STCAT PARENT, CARER AND COMMMUNITY COMMUNICATIONS PROTOCOL

DATE: OCTOBER 2024

1.0 CONTEXT:

With increasing connectivity in recent years there has been a significant growth in rapid communications between all stakeholders. While this brings great benefits, it can also present challenges in matching the expectations of stakeholders with the capacity of school leaders and others to make a timely and detailed response. Further, with the rapid turn-around time of email correspondence, there is often little time to act and a risk that significant time is lost to correspondence rather than dealing with the matter at hand. This protocol aims to achieve a balance between ensuring that stakeholders have confidence that there are effective avenues to communicate with school staff while also ensuring that Academy Trust resources are applied fairly and proportionately to benefit all our children and young people.

Where communication becomes strained and expectations are not met, it can have a significant negative impact on the wellbeing of all involved, and we must do all we can to strive to manage this for all stakeholders.

2.0 PURPOSE OF THIS PROTOCOL:

2.1 It is vitally important that communication between all stakeholders is defined by the values we have defined as core to our Academy Trust. These values and associated behaviours are set out below:

VALUE	BEHAVIOUR
FAITHFILLED	INSPIRED / HOPEFUL / COMPASSIONATE / POSITIVE
TRUTHFULNESS	TRANSPARENT / HONEST / AUTHENTIC
ATTENTIVE	HUMBLE / CONCERNED
GENEROUS	SELFLESS / SERVICE
LEARNED	ACTIVELY INFORMED / RESEARCH DRIVEN
ACTIVE	VISIBILITY / WALKING WITH
INTENTIONAL	AMBITION WITH INTEGRITY

2.2 This protocol should be read in conjunction with:

- The STCAT Complaints Policy for Schools
- The STCAT Complaints Policy for the Trust
- STCAT Policy regarding unacceptable behaviour on school premises

2.3	There are times when the expectations of different stakeholders are not aligned and there are strong differences of opinion. It is important that where this is the case that stakeholders can work through differences with integrity and fidelity to the values outlined above. The Trust Complaints protocol sets out the processes by which a complaint may be resolved. This protocol sets out the expectations for reasonable and fair communication regarding day-to-day issues and the steps school leaders may take where communication becomes problematic or as a solution to those occasions where difficulties arise. Nothing in this protocol prevents a parent from raising a complaint through the complaints policy should they wish to do so but many issues can be resolved through constructive communications, and we encourage stakeholders to work with us in the spirit of co-operation and the values outlined above.
3.0	**SCOPE** **Who does this protocol relate to?** This protocol relates to a stakeholder (defined as a parent, carer, or member of the public) who frequently communicates about issues, either formally or informally, or frequently raises issues that the stakeholder considers to be within the remit of the school, and whose behaviour or conduct in relation to such communications may also be deemed by school leaders to be unreasonable. A separate policy applies to how schools can respond to concerns about an individual's behaviour or conduct when they are on site, including the mechanisms to ban a person from entering a school site where appropriate.
4.0	**AIMS:** i. **Promote strong and respectful relationships between stakeholders** *The school will:* • Establish a home-school agreement that promotes a common understanding for conduct in communications • Establish ways to engage stakeholders to understand views and any concerns clearly • Carry out annual surveys to gather the views and feedback of stakeholders **ii. Promote clear expectations in respect of conduct with respect to communication** The school will: • Share expectations – including the core Trust elements set out below – with parents and carers and the wider community • Share reminders of these expectations in communication where appropriate **iii. Provide a pathway to the reasonable management of all correspondence**

	The school will: • Seek to adopt a staged approach to managing communication that is persistent and / or deemed excessive.
5.0	**Communication: Conduct expectations** It is expected that all stakeholders adhere to the following standards and expectations: 1. There is to be zero tolerance of abusive behaviour 2. Unnecessary personal comments or threats are never acceptable 3. All written communication should be reasonable in length – this will ensure that issues can be addressed efficiently and effectively 4. Persistent communication in circumstances where school staff have already responded to a concern or are in the process of doing so is not acceptable and damages the relationship between stakeholders. 5. Responses will be timely in the context of the nature of the issue and sensitive to the busy nature of a school community. Abusive behaviour of any kind in communications is not acceptable. Abusive behaviour may be direct or indirect. Evidence of illegal or unlawful conduct on social media or communication platforms outside of school platforms will form part of any concern that is raised, for example, where communications are an offence under the Malicious Communications Act 1988 or the Protection of Harassment Act 1997 or are defamatory in nature. While each school and the Trust invites all stakeholders to raise issues around the conduct of staff where there is a concern, stakeholders should recognise that it can be damaging for highly personal statements and comments to be made about staff online or in other communications. It is for this reason that concerns should be raised through appropriate channels and in a measured way. This will enable the Academy Trust to swiftly investigate the issues and take appropriate action where necessary. Staff across the Academy Trust are aware of the rights of stakeholders to escalate concerns to governors, Trust Directors, OFSTED, ESFA and other legal avenues. Threats of escalation or press involvement play no positive part in any meaningful partnership or resolution of a concern with the school or Trust and will not influence the actions of leaders. Stakeholders should be aware of the risk that such communication may be regarded as threatening and are asked to refrain from threatening to escalate an issue in their communications with school staff. Should a stakeholder wish to involve any third parties or regulators, the Academy Trust will respond to such correspondence in an appropriate way at the relevant time. It is challenging for school staff to adequately and effectively respond to communication that is excessive in length. Stakeholders will be asked to revisit communication that is considered by school staff to be excessive in length, identifying: - The 3 key specific points that need addressing as a matter of priority; and - The outcomes they are hoping to see for each point

	This will help to ensure that staff resources are focused on addressing the key issues swiftly. The expectation is that over time school and Trust leaders will address all elements within a communication, but that this is done in a way that is both manageable and reasonable and prioritises the key concerns. Where a significant number of issues are raised this may need to be addressed in manageable stages over a series of weeks or possibly longer. Persistent communication risks damage to the relationship between staff and stakeholders. While school staff will endeavour to respond to communications promptly, schools are very busy places and there may be safeguarding or other urgent issues that prevent a member of staff from responding to correspondence as swiftly as they may wish. Stakeholders should leave a gap of at least two full school days before contacting the school again about a message / email that goes unanswered, unless there is an urgent safeguarding issue which requires attention. The timeliness of a response to correspondence will always be determined in part by the complexity of the issue. For example, it may be necessary for the member of staff who is tasked with responding to email to liaise with one or more colleagues in order to gain further information about the issues involved. It is reasonable therefore that school and Trust leaders may set out a timeframe for response in a way that manages expectations.
6.0	**Proportionate response to persistent / vexatious / malicious communication:** Where communications are persistent, excessively long, vexatious and / or malicious, it is very likely that the Headteacher will be significantly involved and may not be regarded as impartial. Where this is the case, the Headteacher may engage a member of the Trust central team to review correspondence prior to any of the actions listed below. Stepped response to persistent / vexatious / malicious communication: **Step 1:** In the first instance, the Headteacher / Chair of Local Academy Committee will verbally inform the stakeholder that their communications considered to be becoming unreasonable / unacceptable and, if it is not modified, action may be taken in accordance with this protocol. **Step 2:** If the communications persist, the Headteacher / Chair of the Local Academy Committee will inform the stakeholder in writing that their behaviour is now considered by the school to be unreasonable/unacceptable and, therefore, falls under the terms of this protocol and that further issues will be addressed through appropriate action as set out below: Having regard to the nature of the parent/carer/member of the public's behaviour and the effect of this on the school community, the Headteacher may: • Establish 'communication windows' with the stakeholder on the issue in question to ensure correspondence remains proportionate and manageable. • Put in place a single point of contact for the stakeholder through which all correspondence must go – this may include a member of the Trust central staff where appropriate. • Block email traffic to all users except the designated person. • Take other actions as appropriate.

	Step 3: Where behaviours persist, the Headteacher / Chair of the Local Academy Committee may engage legal support: • instruct solicitors to send a cease-and-desist letter. **Step 4:** Where behaviours persist, solicitors will advise on appropriate next steps.