



EXETER  
MATHS  
SCHOOL

FREEDOM FOR THINKERS

# Communication with Parents Review 2023



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## Abstract

This is a review of the communication between EMS, external professionals and parents, with a focus on whether communication is effective in safeguarding students. The central part of the review is an examination of the records for eight students, many of whom have complex safeguarding needs which has resulted in working with external agencies.

We conclude that whilst safeguarding is sound, more can be done to strengthen the school's systems and provide parents with clearer information, particularly when a student no longer consents to the school contacting parents.

## Introduction

### Reason for the review:

This review of communication with parents<sup>1</sup>/carers has been triggered by our parent survey, Jan 2023, in which two parents raised concerns about how the school had cared for and communicated about their child who boarded with us. The parents were from the same family, which indicates that this is an isolated concern. However, their concerns were significant and the circumstances, although uniquely complex, may be repeated in future. We therefore committed to a deeper investigation into this case and others so that where lessons need to be learnt, they are.

### Contextual Information:

Exeter Maths School (EMS) is a 16-19 school but currently has students in attendance whose ages range from 15 to 20 years old. Approximately a third of students board from Monday to Friday, travelling home to be with their family each weekend.

All students are invited to meet a member of the pastoral team at least once a year. This provides an opportunity for those who may not seek out help to speak to someone. It also reduces the barriers to seeking support in the future, should they need to do so.

The school aims to prepare students for independent study and work when they leave the school. As such, we give students space to make decisions and take responsibility for their own learning. For example, if a student fails to submit homework we will talk to them and offer support to help them solve this, rather than immediately informing parents. We recognise, however, that parents have an important role to play in supporting their child during this time and that we need to ensure they have appropriate information to be able to do this.

Due to the age of our students, the school processes operate with the supposition that students have the mental capacity<sup>2</sup> to grant their own consent. If a student is considered incapable of being able to make safe choices, then separate safeguarding measures are put in place. Such measures are determined by the school in consultation with medical professionals.

The legal definition of a child is a young person who is under the age of 18.

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<sup>1</sup> Parent refers to birth parents and other adults who are in a caring or parenting role, for example step-parents, foster carers, adoptive parents and [LA corporate parents](#).

<sup>2</sup> The Mental Health Capacity Act states that a person with Mental capacity is able to make important decisions and understand the implications of these decisions. [Mental Capacity Act 2005 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

## Scope of the review:

The majority of parents, including those of boarding students, report that they are happy with the care of their children and the school's communication relating to this. Whilst we have no desire to be complacent about general communication, this review focuses on cases which relate to students who are facing difficulties, whether they be academic, medical, social or safeguarding.

Its focus is to review the communication between EMS and parents/carers who have parental responsibility for a student at the school and to investigate the school's communication and referrals with other relevant external agencies. It explores whether communication with parents and external agencies is effective in safeguarding students and whether parents are suitably well informed when concerns are raised.

## Methodology

### Our commitment:

The spirit in which this review has been conducted is aligned with our school values:

*Everybody: we take care of each other and put people at the heart of decision making...*

*Mistakes: ... we learn from our mistakes.*

*Honesty: honestly builds trust and enables our community to flourish...*

*Endeavour: we embrace challenge...and seek out opportunities to learn*

We are committed to seeking the truth, learning the lessons that need to be learnt and taking appropriate action as a result of that learning. We have our students' best interests at heart and are committed to being open and honest.

Whilst this report endeavours to communicate our findings as clearly and openly as possible, to protect the anonymity of students and the confidential nature of safeguarding logs and personal communication, we are unable to share all the details of the cases.

### Lead Reviewer:

The majority of the work within this review has been completed by the school's Pastoral Lead, Yasmine Trevelyan (YT). Yasmin joined EMS in January 2023 and as such brings a fresh perspective to the work of the pastoral team.

Yasmin has significant experience as a Designated Safeguarding Lead in multiple settings. Immediately prior to joining EMS, she worked in a Pupil Referral Unit in which safeguarding concerns were numerous and complex. She has expertise and experience in working with external agencies, parents and school staff and as such is well qualified to conduct this review.

### Summary of actions:

At the outset, YT and the school's Headteacher, Kerry Burnham (KB) met with the parents who had raised significant concerns to better understand their perspective. There then followed a deep dive of the records of safeguarding and communication of a sample of students for whom concerns had been raised. Eight case studies were reviewed: four day students and four boarding students, some of whom were working with multi-agencies, including, but not limited to, CAMHS, GPs, Young Devon and Children and Families Social Care. In total, 466 incident reports and 355 action logs were scrutinised.

This was not a random sample, case studies were selected to ensure that a range of issues were considered which included, but were not restricted to, our most complex cases in which work with external agencies was required. The sample also reflected, as far as possible, the diversity within our community with samples taken from both year groups (five from Year 13 and three from Year 12) and a range of gender identities (male, female and non-binary, including students with a different gender identity to that assigned at birth). The cases included students with SEND and those without.

The case studies have been reviewed in light of EMS policies and stated practice. The review has also been informed by national guidance, and examples of practice from other Further Education providers. A list of reference documents are given in Appendix A (p. 14).

In the early stages of the review, our boarding provision was inspected by Ofsted. Inspectors met with the parents of boarding students via Teams. There were two meetings: one with a group of parents and a separate meeting with the parents who had raised concerns in our parent survey. The inspection included a deep dive into our safeguarding and pastoral policies and records, including a review of our most complex cases, both current and historic. Inspectors also spoke to external professional with whom EMS worked to safeguard students. The feedback we received from inspectors forms part of our analysis.

Throughout the review, YT has reflected with KB and this report has been written in collaboration. The results, analysis and conclusions have been shared with members of the School's Senior Leadership Team and their perspective is considered in the final analysis and agreement of the next steps.

## Results and Analysis

Much of the detailed analysis of cases is redacted from this report to enable us to share the review openly whilst protecting the anonymity of students and the confidential nature of their records. The table below provides a high-level summary of the case studies; this is provided to give context to our analysis and conclusions.

| Student | Boarding | Safeguarding | External Agencies | Character of need/concern  |
|---------|----------|--------------|-------------------|--|
| A       | Yes      | No           | No                | Social anxiety and gender identity.  |
| B       | No       | Yes          | Yes               | Pastoral support from EMS team, refused consent to inform parents and sometimes external services.               |
| C       | No       | No           | No                | Completion of homework.  |
| D       | No       | Yes          | Yes               | Historic safeguarding disclosures, parents unaware of details. Ongoing mental and physical health. Attendance.   |
| E       | No       | No           | No                | Bereavement, interactions with peers.  |
| F       | Yes      | No           | Yes               | Social anxiety and Autism.   |
| G       | Yes      | Yes          | Yes               | Complex mental and physical health needs, gender identity, estrangement from parents.                            |
| H       | Yes      | Yes          | Yes               | Attendance due to ill health. safeguarding concerns, refusal of consent to inform parents and external agencies. |

A “yes” in the safeguarding column indicates that there is a safeguarding log relating to the student. A “no” is indicative of concerns that are not related to safeguarding. A “yes” in the “External Agencies” column indicates that at least one external agency has been involved in this case and the school has communicated with them. This may be a provider of support, a medical consultation or a provider of social care.

### Case Study Overview

A summary of the findings for each case is given in the table below. The amount of detail is limited to protect the confidential nature of student’s issues and to protect anonymity. The ordering of students is purposefully different in this table to the table above.

| Student | Record Keeping  | Communication  |
|---------|---|--|
| 1       | Records are clear and thorough, demonstrating appropriate referrals to external agency in addition to internal support. | There is a record of regular communication between boarding staff and parents and a coordinated approach to supporting this student, including the involvement of external agencies. |



| Student | Record Keeping  | Communication  |
|---------|---|--|
| 2       | <p>Clear records of the support given by EMS and of referrals that were made and when.</p> <p>Limited information was on record from the previous school.</p>   | <p>There is no communication with the parents about this case because the student refused consent or to engage in support if information was passed on.</p> <p>Appropriate referrals to external agencies are recorded (MAST<sup>3</sup> and CAMHS<sup>4</sup>).</p> <p>Records show that when the student did not consent for the school to contact external agencies, the student was supported to do so themselves.</p> <p>When the student refused external support, records show that the risk to the student was appropriately assessed.</p> |
| 3       | <p>Records show that when a teacher had concerns about homework, the tutor was notified.</p> <p>There is a record of the student's Year 12 pastoral meeting but they did not attend in Year 13, although they were invited twice.</p> | <p>There is evidence of all the routine communications home via report and parent/student/teacher meetings.</p> <p>There have been no pastoral or academic concerns raised which have needed additional contact with parents or external agencies.</p>   |
| 4       | <p>Clear records of pastoral support given by EMS and of contact with parents.</p>  | <p>Communication with home appears to have been appropriate in this case, including meetings with parents during the period of support.</p> <p>There is no record of a review meeting with parents to ensure that support and communication continue to be appropriate.</p>  |
| 5       | <p>Clear records of appropriate action being taken when incidents occur. Some records of communication lack detail.</p>   | <p>There is evidence of appropriate communication with home and with external agencies when incidents occur. A multi-professional approach, working together with parents is evidenced.</p> <p>There is a record of the student refusing consent to contact parents following estrangement. The records report that this was discussed with parents but there are no details in the log. There is clear evidence of effective communication with appropriate professionals continuing after the estrangement from parents.</p>                     |

<sup>3</sup> Multi Agency Safeguarding Team (this is a general term, the name for the team in each Safeguarding Authority is different, for example MASH in Devon and MARU for Cornwall)

<sup>4</sup> Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services

| Student | Record Keeping  | Communication  |
|---------|---|--|
| 6       | <p>Clear records relating to historic issues and ongoing support and concerns.</p> <p>Records of lesson attendance do not present an accurate enough picture, for example being marked present when receiving pastoral support and not in the lesson itself.</p>  | <p>Communication with parents has been frequent and appropriate. This has been managed to keep the student safe whilst not divulging confidential information that the student has not consented to share.</p> <p>Appropriate liaison with external agencies (including GP and MAST) has taken place, including the chasing up of places on a waiting list.</p> <p>Concerns about lesson attendance were not raised with parents at an early enough point.</p>   |
| 7       | <p>There is a clear record of ongoing support and communication.</p> <p>Within the records there is some inconsistency in the use of the student's preferred name and name at birth.</p> <p>Whilst there is a clear record that communication has happened with external agencies, these could be more thorough with associated emails added and clarity about precise dates and times.</p> | <p>There is evidence of appropriate work with external agencies to ensure this student's safety and support.</p> <p>Appropriate risk assessments have been used when needed and developed in consultation with multi-professionals. The school has over-ridden the student's refusal to consent to sharing information when the threshold has been met for risk of significant harm.</p> <p>There is a clear record of communication with parents including minuted meetings. The student's refusal to consent to sharing their concerns with parents has made communication with parents more complex but the records show this has been at an appropriate level.</p> |
| 8       | <p>Clear records of concerns being raised, support given and of communication between school and home.</p> <p>Records show that the student's change of name was managed in line with EMS policies, ensuring parents were aware before staff used the new name.</p>   | <p>There is evidence of clear communication between parents and, in particular, boarding staff. When parents have raised concerns there is a record of support being put in place for the student and the parents being updated about their progress.</p> <p>There has been no need to involve external agencies in this case.</p>   |

## Ofsted

Inspectors found that the school worked pro-actively and effectively with external professionals, they also found that for the most part, parents are pleased with the level of communication with the school and the support the school provides for their children.

In their feedback to senior leaders, Ofsted inspectors said that parents in the group meeting were overwhelmingly positive. This evidence is matched in the case study review for which our records show particularly close communication between boarding staff and parents of students facing issues. We do, however, recognise that this is a subset of parents, restricted only to those of boarding students. We also appreciate that in their desire to support the school, parents may be particularly positive in their communication with inspectors, despite niggles that may have occurred.

## Parent Survey

In the most recent Parent Survey (Jan 2023) some concerns were raised relating to general communication, including that for boarding students (Appendix B, p.17). Whilst the most serious concerns were raised by two parents from the same family, there is nevertheless a disconnect that some parents feel from what is happening in the school. This is particularly pronounced for some parents of boarding students or those with children who are uncommunicative about school.

One parent used the survey to raise a significant and historic welfare concern that had not been brought to our attention before. This might indicate that we could do more to encourage communication between school and home.

## Homework

For some parents, reassurance is needed that the school will get in touch if there is a significant concern regarding attendance, homework or wellbeing. The school's approach is to first work with students to resolve minor issues such as missed homework and only to contact parents later if our interventions are not working. This is to encourage independence. Our review of records showed that a tutor was informed of a concern but there is no record of a follow-up taking place. We should not assume that nothing happened, but neither can we be sure that action was taken. Clarifying our systems and ensuring consistent application of them will be important if we are to be able to reassure parents that "no news" is "good news".

## Level of Detail

In all eight case studies, there are records of appropriate communication and actions, although in some cases the level of detail is not sufficient to know precisely what was communicated at the time. For example, in one log it stated that parents had been phoned and that [a topic] was discussed, with no other details of the discussion. The level of detail in records has increase in recent months, presenting a much clearer picture than in historic cases. Nevertheless, all records are sufficient to meet the threshold for sound safeguarding, as concluded by Ofsted inspectors during their March inspection.

## Student Consent

The age of our students and their increasing independence, particularly once they turn 18, makes communication with home complex and we have reviewed our practice in light of official guidance and the practice of other post-16 providers. Whilst the evidence indicates that we are executing our responsibilities appropriately, there is more that can be done to ensure that parents, students and the school have a shared understanding of what level of communication will take place when a student refuses consent to speak to parents or becomes estranged from parents/families.

## Working with Professionals

One of the concerns raised by parents was that the school may be acting in isolation and therefore no-one would have a clear overview of care, particularly when a student refuses consent to contact parents. The records indicate that this is not the case; effective multi-agency working is evident in several cases and we found no examples of the school keeping information from other professionals when it was appropriate to share. In fact, one case study provided evidence of the student's lack of consent being appropriately overridden when they were at immediate risk of harm. This provides reassurance that safeguarding staff are well informed about the nature of consent and when to include parents and external agencies, despite a student's protests.

Our own findings were confirmed by Ofsted in their report from March 2023:

*Staff work effectively with statutory bodies and other support services to meet students' needs. Staff are proactive in seeking support for students. Clear information-sharing and partnership working happen where needed. Professionals say communication with staff is excellent.*

That said, the school can do more to ensure that information from previous schools is provided and reviewed by EMS prior to students joining the school.

## Preferred Names and Pronouns

The case studies have highlighted instances of inconsistency in, for example, the use of a student's preferred name. It is our policy for staff not to use a student's preferred name and/or pronouns unless their parents/carers are aware of the change. This can be challenging, particularly for boarding staff who work with students in a more relaxed setting, when peers of the students are using the new name. Regular staff reminders may be needed to prevent errors occurring in the future.

## Clarity of Information

The review of case studies has highlighted other procedures which would benefit from tightening up. In particular relating to lesson attendance and to communication once a period of pastoral support or intervention comes to an end.

The current attendance records are skewed by marking students as “present” when they are in school but not attending lessons (they may, for example, be receiving pastoral support at the time). This leads to an overly positive view of attendance and may have resulted in a delay in highlighting and addressing concerns which in turn created a delay in contacting parents.

There were two instances when pastoral support was no longer being given but there was not a clear log of parents and/or students being informed. One occasion was due to a student being non-responsive to offers of support, in the second case it was following a period of communication with home and support being given in school. This leads to a risk of parents assuming support is ongoing when in fact it had ended.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

### Overall Conclusions

Safeguarding at EMS is sound. The school completes appropriate referrals and communicates effectively with external agencies to ensure a multi-agency approach to student safety.

For the most part, communication with parents is effective and appropriate but there are instances when contact home should have been made sooner and others when greater clarity could be given to parents, particularly when ending a period of support or when a student refused consent to inform parents of concerns.

In the difficult circumstances in which a student become estranged from their parents or refuses consent for contact to continue, the school should provide clear written information to parents and students which clarifies under what circumstances contact will be made and what measures the safeguarding team will take to ensure the student will be protected.

Pastoral support is a strength of the school and teachers know students well and their academic progress. However, there is a danger of being over-reliant on this and some of the school's systems would benefit from being strengthened to ensure no student slips between the cracks.

Despite the mostly positive feedback received by parents, school leaders must guard against complacency and should take care to continue to encourage parents to contact the school with concerns as they arise.

### Limitations of findings

This review is skewed towards our more serious and complex cases involving communication home. It should be read in light of this, with the knowledge and understanding that in the majority of cases systems are working well and students and parents are pleased with the provision.

The number of case studies reviewed is necessarily limited by the complex nature of each case and the time available to review them. Whilst we feel that useful lessons have been learnt from this review, we are also aware that the school will experience new scenarios which have not been considered as part of this process.

The level of information within this report is limited by the need to protect the anonymity of students. Those with responsibility for safeguarding have reviewed more detailed case notes to fully understand the context which has led to the final conclusions.

### Next Steps

Some of the findings of this review are aligned with our own self-evaluation and some actions are already underway, for example, the use of a new Management Information System (MIS) which enables bespoke attendance codes to be used. Nevertheless, we felt drawing these actions together in one place is worthwhile.

The actions below will be included in our School Development Plan in September (if not already been completed). This will ensure that learning is not lost, progress is tracked and governors have oversight of the changes taking place.

1. Some of the school's systems should be strengthened. In particular the:
  - a. collection of safeguarding records from previous schools
  - b. accurate recording of lesson attendance
  - c. flagging of academic concerns to parents, making the threshold for doing so clear
  - d. closing of cases, ensuring all appropriate parties are informed in writing
  - e. informing of tutors and making in-person contact with students who are not responsive to offers of pastoral support
  - f. school's Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy should add information to further clarity on the use of students' preferred pronouns and names; ongoing training of staff should take place.
  
2. For cases in which a student becomes estranged from parents or has removed consent for any pastoral contact with them, the school should have written guidance, in an appropriate format to share with parents and students, which outlines how students will be kept safe and under what circumstances parents will be contacted. This should make clear the difference between students who are under 18 and those who are adults.
  
3. The school should investigate the new procedures that universities have in place to safeguard the young adults who work with them. This should inform our practice. For example, gaining consent from all students who are over 18 to contact a trusted person should they find themselves in a crisis situation.

## Appendix A

### Reference Documents and Evidence:

#### EMS Policies and Procedures:

- Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy 2022
- Prevent Statement

#### External Advice and Guidance:

- Keeping Children Safe in Education 2022,
- Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018,
- Mental Capacity Act 2005
- [When does parental responsibility end in the UK? \(nationallegalservice.co.uk\)](https://nationallegalservice.co.uk)
- [Understanding and dealing with issues relating to parental responsibility - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)
- Information Sharing – Advice for practitioners providing safeguarding services to children, young people, parents and carers

#### Additional Evidence:

- Parent Survey Summary Jan 2023
- Ofsted Inspection Report Mar 2023



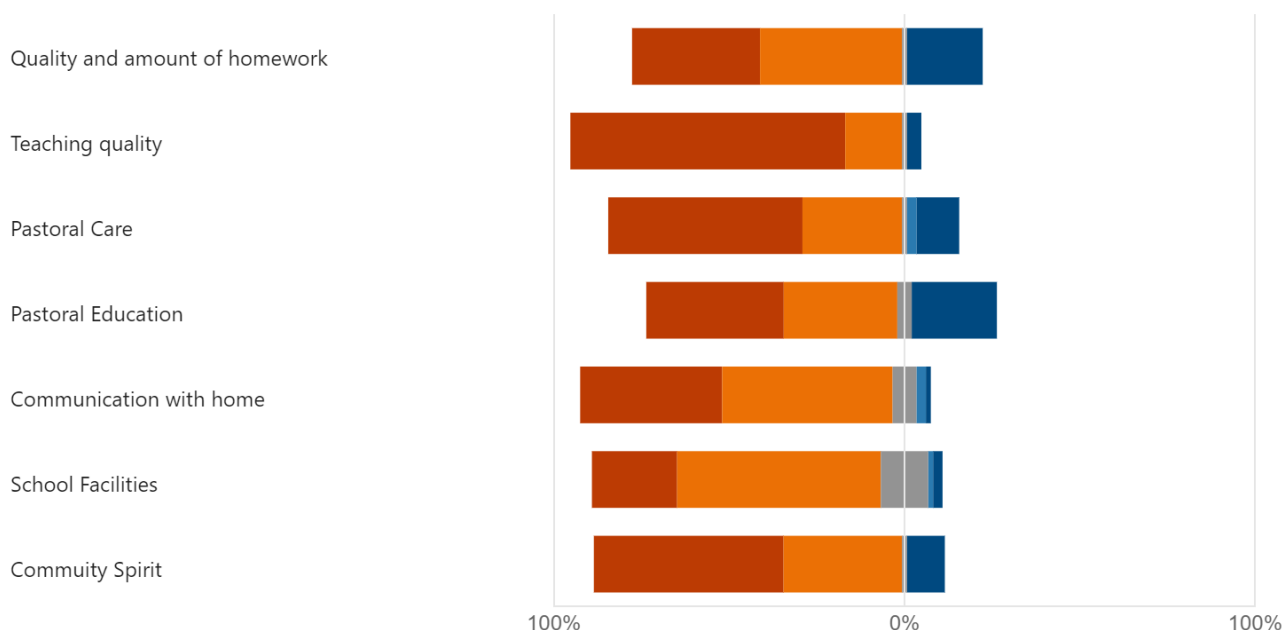
## Appendix B:

### Parent Survey Responses Jan 2023:

We asked parents to rate each category.

In response to “communication with home” two parents (2.7%) indicated that communication should be a “priority for improvement”, a further five parents (6.8%) selected that it “could be better”.

■ Excellent ■ Good ■ Could be better ■ Priority for improvement ■ Unsure



Parents were also invited to add comments about communication. The following eight responses were given:

*“Communication directly with parents could be better regarding functions/events/changes but only because teenage boys aren’t great at communicating!”*

*“I would like school to be a bit more tough on homework that isn’t done, and to inform parents not wait for parents evening”*

*“It would be good to be kept more informed about the homework element of study.”*

*“Support with maintaining good learning and sleeping habits in accommodation has been disappointing. There has been a lack of preventative intervention from the school to avert difficulties and a minimising of problems until they became huge. The response from school was then very good but has again waned. As a parent it is hard to know what is going on and whether it is appropriate to step in or back off.”*

*“Communication with home is difficult with a child/children who find communication difficult - I am not sure how you can improve parent-child-school communication in this situation as clearly all staff have multiple roles to fulfil eg: teaching staff also with form tutor, pastoral roles, etc”*

*“...as the parent of a boarding student, I have no contact with the school other than through school reports, parents evening, newsletter and text about changes to accommodation opening times. I have no sense of what it is like to be a student at EMS, what the peer group is like, or what the aspirations*

*are of teachers and peers. I rely on my son to convey his understanding of school and have limited information from elsewhere to support him. It is like he has gone to university 2 years early which brings it's own benefits. However, the opportunity to provide guidance around significant decisions whilst still a child is lost. I do wonder if the experience is different for parents of day students who have daily contact with their children. I would have liked to know more about how the curricula are set up to be able to guide from the outset rather than becoming informed when it was too late. I am referring in particular to preparation for university entrance exams and choosing university courses. There has been no written guidance that I am aware of from the school that parents can access. This is similar for the A-Level content which makes it tricky to respond to feedback from teachers at parents evening about ensuring your child does x,y and z..."*

*"...the communication to us as a family where we have had extensive problems has not been received regularly enough, particularly at the beginning when we were unaware of the issues building up."*

## Appendix C

### Detailed Review Notes:

This section is redacted for all staff other than senior leaders within the school who have responsibility for safeguarding.