Communications Policy

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Communications Policy

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1. Purpose and scope

Hurst Education Trust (the Trust) believes that clear, timely and respectful communication between our schools and parents and carers is essential to the education, wellbeing and safety of our pupils. Children thrive when home and school work together, and good communication is the foundation of that partnership.

This policy sets out how our schools will communicate with parents and carers, how we ask parents and carers to communicate with our schools, and the standards of conduct we expect on both sides. It also explains the steps the Trust will take where communication becomes unreasonable, persistent or abusive.

This policy applies to all schools within the Trust and to all forms of communication, including face to face conversations, telephone calls, emails, letters, messages sent through school communication platforms, and comments made on or through social media. Throughout this policy, references to parents include carers and any other adults with responsibility for a pupil.

This policy should be read alongside the Trust Complaints Policy, which sets out the formal route for raising and escalating complaints.

Nothing in this policy restricts or overrides the right of any parent, or any other person, to raise a safeguarding concern at any time. Safeguarding concerns will always be received, considered and acted upon in accordance with the school's Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy, regardless of any communication arrangements or restrictions in place under this policy.

2. Our principles

All communication between our schools and parents should be guided by the following principles:

- Partnership. Home and school share responsibility for the education and wellbeing of every child, and communication should reflect a shared purpose.
- Respect. All communication, in either direction, should be courteous, measured and professional in tone, even where there is disagreement.
- Timeliness. Information should be shared promptly, and enquiries acknowledged and responded to within reasonable and clearly stated timeframes.
- Clarity. Communication should be in plain language, accessible to all families, and directed through the appropriate channel.
- Proportionality. The method, length and frequency of communication should be proportionate to the matter being raised.

3. How our schools will communicate with parents

3.1 Methods of communication

Our schools use a range of methods to communicate with parents. These typically include:

- The school communication platform and parent app, used for whole school and class messages, letters, permissions and reminders.
- Email, for individual correspondence and more detailed information.
- Regular newsletters, setting out key dates, events and celebrations.
- The school website, which holds statutory information, policies, term dates and curriculum information.
- Telephone calls, for matters that are urgent, sensitive or better discussed in conversation.
- Face to face meetings, including parents' evenings and arranged appointments.
- Text or app notifications for urgent operational matters, such as emergency closures.

Each school will make clear to its parent community which platforms it uses and for what purpose. Parents are asked to keep their contact details up to date and to check school communications regularly.

3.2 What parents can expect from us

Parents can expect that our schools will:

- Communicate important information in good time, so far as circumstances allow.
- Acknowledge non urgent enquiries within two working days and provide a substantive response, or an indication of when one will follow, within five working days.
- Respond to urgent matters, particularly those affecting a child's safety or welfare, as a priority.

- Be honest, accurate and clear, and correct any errors promptly.
- Treat parents with courtesy and respect at all times, including where the school and a parent disagree.
- Handle personal information in accordance with data protection legislation and the Trust's privacy notices.

For the purposes of this policy, a matter is urgent where it concerns an immediate risk to the safety, welfare or whereabouts of a child, or where it requires action on the same working day, for example an emergency change to collection arrangements or a significant medical matter. Urgent matters should be raised by telephone through the school office rather than by email or app message, as electronic messages may not be seen immediately. In an emergency involving immediate danger to life or safety, contact the emergency services first.

3.3 Working hours and staff wellbeing

Staff are not expected to read or respond to communication outside their normal working hours, during weekends, or during school holidays. Emails and messages may be sent by parents at any time, but a response should not be expected outside these hours. Class teachers have teaching commitments during the school day and will ordinarily respond to messages outside of lesson time. The Trust asks parents to support the wellbeing of school staff by respecting these boundaries.

4. How we ask parents to communicate with our schools

4.1 Raising a question or concern: the right route

Most questions and concerns are resolved quickly when they are raised with the right person at the earliest opportunity. Parents are asked to follow this route:

- First, contact your child's class teacher, via the school office or the school's stated channel. The class teacher knows your child best and can resolve most day-to-day matters.
- If the matter is not resolved, or is more serious, contact the relevant senior leader or the headteacher through the school office.
- If, having spoken to the headteacher, you remain dissatisfied, the Trust Complaints Policy sets out how to raise a formal complaint and the stages that follow.

Escalating a matter directly to the headteacher, the Trust or trustees before the school has had a reasonable opportunity to respond will usually result in the matter being referred back to the appropriate stage.

4.2 Practical expectations

We ask that parents:

- Use the school office or the school's stated channels as the route into school, rather than contacting staff on personal email addresses, personal phone numbers or through social media.

- Make an appointment for matters that need a proper conversation, rather than expecting an immediate meeting at the classroom door at drop off or collection, when staff have responsibility for the supervision of children.
- Allow the stated response times before following up, and avoid sending repeated messages on the same matter to multiple members of staff.
- Keep written communication concise and focused on the matter in hand, so that it can be dealt with efficiently.
- Report absence, appointments and changes to collection arrangements through the channel the school specifies.

4.3 Tone and conduct

We expect all communication with our schools, whether in person, by telephone or in writing, to be polite and respectful. Parents are entitled to raise concerns, to disagree with the school and to challenge decisions. They are not entitled to do so in a manner that is aggressive, offensive, threatening or demeaning towards staff, pupils or other members of the school community. Section 6 of this policy explains how the Trust will respond where these standards are not met.

4.4 Social media

Social media can be a positive way for school communities to stay connected, but it is not a channel for raising concerns with the school and the school will not respond to concerns raised in this way. Parents are asked not to use social media, including private parent groups and messaging apps, to make complaints about the school, to name or criticise members of staff, pupils or other parents, or to share images of other people's children without consent. Where social media activity is defamatory, harassing or threatening, the Trust reserves the right to take appropriate action, which may include reporting the matter to the platform, seeking legal advice, or referring the matter to the Police.

5. Working together to resolve concerns

The overwhelming majority of concerns are resolved informally, quickly and amicably. When a concern is raised, our schools will listen carefully, establish the facts, explain any decisions taken, and identify what, if anything, should change. Parents can help by raising matters early, by being specific about the concern and the outcome sought, and by engaging with the process constructively.

There will be occasions where, after proper consideration, the school's decision is not the outcome the parent hoped for. A decision a parent disagrees with is not, of itself, grounds for a complaint to be reopened or repeated. Where a matter has been fully considered under the Complaints Policy and all stages have been exhausted, the school will not revisit the same matter, although parents retain the right to refer eligible matters to the Department for Education.

6. Unreasonably persistent, excessive or vexatious communication

6.1 What we mean

A small number of individuals communicate with schools in a way that, because of its frequency, volume, tone or nature, places an unreasonable burden on the school and diverts staff time away from the education of children. The Trust considers communication to be unreasonable, excessive or vexatious where, for example, a person:

- Sends communications with a frequency or volume that is disproportionate to the matter raised, including repeated emails, calls or messages on the same issue before the school has had a reasonable opportunity to respond.
- Raises the same matter repeatedly after it has been fully considered and responded to, including matters concluded under the Complaints Policy, without presenting any new information.
- Contacts multiple members of staff, governors or trustees simultaneously or sequentially about the same matter in an attempt to secure a different answer.
- Makes excessive demands on staff time, for example by insisting on immediate responses, unreasonably long meetings, or responses outside working hours.
- Changes the substance of a concern repeatedly, raises new issues each time a previous one is answered, or refuses to define the concern despite reasonable offers of help.
- Covertly or overtly records meetings or conversations without the prior knowledge and consent of the other participants.
- Pursues a concern in a manner that is clearly intended to harass, annoy or wear down staff rather than to resolve the issue.
- Uses artificial intelligence or similar tools to generate correspondence that is disproportionate in length, volume or frequency to the matter raised. The school will respond proportionately to the substance of a concern and is not obliged to reply point by point to lengthy generated documents.

It is the manner and pattern of communication, not the legitimacy of the underlying concern, that may make it unreasonable. A parent with a genuine concern can still pursue it in an unreasonable way.

6.2 How the Trust will respond

Where communication appears to be becoming unreasonable, the school will usually first write to the parent, explain the impact of the behaviour, and set out the standards expected, giving the parent the opportunity to adjust their approach. If the behaviour continues, the headteacher, in consultation with the Trust, may put proportionate restrictions in place. These may include one or more of the following:

- Nominating a single point of contact within the school through whom all communication must be directed.
- Restricting communication to a single channel, for example written communication to a specified email address only.

- Limiting the frequency with which communications will be responded to, for example one substantive response per week or fortnight.
- Declining to respond further on a matter that has been fully addressed, while confirming that correspondence will be read and retained.
- Requiring that any meetings take place with a second member of staff present, with an agreed agenda and time limit.

Any restriction will be confirmed in writing, will explain the reason for it, will be proportionate to the behaviour concerned, and will be reviewed at stated intervals, normally each term. Restrictions on communication do not remove a parent's right to raise a genuinely new matter, to report a safeguarding concern, or to receive information the school is required to provide about their own child.

7. Abusive, threatening or intimidating communication

The Trust has a duty of care towards its staff and will not tolerate communication or conduct that is abusive. This includes shouting, swearing, personal insults, discriminatory or derogatory language, threats of violence, intimidating behaviour on school premises, aggressive or harassing messages, and abusive content posted on social media.

Where communication is abusive, threatening or intimidating:

- The communication will not receive a substantive response. Staff are authorised to end telephone calls and meetings immediately if the other person becomes aggressive or abusive, and written communication of this nature will be acknowledged, if at all, only to confirm that it has been received and will not be responded to.
- The matter will be reported to the headteacher and, where appropriate, to the Trust, and a record will be kept.
- The Trust may impose communication restrictions of the kind described in section 6, or, in the case of behaviour on school premises, may withdraw the implied licence to enter the premises under section 547 of the Education Act 1996, meaning the person may not come onto school grounds without prior written permission.
- In serious cases, the Trust may refer the matter to an external agency. This may include referral to the Police, for example where behaviour may amount to a criminal offence such as harassment, malicious communications or threatening behaviour, and the Trust may seek legal advice or pursue legal remedies where appropriate.

The Trust will always distinguish between a parent who is upset or frustrated, which is understandable and will be met with patience, and behaviour that is abusive, which will not be accepted in any circumstances.

8. Accessibility and communication needs

Our schools want communication to be accessible to every family. Parents who need information in a different format or language, or who need adjustments to the way the school communicates with them, for example because of a disability, are asked to let the school office know so that suitable arrangements can be made. Nothing in this policy is intended to restrict reasonable adjustments required under the Equality Act 2010.

9. Monitoring and review

Headteachers are responsible for the implementation of this policy in their schools and for ensuring that staff and parents are aware of it. The Trust will monitor the use of any communication restrictions imposed under sections 6 and 7. This policy will be reviewed every three years, or sooner where legislative or operational changes require it.

10. Related Policies

- Complaints Policy
- Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy
- Acceptable Use Policy
- Home School Agreement [Where an individual school has this]

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