

HCC Statutory SEND Communication Policy

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Introduction:

Strong and purposeful communication with internal and external partners is an essential part of the success of the Statutory SEND service. The service is required to manage a significant volume of communications through a range of methods including electronic, telephone and face to face. The Hertfordshire [Professional Promise](#) outlines the expectations of all staff working in with families in SEND in relation to communication and working together.

This communication policy is intended to support the day-to-day implementation of the Professional Promise in statutory SEND, whilst also supporting the service with the breadth and complexity of the communications that are received. The policy promotes SEND credibility as a publicly accountable organisation, focused on the best possible outcomes for children and young people with special educational needs.

The policy is intended to promote communication in an environment of fluid change. The SEND management team encourage openness in sharing information with colleagues and are committed to consulting with staff on a regular basis.

Purpose

The purpose of the SEND Communication Policy is to improve internal and external communications by providing a framework which:

- Encourages individuals to connect with colleagues and stakeholders.
- Ensures communication is respectful, purposeful, and therefore valued.
- Enables staff to access key information and be able to talk to line managers.

Principles

- a) Good communication (internally and externally) allows people to develop and maintain positive and professional relationships with other people that in turn enhances wellbeing and purpose.
- b) Senior staff engage with contacts that are escalated to them in ways that foster trust and empowerment for case owners to effectively communicate with school and families.
- c) Good communication should be structured, timely and respectful.
- d) Communication is a two-way process which includes the opportunity for feedback and a commitment to listening on both sides.
- e) Individuals have a responsibility to keep themselves informed.
- f) Leaders are committed to communicate in an open and accessible manner which involves consultation in order to inform the decision-making process.
- g) Clear and effective communication about policy, performance and operational issues is important to maintain an environment in which individuals feel valued and are empowered.
- h) Clear communication should be employed to ensure consistency and reduce unnecessary duplication and rework.
- i) A central tenet of facilitating effective communication is enabling prioritisation by avoiding unnecessary exchanges and having an agreed protocol about when parties are / are not to receive and / or respond to messages.

Scope

All members of the SEND Service have equal responsibility to adhere to the SEND Communication Policy. The aim of the Communications Policy is to reduce the risk to families, settings, other professionals and the SEND service itself of damaging or ineffective communication, and to ensure that all staff are aware of how communications are best conducted externally and internally.

Definitions

External Communications include all the messages and information that the SEND Service presents to different audiences, whether directly (through face-to-face meetings, virtual meetings, telephone calls, letters, e-mails, newsletters) or indirectly through the media and word of mouth.

Internal Communications include all the messages and information (whether verbal or written) shared within the SEND Service and other teams within the council, principally between members of staff, and to and from management and staff.

External Communications

When working with families, settings and professionals, the SEND Service will strive to:

- Recognise and validate contact
- Recognise the intensity of emotions that are inherent in our work
- Set clear expectations and explanations (roles, processes)
- Set a clear timeline and have accountability for this
- Provide updates to any adjustments to this, a clear contingency plan.

As a Service, our first priority is to deliver high quality casework that ensures all CYP with an EHC plan have access to an appropriate education and the provision outlined in their plan. This can include attending complex case meetings, taking part in decision making around assessment, provision and placements, meeting with staff in educational settings, and attending reviews. SEND staff cannot and are not expected to monitor and manage their calls and inbox constantly, whilst delivering these priorities. Constantly monitoring and responding to email or phone calls undermines other essential areas of professional activity. It is important that the structured aspects of communication with settings, families and professionals are adhered to, to avoid the service responding in such a way that minimises the overall positive impact we can have on our children and young people.

Telephone communications:

The SEND team can be contacted through the SEND duty line which can be reached on 01442 453300 from 9 – 5.30 Monday to Thursday and 9 – 4.30 on Fridays.

The role of the Customer Service Centre:

The Customer Service Centre (CSC) provide a first-line response to SEND calls through the SEND duty line, answering straight-forward queries and passing through to an appropriate person in SEND if they are unable to answer a call. On receipt of a call, the CSC will complete the following actions:

- Check the CYP name on EHM to see if they have a current EHC plan or assessment.
- Answer queries relating to who the named officer is and dates for next steps, using system information.
- Signpost to other services such a SENDIASS, the EP service or transport.

If the above actions are not sufficient to answer the callers query, the CSC will follow the process below to support resolution of the call:

- Put a call through to the named EHC coordinator contact number.
- If there is no response, the CSC will put the call through to the relevant SEND duty line.
- If there is no response to the duty line, the CSC will book a 30 minute call back into the named EHC coordinators diary, into one of the pre-assigned “callback” slots.

CSC advisors set clear expectation with callers about when the SEND team are likely to respond back following the below guidance:

- Callers wanting to leave a message or receive a progress update are advised to wait up to 5 working days for a call back. Callers are reminded not to chase us during this time.
- If an e mail has been sent callers will be advised to wait up to 10 working days for a response.
- CSC advisors will only attempt to call a SEND team in these situations if the caller states one of the following:-

- Caller states no response received within agreed timescales and there is no evidence on EHM that a call has been made.
- The case is now more urgent.

To support the successful use of the CSC, the statutory SEND team ensure the following:

- All EHC coordinators ensure that their contact number is correctly added to their intranet profile.
- All case owners and managers ensure callback slots are in diaries, a minimum of 2 hours per week.
- Case owners honour callbacks that are booked into their diaries.
- Involvements are kept up to date in EHM.

Managing telephone communications in the statutory SEND team:

- Team duty lines are manned daily on a rota, with representation from business support and a case-holding member of staff so that queries can be answered quickly wherever possible.
- Teams will devise their own agreed protected time when case owners are not required to answer calls.
- Outside of this protected time or meetings, SEND case owners will have phones on and will answer calls as they come through.
- SEND staff voicemail greetings will set expectations in relation to response times, and the team will regularly check and respond to voicemails on personal and duty lines.
- Case notes will be added to EHM following all telephone communications about individual cases.
- Whilst this is rare, if a caller becomes abusive, the team will follow the call de-escalation procedure.

Email communications:

Email provides us with a quick and easy means of communication, as well as a structure within which to respond. This sets expectations for all and should provide reassurance as to when and how a communication will be responded to. It can be used for such a wide range of communications and as such has also become increasingly difficult to distinguish between formal and informal communications. This can lead to an expectation of an instantaneous reply. It is important therefore that:

- All parties adhere to the expectations of email communication – which is set out in the Customer Service Standards as 10 working days.
- The timeframe for response is respected to allow time for full consideration to be given to all questions raised.
- **There should not be further chasing emails sent within the timeframe.** This will only cause tension, anxiety and frustration, and will not lead to a quicker resolution of issues raised.

When communicating with the SEND Service, please bear in mind our staff are working extremely hard in trying to help our children and young people succeed, often managing large and complex caseloads.

Many of you will be facing the same challenges in your own workplace from an increasing expectation of anytime, anywhere communications. Some readers may be of the view that this is simply the way the world works now. However, we have a duty of care to our staff, as we do to our children and young people. This includes a responsibility to ensure that the staff workload is achievable and does not unreasonably intrude into their private life. Our staff go over and above every day and we want to keep them in a profession they are fully committed to.

The following outlines procedure with regard to **email communication** between the SEND service and families, schools and other educational settings, and wider professionals.

All communication must respect the dignity of the recipient.

- a) As soon as an email is sent an acknowledgement will automatically be sent back (Appendix 1). This signposts to the Local Offer and the Grid where answers to many questions can be found, and we encourage senders to explore these options and come back to us if they are unable to find the answers. It will also give the timeframe within which we will respond.
- b) Please refrain from copying lots of individuals into emails; this can confuse the issue and make it difficult for staff members to respond appropriately. Multiple emails being received can have a direct effect on staff wellbeing and service effectiveness and as such, is something that the SEND service strongly requests your support with.
- c) Emails will be the responsibility of the named recipient and not others who are copied into the email. It is therefore not advised to copy others into emails.
- d) Within 10 working days, in line with the [customer service standards](#), we will provide a response to the email by telephone or via email. This may include informing the sender that more time is required to provide a full response. If this is the case, staff will indicate a timeframe in which a response should be expected.
- e) If a member of staff is not able to deal with the email directly then they will pass it on to the most appropriate person and inform the sender that they have done so.
- f) Staff will not be expected to monitor or respond to emails out of their normal working hours (including weekends, bank holidays, or during annual leave). Whilst senders may compose emails at all sorts of hours to suit their own needs, we would ask that emails are not normally sent outside of a member of staff's normal working hours. Mobile phones and other electronic devices that enable staff to access their emails when away from work can make it difficult to 'ignore' a message, leading to worry and anxiety on the part of the staff.
- g) The use of the word 'URGENT' or 'PRIORITY' in email messages on a frequent basis can prevent effective communication. Use of language should be carefully considered to enable the best possible outcome from the raising of a concern.
- h) Whilst this is rare, if a member of staff receives an email which is of an aggressive tone, sets unreasonable demands or could otherwise be interpreted as harassing, they will refer this to a member of the SEND Leadership team, who will decide if consideration needs to be given to dealing with further communication under [Hertfordshire County Council Policy and Procedure for Managing Persistent and Vexatious Behaviour and Complaints](#).
- i) Communications with stakeholders linked to specific cases will need to be saved to the agreed secure internal information storing database.

Thank you for your contribution in supporting a sensible approach to staff workload and staff wellbeing that ultimately has such an impact on the service we can deliver.

Proactive communications through regular meetings:

To mitigate against excessive use of individual communication coming through via email and telephone, we are implementing a system of meeting with Hertfordshire settings according to level of need.

Special schools:

- Special schools are linked to a Specialist Placement Officer from the SEND team who provides a key part of the SEND offer of support to schools. The Specialist Placement Officer

meets with their allocated special schools at least once per half term to go through the current school roll to discuss:

- who is attending
 - any upcoming concerns about meeting need
 - any children who are on the referral list for the school
 - annual review dates and requests for attendance at reviews will be fed back to EHC coordinators in the area teams.
- EHC coordinators linked to special schools will meet with their school once per month (ideally in person), to touch base around current on-roll pupils. It is expected that this meeting will address the majority of queries raised by either party, and this will limit the amount of additional email or telephone traffic that occurs in between these times.

DSPL's:

- DSPL's provide support for schools in local areas. EHC Coordinators are linked to DSPL's and meet regularly with the DSPL lead for their area. DSPL leads provide a key link between SEND and schools for individual cases, overarching processes, and for the dissemination of messages about changes to practice or new ways of working.
- EHC coordinators will meet with their link DSPL leads at least once a month to discuss phase transfer in the area, in year moves, and young people at risk of exclusion or out of school. Where possible, this will be in the lead school in a DSPL area. DSPL's will support the SEND service to encourage successful placements and develop transition plans for children joining schools in an area.

Mainstream schools:

- Mainstream schools with a high number of EHCP's (in the 22-23 academic year, this will be any school with 15 or more EHCP's) will have a planned meeting once per half term (which will be in school where possible) with their associated EHCCo to discuss key issues which will include phase transfers, children not attending school and queries about reviews or funding.
- It is expected that this meeting will address the majority of queries raised by either party, and this will limit the amount of additional email or telephone traffic that occurs in between these times.

Colleges:

- EHC Coordinators for our 4 local colleges will meet representatives from their college once per half term, to discuss those on roll, non-attenders, expected destinations and progress through phase transfer processes. It is expected that this meeting will address the majority of queries raised by either party, and this will limit the amount of additional email or telephone traffic that occurs in between these times

Lead professional approach:

Our EHC coordinators are caring, committed officers who strive to deliver high quality support at all times. They are usually best placed to respond to queries about individuals, or to signpost to where the queries can most effectively be answered.

When the SEND Service is communicating externally with settings, families and other professionals, they **may** adopt a 'lead professional' approach. This means that there is a single point of contact from the service in relation to that case. Where this person has been clearly identified and communicated, it is important that other members of staff are not copied in / communicated with to ensure communication is effective and most relevant from the lead professional.

Escalations for non-communication:

EHC Coordinators are responsible for ensuring that the statutory processes relating to EHC plans are delivered and they work hard to deliver their roles in a way that ensures children and young people are given appropriate opportunities to succeed. This includes delivering coordinated assessment processes, ensuring that annual reviews are taking place in settings and any changes are considered, commissioning additional support where necessary, and ensuring that all children and young people in Hertfordshire have a confirmed placement or alternative educational provision. EHC Coordinators primarily work with educational settings and other professionals who work directly with children and young people or school staff. Parents or schools with questions about how provision is implemented in settings, what support is available from services across Hertfordshire, or appropriateness of placements for their children or young people should start with their school or setting, the Local Offer, SENDIASS and their DSPL leads. Most questions are resolved by these services.

Where there are questions or issues in relation to statutory processes, EHC coordinators in the SEND team are happy to help. Occasionally, you may feel that your EHC coordinator has not delivered the outcomes you expect. In this circumstance, you can escalate this using the following procedure:

Step 1: Speak to your designated case owner in the team to resolve the concern.

- EHC Coordinators are usually best placed to work through concerns with you, as they have knowledge of the people and processes available to move things on. Our EHC Coordinators will always work with you to clarify any issues or challenges.
- EHC Coordinators work with large numbers of schools and families and are often away from their desk. They work to our Customer Service Standards, responding to emails within 10 days. Please do not send chaser emails or escalate to others in the team within 10 days unless your email is genuinely urgent.
- [You can find your EHC coordinator here](#) or by calling the SEND duty line on 01442 453300.
- You can contact your EHC coordinator by using their email – firstname.lastname@hertfordshire.gov.uk

Step 2: Escalate to the team lead in the SEND team.

- If your concern is not addressed to your satisfaction, or you have not had a response within 10 days, you can escalate the issue to a more senior member of staff.
- [You can find the team lead for your EHC coordinator here](#)
- You can contact them on firstname.lastname@hertfordshire.gov.uk

Step 3: Escalate to a more senior manager.

- If your concern has still not been addressed by the manager within the team, you can escalate your issue to a more senior manager.
- [You can find this information here](#)
- **Please note that if the escalation process has not been fully followed, this will be passed to the team lead within the team who can address your concern more effectively.**

Step 4: Escalate to the SEND resolution team.

- Where all previous attempts to resolve your issue have been unsuccessful, you can escalate your concern to our SEND resolution team who can be contacted on isloggedlettersandcomplaints@hertfordshire.gov.uk

Process where escalations are made without following the escalation protocol:

The key purpose of the escalation protocol is to ensure that questions are answered by someone with knowledge of the case and the next steps, to avoid confusion and to support consistency of messaging. To support this, where escalations are made outside of the escalation protocol including to heads of service or directors, they will be re-directed to the appropriate area of the SEND team, to avoid inaccurate information being shared and to avoid issues relating to consistency of messaging. Below you will see the process.

- The contact (phone or email) will be forwarded to the SEND Resolution team with a standard response that reads “Thank you for your email – I note your concerns about contact with our SEND team. This has been passed on to our resolutions team who will coordinate a response and resolution for you. Thank you for your patience whilst we look into this for you. A member of the SEND team will be back in touch by phone or email with an initial response within 48 hours.”
- The resolution team will log the contact, and check if the escalation protocol above has been followed.
- The resolution team will act according to the protocol, escalating to the appropriate member of the team and logging the escalation point.
- Occasionally, the resolution team may pick up the next steps in partnership with the case owner.

Thank you for your support with the implementation of the escalation protocol. This is an important part of supporting the wellbeing and efficient working practice of the team whilst managing a high volume of contacts.

Internal Communications

Internal communication is embedded within a culture of mutual respect and trust amongst SEND colleagues. SEND staff should feel safe to express themselves and appropriately challenge ideas and decisions without concerns about negative repercussions.

Consideration will be given to using ‘reply all’ to emails, the timing of emails (e.g. on a Friday afternoon / at the start of the school holidays), taking account of staff work / life balance when arranging meetings.

- a) All staff will review and work towards the principles of the following documents:
 - [The Hertfordshire Values and Behavioural Framework](#)
 - Hertfordshire SEND Strategy 2022 – 2025 - [send-strategy-2022-25-pdf-415kb.pdf \(hertfordshire.gov.uk\)](#)
 - Special School Place Planning Strategy - [Special School Place Planning Strategy](#)
 - SEND Service Vision
 - SEND Service Action Plan
- b) All staff will have a clear job description and will have access to regular information about training and support available to all HCC staff.
- c) A service day for all staff will be held on a bi-annual basis. This event will provide an opportunity for staff to gain a better understanding of the areas of work in different departments, build stronger working relationships and share good practice.
- d) The SEND SMT will hold half-termly SEND staff briefings as well as provide written updates linked to these where relevant.
- e) SEND management will run an annual training programme for all SEND staff.

- f) Team managers and team leads will hold team meetings (or similar) on a minimum of a half-termly basis. The purpose of these will be to clarify priorities, give individuals the opportunity to comment on any developmental activity they have been involved in, celebrate team successes and resolve issues.
- g) Line Managers will meet with their team members on a monthly basis to conduct meaningful supervision (pro-rated for term time only / part-time staff) in line with the [Hertfordshire performance and development processes](#).
- h) Line Managers will talk informally with staff in their teams, either individually or in groups, on at least, a fortnightly basis to discuss how things are going, solicit feedback and respond to it.
- i) Commitments already in diaries will be honoured, and agreed, consistent protected times will be decided within teams.
- j) The standard practice for the SEND Service is to conduct virtual meetings with cameras turned on. Exceptional circumstances can be discussed with line managers.
- k) When managing complaints, an approach needs to be agreed with all parties; weekly calls can be incredibly time consuming and not productive, so the most effective form of communication will be agreed.
- l) Communications with stakeholders linked to specific cases will need to be saved to the agreed secure internal information storing database.

Details of this policy:

This policy is owned by the Statutory SEND management team.

This policy will be reviewed every years. The next review will be in August 2023.

This Communication Policy was implemented in October 2022.