

Communication advice to schools following suspicious incidents

Suspicious incidents surrounding Schools occur on a regular basis in Shropshire, most of which end up being explained entirely satisfactorily.

Such incidents of strangers acting suspiciously have included excessive or inappropriate attention of premises, students or staff and even approaching pupils on their way to or from school, although the incidence of harm being experienced is actually rare.

Across the county, a co-ordinated partnership approach to dealing with such incidents is essential. Social media and publicity has hindered the Police in the past. In respect of any suspicious incident, confirmed or suspect kidnap or abduction (or any attempted), schools should not release information to the public, neighbouring schools, parents/carers, pupils/students, the Press or neighbouring houses without first consulting the Police Duty Inspector in Shrewsbury. In the event that the Duty Inspector is not available then advice should be obtained from the 'Force Operations & Communications Centre Inspector (OCCI)'.

The reasons for this are as follows:

- The Police hold primacy for investigating any crime where life is at risk and may opt to deliberately withhold information from the public domain. In such circumstances, there is a risk that the unauthorised release of information by another agency could jeopardise the life of the victim.
- To reduce what is known as deviancy amplification, which is a media hype phenomenon, defined as a cycle of increasing number of reports leading to panic.
- To reduce the risk of false or misleading information diverting public attention from where it needs to be, which could have a critical impact in the immediate stages of a Police investigation.
- To reduce the possibility of spreading false or inaccurate information that leads to the fear of crime.

School procedure in response to a suspicious incident – step by step

A school is alerted to an issue/incident near to or on the school site. This could also include incidents/issues relating to pupils/students travelling to/from school.

School to telephone the Police by dialling 101. Two stages:-

- Initially record the incident with the Police and obtain an incident number.
- Secondly, ask for the 'Police Duty Inspector' at Shrewsbury Police Station or the 'Force Operations & Communications Centre Inspector (OCCI) if the Duty Inspector is unavailable. This is to obtain advice on publicising the incident to pupils/students and parents/carers ONLY. Information regarding a kidnap or abduction (or attempted) should not be made public before consulting the Police Inspector.

Please note. For all incidents or emergencies requiring an immediate Police response, telephone 999 or use a Police response panic alarm, if the school has the facility.

School to supply the 'Police Duty Inspector' or 'OCCI' with as much factual information as possible regarding the incident.

School to ask the Duty Inspector or 'OCCI' for next-steps communication advice. The response from the Inspector could include:-

- School to take no further action and do not inform pupils/students/parents/carers.
or
- School to inform students/pupils, parents/carers. If this is the advice from the Police Duty Inspector/OCCI, the school is to gather from the Inspector, the information that they should be informing their pupils/students/parents/carers and Local Authority (LA).

School to inform the LA of the incident and importantly, the Police incident number. In addition, the school to inform the LA of the detailed advice from the Police Duty Inspector. This would include the next-steps communication advice, either 'no further action' or 'inform parents'.

School to inform their pupils/students, parents/carers if advised by the 'Police Duty Inspector' or 'OCCI'.

The LA will inform Shropshire schools as necessary.

The following are the roles of the three agencies:

Police and Local Authority (LA) – handle the public and Press publicity.

Schools – to inform their parents/carers and pupils/students if directed by the Police or LA.

Local Authority (LA) – to inform Shropshire schools as necessary.

Following guidance from the Police, please note that the LA response to schools will be proportionate to the issue and area affected. This may mean that schools in neighbouring areas are not informed of incidents.

As indicated above, schools should not communicate with parents/carers/students/pupils before acquiring advice from the Police and it is the role of the Police/LA to liaise with the Press. However, if for any reason following an incident a school is not able to seek any immediate advice from the 'Police Duty Inspector' or 'Force Operations & Communications Centre Inspector (OCCI) and the school is pressured for information by parents/carers or the Press, the school can provide a holding Press release/statement with the words to the effect of:-

'The Police have been informed and are actively dealing with the issue/matter. Any further requests for information should be directed to the Press Officer of West Mercia Police by dialling 101. When we have any further information, Shropshire Council will publish it'.

The LA contact is Helen Woodbridge, tele (01743) 254556.

For guidance and advice, please contact Ian Bartlett, Crime Prevention Officer, tele (01743) 252819 or mobile 07990 085941.

January 2020