

Crisis Communications pack for schools

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Introduction

This is a guide to support Hampshire **maintained schools** with managing challenging issues from a communications perspective.

This pack is intended to provide **communications advice and support only**. Schools should continue to contact the local authority, including Children's Services and any other relevant teams, to seek other advice outside of communications and to notify them of any incidents and issues, in line with established processes and reporting requirements.

Notwithstanding the advice in this pack, the Communications team would always still wish to be contacted for advice and support on any issue relating to a sensitive HR or safeguarding matter, including where the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) is involved. You can contact the Communications team by emailing **corporate.communications@hants.gov.uk**

For other issues covered in this guide, please read the advice provided here first. If you still need help, or if your issue isn't covered, you can contact the Communications team using the same email address.

Please note, the team usually supports with **crisis communications** and **reputation management** and does not routinely support with positive PR activity.

General principles

- **Is it even your issue?** – If you have been approached by the press for comment on a sensitive issue, firstly sense check whether it is even your issue to address. Is this something that should instead be referred to another agency to respond to?
- **Do I need to communicate?** – Ask yourself: is this communication necessary? Once a communication is issued, it can be shared more widely, for example on social media or with the press. Therefore, it's always wise to first consider whether there may be other ways of managing the situation, for example by meeting with your intended audience in person or discussing the matter over the phone.
- **Be proportionate** – In the midst of a difficult issue, schools can sometimes feel that the general 'noise' from parents is louder than it may in fact be, prompting a 'knee-jerk' communication which may not be needed. Consider how many parents have approached you with a concern – is it a small handful, or is this a widespread issue which genuinely warrants a communications response?
- **Less is generally more** – Scrutinise every sentence and ask yourself, do I need to say this? What does it add? Could it be challenged, misconstrued or taken out of context? Put yourself into other people's shoes and consider how your words could be perceived from those other viewpoints. The more you say, the more you potentially open yourself up to criticism. In the event of a reactive media statement, keeping it brief will also help to ensure that all or most of your points are included in any resulting coverage.
- **Don't make promises you can't keep** – If you commit to something in writing, be confident that you can deliver it. If you set yourself a timeline, again be sure that you can do what you have said within that time. Making commitments, particularly within a certain timeframe, can invite later follow up questions to check whether you have lived up to your promise.
- **Is it accurate?** – This sounds obvious but always check that what you're saying is factually correct. Any inaccuracies can leave you open to challenge and call into question your wider integrity.
- **Not engaging is rarely the answer** – In a high-profile crisis, it's usually better to be visible and to lead the narrative. Remember – if you leave a gap, people will fill it (often with misinformation).
- **Be human** – Try not to make communications sound 'robotic'. Acknowledge how people may be feeling in a difficult situation and show empathy.

- **Watch your language** – Use clear, simple and relatable words. Avoid cliches or ‘business speak’, be concrete in what you’re saying, and avoid negativity. Try to use active language over passive language where possible.
- **Be consistent** – You don’t need to give all the information to everyone – some people will need to know more than others. However, you do need to make sure that your general messaging is consistent across different communications to different audiences. Saying one thing and then another undermines your credibility and the authenticity of your narrative.
- **The importance of saying sorry** – If you’ve made a mistake, be accountable. Hold your hands up, acknowledge that you got it wrong, and say sorry. A sincere apology backed by clear actions to fix the problem can be crucial in diffusing the situation and rebuilding trust.
- **Put things into perspective** – It can be helpful and reassuring to contextualise situations in the grand scheme of things and to use phrases like – *“this was an isolated incident”, “situations like this are extremely rare”, “we have a good track record”*.
- **Focus on what you are doing, not on what you’re not** – This is a more positive stance that shows you’re engaged and proactive.
- **Identify your spokesperson** – When responding reactively to a media enquiry, consider who your most appropriate spokesperson is. Some cases call for a visible spokesperson who might be the headteacher or Chair of Governors, but in other situations you may prefer to opt for an unnamed school spokesperson e.g.: *A [insert school name] spokesperson said...*
- **Don’t comment on individual cases** – It is never appropriate to publicly discuss individual children or families.

Taking calls from the media

- When answering a call from the media, don't feel rushed or pressured to say more than you'd like – take your time and politely explain that you don't currently have anyone available to speak to them but that you can take their contact details (including email address) so that you can arrange for someone to get back to them. This stops you from inadvertently being drawn into a conversation.
- Take the opportunity to familiarise your reception staff with this guidance.

Filming and interview requests

- The media are freely permitted to film on the public highway and to speak with parents or members of the public.
- However, they cannot enter the school premises and film on school grounds without permission.
- As on all occasions, children cannot be filmed or photographed without the prior consent of their parents/guardians.
- When a school is faced with a reputational issue, we usually recommend declining interviews but instead providing a written statement. Please contact the Corporate Communications team if you have received an interview bid and would like further advice.

Examples of reputational issues and how to manage them

The following pages contain examples of issues that would require careful communications management. Many of the same communications principles apply to other situations not mentioned here.

In some cases, example wording has been provided but would not immediately apply in all situations. If you are dealing with a reputational issue, please exercise caution in using any example messaging given, and sense check this in the context of your individual situation. Please contact Corporate Communications if you wish to discuss further.

Managing a sensitive HR / safeguarding issue

- **Legal compliance** – It's important to ensure that any communications regarding a sensitive staff issue are legally compliant, and that you are not releasing information about the person involved that wouldn't otherwise be known. Advice will be needed in relation to data protection rights and therefore any communications regarding an issue of this nature should be reviewed by an appropriate legal adviser.
- **HR advice** – Communications about a HR issue will also need to be reviewed by your HR provider.
- **Working with the Police** – If the matter is subject to a Police investigation, the Constabulary will also need to see and approve any associated communications. Please liaise with your named Police contact / officer in charge to ensure that the Constabulary's Communications team is sighted accordingly.
- **Highlight your safeguarding policies** – If there is a safeguarding concern, it is helpful to reassure parents about your safeguarding policies (please do check that they are up to date first and that all links work) – *"The safety and wellbeing of all children in our school is our absolute priority, and we have robust safeguarding policies in place including with regards to our staff recruitment. Should there ever be a safeguarding concern, we would always treat this extremely seriously, investigate fully and take the appropriate course of action in line with our policies. You can find out more information about our safeguarding policies on our website."*
- **Telling the right people the right information, at the right time** – This will vary depending on which stage the situation is at:
 - If the matter is still subject to investigation, either internally or externally, it is preferable to keep the matter as contained as possible. You will need to communicate with parents and staff about interim arrangements while the staff member is not in school, and these could simply refer to the staff member not currently being in school. If you feel you need to provide a reason for the absence, you could state that this is due to 'personal reasons'.
 - If there is widespread awareness of the issue, at this point you would need to communicate with your school community. Staff and governors should be communicated with first, followed by parents. If there is press interest, they come last. Staff, governors and parents should be made aware before the issue becomes more widely known in the public.

- Remember to work on a 'need to know' basis – even if the issue is widely known about, you still need to communicate in accordance with data protection legislation, active legal proceedings (if applicable), and important confidentiality considerations.
- Remind staff to direct any parental or media enquiries to whoever is leading the school's response to the issue.
- Have your lines for the media ready before any communications go out to the school community. Once you have communicated with parents, it likely won't be long before you receive a media enquiry.
- Any communications issued while the matter is still under investigation, either internally or by the Police, should generally be avoided altogether. However, this may not always be possible due to media coverage or widespread awareness in the local community. In this case, communications should be brief but reassuring – *"You will appreciate that I cannot go into detail as the matter is still under investigation, and no conclusions have been reached. However, please be assured that we take any concerns relating to staff extremely seriously and would always ensure that any such concerns are investigated fully and that the appropriate course of action is taken."*
- Any issue involving legal proceedings could include arrests, charge announcements by the Police and court appearances, all of which can create further interest from the press and the school community. If the requirement for communications is unavoidable before a final outcome is reached, it is important to emphasise in any communications that proceedings are ongoing, and that no conclusion has yet been determined. It is also helpful to ask parents and staff not to discuss or speculate on the matter, either in person or on social media, as doing so can compromise these legal proceedings as well as leading to misinformation. It could also result in an individual being found in contempt of court, which could lead to a fine or imprisonment.
- A final communication to parents and staff may be required once the outcome of an investigation has been reached, either internally or within the legal system, and the content of this would depend on that outcome. In the event of a dismissal, and depending on the level of awareness and commentary, it may be suitable at this point to go into more detail about the actions the school has taken in relation to the matter. Again, this would need careful input from legal and HR advisers, and any other relevant partners.
- Any communications sent about a member of staff while they remain employed should be shared with them in advance where possible for their awareness.

Teaching Regulation Agency Hearings

There may be occasions where concerns about a staff member or former staff member's conduct result in a referral to the Teaching Regulation Agency (TRA). Hearings are typically held in public and both forthcoming hearings and hearing outcomes are usually published on the TRA website. Forthcoming hearings are usually published in the two weeks prior to the hearing while outcomes can be published anywhere from within a week to up to four weeks later. This can sometimes result in media interest. Below are template communications which can be used in the event of media interest or if there is awareness amongst staff and parents

When the TRA hearing date is published

Below are reactive lines to use if approached by staff or the media. Otherwise, it is best to keep the matter as contained as possible at this stage.

Example lines for staff

As the hearing has not yet taken place, we are not in a position to discuss this at this time. However, please be assured that we are fully aware of the matter and have followed all due process in relation to this.

Example media response

"The hearing has not yet taken place and therefore it would not be appropriate to comment at this stage."

Once the hearing outcome is published

At this point, you may wish to speak proactively with staff and governors, to prepare them for potential interest from the media and parents.

A hearing outcome may not always be picked up by the press and therefore you could decide that you don't need to communicate with parents unless the matter becomes more widely known. In the event of a media enquiry, ideally you will want to ensure that your parents hear about the matter directly from you first rather than in the media.

Below are example lines to use as needed with staff and governors; parents; and the media, if approached. Space is provided within these templates for a comment on the hearing outcome, if appropriate [*eg we are satisfied to see that the TRA's outcome reflects the seriousness of the individual's conduct*].

Example lines for staff and governors

I want to discuss a sensitive matter involving [insert staff member name], who has attended a Teaching Regulation Agency (TRA) hearing regarding [insert brief explanation of issue here]. The outcome of the TRA hearing has now been published. I understand you will be concerned by this news.

You will appreciate that I was not previously in a position to disclose any information due to ongoing investigations into the matter. However, I want to assure you that we have followed all safeguarding processes in relation to this and have worked with relevant agencies as required.

Following the conclusion of our own response, the matter was referred to the TRA in line with standard procedures. As you will be aware, the TRA is responsible for considering an individual's suitability to continue teaching and conducted its own investigation in line with this remit, before publishing its own independent findings. [Comment on outcome as appropriate – see above].

We understand this may lead to interest from the press and/or parents. If any of you are approached by the press, please do not respond but simply refer any enquiries to me. For any parental enquiries which you may receive directly, again please refer those questions to me.

You will appreciate this is a very delicate matter and in accordance with our staff code of conduct, we would ask you to please treat this with the utmost sensitivity.

In the event of media coverage or significant awareness, we will arrange communications to parents to offer reassurance.

I hope the above information demonstrates that we treat any concerns regarding staff conduct extremely seriously and helps to summarise the extensive steps that have been taken in relation to this matter.

Example communication to parents

Dear Parents/Carers

You may see mention in the local news of [insert staff member name], who has attended a Teaching Regulation Agency (TRA) hearing regarding [insert brief explanation of issue here]. The TRA is responsible for considering an individual's suitability to continue teaching, where concerns have been raised about their conduct. I understand that you will be concerned by this news.

While it was not previously appropriate for me to discuss this while the TRA was investigating, I would now like to reassure you that the safety and wellbeing of all pupils is our absolute priority, and we have followed all necessary steps in relation to this matter. As we always would do, we acted from the outset to ensure that the most appropriate course of action was taken, working closely with relevant agencies as required.

Following the conclusion of our own response, the matter was referred to the TRA in line with standard procedures. The TRA has since conducted its own investigation in line with this remit, before publishing its own independent findings. [Comment on outcome as appropriate – see above].

I hope the above information demonstrates that we treat any concerns regarding staff conduct extremely seriously and helps to summarise the extensive steps that have been taken in relation to this matter. We remain committed to maintaining the highest standards of safeguarding and professional conduct, and to ensuring that our pupils continue to learn in a safe, supportive environment.

For more information about our safeguarding policy, visit our website.

Example media response

"The safety and wellbeing of all pupils is always our absolute priority. Any concerns relating to staff would always be treated with the utmost seriousness and, as we have done on this occasion, we would always act immediately to ensure the most appropriate course of action is taken, following all necessary processes and working closely with relevant agencies as required.

"Following the conclusion of our own response, the matter was referred to the Teaching Regulation Agency (TRA) in line with the standard procedures. The TRA is responsible for considering an individual's suitability to continue teaching and conducted its own investigation in line with this remit, before publishing its own independent findings. [Comment on outcome as appropriate – see above]."

Ofsted inspections

Schools are sometimes approached for comment by the press following a negative Ofsted report. Below are some tips on how to respond. A similar approach is suitable for parent communications:

- **Lead with the positive** – *“While we are disappointed with the outcome of our latest Ofsted inspection, we were pleased to note the inspector’s findings that...”*
- **Frame this in the context of other inspections, if appropriate** – *“We are disappointed with the outcome of our latest Ofsted inspection, particularly given our previous Outstanding / Good judgement. However, we are pleased to note the inspector’s findings that...”*
- **Accept the findings** – Some schools may feel strongly opposed to the outcome of their inspection. However, if possible, it is better to position yourself as cooperative and proactively addressing the findings – *“We acknowledge and accept the challenges raised and are committed to rapidly addressing these”.*
- **Back it up with evidence** – Show what you are doing and have already done – *“We have a clear action plan to address the challenges raised and indeed have already done X, Y, Z...”*
- **Acknowledge the local authority** – *“We are working in close partnership with the local authority to action the points raised...”*
- **Acknowledge your staff and parent community** – *“We continue to keep staff and parents fully informed and want to thank them for their ongoing dedication and support.”*

Bullying

Schools are sometimes approached by the press for comment on an alleged bullying issue. Below is an example media response. Similar lines would apply for communications to parents:

"All forms of bullying are completely unacceptable and never tolerated by the school. While we do not comment on individual cases for confidentiality reasons, we take all allegations extremely seriously and follow robust policies and procedures to make sure that any instances are dealt with swiftly and that families are supported throughout. We set high standards for behaviour that are clearly communicated to all pupils and support an open dialogue about bullying both through our personal, social and health education (PSHE) curriculum and through national awareness initiatives such as Anti-Bullying Week. We encourage any parent who may have concerns to contact the school so we can work to address these together.

"For information about our bullying policies, visit our website."

Prohibited items

Below are some tips on how to manage communications following an incident where a child has brought a prohibited item into school.

- **Assess the awareness** – Was this dealt with immediately? How many children saw the prohibited item? Are they likely to go home and start discussing this with their parents, or did this largely go unnoticed? These questions will help to inform whether a communication to parents is necessary.
- **Parental responsibilities** – Position communications as a helpful reminder for parents to be checking children's bags and pockets before coming to school. This then becomes more of an operational message and reiterates that parents, as well as the school, have an important role to play in ensuring children's safety.
- **Emphasise what you have done** – Explain how you addressed the situation – *“the item was confiscated immediately / as soon as we became aware” / “we dealt with this swiftly, calmly and safely” / “we have spoken to the child concerned and have established that there was no ill intent” / “we have reassured all children and spoken to them about what they should and should not bring to school and why this is important for everyone's safety – you can help by reiterating this message in conversations at home”*
- **Safety first** – Focus on children's safety in your response to the incident – *“children were safe at all times” / “at no stage did any child come to any harm” / “the safety and wellbeing of all children is our absolute priority, and we have robust safeguarding policies in place including with regards to prohibited items. These policies were rigorously followed in our response to this matter.”*
- **Reach out to the parents/guardians** – Before issuing any communication, share it firstly with the parents/guardians of the child concerned, out of courtesy.
- **Managing media enquiries** – Any parent communication about prohibited items has the potential to be shared with the press. Media statements should give a brief summary of the parent communication – outline the action you took and emphasise children's safety. Share your lines with the Police for their information and again make the parents/guardians of the child aware of the enquiry and your intended response.

Death in the school community

Schools will naturally want to acknowledge the death of a member of the school community. Below are some tips for managing this sensitively and appropriately:

- **Speak to the family** – Check that they are happy for a communication to be issued and if so, allow them to see this before it is sent. They may be happy for a communication to be sent but not for the person to be named – make sure you abide by whatever their wishes may be.
- **Outline the support available** – A death of anyone in the school community will understandably have an impact on pupils and staff. Communications should set out how the school community is being supported and provide details of other support that may be available.
- **Supporting conversations at home** – Consider providing guidance to parents to help them have supportive and age-appropriate conversations about what has happened, with their children at home.
- **Managing media enquiries** – You may also be approached by the press for comment. Again, ensure that the family is comfortable with whatever you intend to say and sight any other relevant parties on the proposed response.

Missing / injured child

Below are some tips on how to manage communications following an incident where a child has gone missing from school or been injured whilst on site. Many of the same messages apply for both communications to the school community and when responding reactively to media enquiries.

- **Emphasise safety** – Reiterate that children's safety is your absolute priority – *"As parents and carers, we fully understand your expectations in entrusting your children into our care during the school day. Please be assured that the welfare and safety of all children in school is our absolute priority."*
- **Say what action you took** – *"We responded immediately, and the Police / health services were contacted straightaway" / "We immediately carried out the necessary first aid and contacted health services straightaway"*
- **Explain the outcome** – Providing you are confident that the child came to no harm, include lines such as – *"The child was (quickly) found (and is safe and well)"*
- **Outline next steps** – *"Working alongside the local authority and our Governors, we are now carrying out a thorough investigation of the incident. While this was an isolated incident, we will be exploring whether there are any opportunities to potentially further strengthen our existing security measures / processes. Any changes or improvements identified during this investigation will be made once this process has concluded."*
- **Reach out to the parents/guardians** – Before communicating with parents or responding to the media, make the parents/guardians of the child concerned aware.

SEND issues

Sometimes a school may be approached by the media for comment on a family who are unhappy with the SEND provision for their child. Below are some tips on how to manage this:

- **Commenting on individual cases** – This is never appropriate and makes it difficult when responding to a media enquiry, particularly if you feel the reporter has not been given a full or fair representation of the situation. In these circumstances, it can be helpful to say things like – *“While we do not comment on individual children’s cases for confidentiality reasons, the comments made do not give a full or accurate picture; nor do they reflect our absolute commitment to the inclusion of all children in our school” / “While we do not comment on individual children’s cases for confidentiality reasons, we strongly refute the claims being made.”* Just be aware of how such a stance might impact your relationship with the family involved.
- **Emphasise your inclusive culture** – *“We are absolutely committed to ensuring that children with SEND have the same opportunities as their peers to thrive in school.”*
- **Partnership working** – *“We work closely and proactively with families and the local authority and where issues arise, we endeavour to resolve these as quickly and effectively as possible.”*
- **Refer parents back to the school** – *“We have clear systems in place should parents have any concerns regarding their child’s education. In these instances, we would always urge parents to engage directly with us so that matters can be addressed as effectively and constructively as possible.”*

Unpopular operational decisions

Sometimes a school may make a decision which has an unforeseen negative reaction, for example withdrawing a popular event or changing the uniform policy. To prevent this, consider the following points:

- **Consult with the school community** – Where possible, consult with relevant members of the school community before making an important decision.
- **Who is your audience?** – Is this decision something that affects a small number in your school community, or does it affect everyone? Could you issue a more targeted communication about the decision to a specific group of people, or is this something that requires a widespread communication to the whole school?
- **Give a clear rationale** – Explain the reasons behind the decision, and the anticipated benefits. If the decision is about something you're taking away, focus on what you will still be doing. Consider how the decision might be perceived from different viewpoints and try to have these in mind when putting together your communication.
- **Two-way communication** – Remind parents that you have channels in place should they wish to share any thoughts and encourage them to use these if so.

If you're facing backlash following an unpopular decision, consider the following:

- **Prioritise your parents** – When an unpopular decision gains traction in the news and on social media, it's easy to get distracted by this. Your immediate focus should be on your parents and what they need from you, be it further clarity, an acknowledgement of their concerns, or simply reassurance.
- **Brief your staff** – Make sure your staff know how to deal with calls from the media (see general principles) and that they understand not to personally engage but to direct any press interest to whoever is leading the school's media response.
- **Consider your stance** – At some point you'll likely need to consider whether you stick with your decision or change tack. Both will have consequences in terms of your communications response.
- **Focus on the positives** – Have you had lots of positive feedback from your parents? Did you consult with the school community and get their buy-in before making the decision? If so, these are both points worth mentioning in any communications.

- **Listen, listen, listen** – Listen to parental feedback, and be seen doing it. Acknowledge how parents are feeling and make sure they know that you value and hear what they're saying.
- **Consider your media response** – While the main focus needs to be on your parents, there may be value in setting out your stance more widely by responding to any media enquiries on the matter. However, sometimes this can simply keep an unwanted story running. There is no right or wrong answer, and you will need to weigh up the pros and cons of the individual situation.

Lockdowns

In a situation where you need to go into lockdown:

- **Liaise closely with the Police** – If the Police are involved, seek their guidance on when it would be appropriate to notify parents. The immediate focus will not be on communicating with parents but on managing the situation and ensuring everyone's safety. Notifying parents too early could prompt an influx of telephone calls or cause parents to turn up at school, drawing your attention away from dealing with the situation and potentially making it more unsafe.
- **Keep parents updated and reassured** – Once you have made parents aware, it will be important to keep them updated and to reassure them that all children are calm and safe. If communicating retrospectively, explain that you were not able to notify them earlier as your immediate focus was on making sure everyone was safe. Where appropriate, ensure the Police are sighted on any communications to make sure they are comfortable with any content that may refer to the nature of the threat that prompted the lockdown.
- **Prepare for media enquiries** – Following a lockdown, there is potential for the school to be contacted by the media. Responses should cover how the school responded to keep children and staff safe and make clear that parents have been kept informed. Any enquiries asking for more information about the specific threat that led to the lockdown and how that has been dealt with, should be directed to the Police.

Example communication to parents

If the situation is ongoing

Dear Parents

Our school is currently under lockdown due to [insert brief explanation here].

While I understand this may cause some concern, please be assured this is being well managed and all children are safe and calm. We activated the lockdown as soon as we were alerted to the issue and immediately contacted the Police. They are continuing to monitor the situation, and we will not end the lockdown until they have confirmed it is safe to do so.

While our lockdown procedure is in place, we cannot let anyone enter or leave the school site. This is to ensure the absolute safety of everyone in school. I must therefore ask you not to come to school to collect your children early.

I would also ask you to please avoid contacting the school while we continue to manage the lockdown. We will continue to keep you informed.

If the situation is over

Dear Parents

I am writing to make you aware that we needed to put our school into lockdown today due to [insert brief explanation here].

I could not make you aware of this any earlier as at the time, our immediate focus was on managing the situation and ensuring everyone's safety. However, I want to assure you that all children were safe throughout.

We activated our lockdown procedure as soon as we became aware of the issue and immediately contacted the Police. They monitored the situation closely and we did not lift the lockdown until they confirmed it was safe to do so. I want to thank them and our staff for their support today and for responding so swiftly. I also want to thank the children for remaining so calm and cooperative.

While I appreciate this may cause some concern, I hope you feel reassured that we have robust procedures in place for managing such situations, and this incident demonstrated that these work effectively in keeping us all safe.

Finally, you will appreciate that given the Police involvement, I cannot go into any further detail about this incident. They are now investigating the matter, and it is important that we don't compromise this process by discussing or speculating on it in conversation with others or on social media. Your assistance in this is much appreciated.

Example media response

Our school went into lockdown today following a concern about [insert brief explanation here]. We activated our lockdown procedure as soon as we became aware and immediately contacted the Police. All children were safe throughout and parents were informed of the situation. Thank you to everyone involved for their swift and calm response.

Ransomware attack

In the event of a ransomware attack, you may need to notify parents of the incident. Depending on the scale and impact of the attack, media interest may also follow. Below are some considerations when communicating with parents. Similar principles and messaging can be adapted for media enquiries.

- **Explain to parents what has happened and any known impacts** – *‘Our IT systems were affected by a ransomware attack on [insert date and time]. This resulted in the following known impacts: [insert explanation here].’*
- **Outline the proactive steps you are taking** – *‘As soon as the incident was identified, we took immediate steps to secure our systems and minimise disruption. We are working with our IT team/provider to investigate the incident, restore affected services, and understand the full impact.’* You may also need to confirm that you have notified the Information Commissioner’s Office (if there has been a personal data breach that meets the threshold for reporting it). If impacts to personal data are not yet fully known, you could say: *‘We are assessing whether any personal data has been affected and are making all required notifications to the relevant authorities.’*
- **Demonstrate how you are working with relevant partners** – *‘We are also working with [insert relevant partners which may include Police, cyber security specialists, local authority, Department for Education] as required.’*
- **Acknowledge parental concern** – *‘We understand this news may be concerning and will provide further updates as more information becomes available. In the meantime, thank you for your ongoing support at this challenging time.’*
- **Reassure parents about continuity of education where possible** – If the school remains open and learning is continuing, say so – *‘The school remains open and we have arrangements in place to minimise disruption to teaching and learning while we work to restore affected systems.’*
- **Don’t speculate** – Avoid commenting on the cause of the attack, the identity of those responsible, whether a ransom has been demanded or paid, or whether data has been accessed, stolen or published unless this has been confirmed through an investigation. Where information is still emerging, it is better to say that enquiries are ongoing than to provide unverified information.
- **Be transparent and timely** – Share confirmed information as soon as possible and provide regular updates, even if investigations are ongoing. Stakeholders are often more reassured by regular communication than by long periods with no updates.

Public health issues

In the event of a public health issue, please contact the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) which will advise and provide content if a case or incident requires any communication to certain classes, year groups or the whole setting, and will support with any related media enquiries. Should you need to consider implementing a year-group or full school closure due to a public health issue, please contact Children's Services which will liaise with Public Health as required.

There is no requirement to contact the Communications team unless you would like any additional feedback on media statements.

There may be occasions where the UKHSA has advised that communications are not explicitly required but you feel this is necessary to alleviate any anxiety in the school community. In this instance, you may wish to contact the Communications team for support in reviewing any messaging.

For more general advice on managing infectious diseases and outbreaks in schools and other seasonal and national topics, such as flu vaccinations or measles, please follow the HCC Public Health – Health Protection updates which are issued termly on the **School Communications site**.

Social media issues

There may be occasions where difficult discussions concerning your school are taking place publicly on social media. Below are some tips for managing this:

- **Engage with the poster** – If someone has posted something negative or inappropriate which is drawing lots of attention, it's good practice in the first instance to see if you can engage directly with that person and ask them politely to take down their post. This should be done in person or over the phone where possible; avoid putting anything in writing as this could then be shared by the individual and subsequently perceived as an attempt to silence them.
- **Report the post** – You may be able to report a post to the platform on which it's been posted, if the post violates that platform's standards (for example if it's untrue or could be classified as harassment). Be aware that this may not be successful and even if it is, it can take some time before this is actioned. Having several people report the post will give a greater chance of getting it taken down.
- **Seek further advice** – If the social media posts are abusive or targeting an individual, ensure you take copies of the content and consider contacting your legal adviser. For posts about a member of staff, ensure you notify your HR provider.
- **Contact the group admin** – If the post has been shared on a group rather than on a personal profile, you can ask the group admin whether they will consider removing the post – admins are usually very amenable and will often do this without any issues.
- **Consider adding a 'community note'** – Platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and now Facebook and Instagram give the option of adding community notes which allow users to provide more context on a post which could potentially be misleading. However, be clear that if you do this, you are setting out your stance on a very public forum.
- **Set the ground rules** – If your school has its own social media presence and the issues are taking place on there, consider adding a short set of 'house rules' in the About section. These can outline expectations on engagement, what kind of comments may be removed, and how users can contact the school directly with concerns.
- **Hide abusive posts** – If someone posts something abusive that violates your 'house rules', you should hide the post (rather than delete it). It is also worth screenshotting the post so you can keep track of repeat behaviour.
- **Act on threatening posts immediately** – If you receive a post that includes 'threat to life' language e.g. harming pupils or staff or damage to the school, contact the Police immediately, screenshot the post and hide it, and escalate the matter to relevant team members.

- **Remind your parents of your processes** – If a social media post has caused considerable 'noise' amongst parents, it can be helpful to reiterate to all parents that you have set processes in place to manage concerns and complaints – *“as a school, we have clear and well-established channels in place which enable you to raise any questions or complaints you may have. We encourage all parents to engage with these processes as the most constructive and direct route to discuss and resolve any concerns or issues.”*
- **Consider your media response** – 'Noise' on social media can often lead to a media enquiry. Consider how you would like to approach this and if appropriate, have your media statement ready.

Emergency School Closures

- Schools should report emergency school closures using the Emergency School Closures submission form – the 'how to' guide for using the form is here:

Reporting an Emergency School Closure

- This is an automated form and any information included within it will be published on the County Council's public facing School Closures webpage:

Emergency school, college, children's centres and nursery closures in Hampshire | Education and learning | Hampshire County Council

- To help keep the public informed of any school closures in the county, the first emergency school closure reported on any given day is sent to local radio stations. Stations are asked to keep checking the school closures webpage for any closures subsequently reported on that same day.
- Given that this information is shared with radio stations and is public facing, you should carefully consider what and how much information you share in your school closure notifications, as these could potentially attract media interest.
- While it may be appropriate to share a greater level of detail with parents through your own direct channels, school closure notifications should ideally be brief and include information suitable for a much wider audience, including the local media.
- For more information about emergency school closures, go to:
Report an Emergency School Closure (ESC)



Crisis Communications pack for schools

September 2026