

## TRUSTED SUPPORTER COMMUNICATION PROTOCOL

### 1. Purpose

This protocol exists to explain how and why Plymouth Marjon University will communicate with specific external “*Trusted Supporters*” of students from time to time.

In this context, the following definitions apply:

Name	Definition
Next of kin/ Emergency Contact	Someone we will contact in the event of an emergency: a serious accident, serious concern about wellbeing or death. This is usually the person or persons who you have the closest relationship with. We will contact this person, in cases where we are concerned for the student’s safety and feel the student does not have capacity to judge their own safety.
Trusted supporter	Someone we will liaise with about specific concerns or circumstances, usually on request of or with agreement by the student.
Suicide safety plan	A plan worked on with a student and a university professional, to agree how the student will keep themselves safe.

This protocol is expected to be used for exceptional cases, not for standard communications.

### 2. Principles

- 1.1 Plymouth Marjon University provides a transformational education to our students and is student-centred in its approach. Our Values are central to what we do: we will treat students with humanity and fairness; we will encourage independence; we will encourage all students to be the best that they can be. From time to time, it can be helpful to work with specific external supporters of the student in this goal.
- 1.2 Students are almost always over 18 and therefore considered adults. They are expected to be competent in judging whether they need support, and accessing that support. We do not expect students to always know what type of support they need, but to be proactive in asking, and working with us to respond to advice, for example by booking and attending appointments.
- 1.3 Some students may be classed as vulnerable adults, in need of care and support, and very occasionally students may be under 18, and our duty of care towards these students is different and extends further: this is covered under our Safeguarding Policy which will supersede this Trusted Supporter Policy where the law requires it (for example where we are expected by law to raise a safeguarding concern). Sometimes students may reach a stage where we deem they do not have capacity to keep themselves or others safe.
- 1.4 We recognise that from time to time, it can be helpful to our students to liaise with a supportive and trusted external person (for example a friend, partner or relative) in the joint goal of supporting that student: a “Trusted Supporter”. Examples of times when this might be

appropriate are to support a student's mental health, or to support a student through a formal procedure such as an investigation or complaint. We recognise that a Trusted Supporter might change during a student's time with us, or they may ask to liaise with different people for different needs.

- 1.5 We recognise that some processes are hard for students to be part of, and sometimes the University may make decisions which are difficult for students, but they exist to support the good running of the University and the goal of helping every student to thrive. Sometimes our staff may have to communicate difficult messages to students. These will always be carefully considered and fair, but we recognise they are not always welcome.
- 1.6 We cannot liaise with unknown people about students studying with us: we cannot share that they study with us, or discuss their cases.
- 1.7 We cannot share personal information to students about other students.
- 1.8 We will share appropriate information to relevant people within the University, subject to the University's data sharing and risk assessment process, in order to support students to be successful in their studies; for instance, to put in reasonable adjustments to support them.
- 1.9 Our members of staff have the right to do their jobs without harassment, abuse or threat and the University will not accept this towards members of staff.

### **3. Process**

- 3.1 On enrolment at the University, (which happens each year of the course) students will be asked for two contacts:
  - 3.1.1 A "Next of Kin", to be used in the event of an emergency, health and safety concern, serious accident or death of a student, which is compulsory and must be kept up to date.
  - 3.1.2 A "Trusted Supporter".
- 3.2 Trusted Supporters are generally contacted on request of the student, or with agreement from the student. In some cases we may check in with the Trusted Supporter where we cannot contact a student and where it relates to the reasons we are in contact with a Trusted Supporter.

### **4. Circumstances in which we will liaise with an Emergency Contact without consent**

- 4.1 The University may liaise with an Emergency Contact (either a Next of Kin or a Trusted Supporter) without a student's consent, in certain circumstances and/ or as required by our Safeguarding Policy. We will follow the [Information sharing and suicide prevention: consensus statement](#) before contacting Emergency Contacts. Circumstances in which we may do this are:
  - 4.1.1 we have reason to consider the student is at high risk to themselves or others (for example, from suicide)
  - 4.1.2 we cannot contact the student to gain their consent and we can reasonably explain why we cannot contact them
  - 4.1.3 the student does not want to give consent, but we consider that the student at that time lacks capacity to make a decision about whether to share information with people who can support them
  - 4.1.4 obtaining consent would put the student at risk (prejudice the provision of prevention from neglect or harm)

- 4.1.5 we consider it is in their best interests in accordance with section 4 of the Mental Capacity Act 2005
- 4.1.6 if we are not able to contact the student or engage with the student, (for example they appear to be missing) and we believe they are at high risk to themselves or others
- 4.2 We will share data under the lawful basis of substantial public interest in which sharing of data is necessary to safeguard individuals at risk.
- 4.3 We will only share data that is proportionate and necessary.
- 4.4 The judgement on these criteria will be made using the consensus statement on information sharing and suicide prevention. The judgement may be made by the Designated Safeguarding Officer, the Head of Student Wellbeing and Support or the Safeguarding and Student Conduct Manager, or their suitable nominated representative, in liaison with at least two other suitable members of staff (i.e. a group of at least three).
- 4.5 The process where a student cannot be contacted will be:
  - 4.5.1 Aim to contact the student by phone and email.
  - 4.5.2 Contact any members of staff who we reasonably believe may hold information or help to keep the student safe.
  - 4.5.3 If we already have the consent of the student to liaise with a Trusted Supporter on this topic, we may try to contact them to see if they can reassure of the student's safety.
  - 4.5.4 If we cannot make contact with the student through these means, we will contact the Next of Kin. We will inform the student of this as soon as reasonably possible. The timing for this may vary depending on how we judge the urgency of the situation.
- 4.6 The process where a student can be contacted, but does not wish to give consent for someone to be contacted, but based on the criteria above we believe they need to be:
  - 4.6.1 Confirm whether the situation meets criteria to contact someone without consent.
  - 4.6.2 Contact the student, ideally in person, to explain that we need to contact their Emergency Contact. They may wish to contact the Emergency Contact first but we would then follow up.
  - 4.6.3 Contact the Emergency Contact, keeping the student informed where it is appropriate and safe to do so.

**Example case:**

A student has been attending counselling and wellbeing support services due to depression. They have shared with their counsellor that they have had suicidal thoughts but confirmed they do not have a plan or intent to take their lives. They have sometimes brought their best friend to discussions within Student Wellbeing and Support as a support, and have listed that friend as a Trusted Supporter. They are also listed on their Suicide Safety Plan.

One morning, a welfare concern is raised that the student appears to have been out all night and not come home.

Student Wellbeing and Support try to contact the student first. This is not successful, so they contact the Trusted Supporter to see if they know of the student's whereabouts.

The Trusted Supporter has not heard from the student, and is also immediately concerned.

The student has no lectures that day and is not due on campus.

One of the Designated Safeguarding Officer, Head of Student Wellbeing and Support, the Safeguarding and Student Conduct Manager, or their designated appropriate representative will decide, in conjunction with two colleagues, whether the situation meets the criteria to contact the Emergency Contact.

At this point Student Wellbeing and Support emails the student to confirm they will call the Next of Kin, and then contacts the Next of Kin. They will express the reasons for their concerns (that they are concerned for the student's mental health, the levels of concern, and that they have been in touch with them on this question) without sharing detailed information.

Follow-up: the contact in Student Wellbeing and Support will also inform the following contacts of the situation, so that relevant staff are aware and can be prepared:

The Personal Development Tutor

The Dean of the School, who may in confidence inform other key members of staff (for example those teaching the student at that time, Module Leads etc)

#### **4.7 Circumstances in which we will liaise with a Trusted Supporter on request of students**

4.7.1 The University will liaise with Trusted Supporters on request of students where:

4.7.1.1 It is an exceptional circumstance in which it is deemed that the student will be significantly helped by having a Trusted Supporter involved, and

4.7.1.2 It is requested directly by the student, in writing, and

4.7.1.3 It is considered to be directed towards supporting that student's success at University, and

4.7.1.4 It remains at all times a shared supportive relationship between the University and the Trusted Supporter(s), with the focus on helping that student to thrive in their studies, and

4.7.1.5 The Trusted Supporter is happy to be involved and the time for them is not considered onerous to them (particularly if they are a fellow student).

4.7.2 The University will also liaise with Trusted Supporters with agreement of students, as part of a suicide safety plan. A suicide safety plan aims to be a live document discussed regularly with students (for example by a Counsellor or Specialist Mentor) and they may have more contacts on their safety plan than just the Trusted Supporter.

4.7.3 Students can change their Trusted Supporter and the University will not automatically inform previous Trusted Supporters.

4.7.4 The University is not able to confirm to friends or family whether they are or are not a Trusted Supporter: this information must be shared with them by the student except in cases where the Safeguarding Policy supersedes confidentiality.

4.7.5 "Next of Kin" refers to the person a student wishes us to contact in the event of a serious health or safety concern, accident or death.

4.7.6 Students have the right to bring a friend or supporter to certain meetings. This is often a one-off situation, (an example may be bringing a Student Union Officer to an academic misconduct meeting). They do not have to be listed as a Trusted Supporter and information would only be shared with them on that topic and with written consent of the student, for example the meeting invite, and papers relating to it.

#### **4.8 Expectations of Trusted Supporters**

4.8.1 Trusted Supporters are expected to work positively with University members of staff.

- 4.8.2 Trusted Supporters are expected to liaise for the purpose of helping a student to succeed, for example helping the student to understand a process or their responsibilities or actions, or supporting them with their mental health.
- 4.8.3 Communication with Trusted Supporters is generally expected to be time-limited around a specific process or situation. At no time does liaison on one topic or on one occasion constitute an agreement to keep a Trusted Supporter updated on that topic repeatedly, or keep them updated on any other topic, or throughout a student's time with us.
- 4.8.4 Communication is expected to be responsive rather than proactive: the University will always aim to liaise with the student first; the responsibility is to the student not to the Trusted Supporter. The University does not commit to providing regular updates to the Trusted Supporter.
- 4.8.5 Trusted Supporters should therefore not expect updates from the University, nor complain about not receiving them.
- 4.8.6 Trusted Supporters are advised that students may share a limited version of information with them, and the University is not responsible for the accuracy of the information shared by students to their Trusted Supporter.

#### **4.9 Circumstances in which we will not liaise with Trusted Supporters:**

- 4.9.1 The University will not liaise with Trusted Supporters in situations listed below. In these cases the University will pause communication and members of staff will be instructed not to liaise with that Trusted Supporter:
  - 4.9.1.1 Communication is not focused around helping the student to thrive in their studies.
  - 4.9.1.2 Communication is focused on events which are unrelated to their studies, for example a Penalty Charge Notice.
  - 4.9.1.3 Communication is around a standard activity at university, (for example grades, timetabling, admissions or assessments), as students are expected to independently manage their own liaison for these situations.
  - 4.9.1.4 The Trusted Supporter appears to have had a situation misrepresented to the extent that communication is significantly impeded. If this seems to be the case, the relevant staff contacts will need to either clarify the situation to the Trusted Supporter on agreement with the student, or pause liaison with the Trusted Supporter, as the goal of jointly supporting the student will become very difficult.
  - 4.9.1.5 Communication is at any time belligerent, aggressive, personally attacks members of staff or is considered overly time-consuming at the expense of looking after either this student or other students.
  - 4.9.1.6 The judgement on these will be taken by the Head of Student Wellbeing and Support, the Safeguarding and Student Conduct Manager, the Designated Safeguarding Officer, or their designated appropriate representative. Where it is deemed appropriate, in particular where it is deemed that staff may be at risk, this may involve discussions with other members of management to keep staff safe.

#### **4.10 Expectations of students**

- 4.10.1 The University's priority is to the student, not to the Trusted Supporter. Students remain the primary point of contact.

- 4.10.2 In almost all circumstances, students should be copied into emails between Trusted Supporters and the University, and it is preferred that they are also present in any verbal communication.
- 4.10.3 Students should only request that we liaise with a Trusted Supporter where they feel it will be genuinely helpful to them. In line with our value of Independence, we offer support to students to enable them to understand processes and encourage them to take responsibility for themselves.
- 4.10.4 If the student decides they want a member of staff to liaise with a Trusted Supporter, they should request this in writing to the relevant member of staff. They need to specify the topic on which staff can liaise.
- 4.10.5 Students can change their Trusted Supporters on the student portal at any time. If there is ongoing communication, it is up to the student to let relevant members of staff know this: members of staff will not be automatically alerted.
- 4.10.6 Students can request at any time that we no longer communicate with the Trusted Supporter on a specific topic, (i.e.: without changing them on the portal) and again should do this in writing to the relevant member of staff. Where several people are liaising with a Trusted Supporter, they will need to consider a reasonable delay of three working days in informing all members of staff.

## Annex 1 : Other relevant policies

- [Safeguarding Policy](#) (Children and Adults at Risk)
- [Student Regulations Framework](#), in particular note:
  - Section 9, Support to Continue to Study Procedure
  - Section 15, Student Misconduct Procedure
  - Section 17, Complaints Procedure

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