

REPORT OF GROUP MANAGER – MEDIA RELATIONS**CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS SUPPORT PACKAGE FOR NCC SCHOOLS****Purpose of the Report**

1. The purpose of this report is to seek approval for the County Council's Communications and Marketing team to effectively charge maintained primary schools for crisis communications support by de-delegation of funds from the primary schools budget.

Information and Advice**Background**

2. Between April 2012 and March 2014, Nottinghamshire County Council's Communications and Marketing team dealt with 1,277 enquiries related to children and young people's services. A significant number of these related to fostering and adoption and corporate issues such as teachers' strikes, exam results and safeguarding matters. Of these 1,277 enquiries, 214 related specifically to schools.
3. Of the 214 enquiries, 179 related to primary schools, with one issue relating to a single school generating 58 enquiries. Eleven enquiries were generated by another primary school issue and seven enquiries concerned a further school. The remaining 103 primary school-related enquiries concerned inspection outcomes or were one-off calls.
4. Nineteen enquiries were related to issues concerning secondary schools and a further 16 were concerned with matters at a special school, a number of academies and a free school.
5. The figures show a low number of calls related to crisis situations in schools and this is to be expected. Crises are not everyday events; however when they do occur, they have a high level of impact and scrutiny, create major disruption and reputational damage, and can take an inordinate amount of time to resolve. The time spent dealing with a crisis situation can range from 1 to 100 hours.
6. Nottinghamshire County Council has supported the schools it maintains on an informal basis to date but, due to resource challenges, can no longer afford to do this unless a formal arrangement is put in place. This would be similar to the arrangements whereby an element of the schools Delegated Schools budget is used centrally to provide other services such as the free school meal eligibility assessment. The impact of not having a crisis communications arrangement in place is potentially that the Council would be unable

to guarantee that it could support schools with their communications during a crisis situation, which could have major consequences.

7. The communications team is made aware of crisis situations at schools by the Council's Human Resources (HR) team, CFCS education or safeguarding (LADO) colleagues, the school itself, the media and, on occasion, the Police press office.

Examples of crisis communications support

8. The communications team was informed by HR about the situation concerning a school at which a member of staff had been suspended. A senior media officer had a conversation with the school to establish exactly what happened and what action the school had taken. Further conversations took place with CFCS and HR colleagues to agree next steps. A media statement was then prepared which balanced the need to respond to the media and reassure parents, while not prejudicing the HR investigation which was to follow. A letter was also drafted to be sent to parents the same day. Both the statement and the letter were drafted by the senior media officer, and agreed with CFCS, HR, and the school in question. Any further media enquiries were handled directly by the senior media officer. This helped to create some distance between the media and the school, enabling the school to focus on the day-to-day needs of the children. It also meant that the senior media officer was able to keep a watching brief on the story as it unfolded in the media and respond to any inaccuracies. The senior media officer will have regular conversations /updates with the school, CFCS and HR colleagues over the life of this issue to ensure that, in terms of media attention and reputation management, there is a satisfactory outcome.
9. In a further example, the media contacted the communications team directly to find out the situation at a school following an allegation. As before, a senior media officer contacted the school to establish the details. As this situation involved the arrest and charge of a member of staff, the media officer liaised with the Police press office in addition to other NCC colleagues to ensure that any media statement from the school or letters to parents did not prejudice the Police investigation. The senior media officer liaised with all parties over the course of this issue, particularly around appearances in court, and had media statements prepared in advance of any further developments.

Proposal

10. It is proposed that the Schools Forum considers the introduction of a professional crisis communications contingency of £42,000 for the 280 primary schools which are maintained by the Council.
11. This would cost £0.75 per primary pupil (based on Oct 13 numbers) and would guarantee up to 100 hours support per school during the year, in the event of a crisis occurring. .
12. If the proposal is agreed, £42,000 would be de-delegated from the primary schools element of the Dedicated Schools Grant for 2015-16, and be used to fund communications resource to support schools in a crisis where the Council would not normally have any involvement. This arrangement would become effective 1 April 2015.

13. Details of what would be included within the package are shown in Appendix 1.

Other Options Considered

14. Consideration was given to charging individual schools for crisis communications support on an as-needed basis, on an hourly rate, but this would result in the need to establish an accounting function within the communications team.

15. The option of not charging for crisis communications support was considered. However this would lead to a situation whereby the Council could not guarantee to be able to support schools with communicating during a crisis situation, due to the current resource challenges.

Reason/s for Recommendation/s

16. To provide a retained crisis communications support package to maintained primary schools.

Statutory and Policy Implications

17. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, finance, human resources, human rights, the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults, service users, sustainability and the environment and ways of working and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

Financial Implications

18. These are described in the body of this report and detailed in the 'Proposal' section of Appendix 1.

RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1) That the proposal to de-delegate £42,000 of the primary maintained budget to fund a crisis communications contingency be approved, for the 2015-16 financial year.

Clare Yau
Group Manager – Media Relations

For any enquiries about this report please contact:

Clare Yau: 0115 977 3851

Constitutional Comments

19. Schools Forum has the authority to take the decision recommended in the report for primary, non-academy schools.

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

Crisis Communications Package for Schools

Schools Revenue Funding 2015-16 Operational Guide (via DfE website)

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

All.

Appendix 1

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PACKAGE FOR NCC SCHOOLS

No-one can predict what will arise during the course of a school year. Signing up to the crisis communications support package offered by Nottinghamshire County Council, will provide peace of mind for the school and the assurance that, in the event that any crisis does arise, the package will be in place and the schools will receive high-quality advice and practical support. This offer is detailed below.

What constitutes a crisis?

A crisis is an emergency situation that leads to, or is expected to lead to, an unstable situation (danger/ major disruption/ trauma) affecting an individual, group, or community. Crises are negative events that generally occur abruptly, with little or no warning and which require immediate attention.

These incidents disrupt the smooth running of the school and have the potential to adversely affect the school's reputation and/ or generate significant media/social media scrutiny. For example:

- School security issues, including a young child leaving school premises unnoticed/ unaccompanied
- Strangers/ unwelcome individuals on the school premises
- Teacher being disciplined/ HR issues/ inappropriate behaviour by staff
- Ofsted inspection failure
- Serious injury/ death of a pupil or teacher
- Weapons/illegal substances on school premises
- An infectious illness is linked to the school
- An emergency resulting in school evacuation/lock down
- An ongoing police-led incident on the school's premises or close to the school

What if communications are not managed effectively?

If communications are not managed effectively during and immediately after a crisis, it could lead to serious reputational damage for the school, head teacher, governing body and potentially impact on pupils and their parents. Indeed, it can be possible to strengthen the school's reputation or gain a positive outcome from a crisis – if it is handled well.

Current situation

The Council's communications team, which won the national Local Government Communications award in May 2013 for 'team of the year', has built up and demonstrated a high level of expertise in supporting schools to communicate effectively during a crisis.

Nottinghamshire County Council has supported schools it maintains on an informal basis to date, but due to resource challenges can no longer afford to do this unless a formal arrangement is put in place. The impact of this potentially would be that the council could not guarantee to be able to support schools with communicating during a crisis situation, which could have devastating consequences.

Proposal

It is proposed that the Schools Forum considers the provision of a contingency to cover professional crisis communications for the 280 schools for primary age children (5-11 years) which are maintained by the Council.

This would cost **around £0.75 per pupil** and would **guarantee up to 100 hours support per school** during the year, in the event of a crisis occurring. This represents good value for money, with each school securing **up to £5,000 of professional expertise** for its investment in this contingency.

If this is agreed, the Schools Forum would de-delegate £42,000 from the maintained primary schools budget in 2015-16 and use this to fund any crisis communications resources that are required in-year where the Council would not normally have any involvement.

What the contingency would cover:

The proposed package per school, per year includes up to 100 hours of support during and (if needed) immediately after a crisis situation/s at a school, until the matter is resolved or the media/social media scrutiny or 'noise' has abated. This includes:

- **Advice and support with dealing with communications around a crisis situation.** A crisis might include but is not limited to the following examples:
 - School security issues, including a young child leaving school premises unnoticed/ unaccompanied
 - Strangers/ unwelcome individuals on the school premises
 - Teacher being disciplined/ HR issues/ inappropriate behaviour by staff
 - Ofsted inspection failure
 - Serious injury/ death of a pupil or teacher
 - Weapons/illegal substances on school premises
 - An infectious illness is linked to the school
 - An emergency resulting in school evacuation/lock down

- An ongoing police-led incident on the school's premises or close to the school
- **Advice and support includes but may not be limited to:**
 - how best to deal with media/social media enquiries and requests
 - how to deal with including requests for interviews or statements to the media
 - practical support to set up a media conference/briefing in the situation of a major incident/crisis (not a minor one)
 - support with checking/drafting media responses as needed
 - support with drafting/ checking letters to parents as needed
 - communications for a failed Ofsted inspection
 - a list of useful contact numbers for the Council, other key public services and key local media organisations, which will be re-issued regularly if any contact information is updated
 - provision of a range of fact sheets to support schools on a range of topics as needed e.g. building relationships with the local media etc
 - access to the Council's on-call EMERGENCY duty mobile number for the communications team (this is staffed 9am on a Saturday to 10pm on a Sunday and 9am-10pm on all Bank Holidays) – please note this is not for advice that could wait until the next working day but for emergencies i.e. major incidents only
 - FREE media release template (for communicating Ofsted results where this is not a failure)
- The service **DOES NOT include:**
 - Actually delivering any communications with pupils, staff or parents (whatever form this takes e.g. setting up or fronting of meetings, making telephone calls to these audiences or updating the school's website) which will need to be led by the school. However, advice can be provided around this as part of the package
 - Out of hours advice generally – the on-call EMERGENCY duty mobile number for the communications team is for emergency incidents only, rather than for communications advice generally
 - If a school has one or more than one crises which resulted in over 100 hours of support – anything over 100 hours would be chargeable at a rate of £50/hour

Non-maintained schools

As there is only a small number of secondary schools maintained by the Council, secondary schools would need to buy into a crisis communications service per school. There is not currently a package on offer for this, but could be considered as part of the Council's services to schools catalogue in future.

A service to academies is not currently offered, but as with secondary schools, could be considered as part of the Council's services to schools catalogue in future.

September 2014