

FIVE RIVERS
Multi Academy Trust



Communications Policy

Five Rivers Multi Academy Trust

Written: April 2020

Approved by Trustees: 27 May 2020

Next review due: May 2025

1) Context

The aim of this policy is to ensure that all communication from the trust and its respective academies is consistent, accurate, honest, timely and relevant. The trust places a high value on its ability to listen and react to comments and feedback both from its staff members and external stakeholders.

This policy sets out the trust's communication strategy for internal (staff members, children) and external (parents, wider community, businesses, media, other schools and trusts etc.) stakeholders.

Effective communications in all aspects of our academy's business helps us to:

- Build and maintain trust
- Prevent and resolve problems and avoid misinterpretation
- Provide clarity and direction
- Create new and improved relationships
- Build confidence and reassurance
- Increase engagement
- Increase productivity and wellbeing amongst our staff and children
- Create a recognised trust brand
- Raise the trust's profile
- Maintain our high standards and expectations

2) Internal Communication

Effective internal communication helps ensure that everyone is working collaboratively towards achieving the trust's strategic vision, values and objectives. It develops a cohesive culture and empowers staff to make the right decisions in line with those goals. This in turn leads to greater efficiency and productivity and improves outcomes for all of our children.

There are many forms of internal communication and whilst our academies have their own structures of internal communications, the MAT requires consistency in the following approaches which align to the wider strategic aims and objectives.

2a) Staff, Children and Parent Forums

A key component of the Five Rivers MAT governance structure is the establishment of three separate forums; Staff, Children and Parents. These forums have been set up to support the two way communication between these key groups and the trust board. If the trust is to succeed, it is imperative that the views and feedback of our children, staff and parents are taken into consideration.

Forums give trustees and the central MAT team an opportunity to share important updates and obtain views and opinions that can help to shape key decisions made by trustees.

The forums for children take place once per term with the elected School Council members who are responsible for engaging with their peers before and after the forum to discuss the agenda items. Minutes of the school council are taken by Councillors and these are shared with their classroom peers. School Councillors are also invited to attend Trust Board once per annum to feed back their collective views and to share experiences and developments.

Parent forums also take place termly and are conducted in the style of an informal coffee morning Q&A style chat. An agenda is agreed ahead of the meeting and shared with parents and minutes are taken which are distributed to every household to keep everyone informed of the discussions that have taken place.

Staff forums take two forms. Firstly, an annual trust staff forum is held which gives every staff member (from all academies) an opportunity to come together and share experiences and offer feedback to trustees. Annual staff forums are generally centred on a theme, e.g. wellbeing, in which important feedback is captured and utilised by trust board and SLTs to shape future decisions.

In between these annual forums, staff and trustees are able to engage on a more informal basis via trustee visits to schools. One day per term is assigned to trustee visits (in addition to other occasions where trustees are in school for meetings or to engage with children), whereby as many trustees as possible attend our schools with the sole purpose of chatting to staff and exchanging dialogue. Important pieces of feedback are captured by trustees and shared with the wider trust board as appropriate. Anonymity is maintained where this is requested by staff members.

Every academy within the trust is required to promote these forums with staff, parents and children and to actively and positively support participation.

2b) 'Open Door Policy' for children, their families and staff

The trust strives to ensure that there are appropriate opportunities for children, staff and families to feed in their views and comments outside of the formal channels in place. The trust and its academies also attempt wherever possible to respond appropriately to suggestions and comments.

Each academy within the trust will:

- Maintain feedback boxes and cards in key school locations which will be regularly promoted for use by parents and children.
- Ensure that opportunities for informal communications are in place including an 'open door' culture whereby children, parents and families can easily speak with the Principal and SLT members.
- Publish on their websites a central email account for parental enquiries.
- Ensure there are ample opportunities and mechanisms for staff to raise comments, suggestions and feedback to the Principal and SLT.
- Annually issue a survey to all parents, children and staff that has been agreed by the trust to support a review of engagement and satisfaction.

2c) Internal Emails

Emailing colleagues is an effective and quick method of communication and is promoted by the trust. However, effective and appropriate use is crucial.

Particular care should be taken when writing emails to ensure that the Trust's Principles of Ethical Leadership and the Code of Conduct are upheld. Staff should not write anything in an email that they would not want to be shared more widely. Staff should also note that any emails, even after deletion, remain on the server and may be used in a Freedom of Information or Subject Access Request by a member of the public.

2d) Face to Face and Indirect Non Verbal Communication

The Five Rivers Trust promotes a widespread culture of ethical leadership and we are committed to consistently applying these principles in everything we do. The Trust believes that every member of staff is in a position of leadership and can have great influence on colleagues. As such, the Trust's ethical leadership principles should be upheld at all times. This includes all forms of face to face communications with colleagues, be that informal or formal.

Staff are reminded of the power of non-verbal communication in the form of body language, facial expression and behaviour. The Trust expects every staff member to be mindful of their own non-verbal communication and consider how this can affect (and be received by) others.

3) External Communication

External communication is the transmission of information between the trust and / or its academies and another person or entity in the external environment. Examples of these might include local businesses, the Local Authority and Department for Education, Ofsted, other MATs and schools, the wider community and the media.

Consistency in the way in which we communicate externally reinforces the school's brand, which is the emotional connection the trust and its academies has with its community and stakeholders.

In addition to this, a strategic approach to communicating externally is sometimes needed to ensure the reputation of the trust is upheld and to avoid misinterpretation.

With this in mind there are some external communications that must be pre-approved by the trust beforehand and some regulations that must be followed which are outlined here.

3a) General communications

We all work hard to ensure that our schools are welcoming, friendly, supportive and positive and our external communications should also consistently reflect this.

All members of staff interacting with external people (whether face to face or in writing) must uphold the reputation of the trust as a whole. In all communication, we will promote and celebrate our communities and be tactful about any sensitive contextual or demographic disadvantage that might exist. This includes when liaising with external agencies for funding or donations. Where staff are unclear or unsure about how to go about this, advice should be sought from the Principal or Trust office.

Staff are encouraged to maintain networks outside of the academy trust with a view to sharing good practice, sharing experiences and enjoying the many benefits of collaboration. In doing so, staff should always ensure they are acting professionally and adhering to the code of conduct and ethical leadership principles at all times. Any deliberate defamatory or negative comments made about the trust, the academies, children, families, communities or other staff members (at any level of seniority) to any external party will be addressed under the disciplinary procedure. Staff are reminded to refer to the Trust's Whistleblowing Procedure and or Grievance Procedure for raising any matters of concern in the correct and appropriate way.

3b) Physical Environments and Displaying of Children's Work

Our academies receive many visitors each term and our physical environments communicate important messages to visitors. Positive first impressions our guests take away with them are imperative to maintaining a good reputation.

All staff are required to play their part in ensuring our physical environments are tidy and free from hazards as per the health and safety policy.

All staff are required to adhere to the trust's dress code which forms part of our Code of Conduct.

All staff are required to adhere to the Behaviour Policy, ensuring the high expectations we have of our children are maintained at all times, so that visitors' first impressions are always positive.

In addition to this, the trust requires the work of our children to be displayed in a similar format. The following principles apply:

- All work should be approved for display by the Principal or SLT member to ensure quality?
- Consideration of access for all children and parents.
- Complies with the display policies.

3c) Letters, Emails and other written communication

The trust aims to maintain a consistency of written and visual style and tone of voice. All written communication should be spell-checked and grammatically correct. As an education provider this is essential for our own credibility and for the reputation of the academies and trust. Staff should take steps to have their written communication proof read where necessary.

Letters:

Any letters written must be pre-approved by the Principal in the academies and by the CEO or Director of Business Strategy if it is being sent from the central MAT team.

All letters should be on academy letter head with the Trust and school logo clearly visible.

All letters should follow a consistent visual format and be presented in Arial font. A sample letter is attached in Appendix B for reference.

Emails:

Emails are a critical method of communication both internally and externally. To ensure the smooth running of school business, all staff should review their inbox at least once daily and respond to external emails within a reasonable time period.

Aspects that are particularly important with regards to effective and communication are outlined as follows:

- Staff should always ensure emails are polite, professional, grammatically correct, spell checked and that they include the appropriate greeting and closing (e.g. Dear Sir / Madam where the recipient is unknown / Kind Regards / Yours sincerely).
- Staff should adhere to the Trust Code of Conduct and Ethical Leadership Principles in all email communications
- Colloquialisms should be avoided to eliminate the risk of misinterpretation or unintended offense.
- Staff should be mindful of the use of capital letters which can be interpreted as 'shouting'
- Staff should be aware that anything that is written in an email and then sent can remain with the recipient indefinitely and will remain on the trust's server even after deletion. With this in mind staff should not write anything that they wouldn't want to be seen for example via a Freedom of Information or Subject Access Request.
- Staff are reminded to ensure they are adhering to the Information Governance Toolkit which sets out the steps to be taken to protect sensitive and confidential information (e.g. not using the names of children or staff, encrypting sensitive or confidential attachments with a password etc.)
- Staff should never express personal opinion on sensitive, political or potentially controversial matters via email or any other written form of communication.

- Staff should be cautious about sending any messages via email that may negatively portray and or misrepresent children, parents, staff or communities.
- Staff should take care when replying to emails to ensure their response does not result in any potentially legally binding agreement.
- All staff emails must include the following trust signature which is presented in black font:

Kind regards

Name

Job Title

School Address

School Address

Postcode

Tel: (school telephone number or works mobile if you have one)

Email: (your email address)

Please note, a reply to this email is not required during non-working hours.



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No employee or agent is authorised to conclude any binding agreement on behalf of Five Rivers MAT or it's academies with another party by Email without express written confirmation by the CEO or Director of Business Strategy.

The views and opinions included in this email belong to the author and do not necessarily mirror the views and opinions of FRMAT. Our employees are obliged not to make any defamatory clauses, infringe, or authorise infringement of any legal right. Therefore, FRMAT will not take any liability for such statements included in emails. In case of any damages or other liabilities arising, employees are fully responsible for the content of their emails.

3d) Websites

Academy and Trust websites are often the first interaction external stakeholders will have with the trust. It is therefore important that our websites are maintained with accurate, timely and comprehensive information. Branding is also important in order to support the profile of the trust as a whole. Each school will have its own website which will be broadly owned and maintained by the Principal and SLT. However, the trust requires the following principles to be followed:

- All academies within the trust must display the Trust logo alongside their own to ensure branding is protected.
- All academies must provide a direct visible link to the Trust website.
- All academies must display a direct and visible link to the Trust twitter page. (@FiveRiversMAT)
- All websites must comply with data protection and copyright regulations as per the FRMAT Information Governance Toolkit.
- Before an Ofsted inspection, officials will scrutinise school websites for the necessary information and to some extent, make an assessment of the school; using some information before the inspection takes place. In addition, Ofsted and DfE place obligations with schools to ensure core compliance with national requirements on website content. With this in mind it is important that the following information is always up to date:
 - o Performance and attainment (information showing the school's most recent performance and assessment results)
 - o Pupil Premium expenditure narrative report
 - o Sports funding expenditure narrative report
 - o School inspection reports
 - o School ethos and values
 - o Admission arrangements
 - o Behaviour policy
 - o Charging and remissions policy
 - o Complaints procedure
 - o SEND information incl accessibility plan for disabled pupils
 - o SG policy
 - o Subject Access policy and Privacy Notice
 - o Equality information and objectives
 - o Exclusion arrangements
 - o Financial information incl annual report and accounts (Trust website)
 - o Governance details including governance structure and remit, names of governors with date of appointment, register of interests and attendance record at meetings over the last year.
 - o Curriculum provision and content
 - o Contact details for the HT/Principal, SENDCO and the Trust
 - o How to request paper copies of information on the website

3e) Social Media

This section refers to social media pages which are owned and used by the academy and not accounts that belong to individual staff members. This should be read in conjunction with the Trust's Acceptable Use Policy which outlines the trust's policy for staff use of social media.

All academies are encouraged to maintain a regular social media presence with a view to keeping family members and communities up to date on school developments and important news.

The most common form of social media pages owned and used by schools in the trust are Facebook and Twitter. The Trust does not endorse the use of closed / private groups such as WhatsApp to engage with communities and families.

In line with the advice and regulations in place for all written communication, all messages disseminated via these channels should be grammatically correct and spell checked. The primary use for social media is to communicate messages to families and share children's work.

Only children whose families have given explicit consent may be used in photographs on social media and only the first name of the child will be displayed.

All staff are encouraged to follow the Trust and the academies on Facebook and Twitter to help raise our online profile. The links are as follows:

Abbeyfield:

Twitter: @Abbeyfield_sch

Facebook: Abbeyfield Primary Academy

Tinsley:

Twitter: @TinsleyMeadows

Facebook: Tinsley Meadows Primary School

Five Rivers MAT:

Twitter Page: @FiveRiversMAT

On Twitter, we will follow relevant figures, organisations and companies who fit with our values and interests. We will not follow families or pupils (whether currently on roll or not).

To ensure messages and posts on social media are relevant, grammatically correct and strategically considered, each academy will have its own procedures in place setting out which staff members are responsible for managing social media releases.

Comments made by members of the public are to be carefully and frequently monitored. Any negative comments made publicly are to be referred to the Principal and a response considered. If any matter has the potential to bring the academy and or trust into disrepute, Principals are required to consult with the CEO and or Director of Business Strategy and the matter may need to be added to the academy / trust risk registers.

3f) Media relations

The trust promotes efforts to gain positive media coverage of the work of our academies in order to raise awareness of the schools amongst parents and the local community but also to raise the profile of the trust as a whole entity.

Each term Principals will discuss, at ELT, any events in the coming term which they believe may be of interest to the local media. It is the trust's policy to develop a positive working relationship with the local press.

Reactive media work

Whilst our preference is always to take a proactive approach to positive media stories, from time to time there may be the need to react quickly to unexpected media interest.

All media enquiries should initially be logged by the person who is approached with details of the nature of the enquiry, the urgency and the source. No response must be given at the time of the approach. All enquiries will then be passed to the Principal who will always act as the spokesperson for the school.

The Principal will assess the media enquiry on the basis of:

- Opportunity for positive coverage
- Potential for negative coverage
- Likelihood of the story 'growing'

On the basis of this, the Principal will decide whether to involve the CEO / Director of Business Strategy. For guidance, if there is any potential at all for negative coverage, misrepresentation of our families / communities / children or any likelihood of the story 'growing' the CEO / Director of Business Strategy should always be notified so that a strategic response can be agreed.

National Media

In the case of enquires from the national media the Principal will always liaise with the CEO / Director of Business Strategy at the earliest possible point.

In the event of any national or local media presenting to the school gates to interview staff, these must always be declined and the Principal informed of the approach. Any decision to proceed with media interviews or issue a comment will be agreed by the Principal in consultation with the CEO / Director of Business Strategy and for more serious media interest, the Chair of Trust Board).

Cuttings

Each academy will keep an up to date book of press cuttings which is available to the central MAT team and trustees upon request.

3g) Complaints, Feedback and Compliments

The Trust encourages views about our academies whether positive, negative or neutral. Families or communities may wish to comment on their experience of our provision without making a formal complaint. We use the term 'feedback' to refer to these comments.

We use the term 'complaint' in its everyday sense, to mean any statement about our provision or member of staff that has not met the standard that people could reasonably expect.

Complaints, feedback and compliments are all of equal importance. They can help us to understand what we are doing well as a trust and identify areas for improvement.

Feedback:

We generally receive regular feedback through the established channels e.g. parent forums, open door policy etc., however it is important that our academies promote a culture where feedback is welcomed by all in everything we do.

Complaints:

All complaints should be handled in line with the trust and academy's Complaints Procedure. It is imperative that any complaint is investigated thoroughly and fairly and in line with the procedure. In all cases the complaint should be made in writing to either the Principal (if related to an Academy complaint) or to the CEO (if related to a complaint about the trust).

Complaints should always be handled sensitively and should be taken seriously by the investigator who should always attempt to resolve the issue informally first. If this is not possible, the complaint can be escalated as per the policy.

All formal complaints should be reported to the Director of Business Strategy who is responsible for keeping a log of all complaints and the outcome of each one to help keep Trustees abreast of any emerging issues and risks.

Compliments:

Our academies often receive compliments informally in discussion with families and in dialogue between teachers and parents. However, these are less frequently issued in writing. It is important that our trust is able to capture what we are doing well in addition to the feedback and complaints received to help us improve.

Where compliments are given informally, staff are encouraged to request that the compliment be put in writing. Where this is not possible, a verbal account should be reported to the Principal who will log this on the central Complaints and Compliments record. This is shared with the Trust in ELT and is shared with Trustees as appropriate.

4) Review of this policy

This policy was approved by Trustees on 27 May 2020 after their meeting on 22 May 2020. It will be reviewed in five years or before if additional content is required.

Appendix A

See also the following polices which are referred to in this document:

Behaviour Policy

Code of Conduct

Complaints Procedure

Disciplinary Procedure

Ethical Leadership Principles

Grievance Procedure

Health & Safety Policy


Information Governance Toolkit

IT Acceptable Use Policy


Whistleblowing Procedure

Appendix B

Sample letter

Tinsley Meadows Primary Academy 

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Date

Recipient's address

Dear Mr/Ms ~~XXXXXX~~

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Yours sincerely

Principal/Head of School

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