

Chorus Education Trust

Staff Communications Policy

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1. Introduction

At Chorus Education Trust we understand the importance of clear communication between parents, students, staff, the schools and the Trust.

This policy sets out the aims of the Trust with regard to internal and external communications, and sets out the responsibilities of staff.

It may be useful to read this in conjunction with the *Communications Guidance for Parents* booklet produced for each school (due February 2020).

2. Our approach to communication

We know that students will only get the best out of their education if there is a constructive relationship between the school and the students' parents/carers, as well as between all staff. Therefore it's vital that communication between everyone is clear, useful and respectful.

2.1 What does 'clear, useful and respectful' actually mean?

- **Clear:** we will try to ensure that all of our communications can be easily understood. If anyone requires communications in another format we will try and find a solution, as far as is reasonably possible.
- **Useful:** we will only send out information that is relevant and useful, and in a format that people can make use of.
- **Respectful:** all communications should be carried out in a respectful manner, using acceptable language and behaviour. We are aware that parents/carers care deeply about their child(ren) and ask them to also appreciate that our staff are professionals, who try to do their best for the many students under their care.

3. Responsibilities

3.1 School responsibilities

It is the responsibility of the school to:

- Place key policies, documents and procedures in areas that maximise their accessibility and usefulness to the entire school community.
- Communicate the curriculum clearly to parents/carers.
- Inform parents/carers of all school events within appropriate timelines.
- Keep parents/carers informed of the progress of their child at regular intervals.
- Make reasonable adjustments to the way it communicates with staff, students and parents/carers.
- Maintain any data it collects from staff, students and parents/carers in accordance with the relevant data legislation.

3.2 Staff responsibilities

It is the responsibility of members of staff to:

- Ensure the principles and procedures of this and other relevant policies are followed.
- Ensure they read the *Staff Handbook* at the start of their employment, and then read any annual updates that are referenced and acknowledged via the annual staff declaration.
- Ensure they read the *Heads Up* bulletin weekly.
- Communicate proactively with parents/carers about student progress and to help parents/carers to support their child's learning.
- Ensure that all written communication is appropriate in content, and checked for spelling and grammar prior to release.
- Advise the Trust of any changes to their personal data, e.g. change of name or address.

3.3 Parent/carer responsibilities

It is the responsibility of the parent/carer to:

- Read the key communications circulated by the school, e.g. via communications apps, website, newsletter, emails and messages, and respond/act on communication, e.g. sign forms, attending meetings.
- Log on to the school website, apps or other electronic systems for detailed information about the school calendar, term dates, exam details, information on options and other useful downloads.
- Inform the school of medical conditions/allergies, along with medical documentation.
- Inform the school of child protection matters, legal issues or relevant duties with appropriate documentation.
- Inform the school of any changes to contact information for the student or their key contacts.

4. Communications between staff

4.1 Staff briefings

In each school, staff briefings will be held weekly at a set time. All staff are expected to attend the staff briefing to receive important messages about the week ahead from the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). If you wish to add an item to the agenda please contact the Head's P.A.

4.2 Staff e-bulletin

Each school produces an internal newsletter for staff (often called *Heads Up*) published every Friday and sent via email. The content is confidential and should not be printed off or shared. It contains important information for staff from the SLT and other members of staff. Much of the information pertains to events in and out of school for the week ahead and essential information regarding supporting student learning

and pastoral care. If you wish to add an item to the agenda please contact the Head's P.A. by 10am on the Thursday before it is published.

4.3 Noticeboards in the staff room

There are noticeboards in the staff room where general information for staff can be displayed. These are for staff to self-manage. There are specific noticeboards for the recognised trade unions too.

4.4 Staff trays

Every member of staff has an allocated tray in the staff room, where their post is distributed. Other members of staff can use them to pass on appropriate materials to colleagues. There are also trays for form tutors in the staff room, which are used to pass on letters/notices to students.

4.5 All staff emails

The email distribution list for all staff is for urgent and serious communication, and is restricted to use by the SLT. Use of this should be minimised as most items can go into the *Heads Up* bulletin. It should be used in the 'bcc' field, to avoid people replying to all. If an urgent message needs to go out please contact the Head's P.A.

4.6 Email downtime

We have a culture that promotes work life balance and we encourage staff to avoid sending emails outside their normal working hours. However, we appreciate that for some colleagues, and in some circumstances, this is not always possible. There is, however, no expectation to read and respond to emails outside of normal working hours. When sending an email we ask that staff consider whether face to face communication would be better, and to consider the impact that large quantities of emails can have on staff workload.

4.7 The MLE (Managed Learning Environment) / intranet

Some of our schools have a Managed Learning Environment (MLE) which acts as an intranet. The MLE contains a staff announcements section on the staff homepage. All staff can publish information here and are advised to check it daily.

The MLE was originally set up when the new school building opened. Plans are underway at Trust level to replace it with a Trust-wide intranet when time and resources allow.

4.8 School calendar

The school calendar contains information about all the main events, activities and deadlines within school. Any items for inclusion should be sent to a named contact within the school. A member of SLT will have responsibility for then taking the item to SLT for a decision about inclusion. If agreed, the calendar will be updated to include it. In each school the calendar will be shared in a location for accessible by all staff – either on a shared drive or on the MLE.

4.9 Staff handbook

There is a Chorus Trust staff handbook which contains key information relevant to all staff. Each school also has its own staff handbook containing school-specific information. Both can be found on the MLE homepage or on a shared drive and should be read as part of staff induction. Any updates to these handbooks should be highlighted, read and acknowledged via the annual staff declaration process.

4.10 Meetings with staff

Many of the formal meetings for staff are scheduled in the school calendar. Staff should use their judgement to ensure that other meetings only take place when they are needed and that all meetings are run in an effective and professional manner, and that important communications and actions from the meeting are passed on to the relevant colleagues in a timely fashion.

5. Communications with parents

5.1 Website, newsletters and promotional materials

We try to provide lots of useful information for parents in regular newsletters and on the school website.

Any items for inclusion on the website or the school newsletters should be sent to the Communications Manager, who will ensure they are edited and published. Heads of department and subject leads will be contacted by the Communications Manager at least once a year to check the subject information provided on the website and in promotional materials. They should provide updated information for inclusion.

5.2 Communications apps

Each school will have at least one communications app which they use to send messages to parents and/or staff. Each school will have an agreed procedure for staff about how the apps are managed and used. Parents and carers will also have guidance about how to access and use these apps.

There is no expectation for staff to have these apps on their personal phones. However, they can choose to put these apps on their own phone, so they can receive notifications such as school closure alerts on their phone, as well as via email.

Any enrolment queries about communications apps should be made via the Data teams in each school; more general queries should be made to the Communications Manager

5.3 Email correspondence with parents

All emails sent from a school account could potentially be shared as part of a 'data subject access' request, made under the Data Protection Act. Emails should always be written in professional language and appropriate to being an employee. It should also be noted that where a private email account is used for issues associated with work, it has in some cases been deemed as a work account and therefore also subject to the rules of professional language and conduct.

In short, do not send an email that you would not be happy for your employer or a colleague to read.

If contacting the school via email, parents are advised to use the main enquiry email address or the appropriate key stage email address. These emails will then be forwarded on to the appropriate teacher if

necessary. However, some staff do choose to be in direct email contact with parents, rather than go via these channels.

Advice has been issued to parents in the *Communications Guide for Parents and Carers* about contacting staff via email, to help minimise workload issues and ensure that issues are dealt with efficiently. It is summarised below.

Parents should:

- bear in mind teachers' large workload by, for example, making emails concise and to the point, and avoid sending an excessive amount of email,
- send one email to the appropriate staff, rather than separate emails to several members of staff, to avoid duplication of work,
- include staff in the cc field who need to get the information but aren't required to take any action, to avoid duplication of work,
- not expect an immediate response, particularly outside of core staff working hours.

Staff should:

- use the template for email footers, which will be available on a shared drive, or automatically inserted into their emails by IT,
- acknowledge receipt of emails within two working days,
- respond to emails within five working days,
- if further work or investigation is needed to be able to respond fully, explain this and set a further, reasonable deadline for a full response.
- use their professional judgement about whether a communication needs to be logged on the student's record on Sims (via the communications log), and/or shared with other people, e.g. a safeguarding issue would be submitted via CPOMs.
- Raise with their line manager any concerns they have about correspondence that they perceive as aggressive or harassing.

5.4 Meetings with parents

There may be times when you have to meet with parents/carers to discuss an issue about a student. Given the many demands on our staff's time, we have implemented the following measures, which we hope ensure that these meetings work as constructively as possible.

5.4.1 Ahead of the meeting

- Parents and staff should consider whether a face to face meeting is necessary. Could the issue wait until parents' evening? Could it be discussed on the phone? Would a brief sharing of information in an email suffice?
- Staff should agree an agenda for the meeting with parents at least 24 hours before the meeting. This should include an agreed purpose for the meeting, so it's clear why it is taking place. This could happen via email or over the phone.

- If it is possible to send information beforehand that needs to be read for the meeting, both staff and parents will try to do this. Staff will prepare for the meeting, to try and make it as constructive as possible.
- Meetings will normally be scheduled during the school day, between 8am and 4pm. Whilst parents may request other times, staff are only contracted to work within these core hours. Any meetings outside these times are at their discretion.
- Staff should ideally attend meetings with a colleague, allowing one of them to take the minutes. This colleague could be the staff member's Head of Department or, if they are a Head of Department, their SLT link person.
- If a mutually convenient meeting time cannot be agreed, consideration should be given to arranging a phone conversation instead or meeting during parents' evening.
- Meetings should have an agreed start and end time. Generally, meeting lengths are:
 - 15 to 30 minutes for general meetings, such as meeting a subject teacher or year group/key stage representative. This also includes *SEN Assess, Plan, Do, Review* meetings.
 - 1 hour for My Plan reviews.
 - 2 hours for ECHP annual reviews.
- Everyone involved should arrive on time for the meeting.

5.4.2 During the meeting

- A member of staff will chair the meeting, to ensure that it runs smoothly and that the agenda is kept to.
- If, at any time, attendees' language or behaviour is unacceptable (for example, by being rude or aggressive) the Chair can warn them about this. If such behaviour continues the chair has the right to either schedule a short break or end the meeting.

5.4.3 After the meeting

- Staff should take notes of the agreed actions from the meeting and send these to parents within 5 working days of the meeting taking place.
- Staff should note the details of any meetings in the communications log of a student's record on Sims. Safeguarding issues may have to be logged elsewhere, so please seek advice from the Safeguarding Officer.

5.5 Phonecalls

As mentioned previously, phone calls are often an easier way for parents and staff to discuss matters, particularly at short notice.

If calling a parent and there is no answer, staff should always try to leave a message, making it clear who the parent should then contact in school.

If, at any time, a member of staff believes that the language or tone of the conversation has become unacceptable (for example, by the other person being rude or aggressive) they may issue a warning, e.g. *'Please can you consider your tone/language. I may have to end the phonecall if this continues'*.

If the behaviour continues they have the right to end the phonecall e.g. *'I'm sorry but, as I said previously, your tone/language isn't appropriate and so I am ending the conversation now'*.

Staff should use their professional judgement about whether a communication needs to be logged on the student's record on Sims (via the communications log), and/or shared with other people, e.g. a safeguarding issue would be submitted via CPOMs.

Staff should not use their own mobile phones for calls or text messages with parents/carers.

5.6 Complaints

We aim to deliver education of the highest standard. However, on occasions we may fall short of parents' expectations. If they wish to make a complaint they should follow the process outlined in the Trust Complaints Procedure which can be found on the policies page of each school website.

It outlines the process to follow, which starts with raising the issue with their child's form tutor or key stage/year leader. We hope that any concerns can be resolved at any early stage.

Any staff in receipt of a complaint from a parent should inform their line manager.

5.7 Student reports and parents' evenings

The school provides a written report on students' progress at regular points throughout their time with us. Reports are sent home via students. We send parents a message to let them know that their child will be bringing their report home.

We also hold parents' evenings, when they have the opportunity to meet staff and discuss any issues.

5.8 Open evenings

Open evenings are held once a year for students interested in applying for entry into Year 7 and Sixth Form. These are an important opportunity to showcase the school and engage face to face with potential students and their families.

All staff should ensure that classrooms and offices are left in a tidy, presentable state at the end of the school day before open evenings.

6. Communications with students

6.1.1 Communications apps

There is the ability for some staff to send both individual and group messages via the communications apps used in their school. Please refer to the relevant procedure for that school for further information.

6.1.2 Email

All work related emails should be received and sent from a work email account. Under no circumstances should staff use personal email accounts for work purposes. If a student or parent contacts a member of staff via their personal email account, this should be reported immediately to the member of staff's line manager and, potentially, the Safeguarding Officer.

6.1.3 Website and MLE

Students can find general information about school, for example about clubs or careers advice, on the website in the section for '*Current parents and students*'.

In some schools, the student section of the MLE is used by some departments to share information with students. The MLE was originally set up when the new school building opened. Plans are underway at Trust level to replace it with a Trust-wide intranet when time and resources allow.

7. Handling of post and phonecalls

7.1 Post

Outgoing post is sent via reception. This is not to be used for personal post, even if the postage has already been paid, as the safety of postal items cannot be guaranteed.

Incoming post is opened by reception, date stamped and placed in the tray of the member of staff in the staff room. Post marked as confidential is not opened. Likewise, personal post and deliveries cannot be accepted by reception, e.g. Christmas shopping.

7.2 Phonecalls

Any incoming phonecalls via the main school telephone number will be put through to the appropriate person via reception. The reception staff will initially try to 'triage' the call, to find out who the caller is and what they are calling about (whilst being aware that some information may be confidential and the caller may not wish to disclose it). When putting the call through to staff they will first announce who the caller is and what they are calling about (if it has been disclosed).

8. Media communications

8.1 Newsletters and website

Any items for inclusion in the newsletter, website or via other promotional channels should be sent to the Communications Manager.

8.2 Official school social media accounts

8.2.1 Main school accounts

Each school has its own social media accounts which are managed by the Communications Manager. In some instances, this is delegated to individual staff within schools. Please contact the Communications Manager for further details.

8.2.2 Departmental and other accounts

Departmental or subject social media accounts can be used to share topical news with students studying that subject and to highlight news and achievements. Staff should contact the Communications Manager in the first instance for guidance on setting up accounts.

If posting photos of students, staff should first check the photo permissions in Sims and follow the guidance in the Data policy. Any changes to student permissions will be published in Heads Up.

8.3 Unofficial school social media accounts

Any unofficial social media accounts in the school's name and/or using the school's logo will be investigated and also reported to the appropriate social media company. If it is discovered that students or staff have created them they will be subject to disciplinary action.

8.4 Staff presence on social media

Staff are responsible for protecting their personal and professional reputations as well as that of the school when using social media. They should bear in mind the advice we give our students that, even with the most restrictive privacy settings, everything that is published online can potentially exist forever and be shared.

Before posting materials online staff should stop and ask themselves:

- Will the content reflect poorly on them, the school, employer or their profession?
- Are they confident that the comment or other media in question, if accessed by others, (colleagues, parents etc) would be considered reasonable and appropriate?

Staff should not communicate matters relating to school via personal social media accounts or accept 'friend' requests (and similar) from current students. This includes sharing personal telephone numbers for apps such as WhatsApp. Online communication with students should only be done through a managed learning environment where communications are transparent. Staff should use their professional judgement in deciding whether to accept 'friend' requests (and similar) from former students.

Staff who use social media must set the most restrictive privacy settings, eg. locked accounts on Twitter and Instagram; Facebook settings should be set to as private as possible. Even if using different names and locked accounts, staff should be aware that their profile picture can be seen publicly. They should also consider that, even if their own account is set restricted, any posts made on other people's accounts might be seen if they have different privacy settings.

Staff should not link a school email account to social media, unless this has been agreed with the Communications Manager for an official school account.

Staff should never use location-based dating apps on school premises or on the journey to and from school. When setting a profile for a dating app, staff should assume that it could be accessed by their students so should draft their profiles accordingly.

8.4.1 Further advice about using social media

Useful advice about setting up your privacy settings can be found within the help section of each social media site. Staff can also consult their own trade union for advice and best practice. The following advice is also useful:

<https://www.ascl.org.uk/Help-and-Advice/Leadership-and-governance/Leading-and-Managing-Staff/Social-Networking,-Social-Media-and-Email-protecti>

<https://www.teachertoolkit.co.uk/2016/01/15/top-tips-to-keep-teachers-safe/>

<https://www.webwise.ie/teachers/facebook-for-teachers/>

<https://www.childnet.com/downloads/Social-Media-Guide-teachers-and-support-staff.pdf>

8.5 Contact with the media

Any media enquiries should be forwarded to the Communications Manager immediately or, in her absence, the Head's P.A. Staff should not provide responses themselves.

9. Emergency communication

In the event of an emergency, the *Critical Incident Procedure* will be followed. This includes procedures for contacting parents/carers and staff.

In the event of adverse weather, staff will receive messages as outlined in each school's *Adverse Weather Procedure*.