SPECIALIST EDUCATION SERVICES

Communications Policy and Practice

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SES Avocet House Ltd (4926028), SES Turnstone House Ltd (7972485) and SES Kite Ltd (12634002) are subsidiary companies of Specialist Education Services Topco Ltd (13159680)

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1 COMMUNICATION AND CUSTOMER SERVICE

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Good quality customer service permeates everything we do at Specialist Education Services. Each individual is responsible for ensuring the highest possible standards are met. Colleagues, young people, young adults, parents/carers and those from outside agencies are all regarded as ‘customers’ and, as such, are given equal levels of service and response. We aspire to create an environment where excellent levels of service flourish, giving due regard for other people and their role. High standards of communication, using a variety of media, supported by rigorous systems and procedures, play a vital role in promoting quality customer service. Personal laptops, desktop computers and a shared network contribute to achieving these standards. However, people are the most important factor in good communication.

The manner, in which we communicate, within the workplace and beyond, creates a lasting impression. This is true of all types of communications’ media, for example, verbal (both on the telephone and face to face) and written (letters, emails, reports, etc). The format, punctuation and grammar of written documents all contribute to this impression and reflect on individuals and Specialist Education Services. Individuals have a personal responsibility to project positive body language and to check that this is consistent with their tone of voice.

Professional approaches to communication are consistent across the whole staff team, and are the same regardless of whether the ‘customer’ is a colleague, young person, parents/carers or someone from an outside agency. Standards for various communications methods are documented in this booklet. It is an expectation that all staff work to these standards at all times.

Guidelines for the use of computers and the network are included, as consistent use across the whole team is key to successful ‘e’ communication. That said, it is acknowledged this method of communication does not wholly replace more traditional methods. The staff team is equally committed to using whichever method is most appropriate for any given situation.

Personal information will be used within SES by its staff according to the principles of applicable data protection legislation (the "DP Legislation"), meaning the General Data Protection Regulation (“GDPR”), the Data Protection Act (“DPA”) and the Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations ("PECR").

(See also: Data Protection Policy and Practice document)

2 COMPUTERS

2.1 PRINCIPLES

All contracted staff are provided with a personal laptop or a desktop computer for work use. In addition, there are a number of static desktop computers in various locations. These computers are the keystone to efficient communication and form an essential link for access to the network, emails and the Internet. All new staff are given basic training on a range of IT-related matters, as part of their induction. Training is also provided for the core team on a periodic basis.

(See Appendix A for Laptop Induction Training Checklist)

2.2 GOOD PRACTICE

- Always keep your password safe and secure.

- Laptops should be securely stored, whether on site or elsewhere, but not in the house office due to lack of storage.

- Staff access emails at least once each time they are on the premises.

3 EMAIL

3.1 PRINCIPLES

As with other methods of communications, it is essential that email messages present a professional image and that the content is clear and concise. This will help the recipient understand your message and is more likely to elicit a response.

3.2 GOOD PRACTICE

- The same standards of English should be applied to emails as to letter writing. Correct grammar, punctuation, capitalisation, full stops and spelling should be used. Paragraphs should be separated by a line space.

- The subject line should be used to get the recipient's attention and include enough information to help them scan the inbox, and prioritise their responses. It is not helpful to simply write 'Message' in the subject line. A better approach would be "Message from Mrs Smith re confirmation of meeting on 110724".

- Messages must be concise and, where possible, fit into one screen without the need to scroll.

- Do not include lengthy, unrelated topics in the same email. It is better to send separate emails with appropriate subject headings. If necessary, use numbered bullet points to separate the content.

- In the first couple of sentences make it clear if your message is:
  requesting information;
  requesting action;
  providing information.

- Use the 'cc' facility to differentiate between people who need to action (those in the 'to' line) and those who are receiving information (those in the 'cc' line).

- Avoid fancy fonts and colour, etc. (Helvetica Regular 12 point is the default font for all emails and there should be no reason or need to alter this.) Many people can only receive emails in plain text and therefore your message will not be displayed as you sent it.

- Consider the use of attachments carefully. Do not attach a large file if only a small part of it is relevant to the recipient. Instead, paste in the relevant section into the body of the email.

- All emails must be 'spell-checked' and proof-read before sending.

- If the email is to an external audience it can be useful to ask a colleague to proof read the email before sending.

- Always use the formal signature format.

- Avoid sending photographs by email to internal recipients; instead use the drop box facility on the internal network.

3.3 CONFIDENTIALITY

- Emails are not guaranteed to be confidential. If you are sending sensitive information, consider carefully if this is the best method for your communication. Principles of data protection should be applied.

- Files relating to child protection issues must not be emailed.

- Notifications are submitted through the Ofsted website, and are not sent via email.

- Confidential file attachments received via email, should be stored on the network and the email deleted.

- Confidential files should not be stored on laptops.

- Photographs of people should not be sent via email. Photographs received via email should be stored on the network, not on laptops.

- If an outside agency requests that e-mails are sent unencrypted, this must be agreed in advance that it has been requested. Once the person's email is known and established, unencrypted messages are low risk. This excludes OFSTED as their e-mail system is encrypted at the receipt of e-mail.

3.4 DATA PROTECTION

The principles of data protection apply. In particular:

- Personal data about individuals contained within an email and email addresses that identify individuals are covered by the Act and should be used with caution.

- Emails that contain personal data should be marked Confidential.

- Ensure emails containing personal data are sent to the correct recipient (take care when choosing email addresses from a Recipients' List).

- When using Distribution Lists to send emails to those outside the company, ensure that email addresses are not shared. Use the Bcc facility so that email addresses are not displayed.

(See also: Data Protection Policy and Practice document)

3.5 FINALLY

- Pause before sending, particularly if you find yourself writing in anger. Remember, emails are a permanent written record. If you are unsure about the layout or content of your message ask a colleague to check it.

4 <u>MINUTES</u>

4.1 PRINCIPLES

Clear and concise minutes are an essential communication tool and should be written to a consistent standard using the corporate format, regardless of who takes them. Minutes are an objective, accurate record of agreed decisions and actions, not a verbatim record. As with other forms of communication, minutes presented to a consistent high standard create a professional, corporate image.

4.2 GOOD PRACTICE

- All minutes should include:
  a record of those present
  a record of apologies
  the date and time of the meeting

- Look at a copy of the agenda before the meeting and check with the chair if you are unsure about how an item should be recorded.

- During the meeting, ask the chair for clarification if you are unsure what or how to record an item. This may sometimes involve going back to a previous point to check, for example, the agreed action or decision.

- It is not necessary to record verbatim discussions. Summarise the key points, but not who said what.

- Record any agreed decisions or actions.

- Record who is responsible for the agreed action, and the deadline for completing the task.

- Personal data within minutes is subject to data protection principles.

Where confidentiality needs to be respected, initials may be used, or use an anonymous statement, for example, “a member of staff”, “a social worker”, “a young person”.

- Use the standard layout for meetings, including the recording of follow-up on action points from the previous meeting, and any training that takes place during the meeting.

- Use proper English including correct punctuation and grammar.

- Always use the spell checker and proof read the final version, before circulation.

- Email a copy of the draft minutes to the Chair to check and make any changes. The Chair ensures the filename and date is correct on the final version, and they save it on the network.

- The chair sends a copy of the minutes to all meeting attendees (and those unable to attend) via email.

- Paper, hand-signed copies are not kept.

- Timescales for posting the final version of minutes on the network are as follows: for Care Team and Management Team meetings, within 48 hours of the meeting; for all other meetings e.g. committee and PAN meetings, within one week of the meeting. Minutes on the network are stored securely.

Minutes are a historical record. It is important that they are accurate, however, the responsibility does not rest solely with the minute taker. It is essential that he/she work closely with the chair during the meeting, as the chair is ultimately responsible for the accuracy of the final version. Once agreed and published, minutes must not be altered. If inaccuracies are identified later, these must be recorded in the minutes of a future meeting.

5 **NETWORK**

5.1 PRINCIPLES

The networks installed at Avocet House and Turnstone House and SES Kite establishments are an extremely powerful aid to successful communication. They facilitate the safe and secure storage of electronic data, and enable adults and/or young people to share data, where appropriate. Adults and young people are given access to the appropriate area(s) of the network, which is accessed via laptops, or in some cases, via desktop computers. The security of the network is maintained by restricting access to the appropriate area, and by the issue of a password to each user. All data stored on the network is backed up daily to enable recovery of a file should something untoward happen. The back up is cloud based and information transfer is encrypted.

5.2 GOOD PRACTICE

- Always keep your password safe and secure.

- Always ‘log off’ the network at the end of each session, particularly if using a shared computer. Failing to do this could lead to a breach of security.

- Always secure the desktop should you be called away whilst in the middle of a task. In no circumstances should your unsecured desktop be left unattended.

- Data stored on desktops should periodically be copied to the user’s named area of the network for safe storage. This enables recovery of data should a computer become damaged or lost. *SES is progressing towards a cloud based system (Office 365) where an individual’s data is backup up automatically; currently the senior leadership and administration teams are accessing this.*

- Your own personal data, including photographs, video and music must not be stored on the network.

- For security, photographs of young people, young adults and/or staff are stored on the network in the appropriate folder.

6 <u>NETWORK DIRECTORY</u>

6.1 PRINCIPLES

A Network Directory exists to provide a uniform filing system, which allows data to be accessed as efficiently as possible. The directory consists of charts to show the location of main folders, and an A to Z showing the ‘pathway’ to each folder or file. Electronic copies of the charts and A to Z are located in the staff area of the network). All users must adhere to the agreed directory structure, and protocols for maintaining it.

6.2 MAINTENANCE OF NETWORK STRUCTURE

6.2.1 <u>Labelling files and folders</u>

- All folders and files should be labelled using Title Case, i.e. each word begins with a capital letter.

- The file name should be followed by the date in the format ddmmyy, e.g. 261117.

- The date will normally be the creation date; the only exception to this is minutes of meetings when the date should be the meeting date.

- Files that refer to an individual child should be labelled with the child’s initials first, followed by the file name followed by the date, e.g. AB Swimming L24 080419

- Folders do not normally require a date suffix

- File names should be clear and concise to ensure they easily identify the contents. Consideration should be given to where the file will sit in the A to Z list, and how easily it will be identified should an electronic search be necessary to find the file.

- Abbreviations should be avoided if possible, although this may sometimes be necessary to avoid names that are too long to be fully displayed.

- Where abbreviations are used, these should be carefully considered to maximise the chances of electronically finding the file on the network.

- The characters / : must be avoided in file names.

6.2.2 Adding and deleting files

- Staff must notify the administrator before adding or deleting files from areas of the network that have an agreed structure. An agreement will be reached regarding the most appropriate folder for new files. The administrator will be responsible for updating the A to Z.

- In some cases, where files are added to folders on a regular basis e.g. minutes of meetings, it is not necessary to inform the administrator so long as the new files are put in the agreed folder.

7 PAN AND ACTION PLAN MEETINGS

The communication following agreed targets and actions is critical as to whether implementation is effective and consistent.

7.1 PRINCIPLES

The PAN Action Plan will clearly identify who's responsible for which actions and each will have an associated timescale. Those timescales should allow enough time for full communication with the staff team, including a slot within team meetings. With variable factors of on off shift structures communication particularly around targets and actions relating to children should be multi-layered.

7.2 GOOD PRACTICE

Multi-layered communication should be as follows:

- Clear emails to the whole team with attachments (for example the email may be alerting the team to a new child or young adult action plan being on the network, but the Child or Young Adult Action Plan should also be attached).

- Forward a request for an agenda item at forthcoming team and casework meetings.

- Identify and communicate with key DCM on 'launch' days/times e.g. for the start of behaviour programmes, to enable the DCMs to give a 3 day verbal reminder to team members coming on duty, that a programme or approach is up and running.

7.2.1 Circulating Minutes

The following procedure should be followed for minutes of PAN and Action Plan meetings.

- The minutes are drafted and emailed to the chair of the meeting to check for accuracy.

- The Chair ensures the filename and date is correct on the final version, and they save it on the network.

- The chair sends a copy of the minutes to all meeting attendees (and those unable to attend) via email.

- The chair informs the Personal Tutor that the minutes have been published.

- If, following a PAN or Action Plan meeting, a decision has been made which needs to be communicated immediately, this should be done via the content of an email. The minutes must not be circulated until the final version is agreed. However, communication of key points should not be held up.

8 TELEPHONE

8.1 PRINCIPLES

What you say and how you say it can leave a lasting impression. The way you sound may determine how a caller views not only you, but also Specialist Education Services. It is, therefore, essential that all staff follow the steps below when answering the telephone.

This framework applies equally to both internal and external callers, regardless of whether you are receiving or making a call.

- Avoid emotional overtones. Does your voice project impatience, a sense of being rushed or irritation at being interrupted?

- Enunciation – ensure words are pronounced clearly and are not rushed or run together.

- Volume – if your voice is too loud, it may sound aggressive; if it is too soft you may sound timid or powerless.

- Pace – if you talk too quickly, you will sound nervous or rushed; too slowly and you may come across as uncertain and inexpert.

- Negative phrases - try to avoid words such as 'no' and 'not' and replace them with more positive phrases. E.g. “No they,re not available now” might be replaced with “they are with a member of staff at the moment”

8.2 GOOD PRACTICE

- All staff have a responsibility to answer a ringing phone.
- A ringing phone should be answered as soon as possible, ideally within 6 rings.
- If you know the person is not in for any reason, ask if someone else can help.
- If you cannot help the caller directly, or the person is unavailable, take a message and forward as soon as possible, using agreed communication systems. Alternatively, use Voicemail Transfer to enable the caller to leave a direct message (this should only be used when you know the person will retrieve the message from a specific extension number).
- Always offer to take a message, rather than suggesting the caller rings back later.
- If you know there is likely to be a delayed response to the message, alert the caller to this.
- When transferring calls, pass on all the information the caller has given to you, to avoid the need for repetition.
- When transferring calls, tell the caller that the line will go silent.

9 WRITTEN DOCUMENTS

9.1 PRINCIPLES

As with other methods of communications, it is essential that written documents present a professional image. In order to ensure a consistent approach to all written documents, the following guidance is followed.

9.2 GOOD PRACTICE

- The default setting of 12 point Arial should be used for all documents. This is considered to be the clearest font to read. Personal preferences must not be used.
- Use a heading, and sub-heading if necessary, to enable the recipient to easily identify the purpose of the communication.
- Correct grammar, punctuation, capitalisation, full stops and spelling should be used.

- Paragraphs should be separated by a line space. Indents should not be used.

- Left alignment should generally be used.

- All documents must be ‘spell-checked’ and proof-read before sending.

- Standard layouts for letters, minutes and casework must be used. These are in Forms and Formats folder in the staff area of the network.

- The content should be clear and concise.

- Ask a colleague to check the document before sending, if you are uncertain about content or layout.

- Letters and compliment slips must be signed. Compliment slips must be dated.

- Headed paper is available for ‘official’ letters. A template is available in the Stationery folder in the Staff area of the network. Letters on headed paper must be checked for content and quality by the Principal, Head of Education, Registered Manager or Registered Service Manager before they are sent.

- Review Reports are written according to the guidance in SES Personal Tutor Role document and the SES Kite Effective Casework document, and are checked by senior personnel, before circulation.

10 WEB BASED COMMUNICATION

SES has its own website which serves some central communication purposes with the outside community and the world in general. For full information relating to all web based communication see the Acceptable Use of Technology Policy and Practice document.

11 CLEARCARE

The Clearcare software system is designed to integrate procedures and processes involved in the day to day running of SES establishments. The same standards of professional communication outlined in this policy apply equally to Clearcare. For more information please see the SES Clearcare Guide.

Appendix A: NETWORK/LAPTOP INDUCTION TRAINING CHECKLIST

- Communication in respect of SES policy and practice documents.
- What is the network?
- The structure of the network, and who has access, hierarchy, and permissions.
- Storing files on the network, how to do it, and the advantages of back ups.
- Storage space, (music/video files). Personal files can be stored on laptops. Young people's work should be discussed with the Head of Education. Music takes up a lot of memory.
- Logging on and off the network.
- Logging on and off the Clearcare system.
- Laptop security and password security.
- Passwords should not generally be changed.
- Master documents folder on laptop, network and in office.
- The basics of file management.
- Locking documents, stationery pads and templates.
- Saving, moving, copying and deleting files.
- Wireless connections.
- Printing.
- File labelling.
- Network directory and protocols.
- Display of folders/windows, etc.
- Housekeeping, leads, bags, storage, screen damage.
- Insurance, negligence and liability letter to sign.
- Acceptable Use of Technology, including Social networking.
- Securely.