

THE HAVEN

Operated by the Autistic Girls Network charity — 1196655 (England and Wales), SC054837 (Scotland)

Critical Incident Policy

Response to serious incidents affecting The Haven community

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1. Purpose

This policy sets out how The Haven responds to a critical incident — an event of such seriousness that it requires an immediate, coordinated response beyond routine procedures. It is distinct from the Business Continuity arrangements, which cover loss of systems, infrastructure or key people. A critical incident concerns the safety, wellbeing and welfare of the people in our community.

2. Definition

A critical incident is, for the purposes of this policy, any one of the following:

- The death of a learner, staff member, volunteer, governor, or close family member of any of these.
- A serious safeguarding incident, including suspected child abuse, sexual assault, or trafficking of a learner.
- A suicide attempt, completed suicide, or serious self-harm incident affecting a learner or staff member.
- A serious mental health crisis affecting a learner or staff member during a session.
- A serious online incident involving learners — exposure to extreme content, an active online safety incident, distribution of self-generated indecent imagery, or contact by a perpetrator.
- A serious complaint or allegation against a member of staff or governor.
- A major cyber incident with safeguarding implications.
- A public incident affecting the cohort — local violence, hate crime, terrorist incident, major news event with disproportionate impact on our learners.
- Death or serious injury at an in-person Haven event.
- Disappearance of a learner, where The Haven has a duty of care or contractual responsibility. Where there is uncertainty about whether an incident is critical, the default is to treat it as critical and de-escalate later.

3. Principles

- People come first. The welfare of those directly affected takes precedence over operational considerations.
- Decisions are made quickly but not hastily. Pause to think is part of the response.
- Information is held tightly. Need-to-know is the default, even within the team.
- Partnership with statutory services is sought early; The Haven does not investigate.
- The team affected by the response is supported, not just the people directly involved in the incident.
- Communication is honest, factual and proportionate; we do not speculate.
- Records are made contemporaneously.
- Learning from the incident shapes future practice.

4. The critical incident team

On notification of a critical incident, the Critical Incident Team (CIT) convenes. The CIT comprises:

- The Head (or in their absence, the Proprietor).
- The Designated Safeguarding Lead.
- The Operations Lead.
- The Data Protection Lead (where the incident has data or communication implications).
- Any other person whose role makes their inclusion necessary. The CIT is convened by phone, video or in person, immediately. The Head chairs. Where the Head is the subject of the incident or otherwise unavailable, the Proprietor chairs.

5. Phases of response

5.1 Phase 1: Immediate response (0–4 hours)

- Confirm the facts known. Do not act on speculation.
- Ensure the immediate safety of anyone at risk.
- Contact emergency services where indicated (police, ambulance, child protection).
- Notify the family of any affected learner, with care for how the notification is delivered.
- Notify the Proprietor.
- Convene the CIT.
- Identify who must know within the team — not everyone, by default — and instruct them in confidence.
- Begin a contemporaneous log of decisions, actions and rationale.

5.2 Phase 2: Containment and coordination (4–24 hours)

- Coordinate with statutory partners — police, social care, LADO, NHS, Local Authority — as appropriate.
- Identify the affected community: who else is impacted, who needs to be told, in what order.
- Agree the immediate communication plan — what is said to whom, by whom, when.
- Adjust learning provision as required: cancel sessions, brief educators, redirect the timetable.

- Support those directly affected — learner, family, staff — with appropriate signposting.
- Identify staff who may need immediate support themselves.

5.3 Phase 3: Stabilisation (1–7 days)

- Continue the coordinated response in partnership with statutory services.
- Communicate with the wider learner and family group only to the extent necessary, factually and without speculation.
- Brief the Board of Governors.
- Adjust the operational timetable as required.
- Make formal notifications to regulators if required (e.g. ICO for data incidents, Ofsted, Charity Commission, LADO).
- Ensure those directly affected continue to receive appropriate support.
- Provide reflective space for staff involved in the response.

5.4 Phase 4: Review and recovery (1–3 months)

- Complete a structured incident review.
- Identify systemic learning and operational changes required.
- Update policy and practice where indicated.
- Maintain longer-term support for those affected — bereavement, trauma response.
- Report final outcomes to the Board of Governors.
- Update the risk register.

6. Communication

6.1 Internal communication

Communication within the team is on a need-to-know basis. The CIT decides what is shared with whom. Educators in active sessions need enough information to support their learners; they do not always need the full picture. Speculation is not permitted; staff are told what is known, what is not, and what the boundaries of their conversation with learners and families should be.

6.2 Communication with families

The family directly affected receives priority, careful communication, usually by phone, from the Head or DSL. Other families receive factual information appropriate to their situation; sensational detail is avoided. Where peers may have been affected (e.g. they witnessed something, or knew the person concerned), their families are contacted directly.

6.3 External communication

Communication with press, social media, and external parties is led by the Head in consultation with the Proprietor. Staff do not speak to press. Social media is monitored; speculation is not engaged with. Where a coordinated public statement is required, it is short, factual, and approved by the CIT before issue.

6.4 Communication with regulators and partners

Notifications are made to regulators and statutory partners as required: Ofsted, LADO, ICO, police, Local Authority, awarding bodies, commissioners. Notifications are made promptly and follow the framework set by each regulator.

7. Supporting people

7.1 Learners and families directly affected

- Personal contact by the Head or DSL, sustained over time.
- Signposting to specialist support — bereavement, trauma, mental health.
- Adjustment to the learning offer for as long as required.
- A named point of contact for the family throughout.

7.2 Wider learner community

- Educators and mentors briefed and supported to respond to learner questions and reactions.
- Adjusted curriculum content where necessary.
- Open route to the DSL for any learner who needs it.
- Recognition that neurodivergent learners may respond in distinctive ways — including delayed reactions, somatic responses, intense focus on factual detail, or apparent flatness — none of which means they are not affected.

7.3 Staff

- Reflective space and supervision during the response.
- Recognition that responding to a critical incident is in itself distressing.
- Access to external support — Employee Assistance Programme where available, or external counselling.
- Permission to pause non-essential work.
- Specific attention to staff with personal connection to the incident.

8. Records

A contemporaneous record is kept throughout. The record covers what was known when, decisions made, actions taken, notifications made, and rationale. Records are held by the Head in a secure file and are retained in line with the Data Retention Policy. Records may be required by subsequent inquiries, regulatory reviews, safeguarding processes, inquests or court proceedings.

9. Review of policy and practice

After the incident review, the Head leads a structured reflection with the CIT to identify what would be different in a future incident. Findings inform policy review and staff training. A summary is shared with the Board of Governors.

10. Roles and responsibilities

- Proprietor: Ultimate accountability; deputises as chair of CIT where required.

- Head: Chairs CIT; leads response.
- DSL: Co-leads response, particularly for safeguarding-related incidents; manages statutory safeguarding partnerships.
- Operations Lead: Operational coordination; timetable adjustments.
- Data Protection Lead: Data, communication and ICO notification.
- All staff: Follow CIT instructions; record what they know; refer concerns; do not speak externally.
- Governors: Receive briefing; provide challenge and support; oversight of post-incident review.

11. Related documents

- Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy
- Managing Allegations Against Staff Policy
- Low-Level Concerns Policy
- Online Safety Policy
- Data Protection Policy and Privacy Notices
- Data Retention Policy and Data Breach Procedure
- Business Continuity arrangements
- Communications Policy
- Mental Health and Well-being Policy

12. Review

This policy is reviewed annually by the Head and DSL, and after every critical incident, and approved by the Board of Governors.

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