



## Letter Writing Guidance

When writing and sending letters or emails to families or professionals, the following good practice guidance should be followed:

1. **Begin with the end in mind** – Before sending any letter or email, think about what the desired outcome is that you are trying to achieve by sending it. Ask yourself, “If this letter or email is successful, what do I hope the outcome will be and how will that benefit the child?” Think about how the person you are writing to may perceive and interpret your letter. This will help you construct your correspondence in a way that helps achieve the best outcome you want to achieve, even when it may not always be welcomed news you are conveying.
2. **Clear** – The language used is pitched at a level and in a language that gives the family member it is addressed to the best opportunity to understand what is being said or asked. Write in a simple way that a young person would also be able to understand the letters you are writing, even if addressed to their parents or other family members. Age, cognitive ability, language, mental health capacity, and communication are all to be considered.
3. **Avoid jargon** – The use of acronyms and professional jargon is avoided wherever possible. When it is used it is appropriately explained (ie: acronyms spelled out when first used, a brief definition of jargon is explained in brackets)
4. **Be concise** – Your letter or email does not unnecessarily ramble, but keeps information relevant and only what is needed to be said to carry out its intended purpose. Be mindful that cutting and pasting information is not always appropriate or may need to be amended to ensure it is relevant and has an easy to follow flow in the body of the overall letter or email.
5. **Confidentiality** – Confirm the details of the addressee are correct. It is sealed in an envelope which clearly shows the letter is private and confidential with a Bexley return address printed. Check you are sending the correct information to the right person and that they have a right to view it. If sending out batches of letters at once, ask a colleague to double check your work. If sending an email, ensure it is to the correct recipient and does not contain identifying or confidential information unless it is being sent by secure means (ie: Password protected attachment, Egress, or GCSX)
6. **Solution focused** – In Signs of Safety we do not just focus on stating what the problem or worries are. You also need to be clear about recognising what is working well and a desire to work together towards a positive outcome for the child. When writing about the next steps, avoid repeating the problem as a means to a solution (ie: You will stop hitting your child – repeats the problem – hitting.) Focus on the solution as the intended outcome (ie: What would discipline look like without hitting?)
7. **Respectful** – Be mindful of the tone your letter or email is likely to be conveyed by the language used. This can be challenging as 80% of communication is non-verbal, thus how you may perceive the written tone may differ to how someone else may perceive it. Our intent is to work cooperatively with families wherever possible to create better and safer outcomes for their children. Our language must always convey this intention, even in contentious situations such as care proceedings.
8. **Purposeful** – Just because you can send a letter or email does not mean it is the best way to communicate with someone. For example, sending a letter or email to a family saying you are the new social worker can be seen as impersonal. Calling a family first to introduce yourself and then following it up with written confirmation provides a more meaningful first impression for a working relationship. What if they can't read or if English is not their first language? Consider how you present a letter and who else may need to be there to assist the family member with understanding the purpose and content of the letter (ie: an interpreter, support person, advocate).

9. **Professional** – A good balance of emotional intelligence and acting in a manner that represents the profession and council in a reputable light is key. Even with aggressive or abusive families, we can understand the source of this abuse without condoning it or reciprocating with passive aggressive or other inappropriate means. If you are writing a letter when you feel angry or upset, stop and come back to it when you are calm and clear headed. Have a colleague or manager read your letter or email over before sending to ensure it has the right tone for the intended purpose. Keep focused on what's best for the child. If your disagreement is with another professional, speak with your line manager first for advice before reacting through an email or letter you may later regret sending.
10. **Grammatically correct** – Letters and emails are proof read and spell checked for accuracy. Having business support, managers or colleagues proofread can be helpful. Poor spelling and grammar can undermine your professional credibility and best efforts as well as that of the department and the council.
11. **Timely** – Be sure to send your correspondence in good time. By avoiding sending a difficult letter only risks upsetting the intended recipient who may be waiting for a response, regardless of the difficult message it may convey. Giving short notice for a meeting, especially an important one, can not only frustrate a person but is also unfair and gives them little time to prepare. Best practice is to send follow-up letters within a few days not weeks of an important event or meeting. Invites to meetings should give the recipient at least two weeks to help them prepare and make accommodations. If the meeting or matter is urgent, don't rely on only sending a letter. Precede it with a phone call and/or email to ensure the person is given as much notice as possible. If you do send a letter late, even if it is a result of another colleague's inaction, take responsibility on behalf of yourself and/or the department by first apologising in a sincere way for the late response.