumstances; and
- if children are off-site parents should be re-united with them as fast as possible. (It is the duty of the Head Teacher or Head Teacher's delegated representative) to determine in the circumstances whether it may be helpful for parents to view the accident site so they can share the situation with their children.

### **Communicating with parents**

Only nominated members of staff/governors have the authority to contact parents. Such persons, when answering or contacting parents will have a written list of known facts issued by the Head Teacher (or Head's delegated representative). The nominated person will only:

- say what is known for a fact;
- say how parents will be updated as information becomes more complete;
- say how parents should contact hospitals etc; and
- check whether any help is needed with transport.

While the school's main responsibility is to parents whose children are involved, there will be other parents who, for one reason or another, will want to know what has happened from us. Depending on the circumstances it may be appropriate to:

- send an account that is written;
- post information on the college/school web-site; and
- use the media to communicate with parents.

The Head Teacher (or Head's delegated representative) will make the decision.

## **Communicating with pupils**

If the disaster occurs during term a lot again will depend on whether information is available while pupils are in school.

The first priority will be to make sure that pupils know what is true.

The second priority will be, as appropriate, for the school community to share its shock and/or grief.

The procedure will be:

- pupils will be given in tutor groups by selected staff or through an assembly:
  - the plain facts - no speculation; and
  - absolutely honest responses to questions that cannot be answered.

Normally the school will use the following strategy:

- hold an assembly to give out information;
- return pupils to tutor group bases; and
- selected staff to go round the tutor groups and answer questions.

If a disaster occurs during the holiday there may have to be special arrangements to allow families, friends and others to come into school, and for an appropriate member of staff to be available to inform and support. This will be determined by the head (or the head's representative) and put into place by the Disaster Team.

## **Communicating with the media**

Media interest will seem intrusive and unhelpful. It is important to realise, however, that their interest is legitimate. Used properly the media can help to communicate important messages to parents and the community. It is important to do everything to be helpful short of compromising the essential interests of the school. The Head will explain to the press what is happening but will stress that pupils' and parents' interests must come first for us. He will ask for the press's co-operation in achieving this aim. (The Head and Disaster Team will liaise with the LA at all times in carrying out their role.)

- All statements to the media will be made after discussion with the Head (or representative). In ideal circumstances he/she will be the press officer. If he/she is not present he/she should be contacted if possible. A deputy will cover the Head's absence;
- the Chair of Governors will make a statement at the earliest but appropriate moment;
- governors and staff will refer all questions to the Head Teacher (or delegated representative) and must refuse to make any comment or react to any statement put to them by the media.

The following will be the principles to guide dealings with the press. It should be remembered that the media will be looking for a story and headlines. A 'story' only lasts for a short time in media terms so they will be looking for a quick result: grief to dramatise or blame to allot. They only polarise. However,

there are possible stereotypes which we can help to get sympathetic treatment:

- close-knit school devastated by disaster;
- staff trying to hold things together under impossible circumstances;
- caring school trying to do what it can; and
- bolt from the blue overwhelms all sensible precautions.

*N.B. We must remember that we have to be careful that nothing we say should increase grief or wrong-foot ourselves in possible legal action.*

The media will normally not be invited onto the school site and if they do make their way into the site uninvited, they should be referred to the Head Teacher, who will normally ask them to leave, and will explain why. The assistance of the police could be sought if necessary.

It is the responsibility of the Head Teacher in consultation with the Disaster Team to determine whether a press conference should be arranged in a place away from the children. If there are signs of devastation on the school site, it may be inevitable that they will have to be allowed to take pictures but the Disaster Team will attempt to ensure that these do not add to the grief of parents and others.

Pupils will be kept away from the media and the importance of this will be explained to the pupils.

No addresses will be given to the media.

This policy will be kept under regular review in the light of developments and best practice.

**Guidance to the head (or representative) on dealing with the media**

The head will say that the school will:

- tell them everything known definitely as soon as we have told parents;
- tell them what we do not know at this stage;
- tell them when further information will be available;
- not speculate or go along with their speculation; and
- not be giving any names or confirming any names until all the members of a trip are accounted for.

Within these limits the head has the responsibility to give quotable statements and go on air.

**Interview technique**

- Generally it will be important to 'come in under the question', being calmer and quieter than the questioners;
- two points clearly made and repeated are worth many made in a confused way;
- it is crucial to remember that you are talking to the audience beyond the interviewer while answering the interviewer's questions;
- meet aggressive questions with facts e.g.
  1. 'all trips go through a vetting procedure';
  2. 'we have fire practices termly';
  3. 'we have records and once we have done our duty by our parents and pupils we will check it out'.

Generally the school will be saying over and over again that the school will turn its attention to causes and lessons to be learned when we have done what we can do for pupils and parents.

## **Short- and medium-term actions**

### Short-term action

The governing body will meet as soon as practicable to be briefed by the head and Disaster Team, and to decide how any inquiry should be carried. The Disaster Team will seek advice on this as appropriate.

It will be the responsibility of the head to make an announcement about any inquiry. The head will ensure that included in any public statement will be the governors' resolve to co-operate fully with any external inquiry.

The Disaster Team will determine in the circumstances how to help the school community come to terms with the shock and grief, and which appropriate agencies to use.

The Disaster Team will bear in mind in all its decisions the importance of enabling normal life to be resumed as soon as possible without denying or minimising what has happened.

Immediate steps should be taken to restore the situation in the case of fire etc. and lessons should be as normal as possible as soon as possible.

Legal (LA) advice will be sought as appropriate.

### Medium-term action

The Disaster Team will determine how best to ease the return of young people involved and what support they will need.

Normally appropriate consultancy/counselling will be sought (see Appendix C).

The more detailed advice in *Wise Before The Event* will be considered.

**Note on post-traumatic stress disorder and the role of counselling**

It must be expected that some of those involved in the disaster will suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. This may involve panic attacks, flashbacks, feelings of depression and guilt. They may be deeply disabling and often affect adults more than children. Expert advice should be sought on this and part of the longer term plan must include plans to support both pupils and staff members who may be unable to return to school.

It was generally thought in the past that immediate access to counselling was helpful in the aftermath of a disaster. This has been shown to be counter-productive and in some cases damaging.

Advice now suggests that counselling should be postponed until at least a month after the event and then brought in for those who have been unable to 'move on.' The main thrust of the school's policy must be not to deny the events but to emphasise that 'life goes on' and that 'we have the strength to cope with even this.' It is vital that children and adults are not disempowered in dealing with the trauma of the disaster by the suggestion that they cannot cope without help or that they must relive the disaster to come to terms with it.