

Draft of Mansfield Policy for Dealing with a Student Tragedy

Adopted by Governing Body on 23 November 2022

1. Introduction

This document is an adaptation of the university draft guidance circulated in Spring 2022, as applied to Mansfield College.

'Student tragedy' in this context is defined as any sudden and unexpected event concerning a student which both seriously and directly affects both College and Faculty/Department communities. This includes student deaths, but may also concern cases of significant injury or crisis.

Annex A contains a quick-reference checklist for responding to a student tragedy and contact numbers for key contacts.

2. Being Prepared

University guidance says "It is expected that Colleges would normally take the lead in responding to a student tragedy." The college leads response to a student tragedy involving a Mansfield undergraduate. Where the tragedy concerns a graduate student, it may sometimes be appropriate for the Faculty or Department to be the focus of response.

Where Mansfield takes the lead, efforts should be made to ensure that the Faculty / Department are kept informed and alerted to any communications the College may issue. Where Departments take the lead, efforts should be made that the student's College is informed and alerted to any communications the Department may issue.

Within Mansfield, the Principal is 'the Lead' within college on student tragedy. If the Principal is unavailable, the deputies are: Chaplain, Head of Welfare, Senior Tutor, in that order.

The members of staff who must be informed as soon as possible are: Principal, Senior Tutor, Head of Welfare, Chaplain, Porter's Lodge. If the tragedy concerns a PG student, the Tutor for Graduates should also be informed. It may also be relevant to inform: college doctors, academic administrators, certain academic staff, certain junior deans, certain operational staff, depending on the impact the tragedy might have on them.

The core members of staff who need to read this policy for student tragedy in advance are:

- a) those who may be called on to be the student tragedy lead: the Principal, the Chaplain, the Head of Welfare, the Senior Tutor;
- b) those most likely to be involved in emergency response: the Head Porter, each member of the Lodge Team and the junior deans.

Other members of college can be briefed as necessary if a tragedy occurs.

3. Immediate Action

As soon as there is notification of a student tragedy, follow the procedure of ***immediate action*** in the checklist [Annex A].

In the event of a discovery of a death on University or College premises, the police ***must*** be notified. Nothing should be moved or touched until the Police have arrived and advised on next steps. If there are witnesses whom the police will need to interview, ensure that there is a private area available to them and appropriate support provided. Care is needed to encourage witnesses and/or affected students to not inform any third party until the next-of-kin is informed. The police or hospital will normally make contact with the next-of-kin. If the next of kin is abroad, usual protocols of informing next of kin should be followed, but in some instances the task of informing them of the death may be assigned to the consulate or embassy. The designated contact with the emergency services should ensure that next-of-kin have been informed before any communication is issued.

If any staff member from the college learns of a student tragedy, they should inform the lodge immediately.

The Lodge will

- a) Contact emergency services if appropriate.
- b) Immediately inform the Principal by phone or in person. If the lodge is not able to contact the Principal by phone, they should phone the Chaplain, Head of Welfare, Senior Tutor, in that order until they are able to contact someone by phone. This deputy will lead until they can hand over to the Principal.
- c) Send a brief email to the Head Porter, Senior Tutor, the Head of Welfare, The Chaplain, the Head of HR and if relevant, the Tutor for Graduates to alert them to the tragedy and informing them who has taken the Lead.
- d) Assist the Lead e.g. if requested to make the area secure for police or if requested to contact welfare staff to provide to support anyone in distress.

4. Communications

4.1. Main groups with whom there is likely to be communication

There is likely to be communication with four main groups in the case of a student tragedy:

- *External professionals*: The Lodge is likely to be first contact for the emergency services, including the police, fire brigade, the ambulance service and the medical authorities. As soon as possible, the Lodge should involve the Lead, regardless of whether the tragedy comes to light in working hours or not. The Lead can then decide who will take over liaison with emergency services. In dealing with student deaths, normally the police will inform the family. However, a member of College staff will need to ensure this has been done, including when and how, before contact is made with the family.

- *University Authorities*: The student tragedy lead, that is, the Principal or their deputy, should contact University Security Services, who will inform the University Marshal, and (depending on the College's wishes), will liaise with the News and Information Office and inform the Vice-Chancellor's Office, the Proctors' Office, the Director of Student Welfare and Support Services, the Counselling Service, Oxford University SU, and the Chair of the Health & Safety Management Committee, as appropriate.

This is important since these people may find themselves being approached by the press without notice. All of these groups and individuals will be willing to help any College or Faculty/Department in times of tragedy, but will normally wait to be invited to do so.

- *Press*: The local press liaise regularly with the local police and hence it is likely that the press will be aware of something unusual happening within the collegiate University, and particularly within a College very quickly and will approach that College. This is why someone must contact the University News and Information Office as soon as possible, so that it can field initial enquiries and advise on how to respond to direct questioning.

- *College and Faculty / Department Community*: Systems will be needed to ensure that all sectors of the College (including College officers, senior members, junior members, College staff) and appropriate staff and students within the Faculty / Department (including heads / chairs, directors of studies, senior / academic officers, and relevant academic staff) are kept informed as to what has happened as quickly as possible. A member of staff should be designated to act as liaison between Mansfield and the student's department/faculty. Timing of communication should be co-ordinated and releases simultaneous, in order to avoid speculation.

In the event that a student tragedy happens outside of Oxford or abroad, resulting in death and/or serious injury, the Collegiate University may wish to consider sending an appropriately senior, and welfare trained, representative to that location to provide support for family and friends.

Should a tragedy happen abroad, the University, on behalf of the college and/or department may need to liaise with local embassies and/or Foreign & Commonwealth Office. The responsibility for investigating and determining the cause of death usually rests with the authorities in the country in which the death occurred.

A copy of risk assessment forms that in particular postgraduate students fill out as part of field work, study abroad, or internships ideally should be lodged in advance with the student's College. Alternatively Colleges can access these forms via the relevant Divisional Safety Office or the Department (e.g. in the case of Modern Language Undergraduates on year abroad).

4.2. Contact with individuals close to the person concerned

Family members

In the case of sudden deaths, the family will normally be contacted by the police first, who will require next-of-kin details from the College. It is essential that the College checks with the police that the family has been informed before any significant level of detail is disseminated internally, or any press statement is released. In the case of families based overseas, contact may take some time.

The college will consider designating a senior member of staff who knew (though did not necessarily have a close relationship with the student) as a **single point of contact for the family**.

The family contact may take on the following responsibilities:

- To establish practical help needed by the family, e.g. in gathering personal belongings of the deceased student.
- To ascertain whether the family would welcome students and staff attending the funeral.
- To deal with practical information, such as returning fees or providing a posthumous award.
- To manage the transfer of access to email accounts.

If a student has no contact with their parents, the next-of-kin should be informed according to the details held by the College and University. The following Guidance assumes family involvement, but in instances of estrangement from family the named next-of-kin should be informed and cases should be handled on an individual basis. Mansfield has many students who are estranged from their parents and particular care must be made that all staff follow the student's wishes about next of kin contact. The lodge, since it acts as the reception for college, should be reminded of this.

Partner or close friends

It is important to discover as quickly as possible whether the person concerned has, in Oxford or elsewhere, a partner or close friends who should be informed urgently. JCR or MCR officers or friends may be able to suggest which fellow students to contact: colleges should consider conducting such information gathering via the JCR/MCR welfare team, in order to systematise the investigation, and avoid traumatising those close to the tragedy. The Faculty / Department may also be able to assist in this respect. Friends may be able to indicate membership of a club or society, and in cases where clubs / societies are heavily affected the Proctors' Office and/or Oxford University SU can provide advice.

The College will need to consider how far, if at all, responsibility for breaking any bad news should be left to individual students within their respective communities. In the case of a serious student tragedy, a senior member of the College with welfare responsibilities should be assigned to communicate the news to individuals close to the student concerned. In other cases, student friends of the individual may wish to communicate news to those close to the individual concerned, but it should be made clear that these friends are under no obligation, and that ultimately the responsibility for sensitive dissemination of information belongs to the college.

4.3. Statement for the press

The University News and Information Office has considerable experience in dealing with the press in times of student tragedy and in liaising with the police press office. The News and Information Office will support Colleges and Faculties / Departments in the event of student deaths by: helping to draft a statement for the media; advising on how to deal with media interest; and, if asked, fielding all media enquiries on behalf of the College.

Annex B provides guidelines from the News and Information Office. Basic guidance includes:

- Ensuring next-of-kin have been informed before releasing a name or making a statement.
- A media statement would normally give the student's name, year and subject; express sadness and (if relevant) shock; give a positive message about the student and how they will be missed; and express sympathy to the family.
- It is not necessary or wise to go into detail about the circumstances of a tragedy, nor should any statements apportion blame in public.

It is important that staff, particularly those working in front-line roles, are informed about how they should deal with requests from the press. While students cannot be forbidden from talking to the press, they should be warned about dealing with intrusive enquiries and advised to protect the privacy of the student and the family. Colleges and departments should seek to protect students, as far as possible, from intrusive and potentially upsetting press queries, by advising and supporting them.

The above also applies to the student press, which is often a source for national journalists. Porters within Colleges should be advised that journalists may doorstep. The College and the Faculty /

Department can control access of professional journalists to their premises and internal communications, but cannot do so with student journalists.

4.4. Wider communication

Immediate community

It is essential that the College verifies that the family has been informed before any level of detail is disseminated. It is also important, even after the family is informed, to maintain confidentiality in any College statement and to urge all to maintain confidentiality in the general discussions that will take place informally in College. Personal information about a student continues to be confidential after their death. For example, it would not be acceptable to reveal that a student who has died had been receiving counselling.

Dissemination of the news in both the student's College and Faculty / Department can be achieved by:

- an internal communication which should be as informative as possible without being prejudicial to subsequent enquiries. Email must be used sensitively. Those disseminating this information must also be aware that any such message can be forwarded and so any wording must be thought through carefully. Sample communications can be provided by the News and Information Office.
- organising a (voluntary) assembly as soon as practicably possible to inform the College as a whole of developments and to provide information.

The latter is important in order to avoid a sense of alienation among the community, rumour-mongering and additional anxiety and uncertainty. Further meetings may be needed for those who missed the first or if more information comes to light. Note that any internal communications regarding the tragedy may be passed to the media.

Further communication

Other college communities may be affected by a student tragedy even if the student was not a member. Such colleges may wish to disseminate information to their students via the guidance above for the *immediate community*. This should ideally include sources of support, such as

- Sources of support internal to the College, e.g. its Welfare Team
- The University Counselling Service
- Oxford SU Advice Service or
- Nightline
- External agencies, such as Cruse Bereavement Care

Support may also include advice on dealing with press and social media. Broader communication to the University community may be needed depending on the circumstances. For example, tragedies involving multiple students or situations where the collegiate University has experienced separate student tragedies in a short period of time may necessitate a wider communication to the student body. The News and Information Office may wish to inform the student press who may report on student tragedies. Oxford SU may communicate with student welfare representatives in JCRs and MCRs and may signpost further sources of support, such as Nightline.

4.5. Social media

Depending on the circumstances of the student tragedy, information may rapidly circulate on social media. The College may come under pressure from social media to release a statement; however, no

statement should be made until it is verified that the family have been contacted. If, however, there is a likely to be a significant delay, the College should consult with the News and Information Office about issuing a brief statement.

Students may need to be warned about speculating on social media and advised to protect the privacy of the student and the family. Students should be encouraged to instead share any information that may be pertinent to the investigation of a student tragedy with the police, rather than disseminating and speculating upon any such information on social media. Furthermore, students should be advised that the press may republish public social media posts which may be used out-of-context.

5. Support

5.1. Supporting family and close contacts

It is important that contact with the family is continued and that they are offered help in dealing with the tragedy. Families may wish to visit the College and the Faculty / Department (both by arrangement) and to collect any personal effects. The College should consider offering accommodation to the family while in Oxford.

Families respond to and express grief in different ways. Cultural backgrounds and different religious beliefs may have a bearing on this.

Colleges might find themselves subjected to anger and accusations, or individual staff and fellow students may be subjected to obsessive enquiries. Cultural awareness should be taken into account when discussing mental health or lifestyle issues, or student suicide.

In the event of a student death, it is important to ensure that all regular correspondence with that student ceases to mitigate further distress to the family. This could include updating a student's record to ensure that correspondence, for example about tuition fees, College fees, battels, and library fines ceases or where relevant is sensitively handled. Consideration is needed for when a public profile of a student on a College or Department / Faculty website should be removed.

5.2. Support within the College

It may be necessary to have urgent support available within the College. Generally, the kind of support needed will come from friends, the Head of Welfare, Chaplain, Junior Deans, tutors, College Doctors, JCR or MCR officers, and Peer Supporters for example. The Counselling Service can help, but will only do so in a systematic way if requested by the College. Individual students may also wish to approach the Counselling Service directly. Professional assessment may occasionally be necessary.

5.3. Support for those in the College/Faculty / Department and from the Counselling Service

It is important for the College to identify those close to the person concerned who are not members of the College community and to keep them informed. This includes students and staff (e.g. the director of studies and associated officer/s) within the relevant Faculty / Department. It may also be important to contact those who were students at the same time as the person concerned (e.g. students studying abroad for a period). Thought will also have to be given to any procedures for cases involving students currently out of residence for any reason.

The Counselling Service may be able to help, and should have been informed of student tragedy by the college or department as a matter of course: advice, assistance in managing meetings, counselling for individual students, group work for peers etc. It is helpful to let the Counselling Service know as soon as possible, as students may go there for support in any case.

Mansfield is a close community and several college staff are likely to have had frequent small group or 1:1 interaction with the student concerned. As such, those staff may need welfare support as they come to terms with the events. Such staff might include the student's academic tutors, the junior deans from the student's residence or the scout who cleans their room regularly, for example. Some of these people are likely to be tasked with providing welfare support to others and so it might be easy to neglect their own welfare if attention is not paid to this.

Togetherall, a psychological on-line support service also for staff, can provide support to College or Departmental staff who have been supporting others in relation to a bereavement. College/Departmental HR Departments should signpost staff to relevant support services, and should be mindful of the needs of those staff who may have been affected, allowing compassionate leave where appropriate: colleges may wish to consider pre-emptively having a standard system of support in place for staff in the aftermath of tragic events.

5.4. Funeral Arrangements/Memorial Services

The college, in consultation with the family, might wish to mark the event of a death in some way. The Vice-Chancellor, and the relevant Faculty / Department, will be guided by College advice on whether to send condolence to the family on the University's behalf. Representatives from the collegiate University may wish to attend the funeral or memorial service and it is recommended that a minimum of two staff members attend if appropriate. Funeral arrangements may be informed by different timelines given that some religious beliefs require a burial to take place within 24 hours.

The College or Department may together wish to offer an online tribute page or condolence book.¹ Depending on the circumstances it may be appropriate to fly flags at half-mast.

Colleges may also wish to mark the first anniversary of a death with the family and to maintain contact with them in the longer-term. Permanent memorials to the individual, such as a tree in the grounds or a small plaque, are a means of allowing the family to return to College as and when they wish without feeling intrusive.

5.5. Coroner's Court

In the case of a sudden or unexpected death the death will be reported to the Coroner who must hold an inquest in order to determine the cause of a death if any of the following applies:

- the cause of death is still unknown
- the person might have died a violent or unnatural death (which definition includes apparent suicide)
- the person might have died in prison or police custody.

¹ An example from 2016: <https://www.geog.ox.ac.uk/news/articles/170516.html>

If any of the above applies then the usual procedure is that the Coroner will open an inquest shortly after the death and hold a short initial hearing at which the Coroner will deal with important immediate concerns i.e. (a) verifying the identity of the deceased (b) issuing a burial order or cremation certificate once any necessary post-mortem examinations are completed and (c) processing any requests for interim death certificates. But the Coroner will then usually adjourn the inquest while further enquiries are carried out. Then a full inquest, a public hearing at the Coroner's court to which members of College or University staff may be summoned to give evidence in person (as well as in writing), is usually expected to be completed within 6 months of the coroner being notified of the death. (However, this can be extended where detailed investigations are needed).

The full inquest hearing will require further support and may also re-kindle press interest, which might place the College and individuals within the University under a second episode of pressure. Many of the above procedures – especially regarding press statements – need to be borne in mind at this stage also.

6. Longer term considerations and lessons learned meetings

It is important for those closely involved in dealing with events following a tragedy to keep each other informed at regular intervals. Mansfield will hold a review meeting to consider how the tragedy was handled and whether there are implications for College or University procedures. Advice may be sought from the Director of Student Welfare and Support Services, as well as the College Doctor and the Counselling Service about meeting several weeks or months afterwards, *to discuss delayed consequences that need to be addressed*. It is recommended that Student Welfare and Support Services holds an annual 'lessons learned' meeting in order to review any cases of student tragedies, consider relevant updates to this Guidance, or any specific recommendations, and inform welfare leads in Colleges accordingly.

It is important to remember that there may be longer term impacts on the University community, including: impact on staff and students from a potential police investigation; additional support needed when the student's year group graduate; and anniversaries of a student death may lead to renewed press interest.

ANNEX A

FIRST RESPONSE FOR COLLEGES

Immediate action on discovering the incident, contact

1	Contact EMERGENCY SERVICES as needed: Police, ambulance, fire brigade.	999
2	PORTERS' LODGE should: Phone the Principal. If Principal is unavailable, phone the Chaplain, Head of Welfare, Senior Tutor, until someone is identified to act as lead. Brief email to the Head Porter, Senior Tutor, the Head of Welfare, The Chaplain, the Head of HR and if relevant, the Tutor for Graduates to alert them to the tragedy and informing them who has taken the Lead.	Lodge has up to date contacts list
3	PRINCIPAL should contact: University News and Information Office If no answer from Duty Officer contact:	(2)80 528 (office hours) 07738 135 619 (duty officer)
4	University Security Services (24/7)	(2)89 999 (for emergencies)
	Should endeavour to inform the student's Faculty or Department as soon as possible.	
5	University Security Services will, unless requested not to do so, contact the: University News and Information Office, Vice-Chancellor's Office, Proctors' Office, <i>Counselling Service</i> , <i>Oxford University SU</i> , <i>Director of Student Welfare</i> and Support Services, Chair of Health and Safety Management Committee, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education) as appropriate.	(2)72 944 (24 hours)

NEXT STEPS

6	When police have informed family, establish official contact with the family. The local police and/or Security Services can assist to ensure the family have been officially informed.
7	Inform the student's partner, close friends etc. inside and outside College, Faculty / Department, Oxford etc.

- 8 Decide how to inform members of the College generally (perhaps a notice or meeting), and advise them on dealing with the media etc.
- 9 Prepare statement for students and staff, local and national media (as appropriate) in consultation with the News and Information Office. This statement should follow [Samaritans reporting guidelines](#).
- 10 Consider nature of support needed by any people closely affected.

ANNEX B

Guidance from the University News and Information Office

1. Always make sure that next of kin have been informed before releasing a name or making any statement to the media. Usually releasing a name and confirming personal details is a job for the police.
2. Whoever takes the lead in the case of a student tragedy, i.e. the College or Department, should inform the Head of Student Communications at the Public Affairs Directorate.
3. A media statement would normally give the student's name, year and subject; express sadness and (if relevant) shock; give a positive message about the student and how they will be missed; and express sympathy to the family.
4. The statement can be left with the News and Information Office and all media callers can be directed there.
5. The media will often ask the College or Faculty / Department (via the News and Information Office) to provide photos of the student. Providing photos is not advised except with express permission of the family: provision of photos to media is usually the next of kin's decision in the event of a death.
6. The media may try to obtain further information or images through indirect means. Possible routes are individual College and University members who may have known the student, and social media, in particular Facebook. The News and Information Office can advise on how to manage the interest and protect privacy.
7. It is not necessary or wise to go into detail about the circumstances of a death. This is a matter for the police and the coroner: it is for them to decide how much the family or wider public should be told.
8. Do not make any comments or statements apportioning blame in public. To do so could prejudice a police enquiry or an inquest or constitute serious libel, apart from causing great distress.
9. If a student has apparently been murdered or has died as a result of an overdose, accident or suicide, it is unwise to make any comment on the circumstances, which will invariably be the subject of a police enquiry.
10. When a student has died, the media (and sometimes those close to the student) sometimes blame Oxford and its perceived pressures for the death. In such cases, it is helpful for the College and the University to work together to show their deep concern for the welfare of all students and to highlight the wide range of pastoral care available.
11. Internal communications about the death, especially written communications, may be passed on to the media, and consideration should be given to this when drafting them.

Further advice in the case of pandemics

Summary

During a pandemic there may be an increased risk of student tragedies, and particular challenges may arise from students and staff not being physically present. Where the ability to hold mass gatherings, or meet in person, is limited, colleagues will need to consider how to share news in a sensitive way using other means. The University might be affected by many student deaths during a pandemic, and only hear of them after the event.

What remains the same?

Much of this Guidance still applies in a pandemic situation, although we need to be realistic about how much we can do with reduced staffing levels and restrictions on movement and assembly. Where a person or role is named in the Guidance, anyone covering for them e.g. as Deputy Head of Department or Acting Head of College, should be made aware of their responsibilities in the case of a student tragedy. A generic e-mail address monitored by several people could be helpful.

It is still very important to communicate as required with external professionals, university authorities, the press (via the University News and Information Office), and the wider college/department community. Communication between Colleges and Departments remains essential. This applies regardless of where the student tragedy occurs in the world, and in situations where there are multiple deaths. [Section 4.3]

If a tragedy occurs on University or College premises, we must still notify the police (as at Annex A 'Immediate action').

Respect for family and friends remains paramount, including verifying that the family has been informed before making any statements about a student tragedy. Whilst we cannot control the spread of 'rumours' and unverified information online, we can continue to encourage everyone to respond respectfully. [Section 4]

What might be different?

Tragedies occur away from Oxford

Where a student tragedy occurs outside of Oxford, the University might find out after the event, through family, friends or (social) media. Family members might call a generic phone number (Lodge/reception), or e-mail equivalent, or contact a Tutor/Supervisor whose name they recognize.

Colleges and Departments will need to ensure that all staff, and student reps, know what to do if they are contacted in this way, or learn of a tragedy indirectly, e.g. notify Head of Department, College Welfare team etc. The Department and College might need to verify information which does not originate from family members or the police/NHS before sharing the news more widely.

Sometimes the police will contact the University (if they identify a student by their University Card) seeking Next of Kin information. This information is stored on eVision for both undergraduates and graduates. Colleges may consider keeping this information also on a separate but regularly updated file in order to have a backup in the case of eVision outages.

Communicating remotely

The Guidance recommends holding a voluntary assembly as soon as possible in the College or Department to provide information about the student tragedy. This may not be possible in person during a pandemic, and so could be conducted remotely or replaced with e-mail or a pre-recorded message.

Communicating with the family will also have to take place remotely where social distancing measures are in place or travel is not possible. This could be compounded by family members themselves being unwell.

Additional medical considerations

Where a student death or serious illness from an infectious disease occurs on College or University property there may be additional public health requirements e.g. deep cleaning, evacuation of adjacent rooms, closure of common areas, or a need to notify third parties of the infectious disease. Public Health England may give specific advice, or Colleges can seek advice from their College Nurse or GP. These additional measures, and the fear of further infection, might cause additional distress to students and staff.

Support available

College welfare support might be reduced during a pandemic, or delivered entirely remotely. [Section 5].

In communications to students please remind them that Student Welfare and Support Services is operating remotely, and the Counselling Service remains available for individual students and (where possible) support groups. Students and University staff can also access mental health support (including for grief and loss) online via [Togetherall](#).

Funerals and memorials

During a pandemic there may be restrictions on funeral services. Staff should consult the relevant college Chaplain or other spiritual leader for advice (or the University Church where there is no college Chaplain).² Faith leaders can also signpost staff to representatives from other faith communities within Oxford.

Where a student has died away from Oxford, the funeral is likely to be held in their local town/country with immediate family only. A memorial service or event of some kind could be planned for when travel/assembly restrictions during a pandemic are lifted.

² The College Chaplains have already produced separate funerals guidance for COVID-19. <https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/welfare/chaplaincy>