

# University of Surrey Suicide Safety Strategy

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## Introduction

Suicide is the leading cause of death in adolescents and young people in the UK [1]. Student suicides, as well as being devastating for family and friends, also have a profound effect on the wider community of students and staff. Every time a person dies by suicide it is estimated that around 135 people are affected [2].

The factors leading to someone taking their own life are complex. No one organisation or sector can directly influence them all, however we recognise that universities play a key role in helping to prevent suicide within the institution. A whole university approach alongside partnership working with statutory NHS services and the voluntary sector is required to ensure best practice is followed and that suicide prevention remains at the top of local agenda.

We are committed to ensuring that our university community is as 'suicide safe' as possible. This strategy has been informed by the research-led 2018 UUK guidance on becoming a [Suicide-Safer University](#) [3].

## Purpose

The purpose of this strategy is to raise awareness of suicide, including suicide prevention and mental health, resulting in fewer incidents of attempted suicide and death by suicide.

Entirely preventing death by suicide may not be possible, however many are preventable. This strategy articulates our efforts to reduce the likelihood of people within our community making suicide attempts and dying due to suicide.

## Context

It is thought that 25% of young people will experience suicidal thoughts at least once in their life [4]. Whilst the suicide rate among students is statistically lower than the general population, in England and Wales in 2016-17 95 students died due to suicide [5].

Within the county of Surrey there are an average of 92 deaths by suicide each year. The suicide rate in Surrey is lower than England the South-East region, with the county making progress in reducing this rate since 2008 [6].

Nationally, of those people who die by suicide, only around a third are known to mental health services [7] and not everyone who dies by suicide has a diagnosed mental health condition [8]. This means it is essential to look beyond professional services and empower the entire University community to engage with suicide prevention.

## Understanding suicide in the student population

The reasons for suicide are complex and individual. However, we do know that financial difficulties, social pressures, life transitions and academic challenges can have a significant impact on the mental health of students [9] [10] [11]. Research indicates that a range of factors may be associated with increased risk of suicide including:

- A history of suicide attempts
- Experiencing mental health difficulties
- Alcohol and/or drug abuse
- Identifying as LGBTQ+ or being unsure about sexual orientation and gender identity
- Suffering from a chronic physical health condition
- Being bereaved, particularly by suicide in others
- Debt or financial worries
- Experiencing bullying in all forms, including cyberbullying

[The Jed Foundation](#), a not-for-profit organisation in the US, has led the way in developing a strategic public health approach to student suicide prevention. They designed an evidence-based 'comprehensive approach' to student suicide prevention on US university campuses [12].

The framework recognises that a comprehensive effort needs to address three parts; prevention, intervention and postvention (actions taken following a suicide with the aim of providing support to those bereaved and to reduce the risk of contagion).

The framework is set out in the diagram below:



## **Stakeholder Engagement**

To create a suicide safer community we must engage with all members of the University, from students with lived experience to front-line staff to senior leadership. As this strategy is developed and refined, we will provide opportunities for consultation and welcome feedback from all.

We will also engage with external partners to ensure our work is aligned to regional and national strategies and protocols.

## **Strategic ambition and objectives**

The strategies overarching objectives, guided by aforementioned Universities UK guidance and the Jed Foundation, are:

- To contribute to the **prevention** of suicide
- To enable **intervention** and support for people experiencing suicidal thoughts
- To facilitate **postvention** (post-suicide response, review and support)

Following a review of the University's current mental health and suicide prevention provision, six objectives have been identified to help support the achievement of this goal:

**Objective 1: Facilitate and engage with research on suicide**

**Objective 2: Promote cultural change by reducing the taboo of talking about suicide**

**Objective 3: Tailor approaches to improve emotional wellbeing in particular groups**

**Objective 4: Train all front-line student-facing staff in mental health and suicide awareness**

**Objective 5: Develop, implement and review support pathways within the University**

**Objective 6: Establish clear and collaborative local care pathways**

**Objective 7: Identify and publicise a suicide postvention team**

**Objective 8: Improve the information and support provided to those bereaved by suicide**

## **PREVENTION**

Adopting a whole University approach to good mental health is a key part of creating a suicide safer University. The objectives identified here are about creating an infrastructure that supports student mental health as well as engaging with ongoing research identifying evidence-based best practice in suicide prevention.

### **Objective 1 - Facilitate and engage with research on suicide:**

Actively seeking out and engaging with opportunities to collect and analyse data on suicide and parasuicidal behaviours, the groups most at risk and how the picture is changing over time, at both a local and national level is critical for effective suicide prevention work.

Although we do have connections to local community groups that monitor patterns of suicide in the Surrey area, as well as links into national groups looking at suicide within the HE sector, further work can be done to improve these links and take a more active role in these groups.

**How we will deliver on this objective:**

**Action 1:** Engage with Surrey Suicide Prevention Partnership to monitor local patterns related to suicide. We will do this through regular attendance at meetings as well as ongoing networking and contribution to local initiatives.

**Action 2:** Engage with national working groups that look at student mental health, with a particular focus on the [Student Mental Health Research Network](#) (SMaRteN), a national research network led by Kings College London.

**Action 3:** Initiate a University of Surrey Suicide Safety working group comprising of staff and students that meets regularly to review current research and formulate plans for implementing up and coming best-practice interventions.

**Objective 2: Promote cultural change by reducing the taboo of talking about suicide**

The University of Surrey has long endeavoured to create a culture where individuals are encouraged to be open in acknowledging and seeking support for any mental health difficulties they may be experiencing.

Whilst a reduction in stigma in talking about mental health is noted, there remains a significant taboo around talking about suicide specifically. It is recognised that many people are fearful of raising the topic, asking questions and talking openly about these feelings. Students have noted anxieties around parents being informed without consent, or their future on their course being bought into question.

Talking about suicide offers an important opportunity for an individual to seek support and begin to work towards recovery. A vital part of suicide prevention is encouraging these conversations to take place.

**How we will deliver on this objective:**

**Action 1:** We will continue to publicise the support services in existence, with particular focus on letting people know that they can talk to us about suicide without fear of repercussion.

**Action 2:** We will host regular Suicide Awareness events in collaboration with the University of Surrey Students Union. These will coincide with national awareness raising events including [University Mental Health Day](#) and [Mental Health Awareness Week](#).

**Action 3:** We will review the physical communication materials places around campus, advising people of support services, with particular focus on communal areas in halls of residence.

### **Objective 3: Tailor approaches to improve emotional wellbeing in particular groups**

Those who are the most vulnerable in a community are disproportionately at risk of suicide. Local and national research has identified the following 'high-risk' groups that are particularly relevant to our University population:

- Males
- Black and Minority Ethnic groups (BAME)
- People who identify as LGBTQ+
- Those misusing drugs and alcohol
- People with a history of self-harm

There remain several gaps in targeted provision of emotional wellbeing initiatives to groups that are at increased risk of mental ill health. A co-ordinated response is required to ensure that all 'at-risk' groups are identified and that collective resources are used to best-effect.

#### **How we will deliver on this objective:**

**Action 1:** We will review existing research that works to identify 'at risk' groups described above and engage with these student communities using a service design approach to identify pains, gains and jobs to be done in help-seeking behaviours.

**Action 2:** We will coordinate the publicising of the multiple avenues of support and community connections that already exist, so that students know where to go to seek out this information

**Action 3:** We will recognise the value of peer-based support in engaging certain groups and ensuring that evidence-based mental health interventions are incorporated into prevention-based care via peer support channels through training and peer supervision.

### **INTERVENTION**

Reducing stigma through education and awareness and creating connected communities is part of the solution to encouraging a mentally healthy university and encourage help-seeking behaviour. However, universities need to go further to ensure the provision of a diverse, accessible and comprehensive range of support and pastoral services for those students experiencing mental and emotional distress.

### **Objective 4: Train all student-facing staff in suicide awareness**

Training people who are likely to be in contact with suicidal individuals in recognising and responding to risk may improve short-term knowledge and confidence in being able to initiate supportive conversations [13] [14]. Further research is needed to demonstrate the efficacy of these training interventions, however the University is committed to actively exploring the positive impact of this.

We have a long-established suite of training courses for staff on mental health awareness and have recently introduced accredited [Mental Health First Aid](#) training. Between December 2017 and

December 2020 over 300 members of staff have attended a course relating to supporting the mental health of students and colleagues.

**How we will deliver on this objective:**

**Action 1:** We will develop and communicate guidance on how staff can be encouraged to support students, with as much focus on what is not expected of them, as what is, paying particular attention to maintaining boundaries.

**Action 2:** We will establish an annual coordinated training plan for staff on mental health awareness and suicide prevention. The initial focus will be on staff who perform significant pastoral care duties, particularly Security staff and the Residential Wardens.

**Action 3:** We will develop a short and focused suicide awareness e-Learning module that can be accessed by all staff and students, highlighting the [See-Say-Signpost](#) approach.

**Objective 5: Develop, implement and review support pathways within the University**

It is of vital importance that all University staff and students are aware of, and confident in, reaching out for support and guidance for both their own mental health, and in raising concerns related to others.

Informed signposting, where a referrer is able to not just offer the name of a service, but able to talk an individual through what the service offers and what to expect at first contact, can reduce anxiety and encourage help-seeking behaviour.

The Centre for Wellbeing has recently published '[Guidelines for Raising Concerns](#)' documentation that offers clear advice on what to do in a range of concerning situations. This sits as part of the internal website where staff can also find in-depth information on what services are offered and how individuals can access them.

**How we will deliver on this objective:**

**Action 1:** We will regularly review and communicate existing Guidelines for Raising Concerns and provide training in following this protocol.

**Action 2:** We will identify and map staff in each Faculty and department who are engaged in additional pastoral support, either as a direct result of their role (e.g. Personal Tutor) or through their own voluntary commitment (e.g. Wellbeing Champion).

**Action 3:** We will then develop these links through Wellbeing and Welfare 'Faculty Links' to strengthen referral routes and support for staff.

**Objective 6: Establish clear and collaborative local care pathways**

Although the NHS is beginning to consider students as a population in their own right, difficulties remain with the coordination of care between statutory services (primary, secondary and tertiary care) and the support provided by universities.

Students who experience mental health difficulties need a single experience of care as they move from university support to NHS provision, both at university and at home. This unified service model must be underpinned by shared data. Conversations must be held between students, the university and local care services to formulate strategic relationships, working together based on agreed values to achieve a shared set of outcomes.

Whilst relationships are in place between the university and local stator services, turnover of staff has led these to be challenging to maintain and they operate on an informal basis, rather than through formal agreement.

#### **How we will deliver on this objective:**

**Action 1:** Mapping of current local services will be undertaken and used to inform the potential redesign and implementation of shared care pathways. We will focus on the following services:

- Guildford Community Mental Health and Recovery Service
- North West Surrey Home Treatment Team
- Royal Surrey Psychiatric Liaison Team
- West Surrey and NE Hants Early Intervention in Psychosis Service
- Guildford Safe Haven

**Action 2:** We will host a Surrey Mental Health Round Table event on a yearly basis to discuss relevant local topics and share expertise and best-practice.

#### **POSTVENTION**

The term postvention describes activities developed by, with, or for people who have been bereaved by suicide, to support their recovery and to prevent adverse outcomes, including suicide and suicidal ideation.

How we support people after any death has some common elements, however the aftermath of a death by suspected suicide brings unique considerations.

#### **Objective 7: Identify and publicise suicide postvention team**

A death by suicide in the University community can have wide-reaching affects. Furthermore, in some circumstances, through the process of social contagion the death of one student by suicide may trigger suicidal thoughts and behaviours in others, particularly those who are already vulnerable.

It is therefore essential that the response to a student death in managed by a core group of highly trained staff in order to minimise further harm and support continuous improvement and learning.

#### **How we will deliver on this objective:**

**Action 1:** We will identify staff who will form part of a Suicide Postvention Team and ensure they have received up-to-date training in suicide awareness.

**Action 2:** We will develop a clear protocol that describes what actions will be taken, and by whom. This will be linked to [PHE guidance](#) [16] on how to identify vulnerable people following a suicide alongside the University's Student Death policy.

### **Objective 8: We will provide better information and support to those bereaved by suicide**

The University of Surrey places a strong emphasis on the provision of bereavement support for students, with multiple measures already in place including access to peer-led bereavement support groups, counselling services and chaplaincy. Staff are also able to access bereavement training, enabling them to identify how to effectively support bereaved students and colleagues.

Despite a strong general offering, we recognise that more focused support for those bereaved by suicide would be valuable. This will play an important role in reducing the risk of suicide contagion as well as providing specialised support at a vital time.

#### **How we will deliver on this objective:**

**Action 1:** We will design a protocol that the suicide postvention team will use to identify those who may be affected by a suspected suicide and those who may be at risk due to exposure to the suicide and provide them with an offer of timely support.

**Action 2:** We will work with partners across the South East to advocate for improved access to postvention support, including statutory and voluntary services thereby ensuring students have the option of seeking support external to the University if needed. We will focus on developing a working relationship with the [Lucy Rayner Foundation](#), a local charity who set up the Surrey Suicide Bereavement Service, offering 121 support to people bereaved by suicide.

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